



MURDOCH
UNIVERSITY
PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Submission 159
TE Inquiry

Submission by

Murdoch University
School of Education

to

**House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Education and Vocational Training:**

Inquiry into Teacher Education

Gosnells, WA, 25 October 2005

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Murdoch University School of Education was one of the founding Schools in the University, which itself was founded in 1975 as a university. Unlike many other institutions throughout Australia with teacher education programs, Murdoch has never been anything except a research university. Accordingly, it has a history of significant productive work with research, teacher preparation and professional development in education. Since its inception, Murdoch has had students enrolling internally and externally in courses or individual units; almost all units are available in the external mode, as well as internally. Until recently, all courses were located at the South Street Campus in a southern suburb of Perth; beginning in 2003, the primary teacher education program has also been offered at Murdoch's second campus at Rockingham, and will be offered there in its entirety from 2006.

By way of brief overview, and to give a sense of scale, the following table describes the present composition and size of our various teacher education programs:

Name	Duration (FTE years)	Number of FT students	Number of PT students
Bachelor of Education (Primary) Murdoch campus	4	418	200
Bachelor of Education (Primary) Rockingham campus	4	178	19
Bachelor of Education (Secondary)*	4	182	54
Diploma in Education (Primary)	1	59	57
Diploma in Education (Secondary)	1	59	57
Bachelor of Education (Primary) (Graduate Entry)	2	22	11
Bachelor of Education (Secondary) (Graduate Entry)	2	7	2
Totals		925	400

* This program is typically taken concurrently with a second degree, so that most students graduate with BSc/BEd or BA/BEd after four years.

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

From its inception, Murdoch University has recognised the importance of providing opportunities for a diverse range of students into initial teacher education programs, both to ensure adequate opportunities for non-standard entry students and also to provide a graduating class that has a range of experiences. For that reason, while many of the students in the undergraduate teacher education program were themselves only recently in school, we have always had a significant proportion of applicants who are not directly out of school, so that selection measures additional to standard TER have been needed. For many students, the STAT has been used as a measure of suitability for tertiary study, and we have accepted the University's mechanisms for translating STAT scores into TER scores, and then selected students according to TER rank.

Mature-age students, frequently women who have raised their children to at least schooling age, but also both men and women entering tertiary education for the first time from other professions or occupations, have often been amongst our best students.

In the past three years, with the start of a primary teacher education program at our second campus at Rockingham, the proportion of non-standard entries has increased, which is interpreted as accommodating a significant proportion of local people who would not otherwise have had access to University studies, through the agency of enabling programs. Education is traditionally a popular choice for students of this kind.

We have not to date required that students achieve minimum standards in any particular courses before being eligible for selection, and in particular, we have chosen not to require particular English or Mathematics pre-requisites at senior secondary school level. Instead, we have taken the view that it is important that teachers graduate with the necessary suite of content skills for teaching, rather than that they should enter with those necessary skills. Accordingly, we require students to pass particular units, which have embedded content requirements in areas of Mathematics, English and Science. While the great majority of students entering directly from school have in fact completed courses at Year 12 or Year 11 in these areas, this would not be the case for non-standard entry students, and we recognize that mandatory pre-requisite requirements would have the effect of excluding many such people. The required units referred to above are not always completed satisfactorily by students, providing for us some evidence that we are not routinely accepting inadequate content standards.

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

As noted above, our undergraduate Bachelor of Education courses attract students with diverse backgrounds and experiences, including mature-age students with special entry procedures and mature age students completing various enabling programs.

The Diploma in Education course, by its nature, attracts students from a wide variety of undergraduate majors, including people who graduated some time ago and are changing careers to become teachers. Applicants come from a wide variety of backgrounds, including Law, Veterinary Science, Engineering and Commerce, with substantial competition to gain one of the available places. For example, in the 2005 intake, we selected 95 applicants for the Primary Diploma in Education, out of 295 first-preferences (around 32%) and 91 applicants for the Secondary Diploma in Education out of 190 first preferences (some 48%).

Similarly, for the two-year graduate entry programs, we selected 51 from 78 applicants (about 65%) for the primary program and 21 out of 45 (about 47%) secondary applicants.

