

Australian Catholic University

**Submission to the Senate Education and
Employment Reference Committee
inquiry into “The issue of increasing
disruption in Australian school
classrooms”**

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Australian Catholic University (ACU)

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
THEORY VS PRACTICE	2
<i>THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRACTICUM.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>HUB SCHOOLS</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>PARAPROFESSIONALS</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY</i>	<i>4</i>
ATTACHMENT A: AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY PROFILE.....	5

Executive summary

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Government Senate Education and Employment Reference Committee inquiry into “the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms” (the inquiry).

ACU is responding to one of the terms of reference (ToR) of this inquiry:

(d) the robustness, quality and extent of initial teacher education to equip teachers with skills and strategies to manage classrooms.

As the largest educator of pre-service teachers in Australia, ACU is well positioned to comment on the issue of equipping teachers with skills and strategies to better manage classrooms, which is a vital aspect of initial teacher education (ITE).

The threshold question of whether school discipline is a problem in Australia is often answered by reference to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD’s) index of disciplinary climate, associated with the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the latest version of which is 2018. PISA results based on the 2022 survey (delayed by one year due to COVID) have not yet been released; however, based on the 2018 PISA results, Australia does have a problem with classroom discipline. According to those 2018 results, Australia ranked 70th out of 77 participating nations, and was one of a minority of countries where classroom discipline deteriorated between 2009 and 2018.¹ ACU’s own annual Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing survey also reports that school principals are increasingly subjected to offensive behaviour, and that threats of violence and actual physical violence is most likely to come from students.²

ITE providers are required to teach students about classroom management through accreditation requirements set by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). ACU recommends stronger and deeper partnerships between universities and schools to foster a closer relationship between theory and practice. This would enable opportunities for pre-service teachers to be exposed to expert teachers managing difficult situations, and students, in classrooms.

This can be achieved through various approaches, including:

- i) expanding the “hub model” for the professional experience placement (or “practicum”);
- ii) employing pre-service teachers in their early years as paraprofessionals and/or learning support officers in schools; and
- iii) utilising realistic simulations of school life and emerging technologies, including the use of virtual reality, to expose pre-service teachers to the skills they need to manage classrooms effectively.

ACU recognises the importance of the theory-practice relationship in equipping pre-service teachers with the skills and strategies to manage classrooms effectively. Through closer partnerships between universities and schools, and the integration of theory and practice in ITE programs, pre-service teachers will be better prepared for the teaching profession.

¹ OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students’ Lives*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris. See Figure III.3.1 & Table III.B1.3.2

² S-M., Kidson, P., Dicke, T., & Marsh, H. (2023) *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey* (IPPE Report). Sydney: Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, ACU

Theory vs Practice

Classroom management is an accreditation requirement of all ITE courses via AITSL.

ITE providers must demonstrate that their pre-service teachers meet the AITSL Graduate Teacher Standards prior to graduation, including

- “Standard 4 – Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments.”

Of relevance to this inquiry, a subsection of Standard 4 is

- “Standard 4.3, Manage challenging behaviour – Demonstrate knowledge of practical approaches to manage challenging behaviour.”

All universities must address this standard. For example, ACU meets the requirements through offering subjects such as

- “Effective Teaching 3: Engaging Learners and Managing Learning Environments” for ACU’s undergraduate Bachelor of Education (B. Ed) students.

This subject examines research and theories relating to behaviour management and teaches practical strategies to minimise disruptions and respond to off-task and challenging behaviours. Students are required to analyse real-world cases of disruptive learner behaviours and critique teacher/school responses.

- “Effective Teaching 1: Promoting Positive Learner Engagement” for ACU’s postgraduate Master of Teaching (M. Teach) students.

This subject examines the factors contributing to undesired and challenging behaviours and the positive responses that can and should occur. Students are required to plan ways to foster positive behaviour and manage behaviour that is challenging.

