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Submission: Inquiry into Teacher Education

Terms of reference

O Examine and assess the criteria for selecting students for teacher training courses

O Examine the preparation of primary/secondary teaching graduates to teach LITERACY (and numeracy).

SUMMARY

1. Students are entering universities from their schooling (primary and secondary) with a wide range of differing abilities in their foundational literacy skills (Report/Evidence attached). At this point in time, universities must accept students into programs as they present; it cannot be expected that all students have acquired all the necessary skills and knowledge considered essential for tertiary education. Having a lack of foundational literacy skills DOES NOT mean that, in the long term, a student is unsuitable for tertiary studies (including the teaching profession). Many students exhibiting these 'surface' problems may be high achievers, efficient learners and potentially competent professionals in the workplace.

2. Raising the level of tertiary entry scores will not, in itself, ensure that the system will get the 'best' teachers. There is not always a high correlation between tertiary entrance scores and mastery of foundational literacy skills.

3. No matter how well prospective teachers master the methodology and teaching matter of English/literacy, they will be ineffective teachers if their personal literacy skills are flawed. Teachers are the 'models' and 'assessors' of spoken and written English in the day-to-day teaching of all aspects of English in classrooms.

4. In the short term, the government must recognise that the present education system has produced many students with fundamental literacy problems, and needs to provide 'dedicated' funding to address student 'deficits' in those areas of education for which they (governments) have been responsible. A model of intervention needs to be conceptualised and put into practice as a matter of urgency so that students who are now in training for the teaching profession move into the workplace with adequate literacy competencies and the ability to teach these to the next generation of tertiary entrants.

Background of submission writer

I am writing this submission as an independent person. I was a primary school teacher in Queensland for nearly 20 years with 1.5 years teaching secondary English. This was followed by 15 years in consultancy services delivering professional development in English curriculum to schools. During the past 4 years and at this present time, I am a Faculty Mentor (FM) holding two, half-time positions in the Faculties of Education and Nursing and Economics, Business and Law at the University of New England (UNE). An FM position is responsible for the induction of students in the first year courses of faculties, assisting with the teaching of essay writing skills and general literacy problems.

It is from my FM position in the School of Education (12 hours per week / 150 students) for the past 3 years and from my extensive experience in the teaching profession that I base this submission.

O **Examine and assess the criteria for selecting students for teacher training courses**
O **Examine the preparation of primary/secondary teaching graduates to teach LITERACY (and numeracy)**

As part of my position as FM, I have taken an immense personal and professional interest in the first year students who have been selected to participate in teacher training programs. I have assisted these students with their essay writing and conducted a range of literacy tests across the student cohort to ascertain the level of 'foundational' literacy of the students for three consecutive years. I have followed up this testing with sets of remediation workshops in an endeavour to alleviate 'problem' areas. These activities have given me further insights into the standard of literacy among students of education.

A very general observation drawn from these experiences, combined with my background in teaching and literacy, is that students entering university have a very 'mixed bag' of basic literacy skills (general writing skills including grammar, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure and handwriting) which I suggest could depend on whom they have had as teachers and possibly where they were educated. I would consider, from the data I have collected, that at least 50% were 'underskilled' in these basic areas.

In the course of my work with education students, I have conducted tests and collected considerable data. By way of example, I have submitted an APPENDIX of a Report/Data on student competencies with the spelling of a middle primary school level core spelling list. While this data was collected with UNE education students, I would claim that similar data would most likely result from testing in other faculties and at other universities. From my observations of student essay writing, I would also suggest that similar testing in other foundational literacy areas (e.g. punctuation, grammar and sentence structure) would most likely yield similar results.

Many of the students who participated in this spelling study achieved a range of levels in higher education exit scores. Throughout the academic year, a number of students in the literacy intervention programs were achieving high marks in their assessment tasks and receiving good reports from their teaching practice schools. It appears to me that their 'impoverished' spelling skills were more the result of poor teaching at some earlier time in their education rather than a lack of academic abilities and personal suitability for teaching. Surely, the school system has a duty of 'educational care' to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by the negligence that has seemingly occurred through a poorly organised education system.