We have recently sponsored enabling courses at the Rockingham campus to allow students from diverse backgrounds to enter Teacher Education, having been provided with adequate direct support to develop the academic skills to profit from a university education. Both the Unifocus and Careers Combo programs have been constructed to help students in the South-West corridor of the greater Perth metropolitan area embark on university studies, from backgrounds for which this would not usually have been possible.

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

Attrition rates for our largest programs (the BEd Primary programs) tend to be around 20% per annum. Attrition is more prevalent in the first year of the program than in later years, and is interpreted as mostly related to the difficulties students have starting out with university studies, and the difficulties students have with external study. While both of these are a source of concern, the problems are recognized across the University and are not restricted to Teacher Education. In response to the issue, the University's Academic Council has recently established a First Year Experience Working Party, which is considering measures to address attrition issues.

Some attrition is acceptable, since it suggests that students who recognize that teaching is not the appropriate career for them ought to be able to transfer to a course more suited to their interests and abilities. For some students, the challenges of teaching (over and above the challenges of undergraduate study) are too demanding, and this is not always clear until they are some way through their program, sometimes manifested in School Experience.

After teaching courses are completed, attrition from teaching itself is also problematic, and recognized as a serious problem, especially in key shortage areas, such as secondary mathematics and physical science. While such attrition is problematic for the profession, it ought to be recognized that conditions in schools are such that well-qualified teachers can often be lured by an easier job that provides them with more tangible remuneration. It is well recognized that teacher salaries start fairly high, but plateau more quickly than do those of other professions. Graduating teachers, especially those with some experience of teaching in schools, are well capable of doing many other things than teaching, and frequently choose to do so.

Much is also made of the claims that people will have several occupations over their lifetimes, so that we ought expect both a significant number of people to leave teaching for other professions and also a significant number to be attracted to teaching after pursuing a different career. Both of these phenomena occur.

4. Examine and assess the criteria for selecting and rewarding education faculty members.

There are uncompetitive salaries for beginning academic staff, compared with competent and experienced teachers; this is especially the case for primary specialists.

Schools of Education require a range of expertise and interests, needing to cover all the learning areas in schools, as well as the study of relevant educational contexts and processes.

The reward structures in universities, including Murdoch University, are still slanted towards published research and research outcomes (such as competitive grants and refereed publications). These are not necessarily the best measures for professional staff and can even discourage professional activity that is not readily 'counted' on traditional research-based measures. Promotion is still mostly dependent on research output.

5. 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.

Education was a Murdoch University Foundation School in 1975. The concept of a 'reflective practitioner' has been germane to Murdoch's School of Education, throughout that time. We see ourselves as helping and demanding that students learn to think about what they do and why they do it. Murdoch's teacher education courses were developed carefully and deliberately to comprise an appropriate mixture of units that involve the contexts in which education is located, the processes (of teaching, learning and assessment) involved, and the curriculum that frames the activity in schools. The concept of a reflective practitioner as a skillful and thoughtful professional person within all three of these domains has been central to course development and delivery for thirty years.

We would thus take issue with the idea of 'teacher training' in this Term of Reference, since it evokes a different view of teachers as trained to follow pre-determined courses of action, rather than make intelligent, well-considered and thoughtful, evidence-based professional decisions for themselves about what to do in educational settings.

For the Bachelor of Education programs, the concept of reflective practice is first developed in the required unit, EDU101 Introduction to Teaching and is an essential component of the final unit, EDU366 Professional Issues in Teaching. We regard these two units as 'framing' the courses, and intend that other units in the courses contribute to a gradually developing view of reflective practice.

In similar vein, we described professional field placements as 'School Experience' (not 'Teaching Practice'), to acknowledge their status as providing student teachers with opportunities to experience professional work in schools, and to learn from it, rather than merely 'practicing' what they have been 'trained' to do.

Research is embedded in the content of all units, and Murdoch staff themselves engage in reflective practice regarding their own teaching, informed by their research projects, recent policy initiatives, professional development work with schools and teachers, and outside community liaison work with educational authorities, professional bodies and others. As examples of external influences on the philosophy of the School's courses, the local Teacher Competency Framework and the various Professional Standards for teachers have been influential in considering the directions and status of courses.