These subjects occur concurrently with the professional experience placement (or “practicum”), where the pre-service teacher spends time in a classroom as part of their studies, receiving feedback from supervisors on their teaching.

Both subjects require students to demonstrate practical approaches to classroom management which may arise on the practicum with the assistance of their supervising teacher.

The importance of the practicum

The practicum is an essential component of ITE, as it provides pre-service teachers with the practical experience they need to learn the complex skill of classroom management. Dealing with challenging behaviours in different contexts requires first-hand experience and a unique set of skills and strategies that can only be learned on the job. Theories and strategies are useful, but they become more powerful when they are seen in action. For this reason, teaching graduates consistently rate their practicum as the single most useful aspect of their degree.

However, peer learning is not a common practice in Australian teaching culture, as it is in other countries. In Shanghai, for example, all teachers have mentors, and new teachers have several mentors who observe and give feedback on their classes.³ In many high

³ Jensen, B. et al., *Catching up: learning from the best school systems in East Asia*. Grattan Institute. (2012).

performing East Asian countries, teachers regularly observe each other's classes, providing instant feedback to improve each student's learning.⁴ By contrast, registered teachers in Australia can spend their entire career without ever having their teaching observed by another teacher.

Teacher isolation, rather than peer observation, is the norm in Australia which undoubtedly is one of the reasons why universities struggle to find enough teacher supervisors for their pre-service teachers. To help change this culture and enhance teacher effectiveness, including classroom management, ITE providers must expose pre-service teachers to expert teachers dealing with challenging behaviours in authentic classroom settings.

To achieve this, ACU recommends federal and state governments foster initiatives that allow for greater partnerships between universities and schools and in turn greater immersion in the classroom to ensure graduating teachers are profession ready. Three initiatives that would promote partnerships and greater preparedness for managing behaviours in the classroom, include: i) "hub schools", ii) pre-service teachers working as paraprofessionals and/or learning support officers and iii) integration of simulation and other emerging technologies.

Hub schools

"Hub schools" are clusters of schools that receive state government funding to work exclusively with a single university and offer professional experience placements to that university's pre-service teachers. These arrangements often involve reciprocity where the university provides professional development opportunities to the schools' teachers.

As hub schools become more familiar with the university and its students, knowledge and ideas about teacher education are exchanged more easily, benefiting both the in-service and pre-service teachers.

ACU has established several NSW Department of Education school hubs, including a twenty-two-school hub located in the inner west of Sydney; a ten-school hub for Schools for Specific Purpose, which provides intensive support for students with intellectual or physical disabilities; and a third hub with schools in Western Sydney. ACU also has strong partnerships with Catholic Education and has hubs in the inner Sydney city, Western Sydney, Broken Bay region and Wollongong dioceses, funded by each diocese / system. Additionally, we have a metropolitan hub in Melbourne and a regional hub in Swan Hill on the Victorian / NSW border

ACU has found hub schools facilitate a greater immersion of pre-service teachers into the life of the school and the realities of classroom management. These strong partnerships between individual schools and universities should be expanded to provide pre-service teachers with more opportunities to observe expert teachers managing diverse and complex situations to further develop effective classroom management strategies and skills.

Paraprofessionals / Learning Support Officers

Another option for greater exposure to the realities of classroom management is to employ pre-service teachers as paid learning support officers in schools in the early years of their candidature. This initiative would only be applicable to the early years of candidature as final-year pre-service teachers can be registered as conditionally accredited teachers, rather than work as Learning Support Officers (LSO).

⁴ *ibid.*

Apart from reducing the administrative burden on teachers, employing pre-service teachers as LSOs would have several additional benefits:

- It allows for greater immersion in schools, strengthening the understanding of the relationship between theory and practice,
- It provides an early exposure to the realities of the profession and a teacher's life, including the skills required for successful classroom management, and,
- It offers a part-time salary, with the de facto stipend making teaching a more attractive option thus reducing one of the barriers to uptake.

