

A UNIFIED NATIONAL APPROACH TO IMPROVE TEACHER EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA IS THE MAIN THEME OF A REPORT BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES EDUCATION COMMITTEE. NOW THE GOVERNMENT IS CONSIDERING ITS SWEEPING RECOMMENDATIONS.

GEOFFREY MASLEN REPORTS

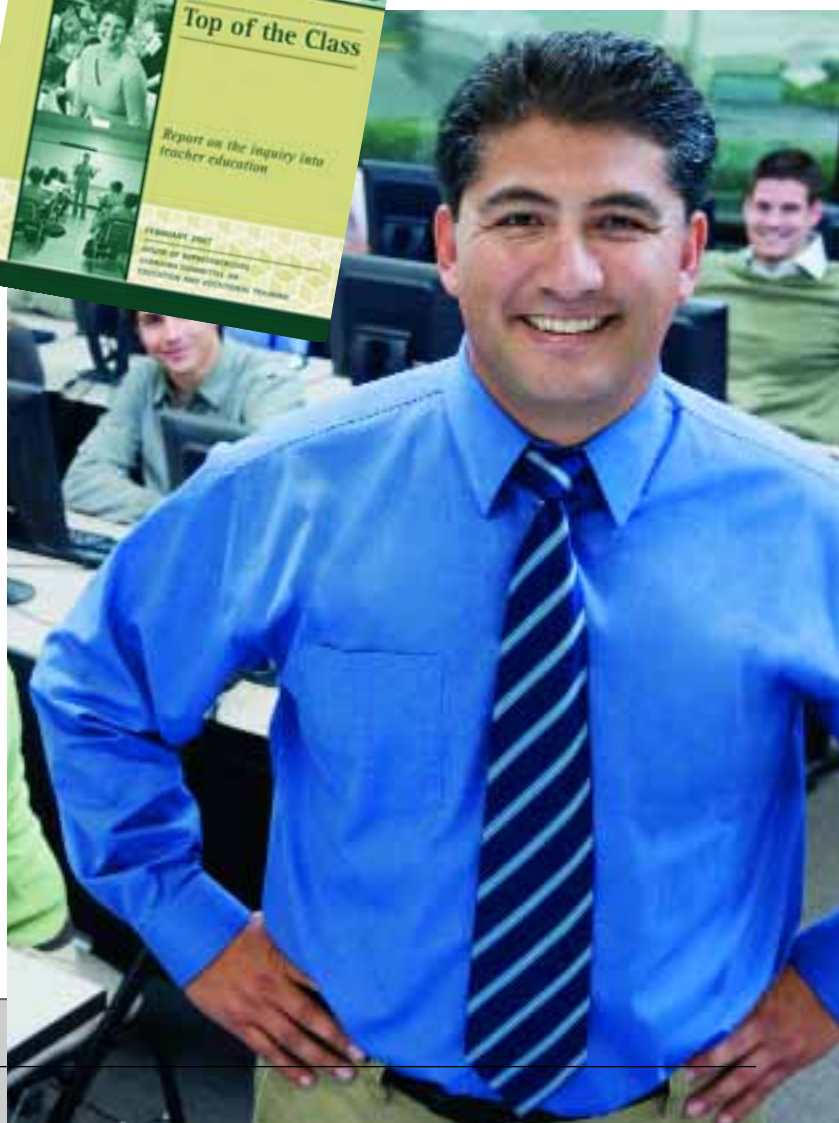
The ART OF TEACHING

It took two years to produce, attracted 195 written submissions, involved 29 public hearings across Australia at which 446 witnesses appeared, and runs to 230 pages. Yet the latest report of an inquiry into teacher education tabled in February contains just 12 recommendations.

Admittedly, those 12 proposals are actually composed of more than 20 subsections that call for substantial changes in the way student teachers are prepared to do battle in the classroom. These include a national system of accrediting university education courses, a more effective period in the classroom for trainee teachers, a proper first-year-out induction scheme, an education research fund to inform teacher education policy—and more money, millions of dollars more.

The House of Representatives Education Committee has four representatives of the Australian Labor Party who are outnumbered by the six Coalition MPs. Nevertheless, the report's conclusions were endorsed by both sides and have been welcomed by the various lobby groups involved in schools, universities, teacher unions and parent associations.

Although several of the recommendations are far-reaching, observers wonder whether any of the 12 will be adopted. That isn't surprising considering a succession of state and federal governments have held more than 50 of these investigations over the past 25 years—and few of their proposals have ever been accepted.



