

A National Overview of Teacher Education in Australia

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Published

2006

Book Title

Entry to the Teaching Profession: Preparation, Practice, Pressure and Professionalism: College Year Book 2006

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A NATIONAL OVERVIEW OF TEACHER EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

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As the world increasingly becomes interconnected, the content of teacher education and student learning becomes more challenging. As reported by Skilbeck and Connell (2004) teachers have to come to terms with “constantly changing societal requirements” (p.7). In Australia there are currently about 255000 teachers (Teaching Australia, 2006). Here as elsewhere in the world, there is an ageing teaching workforce and therefore increasing retirements. In this context, the preparation of new teachers and the ongoing professional development of those in the current teaching force are seen by many to be the key to educational improvement. One of the hallmarks of a profession is a specialised body of knowledge acquired through professional education (Darling-Hammond, 2003). This chapter looks at the nature of initial teacher education programs, providing a general overview of teacher education goals, entry requirements, programs and professional experience.

NATIONAL GOALS

In Australia, as in many countries, ‘quality teachers’ is the goal and focus of teacher education programs. The quality of teaching and learning is an important factor accounting for variations in school students’ achievements (e.g. Cuttance, 2001; Rowe, 2003). However, as Skilbeck and Connell’s report for MCEETYA (2004), acknowledged, “judgements of quality and decisions about how to recognise quality are difficult” (p.7).

Among the benefits claimed for a national approach is the strengthening of initial teacher preparation. Teacher education programs generally tend to organise the development of quality teachers around pedagogical knowledge; subject area content knowledge; skills and attitudes necessary for effective teaching, strong understanding of human growth and child development, effective communication skills, strong sense of ethics; capacity for renewal and ongoing learning. The identification of a quality teacher is similar across institutions around the country. Discussions towards the establishment of a national framework align with these elements.

The current response in continuing efforts to define and promote quality teaching in Australia is occurring within the development of a national framework for professional teaching standards, as recommended by MCEETYA 2003. This received State, Territory and Federal Education Ministers’ endorsement. Currently, pre-service teacher education programs are designed by Faculties in universities to be approved by the various States through boards, councils or institutes of registration. There are overlapping responsibilities of States and the Commonwealth for universities and teacher preparation, which it is argued, necessitate a cooperative approach to developing and supporting teacher quality. The intention of a National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching is to provide the basis for agreement on and consistency around what constitutes quality teaching. The establishment of the national standards, it is argued, does not replace those developed at a local level. Policy documents acknowledge “States and Territories are best placed to implement processes, or assist

the profession in the implementation of processes, that will be recognised as reflecting the real quality of teachers' work" (MCEETYA, 2003:6).

ENTRY INTO TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Selection for teacher education in Australia is based on year 12 results, or first-degree results, in the case of graduate entry programs. Currently, it is not common practice for Faculties to interview or to select students in other ways for teacher education programs. Most who enter teaching do so as Year 12 graduates. They enrol at university and then go on to teach in schools, perhaps to spend their working lives there. While entry into teacher education after year 12 will continue to be the route for many new teachers, one feature is the continuing increase in the proportion of mature age students entering teacher preparation programs. (Skilbeck and Connell, 2004:9). Overall this is seen as a benefit to the profession for it increases the variety in the backgrounds and experiences of teachers.

One concern of universities is the growing attrition rates of students in undergraduate programs. As a result, student retention strategies have been put in place. Possibly unlike other undergraduate programs, attrition in initial teacher education programs is not high in the first year. However, it is an important issue in years following, when potentially good future teachers do leave the program. In particular a crucial stage occurs when students undertake professional experience. Many teacher education programs in Australia are developing more comprehensive and supportive guidance in their initial preparation courses to address attrition.

As in most countries of the world, there is an ageing teaching workforce and therefore increasing retirements in the Australian Workforce. However, unlike other parts of the world, Australia is not predicting *widespread* shortages. There are shortages in particular subject fields and locations (such as the areas of special education, technology, mathematics and science; and rural and remote locations), but overall there are sufficient numbers of qualified teachers – but not all are teaching.

PROGRAMS

Initial teacher education programs generally fall into two categories – both are housed in university faculties or departments of education.

