

Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc
Submission to the Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training
National Inquiry Into Teacher Training

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Background

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) was founded in 1921 as the representative voice of parents, citizens and students associated with government schools in Western Australia. WACSSO is a non-party political and non-sectarian body with a current membership of 634 P&C Associations directly affiliated with WACSSO. WACSSO is therefore well placed to offer comments, feedback and suggestions for future developments relating to education and training in government schools in WA.

WACSSO influences the direction of education for the benefit of all students. Underpinning the workings of WACSSO are values and beliefs about children and young people and the importance of education. The following statements indicate the philosophical basis for this WACSSO submission relating to the National Inquiry into Teacher Education.

WACSSO is committed to a public education system available to all young people irrespective of their age, socio-economic status, culture, and gender, level of ability or where they live.

The philosophy underlying WACSSO policy centers on the principle of equality, excellence and participatory democracy and recognises that all human beings depend on each other and so the future well-being of individuals is dependent on the future well-being of all.

Equality is dependent on such premises as: recognition that all children have a capacity to learn; learning is the construction of meaning from experience; school practices must acknowledge and build on the culture and experiences children bring to school; and children have a right to develop their skills, knowledge and aptitudes in challenging but personally successful and fulfilling ways.

The principle of excellence implies that the public school system must provide for all students the highest quality education, which will enable them to learn how to learn throughout their lives and to apply that knowledge for the benefit both of themselves and of others.

Public education must be geared to develop among all students, a sense of justice as well as respect and concern for others.

The principles of a participatory democracy hold that the provision of an education system must address the needs of all. This is most likely to be achieved when those involved in the system, students, parents and teachers, are enabled and empowered to be partners, through representation in all decision-making processes of the system.

Accordingly, all persons attending government schools have the right to an unrestricted and effective education of the highest quality to allow them to develop their full potential

as individuals. As empowered citizens, these students can take every advantage of social, political and economic opportunity; obtain fulfillment of their reasonable aspirations within the range of their abilities; contribute their skills and knowledge for the betterment of Australia; and be able to participate harmoniously in all aspects of society.

WACSSO believes that these tenants form an essential statement of principles for guidance in its practical activities toward achieving an excellent, empowering, public education system for all.

National Inquiry into Teacher Training

The Inquiry has invited submissions that address “Teacher Training” with specific attention to the Terms of Reference for the Standing Committee. The Inquiry has also impressed that reference be made to current research, to developments and practices from other countries as well as to the practices of other professions in preparing and training people to enter their profession. Therefore WACSSO has drawn from relevant and recent research, to respond broadly, as well as positioning these issues in accordance with WACSSO Policy 2004.

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

WACSSO considers that selecting the most suitable candidates for teacher training is of paramount importance in the first instance. It may be that if greater emphasis was placed on the initial selection process, then many of the issues relating to attrition, withdrawal and transfer to other degree courses could be minimised for the long-term.

It is apparent that teaching attracts more female than male candidates especially at the primary level of teaching. Greater effort could be made to redress the balance and raise the profile of teaching generally to ensure that both men and women are attracted to the profession.

As Universities are entirely responsible for the selection process, the introduction of selection interviews generally, would enable universities to measure student’s initial perceptions for their teaching career and serve as a gauge to suitability to the profession aside from TER scores. Much of the literature suggests that beginning teachers feel unprepared for the classroom environment and contextual school culture generally. Students have reported feeling unsupported, lack supervision and opportunities for mentoring. It is also relevant to note that studies have well documented the high percentage of burnout (20 -25%) of beginning teachers in the first - third year’s of full time service.

Refining the selection processes should also take into account the prior learning of candidates and recognise multiple pathways in order to ensure that a diverse selection of candidates are being trained within any given academic year. Courses could also make use of the full calendar year to train students from different pathways in order to provide

fast track options for those transferring from related disciplines and alternative learning institutions.

