



17 December 2018

To: The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training
From: The School of Education, University of the Sunshine Coast

Response to the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession

1. Increasing the attractiveness of the profession for teachers and principals, including workplace conditions, and career and leadership structures.

1.1 Media agendas

All too often teachers are blamed for less-than-satisfactory student and school performance. Whilst journalists are entitled to report on issues which are in the public interest, the purported deficiencies of teachers and principals frequently give rise to the headline which will attract the widest audience, and teachers inevitably become the default target of blame. The good work that teachers do is significantly under-reported. Governments, state education authorities, regulation authorities, school systems, individual schools, teachers themselves and higher education providers of ITE should therefore focus on proactively promoting good news stories about teachers in collaboration with media sources. If the government is going to achieve their aim of raising the status of the profession, then promoting it as a worthwhile profession will need to feature in its communication with the public.

1.1 Political agendas

Feeding into the destructive media coverage concerning the teaching profession, politicians regularly engage in a discourse of teacher educator blame. This underlines a lack of trust and respect for teaching professionals. Political leaders must do all they can through articulated policy and commentary to enhance teacher identities and status in order to alter the negative image of the teaching profession which has lodged itself into the minds of many Australians. Politicians have an important role and wield significant power which can have impact on the status of teachers, and consequently what is played out in the media and absorbed by the general populace.

1.3 Training/compliance approach to teacher education

The lack of trust and respect shown by the media and by politicians, is also reflected in the increased compliance approach to teacher education and close monitoring by each state on behalf of the Commonwealth Government to ensure that professional standards are adhered to. This is reflected across the board within education, where creativity and context are not valued. Minimal opportunity exists for creativity in the way teachers are prepared for their chosen profession by higher education institutions, and in the way that teachers anticipate they will be able to be creative in their future careers. This impacts directly on the attractiveness of the profession.

Approaches to learning to be a teacher should be able to be creative, relevant to 21st century learner needs and inspiring to future teachers, whilst maintaining rigorous academic standards. Presently, conformity and a compliance mentality dominate the culture of a profession which must be creative and reflexive to survive and to flourish. In the same way, context is ignored in favour of national agendas. Regional, rural and remote educational contexts, and their unique requirements, are not catered for within a dogmatic 'one-size fits all' approach to educational policy.

1.4 Attractiveness of ITE programs and how they are promoted

Higher education institutions can make more of each preservice teacher's entrance into the profession with significant professional welcoming activities and partnerships with schools and community. This must also be reflected in how the initial teacher education programs are positioned and marketed by the university to entice potential enrolments into initial teacher education programs.

1.5 Continued professional connection

Not only is it crucial for preservice teachers to be welcomed to the profession and engaged at the start of their program of study, but more effective initiatives (both government- and school-funded) that continue to offer professional development are crucial. Provisional teacher registration throughout the preservice teacher's undergraduate or postgraduate study would affirm their newly-acquired status as a member of the teaching profession, albeit as an associate member, until graduation.

1.5 Further study encouraged by employers

The undertaking of postgraduate study following five years of teaching service could be supported by a teacher's employing body in terms of time release and subsidy of course fees. This would be a welcome incentive and encourage teachers to continue in the profession. Their studies would likewise enable teachers to develop skills equipping them to approach challenges encountered in their work with more confidence or support them to gain further qualifications to pursue their leadership ambitions.

1.6 Progression needs review

The promotional pathways available, along with the processes and the requirements to achieve Highly Achieving Teacher or Lead Teacher status, should be reviewed. There should be more equity between states, systems and schools with regard to promotional opportunities for teachers. The means by which these levels are determined should be relevant for each phase of schooling and for specialist teachers, for example, music teachers.

1.7 Encouragement to rural and remote

There should be an equitable approach by both national and state governments to attracting teachers to serve in rural and remote locations, and to encouraging people from those areas into the teaching profession so they can serve their communities. Working conditions offered in those locations have improved in some states along with remuneration incentives to allure teachers to undertake these roles, but more can be done to ensure equity across Australia. It is crucial to ensure that students in remote locations have continuity of access to a good education served by teachers enthusiastic to teach in their school.

1.8 Equity regarding transfer between states

Ease of transfer across the states within Australia would be an additional logistical encouragement for teachers to remain in the profession. The adoption of a national teacher registration system (as opposed to the current state-centric model) would allow transfer between states to be achieved.

1.9 Attracting males into Prim and EC

Proactive promotion of teaching as an excellent career choice for both males and females should remain a priority for governments and employing bodies.

2. Provision of appropriate support platforms for teachers, including human and IT resources.

2.1 Mentoring and wellbeing support

Support must be available in the form of access to a mentor or a critical friend to support teachers at all stages in their careers, but especially at the start. This should be a national scheme and available to all teachers. In terms of pastoral care, there is a need to support teachers' and principals' health and wellbeing in proactive ways, and not just as a resource which is only accessed by the individual at a crisis point.