The point I am endeavouring to put across here is that students qualifying under the present university entrance system SHOULD be able to enter teaching with the condition that the government recognises that some/many of these students present with literacy deficits. Universities need to be funded to develop some systems to remediate the situation rather than disallow students from pursuing a chosen career.

I would like to point to Old Dominion University (USA) (see Reference below) as a model for how some focus on literacy standards could be achieved. It has implemented a university-wide 'Exit Examination of Writing Proficiency' which is 'a graduation requirement for all undergraduate students'. Suitable support services ensure that the students have many opportunities to re-sit tests and support mechanisms assist students by offering training programs in identified deficit areas. For students graduating from teaching courses, I would suggest that ALL STUDENTS SHOULD GRADUATE WITH A LITERACY PROFICIENCY CERTIFICATE ATTACHED TO THEIR FIRST DEGREE. I am sure that the general public would be most assured to know that the teachers of their children have attained not only a teaching degree but also certification of their personal literacy skills.

Lastly, I would like to point to the position of FM that I hold in the teacher education program as a model for the provision of effective interventions. I am an 'experienced school teacher' employed in a university where most 'teaching' employees are hired on the basis of academic qualifications / capacity to do research. The kind of work I do draws deeply on the knowledge and experience gained from teaching in schools. While the position relies on insecure funds, has low teacher-student ratio and is contract-based, UNE faculties have supported the service for over four years and should be commended for attempting to provide for its disadvantaged students. As a model of student support for university literacy interventions, it has much to offer any government examining ways and means of upgrading the literacy standards of its future teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Acknowledge that the education system for the last generation of Australian children has disadvantaged some students and that students currently enrolled in teacher education courses in universities at this point in time may require intervention programs with their foundational literacy skills.

2. Provide funds and 'sound' programs to upgrade the literacy skills of future teachers.

3. Attach mandatory literacy certificates to essential qualifications for employment in the teaching profession.

Reference

. Old Dominion University: Teaching Centre

http://search.netscape.com/ns/boomframe.jsp?query=old%2Bdominion%2Buniversity&page=1&offset=1&result_url=redir%3Fsrc%3Dwebsearch%26requestId%3Db3fed7d63c79f4e9%26clickedItemRank%3D1%26userQuery%3Dold%252Bdominion%252Buniversity%26clickedItemURN%3Dhttp%253A%252F%252Fwww.odu.edu%252F%26invocationType%3D-%26fromPage%3DnsBrowserRoll%26amp%3BampTest%3D1&remove_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.odu.edu%2F

APPENDIX: REPORT
RESEARCH PROJECT: IDENTIFICATIONAND REMEDIATION OF SPELLING DEFICITS IN FIRST YEAR BACHELOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAM

BACKGROUND

In 1999, with the assistance of the then Faculty Mentor for FEHPS (Corinne Buckland), a process of testing first year education students for literacy deficits was initiated. This activity was named the Literacy Diagnostic Activity (LDA) and was followed up with a set of five remediation workshops for identified students. One workshop was dedicated to spelling skills. When I took over the Faculty Mentor position in February 2003, I extended the literacy testing to include the *South Australian Spelling Test (SAST)*. In response to the results of this test, I took a group of 12 students who scored at the lowest level (below 50/70) of the first year education cohort for intensive remediation of their spelling The workshops ran for one hour a week for six weeks on a COMPULSORY basis. (Several of these students continued on with weekly spelling workshop sessions into their second year on a voluntary basis.)

