

The preparation of Australia's teachers has long attracted the attention of governments around the nation. Following a New South Wales investigation in 2001, a federal inquiry in 2002 and a Victorian parliamentary study that reported last February, the House of Representatives Education and Vocational Training Committee is undertaking its own review. Geoffrey Maslen reports.

Teaching by degrees

IN ONE of his oft-repeated lines, George Bernard Shaw delivered a malicious misrepresentation of the world's pedagogues: "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches."

Even a century ago when Shaw made that observation in one of his plays, it was a callous calumny. Three years later, Henry Brooks Adams tried to correct the record by declaring, "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

Yet it is Shaw's aphorism rather than Adams' that still influences the way many people regard teachers, as if teaching was a job anyone could do. The assumption being they weren't very good at doing something else.

The 150,000 men and women who teach in Australia's schools could point to these critics and say, "You try studying at university for four years and then keep 20 tiny tots entertained and educated for six hours a day; you try managing a class of 25 teenagers with hormones surging through their veins for week after week over a whole school year!"

It may look easy to the outsider, recalling school-life from a desk facing the blackboard 10, 20 or 30 years ago. But teaching today is more demanding than it ever was, requiring pedagogic, psychological and managerial skills of a very high order. Yet only some of those skills are learned while tyro teachers are being trained, the rest they must pick up on the job—or in further study that can go on for years.

Of the 100,000 students enrolled in the faculties of education at Australia's 40 universities, about one in four are classroom teachers and principals undertaking postgraduate programs to improve their abilities. The other 75 per cent are involved in preservice training.

Even when they have been inducted into the profession, many young teachers find the demands too exhausting so they soon quit and go off looking for another job away from school. Studies in America have found that nearly one in three teachers starting their careers resign in the first year. Although figures are not available for

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Australia, some experts put the drop-out rate at more than 20 per cent.

Not only does this represent a waste to the faculties of education that spend thousands of dollars training them but the drop-outs are also a worrying loss to schools already struggling to fill teaching vacancies.

This is one of the reasons the education faculties are facing another inquiry into teacher training—even though there has been a review at state and federal levels every year on average for the past 25 years. Educators argue that each inevitably reaches much the same conclusions while the problems education faculties confront become ever more daunting.

The latest investigation by the House of Representatives Education and Vocational Training Committee might be different. But sceptics recall that a national study two years ago, focusing on science and mathematics teaching, produced a swag of recommendations most of which are yet to be implemented.

The House inquiry into whether teacher trainees are being adequately prepared for the classroom raises an interesting paradox, says Steve Dinham, a professor of education at the University of Wollongong. On the one hand, there is abundant evidence that teaching today is a highly complex and demanding undertaking. On the other, there is pressure to produce graduates who can be effective professionals from day one in schools.

“We know from research into many fields that it takes 10 to 13 years to become expert in anything,” Professor Dinham says. “There is much about teaching that can’t be taught and must be learned through experience.”

He says a significant issue in teacher education is the over-crowded curriculum. Whenever a social problem arises it is handed to schools to solve and soon finds its way into teacher education courses. Rarely is anything taken away to balance what is imposed.

University of Newcastle Professor Terence Lovat is President of the Australian Council of Deans of Education and he says the average education faculty is now managing twice the number of students with half the staff it had 10 years ago. Despite this, Australian teacher education is one of the most highly regarded in the world.

“I was woken in the middle of the night recently by a call from BBC Radio in London,” Professor Lovat says. “On the same day that teacher education was being slagged in the Australian media, the British media were running a story about how successfully recent Australian graduates had fitted into British schools.”



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Britain, he says, plans to recruit 10,000 Australian teachers over the next few years. Although there are “cheaper teachers” than the Australians who could be recruited, Professor Lovat says it is the Australian teacher who is regarded as well trained in a way almost forgotten in Britain.

“These teachers are said to understand the profession, to know their subject, know how to teach it and to be sufficiently flexible to be able to work in a variety of settings.”

Professor Lovat suspects the latest inquiry could be worthwhile—but only if it is an opportunity to identify a decade and a half of underfunding that takes no account of the costs of placing trainee teachers in schools for their practice rounds.

Professor Dinham agrees: funding is a core issue and beginning teachers need more time to observe and teach in a variety of schools. But lack of money militates against this, as does having to pay teachers to supervise the trainees.

“In New South Wales, teachers receive a little over \$20 per day to supervise a trainee teacher,” he says. “That doesn’t sound much but it takes around \$500,000 in total to send 1,000 trainees out to schools for a four-week practicum. We would love to do more.”

Federal Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson, who initiated the latest investigation, says this one will receive all the support it requires from his department—whether research, additional resources or secondment of personnel.

“The inquiry specifically will be examining a number of things, in particular the people that are being attracted to teaching in Australia, both from school and mature age,” Dr Nelson says.

“It will also examine the extent to which there are attrition rates from our universities, the way in which universities prepare the next generation of teachers to deal with students with disabilities, with learning problems, with behavioural problems.”

He says the inquiry will complement an investigation being conducted by Dr Ken Rowe from the Australian Council for Educational Research into the teaching of reading in Australian schools and the way teachers are prepared to teach children how to read.

The terms of reference for the House inquiry cover 11 main areas and, as the minister explains, include the criteria for selecting teacher education students, the structure of courses and methods used, how teachers are prepared to teach reading and numeracy, and—in a remarkable phrase—“how they are prepared to deal with bullying and disruptive students and dysfunctional families”.

At the University of Tasmania, where 1,200 students are enrolled in the faculty of education, dean Professor Roslyn Arnold wonders how on earth teachers are supposed to be trained to deal with dysfunctional families. Then there is the reference to literacy again and the other Nelson-initiated inquiry into the teaching of reading.

