

The Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
Email evt.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO TEACHER EDUCATION

The following views are offered to the National Inquiry into Teacher Education in reference to Criteria 7 and 2:

Criterion 7:

Examine the preparation of primary and secondary teaching graduates ...

I wish to highlight two areas in which teachers struggle to meet the demands of teaching, and suggest some ways of tackling the problems:

(a) Differentiation.

Learning is a sequential process, in which knowledge and skills build on prior knowledge and skills. This is particularly true of literacy and numeracy. Yet, in a Primary classroom, there are students at a range of levels. Some are at the appropriate level for the new learning, some may well understand the work even before the teacher presents it, and some lack the prior understandings to comprehend the material at all. Yet each of these groups needs to be taken from their current level of understanding to new learning. This is not simply a case of teaching a common lesson to all, and expecting different levels of achievement. Rather, it means that, in a Primary classroom, especially during literacy and numeracy lessons, there may be three or four completely different lessons taking place at a given time. Managing this learning environment is challenging, and requires extensive

training. Our current graduates are generally ill-equipped to manage this type of learning environment.

(b) Curriculum development.

This is not mentioned in criterion 7, yet is a key requirement. Syllabuses have been discarded in our schools. Each state has produced a set of outcomes which students must achieve, but there is little or no guidance as to how a teacher will plan a program of learning experiences to assist a student to achieve those outcomes. In a recent conversation with the WA Curriculum Council, I was told that the Curriculum Council had the brief to produce the outcome statements (in their various configurations), but had no role whatsoever in what schools did with them.

Developing curriculum is a skilled, collaborative task, which takes extended time. We are now expecting teachers to do this, to plan and implement a structured, sequenced, comprehensive, appropriately levelled set of learning experiences for students – and in a range of subjects. While this is not quite the same as creating curriculum for publication and widespread dissemination, the process is essentially the same. It needs to be taught in pre-service courses.

Consequence

The most significant thing lacking in teacher education courses is time. To learn how to instruct is a short term task which can be learnt in a week. To educate is to create or select appropriate curriculum experiences; present them in creative ways which engage students and which respond to contemporary knowledge of how people learn; provide appropriately for each student within the class at their level; evaluate the learning of each student; and plan subsequent learning experiences which build on each student's understanding. (And all this in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes.) To learn to do this takes more than a year! And yet, many teachers have one year of training. The one year Diploma of Education course should be scrapped, and replaced by a two year degree *at least*.

Of course, graduates have three other years of university experience, but this does not train them to be teachers. It certainly does not train them in the various points listed in Criterion 7. Nor does it train them in the skills I have identified above, nor in child and youth development.

It is an insult to the work of a teacher to believe that these understandings and skills can be gained in one year. Imagine someone with a 3 or 4 year Education degree completing a one year diploma to become a doctor, or an engineer, or a lawyer. Yet the knowledge required of a properly equipped teacher is just as demanding.

This has long been identified as a significant problem. However, because the practice is accepted in all Australian universities, no university will tackle this alone. To do so would be to decimate their course, because they would have few students.

I encourage the Inquiry to recommend the imposition of a minimum limit of hours or units of teacher education in all courses, this minimum to be the equivalent of at least a two year full time course, with such units focussing specifically on the practice of teaching and learning, and not on extending knowledge of a teaching subject.

Furthermore, I encourage the Inquiry to recommend the inclusion in all Teacher Education courses units on differentiation of learning and curriculum development.

Criterion 2:

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

I question the wording of this criterion, because it implies that students are attracted to courses *per se*. Rather, I think that most students, certainly at undergraduate level, are attracted to the employment opportunities which the course opens to them. That is, few students are attracted to Teacher Education courses because they have heard that the course itself is particularly entertaining, challenging, or otherwise attractive. Rather, they choose the course because it will lead them to a particular employment or promotional opportunity. (Some post-graduate students might be an exception to this rule, as some experienced teachers might undertake further courses simply for their own education.)

Students should be attracted to Teacher Education not by lowering entry standards, making the courses easier, offering double degrees, offering a one-year transition course, or other quick fixes, but by improving the appeal of teaching as a career. It concerns me that the exciting and challenging work of teaching does not attract sufficient quality applicants, but the solution is not to make access an easy pathway.

Therefore, I encourage the Inquiry to recommend high standards of entry for Teacher Education students, challenging courses, comprehensive courses and high expectations, rather than the lowering of standards in order to provide a quick fix to increase student numbers.

Yours faithfully

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