In 2004, testing of basic skills in first year education was extended to include a grammar and a core mathematics test. Students were again tested for spelling deficiencies using *SAST*. More than half of the education group gained scores below 60/70 and about 20 of these students scored between 36-50/70 (about middle primary level). At tertiary level, any student scoring below the 60/70 level could be considered a 'challenged speller'. An examination of students' spelling approximations on the test items revealed that they had poor knowledge and application of a range of skills required for 'reasonable' spelling ability. The use of the measure of 'reasonable' presumes that students training to be teachers of primary level children should exhibit a reasonably high level of competence in their personal spelling abilities. This year, I took 25 students with test spelling results ranging from 36-53/70 for 10x1 hour remediation sessions.

THE SPELLING PROGRAM

The main aim of the remedial spelling program for students identified as the 'most challenged' in first year Education was to:

- Consider the 'issues' that students have had with spelling from their personal and academic experiences and find ways to improve their self-image/confidence as 'competent spellers'
- Test a 'core spelling list' and record all incorrect spelling. (Core spelling words are those words which are about 80% most frequently used in writing, and contain words which a teacher may need to write 'on their feet' in the course of running a classroom.)
- Identify and record a set of miscellaneous words misspelt in their written activities
- Expose the students to some word-level language studies appropriate for learning to understand how the English language system works for the correct spelling of words (e.g. spelling patterns, sound-symbol relationships, homophones, irregular verbs etc)
- Develop processes to analyse and learn words identified in their writing activities and through spelling tests
- Achieve 100% proficiency in individual tests of all words identified as misspelt in core and miscellaneous lists
- Come to some understanding of 'best practice' for the teaching of spelling by modelling this in the process of teaching the students to spell
- Explore multimedia programs which may be used by individuals to work independently to enhance memory retention of identified spelling words and provide interactive activities with feedback on learning-to-spell exercises/activities.

SOME OBSERVATIONS

- **Consider the 'issues' that students have had with spelling from their personal and academic experiences and find ways to improve their self-image/confidence as 'competent spellers'**

Most students were very conscious of their inability with spelling with some stating that 'no one has ever been able to teach me to spell'. They also said that they had developed a number of 'avoidance strategies' (e.g. when asked to write on the blackboard during teaching practice, they substituted more easily spelt synonyms - an 'enormous' animal was written as a 'big' animal). Students in this spelling group appeared to have a wide range of academic abilities with tertiary entrance scores ranging from the high to lower levels. Some students were achieving very well in assignment and teaching practice activities. In some cases, assignment work was a poor indicator of spelling inability as this only showed up under test conditions. In general, spelling difficulties did not neatly align with low academic performance.

- **Test a 'core spelling list' and record all incorrect spelling. (Core spelling words are those words which are 80% most frequently used in writing; and contain words which a teacher may need to write 'on their feet' in the course of running a classroom.)**

The core spelling list years 3-7 (about 400 words) from the Education Queensland English Syllabus was tested throughout the 10 week period. Nearly all students showed a weakness in spelling these basic words. For instance, most students had problems with common homophones, (e.g there/they're/their, who's/whose); commonly confused words (e.g affect/effect, practice/practise), simple contractions (hav'nt for haven't), Australian/American alternatives (e.g. color/colour), simple everyday words (e.g. fourty for forty, Feburary for February), plurals (e.g. two ladys) and verb tense (e.g. blead for bled). A table of word approximations and frequency of errors for this core list was drawn up (see Appendix 1).

- **Identify and record a set of miscellaneous words misspelt in their written activities**

Words were collected on a miscellaneous list in their spelling journals from all workshop activities including dictations and tests. Students often mismarked their own work and I regularly took up their spelling books to check their work, adding mismarked words to their personal list. In general, students seemed to have less trouble mastering the spelling of longer and more difficult words (e.g. all students could spell 'government' and 'syllabus' but were unable to the spell high frequency words like 'neither' or 'ninety' from the core list).