Selecting the best candidates on academic excellence only, may not ensure that the most 'well rounded' candidates are selected. Many professions recognise the validity and transferability of a teaching degree and students are well aware that on graduation, multiple options may be open to them.

As the average age of teachers rises and many will be due to retire out, a window of opportunity exists to engage new recruits and establish new perceptions. New career opportunities should be identified and promoted. Recognition of the profession and rewards must reflect the value society places on education and be reformed to reinvigorate teaching as the profession of choice.

Research needs to focus on why teachers leave the profession to pursue other pathways and track student teacher perceptions and changing perceptions as they advance through their degrees with particular focus on pre and post practical school based placements (practicum).

Student teachers need to be prepared and able, to engage with young people and parents, to realise from the outset that education does not happen in a vacuum and that multiple stakeholders have a vested interest in their ongoing enthusiasm, creativity and success.

WACSSO premise: A collaborative school community is one in which parents, students, staff, the principal and the wider community all work together towards achieving the best educational outcomes for each and every student and one which meets the needs and aspirations of the whole school community (2004).

Selection criteria and screening interview strategies for both undergraduate and post-graduate students need to be able to identify existing strengths and could include:

- statements of expectations and rationale for pursuing a career in teaching,
- demonstrated interpersonal, communication skills and emotional resilience;
- prior learning and life experience to facilitate diversity.
- an expectation and commitment to engage at all system levels, an understanding of the existence and importance of school-based decision making groups such as P&C and School Council's, as part of an all-round education in participatory community development.

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

“Currently female teachers are over-represented in the primary teaching workforce in each State at 75% or more. Although this is balanced out in the secondary sector, female teachers still outnumber male teachers at 55% to 45% (MCEETYA, 2002).

The most recent attempts to provide scholarships in each state, directly aimed at attracting males to the profession have not achieved overwhelming support and in some cases, scholarship allocation remains vacant. It needs to be understood why, when scholarships are made available, males are still not attracted to teaching. Diverse pathways need to be developed to provide multiple entry points, for both men and women, to include mature age entry.

Australia's universities have a more diverse population than in many other countries. Compared to other countries a smaller proportion of higher education students commence university directly from school and there are more mature-aged students, students studying part time and students studying via distance education. Australian universities show a strong support for equity and the Commonwealth provides some means tested income support for equity groups and monitors progress in improving access, participation and success (DEST, 2004).

Universities face greater competition in attracting students. Students also have greater expectation from universities to deliver quality services, due to the existence of contributions and fees. Universities also compete with other public and private education providers. Students have flexibility to move between courses and undertake double degrees. There is therefore more choice and students will maximise what is essentially a user pays service.

The most consistent and widespread barrier to undertaking a degree course is the cost. The current level of financial support to students and their families/caregivers is inadequate. The level of HECS debt and repayment strategies (unless employment is sought overseas) is a burden to the young person embarking on any career and increases that burden for high-stress occupations involving direct client contact.

According to the Higher Education Review (2004) universities are 'self-accrediting' institutions and the state does not directly control or scrutinise course content. No external exams exist to monitor standards between institutions or ensure minimum standards apply. Individual universities decide whom to admit as students and are responsible for deciding what to teach, the methods used and how assessment is carried out. Professional bodies and associations play a significant role as external arbiters in the quality assurance framework through their accreditation of professional courses in areas such as nursing, medicine, law, accounting, engineering and architecture. Professional bodies also have a role in monitoring the quality of courses.

Australia now has the Australian Universities Quality Agency, which will assess the adequacy of each institution's quality assurance processes for teaching, learning, research and management on a five-yearly cycle.

As greater competition exists in attracting students to courses, there are also factors directly related to teaching, such as gender trends, the ageing of the current workforce and subsequent retirement of the 'baby boomers'. Strategies for engaging candidates, must consider the possibility of promoting the profession within high schools to motivate

and inspire candidates to enroll directly from Year 12 graduation.

