

## **‘Are we there yet?’ 25 years of reform (and reform, and reform, and reform) of teacher education in Australia<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the reform of initial teacher education (ITE) policy in Australia over a 25-year period from 1998 to 2023. It examines policy shifts and movements over this timeframe and aims to better understand the ongoing reforms in the changing contexts of their times.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

The paper engages a critical policy historiography approach, focusing on four ‘policy moments’ each linked to a review commissioned by the Commonwealth government of the day. It draws upon the reports and government responses themselves, along with media reports, extracts from Hansard, and ministerial speeches, press releases and interviews related to each of the four policy moments, asking critical questions about the ‘public issues’ and ‘private troubles’ (Gale, 2001) of each moment and aiming to shed light on the complexities of these accounts of policy and the trajectory they represent.

#### **Findings**

The paper charts the construction of the problem of ITE in Australia over time, highlighting the discursive continuities and shifts since 1998. It traces the constitution of both policy problems and solutions to explain the current policy settlement using a historical lens.

#### **Originality/value**

Its value lies in offering a reading of the current policy settlement, based on a close and systematic historical analysis. Where previous research has focused either on particular moments or concepts in ITE reform, this analysis seeks to understand the current policy settlement by taking a longer, contextualised view.

**Keywords** Australia, teacher education, education policy

**Paper type** Research paper

Initial teacher education (ITE) has been subject to significant and ongoing global reform over the past two decades, with teacher education policy functioning as “an expression of global neoliberal policy imaginaries and reform movements” (Mayer, 2021, p. 3). Connell (2009), writing in this journal over a decade ago, argued that the ‘improvisatory quality’ (p.12) of teachers’ work made teaching itself a ‘peculiarly unteachable form of work’ and generated ‘perpetual discontent around Initial Teacher Education’ (pp.11-12). Often linked to the construction of ITE as a policy problem requiring government intervention (Cochran-Smith, 2004), the global reform of teacher education has seen assonant shifts since the 1990s in diverse contexts, responding to the ‘peculiar problems’ (Labaree, 2004) of the work of preparing teachers.

Against this backdrop of global reform, this paper explores the history of ITE policy reform in Australia since 1998. Australia provides very fertile terrain for examining ITE policy reform, having, in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a public lecture of the same title, given as the Inaugural Dean’s Lecture at Dublin City University in March 2023.

the years between 1979 and 2007 produced 101 reports on ITE (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), referred to by Bill Loudon as ‘101 damnations’ (2008). While there is no authoritative source on the number of similar reports in the years since 2007, research on ITE policy (e.g. Alexander and Bourke, 2021) suggests a continued succession of reviews and reports, up to and including 2023.

Unlike school education, which was retained in 1901 as a responsibility of individual states and territories under the newly-constructed Australian Constitution, higher education, including initial teacher education, is a responsibility of the Commonwealth. Much has been written about the expansion of federal governance of school education since the 1970s (e.g. Lingard, 2000, Savage and O’Connor, 2019), which, particularly in the past 15 years has seen the advent of national curriculum, standardised testing, and teaching standards. Over the same period successive Commonwealth governments have stepped up their control of ITE programs, at least partly in response to growing panic about declining national performance on international large scale assessments such as PISA (Savage and Lingard, 2018). Researchers have employed different forms of policy and discourse analysis to explore aspects of Australian ITE reform over the years, for example, the introduction of a compulsory specialisation for primary ITE students (Bourke *et al.*, 2020), and of nationally regulated teaching performance assessments for all ITE students (Brownlee *et al.*, 2023). Others have explored the forms and consequences of increased regulation (e.g. Gore, 2016, Rowe and Skourdoumbis, 2019, Savage and Lingard, 2018), while some researchers have taken a comparative lens to the reforms, tracing consonances and dissonances between national contexts (e.g. Gale and Parker, 2017, Mayer and Mills, 2021). Many of these studies have located the analysis within recent historical context, for example, Alexander and Bourke’s (2021) comparative analysis of the 1978 Review of Teacher Education in Queensland and the 2015 Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) report; Gore’s (2016) survey of reforms around program length and national regulation of ITE up to and including TEMAG. This sits alongside O’Donoghue and Moore’s (O’Donoghue and Moore, 2019) expansive history of teacher preparation in Australia from 1788 to c.2015, which touches on but does not provide systematic analysis of policy shifts up to and including TEMAG. This paper seeks to offer a longer, systematic consideration of the history of the reforms and the discursive shifts that have taken place, and in doing so, illuminate the current policy settlement. A carefully constructed understanding of the origins of the contemporary ‘problems’ of ITE may help to inform a nuanced response at a critical point in time when the increasing intensity and complexity of teachers’ work makes high-quality ITE essential for the retention of early career teachers. To this end, this paper focuses upon four ‘policy moments’ that highlight the context, scale, content and intent of ITE reforms, since 1998. These four moments are understood as a series of policy settlements in the sense posed by Jane Kenway, who argued that “policy represents the temporary settlements between diverse, competing and unequal forces within civil society, within the state itself, and between associated discursive regimes” (1990, p. 59). The four policy moments selected coalesce around significant inquiries commissioned by federal governments, two of which involved parliamentary committees and two of which involved ‘expert panels’. They are:

