



Australian Education Union

AEU Response to the Higher Education Standards Panel Public Consultation on Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes Discussion Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian Education Union is an organisation of employees registered under the *Fair Work (Registered Organisations) Act 2009*. It represents the professional and industrial interests of approximately 187,500 members employed in government schools and public early childhood work locations, in TAFE and other public institutions of vocational education, in Adult Multicultural or Migrant Education Service centres and in Disability Services centres as teachers, school leaders, and education assistance and support workers.

The AEU has an ongoing commitment to ensuring high standards of education are provided in all the sectors in which its members work, in the interests of all Australian students and the broader community.

We welcome this opportunity to respond to the invitation from the Higher Education Standards Panel to provide a brief submission to the public consultation on Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes and the discussion paper released by the Panel.

Our primary interest in this matter concerns the provision of courses of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) by Higher Education institutions which is directly related to the quality of teaching and standards across the teaching profession, areas of direct concern to the AEU. Also of interest is the intersection, if any, of workforce planning with ITE intake in Higher Education Institutions.

THE REQUIREMENT FOR HIGH STANDARDS

Initial Teacher Education courses are not higher education programs aimed to equip graduates with a generalist education. They are specialist courses designed to prepare graduates for successful entry to the teaching profession and subsequently into successful transition to employment, where their efforts centre on improving the educational outcomes of students.

Improving educational outcomes is universally acknowledged as essential to social cohesion and broader community and social participation as well as the economic prosperity of the nation.

The quality of teaching is integral to this outcome. It is often described as the single most important ‘in-school’ factor accounting for differences in student achievement scores.¹ Those nations whose students are among the highest achievers in international assessment programs such as *PISA* are those who recruit and select the most able students for their teacher education

¹ See, eg, Miller, K. (2003), *School, Teacher and Leadership Impacts on Student Achievement*, Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, Colorado, (http://www.mcrel.org/pdf/policybriefs/5032pi_pbschoolteacherleaderbrief.pdf); Hattie, J. (2003), *Teachers Make a Difference: What is the Research Evidence?* ACER Annual Conference, Melbourne; OECD (2005), *Teachers Matter – Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers: Overview Report*, OECD Publishing, Paris, (<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/39/47/34990905.pdf>) and Dinham, S., 2015, *Issues and Perspectives relevant to the development of an approach to the accreditation of initial teacher education in Australia based on evidence of impact*, AITSL, Melbourne, p1.

programs. Entrants to ITE courses in these countries are from the top cohorts of all University entrants (5% in Korea, 10% in Finland, 30% in Singapore, Hong Kong & Canada).²

It is for reasons such as these that, while acknowledging and respecting Higher Education institutions' autonomy in their programs of study and of selection of students into them, ITE courses are also required to be accredited by jurisdictional teacher regulatory authorities as appropriate for the registration and licensing of teachers for employment in their respective states and territories.

Increasing public concern has been evident about the standards of entry and of the academic capacities and personal qualities of students, and their ability to successfully complete courses and make the transition to becoming successful teachers.

This has seen a recent federal government review of Teacher Education,³ and the revision, in December 2015, of the Standards and Procedures for the Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia [Program Standards] by the Australian Institute for Teachers and School Leadership [AITSL]. The Program Standards require providers to be open and transparent or explicit about their selection mechanisms, their threshold entry scores and the exemptions, if any, which are used.

These concerns have intensified the AEU's long history of advocating for the introduction of minimum academic standards, proper workforce planning measures and minimum entry standards for ITE courses as a means of attracting the most academically able students into teaching, thereby enhancing the status of the profession and lifting the quality of the entire school system. Most recently, the AEU's Annual Federal Conference (February 2016) Statement (paragraph 2.4) makes this clear:

*With regard to Initial Teacher Education we will maintain our strong position of enhancing the profession through the introduction of minimum academic standards and lifting entry scores for teaching degrees. We will continue to call for an end to a flawed system that allows universities to enrol as many students in teaching course as they want regardless of their ATAR scores, and for the introduction of proper workforce planning and minimum entry standards for teaching courses. Attracting the most capable entrants to teaching courses is a crucial first step in ensuring our children get the best education possible. While academic ability is not the only thing that makes a good teacher, it is clear that attracting the most academically able students into teaching will lift the quality of our school system.*⁴

² Ingvarson, L., Reid, K., Buckley, S., Kleinhenz, E., Masters, G., Rowley, G. (Sept, 2014). *Best Practice Teacher Education Programs and Australia's Own Programs*. Canberra: Department of Education, p48.

³ The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers*, December 2014.