The average age of teachers across Australia, according to 2002 statistics was 43.1 with a median age of 45. The most frequently encountered age among Australian teachers was 49 (MCEETYA, 2002).

Teacher training courses need to address the gender preference of teaching as a profession chosen mainly by women. Research into the drift to other professions with a teaching qualification may indicate why newly qualified teachers do not take up the profession.

Employment of full-time teachers (1990 – 2001) rose in Australia by 11.4 %. This exceeded the growth of employment in the economy at large, much of this take-up being in the primary school sector. In the previous ten year period employment of teachers rose by 1.2 % per annum largely reflecting growth in secondary teacher employment.

The difference in growth for the period 1990 – 2001 has been attributed to an increase in the number of students at the primary level and a decline in the overall student to teacher ratio in the primary sector while the student to teacher ratio remained unchanged in the secondary sector (MCEETYA, 2002). In the local context the number of primary school teachers rose by over 40% in Western Australia, a rapid increase between 1990 and 2001. The research relating to the supply and demand of teachers in Australia conflicts with predictions of other OECD countries. If a shortage is predicted, is it genuine or reliant on unreliable rates of exiting teachers in the first five years of service?

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

In Australia it is evident that rural and remote allocation of graduates and experienced teachers has remained a long-standing challenge. Research shows that many countries experience staff allocation problems and high turnover in rural and remote areas. The problems are compounded in Western Australia due to the extreme remoteness, perceptions and actualities evident for beginning teachers and undergraduate students. As much of the population is centrally based, students generally may have had no prior experience of the diversity of communities and cultures in their own state. Issues surrounding personal and professional isolation have been well documented (Sharplin, 2002) and yet remain issues for experienced teachers as well as new graduates. A number of recommendations have been identified and implemented to address these issues and to increase sustainability in these areas.

WACSSO would recommend that remote placements for students are fully funded, orientations are undertaken geared towards specific cultural communities and technology is broadened to support those working in isolation. Aside from the issues related to staffing schools, the broader issues of health provision and support services available in these locations, needs to be re-invigorated, so that communities can remain viable.

Attrition rates from teacher training courses may be due to a combination of factors. Student perception at course commencement may be idealistic and when those ideals are not realised, the student makes a crossover to another discipline. The realities of the job and experiences obtained during first practicum may also see a number of students drop out or transfer. Evaluation outcomes suggest that candidates need to feel and experience both personal and professional fulfillment to enhance the attractiveness of teaching as a career choice.

For those pre-service teachers that have made the transition from graduation to the workplace, the rates of attrition during the first three years of a teaching career have been, through research on beginning teachers, attributed to burnout, (Goddard & O'Brien) resulting in a turnover of staff between 20 – 25%. The research clearly identifies the need for further research which focuses on existing gaps and must have a beginning career focus.

This research dispels the myth, that burnout amongst teachers, is the result of long career service, where some teachers have become 'tired' and may seek early retirement or re-deployment. The sifting out of these teachers may not address the problem at the school level, if the plight of beginning teachers is not taken seriously. Although comparison studies relating to burnout levels across other careers are consistent for those working with high client centered contact, the relationship between levels of burnout between client centered workers and other occupations is not clear. Research has revealed that teachers are more satisfied with intrinsic rewards related to the nature and values consistent with teaching and less satisfied with extrinsic rewards such as payment levels and opportunities for advancement. Once teachers no longer feel they are contributing to student advancement the other areas available to focus on reward are few.

The research has also shown that post-graduate beginning teachers, with a first degree in another discipline were more likely to have significantly higher burnout levels, highlighting the different perceptions perhaps, of these candidates, linked with the varying pathways that students may take in arriving at their career choice.

The current research is a product of three decades of investigation and conclusions relating to burnout are well accepted. There is the possibility that post-graduate candidates have experienced disillusionment, lack of support, poor role clarity and conflict with their ideals prior to graduating and face further on the job stresses when commencing employment.