The School has strived to develop rich connections between the teaching profession, the community and the university, although sustaining these is difficult in a climate of increasing pressures and rising workloads. The philosophy that teacher education courses involve richly connected components contributing towards the development of reflective practice is difficult to implement over time, when there are significant external influences and because of the busy nature of academic work, with limited opportunities to work on course development collaboratively. So, a drift from the ideal is inevitable. One response to this phenomenon is to focus attention on aspects of the program that are regarded as problematic, and recently a series of School Working Parties has been established for this purpose (concerned with issues of School Experience, fostering Literacy of our own students, and the ways in which our students

learn about Assessment). The five-yearly formal School Reviews conducted by the University provide a mechanism for activities of these kinds to be brought into relief and to allow the big pictures related to our philosophy to be considered afresh.

As far as teaching methods are concerned, while there are situations in which large group lecturing is both efficient and economically unavoidable, a great deal of undergraduate teaching involves students learning in smaller face-to-face groups, where there are opportunities to engage in professional conversation and collaborative work, settings in which reflective practice has more opportunity of being developed and settings which reflect better the likely contexts in which professional practice in schools occurs.

6. Examine the interaction and relationships between teacher training courses and other university faculty disciplines.

Primary Bachelor of Education students have significant opportunities to take electives from elsewhere in the University, and are not confined to School of Education electives, consistent with a view of students deciding for themselves which of their interests to develop and which aspects of their backgrounds to improve. As a matter of philosophy, Murdoch University has generally constructed its programs in this way, to encourage a measure of interdisciplinarity and to respect individual choices. Students are encouraged, but not required, to develop a strength in an area, even to the point of obtaining a recognized University minor in their degree. The nature of primary schooling (mostly generalist in nature) also encourages students to choose electives from a variety of other areas.

While there have always been pressures to encourage (or even to demand) that students take a number of units in particular areas, the length of the program and the number of Learning Areas in the primary school conspire to make this very difficult.

While a case might be made for requiring students to complete a succession of units in a particular learning area (such as mathematics, for example), one consequence of such a practice is that students would have fewer electives. And the case that might be made for mathematics, can just as persuasively be made for English, for Science, for the Social Sciences, for the Arts, for Health, for Technology, and so on.

There is a second problem with such expectations, that the courses taught in other University disciplines tend to be taught to a general audience, rather than one focused on intending teachers. So the emphasis is likely to be on content knowledge, not on 'pedagogical content knowledge', the proper responsibility of units within a School of Education.

At the secondary level, there is usually relatively little contact between the School of Education and other disciplines within the university. Students undertaking, say, a Physics or a History degree, along with the Bachelor of Education, complete the same courses as those undertaking Physics or History degrees with no intention of being teachers. On the one hand, this provides a guarantee that the undergraduate major is no less acceptable than would otherwise be the case, while on the other hand this might be interpreted as an opportunity lost for intending teachers to study specialist units related to teaching. For the most part, units in other faculties are not tailored to the particular needs and interests of intending teachers, and there have been only limited conversations about such possibilities at Murdoch University.

There is a discernible view amongst some professionals outside education that only units within their discipline are 'proper' units for undergraduate study of content. From such a perspective, content units that focused to an extent on pedagogical content knowledge or were tailored to the particular needs of teachers in some other way (such as, for example, a unit on the history of mathematics), might not be regarded as 'acceptable' units for undergraduate majors. Nonetheless, there is a good case for discussions to take place regarding whether units outside the School of Education might be constructed especially to suit the needs of intending teachers, and yet still be regarded as acceptable within another faculty major. Joint appointments across Education and other faculties would facilitate such developments, but have not so far been pursued at Murdoch University.

- 7. 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;**
 - achieve accreditation; and**
 - deal with senior staff, fellow teachers, school boards, education authorities, parents, community groups and other related government departments.**

This list serves to illustrate some of the complexity of teaching and thus some of the complexity of teacher education. Most of the above aims reflect elements of a teacher education program, for which the development of reflective practice is important. What these have in common is that there are not single 'solutions' or 'formulas' related to them that are to be learned by student teachers and then methodically applied in schools. Rather, each requires the gradual development of professional knowledge and understanding, tempered with a good understanding of the significance of various contexts, with the aim of developing practitioners capable of making sound professional judgments and decisions. Indeed, the Curriculum Framework in Western Australia is premised on tacit assumptions that teachers are both expected and entitled to make professional decisions in their own particular settings, consistent with supporting student achievement of the outcomes articulated. Learning to deal with some of the elements listed above requires attention to them both on campus and as part of School Experience; indeed, both of these are essential.