1. *A Class Act* – report on Commonwealth Senate Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession, 1998
2. *Top of the Class* – report on Commonwealth House of Representatives Inquiry into Teacher Education, 2007
3. *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* – report from the Commonwealth Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2015
4. *Next Steps* – report from the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review Expert Panel, 2022, along with the associated *Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper*, 2023

While many other reforms have occurred at state and territory levels over this period, these particular ‘moments’ were selected because they represent significant decision points at a national level during a period in which federal control of education significantly increased (Savage and Lingard, 2018). The 1998 report was identified as the starting point, as the first Commonwealth

report to recommend federal regulatory intervention in ITE. As argued previously (Mockler, 2018, Savage and Lewis, 2018), while many of the recommendations of the report were ultimately rejected by the government of the day, *A Class Act* provided a catalyst for a series of key reforms that have cascaded over the 25 years since its publication.

The analysis presented here draws upon the reports and government responses themselves; media reports; extracts from Hansard; and ministerial speeches, press releases and interviews. In examining these moments of temporary settlement, the shifts between them and their overarching direction, the analysis aims to chart the changes and continuities in the reforms themselves and the discourses that surround them; to suggest some of the particularities of the Australia context that have given rise to them; and to highlight the more universal, globalised themes. The analysis employs a 'critical policy historiography' approach, an approach that engages with "the substantive issues of policy at particular hegemonic moments" (Gale, 2001, p. 379), and as such is concerned with Gale's (2001) five key questions:

1. What were the 'public issues' and 'private troubles' within a particular policy domain during some previous period and how were they addressed?
2. What are they now?
3. What is the nature of the change from the first to the second?
4. What are the complexities in these coherent accounts of policy?
5. What do these reveal about who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged by these arrangements? (p.385)

Importantly, these questions were used reflexively rather than procedurally to lead the identification of appropriate source material and guide the analysis. While they are used as a touchstone for the discussion provided in the paper, the analysis is presented in the form of an overview of each of the four reform agendas, before moving to a broader account of assonances and dissonances, both in terms of the content of the reforms and the discursive framing. The paper takes a starting point, however, the recent discursive positioning of ITE.

### **'Screaming out for reform': The current state of initial teacher education in Australia**

In August 2022, newly-appointed Commonwealth Minister for Education, Jason Clare, chaired a one-day 'Teacher Workforce Roundtable', designed to address the current critical teacher shortage. The roundtable involved state and territory Education Ministers; a small number of teachers, school and system leaders; and leaders of statutory authorities. When the minister emerged for a lengthy press conference at the end of the day, after beginning with observations about teachers having "the most important job in the world", he gave account of the day:

It kicked off with Angela. Angela was almost in tears herself. Almost brought me to tears. Talking about working 60, 70 hours, working on weekends. Thinking about whether she was going to stay in the job or not - but knowing that she loved the kids that she teaches. Being in the job for all the right reasons. Wanting to change those kids lives. We had another teacher who talked about doing lesson prep on Mother's Day, putting the kids to bed, and then going back and doing more work once they're asleep. But we heard great things as well from teachers. Talking about if we do things a little bit differently, how we can change work for them, and how we can encourage more people to become teachers.

'Prac' was one of the big things that came up again and again and again. Practical experience right off the bat when you first become a [student] teacher. As well as paid internships in final year. Seeing having student teachers in the classroom as an asset rather than as something that just gets in the way. And helping to make sure that young people who are at university know what they're getting into and really want to be there for the right reasons. As well as better preparation in teaching kids how to read and how to do maths. One principal there talked about how in the university courses they do to become teachers, only

about 12% of the time is focused on teaching to read, and 12% focused on teaching maths. So more focus there. (Education Council, 2022)

Here, Clare seamlessly pivoted, within the space of less than a minute, from discussions of trenchant and debilitating workloads contributing to the teacher shortage (which was the espoused focus of the roundtable), to the need for ITE students to complete more practical experience and focus for a greater proportion of their degrees on literacy and numeracy. Later in the press conference he said “what came out really clearly out of the conversation today...was that initial teacher education is screaming out for reform”. Indeed, reform of ITE was one of the few key actions that emerged from the teacher workforce roundtable, with the announcement of review, led by an expert panel, beginning the next month. Interestingly, despite this focus on ITE, and the minister’s commitment to the roundtable involving “principals, teachers and education experts” (Clare, 2022a) there were reportedly no education academics (including Deans of Education) present at the roundtable.

In the same press conference, Eve Lawler, Minister for Education in the Northern Territory said that “for too long, we have felt that [ITE] hasn't provided us necessarily as employers with a set of teachers that we need, with the skill sets that we require in our system” (Education Council, 2022). Here we see the overt positioning of ITE reform as a policy solution, to the problem, on the one hand, of the critical teacher shortage, but also to the ‘problem’ of teacher quality. An exploration of the four previous waves of reform, beginning in 1998, is helpful for understanding this current positioning of ITE and the contemporary policy attention.