- **Expose the students to some word-level language studies appropriate for learning to understand how the English language system works for the correct spelling of words (e.g. spelling patterns, sound-symbol relationships, homophones, irregular verbs etc)**

Most students had little or no knowledge of basic word-level language studies which they could apply to their spelling (e.g. base words, chunking, homophones, word families, spelling patterns, spelling rules, irregular verbs, word derivatives etc). There was insufficient time to cover the full range of topics which needed to be studied, practised and applied to writing tasks.

- **Develop processes to analyse and learn words identified in their writing and through spelling tests**

At the beginning of the workshop sessions, it appeared that the students were limited to three main strategies for spelling words - 'know it off-by-heart', 'sounding out' and 'the computer will do it for me'. There are too many words that a teacher/tertiary level student is required to be able to spell to learn all of these 'off by heart' as individual units. 'Sounding out' is a poor strategy because of irregularities in the sound-letter relationships in words (about 60% irregular). Using computer spell check will not assist a teacher working 'on their feet' in a classroom context and cannot be entirely counted upon to read words in context. In general, students exhibited sparse knowledge of the range of strategies available to them for learning to spell words (e.g. learning the spelling patterns of groups of words, using mnemonics, word building from known words, identifying base words, applying common spelling rules, look/cover/write/check strategies etc).

- **Achieve 100% proficiency in individual tests of all words identified as misspelt in core and miscellaneous lists**

At the end of 10 weeks, all students had two individual lists of spelling words (core and miscellaneous) which had been identified as incorrect spelling. They had to learn these words and then make an appointment with me for a full test with the understanding that 100% mastery was required to receive a certificate of completion for the 10 week program. These one-on-one sessions gave me the opportunity to provide individual tuition on any spelling issue that arose. Students had to make further appointments until full mastery was achieved. During these interviews, I explained to students that the program they had undertaken was approximately a third of the experiences they would require to achieve 'reasonable' spelling mastery. Most of the students expressed a desire to continue with a higher level of a remedial spelling program in their second year.

(Please note: The writer recognises that 100% mastery level could 'drop' in time. Target words would require retesting at a later date and observations of application to contextual writing tasks would also be required to validate student mastery to this level.)

- **Come to some understanding of 'best practice' for the teaching of spelling by modelling this in the process of teaching the students to spell.**

All students were given a spelling journal (a favoured practice in most modern classrooms) as a basic resource for this spelling program. The journal contained lists of core words, templates for collecting and studying identified personal spelling words and a section covering information for word-level language studies. Most activities were conducted as they would be in a regular classroom, with a commentary on relevant classroom practice. Some students showed developing awareness of classroom practice and began to become analytical about how effective spelling programs were in their teaching practice schools.

- **Explore multimedia programs which may be used by individuals to work independently to enhance memory retention of identified spelling words and provide interactive activities with feedback on learning-to-spell exercises/activities.**

The program of instruction for this spelling group was highly 'teacher-centred'. Research of support materials revealed a number of suitable web/CD-ROM programs which could help the students with independent activities. While these programs may assist the student to develop a range of skills independently, I am of the opinion that they would not stand alone as a learning tool. Students needed structure, expectation, monitoring and support to overcome an embedded and clearly learnt inability to cope with the spelling of words for non-computer generated writing tasks. The use of AUSSIE SPELLFORCE (CD-ROM, interactive learning spelling program) was brought to my attention by a student with a long history of spelling difficulties. To my surprise, he had only a couple of errors in his individual test. He explained how he had used the program on a daily basis to practise the words on his list. Obviously, the use of technology for remembering activities had been very successful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All students who are training to be teachers in schools should exhibit a base level of personal spelling competencies as measured by a set of tests. Suitable tests need to identified/written to establish this.

2. Teaching staff in the teaching degree courses should be alerted to the problem of student spelling deficiencies and consider ways to assist students to enhance their spelling abilities by integrating spelling activities into their course work and workshop activities. There should be an expectation that written work is spelt correctly in all teaching and learning activities.

