Promising Practices

Improving the Quality of the Selection Process of Teacher Candidates in Australia

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This case study describes a “promising practice” drawn from an OECD review of initial teacher preparation in Australia from 22-26 May 2017.

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Context

Teacher candidates can undertake an initial teacher education (ITE) programme at the undergraduate or postgraduate level in Australia. There are several routes to entry: secondary education, vocational education and training (VET), higher education institutions, mature-age entry, professional qualification or “other”. Decisions on admission to programmes are made by individual institutions according to criteria they set that must comply with a set of national regulatory frameworks. According to 2014 data, 43% of commencing undergraduate ITE students entered from secondary education, 25% entered through undertaking a previous higher education degree, and 17% entered through VET. The vast majority of postgraduate students (95%) are granted entry on the basis of their record of study in higher education (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2016a[1]).

In Australia, there has been an increase in the proportion of students entering undergraduate ITE programmes directly from secondary education with an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) in the lower bands. The ATAR, which will be used nationally from 2020, indicates a student’s position relative to all students in the same year cohort. Universities commonly define an ATAR cut-off point between 0.00 and 99.95 for entry into programmes. In 2005, 21% of teacher candidates had an ATAR of 70 or lower. This increased to 40% in 2014 (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016a[2]). In 2014, the Teacher Educational Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG), in its review on initial teacher preparation in Australia, voiced concerns about the variability and lack of transparency of entry decisions by teacher education institutions, which may impact adversely on the quality of teachers graduating from programmes (Teacher Educational Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014a[3]). Specific areas of concern included:

- teacher candidates with inadequate levels of literacy and numeracy to cope with the requirements of a teaching career
- a growing number of candidates entering, particularly into undergraduate programmes, do not meet the published selection requirements (ATAR cut-off points)
- selection processes lacking sophistication, rigour and robustness – and not paying sufficient regard as to whether candidates have the personal characteristics required to be a successful teacher.

How the new arrangements work

New national selection requirements

In response to these concerns, and as part of the ITP reforms developed in response to the TEMAG’s recommendations (Australian Government, 2015a[4]), a number of changes were made to selection requirements for entry to teacher education programmes, applying to all new intakes of students from January 2017. The changes are set out in new standards and
procedures published in December 2015 (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2015[5]) and require that all institutions providing initial teacher education should:

- set both academic and non-academic criteria and apply these to every student they admit to their programmes
- publish information about their selection mechanisms to ensure transparency, including: selection mechanisms used; threshold entry standards applied; student cohort data and any exemptions used.

Selection processes form a key part of the requirements that all programmes must meet to gain or maintain accreditation. While institutions will be able to choose how they satisfy the requirements, they will be required to provide a rationale for their approach to selection, including selection mechanisms and threshold entry standards applied (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2016[6]).

In addition, all Australian education ministers agreed that, from 1 July 2016, all teacher candidates would be required to sit and meet the standard of the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students prior to graduation. Administered using an online assessment tool, the tests were designed to measure personal literacy and numeracy, with the test benchmark broadly equivalent to the top 30% of the Australian adult population. Teacher graduates are given three attempts to pass the test, with up to two additional attempts allowed in exceptional circumstances (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016[7]).

**Additional selection requirements of individual states and territories**

Individual states and territories have also introduced additional requirements. For example, the state of New South Wales has specified that candidates entering an ITE programme directly from secondary school must have above-average results in at least three subjects in Year 12 (the final year of high school), including English. If they do not, they must complete study over the course of the programme in order to demonstrate that they have equivalent skill levels. The state of Victoria has introduced a requirement from 2018 that school leavers require a minimum ATAR score of 65 to enter undergraduate programmes – and this will increase to 70 from 2019.

**The Teacher Capability Assessment Tool, University of Melbourne**

In 2012, the University of Melbourne developed the Teacher Capability Assessment Tool (TCAT) as an evidence-based tool for selecting and developing entrants into their post-graduate teacher education programmes. More than 3 000 applicants were selected into post-graduate programmes at the University of Melbourne using TCAT between 2012 and 2016. The tool assesses a range of cognitive and non-cognitive domains associated with the successful completion of ITE programmes. The TCAT is composed of two core components: 1) informed self-selection and 2) cognitive and non-cognitive skill assessment, in addition to 3) optional components composed of a structured behavioural interview and teaching demonstration (Figure 1) (Bowles et al., 2014[8]; University of Melbourne, 2017[9]).