⁴ Australian Education Union, 2016 Annual Federal Conference, *Conference Statement*, February 2016

WHAT THE EVIDENCE ON ENTRY TO ITE COURSES SHOWS

While concerns are often expressed about the uniquely Australian system of constructing a single overall rank order for senior secondary students entering university courses generally, it is likely to continue to dominate admissions processes and policies in many institutions.⁵ This is despite the recent phenomenon of some institutions ceasing to publish ‘clearly-in’ ATAR scores for their ITE courses specifically or across a range of their courses.⁶

University course ‘entrance scores’ such as ATARs or similar measures (for example, ‘grade point averages’), for those that enter by alternative pathways will continue to be seen in the public as a ‘proxy’ for the academic capability of the prospective entry candidates. After all, the quality of those who graduate is dependent at least in part on the academic quality of those who enter.⁷

In respect of ITE courses, AITSL publishes a Data Report on Initial Teacher Education courses with the most recent report, 2015, providing data on the 2013 cohort of students. While the report shows that approximately 20% of ITE commencing students have an ATAR score, a number of disturbing trends are evident in the data:⁸

- ITE courses compared to other courses have higher proportions of students in the lower (50 and under) and middle (60-80) ATAR bands and fewer in the upper (80 plus⁹). This reflects a trend evident in the data since 2005. However the proportion of students in the middle and higher bands are declining while those in the lower bands are increasing.¹⁰
- Higher ATAR bands are associated with higher retention rates in ITE.¹¹
- Although ITE courses have higher success rates (ie, successfully completing or passing units of study) than all other courses, higher success rates are associated with higher ATAR bands and those admitted with an ATAR have higher success rates than those admitted through other pathways.¹²

⁵ For the uniqueness of Australia’s ‘ATAR’ system, see Matters, G & Masters, G. (October 2014), *Redesigning the secondary–tertiary interface: Queensland Review of Senior Assessment and Tertiary Entrance*. Melbourne, ACER, pp55-56. (http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=qld_review)

For universities’ continued reliance on use of the ATAR system, see Group of Eight Media Release, 13 April 2016.

⁶ In Victoria in 2016, for example, Federation University, Victoria University and La Trobe University ceased to publish ‘clearly-in’ ATARS over a number of ITE courses and across all course offerings the proportion of Victorian courses with published ‘clearly-in’ ATARS declined from 40% in 2015 to 25% in 2016. See *The Age*, 19 January 2016.

⁷ For a benchmarking exercise comparing Australia’s ITE selection methods and those of high-achieving countries, including drawing on academic research to establish the necessity for high academic entry standards, see Ingvarson, op cit., p65-67.

⁸ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2015, *Initial teacher education: data report 2015*, AITSL, Melbourne, p34.

⁹ Ibid, p35, Table 15.

¹⁰ Ibid, p37, Figure 16.

¹¹ Ibid, p46, Table 20

¹² Ibid, p51, Table 24.

This data for ITE students correlates with the findings of a cohort analysis conducted by the federal Department of Education which tracked all bachelor degree students from 2005 to 2012. The analysis shows that higher completion rates are associated with higher ATAR bands.¹³

While noting that ATARS were only relevant to a percentage of those entering ITE courses, the authors of a recent major study of Australian teacher education and workforce conducted for the Australian Government found high ATARS to certainly be desirable.¹⁴

The correlation between ATAR scores and later school teacher attrition rates is also an issue of concern.

While the attrition rates of early career or beginning teachers in Australia are consistent with those in North America, the UK, Europe and Hong Kong, and it appears there is little substantive evidence that attrition rates for teaching are any higher than those of other professions, the fact of high attrition rates suggest that Higher Education institutions are not selecting those students who can successfully engage in professional teaching practice.¹⁵

This does not suggest that the admissions processes and policies institutions are solely to blame for, or cause, teacher attrition rates. The reasons for the phenomenon may well have as much to do with personal, professional and even industrial relations factors associated with actually teaching in the early years of the career.¹⁶

However, as a recent report from the Queensland College of Teachers notes, the loss of beginning teachers is a problem because it leads to a loss of expertise, partial wastage of investment in ITE and increased teacher shortages.¹⁷

Teacher retention is therefore a serious issue,¹⁸ and not something that Higher Education institutions should eschew as lying outside their province of responsibility.¹⁹

¹³ Australian Government Department of Education (2014), *Completion Rates of Domestic Bachelor Students: A Cohort Analysis*, p4.

¹⁴ *Longitudinal Teacher Education and Workforce Study – Final Report* (November 2013), p227. (https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/ltews_main_report.pdf)

¹⁵ On the international comparisons see Gallant, A and Riley, P, (2014), *Early Career Teaching: New thoughts on an intractable problem*, Teacher Development: An International Journal of Teachers' Professional Development, 18:4. These authors review the literature and estimate the Early Career Teacher attrition rate at between 40-50% (p562). The data on attrition rates for the teaching profession more generally may be significantly lower (4.5%) than these estimates. See Willet, M, Segal, D & Walford, W, (2014), *National Teacher Workforce Dataset*, Dept of Education, Commonwealth of Australia, p50. (https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/ntwd_project_report.pdf). On comparing attrition rates for Australian teachers with other professions, see Productivity Commission (2012), *Schools Workforce*, Research Report, Canberra, pp62 ff.

¹⁶ *Longitudinal Teacher Education and Workforce Study – Final Report* (November 2013), pp95-96.

¹⁷ Queensland College of Teachers (2013), *Attrition of Recent Queensland Graduate Teachers*, p12.

¹⁸ Ewing, R & Manuel, J (2005), *Retaining quality early career teachers in the profession: New teacher narratives*, Change: Transformations in Education, 8:1, p4.