2.2 Safety of teachers

Safe-guarding the safety of our teachers requires a national approach. There should be government policy and protection initiatives to protect teachers against any form of physical or psychological abuse, including, but not limited to, challenging parental behaviour. This would align the teaching profession with other professions such as the police force where safety of its members has been recognised as a high priority. Doing this for our teachers would be re-assuring and would display awareness of the current significant workplace concerns of teachers. Increased partnering with stakeholders in the community to assist in the support of teachers and principals is recommended and this would also enhance these important ongoing relationships (e.g. the Adopt-a-Cop scheme which should have guaranteed funded for each school). Approaches designed to improve safety of teachers could also include the recruitment of support personnel for behaviour management, engagement of community organisations to provide breakfasts and lunch time activities, and broader provision of school chaplains, counsellors and youth workers. The approach adopted in each school will reflect the complexity of that school environment – and should not be a one-size fits all approach.

2.3 Flexibility and trust

When it is appropriate to work away from the school site, attendance at school should not be compulsory. Schools and school systems should be encouraged to regard teachers as professionals who will fulfill all their teaching and associated administrative and/ or leadership responsibilities with an associated degree of autonomy. Other professionals are able to perform their roles in this way, and teachers would be encouraged by this move towards increased flexibility and trust.

3. Identifying ways in which the burden of out-of-hours, at-home work can be reduced.

3.1 Stress management and work/life balance crucial

There should be ongoing professional development and proactive encouragement for teachers to establish a work/ life balance. Government-funded support centres to promote health and wellbeing (e.g. the Department of Education and Training, Queensland, Centres of Learning and Wellbeing) should be accessible to teachers across Australia. Time-management skills should be emphasized along with the professional capacity to determine when enough preparation or other duties have been done. School leaders must also frequently encourage their teachers to know where to draw the line regarding their role, whilst maintaining a high standard of performance. Time release for early career teachers is essential for them to get on top of all the processes, policies and duties associated with their new roles (see 4.2 below).

3.2 Different staff models can assist

Para-professionals, such as teacher aides, can assist in further reducing some aspects of teachers' responsibilities and additional duties. One suggestion is to employ preservice teachers in these types of para-professional roles whilst studying, partly to provide school experience for them, but also to make an impact on the quantum of out-of-school hours work teachers are obliged to take on. The training of teachers in working effectively with para-professionals would enhance the efficacy of para-professional teacher assistance models. Another strategy would be to utilise casual staff in ways that more effectively reduce teacher overload especially at peak times. This may relate to assistance with lesson preparation and taking on more responsibility for learning activities when taking classes for teachers.

3.3 Physical environment

Time and resources should be made available for teachers to embellish their teaching environments. All too often, this essential aspect of creating an inspirational learning environment is left to individual teachers to undertake in their own time and by utilising their own financial resources. The inequity of expecting teachers to subsidise classroom embellishment is one aspect of the current situation, but the impact on teachers' workload is the other concern. The consequence is that more work must be done outside of their apportioned working hours.

3.4 Leadership advocacy and management skills training

School leaders must more frequently articulate what is reasonable in terms of hours of duty and to make available management skills training for teachers to assist with balancing their complex roles which can impede on personal time to an unacceptable level. It is important that leaders support teachers in their handling of parental inquiries, which can be time-consuming as well as confrontational, but that they also equip teachers with specific conflict resolution and personal communication skills.

4. Investigating ways to increase retention rates for the teaching profession and avoid 'burn out' among early-career teachers.

4.1 Tapering PSTs into the profession

Right from the start of a preservice teacher's ITE studies, the fostering of collegiality, professional networking and peer support is essential, and this can be encouraged further by higher education providers. Academics should endeavor to ensure good connections with schools throughout courses to increase preservice teachers' understanding of the teaching role they are aiming to step into and to provide broad professional support. Regulatory authorities providing provisional teacher registration from the beginning of their studies will encourage a sense of belonging to the profession and may well have a favourable impact on retention rates.

4.2 Reduce first year teachers' loads

All beginning teachers should be given a 50% load for their first year in the profession to ensure that: they have ample time to get on top of administrative as well as pedagogical requirements of their new role; they are able to familiarize themselves fully with school routines and policies; and that burn-out of beginning teachers is avoided.

4.3 Professional connectivity

The consistent funding of professional associations is recommended across the disciplines and phases of schooling, as, currently, individual membership fee payment is often financially prohibitive to preservice teachers. The aim of this would be to ensure that early career teachers remain in touch professionally with their networks which can like-wise reduce attrition and enhance levels of professional satisfaction.

Dr Susan Simon, on behalf of the School of Education, USC