

Independent submission to

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment,
Education and Training

inquiry into

The Status of the Teaching Profession

Terms of Reference

1. Increasing the attractiveness of the profession for teachers and principals, including workplace conditions, and career and leadership structures.
2. Provision of appropriate support platforms for teachers, including human and IT resources.
3. Identifying ways in which the burden of out-of-hours, at-home work can be reduced.
4. Investigating ways to increase retention rates for the teaching profession, and avoid 'burn out' among early-career teachers.

I applaud the House in undertaking this vital inquiry. In this short submission I will not bombard you with figures nor bury you in graphs. My message is simple, and responds primarily to points 1 and 4 of the TOR.

Executive summary

- *Teachers are the architects of society*
- *Poor policy decisions now will create poor socioeconomic conditions 20-30 years from now*
- *Standardisation is a poor policy decision*
- *Australian education is not in crisis, but it will be soon if nothing is done*

Teachers build nations

The education system is the only structure in most modern nations which touches the entire population, and does so during people's most formative years. The way people think, what – and more importantly *how* – they understand, their hopes, attitudes, aspirations and capacities are constructed during the years of compulsory education, and teachers and the education system as a whole are a central guiding influence during this time.

Australian primary and secondary students are in school for around 200 days a year, and for 6.5 hours per day. That's about a quarter of their annual waking hours. If both of a child's parents work, it is possible for an Australian child to spend more time in contact with her teachers than she does with her own parents. The common law principle of *in loco parentis* (*in place of parents*), although not an official part of Australia law, is nevertheless an accurate summation of the situation of educators at primary, secondary, and even early tertiary levels.

The impact that teachers have on the cognitive, emotional, physical, attitudinal, cultural and intellectual development of a nation's people, and hence the *crucial importance of the teaching profession to the well-being of a nation as whole*, cannot be overstated. And yet as a profession, it is consistently undervalued,

particularly at tertiary level, where careers are built solely on research and grant attraction, leaving teaching as an often resented bolt-on.

Yet the reality is that teaching is a high social responsibility and an art. When exercised by inspired individuals, it builds minds and changes lives.

Education underpins national productivity

The quality of a nation's education system presages that nation's productivity, creativity and international competitiveness in a very direct manner. A terrifyingly negative example of this was provided in the early 1970's, when Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge exterminated the academic component of Cambodian society, with a crippling effect on the nation's socio-economic stability that it is only now recovering from. Although the Khmer Rouge were only in power from 1968 until 1979, the negative economic impact (in terms of GDP/capita) of their violently anti-academic philosophy continued to push the nation's economy downward for several years, reaching a historic low in 1985. Cambodia's economy didn't recover to its 1968 level until nearly 40 years later, in 2003.

A far more positive example is of course Finland. A series of educational reforms beginning in 1950 have positioned Finland as the undisputed leader of effective educational policy, and the flow-on effects can be seen in the nation's GDP/capita performance since that date. Apart from an economic downturn in the early 1990's, brought about by a combination of internal economic policy and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland's economic growth has been steep and steady since WWII.

Australia scores higher than Finland on both the general and the educational scales of the UN's Human Development Index, and has done since the indices began in 1990. Australia's education system is far from failing, and is not in crisis, but that is no reason for complacency.

There are tendencies emerging in Australian education whose effects will be disastrous if they are not reigned in quickly. It is crucial that these considerations form part of the Committee's deliberations, and drawing attention to them is the purpose of this submission. I don't doubt that other more detailed submissions will provide ample documentary evidence of the points raised here.

Standardisation will destroy education

In this era of mass education, it is easy to overlook the fact that *effective teaching is ultimately interpersonal* – an exchange between the teacher and the individual student. This simple fact is central to understanding what the profession implies, what it requires and what policy levers need to be put in place – and which ones need to be avoided – to assure that quality is achieved and maintained.

Any teacher knows that it is rare to “get through” to all of your students in any given group. But the most effective teachers constantly strive to do just that, and in trying to make that connection, they are demonstrating:

- a) A genuine interest in the individual they are trying to teach
- b) The cognitive flexibility and mastery of their subject necessary to modify their approach as needed to make sure that connection is achieved and maintained
- c) A capacity to reflect on their own pedagogical effectiveness in real time, which implies attention, keen observation, compassion and excellent communication skills

But in order for a teacher to be in a position to do all this, quite apart from the quality of their own training, a number of things must be true of their work environment:

- a) **TRUST**: teachers need to know that the organisations they work for (schools, universities, RTOs) have faith in their capacity to effectively determine what their students need.
- b) **FREEDOM**: teachers need to have the flexibility to modify their approach as required to become effective mentors to as many of their students as possible, without being hampered by arbitrary constraints.
- c) **SUPPORT**: Teachers need to work in a supportive environment that offers them opportunities to maximise their own operational excellence in terms of resources, as well as in terms of opportunities for professional development and professional exchange locally, nationally and internationally.