The latest inquiry was initiated by former Education Minister Brendan Nelson and the report's warm reception by most stakeholders was probably due to relief at its findings. For the reasons Dr Nelson gave in calling for the inquiry, it seemed likely it would produce a condemnation of university education faculties and the academics involved in preparing novice teachers for the classroom.

Dr Nelson had pointed to the weak literacy and numeracy skills of newcomers to teaching, along with the left-leaning tendencies of their lecturers, to highlight what he said were the quasi-sociology, fad-driven ethos of the faculties.

For schools, a crucial recommendation was the proposal that a structured induction program, including an allocated mentor, be provided for beginning teachers.

But instead of condemning the pedagogues, the committee was generally supportive and its report declared there was no crisis in teacher education. It did, however, argue for improvements that have the potential to markedly increase the effectiveness of how tyro, or beginning, teachers are trained—especially since a number of beginning teachers rated their pre-service education poorly and up to 40 per cent seemed destined to quit the classroom in their first three to five years.

For schools, a crucial recommendation was the proposal that a structured induction program, including an allocated mentor, be provided for beginning teachers while the practicum process—the period that student teachers spend in schools—needed many more places and more time for trainees to front real-life pupils.

Deans of education were among the first to welcome the House committee's findings. President of the Australian Council of Deans of Education, Professor Sue Willis said

the inquiry had taken the issue of teacher education very seriously indeed, noting that it was “undeniably important to the social and economic wellbeing of the country”.

“This report both acknowledges the good work of teacher education and gives constructive suggestions about how it might improve to the long-term advantage of the students of Australia,” Professor Willis said. “[But] it would be so easy for the effort of an inquiry to be wasted, as has been the case for many predecessor reports over the years, since teacher education is often caught between levels of government and hampered by lower than needed levels of funding.”

She said the report had made a significant contribution to understanding what should be done to advance the cause of high quality teacher education. The deans were particularly pleased that the report was a bipartisan effort and that the committee had refused to “buy into the kind of crisis thinking about education that seems to be so prevalent”.

The second finding that naturally drew applause from the deans was the call for greater expenditure, not just to put teacher education on a sounder financial footing but funding for educational research and for additional programs to increase the diversity of entrants to teacher education. “One of the really good things in the report is the recognition that Australia needs a better evidentiary base with the establishment of a national clearing house for education research,” Professor Willis said. “At the same time, it is not possible for education faculties to respond to a number of the committee's proposals without additional resources—something the committee itself also concluded.”

Even without more government money, Professor Willis said the ACDE was already taking action on some issues, including developing a national system of teacher accreditation and seeking seed funding to set up a longitudinal study that would track teachers as they underwent training and follow their careers over several years.

“The third issue is school placement and developing partnerships with schools,” she said. “There are huge financial problems in this area but, regardless of resources, this is critical in the training of teachers and we have begun linking with other education organisations to set up a research project on how we can achieve better placements.”

Professor Willis said the deans were highly doubtful about the committee's seventh recommendation which concerns the ways teachers are inducted into the profession when they begin in a school. The recommendation calls for a year-long induction program with an experienced teacher acting as a mentor and a 20 per cent reduction in the beginner's teaching load. It also calls for the number of teachers in training to be matched with the demand by schools for more staff.

“The ACDE is very sceptical about recommendation seven, both its principle and its practicality,” she said. “We are particularly un-persuaded by arguments about matching supply with the demand from schools.”

Another group to applaud the committee's conclusions was the Australian Education Union. With more than 100,000 members in schools across the nation, the union described the result as “a positive report which acknowledged the real problems facing teacher education”.

AEU president Pat Byrne said the committee had correctly identified the teaching practicum as an issue and the AEU fully supported the recommendation that there be increased federal funding for universities to enable them to expand the time student teachers spent in schools.

“We also support the recommendation for a properly funded, structured induction to the profession for graduates to smooth the transition between university and

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school. We believe there is great merit in having reduced face-to-face teaching loads as part of that induction to enable further professional learning opportunities and appropriately trained mentors to fulfill this role.”

Ms Byrne said the union had consistently called for reforms to teacher education as well as improved support for beginning teachers. She noted that a recent survey by the union of new teachers highlighted the extent of the problem of retaining teachers in the profession with only half those surveyed expecting to be still teaching in 10 years time.

The AEU also endorsed the inquiry’s call for greater consistency among teacher education courses—something that could be achieved through a national framework. Ms Byrne said work towards this had commenced through the Australasian Forum of Teacher Registration and Accreditation Authorities.

Another significant group, the National Tertiary Education Union, which represents academics and general staff in universities, similarly agreed with the report’s major conclusions and its comment that while the teacher education system was not in crisis and had served Australia well, it could do better.