### **How did we get here? Initial teacher education policy in Australia from 1998 to 2022**

#### ***‘A Class Act’: Initial teacher education as a complex endeavour***

In 1996, the newly-elected Howard government, a conservative coalition of the Liberal and National parties, referred the issue of the status of the teaching profession to the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. The Committee was at the time comprised of nine Senators, of whom only three were government senators – four members, including the Chair, belonged to the opposition and two to a progressive minor party. At the time, the country was faced with impending teacher shortages resulting from a lack of workforce planning, and the remit was to look into the status of teachers and the development of the profession over the next five years. It had six terms of reference, one of which related specifically to ITE:

5. Examine the tertiary entrance levels of teacher trainees and the research literature on the quality of Australian teacher education programs, and identify those features which bear significantly upon the quality of classroom practice. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998, p. vii)

The report, entitled *A Class Act*, recommended the establishment of a national standards and registration body for teachers, with responsibility for the development of national professional standards and the accreditation of ITE programs; some steps to remedy the increased casualisation of teaching; further support for induction into the profession and for teacher professional development and learning. Four of the 19 recommendations related specifically to ITE:

**Recommendation 10:** That the Commonwealth government introduce scholarships for university graduates to undertake post graduate professional qualifications in teaching.

**Recommendation 11:** The abolition of differential HECS<sup>2</sup> fees. This will remove the particular disincentives now faced by science graduates planning a career in teaching.

**Recommendation 13:** The establishment of a National Teacher Education Network comprising a consortium of innovative teacher education faculties and schools to build upon the work of the National Schools Network and the Innovative Links Project in modelling best practice in the development and delivery of initial and continuing teacher education.

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<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Contribution Scheme, student fees for university courses

**Recommendation 14:** The establishment of a national development fund for research in education. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998, pp. xiii-xiv)

These four recommendations focus more on support of ITE and pre-service teachers than on regulation. On the nature of teacher education and teachers' work more broadly, the report said:

It is generally acknowledged by all those involved – university educators, practising teachers, education departments and beginning teachers themselves – that no pre-service training can fully prepare new teachers to perform at their full capacity from their first day at work. This is not a reflection on the quality of new teachers nor on the standard of pre-service training. It is a recognition of the complexity of teaching and of the large number of variables (such as type of school, socio-economic and cultural background of students, school 'ethos', extent of support from colleagues and principal etc) affecting a teacher's performance. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998, p. 204)

*A Class Act* generally takes a more developmental than punitive stance, wherein issues to do with the declining status of the teaching profession are not construed as a lack of 'quality teachers' or good teaching, or a lack of quality teacher education programs. While *A Class Act* did initiate the discussion of attracting the 'best and brightest' into ITE, a discussion that has continued over the past 25 years, the suggestion in the report was that raising the status of the profession would in itself attract the 'best and brightest', not the inverse, which has dominated many subsequent discussions. Also embedded in the report is the start of discussions of 'Quality Assurance' of ITE, but again more as a lever for raising the status of the profession than as a call for the reform of ITE.

The relationship between the education policy of the late 1990s and federalism was a complex one, however, and so while the federal government agreed with the spirit of most of the recommendations of *A Class Act* (Commonwealth of Australia Senate, 1999), they referred many of them to the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (the predecessor of the Education Council, and the current Education Ministers (sic.) Meeting, comprising federal, state and territory Education Ministers). This included the establishment of professional standards and accreditation processes. From the late 1990s, the eight states and territories developed (or further developed) professional standards for teachers, teacher registration and accreditation processes, and processes for accreditation of ITE.

In many jurisdictions, this work required new legislation. In New South Wales, for example, the work was begun in earnest only after a local review of ITE (Ramsey, 2000). The NSW Institute of Teachers was then established by an Act of Parliament in June 2004, professional teaching standards were finalised later that year, and in 2006 the first set of guidelines for accreditation of ITE programs was published. Not until 2008 was the first tranche of programs submitted for accreditation to the NSW Institute of Teachers (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2008).

Consequently, in the seven years between *A Class Act* and the next federal inquiry, there was a flurry of activity in all states and territories as these systems and structures were either established from scratch, as they were in NSW, or overhauled and enhanced, in the name of, to use the words of the NSW Institute of Teachers (which provide something of a contrast to *A Class Act* itself), "assure[ing] both the profession and the community of the quality of teacher education programs" (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2006).

***'Top of the Class': Out with the 'quasi sociology departments'***

In 2005, amidst this activity, the federal Minister, Brendan Nelson, called an inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training into the "scope, suitability, organisation, resourcing and delivery of teacher training courses in Australian... universities" (Commonwealth of Australia 2007, p. xi). The inquiry was also "to examine the preparedness of graduates to meet the current and future demands of teaching in Australia's schools". It resulted in the *Top of the Class* report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007).

