

SUBMISSION TO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING INQUIRY INTO TEACHER EDUCATION

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Open Universities Australia

Open Universities Australia (formerly Open Learning Australia) provides open access to university-level units and courses delivered at a distance, often on-line. It is a private company owned by seven universities, which registers students in studies with those and other providers. Students can take out degrees from the participating universities or gain credit for further study with them.

In this submission, we address two of the Committee's terms of reference, arising from our experience in attempting to develop a national teacher education qualification through our partner universities.

Term of Reference 2: Examine the extent to which teacher training courses can attract high quality students, including students from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

High quality students have diverse backgrounds and experiences. Existing opportunities for teacher training do not always address ways of providing access to training by such students. Open Universities Australia, which already provides an open access pathway to higher education in a range of disciplines, is interested in teacher education because we are experiencing high demand for such a course from our existing student base. National demand still outstrips the number of places available in teacher education programs. We would like to find a way to contribute to solving the teacher shortage problem and provide pathways for high quality students whatever their background or circumstance.

In particular, we would like to focus on educationally disadvantaged rural and remote communities. Our organization has a commitment to improving equitable access to higher education. A practical, professional program such as teacher education would make a substantial contribution to educational equity for both the trainee teachers and for the school students they would eventually serve.

Currently, small rural communities suffer high teacher turnover rates. This can be traced to the fact that, whether by intent or by default, many beginning teachers' first assignment is to either a struggling urban school or to a rural school. Young, single, urban teachers often find the rural experience quite alienating. While many states and communities have implemented support programs for new rural teachers, the fact remains that most of this cohort will return to the cities within two years. In a small town, it can take that long for people to simply begin to know the teacher and for the teacher to begin to understand the community.

At the same time, in those same towns, there are community members who would appreciate the opportunity to become teachers. Their families have made a long-term commitment to the area. Many of these potential teachers may already have some prior tertiary education. We would like to see and to support a drive to recruit and train such individuals to be teachers, and then to assure them that they will have opportunities in their local area as teaching positions become available. We would like to see support for teacher practicums for such trainee teachers in their own communities. We would also like to see a national program that would enable Indigenous Australians who have qualified as teachers' aides to develop into fully qualified teachers, again with the opportunity to work in their own communities.

Information on the unmet demand for teacher education suggests that there are significant numbers of high quality teacher trainees within such communities. Equally researchers have argued that having regard to a number of "age, gender, SES and applicant pool issues" the evidence suggests "that prospective teacher education and nursing students are likely to be more sensitive to fee levels than students studying in many other fields of education. This is particularly likely to be the case for prospective students from rural and regional Australia". (David Phillips in Barry Cameron, *Never enough of a good thing?: unmet demand for tertiary education and training*, Tertiary Education Management Conference 28 September – 1 October 2003)

Our interest in distance-delivered teacher education, especially to rural and regional Australia led us, in 2004, to initiate a series of meetings amongst our Shareholder universities. Griffith University, Macquarie University and Monash University, in particular, engaged with us in examining what might be possible. The barriers we encountered are described under item 11, below. We believe that with some changes to government policy settings, these barriers can be overcome. There are of course other issues that are in our own hands, such as how to organise across-the-country practicums and face-to-face tuition where it is necessary. We are finding solutions to similar issues through our new Nursing qualification, introduced this year, and are confident that they can be dealt with if the issues raised here are addressed.

The viability of a national distance-delivered program would also be affected by the extent to which curriculum frameworks and standards around the country lead to significant syllabus and assessment differences in schools

Term of Reference 11: Examine the adequacy of the funding of teacher training courses by university administrations.

Teacher education is an expensive commitment by universities due to its extensive practicum component. NSW research supports these claims. The University of Wollongong reported in 2003 that the high costs of field experience placed a limitation on the number of student places that could be offered in teacher education. Barry Cameron has suggested that the national award regarding the payment of teachers for supervising practicum students 'translates into a 10-15% tax on teacher education, even before the academic unit's own involvement in the practicum is factored in". (Barry Cameron, *Never enough of a good thing?: unmet demand for tertiary education and training*, Tertiary Education Management Conference 28 September – 1 October 2003). There are limits to which cross-subsidisation of courses can be carried by university administrations.

Resulting restrictions on providing teacher education have meant 7,787 qualified applicants were turned away from teacher education places at Australian universities in 2002. At the same time there are major shortages in certain disciplines and geographic areas, while the profession is ageing. In NSW, there is currently an annual shortfall of 600 Mathematics, Science and Technology teaching graduates, while completion numbers in these categories have declined by a total of 246 since 1995 (NSW Submission to the Commonwealth Government Review of Higher Education, <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/reviews/subhighedu/>).

AV-CC figures show that while unmet demand for teacher education has been exceeding the national average for fields of education since 2001, reaching 40% in 2003, "universities only increased the number of offers made to eligible applicants by 1.6% between 2001 and 2003"(Cameron,2003). This discrepancy is most serious outside the metropolitan area. Charles Sturt University experienced a 29 per cent increase in first preferences for teaching courses in 2002, to a total of 3,464. However offers were under 600. Similarly, first preferences for the Graduate Diploma of Education numbered 1034 but offers could only be made to 271 applicants (NSW Submission).

As the Deans of Education point out with 40% of eligible applicants missing out in 2004, up from 28% in 2001 this represents nearly 10,000 eligible applicants who are now not offered a place in the field of Education. (*New Teaching, New Learning: A Vision for Australian Education*, October 2004, Australian Council of Deans of Education, Canberra). The trend continued in 2005 with, for example, in Victoria 49.4% of would-be teachers missing out on first round offers.

At the same time, there is a considerable disjunction between charging (and thus funding) teacher education, and nursing education students, at a very low HECS level and then expecting universities to be able to conduct these very expensive programs in ways that ensure the highest quality outcomes. It may be necessary for the government to consider funding these two professional courses at a higher level than that corresponding with the level of HECS fees that students encounter, reflecting their status as national priority areas.

Specifically, there are two barriers to increased access to teacher training that our colleagues have discussed with us:

1. *The available funding for practicum supervision* for both by the university teaching method staff and by teaching method supervisors at the schools. Currently many university Education faculties are underwriting the cost of supervision by shifting some of the income they receive for subject matter units to the practicum units. This problem is even more acute when the subject matter units are taught in other faculties.

Supervision generally requires a great deal of travel and staff time with the result practical considerations limit the geographical reach of practicums. In order to keep costs under control, universities employ many part-time former teachers, rather than university staff, to provide university supervision and quality assurance. While there are many excellent supervisors resulting from this approach, this inevitably results in uneven quality of supervision.

Not only does this put the overall quality and consistency of trainee supervision at risk, it means the quality and relevance of the university program is not enriched by academics' regular exposure to the realities of today's classrooms. It also means that experienced teachers have less opportunity for professional development that might accrue from discussions of methods with university researchers.

Universities need to have funding that recognises the costs of programs with heavy practicum commitments rather than rely on the juggling of funds between discipline areas.

2. *Implications of National Priority status*

Education's status as a national priority has increased the financial constraints of the education academic providers. Indeed, the national priority status was not reflected increased funding over and above what the discipline area might have expected under the pre-existing weighting system. In 2004 Education had a weighting status of 1.3 (on a par with Behavioural Sciences and Social Studies). A similar status in 2005 would have resulted in an estimated income base of \$11 322 rather than the estimated \$11006 (Exact amounts are not published by DEST).

Exacerbating this is the fact that Graduate and Postgraduate Education are now funded at the same weighting as Undergraduate Education and had no practicum increase. The latter probably resulted a slightly less funding in 2005.