Pre-service training needs to be able to identify arising disappointment, possible mismatches and distress between actual and ideal self-image. Student perceptions need to be accurate, prior to commencement. The research also suggests that post-graduates entering teacher training may develop different career aspirations. Post-graduates may seek specific reward from teaching a specialisation rather than the teacher process itself.

“Again disappointment and lack of rewards are hypothesised to lead to greater rates of burnout for such teachers” (Goddard & O'Brien).

Examine the educational philosophy underpinning the teacher training courses (including the teaching methods used, course structure and materials, and methods for assessment and evaluation) and assess the extent to which it is informed by research.

“Do teachers need to understand the deep theories underpinning much educational practice? (Suda, 2004).

It is considered that an overarching purpose of teacher training would pay particular attention to the improvement of teaching practice generally and especially at the classroom level. Knowledge of the various theories derived from philosophical positions, should remain as a foundation of teacher training. It is helpful in the contemporary context for students to be able to relate theory to practice and to develop avenues for reflective practice and supervision, where critical analysis and academic rigour are not compromised. Similar professions have also developed a focus on reflective practice.

A balance within teacher training courses is needed to provide extended practicum components where pre-service students can actively engage in the classroom context, reflectively identifying where theory informs the realities of experiences within a particular school culture. Often professionals from many disciplines are confronted with the dilemma between the ‘world of practice and theory’.

WACSSO proposes that: *“school practices must acknowledge and build on the culture and experiences children bring to school”*. Therefore students need to be well-grounded in all aspects of a rapidly changing society and social relatedness.

The resulting tensions need to be explored during practicum and within the educational institution where supervision should be paramount. The nature of schools and classrooms can be explained by various theorists, this knowledge needs to be transferable, acknowledged and placed within a contemporary context. Related professions have not abandoned theory, but have placed and emphasis on:

- transferable skills,
- developing best practice and;
- opportunities for critical reflection, professional development and mentoring.

“So why do many teachers view such theorising as lofty idealism at best and unrealistic posturing at worse. Many will comment that teacher training programs do not adequately prepare teachers for the practicalities of the classroom. They see little relationships between theory and pedagogy. Yet some kind of theoretical principles must underpin the decision to teach in one way or another” (Suda, 2004).

It needs to be acknowledged that students whether undergraduate or post-graduate, have previous knowledge and skills which should inform the learning process, therefore making learning relevant to the learner’s life. Egalitarian approaches are needed to relate to ‘real-world’ contexts. These principles are being utilised currently within a number of professions from the helping professions to business practice. As new practitioners,

graduates should have the ability to interact with the knowledge as reflective learners and become more 'literate' in academic discourses of pedagogy.

Examine the preparation of primary and secondary teaching graduates to:

- **teach literacy and numeracy,**
- **teach vocational education courses;**
- **effectively manage classrooms;**
- **successfully use information technology;**
- **deal with bullying and disruptive students and dysfunctional families;**
- **Deal with children with special needs and/or disabilities.**

WACSSO considers that it is the right of all people to be literate and numerate and that it is the responsibility of the education system to foster the development of concepts which lead to understanding and the effective use of skills. Favourable learning environments, flexibility in the distribution and use of resources, and positive expectations on the part of teachers and parents are basic steps towards ensuring that every student is encouraged by a sense of achievement to develop confidence and self-esteem.

“There are multiple perspectives affecting the preparation of teachers to teach reading and writing” (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 1999).

As with New Zealand, Australia currently compares well on an International level in comparison to other OECD countries. Australia is placed in the second band of countries from the 41 where tests were conducted.

With this being the case it appears that although Australia is faring quite well the question appears to be, are we doing well enough? This question has also been raised in New Zealand, where research has begun to focus on the perspectives of pre-service teachers and their training.

With a recent concern about pre-service training it appears that training is not adequately preparing teachers. The achievement gap for pupils, between the good readers and the poor readers is too wide and differences in learning consolidation have to be taken into account for pupils from Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB). There appears to be a good enough case for the development of best practice principles, rather than more of the same.