The terms of reference for this review covered selection criteria for entry to ITE; attraction of “high quality” ITE students; attrition rates; selection of teacher education academics; a focus on the ‘educational philosophy’ underpinning ITE; and the question of how far ITE programs were research-informed. It also probed the relationship between education and other disciplines within the university; various aspects of teacher preparation, including literacy and numeracy, vocational education, classroom management and general capacity to “deal with” others in the context of their work; the role of school partnerships; funding; and professional learning. It is important to note at the outset, that while *A Class Act* focused on the status of the teaching profession, with ITE as a contributing factor, *Top of the Class* focused squarely and exclusively on teacher education. As noted above, in the years between the two reviews, extensive infrastructure had been put in place by the states and territories in the name of assuring the quality of teachers and ITE, with much of this infrastructure still under construction in 2005.

In the years between 1998 and 2005, the appetite on the part of the Howard government for federalism in education policy had expanded. In the late 1990s this had predominantly taken the form of a drive toward literacy testing (Lingard, 2000). In 2004/5 it took the form of a national values campaign, where all schools, government and non-government were obliged to install a functioning flagpole on which they could fly the Australian flag, and display a ‘national values framework’ poster.

By 2005, it seems that the Minister had firmly set his sights on another run at a national curriculum (Australian Associated Press, 2003), but with Labor governments in power in all states and territories, and the federal government in its fourth (and ultimately final) term, the task of gaining consensus would be complex. Less complex, and inevitably less contested, was the prospect of further regulating ITE. In the press conference in which he announced the *Top of the Class* inquiry, the Minister said “In too many instances I’ve had teacher education faculties described to me as quasi-sociology departments”, and when asked by a journalist to clarify, he said:

...the concern that anecdotally comes to me far too often is that instead of scientific rigour that’s being applied, whether it’s in the teaching of teachers, to teaching maths, or in reading, or in science, or in a number of other areas that there is far too much emphasis on the sociology of teaching and all that that entails and not enough emphasis on the hard sciences which we as parents expect teachers to be equipped with when they actually go into classrooms. (Nelson, 2005)

In the fortnight prior to the announcement, Rupert Murdoch’s flagship newspaper *The Australian* had run a campaign against the then-president of the NSW English Teachers Association, a prominent teacher education academic whose editorial in the Association’s professional journal some months prior had argued that the re-election of the Howard government in 2004 was evidence of the failure of critical literacy in English classrooms across Australia (Sawyer, 2005). *The Age*, a more left-leaning Melbourne broadsheet, noted shortly after the announcement that “The Sawyer controversy became part of the rationale for this week’s parliamentary inquiry into teacher training” (Green, 2005), wherein the question of ‘who is teaching our teachers?’ became central to the inquiry.

Despite the focus on this issue in the terms of reference, response to this question is absent from the recommendations from the inquiry, which called for:

- The development of a sound research base for teacher education;
- A national system of ITE program accreditation;
- Expanded funding for entry to ITE;
- A focus on collaborative approaches to professional experience, research, induction and professional development;
- The development of a National Teacher Induction Program;
- The inclusion of ongoing teacher professional learning as a condition for maintenance of registration to teach;

- A feasibility study to explore the establishment of a National Clearinghouse for Educational Research; and
- Revised funding for teacher education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007).

The report was tabled in parliament in February 2007 and MPs from both sides of politics endorsed the recommendations and spoke about how the inquiry had demonstrated that teacher education in Australia was not in crisis (Commonwealth of Australia House of Representatives, 2007). The government did not issue a formal response to the report before the forthcoming election, which they lost to Kevin Rudd and the Labor Party, which had campaigned strongly on the platform of an 'education revolution'.

It transpired, however, that there was bipartisan support for national systems of accreditation, and 'national consistency' for both teachers and teacher education. Consequently, many of the recommendations of *Top of the Class* were assimilated into the new government's so-called education revolution. In 2010, the previously toothless 'Teaching Australia' was reconstituted as the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), and charged with overseeing the process of national accreditation. After some significant negotiation, a framework for national accreditation of ITE, linked to new national professional standards for teachers, was launched in April 2011 (AITSL, 2011). This initial national framework had seven program standards, related to program outcomes; program development; program entrants; program structure and content; school partnerships; program delivery and resourcing; and program evaluation. The timeline for implementation of the new processes meant that the first tranche of programs was accredited in preparation for the 2013 academic year, with a larger group scheduled for accreditation ahead of the 2014 academic year.

During this period, the attention to 'quality assurance' continued, although focused differently this time, and more on 'improving the standard' of ITE. The 'best and brightest' discourse continued but was linked explicitly to literacy and numeracy. Importantly, *Top of the Class* was framed by statements about the importance of ITE because of the critical importance of teachers, laying the groundwork for ongoing discursive framing around the links between ITE and 'teacher quality'. Finally, from the framing to the report and its consequences, we see an emerging focus on the 'practical aspects' of teacher education pitted against the 'theory' said to be popular with teacher education academics.