- The informed self-selection and cognitive and non-cognitive skill assessments are completed online by prospective teacher candidates. Data are collected on a number of personal attributes and capabilities related to experience and readiness to enter ITE and ultimately be a highly effective teacher. The assessments are based
on research evidence relating to the factors that are likely to be associated with success in a teaching career and allow prospective students to undertake self-reflection on their own suitability for and understanding of teaching. The self-selection process assesses qualities such as disposition, self-regulation and resilience in the face of challenge, as well as a candidate’s communication style, ability to act fairly, cultural sensitivity and self-awareness. Cognitive assessments consist of numerical, verbal and non-verbal reasoning tasks.

- The optional components involve a trained panel of interviewers who assess candidates in six key research-supported areas of relevance, including interpersonal skills and behaviour under pressure. The teaching demonstration component involves candidates preparing and presenting a short lesson to a panel of assessors composed of experienced and active educators.

Figure 1. Teacher Capability Assessment Tool Model of selecting teacher candidates


Why is it an opportunity?

The OECD team in its review of Australia from 22-26 May 2017 noted the opportunities that these selection practices provide regarding three areas:

- Transparent and rigorous selection processes, in line with revised accreditation guidelines to strengthen evidence-based teacher policies. The national and state- and territory-wide changes to entry requirements for ITE programmes should provide greater assurance about the consistency of institutional decisions
concerning admission to ITE programmes and, as a result, assist in raising the quality of teaching in Australia. An explicit decision-making tool such as TCAT allows the compilation of a comprehensive set of data on prospective teacher candidates that not only guides and widens the available data on selection decisions for entry into ITE programmes, but can also assist development goals for teacher candidates during ITE programmes.

- **Benefits for the status of teaching in the longer term.** More explicit and higher entry standards that make it harder to get into ITE programmes could assist in improving the perception of teaching as a desirable professional pathway and, if this happens, higher quality applicants may be attracted to teaching.

- **Selection on the basis of a broader range of candidate qualities can improve the capacity to identify promising teachers.** The new requirements require a broader range of attributes to be taken into account in the selection decision. While some institutions already approach selection decisions in this way, the fact that all institutions will be required to do this in the future should help to build a teaching workforce that has an appropriate mix of characteristics.

- **Scaling up existing good practice.** TCAT presents an opportunity to scale up existing evidence-based practice. The tool is already used for selection into the Tasmanian Teacher Intern Placement Programme (see Promising Practice 8), and state authorities are using it to develop and track predictors of teacher effectiveness over time.

### How could it be improved?

The information provided by these new selection processes can be improved by:

- **Monitoring trends to understand the impact on the quantity and quality of entrants to programmes.** There appears to have been an overall reduction in the number of applicants to ITE programmes in 2017 and the reasons for this were not well understood at the time of the OECD review team’s visit. It will be important to monitor trends in the overall mix and composition of applications and analyse the ways these might be linked with selection processes to ensure that specific or more general supply issues can be effectively addressed. There is a particular concern about the impact of the new requirements on the numbers of applications to ITE programmes from sought-after candidates from disadvantaged communities and ethnic minorities that will require dedicated monitoring.

- **Assessing the level of literacy and numeracy requirements.** The OECD review team heard some comment that the literacy and numeracy requirements that had been set are still too low, so the validity of this concern should be assessed as implementation proceeds.

- **Evaluating implementation and ensuring feedback loops.** It will be important that the consistency of implementation across institutions and states and territories is monitored to ensure that the desired impact is being achieved. While institutions are now required to be very explicit about their processes and decisions, this requirement will lose its impact if the information from institutions is not analysed and feedback not provided by authorities. Appropriate feedback loops will need to be put in place to regularly adjust practice and align other policies, such as accreditation.
For more information