¹⁹ The authors of the *LTEWS Report* (above fns 12 & 14) conclude "Thus, it is important for teacher education providers and employers to work together to identify the abilities and capabilities relevant for each phase of a teaching career, particularly those for beginning teaching." (p229)

Such views are corroborated by the authors of the *National Teacher Workforce Data Project Report* (June 2014) who commented (p46):

“ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) scores often attract attention in education with observation of reduced requirements for education qualifications. Stakeholders have commented on a number of potential reasons for this trend, including lower fees, and education being the “default” degree that the liberal arts used to be. Regardless of cause, understanding both the entry ATAR and then that of those that complete their education, register with their regulator, and then take a teaching role, may provide a more complete story. Students failing to complete their education course is a concern both for the training institutions as well as having a potential impact on overall supply. Being able to incorporate information across the full teacher life cycle from education to employment and then exit, would provide an holistic perspective about which areas should be targeted to retain teachers, including prospective ones. This will also support the provision of key market information to a number of stakeholders including prospective students, parents, universities and employers.”²⁰

TEACHING DEMANDS HIGH STANDARDS

The impacts of globalisation, modernisation and increasing rapidity of technological change impose significant challenges to societies moving to more knowledge-based, post-industrial foundations. This in turn imposes significant challenges on schools and school systems to constantly adapt and innovate in preparing students to meet these challenges in the 21st century. Amongst other things this will require constant revision in the skills and capabilities of teachers.

International research evidence establishes that students’ self-efficacy – their belief in their own ability – has a significant effect on their academic achievement and behaviour. Similarly, there is evidence that teachers’ sense of self-efficacy – their belief in their ability to teach, engage students and manage a classroom – has an impact on student achievement and motivation, as well as on teachers’ own practices, enthusiasm, commitment, job satisfaction and behaviour in the classroom.²¹

In this context the concern with high academic standards for entry to ITE courses becomes significant – countries with high levels of student achievement are those that impose high academic standards for aspirant teachers.

²⁰ AEEYSOC National Teaching Workforce Dataset Working Group, *National Teaching Workforce Dataset Project Report*, June 2014; p.46

https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/ntwd_project_report.pdf

²¹ Schleicher, A. (2015), *Schools for 21st-Century Learners: Strong Leaders, Confident Teachers, Innovative Approaches*, International Summit on the Teaching Profession, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264231191-en>. p41

In Australia some states are imposing regulatory requirements to raise academic standards is occurring. In NSW from 2016 onwards admission to an accredited undergraduate teaching degree will require:

- a minimum of 3 Band 5 subject results at the end of senior secondary school (HSC) including one in English; or
- pass bridging units benchmarked to a Band 5 HSC result; or
- enrol in an accredited degree and pass a full year of academic studies in the subjects the teacher proposes to teach; or
- complete a BOSTES (the regulatory authority) approved alternative entry pathway as advised by the teacher's prospective university ²²

A similar approach is being considered by Victoria and has been welcomed by the AEU.²³ In addition to advocacy for minimum entry standards and academic requirements, the AEU also supports the introduction of two-year (or equivalent) graduate entry programs as the preferred model of initial teacher education. Such a model would strengthen the long-term quality of the teaching workforce, and is consistent with ITE in many other countries.

WORKFORCE PLANNING

University intake into ITE courses is currently not related to a coherent workforce planning strategy. This means that there is no intersection between course enrolment and future employment prospects: universities can enrol as many students as they wish into ITE courses without consideration of the availability of projected employment upon graduation. The result is frequent oversupply of teachers in some curriculum areas, frequent undersupply in other curriculum areas, and a significant number of new graduates each year for whom permanent employment in the short-term is a pipe-dream. They work as casual or contract teachers – often for a year or more – during which time their access to formal support provided to new teachers can be patchy at best.

To prevent this situation in future, the AEU asserts the need for proper workforce planning across all jurisdictions. Coupled with the introduction of minimum entry requirements and academic standards, such a measure would assist in maintaining the long-term quality of the teaching workforce. Proper workforce planning is also consistent with the behaviour of high-ranking countries such as Finland, where not only academic standards but also workforce planning needs form part of the matrix determining the number of places available each year in ITE university courses.

²² View these requirements at the NSW Board of Studies, Reaching & Educational Standards (BOSTES) website: <http://nswteachers.nsw.edu.au/future-returning-teachers/become-a-teacher/raising-university-entry-standards/>

See Henrietta Cook, *Government plans for top teachers*, The Age, 19 January 2016. AEU Media Release, *Minister Birmingham must take action to lift entry standards for teaching degrees*, 19 January 2016²³

RECOMMENDATION

The AEU has long been a vocal advocate of minimum entry requirements, robust academic standards, graduate-level teacher entry programs, and proper systems of workforce planning across education jurisdictions.

Consistent with our support for these measures, the AEU urges the Panel to make recommendations proposing the introduction of:

- minimum entry requirements, minimum academic standards, and proper workforce planning; and
- two-year (or equivalent) graduate entry ITE programs.