***'Action Now': The invention of 'classroom readiness'***

In September 2013, the Labor government lost a federal election to the Abbott Liberal-National Coalition. Christopher Pyne, who had been Shadow Minister for Education for five years, became the Minister for Education. When asked early in 2013 about the first thing he would do if the Coalition won the election and he became the Minister for Education, he had said:

... the first thing we would do is address issues of teacher quality in our universities. The first thing we could do is to make sure that the training of our teachers at university is of world standard. ... We would immediately instigate a very short term Ministerial Advisory Group to advise me on the best model for teaching in the world. How to bring out more practical teaching methods, based on more didactic teaching methods or more traditional methods rather than the child centred learning that has dominated the system for the last 20, 30 or 40 years, so teaching quality would be at my highest priority, followed by a robust curriculum, principal autonomy and more traditional pedagogy. So I want to make the education debate, move it on from this almost asinine debate about more money and make it about values because while money is important ..., what we are teaching our children and how we are teaching them and who is teaching them is all much more important. (Pyne, 2013)

True to his word, the *Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group* (TEMAG) was convened in early 2014, with a remit to address what the minister had referred to as “a malaise in the teacher training in Australia that needs to be addressed” (Pyne, 2014). When asked by a journalist what he meant by ‘malaise’, he said:

Well the feedback is that the courses are too theoretical and not practical enough. That young people are not prepared or trained to actually teach and that they spend a lot of time at university but not enough time in the classroom learning the practical skills that are required. That there is an emphasis on primary school teaching, we don't have enough specialists in science and maths in senior school. And these are all issues that I want my teacher education taskforce to advise me on over the coming twelve months. (Pyne, 2014)

It is important to note that in a shift away from the processes used in the previous two reviews, this review was conducted not via the parliamentary committee system, wherein the panel would have included both government and opposition members of parliament or senators, but rather by a panel of experts appointed directly by the Minister. The Terms of Reference for TEMAG set out that it would “provide advice to the Commonwealth Minister for Education on how teacher education programmes could be improved to better prepare new teachers with the practical skills needed for the classroom” (Craven *et al.*, 2015, p. 57). The group was to identify “world’s best practice” in teacher education with a focus on pedagogical approaches, content knowledge and professional experience, and “identify priorities for actions to improve teacher education and suitable implementation timeframes” (p.57). It is worth noting that these terms of reference are quite different to the previous two inquiries in that it seems that the seeds of the ‘solutions’ are actually embedded in the terms of reference: more ‘practical skills’, and particular types of pedagogical approaches, both of which were constituted as the foundation of teacher quality.

The overarching theme of the TEMAG report is the concept of ‘classroom readiness’, which, despite its central place within the report, is not precisely defined. A hallmark of the recommendations of the report was the focus on ‘impact’: impact both of teacher education programs and of pre-service and graduate teachers on student learning. The 38 recommendations, most of which were accepted by the government, related to the five areas of stronger quality assurance of ITE programs; rigorous selection for entry to ITE; improved and structured professional experience; robust assessment of graduates to ensure classroom readiness; and national research and workforce planning capabilities.

The government response to the TEMAG report included a commitment of \$17m to once again reconstitute the recently reconstituted AITSL, to develop and lead the reforms. The then newly-minted AITSL Chair John Hattie took strong ownership of the reforms, which were consistent with his well-known “know thy impact” (e.g. Hattie, 2012) mantra, saying in a press release:

My driving force in implementing this reform is to make sure education courses only graduate teachers who will have a positive impact on students’ lives and to promote the excellent programs that can achieve this. I want to put in place quality assurance processes that approve courses based on how their graduates perform’, said Professor Hattie. ‘I look forward to working with universities as well as schools and regulators to improve the way the profession prepares its new members. (AITSL, 2015)

As a result, AITSL released revised accreditation standards and processes in 2015, that integrated the TEMAG recommendations. The two most significant changes here were the mandating of a Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA) as a pre-graduation requirement and demonstration of ‘classroom readiness’ for all ITE students, aligned to the Graduate Standards, and the central role of ‘evidence of impact’. For accreditation under the new rules, providers were required to demonstrate their plan for collection of evidence of impact of both pre-service teachers and graduates, and report annually. Additionally, to ensure the quality of graduate teachers, a literacy and numeracy test – known as LANTITE (Literacy and Numeracy Test for ITE) was introduced as a pre-graduation requirement. The TEMAG era was thus characterised by a strengthening of quality assurance, a continuation of the



previous discursive framings, for example, around the theory/practice dichotomy, and the ‘best and brightest’, and an additional turn toward ‘classroom readiness’ and ‘impact’.

The new standards and procedures came into force in 2016, with the first round of accreditation due by 2017. At this stage, some ITE programs had not yet had a chance to be accredited under the previous set of reforms, given the swiftness of the reform cycle. AITSL provided seed funding for consortia of universities to develop TPAs, and the first of these was endorsed in 2018, with the bulk of programs accredited for the first time under the new system between 2019 and 2021.

***‘Quality Initial Teacher Education’ and Beyond: Getting Australia ‘back near the top’***

In April 2021, then Minister for Education and former Teach For Australia (TfA) Board Member Alan Tudge launched a review of teacher education in Australia, known as the ‘Quality Initial Teacher Education’ (QITE) review. At the launch, he said:

...the last major review was back in 2014, and it was a very good review and most of those recommendations have been implemented, or are being implemented now, and there’s been exceptionally good reform which has come out of that. (Tudge, 2021b)

This announcement was part of a suite of strategies announced by the Minister to put Australia “back near the top” (Tudge, 2021b) of international standardised testing league tables by 2030.

