

Inquiry into Teacher Education

House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training

Submission by Glenn Scarffe - Maths/Physics Teacher, Tully State High School

Preamble:

I have been teaching for 7 years, all of which has been at Tully State High School, a north Queensland school situated near the coast in between Townsville and Cairns. After completing high school I undertook two years of a Bachelor of Engineering degree before switching over to a Bachelor of Science in Applied Mathematics and Statistics (my true love). After graduating I worked at Griffith University as a research assistant and casual tutor for two years before undertaking a one-year Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary), which was being offered for the last time as a one-year course. Upon completion of this degree I received my placement to Tully State High School. I believe I am well placed to make a submission (to relevant terms of reference) to this enquiry, and am doing so in my capacity as a Queensland teacher, a past university student, and also as a previous member of university staff. Any opinions expressed here are my personal opinions and are not necessarily the opinions of my school.

Responses to the Terms of Reference:

1. Examine and assess the criteria for selecting students for teacher training courses

Ideally, the teaching of students in high schools is done most effectively when highly qualified, experienced and enthusiastic teachers teach in their chosen field(s). Teachers who are highly qualified possess both the intricate subject knowledge across theoretical and practical contexts, but importantly demonstrate and apply this upon a sound pedagogical base.

Prospective teachers in Queensland can graduate in one of two ways: either by a dedicated four-year teaching degree, specialising in two subject areas; or by completing a graduate degree in teaching (1/2 years) after completing an undergraduate degree (usually three years) in their subject areas.

The selection of students for both undergraduate and post-graduate teaching degrees must be more than an 'entry score' process, which in recent years is continuing to trend downwards. There are various important factors that will have a bearing on whether or not a person is suitable for a career in teaching, including a love and enjoyment of the subject they teach, an ability to acquire new knowledge and understanding, and an ability to teach using 'multiple literacies', that is to be able to explain concepts in multiple ways to cater for the diverse style or learners.

Teachers possessing an undergraduate degree in their chosen field before undertaking a teaching degree will generally demonstrate all of the above criteria. Quite often the coursework they undertake is of a higher level than what is required in secondary schools, however this often means that as teachers they have a greater understanding of the extensions and applications of the work, and will not generally be subject to 'credibility' issues in the classroom.

However that is not to say that teachers who complete an undergraduate teaching degree are not suitable, but it is often the case that they enter a teaching degree not

convinced of the subject areas they wish to teach in, and therefore may not possess the criteria I believe is necessary for good teaching.

I suggest that in addition to the general intake of students studying undergraduate degrees in teaching, universities (supported by government) actively target people with, or about to complete, degrees in other fields to consider teaching as a career. These students may be attracted via a scholarship or bursary to financially assist them into further study, and/or preferential placement to school districts/regions of their choice.

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

At present, teaching as a profession is seen by many as a career to go into when all else fails. Secondary school students who are thinking about a career in teaching are often very influenced by their own teachers. A consequence of this is the decline in the proportion of male teachers remaining in the system. What was initially a concern mainly confined to the primary school sector is now spreading into secondary schools. This reduction in the number of male role models is having a damaging affect on the number of young men, who may be well suited for a career in teaching, who decide against a teaching career.

A dynamic and diverse teaching body is essential for schools to offer a 'well-rounded' education to pupils. Teacher training courses will not significantly enhance this diversity on their own. Attracting students from diverse backgrounds and experiences will require novel schemes in addition to those mentioned above such as scholarships to groups of students that have been identified as being either under-represented or of a high quality. Unfortunately, financial factors limit the number of people who consider teaching as a 'career change'. Low starting salaries and salary scales which work on the number of years teaching mean that it becomes a financial risk for some who have to study for up to four years with no guarantee of a full-time position, and then begin on a salary often significantly lower than before. It is quite often these people who make the best teachers due to their wide life experiences and at present there are not enough incentives to lure these people into a teaching career.

I suggest that starting salaries be more flexible to take into account other experiences and that financial assistance in the way of scholarships or HECS-free places be given to those who transfer to teaching from another career.

