

15th April 2005

The Secretary of the Committee
Inquiry into Teacher Education
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2000

Dear Sir/ Madam

I wish to make a submission to the Inquiry into Teacher Education regarding an issue and associated matters that have concerned me over the past 30 years of lecturing in Teacher Education, researching in the field of education and supervising trainee teacher (Secondary and Primary). My concern is the low academic standards and skill level required of Teacher Education graduates.

I will briefly discuss my concerns under the following headings:

1. Academic and professional rigour:

Over the past 30 years I have been engaged in training Teacher Education students as a team member in a number of units which clearly lacked academic and professional rigour. On occasion I have witnessed Education students engaged in units that are unfortunately mockingly called "Cut and Paste: 101" and "Cut and Paste: 202." These courses of study lack academic rigour and possess little or no long term professional benefit.

The knowledge levels, skills, ability and professional understanding of graduates from University courses such as Medicine, Dentistry, Law, Accountancy, etc compared to Teacher Education graduates indicates to the Australia community that Education graduates possess little in-depth knowledge of their chosen profession and few teaching skills and ability.

2. The standard of achievement:

The standard of achievement expected of students studying Teacher Education courses is so low that in my opinion the standard is both "academically and professionally shabby." May I illustrate with merely one example. In a First Year Education course assessed by the University that educates the largest number of Australian teachers the lowest mark awarded was an inflated 60 percent. One student gained 13 marks lower than this inflated minimum. This student who gained merely 47% was awarded a pass as she was perceived to be only 3% lower than 50% rather than 13 % less able than the next lowest student. Similar illustrations can be multiplied twenty-fold!

Many first year Education written assessment requirements and examinations are lacking in specificity so that they can be passed by any assessment -wise first year University student without attendance at the lectures or tutorial sessions or even reference to course materials.

Some tutorials and workshop sessions arranged as part of the coursework of Teacher Education units are often time-wasting exercises. After the first 20 minutes or so little is accomplished in these sessions that is of any real benefit to the professional career of those in attendance.

3. Student Evaluations:

As an academic involved in Teacher Education programs I have been keen to increase the educational and academic rigour of those units for which I have been responsible.

Unfortunately I became 'caught between a rock and a hard place'. If I endeavoured to increase the quality or quantity of my Units I became aware that students may complain to my Superiors or downgrade my Unit Evaluations. As both my Superiors and the results of the Student Unit Evaluations are used to determine my suitability for promotion I chose the path of least resistance and ensured that my Superiors and my students were "happy" with my Units rather than academically and professionally challenged by them.

I often wondered at the worth of the evaluations by a group of 18 year olds judging the professional value of an education unit that they may not fully appreciate till the third or fourth year of their teaching career. Student evaluations of units have become merely unreliable "popularity contests" rather than valid indicators of the quality or worth of a Teacher Education unit.

4. Academic Content:

One reason for the low academic and professional rigour of Teacher Education subjects is due to Secondary and Primary education students not becoming proficient in an area of study. They are taught, for example, to teach mathematics without any real understanding of the academic discipline of mathematics. They are taught mathematics curriculum units not mathematics units. Thus during the 1990s I discovered in mathematics curriculum units that approximately ten percent of Primary Teacher Education students could not pass (50% pass mark) a test in Year 6/7 Mathematics and few had little real understanding of the discipline of mathematics..

Education students should be required as part of their 4 year degree to complete a minor (3 units at least at the First and Second Year Level) in a chosen field.

5. Professional Practice

The Pre-Service Professional Practice sessions undertaken by trainee teachers in schools are supervised by mentor teachers who have been educated in the same system with its lack of rigour and low level of professional standards. In short, a number of mentor teachers are poor role models. Unfortunately many Tertiary Educators have been similarly educated; some have in a sense never 'left school.'

Recommendations:

I recommend that the Committee examine ways:

- i. to ensure the Teacher Education courses are significantly increased in academic and professional rigour;
- ii. to increase the standard of achievement expected of students studying Teacher Education courses so that the standards of achievement begin to equate to at least the minimum standards of the other professions;
- iii. to return the invalid and unreliable Student evaluations of Units to a position of non-compulsory indicators used by Educators for their own professional purposes rather than indicators of successful teaching of relevant units;
- iv. to ensure that Pre-Service Professional Practice sessions possess a high level of professional experience.

Unfortunately while I wish the committee members well in their endeavour I believe that due to entrenched attitudes and belief structures and lack of goodwill it will be near impossible to move Teacher Education to approach the academic and professional rigour of the other professions.

Yours sincerely

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