Tudge had played a very long game in relation to the reform of ITE. In his inaugural speech to parliament, in October 2010, almost a decade before he became the Minister for Education, he said:

I am proud to have helped establish the Teach for Australia (TfA) initiative that aims to lift the standing of teaching through tapping into a different pool of graduates. I am pleased there is bipartisan support for it. I support initiatives for mid-career professionals to be accelerated into teaching in a similar way. *However, we must just go further and rigorously assess the quality of the teaching courses at our universities.* (Tudge, 2010)

In his TfA days, Tudge had also worked with the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, a not-for-profit organisation promoting direct instruction, and he had formed the view that there was incontrovertible proof that the exclusive use of direct instruction overall, along with the exclusive use of phonics in teaching reading, were the only truly effective forms of teaching (Tudge, 2021a, c). The flavour of his desired ITE reforms was informed by this view. In November 2021, between when the QITE report was provided to the Minister and when the government response was issued, Tudge issued a press release about a report produced by the Centre for Independent Studies, a conservative think tank favoured by the Liberal Party, that argued, consonant with the Minister’s position, that ITE was in need of reform. The Minister’s press release said:

Teacher education faculties that are not adequately preparing student teachers to become effective classroom teachers using evidence-based practices should not be in the business of teacher education. (Tudge, 2021a)

By November 2021, all Australian ITE programs had recently been accredited under the guidelines put in place by the conservative government of which Tudge was a senior minister. Tudge, however, was pointing here to an intention to narrow the definition of “evidence-based” and thus legitimate, practices. While the review was still in process, the Minister had authored an op-ed for *The Australian* which included the claim that “many teacher education faculties have been infected with dogma and teaching fads, at the expense of evidence-based practices” (Tudge, 2021c). He noted that “McKinsey analysis shows a student who is taught predominantly through explicit teaching methods has a 10-month advantage in their learning at age 15. The evidence is clear, but it still is resisted by many in education faculties”. It appears that both the problem and the solution to be highlighted by the review were identified by the Minister in advance of the report of the expert panel.

The QITE review's terms of reference (Paul *et al.*, 2022) related to two overarching themes: attracting and selecting high-quality candidates into the teaching profession; and preparing ITE students to be effective teachers. Foregrounded in the terms of reference is a strong emphasis on 'evidence-based practice' and practical experience for ITE students. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is also a strong focus on 'evidence-based practice' in the recommendations, particularly related to the ITE curriculum for teaching reading, where phonemic awareness and phonics are noted as a key example of such practice. Strengthening of moderation of the TPA nationally, developing national guidelines for mentoring of early career teachers, and a national approach to understanding teacher workforce supply and demand all feature in the recommendations. Most notable is Recommendation 15, which called for the link between performance and funding of ITE to be strengthened. The nominated strategies for this involve allocating Commonwealth supported places for ITE programs to providers based on quality; "developing a quality measure for ITE courses that enables performance-based assessments of ITE programs and assists in student choice" (Paul *et al.*, 2022, p. 73) and then rewarding and presumably sanctioning providers according to their performance on this measure, while making performance data publicly available. When the QITE report was released by Tudge's successor, Stuart Robert, in February 2022, he also announced the appointment of an ITE Quality Assessment Expert Panel, which would be tasked with the development of the performance standards and the links to funding. A change of government in May 2022, however, brought this work to a halt.

Post the August 2022 Teacher Workforce Roundtable discussed earlier, Jason Clare announced a further review of ITE by a newly-appointed Teacher Education Expert Panel (TEEP), that, in the words of the press release, "implements recommendation 15 of the Quality Initial Teacher Education report and goes further" (Clare, 2022b), with a remit to:

- Strengthen the link between performance and funding of ITE
- Strengthen ITE programs to deliver effective classroom ready graduates
- Improve the quality of practical experience in teaching
- Improve postgraduate ITE for mid-career entrants.

At the time of writing (May 2023), the Review remains in train, with a Discussion Paper (Scott *et al.*, 2023b), in which many of the assumptions and views embedded in the QITE report were brought to life, issued for public consultation (Scott *et al.*, 2023a) in March 2023. The panel will report to the Minister in mid-2023.

## **From 'there' to 'here': Traversing 25 years of initial teacher education reform**

### ***The trajectory of ITE reform***

Exploring the four 'policy moments' side by side highlights some significant assonances. The most enduring tenet, which goes back to 1998, is the one around the need for 'quality assurance' of ITE, which began as a means of raising the status of the teaching profession as has, over subsequent rounds of reform, become a relentless 'strengthening' of accreditation and regulation of ITE. The 'best and brightest' rhetoric has similarly been in play since the first wave of reform, manifest at a national level since the TEMAG report in a concern for the literacy and numeracy levels of ITE students. While it is difficult to argue against the principle that teachers should ideally be within the top 30% of the population in terms of literacy and numeracy, the current national testing regime makes one assumption that it is possible to graduate from an ITE program with poor literacy and numeracy – an assumption that would never be made about (e.g.) legal or medical education – and another that personal literacy and numeracy outweigh the many other important attributes of good teachers.