3. Because most spelling errors in core words have been thoroughly learnt in an incorrect form, it needs to be recognised that it will take considerable time to reteach and practise incorrect words so that the error is eliminated in day-to-day writing tasks. Deficits in student knowledge of word-level studies which apply to spelling competence also take considerable time to teach and practise to a level of acceptable proficiency in writing contexts.

4. There should be some clear statements about the function and importance of spelling in the work of teaching. How are teachers perceived in the public arena if they are unable to demonstrate their spelling competencies in the day-to-day running of classrooms and in their interactions with their client communities? Do the communities served by teachers have high expectations of the spelling abilities of the teachers of their children?

5. Students should have 'reasonable' level of personal literacy competencies in those areas of the state syllabus in which they are to be teachers.

DATA Core spelling list yrs 3-7: Error analysis of 25 students

Word (402)	Error analysis / frequency	No.
across	accross xxxxx	5
against	adgainst x agenst x	2
allow	alow xx	2
already	allready x	1
always	alway x allways xx	3
animal	anamial x	1
another	anther xxx	3
appear	apear xxxx	4
arrive	arive xxxxx x	6
my aunt	aurnt xx aint x anitie x arnt x	5
began	begain x	1
behind	behinde x	1
being	been x	1
believe	beleive x belive xx	3
board the boat	bord xxxx bored xxx	7
bought (buy)	brought xx baught x	3
bread	beard x	1
break an egg	brake xxx	3
breakfast	braekfast x break fast x	2
broom	brum x broun x	2
brother	brothe x	1
burnt	brunt x bunt x bernt x	
can't	cant xx	2
caught a ball	cought xxxx	4
centimetre	cenermetre xx centemeter xx centimeter xxx centemeter x centermeter x centrmetre xx	11
clothes	cloths xxxxx closes x clouths x	7
colour	color x	1
of course	ofcourse x of cource x of cause xx of corse xx	6
corner	connar x courner x cornor x	3
cousin	couisin x cousine x cousion xx	4
decide	dicide x	1
decrease	decress xx	2
disappear	disapear xxxxx xx dissapear x disap---x x disaper x	10
doctor	docter x	1
does	dose xxx	3
dollar	dollor x	1

Word (402)	Error analysis / frequency	No.
don't	don't x	1
during	durring xx	2
empty	emty x	1
far	fare x	1
favourite	favorite xxxxx favourte x flavour x favourate xxx faviourite x faviorate x	12
a few	afew x	1
finally	finially xxx	3
finish	finnish x	1
fire	fier x	1
flew away	flow away x	1
wash the floor	flaw xxx	3
fly	flie x	1
follow	flow x	1
force	fource xx forse x froce x	4
fright	fight x frieght x	2
front	frount x	1
germ	gurum x gherm x	2
guard	gaurd xxx gard x	4
happiness	happyness x happey x hap---x x happieness x happynes x	5
haven't	hav'nt x havnt x havent xx have'nt xxx havn't x	8
health	heath x	1
heavy	heavey xx	2
he's coming	his xxxxx hes x	6
I hear you	here you x	1
heard you	herd you xxx heart you x heared you x	5
hide	hinde x	1
holiday	holliday x	1
ride a horse	hourse x	1
hospital	hospitial x hospitle xx	3
hungry	huggery x hungary x hungrey x	3
interpret	interrpret x interperet x interprut x intepret x interperate x interprete x interpret x interprite xx interpert x	10
it's nice	its x	1