“We strongly support the overriding recommendation that funding for teacher education needs to be substantially increased,” said NTEU spokesman and research officer Paul Kniest. “In particular, the NTEU strongly supports the recommendations to establish a sound research base for teacher education and for significant increases in Commonwealth funding [of] the teaching practicum.”

While most of the recommendations were in line with the NTEU’s submission to the inquiry, Mr Kniest said the only one the union had issues with concerned the development of national parallel systems for teacher registration and course accreditation.

“The NTEU does not believe it is necessary to have parallel accreditation and registration systems,” he said. “The introduction of a course accreditation system has the potential to threaten the academic freedom of staff involved in teacher education programs as well as university autonomy and independence.”



Improved support is needed for beginning teachers.

Mr Kniest questioned whether the federally-funded Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (known as Teaching Australia) was the appropriate body to oversee the registration and accreditation processes.

He said the union was not convinced it was truly representative of the teaching and teacher education professions. It was an independent company with one shareholder—the federal Minister for Education—and its current board had no members from organisations representing teachers such as the AEU, or teacher educators such as the NTEU.

“The real danger, however, is that like the majority of reviews and inquiries into teaching and teacher education in Australia over the last two decades, governments will fail to implement the recommendations of the *Top of the class* report,” he said.

Secondary school principals likewise backed the committee’s findings. President of the Australian Secondary Principals Association, Andrew Blair, said the issue of teacher preparation had been of serious and

ongoing concern to his members over many years.

“As an association we feel strongly that Australia’s teacher preparation courses must be nationally accredited to ensure both consistency and quality,” Mr Blair said. “It is our view that the courses should reflect and be responsive to the views of key stakeholder groups, in particular school leaders.”

He said the association strongly supported any strategies that helped tackle teacher shortages and that would see students graduating from universities encouraged to help overcome shortfalls in foreign language teaching and senior school mathematics and science.

The association had been heartened by recommendations in the report which would ensure trainee teachers spent longer in the classroom, alongside high-quality and experienced teachers learning the art of the profession, Mr Blair said.

“In particular, any moves towards a focused and strategically implemented internship model would be highly

valued by Australia's school leaders. There has been ongoing frustration from many of the stakeholder groups with university-run teacher training programs that are managed by lecturers who have little or no experience in today's classrooms."

There was also concern that the programs provided by many universities appeared to have changed little in 20 or more years, Mr Blair said. He added that if teachers were to be "top class" they needed to be trained in a manner that reflected what current research indicated about good practice.

One of Australia's most respected educators, Dr Malcolm Skilbeck, who now runs an international

education consultancy with his partner, Dr Helen Connell, said the committee had done "a workmanlike job" and was right to aim for a fairly brief set of recommendations.

Dr Skilbeck is a former vice-chancellor of Deakin University in Melbourne, a former deputy director of education with the OECD and a consultant with UNESCO and the British Council. He said the most important issues from his point of view were those dealing with partnership and the demographic imbalances in the profession.

"But I would like to have seen the committee go much further with the orientation of teacher education moving towards the schools and

student teachers not only spending more time in schools but school people becoming equal partners in the design and delivery of the overall program," he said.

Dr Skilbeck noted this would require big changes in where the money was spent, in the design and facilities of selected schools, in the professional learning of future school-based teacher educators and in the roles of university staff.

"The committee is moving in the right direction but I had hoped it would be bolder in addressing these issues. So while its emphases on improved partnerships and strengthened practicum are welcome, we need more decisive leadership and much more detailed analyses of how to achieve this reorientation—what and how universities teach future teachers needs much closer critical scrutiny."

On the committee's call for the Australian government to set up an educational research fund similar to the National Health and Medical Research Council, Dr Skilbeck said it was good to have research highlighted. But the committee had missed an opportunity in not carrying out an analysis of recent research and scholarship—especially that in America and Britain where teacher education has been under intensive review.

"Just throwing money at research won't help; there should, first of all, be a commissioned review of research tied to an issues analysis grounded in both the committee's recommendations and in the debate over issues of quality and relevance in Australian education in an international context," he said.

Dr Skilbeck said he would be surprised if the federal government—or any government—accepted the committee's relatively large expenditure proposals, which should have been tied to definite targets. As well, the committee seemed to assume that every university should continue to offer teacher education whereas it was questionable whether every one of them should be in the business. ■

The 'Top of the class' report is at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/evt/teachereduc/report.htm or for more information email evt.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4573.

"We feel strongly that Australia's teacher preparation courses must be nationally accredited."



A year-long induction program with an experienced teacher has been proposed for new teachers. Photo: photolibrary.com