

The six steps to better teachers for Australia's school systems

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A young teacher fresh out of university stands at the front of her first classroom (they usually are women), facing a group of 25 or so expectant Year 5 students. Her first task is wrangling such a large group of children; most parents struggle with two or three.

But that is easy compared to the professional challenges of effectively teaching every child in her class. In the average Year 5 class, some students will still be performing at a Year 2 level, yet others will be stretching into the work of high school while the rest will be at various points in between.

Yet the initial teacher education teachers receive at university generally fails to provide them with essential skills. Teachers are thrown in front of a classroom and left to sink or swim. Some are excellent in spite of their teacher training, not because of it.

For each student to learn to the best of their ability, teachers must quickly be able to use their formative and summative assessment skills to identify a child's learning needs and then develop curriculum and teaching strategies to -address each of those needs.

To achieve this, teachers must have high-level skills in educational theory and child development, and use a wide range of general and subject-specific teaching skills. This requires deep knowledge of their subject area. Maths teachers, for example, must have strong mathematical knowledge and capabilities to assess and teach every child properly.

On top of this, teachers must be able to evaluate continually the impact of their teaching on every student to ensure the cycle of teaching and learning is constantly improving. None of this is easy. To pull it off, teachers require a sophisticated and complex set of skills that too often they have not been taught during their education degree. It is no wonder that early-career teachers leave the profession and that Australian children are not learning as fast as they should. Hopefully, this is about to change.

Governments across the nation are considering reforms that could fundamentally change initial teacher education, enabling improvements to the quality of education our young people receive in this and future generations.

But reforming universities — where most teachers are initially educated — is incredibly difficult. A toxic reform debate, with opponents trading insults and continually focusing on the wrong areas, is not helping. The debate is pushing policymakers into the same sorts of reforms of initial teacher education that have continually failed in other areas — policies that increase regulation and government control of the factors that make little difference to the quality of the teacher produced.

Learning First, a Melbourne-based organisation that specialises in education reform, training and policy, is working with a number of education systems around the world to improve their teachers. Many countries share similar concerns of declining quality of initial teacher education. All share the problem of how to get highly autonomous universities to improve their training programs and align them with government plans to improve school education.

The way forward is to rise above polarising debates and recognise the true problems in teacher development, the idiosyncrasies of the sector and the impact of these, and reforms that best develop and support teachers in a complex profession.

Learning First's report *A new approach: Reforming teacher education*, released today, shows how improvements in initial teacher education can be achieved. It finds that reforms are more effective when they focus on the later stages of teacher education, closer to when teachers seek their first job in schools, rather than upon selection into education degrees.

The report highlights the current situation that gives universities financial incentives to provide poor quality, low-cost teacher education and how this can be changed. Importantly, it details the various reform options available to government and how they can play out in various systems.

I was a member of the federal government's Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, which recently handed its recommendations to Education Minister Christopher Pyne. The advisory group received submissions from all parts of the education sector on how to improve teacher education, and made abundantly clear severe deficiencies in teacher education, including:

- A lack of evidence-based content: Many teaching courses are training future teachers in practices that are out of date and not backed by research. The problems with this cannot be understated. Even the hardest working teacher cannot help students learn if they are equipped with ineffective strategies.
- Inadequate subject knowledge training: Too many teaching courses lack rigorous training in specific subject knowledge. The best systems around the world do not just screen teaching candidates for such knowledge on entry into a course, they also integrate rigorous study of the subject throughout the program. Teachers need an in-depth knowledge of a subject to instruct students effectively, particularly when students are struggling to understand. Teachers with a poor grasp of the subject find it difficult to reframe lessons to meet the learning needs of all students.
- An insufficient focus on skills for clinical teaching practice: Great teachers must continually evaluate and develop their own practice. Fundamental to this is the ability to assess the impact of their teaching on student learning. Unfortunately, very few teaching programs equip beginner teachers with the skills to collect data on student progress and analyse the information to adjust and improve their teaching approach. Even the best teaching programs will not be able to prepare teachers for everything they need to know. That is why these clinical practice skills are essential to ensuring teachers can adapt to different student needs and make sure all students are learning.
- Limited practice: Teachers see the practical experience in a school as the most useful part of their training. Effectively linking teaching theories to classroom practice is critical to developing beginner teachers. But there is a lack of feedback between schools and many universities, which results in teachers struggling in their first years in the classroom. Some universities are clearly avoiding their responsibilities altogether, and student teachers are forced to cold-call schools to find practical training placements.