A Literacy Taskforce established in New Zealand argued that pre-service teacher education should enable student teachers to become “good practitioners” who reflect on both practice and theoretical knowledge and apply this to their literacy programs.

High quality teacher education should focus on developing the skills and knowledge necessary to implement best practice in the teaching of reading and writing. Guidelines should be developed and established to distinguish those education practices that develop genuine knowledge from those that do not.

Research needs to be undertaken on pre-service teachers as part of a critical and reflective practice undertaken whilst on practicum. Professional development for university lecturers should focus on lecturing style and content.

“All secondary subject programs should take steps to ensure that student teachers are equipped to support pupils’ literacy needs in their specialist subject and have a sense of responsibility for doing so” (Inspectorate of Education, Scotland, 2001).

Components of programs should be informed by current research, be based on well considered rationale and have a clear view of good practice in schools.

Successful university tutors introduced theoretical ideas and principles gradually, this enabled student teachers’ understanding of how these theories can be related to good classroom practice. Time needs to be allocated to support student teachers on placements effectively.

Teaching VET courses requires specialist skills over and above the current skill requirements of beginning teachers. A significant element of industry based training and proven industry work experience is needed as a pre-requisite. Additional qualifications or more preferable practical experience should be sought. Currency in Industry Standards needs to be demonstrated, especially in Secondary VET Certificate classes. Ongoing TIP’s (Teacher Industry Placements), should be mandatory for specialised Vocational teachers.

The preparation of graduate teachers to effectively manage classrooms has been open to criticism. Factors contributing to such difficulties have been attributed to classroom size, pupils with learning difficulties, the mainstreaming of children with special needs and a culture of bullying, among others. Research shows that effective classroom managers are those with confidence in their abilities. The beginning teacher requires preparation and experience.

Although much will be gained with ongoing experience, preparedness needs to be firmly established through the teacher training experience of pre-service teachers. Part of the practical components could focus specifically on establishing techniques which build confidence whereby the student teacher can experience effective outcomes. Stress and burnout have been attributed to low confidence in this area amongst beginning teachers and experienced teachers.

Studies show that teacher attitudes reflect apprehension and low tolerance for children with behaviour difficulties (Giallo & Little, 2003). Studies also show that confident teachers maintain student attention on academic activities. Less confident teachers are more likely to use inappropriate management techniques and frequently refer students to other school personnel.

Although further research in this area is needed, evaluations show that teacher confidence is highest in pre-service years and decreases within two years of graduating and improved

again with 6 or more years experience, but did not reach pre-service levels. Strategies may include:

- assessing school climate or ethos to determine a ‘fit’ or positioning within that culture;
- social support from colleagues and other professionals, such as mentoring, supervision and opportunities for reflective practice;
- professional preparation, through a specific unit relating to the core issues and backed up by placement training.

The research relating to student teacher training has shown that student teachers claim to not receive formal training on classroom management or the workplace environment.

Support structures are needed in schools for new graduates, research needs to be carried out on students whilst on placement.

Specific behaviour management strategies include:

- information and strategies to deal with specific disabilities
- formal subjects on classroom management
- hands-on experience as provided in training course practicum;
- possible extension to practical elements of training courses

Research has shown that these skills are not explicitly taught and teachers must rely on modelling from supervising teachers.

Deal with senior staff, fellow teachers, school boards, education authorities, parents, community groups and other related government departments.

WACSSO believes that: *“The principles of participatory democracy hold that the provision of an education system must address the needs of all. This is most likely to be achieved when those involved in the system, students, parents, and teachers, are enabled and empowered to be partners, through representation in all decision-making processes of the system”*.

WACSSO proposes that state parent bodies be included on the Agenda for New Teacher Induction sessions conducted by DoET, to provide information about P&Cs and the benefits they bring to schools.