The exceptions to the preceding paragraph are the aims concerning vocational education and accreditation. In the former case, Murdoch does not prepare students specifically at present to teach vocational education courses in secondary schools, but has rather focused on the key learning areas of English, Drama, Media, Mathematics, Science, Society and Environment and Second/Foreign Languages. In the next few years, however, once the new post-compulsory Courses of Study have been developed through the Curriculum Council of WA, we expect that VET emphases will be increased within the School of Education, because they will be more prominently identified in the Courses of Study themselves.

As far as the other exception, accreditation, is concerned, Murdoch has followed closely the

establishment of the Western Australian College of Teaching (WACOT) and is aware that a more formal process of accrediting Teacher Education courses is to be implemented soon. We would welcome such a development, since it will provide an opportunity for community-wide debate on the appropriate balance to be sought within Teacher Education programs. While the composition of any Teacher Education program is always the result of such debate, there will be value obtained by seeking a consensus of some sort about the most appropriate elements of a balanced program to suit Western Australian needs. We would not expect, and would be most disappointed, if an accreditation process produced a uniformity on questions such as those identified in this term of Reference, which would give the (false) impression that there was one 'correct' way of handling the matter.

Indeed, one of the abiding constants in teacher education is the need to deal with change. It is imperative that teacher education programs develop graduates who are capable of adapting their practice to the ever-changing circumstances they will encounter over their professional lives, rather than being satisfied that complex educational questions, or societal issues, have a single, unchanging 'correct' answer. The changing nature of society, schools and the curriculum are important reasons why the development of reflective practitioners is of key importance.

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

As noted earlier, School Experience is of major importance to the teacher education program at Murdoch University, as it also is elsewhere. Schools and school staff play an important role in providing the context for authentic learning about professional practice to occur. The nature of School Experience at Murdoch has undergone continuous evaluation since its inception thirty years ago, consistent with the motif of change referred to above.

Until fairly recently, School Experiences at Murdoch were organized around a group of students provided with a Murdoch caravan at a school, and a Murdoch staff member who stayed in the school (with an office in the caravan) more or less constantly over the duration of the School Experience. This arrangement provided important opportunities for students to learn from schools, as well as from each other and the Murdoch supervisor, who was located on the campus and directly involved with the associated campus units. It also provided significant opportunities for regular input from school to university and vice versa.

In recent times, this model of School Experience has been replaced with one in which students are located in the School itself, and Murdoch supervisors visit them regularly to support their learning and liaise with cooperating teachers in schools. A major reason for the change has been the cost and practicality of making such an arrangement work, with declining budgets and rising student numbers. A consequence of the changes is that the relationships between Murdoch and the staff in schools is a little more distant than previously.

The increasing size of the program and the budgetary pressures over the last decade have resulted in an increasing amount of supervision of School Experience being handled by casual staff, who are typically school teachers themselves. Unlike the earlier arrangements, these supervisors do not normally have a role in teaching on-campus units associated with School Experience, resulting in some level of threat to the coherence of the experience.

The courses continue to include significant contact between student teachers and experienced teachers, however, both in schools and visiting schools in a supervisory capacity, which provides important professional connections of campus work to field work.

It continues to be difficult to persuade the best teachers to devote some of their energies to having a student teacher in their classroom, and this problem seems to have become considerably worse in recent years. One factor in this regard is the increasing expectations on teachers for dealing with curriculum change processes, leaving little space to work with student teachers. Another factor is the perception that financial remuneration for such work is inadequate: the supplement to a teacher's regular salary is quite small, and many teachers feel that it undervalues the importance of the work. A factor that is helping the task of finding good cooperating teachers is the recognition of such work as a criterion for being recognized as a Senior Teacher, as well as an ongoing professional expectation of Senior Teachers.

While there is much informal input from teachers and schools to the teacher education program, more formal and systematic opportunities are more limited. One of these involves the five-yearly School Review Process, which involves a three-person review Panel, at least one of whom would typically be located in a School. In earlier times, the School of Education has routinely had teacher representatives on various committees, especially those dealing directly with Initial Teacher Education. Such arrangements were far from ideal, however, as it was often difficult for school representatives to attend scheduled meetings on campus.