The instrumental focus on impact, as though the impact of both ITE and teaching itself can and should be measured on a daily or weekly basis, is a more recent one. Attempting to draw a direct connection from ITE programs to the learning of the students of current ITE students and recent

graduates is imbued with a range of problematic assumptions that are also difficult to substantiate and almost impossible to assess.

The focus on ‘classroom readiness’, manifest most recently in the TPA, has at least opened opportunities for broader cross-sectoral discussions about authentic assessment in ITE, and recent research has highlighted some of the affordances of this (Lawson-Jones, 2023). As problematic as some deployments of the concept of ‘classroom readiness’ may be, as Spina and colleagues (2022) have recently argued, the process of developing and embedding TPAs in ITE has also provided opportunities for teacher educators to engage with more intelligent forms of accountability (O’Neill, 2002, 2013) rather than the usual blunt instrument of performative accountability.

And finally, to the emerging tenet of quality benchmarks, public availability of data to enable ‘choice’ via competition, and links between said ‘quality’ and funding of ITE programs and providers. This clearly will be a driver into the future however it is not known what these processes will look like or what their effects, perverse or otherwise might be. What can be said unequivocally – and indeed was said by the OECD some years back – is that there is good evidence that competition within education systems has negative effects on equity and inclusion and not necessarily the positive gains in performance that an economist might predict (OECD, 2014).

### ***The Discourse of ITE Reform***

Beyond the reforms themselves, the discourses that support them and which enable them to be constantly revisited and renewed have also endured over time. First, the reform of teacher education, in Australia as elsewhere, is consistently framed by what Marianne Larsen (2010) has termed ‘the discourse of teacher centrality’, in her words “one of the most revered and abiding cultural myths associated with education: the assumption that the key to educational success lies with the teacher” (p.208). She argues that the discourse of teacher centrality was preceded historically, and enabled by, a discourse of blame and derision about teachers which together construct teachers “as being deficient and simultaneously shouldered with the responsibility of fixing societal and school problems” (p. 208). Larsen argues that the discursive effects of teacher centrality have included tightened control over teachers through mechanisms of performative accountability, the increased technicisation of teachers’ work as a consequence of the burgeoning school effectiveness movement, the de-contextualisation of teachers’ work, the standardisation of teacher education, and the individualisation and responsabilisation of teachers.

Rhetorically, the discourse of teacher centrality is embedded in the claim that “teachers have the most important job in the world”, as the current Minister for Education noted in his August 2022 press conference, one in a long line of Ministers opening discussions of the failings of teacher education, and sometimes teachers themselves, in this way (e.g. Gillard, 2009, Pyne, 2015). This rhetorical move is used to underpin particular visions of teacher quality which have permeated ITE reforms over the past 25 years.

Second is the discourse of ‘classroom readiness’. As noted earlier, this is a very slippery concept, one that is mostly undefined despite widespread use in the public space. It is enabled by anecdotal tales, told over and over again, of, for example, in the words of past Minister Alan Tudge, “many teachers say they don’t feel well prepared when they enter the classroom” (Tudge, 2021c). This often gives rise to arguments about the lack of ‘practical’ training in ITE, and laments about the amount of theory to which ITE students are subjected. It often leads to discussions about shorter ITE courses and about alternative certification such as that embodied in TfA.

Third, and this links the more enduring ‘theory’ issue through to newer discussions of ‘evidence-based practice’, is the discourse around fads and dogma said to proliferate within schools of education. Like classroom readiness, ‘evidence-based practice’ is seldom defined by its users, whom the idea that ‘evidence’ might be a contested and contestable notion eludes. Australia has a long history of reading wars (Snyder, 2008), an educational wing of inter-generational culture wars, which may explain the focus on phonics, however direct and explicit instruction have more recently joined

the stable of 'evidence-based practices'. Dogma and fads on the other hand, are said to comprise constructivist approaches to learning, the privileging of "black armband history", inquiry-based learning, and so on. This discourse not-so-subtly suggests that ITE would best be either removed from schools of education, or at the very least, have its curriculum standardised and locked down such that there is limited space for freewheeling beyond the agreed and uncontested 'evidence base'.

Previous research, using corpus-assisted discourse analysis of media texts about teacher education in the time of Ministers/Secretaries of Education Duncan (US), Gove (UK) and Pyne (Australia) highlighted enduring and common problematisations of ITE programs, manifest in claims about the lack of practical experience; of ITE students, manifest in the 'best and brightest' discourse; and of ITE academics and institutions, manifest in claims of ideological and faddish orientations (Mockler and Redpath, 2022). The longitudinal Australian analysis presented here is consonant with these findings, and also with Labaree's argument that ITE is a productive space for politicians to propose and enact reform, regardless of how many previous reforms there have been, whether those reforms are ongoing, and what the effects of those reforms might have been:

For academics and the general public alike, ed school bashing has long been a pleasant pastime. It is so much a part of ordinary conversation that, like talking about the weather, you can bring it up anywhere without fear that you will offend anyone...For the public at large, this institution is remote enough to be suspect (unlike the local school) and accessible enough to be scorned (unlike the more arcane realms of the university). (Labaree, 2004, p. 3)