Word (402)	Error analysis / frequency	No.
jail	gail x	1
joyful	joyfull xxx	3
kilometre	kilometer xxxxx xxx kilomiter x kelometer x	10
two ladies	ladys x	1
laser	lazer xxxxx x lasiar xx lasour x	9
later	latter x	1
lead / led	(confusion) xxxxx x leed x	7
letter	leter x	1
litre	liter xx letre xx leter x	5
lose / loose	(confusion) xxxxx xxxxx xx los x	13
maybe	maby x	1
meant	ment xxxxx xxxxx x met x	12
metre (measure)	meter xxxxx xx	7
minutes	minuts x	1
moment	momment x	1
month	mounth x	1
Ms Smith	Miz Smith x Mis Smith x	2
nearly	nealy x nearley x	2
neither	niether x neather xxxx neiver x	6
noise	nosie x	1
nothing	noughting x	1
o'clock	oclock x oclocc x	2
full of	off x	1
often	offen x	1
onto the floor	on to x	1
walk past you	passed xx	2
piece / peace	(confusion) xxx peice of pie xx pice/peece sign xx	7
plane flight	plain x	1
poem	pomem x	1
pretty	prety xx prity xx pritty xx	6
probably	proberbly x probally x probaley x probaly x	4
quarter	quater xxxxx xxxxx	10
Queensland	Quensland x	1
quite / quiet	(confusion) xxxx xxx quit nice xx	9
reach	rich x	1
really	realy x	1

Word (402)	Error analysis / frequency	No.
remember	rember x remember x	2
sadness	saddness xxxx	4
scared	scard x	1
seen you	sceen you x	1
shoes	shoaes x	1
since	scince x science x	2
slowly	slowley x	1
straight	stright x	1
suburb	suberb xxxxx xx subberb x subarb x subburb x	10
sugar	suggar x suger x	2
television	telivision xxx televison x	4
that's nice	thats xxxxx	5
there /their / they're	(confusion) xxxxx xxxxx (they're comming x)	10
those	thoes x	1
even though	thou xx thow x	3
threw / through	(confusion) xxxxx x throgh x throw (threw) x	8
I'm tired	tried xx tied xx	4
tomorrow	tommorrow xxxxx x	6
trouble	touble x	1
uncle	unchel x	1
upon	apon x	1
upstairs	up---x x up-stairs xxx	4
usual	ussual x usal x	2
vacation	vaction x vocation x	2
video	vidio xxx	3
wasn't	was'nt xx wasen't x	3
bad weather	wheather x	1
who's / whose	(confusion) xxxxx xxxxx xxx whos (comming) xx	15
one woman	women xxxxx x	6
woollen	wollen xxxxx xxxxx x woolen xxxxx xx	17
won the race	wone x	1
wouldn't	would'nt x	1
worse	worst xxxx wors x	5
written	writen x	1
you're coming	your xxxxx xxxxx xxxx	14

Word (402)	Error analysis / frequency	No.
Saturday	Saterday x	1
January	Janurary xx Januarry x Jenuary x	4
February	Feburary xxxxx xxx Febuary xxxxx xxx Feburery x	17
July	Jully x	1
August	Augest xx	2
September	Semptember x	1
November	Novermber xx	2
eleven	evelen x eleven x	2
thirteen	thurteen x thriteen x	2
fourteen	forteen x	1
fifteen	fiveteen xx fiffteen x fithteen x	3
eighteen	eightteen xxxx	4
nineteen	ninteen xxx	3
twenty	tweenty xx	2
thirty	thirdy x therty x	2
forty	fourty xxxxx xxxxx xxx fourthy x fortey x	15
fifty	fivthy x fiffty x fithty x	3
ninety	ninty xxxxx xxxx	9
ninety-six	(no hyphen) xxxxx xxxxx xxxx	14
thousand	thounsand x	1
third	thrid xx thurd x	3
fourth	forth xxxxx	5
fifth	fivth x fith xxxx fiffth x fithth x	7
sixth	sith x sixths x	2
eighth	eigth x eightth x	2
ninth	nineth xxxxx xxxxx xxxx	14
tenth	thenth x	1
eleventh	evelenth x elleventh x	2
twelfth	twelth xxxxx xxx twelvth xxxxx x tweelth x twelfh x twefth x	17