3. Examine attrition rates from teaching courses and reasons for that attrition.

Apart from the baseline attrition rate associated with any university course, teaching degrees have additional inherent difficulties in keeping students. Without any detailed data on attrition rates I believe that, unlike most other courses, the practical component required in studying a teaching degree is unique. It is this 'real-life' component, which is of course essential, that will be the deciding factor to students in deciding whether to continue in the course. From what I understand of the current schedule, students do a limited amount of practical placement during the early stages of their degree. Although many students have just left secondary school themselves, it is important that they understand early in their course what it will be like when they are in front of a class. It can be quite daunting for a teenager to have to teach students only a year or two younger than themselves and it is this reality check that may persuade many to leave their course early.

An increasing component of a teacher's week is taken up with non-teaching activities including planning and marking which has always existed, but of late the increase in time taken on administration has required a teacher to learn new skills including the

use of technology. It is important that pre-service teachers are exposed to the full gamut of activities early on in their course.

I suggest that pre-service teachers undertake a significant amount of time at a school in their first year of study – not in an official teaching capacity, but just to oversee what teachers are required to do. Of course, students should be encouraged to participate actively in class but only in situations where they and their supervisors feel comfortable. As time progresses and the students feel comfortable with curricula, aspects of planning and other non-teaching tasks, their in-class practical time would increase. Hand in hand with these school visits would exist lectures which complement the phase of practical work currently being undertaken.

6. Examine the interaction and relationships between teacher training courses and other university faculty disciplines.

At present, the subject-specific skills required by teachers is being taught in isolation from the broader body of thought. For example, a prospective maths teacher takes the required mathematics subjects offered by the university as a subset of their total study, and thus are always learning within the context of teaching, rather than learning itself. The student therefore does not appreciate the broader application and depth of study that is possible in their area. As mentioned earlier, it is this larger 'world view' of the subject matter which often can make a significant difference to the way our material is both delivered and taken up by our students. This is where post-graduate and other mature age teaching students have an ability to teach both in context, and with a larger appreciation of the extension and application of the subject.

I suggest that students are exposed to a larger field of study in their area(s) than would be deemed the 'minimum', and that students gain a deeper understanding, appreciate the history and significance of, and realise the application (including careers) of their subject areas.

8. Examine the role and input of schools and their staff to the preparation of trainee teachers.

Universities should see practicing teachers as their greatest resource. With due respect to academics that are often at the forefront of pedagogical change, it is those at the 'coalface' who have a more intimate knowledge of the requirements, diversity and changes that are inherent in schools today. Trainee teachers should be exposed to teaching staff continuously, not just during practical placements. A situation where every trainee teacher is paired up with a practicing teacher I would see as a both a fundamental benefit to the trainee, but also a professional benefit to the teacher. Regardless of whether the two actually meet face to face, this professional exchange between the two would give trainee teachers a full-time mentor or point of call to assist them in all aspects of their study. I believe the majority of schools would see this as a valuable enrichment exercise to their teachers and the school in general.

In addition to mentoring, another example of the huge resource which schools could be to teacher training institutions is for practicing teaching to be involved in the planning and delivery of lectures and/or tutorials. Guest lectures or tutorials involving enthusiastic teachers can only boost interest and relevance in students, who often have the opinion that lecturers are too far removed from current teaching pedagogy and practices. Hence the expression, "those who know teach, those who don't teach teachers to teach".

9. Investigate the appropriateness of the current split between primary and secondary education training.

In our state, there has been a shift in ideology towards the 'middle phase of learning' and as a result many schools are now modelled on the lower/middle/upper designation. Thus the current primary/secondary division in teacher training will not cater exactly to what is happening at many schools. For this reason I believe teacher training courses, while still being split into two groups, will have to contain a significant amount of 'overlap' in both their content and delivery.

10. Examine the construction, delivery and resourcing of ongoing professional learning for teachers already in the workforce.

Professional development opportunities have increased significantly in just the past seven years while I have been teaching. This is partly a union-based initiative to justify our 'professional' status, but also a response to a large body of respected research which points to positive correlations between teaching outcomes and professional development.

I believe that the majority of professional development initiatives undertaken should be chosen on a school-by-school basis. While there appears to be a marked increase in the number of regulatory protocols which require state-wide professional development days, schools need to give targeted, flexible and relevant professional development to their staff. Schools must embark on a medium to long-term professional development strategy which is approved by the relevant district or state authority and have access to the proper funding and resources to be able to carry this out.

Thankyou for your interest in what is a very important and necessary review.

Yours faithfully,

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