



# **SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY INTO TEACHER EDUCATION**

Prepared by:  
Professor Lawrence Angus  
School of Education  
University of Ballarat

15.04.2005



This brief submission touches on several issues that the Inquiry might discuss in detail during the course of its investigation. One point that should be emphasised is that the University of Ballarat welcomes any attempt to review and improve teacher education. It should be noted, however, that there has been a plethora of Inquiries, Reviews and Reports into this area over the past two decades and particularly in the last few years. One cannot help but wonder about the motivation behind this particular Inquiry, particularly when comments attributed to the Minister for Education in the media suggest that he is responding to the unsubstantiated comments of some school principals and annoyance at public comments made by a small number of members of the education profession. This is not to suggest that a fairly conducted Inquiry will not be of great benefit.

A strong argument can be made that the current period is one in which the pace of change is increasing and the importance of education for a progressive society and strong economy has never been greater. This is certainly not the time for any kind of government-backed public commentary that is dismissive of those who strive to prepare teachers to begin the challenging career of teaching. More and more is expected of teachers in contemporary Australia and internationally. And more and more is being delivered. It is clear from his public statements that the Minister has heard some dismissive comments about Education graduates from some school principals, and it is true that school principal associations have expressed concerns about some elements of teacher education. However, I have yet to come across a school principal who does not agree that Education graduates today are far better prepared than in the past. The point is whether this already excellent level of teacher preparation is good enough for the demands of the current period. This is where all education participants can make a contribution to the Inquiry and support the necessary continuous improvement of teacher education.

**Term of reference 1: Examine and assess the criteria for selecting students for teacher training (education) courses.**

Selection of year 12 school leavers is typically according to ENTER scores with rescaling of the middle band of applicants according to desirable criteria for the particular courses. Around 50% of students entering Education courses are mature aged, and these are typically selected according to a range of indicators and in accordance with their prior experience. Some programs require interviews and/or other more comprehensive selection mechanisms, but these are extremely expensive and their reliability may be problematic. This is particularly the case with interviews. It is not clear that good performers at interview necessarily make the best teachers.

**Term of reference 2: Examine the extent to which teacher training (education) courses can attract high quality students, including students from diverse backgrounds and experiences**

It is generally accepted that graduates of Education programs are better prepared and of higher quality than at any other time. The entrants, too, are generally of high quality in terms of ENTER scores and equivalent ranking on the basis of their experience. The diversity of entrants is particularly apparent in the approximately 50% of entrants who are mature age.

In Victoria, successful programs have been launched to attract people, including professionals, into teaching. These should be examined. Most such programs involve fast-tracking and flexible delivery. However, it should be noted that teacher education courses typically have far more applicants than there are places. The most direct and obvious way to include a greater number of high quality students would be to increase DEST load in education.



**Term of reference 3: Examine attrition rates from teaching courses and reasons for that attrition.**

The figures indicate that attrition rates from Education courses are low. Departure rates tend to come later when practicing teachers depart the profession for a broad range of alternative careers (including politics- leaders of both main political parties in Victoria, for example, are former teachers as have been recent Premiers on both sides).

What deserves closer investigation is the relative ease with which practicing teachers move from teaching to other professions. Such movement is sometimes interpreted negatively as teachers 'dropping out' but the reality is that teachers have been educated in, and have developed on the job, the sorts of generic skills that are increasingly required by business and industry. A cursory examination of the outcomes for many teachers who took part in the Victorian Teacher Release to Industry Program illustrates this point. Participants left teaching because they were snapped up in their industry placements and offered senior positions. In similar ways, the movement of teachers into other areas of work, while it is to be regretted in terms of maintaining a strong teaching profession, is to be celebrated in terms of enhancing the skills base of Australian business and industry.

**Term of reference 4: Examine and assess the criteria for selecting and rewarding Education faculty members.**

Education faculty members typically have prior experience in teaching and educational leadership. Also, many Education programs make use of experienced practicing teachers who are often employed to deliver those elements of the program that most benefit from current professional knowledge and current practice. The mix works well and has, in some cases, contributed to the expert professional teachers conducting further research and study and gaining appointments as academics. The inclusion of expert practitioners has strengthened many programs and aided the always problematic balance between theory and practice. In fact, where the combination works best, it tends to blur or even eliminate the theory-practice distinction.