“We’re all getting a bit tired of the literacy debate,” Professor Arnold says. “There’s a huge amount of research into the teaching of reading and writing so what that inquiry can add is anyone’s guess.”

Dr Nelson says the teacher education investigation will carefully examine the philosophical underpinnings, the extent to which teachers are being supported in their training when they attend schools for practice rounds, and the way schools are delivering mentoring and support to new teachers.

The House committee is chaired by National Party MP Luke Hartsuyker (Member for Cowper, NSW) and includes five Liberal politicians while Labor has four members, including the Deputy Chair, Rod Sawford (Member for Port Adelaide, SA). Despite the conservative majority, Dr Nelson says all 10 members of the standing committee are parents and four had been teachers so they would approach the issue with an open mind “and get in my opinion to the bottom of the problem”.

The “problem” would seem to be the failure of education faculties to prepare new teachers to do their job. Dr Nelson says he has no doubt this occurs in some

universities: "In too many instances I've had teacher education faculties described to me as quasi-sociology departments. There is criticism from principals to varying degrees about the standards of graduates that come to them to teach in our schools."

As anecdotal evidence for his concerns, Dr Nelson quotes research conducted at the Queensland University of Technology which found more than half the final-year teachers in training could not identify a syllable from four choices. Three-quarters could not identify "the word sounds in words".

"We also had the products of the education system in first-year students at the University of New England recently where a quarter were not able to pass successfully the year 8 maths exam and none could achieve 100 per cent," he says.

But Professor Dinham is sceptical of these examples. He says that if in fact some entrants to teacher education can't meet basic standards in high school mathematics and literacy, "how is it they have just emerged from schools with a Higher School Certificate and a university admissions score over 80?"

The National Tertiary Education Union, which represents university academics, is keen to support any measure aimed at improving teacher education and will participate in the review. NTEU policy and research coordinator, Andrew Nette, says the inquiry is the latest in a long line of teacher reviews and the union wants this one to bring about real improvements.

The review needs to focus both on teacher education at universities and on improving the chances for ongoing professional development of teachers once they join the workforce, Mr Nette says.

"As part of this, the government needs to commit now to making sure the review's outcomes are properly resourced," he says. "That includes ensuring that additional funds are made available for teacher training and that these actually get to the education faculties rather than being diverted into other areas of university operations."

Terry Lovat and Steve Dinham agree that in some universities education has been used as a 'cash cow' to fund other faculties. As demand for teaching places invariably exceeds supply, teacher education is seen as low cost and low profile compared with other areas, they say.

"Thankfully this is changing with a higher profile for education and Dr Nelson can take some credit for this," Professor Dinham adds. "Entry standards for teaching have been

rising across Australia with a UAI of 80 now being the minimum in many faculties."

Commenting on Dr Nelson's claim that education faculties have become "quasi-sociology departments", he notes that education is "an intensely social profession". But he admits there has been a drift away from study of the curriculum areas since teacher education moved into universities in the late 1980s.

"Beginning teachers have two fundamental needs," he says. "They want to know what to teach, and how to teach it. The backbone of any teacher education program must be the school curriculum. In some universities there has been too much emphasis on other matters, with beginning teachers receiving scant preparation in some curriculum areas."

Terry Lovat probably sums up the general view of academics working in faculties of

education: "If the inquiry team has the gumption to unpick the evidence of inadequate funding and the political will to deal with it, then the inquiry will have been worthwhile."

"If it chooses the path of the Victorian report, full of good ideas with no connection to policy, funding or industrial realities, it will achieve nothing." ■

Geoffrey Maslen writes on education for Australian and overseas newspapers. He was a secondary school teacher for more than 20 years and also lectured to trainee science and mathematics teachers.

More information on the inquiry into teacher education by the House of Representatives Education and Vocational Training Committee is available at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/evt/teacher_educ or email evt.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4573.



Evanthe Nott. Photo: Michael Silver

When the learning really starts

"Your first day in front of a class, on your own as a real teacher without anyone supervising you, is the most frightening," says Evanthe Nott. "That's when the learning really starts."

Ms Nott does not think the preparation she received before facing her first class was inadequate, just that nothing quite prepares the beginner for that initial confrontation.

In her three years of a bachelor of teaching degree at Deakin University in Melbourne, Ms Nott spent 12 weeks on practice rounds in primary schools. The practical experience, along with learning about child behaviour, developmental psychology and preparing lessons, she found very useful.

But the three-year degree was phased out and teachers needed a four-year bachelor of education to qualify. So Ms Nott went back to university for another 12 months during which she had a further 11 days in schools. She also worked part-time with disabled students, helping them as a note-taker.

The work made her realise "I do like teaching and working with disabled children". This time, though, to get a permanent job in a school for intellectually and physically disabled children, she required additional qualifications in special education. So she began a masters degree as a part-time, external student at Deakin.

That year required 45 days in different schools, teaching classes in front of another teacher or being watched by one of her university lecturers. She graduated for the third time and was able to gain a permanent position at one of the schools where she had completed a practicum.

Ms Nott is now a mentor for newcomers to the profession. Unlike when she first graduated, newly-qualified teachers in Victoria are classified as 'provisional' for their first year. They must prove to the school principal and their mentor that they can handle classes and manage the manifold tasks teachers must undertake before they can be finally registered.

"As far as I'm concerned, they're already a teacher when they graduate but this new requirement means they have to do a fifth year and only then are they rated a teacher," Evanthe Nott says. "I think that's a bit much!"