Information technology – Simulation and emerging technologies

The integration of technology into education is becoming increasingly inevitable, with both schools and universities adopting a wide range of current and emerging technologies to enhance the learning experience and help prepare pre-service teachers for the profession.

Information technology (IT), specifically simulation software and virtual reality, provides a unique and effective method to support pre-service teacher development. One key advantage is that it allows pre-service teachers to practice and experiment with various classroom management strategies in a safe and controlled environment.

For example, simulation software can allow students to practice managing challenging behaviours without putting either the student or pre-service teachers at risk. This can lead to improved confidence and competence when dealing with real classroom situations. Simulations and virtual reality can also provide pre-service teachers with exposure to a diverse range of contexts and situations, which they may not otherwise encounter during their practicum. This can help to broaden their perspectives and better prepare them for a range of challenges they may face in their future teaching careers.

ACU's use of SimSchool and virtual reality headsets in our education degrees is a prime example of how technology can be effectively integrated into ITE. In our ITE degrees, virtual reality headsets are used to familiarise students with the wide range of early childhood experiences they may encounter. Additionally, SimSchool is used to generate data that evaluates the preservice teacher performance of their simulated teaching experience. Pre-service teachers are then required to use the data to reflect on the feedback and their practice as they plan for improvement. Moreover, we are exploring the use of Simlab to enable students to practice their classroom management techniques and engage with parents at the parent-teacher interviews. The continued exploration and integration of technology into ITE will be essential to help pre-service teachers further develop their skills and strategies to manage classrooms.

Attachment A: Australian Catholic University Profile

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a publicly funded Catholic university, open to people of all faiths and of none and with teaching, learning and research inspired by 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition.

ACU operates as a multi-jurisdictional university with eight campuses across four states and one territory. Campuses are located in North Sydney, Strathfield, Blacktown, Canberra, Melbourne, Ballarat, Brisbane and Adelaide. ACU also has a campus in Rome, Italy.

ACU is the largest Catholic university in the English-speaking world. In 2020, ACU had over 33,000 students and 2,300 staff.⁵

ACU graduates demonstrate high standards of professional excellence and are also socially responsible, highly employable and committed to active and responsive learning. ACU is the number one university in the country when it comes to graduate employment outcomes three years after graduation, with a 95.5 per cent employment rate.⁶

ACU has built its reputation in the areas of Health and Education, educating the largest number of undergraduate nursing and teaching students in Australia⁷ and serving a significant workforce need in these areas. Under the demand driven system, ACU sought to focus and build on these strengths.

Since 2014, ACU has had four faculties: Health Services; Education and Arts; Law and Business; and Theology and Philosophy.

As part of its commitment to educational excellence, ACU is committed to targeted and quality research. ACU's strategic plan focuses on research areas that align with ACU's mission and reflect most of its learning and teaching: Education; Health and Wellbeing; Theology and Philosophy; and Social Justice and the Common Good. To underpin its plan for research intensification, ACU has appointed high profile leaders to assume the directorships, and work with high calibre members, in six research institutes.⁸

In recent years, the public standing of ACU's research has improved dramatically. The last Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) assessment (in 2018) awarded ACU particularly high ratings in the fields of research identified as strategic priorities and in which investment has been especially concentrated. For example, ACU more than doubled the total number of top scores of 5 (well above world standard) in the 2018 ERA. In health sciences, ACU did not receive a single score below 5 while in education, ACU is one of only four universities in Australia to achieve a top score of 5 in the 4-digit fields of research. ACU's rapidly growing reputation in research is in line with its steady expansion.

⁵ ACU *Pocket Statistics 2022*.

⁶ QILT (August 2020), *2020 Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal (GOS-L)*

⁷ Department of Education and Training, *2019 Higher Education Data Collection – Students, Special Courses*. Section 8, table 8.3

⁸ Australian Catholic University, *ACU Research*, acu.edu.au/research