Rewarding faculty members is constrained by funding limitations, which have been only marginally eased by the recent allocation of modest funds to assist with the practicum.

**Term of reference 5: Examine the educational philosophy underpinning the teacher training (education) courses (including the teaching methods used, course structure and materials, and methods for assessment and evaluation).**

This term of reference deals with an enormous range of topics that are worthy of substantial investigations on their own.

In beginning to address this term of reference it should be noted that Education, as has been pointed out by numerous leading philosophers, is an inherently contestable concept. There is simply no 'one best way' of going about teaching and learning. Rather, it is important in education, as in most other important areas of social life (such as politics), that we are alert to the possibilities of new ideas and ongoing debates, and must be willing to critically appraise our assumptions and assert a range of positions that can inform educational policy and practice. As in politics, it is extremely dangerous when zealotry passes for philosophy, and such an anti-educational phenomenon as zealotry is to be avoided at all costs. Teacher educators are very aware of these points and will welcome a sincere and considered Inquiry that can inform and support their work. It



is therefore important that the Inquiry itself be informed by the perspectives of diverse participants in the delivery of education and training, its governance, and in the diverse social and employment contexts in which the beneficiaries of education will live their lives.

Given the above, educational philosophies should be able to encompass a level of pluralism and a range of conceptual positions and assumptions that are consistent with an educated and informed society. Fundamental educational issues are continually being conceptualised and reconceptualised. Critical thinking and reflection, the testing of good ideas against other ideas, and the willingness to incorporate into one's own thinking the influential ideas of others, are central to any concept of education. Further, philosophical perspectives must be forward looking rather than steeped in the past and must be informed by considered views of the fundamental purposes of education. And they must be grounded in the realities of the present as well as the foreseeable future.

For example, one of the most significant elements of the reconceptualisation of teacher education over the past decade has been the critical importance given to the point that teachers learn to be teachers throughout their careers. This is important not only for teacher development as professional educators, but precisely because the educational needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will change rapidly during the course of any teacher's career. It is exceedingly important that pre-service teachers learn this point well. They cannot expect to be 'ready-made' teachers in their first year in schools. Being a teacher requires the development of an ongoing relationship between the teacher and students that is simply not possible during pre-service courses. Recognition of this basic point is clearly of immense importance to the Inquiry (and relates to several of its terms of reference) because the point highlights the importance of teacher education being regarded as an essential aspect of all stages of a teacher's career. It is the main point behind the introduction in Victoria of formal in-school mentoring processes for beginning teachers and the attempts to develop a strong culture of continuous mentoring and professional development in education.

**Term of reference 6: Examine the interactions and relationships between teacher training courses and other university/faculty disciplines**

Education has certainly opened the doors to participation by other faculties throughout the past decade. It is now not uncommon for Education students to complete around 50% of their course in other faculties. This is the case for combined degrees such as BEd/BSc and almost all Education courses have significant contributions from the disciplines. So strong has been such 'outside' involvement that, particularly in smaller universities, the viability of many areas such as humanities, mathematics, sciences and IT has been maintained by the presence of Education students in their subjects. Many of these areas would be very vulnerable if not for the presence of Education students in their subjects.

**Term of reference 7: Examine the preparation of primary and secondary teaching graduates to:**

- 
- 

The items listed in this term of reference must typically be covered in teacher education courses if they are to be accredited by, In Victoria for example, the Victorian Institute of Teaching. However, points made in relation to term of reference 5 are also relevant to this term. As is apparent even just from the range of topics listed in this term of reference, teacher education must be a career-long enterprise which includes continuing professional development. The teacher education



curriculum is very crowded, and it is a truism that education priorities change over time - for a host of reasons. Initial teacher education cannot, and should not attempt to, deliver graduates who can be regarded as ready-made teachers. Part of the prevailing current philosophy of education is that teachers must also be learners – continual learners. This is possibly the most important thing that pre-service teachers can learn during their teacher education courses.

**Term of reference 8: Examine the role and input of schools and their staff to the preparation of trainee teachers.**

As mentioned above (Term 4), expert practicing teachers are used quite extensively in most Education courses. This development has been enthusiastically pursued by teacher education institutions and also by schools that have been prepared to develop partnership arrangements. Such collaboration has enabled a great deal of innovation in programs. Of course, teachers in schools also supervise pre-service teachers in their school practicum, where, as skilled practitioners, they mentor and support the student teachers and have substantial responsibility for assessment of the student teacher's capacity to teach.