The advisory group's report highlighted these issues and unfortunately added fuel to what was already an unhelpful debate, one that focused on restricting entry into teaching. As soon as the report was released, newspapers were full of commentators claiming the report was

negligent in not arguing that the federal government should impose new regulations for who should be able to get into teacher education.

In recent years, increasing numbers of people with poor academic records have been admitted into teacher education, feeding fears of falling standards. But this debate is steering policy reform in the wrong -direction. A false dichotomy has been created: if you believe academic standards are important in teaching, then you support federal government regulation of who should and should not get into teacher education courses; if you don't support federal government regulation then you are seen as soft on academic standards in teaching.

Teachers must have very strong academic capabilities. The argument that teachers who are good with children don't need to be very good academically is rubbish and an insult to the teaching profession. Maths teachers must have a high level of mathematical content knowledge, as must -science teachers of science and history teachers of history.

But this doesn't mean that federal regulation of entry into teacher education is the answer. In fact, it could make things worse. There are more effective and comprehensive reform options that will build capacity in universities, align incentives of universities with schools and improve the quality of beginner teachers.

Reforms that will improve school education

The focus of reform should be where it will have the greatest impact, and that is on better training for teachers to improve school education for students. To do this, we must focus on improving how universities train our teachers.

While much of the public debate has focused on making teacher training programs more selective, there are more points along a teacher's training pathway where governments can intervene. The pathway has six steps: selection into a teaching degree, the experience students receive in their teacher education (which is determined by the quality of the course), graduation, registration, hiring, and their first years of teaching.

Governments must identify the most appropriate place to intervene and then design the reforms that will have the greatest impact. Raising ATAR cut-offs to get into teaching is a filter at the beginning of the pathway, while requiring evaluation after the first year of teaching, would fall at the end. The strength of the assessments and their consequences is important. For example, a registration exam with a passing rate of 95 per cent would not be considered a strong intervention.

Governments should look at the pathway as a complete system rather than as separate steps. In general, stronger filters further down the pathway affect not only the quality of the candidate but also the quality of the teaching program.

In Australia, far too much focus has been on the selection of candidates into teaching. The ability to improve the actual education that those candidates receive has been too often ignored. The much-touted solution of imposing an ATAR cut-off fails to improve the quality of the candidates in the way intended.

While the data is poor, on average across Australia only 20 per cent of teaching graduates enter their course on the basis of their ATAR score. Most enter teaching either as postgraduate students or through alternative means such as VET study. Of the 20 per cent of people who enter on their ATARs, fewer than half have low marks. So setting a minimum ATAR score of 70 (the top 30 per cent of school leavers) would in fact, affect only 8 per cent of teaching candidates.

In fact, the average ATAR score of those entering teaching through other means is far lower than the average of those entering straight from high school. Hence, an ATAR cut-off would still allow students with low ATARs to study teaching if they enter through an alternative pathway. Universities would encourage these alternative pathways to avoid regulation that decreases their revenue and, in doing so, make problems with poor data even worse.

A reform focus on the other end of the teacher education pathway is more effective because it allows for greater certainty over a candidate's teaching ability. Moreover, it puts the focus where it belongs: on the quality of teacher education and how teachers are prepared for the classroom.

One of the largest problems in teacher education is that it has little — and often nothing — to do with whether a teacher gets a job or the type of job they get.

A comprehensive analysis in one Australian state showed that all student teachers graduate (if they want to), all are registered as teachers, and all are equally likely to get employment as teachers. So the skills and abilities they develop (or don't develop) during their teacher education has little impact on their careers.

The system sends a message and financial incentive to teaching students to take the cheapest, quickest teacher education they possibly can because, regardless of quality, it won't affect their employment or pay as teachers.

Reforms that ensure teachers' skills and capabilities determine their registration or employment would drive more teaching students to search for higher quality courses. But do universities have any incentive to provide high-quality teacher education?

Under the current system, universities have a clear financial incentive to provide the cheapest courses they can. Many students will still attend because it doesn't affect their employment or career, and it increases revenue for universities. In teacher education, low-cost courses usually equate to low quality because providing an effective blend of theoretical training (usually in universities) and practical training (usually in schools) is expensive.