The ability for beginning teachers to relate effectively within a ‘whole of school community’ perspective should be part of pre-service training and cross-over into the practical components of teacher training courses. There is a need to balance the time allocated to theoretical components of teaching with interpersonal aspects of engaging with the ‘machinery’ of the sector. This will enable students to position themselves within the learning environment and gain an overall comprehension of the many aspects and understandings of their chosen profession.

The myths of hierarchies should be removed, beginning teachers should be able to feel confident that there is an ongoing communication input from all levels and that negotiated environments between senior staff, staff, school boards, school councils and parent & citizens' associations already exists in the schools community and is not merely the rhetoric of theoretical discourses on engagement, sustainability and community capacity building, selectively interwoven into the literature.

Since the School Education Act 1999 came into effect on January 1st 2001 (WA), all government schools have been required to have a school council. Both in spirit and in its detail, the legislation affirms the necessity for close cooperation between schools, parents and local communities in ensuring the best possible educational outcomes for students.

WACSSO proposes that: Mandatory School Council training is provided to all student teachers to ensure that they understand the role and accountability of parent/community members in schools.

The issue of accountability must also be recognised as a two-way commitment. Definitions of accountability and what this means for teachers needs to be clarified within teacher training courses. All professions are expected to operate within accountability guidelines. In relation to education it is felt that students are held accountable for poor achievement by being retained or remediated and parents for their standard of parenting. Greater transparency for teacher performance would be welcomed to ensure that educators are constantly growing and learning from their own education practice through guidance and encouragement rather than by student performance measures alone. Accountability systems should be linked to reasonable goal setting given the contextual nature and conditions the student and teacher are dealing with.

As part of the two-way communication commitment the system of teacher reporting to parents needs to be simplified and easily understood. Current systems are an administrative burden, which do not translate to the promotion of teacher – parent interpersonal relationships, even if they do serve the quantitative evaluation methods of the system. Graduates should be well prepared to convey timely responses to parents relating to improvements and success as well as weaker areas of achievement, this needs to be a co-ordinated response so that students and parents can benefit from assessment and prepare a plan of action where required as an intervention to prevent failure. Graduates need to be prepared to get to know their community families, differing parenting styles and to possess awareness that their job entails specialised people skills as much as specialised subject and classroom planning.

Much of the research suggests that although provision has been made to increase the effectiveness of family-school partnerships, the reality remains that many individual teachers and some schools could do a lot more to develop and put into practice engagement strategies on a daily basis. Beginning graduates need to be able to practice skills of engagement whilst undertaking practical undergraduate qualifications.

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

Schools and staff have an important role in the preparation of trainee teachers and in supporting beginning teachers. Students on practicum should be given adequate supervision, de-briefing and opportunities for reflective learning. Such practices should be reinforced at the campus level also. Mentoring should be provided which allows classroom confidence to develop.

Close relationships need to be fostered by universities with schools participating in practicum. As a part of this process the outcomes and perceptions of students need to be monitored and measured to ensure that practicum is meeting the needs of pre-service teachers. Currently studies of this kind are finding that students lack confidence, feel disillusioned and do not spend enough time in the classroom to experience the benefits of their instruction and feel job satisfaction.

In Summary

WACSSO has broadly responded to the Terms of Reference and the comments provided are considered as a starting point, from which further integration of past and current research can be acknowledged and be complemented by the perspective of relevant parent systems.

WACSSO Policy: H1

- 1.1** School-based decision-making should be as widespread as possible and may cover as many aspects of the operation of the school as the school community desires within broad curriculum and access guarantees common to all government schools. School-based decision-making can take place in a multiplicity of forms, including school councils, parent organizations (including all those that represent particular groups within the parent committees), all sub-committees of these groups, all ad-hoc committees and special focus committees (eg. student welfare and curriculum).
- 1.2** The ability to be involved, represented and heard must be equally available throughout the school community. Involvement must be actively encouraged and supported.

WACSSO believes that the “whole of school community” must have input to relevant aspects of teacher training and has welcomed this opportunity to contribute.