**Term of reference 9: Investigate the appropriateness of the current split between primary and secondary education.**

This is a thorny question. Virtually all State and national systems have such a split, sometimes into more than just two major 'stages' of schooling. Administratively, such splitting has obviously proven to be convenient and it would require substantial restructuring at huge cost to do anything different now. Conceptually, however, in teacher education the notion of a clear developmental split between primary and secondary has long been regarded as artificial. Indeed, some Education courses prepare students to teach across the divide - for example, the BEd (P-10) program at the University of Ballarat. This program emphasises the 'middle years' (years 5-9) not because they are regarded as a separate developmental stage but because, historically, young people in that stage of schooling have been most likely to become disengaged from education.

**Term of reference 10: Examine the delivery, construction and resourcing of ongoing professional learning for teachers already in the workplace.**

This term of reference points to an area of teacher education that is in urgent need of attention and resourcing. In many universities, and in smaller universities in particular, Commonwealth Supported Places have been withdrawn from postgraduate level Education courses (except for immediate pre-service courses). In these universities Master of Education programs are withering. The full-fee costs are prohibitive for most teachers and, unlike in comparable countries like the USA, they do not receive any salary increment or any clear advantage in promotion as a result of gaining a MEd qualification. In the rapidly changing educational world of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, it would seem imperative that practicing teachers engage in the academic study of new ideas and educational developments. Enabling them to upgrade their qualifications is a funding imperative. Such upgrading will assist established teachers to take a necessary leadership role in relation to the increasing proportion of graduate teachers needed to staff the nation's schools.

**Term of reference 11: Examine the adequacy of the funding of teacher training (education) courses by the university administration.**

This is obviously a complex matter. The Minister has been quoted as commenting that he suspects that recent allocation of funds to universities to contribute to the costs of the practicum may not be being used as intended. However, the increase in funding has been modest anyway – partly because it was rolled into the annual operating grant and allocated according to taught load.



SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY  
INTO TEACHER EDUCATION

---

This has meant that universities have taken their usual 'off-the-top' proportions for central administration and infrastructure. And by following taught load, most courses have not received the supplementation they might have expected. Indeed, it seems odd for DEST to have said they wanted to support the costs of practicum yet to allocate the money according to taught load. As stated above, many Education courses have only 50% of the taught load of Education courses yet bear 100% of the cost of the practicum. If Education courses were taught totally within the Faculties of Education, they'd be getting much more per student for the practicum costs yet they'd be doing the same amount of practicum.

It will be important for the Inquiry to investigate such matters and the relative effects on Education viability since the introduction of DEET Weightings in the late 1980s through to the encouragement of other discipline areas (apart from Nursing) to raise their HECS charges by 25% in 2005.

It is pertinent to note that in recent years there has been an unprecedented increase in the level of resourcing of education, and of teacher education, in many nations (particularly the OECD nations with which Australia likes to be favourably compared). In this respect, the Australian education system is in danger of falling behind. The Inquiry must confront the stark reality that most comparable nations to Australia are investing heavily in education while Australian and State governments are not. Indeed, teacher educators across the country have larger teaching loads than their academic peers in other Faculties/Departments and, over the past decade, have had their number approximately halved while the number of students enrolled in Education has approximately doubled. It is absolutely essential that funding issues are addressed as a priority. It should be acknowledged that teacher educators have performed extremely well in such circumstances as is indicated by the high levels of demand for Education courses, the high levels of student satisfaction and completion rates, and employment rates. Moreover, because of their general quality, Australian Education graduates are being actively recruited internationally.

The Inquiry provides an excellent opportunity to recognise the current nature of teacher education, to support teacher educators in improving their work, and to ensure that Australia, like its colleague nations, improves its investment in teacher education and education generally.

The School of Education at the University of Ballarat wishes members of the Inquiry well in their investigation and deliberations. We would be happy to assist the Inquiry in any way.

Yours sincerely

Professor Lawrence Angus  
Head, School of Education  
University of Ballarat  
and  
Chair, Victorian Council of Deans of Education



SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY  
INTO TEACHER EDUCATION

---