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THE CONVERSATION

Why scrap teaching degrees? There is no crisis in teacher education

October 15, 2015 6.32am AEDT

Christine Ure

Head of School of Education, Deakin University



The supply of teachers cannot be turned on and off like a tap – it takes years to create a teacher.
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A story in The Australian on the employment of teaching graduates and quality of teacher education programs implies there is a crisis in teacher education when there is not.

Australian higher education institutions produce teachers of high quality. I am frequently contacted by international teaching agencies because they recognise that Australian teachers are adaptable and have a strong focus on student learning outcomes and well-being.

The call from the Australian Education Union to make sweeping changes to permit only graduate entrants into teacher education and to approve only graduate teacher preparation programs is not an effective way of ensuring quality teachers.

Why scrap teaching degrees?

Let's begin with the call for the scrapping of undergraduate teacher education degrees.

More than two-thirds of primary teachers and half of secondary school teachers complete undergraduate programs. They are as successful as bachelor graduates from other disciplines in seeking full-time employment. So why would you cull a key pathway for the creation of quality teachers?

Then there are the calls for the quick fix of allowing only students who achieve a certain ATAR score – their ranking on completion of year 12 – to enter teacher education courses.

Quality isn't all about grades

Only one-third of teacher education students, at most, are selected on the basis of their ATARs alone. In reality, it takes a combination of academic and life skills, as well as personal traits and experiences, to make good teachers.

The quality of the graduates who leave university for school classrooms is much more important than the manner of selecting candidates in the first place. In undergraduate programs this quality is achieved through four years of quality teacher preparation.

The enormous public focus on the literacy and numeracy test, to be introduced next year as a mandatory requirement for graduating teachers, is not based on evidence that teachers as a whole are deficient in these areas.

Additional testing beyond course requirements will not provide a universal panacea for teacher quality. It will also require substantial additional funding that could be spent on other aspects of teacher preparation.

With regard to the job prospects of teacher graduates, we could argue statistic for statistic. Claims that only 6% of NSW graduates were employed on full-time contracts this year require further scrutiny.

For example, the Longitudinal Teacher Education and Workforce study, released late last year, found that 74% of graduate teachers are in employment in the year after graduation. Up to 84% in the second year. Two-thirds of graduates start in full-time positions, though less than 20% are employed on a permanent basis.

The study also found that 40% of graduates were working in educated-related industries like tutoring (19.5%) and early childhood education (17.2%)

The teaching gaps we need to fill

If we consider demands for teachers in specific areas, we see that there are critical shortages.

Right now, while there are 4% Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander students in our schools, only 1% of their teachers are Indigenous.

Men are hugely underrepresented in early childhood and primary education. The proportion of teachers who speak a language other than English at home is only half the national average.

We need many more teachers in disadvantaged, remote and rural areas – and that doesn't take into account the much-publicised shortage of science, technology, engineering and maths teachers, so vital to this country's future.

The constant public denigration of teachers deters some of our best and brightest.

Teacher education student enrolments dropped by 9% last year – at a time when primary student numbers are on the rise, soon to be followed by increasing numbers of secondary school students.

We also need to address the ageing teaching workforce profile: the percentage of those under 30 has dropped; mid-40 is the average age of primary and secondary teachers; and the proportion of teachers aged over 55 years continues to rise.

The supply of teachers cannot be turned on and off like a tap. It takes years to create a teacher – something that makes the loss of 40% of teachers in the first five years after university deeply disturbing.

How can we better support teachers?

Early-career teachers need strong support and mentoring when they enter the workforce, followed by opportunities for lifelong professional learning. In the public realm they need appreciation, not relentless denigration, for their dedication and hard work.

The narrow focus on ATAR scores, random statistics and the upcoming numeracy and literacy test reflects a very simplistic view of our complex education system.

It takes many players and moving parts working well in concert to give our children the best teachers for the highest-quality education possible.

Instead of knee-jerk crisis reactions to fragmented information about employment rates, it would be of much greater benefit to have deeper, more considered public conversations about what sort of education system we want and how best we can work on the many levels needed to provide it.



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ATAR
Teacher training