A compliance-driven standardised approach to education is antithetic to all three of these requirements, and stands to do long-lasting damage to Australian education and therefore to Australian society. It is precisely such an approach which is currently developing in the Australian VET system and elsewhere.

The Australian VET sector has taken what seems like a good idea on paper (*national consistency of qualifications*) and turned it into a machine that will utterly destroy educational quality if it is not stopped. In an effort to standardise the contents, flow and assessment of teaching materials across the VET sector, systems have been put in place that completely remove autonomy, discretion and trust from teachers. Australian VET teachers are reduced to the status of hoop holders for the students to jump through, and the context is one in which quality teaching, and hence quality learning, is virtually impossible.

Standardised curricula, standardised assessment and worse, standardised level, pace and path of learning are terrible ideas that drag the whole education process toward the bottom. Guidelines and principles are essential, but the current approach goes way beyond guidelines, and tries to prescribe the entire teaching process. It creates a compliance-driven atmosphere within which teachers are not treated as having any capacity to decide what is best for their students, not allowed to adapt their approach, not allowed to innovate nor to react in real time, in short, are not actually permitted to *teach*. The context is one that guarantees mediocrity at best, and complete educational failure at worst. It has been said to create a “race to the bottom” in terms of quality output, and this is sadly the effect we are already seeing.

But this is not entirely surprising, as standardisation is driven, not by pedagogical quality, but rather by administrative facility. It is the wrong driver, and it will ultimately have disastrous consequences.

Standardised courses quickly become “tick and flick” exercises. There is little motivation for teaching staff to try to prevent this degradation, as they are afforded no autonomy nor authority within the system to take charge of the learning process, and there is no incentive for students to actually work hard, as “competency-based learning” only requires a *path of least effort* approach to satisfy the conditions. The whole context is drab, uninspiring and lacking almost all of the hallmarks of effective education.

Raise the bar!

Perhaps the most radical aspect of the Finnish approach to the teaching profession is that they have made the qualification requirements very stringent (Masters degree minimum) but made the remuneration considerable (above OECD standards). The effect of this is to guarantee quality of teaching staff, and to make the profession a desirable one as it represents personal financial security. This makes teaching a respected, coveted and competitive profession in Finland, with positive flow-on effects in terms of teaching quality, resulting directly from:

1. Strong job satisfaction, which speaks to *teacher motivation* and *performance*, and
2. A positive public perception of education in general, which speaks to *student motivation*.

A system that motivates both educators and learners cannot fail. The remuneration that Finnish teachers receive is undoubtedly a strong attractor to the profession, but what keeps Finnish teachers engaged and

effective is the fact that they are trusted to know what they are doing, and do not work in an environment of disempowering compliance and imposed arbitrary restrictions.

We reap what we sow

The flow-on effects of poor educational decisions take a generation or more to manifest. Longer than a political mandate. Correcting the erroneous path of standardisation will require long-sighted and politically altruistic action.

Fractionated and inward-looking educational policies in the US have culminated in the idiotocracy that we now see in power in that nation, and in the millions of ill-informed individuals who support it. The current Brexit debacle is the outcome of similar problems in the UK, although thankfully there the tide appears, perhaps, to be turning.

Those who have been taught to *reflect*, to *question*, to *challenge*, to appreciate *diversity*, *science*, *art* and *culture*, are not those who divide and segregate, who discriminate and who say and believe anything that suits their narrow agenda. These latter are the causers of suffering, the starters of wars, and in extreme cases, and times not so long past, the destroyers of nations and the murderers of millions.

Australia is a long way from such extremes, but the degradation of the education system is a sure step on the path to precisely that kind of social disintegration. ***Let us step off that path at once.***

I urge you to be bold. Put in place measures to assure for teachers

- ***more stringent qualification requirements***
- ***greater professional freedom***
- ***higher salaries***

and more importantly, ***abandon this headlong rush toward standardisation and compliance.***

Do this now, and the rewards will be reaped by future generations of Australians in ways we cannot even anticipate.