Comparisons with other professions are illuminating. Medicine, for example, has a different cost structure as it is more expensive to train doctors. In contrast, poor-quality teacher education is cheap, with low marginal costs of adding more students to existing courses. Universities have much greater financial incentives to expand low-quality teacher education than medicine.

Teaching degrees have stronger similarities to law degrees. Both are relatively cheap to run (especially the marginal cost of educating an additional student) compared with, for example, medicine, but the incentives differ because of the links between the quality of university training and a student's career outcomes. In teaching the links are poor; in law the links are strong.

Competition among law students is fierce. The quality of the course and university you attend greatly affects your progression and earnings in a legal career. Every potential law student knows that if they are admitted into a good course they have a better chance of working at a top law firm. Universities, therefore, have incentives to improve their law courses to attract more students who will then be able to secure better jobs and higher salaries.

But this is not true for teachers and ITE programs. Universities won't lose students if they offer poor-quality teaching courses, so there are no financial incentives for universities to improve their teacher education programs. Reforming teacher education so the quality of the

teaching degrees is linked to teachers' employment and career prospects will change the incentives for students. Publishing information on the standard of the program will create clear incentives for universities to improve the quality of teacher education they provide.

As an example, consider changing teacher registration so that only those who can demonstrate they are effective teachers can qualify to be registered. A comprehensive assessment would mean that only a percentage of -applicants — not all — would pass and be registered.

The registration passing results for each teaching course in a university could be made public, so students considering becoming teachers could judge which courses gave them the best chance of being registered as a teacher.

This would completely turn the current system on its head. Universities would have clear incentives to improve their course because students would balk at paying money for a teacher education course that is not good enough to get them registered as a teacher. Similar reforms have been implemented in Korea after it became concerned about the growth in low-quality courses.

Creating a strong evaluation at teacher registration, or upon employment, is not the only option but it illustrates how reforms will be more effective by targeting teachers when they enter the classroom. That is, towards the end of the education pathway.

In the end, these reforms will also drive up the entry requirements. Student teachers with poor academic abilities will not pass and universities will not want to be seen to have high failure rates. This is more effective than simply regulating higher entry requirements for courses.

Systems that choose not to follow this direction can focus on evaluating and developing teacher education more directly. A number of education systems around the world are establishing methods to evaluate teacher education. Some use funding levers to provide incentives to education faculties to, for example, work more closely with schools to improve reading literacy.

These reforms can improve teacher education across the sector as new effective practices are properly disseminated.

Which level of government should intervene?

Given all the problems with federal-state relations over the years, it is a pity that differences in federal and state interventions are continually ignored. State governments run schools. For public schools, they hire and pay all teachers and school leaders, provide the buildings and resources to ensure schools can operate. They set the vast majority of student assessments and policies that determine how schools operate and can improve.

The main areas of influence by the federal government are in the development of the national curriculum, numeracy and literacy tests in NAPLAN and funding of mainly non-government schools.

Teacher education is a more difficult area given the federal government funds and provides much of the regulation of universities but the states are the main employers of teaching graduates. But given the dominance of state governments in school education, any federal government intervention must be done cautiously. Federal government policies that run counter to state government strategies ensure that both federal and state reforms are

ineffective. This has been a major problem in school education that is too regularly overlooked.

In recent times, NSW has led the nation in reforming teacher education. Notably, it has instituted new tough entry requirements and a more comprehensive evaluation of the quality of teacher education courses.

Many commentators who supported these moves lambasted the TEMAG report for failing to follow the lead of NSW in this area. It was argued that the federal government should also institute new entry standards and tighter evaluation of university courses.

But this ignores the fundamental issues of the federal system. It is precisely because of the comprehensive reforms in NSW that the federal government should not intervene. If the federal government comes over the top with new regulations, then history shows it will ruin the incentives created by the NSW government and any alignment with other key NSW reforms. The good work in NSW would be ruined.

There are a number of reforms that can improve teacher education but we must focus on the ones that will have the greatest impact. Nothing will change unless teaching students and universities face consequences for running poor-quality, cheap education courses. And if nothing changes, our children pay the price.

Link to article in *The Australian*

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/the-six-steps-to-better-teachers-for-australias-school-system/news-story/96f2cc136450b7ca6344ddd4eaef11b7>