The 'temporary settlements' (Kenway, 1990) represented in the four waves of reform highlight the ways in which ITE has been construed in the public space over this 25 year period, a period comprising the final nine years of tenure for a conservative government (Howard), followed by six years of Labor governments (Rudd-Gillard-Rudd), nine years of conservative governments (Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison), and finally the first year of a new Labor government (Albanese). Evident is long term and bi-partisan commitment to the rolling reform of ITE, perhaps best illustrated by the way that the recommendations of the QITE review, which had been inspired by the personal orientations and commitments of a deeply conservative Minister for Education in 2021, and were prosecuted with gusto by the incoming, purportedly progressive Labor minister as a 'silver bullet' response to the teacher shortage crisis. Similarly, the ITE reforms proposed by the *Top of the Class* report but not implemented by the Howard government in its final two years of tenure, were seamlessly and enthusiastically incorporated into federal reforms as part of Labor's 'education revolution' post-2007. With no time for bedding down of or evaluation of reforms before the next round of reform, ITE institutions and academics remain at the mercy of this bi-partisan belief in a constant crisis which goes uncontested even as new governments, determined to carve out their points of difference in other policy arenas, take the reigns.

Each wave of reform has shifted ITE policy further away from an appreciation of teaching and teacher education as complex and contingent endeavours, and closer to an understanding of teaching as a simple process of 'delivering' 'what works'. Within this view, teacher knowledge is circumscribed according to a narrow and pre-ordained uncontested evidence base; teacher professional judgement is regarded as subjective and unreliable; and intellectual and creative work on the part of teachers is spurned in favour of that which can be more effectively standardised and controlled. In the process, the expertise of teachers and teacher educators is recast as "vested interests" (Hare, 2023). In launching the recent expert panel discussion paper, said to represent a "back to basics" approach to ITE (Bita, 2023), the chair of the panel was reported to hold the view that "unions, the existing teacher workforce and university academics could all try to stymie changes to how the teaching profession is taught and how it is accredited because it reflected their own training and experiences" (Hare, 2023). That the expertise of the teaching profession itself and the

teacher educators and educational researchers who support them could be summarily dismissed as ‘vested interests’ is a concerning window onto where the next ITE policy settlement may land.

The policy trajectory leading to this settlement, as this analysis has shown, is the result of 25 years of continuous, compounded and cascading reform, supported by bipartisan commitment to standardising ITE and strengthening performative accountability for both teachers and teacher educators. Ultimately, initial teacher education is and will remain about more than ‘frontloading’ knowledge of classroom management and direct instruction into the minds of would-be teachers. The current teacher shortage is a crisis largely born not of the unwillingness of young people, including the ‘best and brightest’, to embark on teaching careers, but the difficulty of retaining teachers into and beyond mid-career. That contemporary schooling systems and structures create workloads and workplaces that are increasingly impossible for good teachers to navigate is both a real problem and one that will not be solved by reforming teacher education or narrowing definitions of teacher quality. A short-sighted approach that misunderstands the central role of ITE as the transmission of technical skills rather than the formation of knowledgeable, creative, and personally and intellectually agile teachers with sharp and finely honed professional judgement, represents a tragically missed opportunity, particularly in the context of an “unprecedented” (Commonwealth Department of Education, 2023, p. 3) teacher shortage. This is, however, the vision of ITE that has come to prevail in Australia, through ongoing rounds of review and reform over 25 years, and that is now deeply entrenched in Australian education policy, regardless of the political alignments of the government of the day.

### **Postscript**

The public consultation on the TEEP Discussion Paper (Scott *et al.*, 2023b) culminated in the report, *Strong Beginnings*, (Scott *et al.*, 2023a) published in July 2023, while this paper was under review. Consonant with the reform trajectory discussed here, *Strong Beginnings* positions teachers as “critical to delivering on the ambition for the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration”, arguing that “one of the best ways to help beginning teachers be successful from day one is to improve ITE” (p.6). The report includes 14 recommendations organised under the four ‘priority reform’ areas of: strengthening ITE programs to deliver confident, effective beginning teachers; strengthening the link between performance and funding of ITE programs; improving the quality of practical experience in teaching; and improving postgraduate ITE for mid-career entrants. The Education Ministers Meeting had provided in-principle support for all recommendations prior to the report being released to the public, and the first wave of actions, around new guidelines for ‘practical experience’; and revised processes for accreditation of ITE programs are now underway. ‘Evidence-based practice’ manifests in the TEEP report in the form of new ‘core content’ for ITE programs, with the panel designing the core curriculum based on an unpublished research synthesis prepared for the review by the Australian Educational Research Organisation. This core curriculum, due to be embedded in all ITE programs by late 2025, comprises the four areas of ‘the brain and learning’; effective pedagogical practices; classroom management; and responsive teaching, and given the narrow evidence-base on which it draws, will in all likelihood further limit the scope of ITE. This, and the processes by which the link between performance and funding of ITE will be strengthened, hold the capacity to further shape ITE as this new policy settlement plays out.

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