1. *Bachelor of Education* - single or double degree programs: These entail both subject matter content preparation and pedagogical preparation. They tend to be four or five-year programs with the teacher preparation portion generally representing a minimum of two years. Those who have made an early decision for teaching – such as school leavers, particularly choose them. This model is probably viewed as the most comprehensive approach for providing a sound grounding in both theory and practice.
2. *Graduate entry programs* – Bachelor, Masters, or Graduate Diploma: These are one or two-year programs and they vary across Faculties. Some offer Graduate Diplomas in both primary and secondary; others offer two-year Graduate entry degree programs at Bachelor or Master's level. These programs emphasise

pedagogical preparation more than subject area content preparation, as students enter with an undergraduate degree.

While there are exceptions (eg University of Central Queensland) the organisation of programs tends to be under the nomenclature of Bachelors or Graduate Diplomas of Education, “Primary” or “Secondary”. However within these programs, changing local or national priorities are developed and implemented. For example most programs now address the middle years of schooling as an area for specialisation.

Overall, the preparation of primary teachers tends to a generalist approach – that is to teach across all content areas, and levels. However there are specialisations - mainly available in third and fourth years of the initial degree. These specialisations vary – and can include early childhood; special education; as well as subject content areas, particularly Health and Physical Education and Music. At the secondary level students typically major in two subject areas. A major priority across all initial teacher education is integrating information and communication technology into pedagogy.

A feature common to most initial programs is a student portfolio. Students throughout their programs are guided towards a culminating teaching portfolio, representing evidence of their achievements in terms of academic performance and professionally specific attributes.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Most professions place importance on their new members having significant experience in the workplace as part of their professional preparation. A strong professional experience component is essential to teacher preparation.

The word ‘practicum’ is no longer used in most initial teacher education programs. This is the result of research and advice from schools and teachers that argue it to be an inadequate description for the learning of student teachers in models of teacher education where workplace learning is acknowledged as essential to teacher preparation. ‘Practicum’ as a term has become unhelpful in an environment where, as Skilbeck and Connell (2004) noted in their report to MCEETYA, there is widespread criticism of educational theory courses. It tends to reinforce an unsustainable distinction between the theory and practice of teaching.

Rather than the word ‘practicum’, the term ‘professional experience’ is now used. In some states, boards or councils of registration set a ‘minimum’ time. However, ‘professional experience’ as a term better captures the direction many teacher preparation programs take, where the student teacher will be involved actively in the complex professional work of teaching in a number of different ways, as part of their preparation program. Increasing the time spent working alongside teachers in schools is only one aspect of these models. Some programs have for example, integrated what is termed ‘service learning’ within courses. Further, using the term professional experience acknowledges its role in contributing to professional knowledge and practice throughout their teaching years. In this way, strategies for ‘reflective practice’ have become integral to the informing principles of initial teacher education programs.

SUMMARY

Our success as a society and as an economy depends on quality teaching for good student learning; the starting point to achieve this priority begins with high quality teacher education. While this applies to initial teacher preparation, it must continue throughout their careers in the provision of induction of beginning teachers, and of professional development programmes.

Partly in response to fears of teacher shortages, in some states, such as Queensland, there has been a change in credentialing for graduate entry into teaching. Easing entry into the profession is a standard response to teacher shortages – and as explained earlier, it is not a case in Australia of widespread shortages - but as Skilbeck and Connell (2004) recommend, it is important that in such a context that targeted recruitment policies be established, to address those fields and locations that are experiencing the shortages.

Faculties or departments of education value the development of partnerships with schools. This is evidenced by experienced teachers with teaching roles within the faculties; and also the reciprocal work of tertiary teacher educators in schools and education departments. As a result the trend towards establishing specific school and university partnerships to create linkages between teacher education coursework and professional experience is gaining. One critical element is the need for many more teachers to be involved in working alongside student teachers in the schools.

There is always a need for the professional experience component of initial teacher education to be carefully examined. However for it to be most effective, there is a need for co-operation across the universities, employing authorities and the profession, in the areas of joint planning, delivery and reporting. In effect, this co-operation is essential to successful research and development in the overall preparation of teachers for the future.

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