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## We can't afford to ignore the teacher exodus

Opinion

By [Tania Aspland](#)



**Photo:** [Up to one in three Australian graduates leave teaching during their first five years out of university.](#) (Jupiter Images Corporation)

*Reports on the loss of teachers in NSW reveal just the tip of the iceberg. We have a serious issue with graduate teachers dropping out of the workforce early and it's time to take this seriously, writes Tania Aspland.*

Yesterday's [ABC report on the loss of NSW teachers](#), who are unable to secure enough work for professional accreditation, highlights the need for a much more rigorous, holistic view of the profession.

The workforce problems outlined in the story are only some of the myriad issues causing between [one in three](#) and [one in five Australian graduates to leave teaching](#) during their first five years out of university.

The financial cost to taxpayers, of money invested in education without a long-term return, is obvious. But the cost to the education of our children, who are the future of this country, is incalculable.

We know there are major shortages in key academic subjects like maths and science, in disadvantaged, rural and regional areas.

We also know that, while university applications for teacher education continue to fall, [the numbers of first primary, then secondary, school students are set to rise significantly](#) - a situation likely to cause a teacher shortage in the next few years.

The [teaching workforce is ageing](#); there is still a worsening gender imbalance with fewer male teachers; and there is a disproportionately low number of teachers who reflect, and can act as role models for, our disadvantaged and racially and culturally diverse school students.

In his [Super Connected Jobs report](#), social researcher Bernard Salt says teaching is one of the key jobs of Australia's future. More primary and secondary teachers will be required. Salt says:

The rise of the knowledge economy is part of this shift in the workforce but so too are demographic trends like the ageing population base and strong levels of immigration.

So, if the horizon is bright for the predicted expansion of the education sector, what's going wrong? Why wouldn't you want to be a teacher?

The continuing public denigration of teachers is not helpful. Just this week [terms like "dumb" and "thick" were again being used](#) with little regard to what the statistics really mean.

Yes, a small number of new teaching students enter university on lower ATAR scores - a tiny proportion of the [one in five](#) initial teacher education students who are chosen on the basis of their Year 12 ATAR scores alone. Each case is judged on its merit.

Educators know that great teachers have a number of desirable academic and personal traits and, because of this, most teaching students are selected through a variety of means.

It's also worth noting that the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, whose [2015 report is the foundation for current teacher education reforms](#), could not find any research to show that students with high ATARs make the best teachers.

What counts is how teacher education students finish their university courses, not how they enter their course years earlier.

[Research shows that graduates feel ready and prepared to teach](#) but, when they enter the classrooms, they encounter loneliness and isolation; a lack of emotional, expert support and resources; and disillusioning school cultures.

A more holistic approach would see all schools and state authorities address the lack of vital in-school mentoring and support during the start of young teachers' careers.

Early career teachers need professional guidance and continuing development as they grow to meet challenges of increasingly complex classrooms. Teaching is by no means a one-size-fits-all affair.

While it may be the only place they can get jobs, it also seems counter-intuitive to have a [disproportionately high number of our least experienced teachers working to meet the teacher shortage in remote and regional Australia](#) - places where they are often more isolated, with less support, than their urban counterparts.

The workforce structure is also problematic. The casualisation of jobs, which particularly affects teachers with limited experience, can mean a graduate will struggle for years with no

job security, a lack of professional development and mentoring and a career path full of potholes.

The [Staff in Australian Schools Survey](#) found that fewer than half the teachers, aged 25 or younger, were in ongoing or permanent positions. This is another disincentive for potential teachers.

It's disheartening to hear stories like the one about the bright young teacher who recently decided to abandon the profession after a demoralising five years spent working casually in regional schools.

Even teachers with permanent positions, who want to continue teaching in the classroom, find that their career trajectory is short with underwhelming levels of pay when they reach senior positions.

It's easy to suggest singular fixes for multiple issues but education is complex. It involves parents, students, teachers, academics, institutions, governments and many other organisations all playing their part.

If we want the best quality teaching this country can offer, we need to work more in concert; strengthen partnerships; gather and use evidence - rather than ill-informed opinion - to make needed changes; provide the right working conditions for early career teachers to thrive; and strive to integrate all the elements it takes to educate a child.

*[Professor Tania Aspland](#) is the president of the Australian Council of Deans of Education, the peak body representing all Australian universities and several of the private colleges that offer initial teacher education degrees. She is Executive Dean, Faculty of Education and Arts at the Australian Catholic University.*

**Topics:** [education](#), [education-industry](#), [business-economics-and-finance](#)