In recent years, the School of Education has established the Partnerships in Professional Learning program, coordinated by Barry Down and Helen Wildy. This program has provided a systematic mechanism for ongoing professional input from schools and teachers to the University (and vice versa), and has focused attention on the School Experience process most recently, including the development and trialling of a distributed placement.

9. Investigate the appropriateness of the current split between primary and secondary education training.

The nature of primary and secondary schools in Western Australia has suggested to us that a primary teacher education program ought focus on the development of generalists, while a secondary program ought focus on the development of specialists. To date, we have not developed a program that caters specifically for the middle years of schooling, where the boundaries between specialists and generalists become rather more blurry. There is no intention at present of developing such a program, but, again, an expectation that our graduates (both primary and secondary) will be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances in schools as they arise. Our secondary graduates focus on years 8-10 (generally regarded as the lower secondary years), with a small percentage of time directed at curriculum and students in Years 11 and 12.

Within the School of Education, the primary/secondary division is manifested only in the curriculum and School Experience units. For all other units, primary and secondary students are in classes together, and it is felt appropriate for this to occur. The Western Australian Curriculum Framework is intended to emphasize the communalities of experience over the school years, consistent with the organization of our programs.

In the first year unit, EDU101 Introduction to Teaching, all students spend one week of their associated School Experience in a primary school and the other week in a secondary school, a practice that we have long regarded as necessary, both to help students learn from the diverse contexts and also to encourage students to reflect on whether their preference (for primary or secondary) is appropriate.

10. Examine the construction, delivery and resourcing of ongoing professional learning for teachers already in the workforce.

It is widely recognized that short, one-off 'professional development' experiences for teachers are of limited value, yet it is not an easy matter to provide superior forms of professional learning for many teachers. Formal study for University awards is an important kind of professional learning, but this has become much less common in recent years, regrettably. There are three major reasons for this. Firstly, the imposition of substantial fees has reduced the attractiveness for many teachers; unlike HECS, payments cannot be deferred but are a real drain on family resources. Secondly, there seems little encouragement and incentive from employers for teachers to undertake formal study. (eg, pay rates are not affected by a higher qualification). An exception is for teachers seeking to be promoted (out of teaching into administration). A third reason is the perception (frequently incorrect, but nonetheless a real perception) that tertiary study is not directly relevant to professional practice. This perception seems to be more likely among those who do not undertake study than those who do.

Our experience in recent years is that models for professional learning that involve significant ongoing work located in practitioners' schools, within an action research framework, are most likely to be effective vehicles for professional growth. School of Education staff have been involved in such programs (recent examples of which are the QTP program and the ASISTM program), typically in a 'critical friend' role. This seems a good mechanism for University staff to provide expertise and develop strong partnerships between schools and the University.

Student scholarships seem more likely to be available for research degrees than for other kinds of professional learning. While this is a good idea for some teachers, and ought to be provided for them, the professional learning needs of many other teachers are not well served by courses focusing on research degrees.

Murdoch University has experimented with shorter courses targeted at teachers, such as Certificates (involving half a year's work), as well as summer school and external offerings of units, but the need to charge full fees continues to provide a significant disincentive for teachers to participate.

11. Examine the adequacy of the funding of teacher training courses by university administrations.

Teacher Education courses are not sufficiently well-funded, because universities themselves are not sufficiently well-funded. The steady rise in tertiary staff-student ratios generally over the last fifteen years has been reflected at Murdoch University as much as elsewhere, and (as noted above) economic realities have gradually reduced the effectiveness of School Experience models, as funds have dwindled. The issues are well articulated in the Australian Council of Deans of Education submission to this Inquiry.

We would hope that an outcome of this Inquiry will involve recognition of the significance of funding issues to the improvement of teacher education programs nationwide, as well as Murdoch University in particular.

The HECS freeze to make a priority for teacher education has been an especially poor idea. The reduction in HECS-based income for Education seems likely to lead inevitably to a conclusion that less University resources ought to be devoted to it, thus paradoxically turning what is recognised as a priority into a non-priority. We share the position on this matter presented to the Inquiry by the ACDE.