Teaching must be able to attract its share of talented graduates

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Current industrial negotiations over teacher pay are paying little attention to research on what really matters; ensuring a high quality teaching profession capable of attracting its share of the ablest graduates and recognising teachers who reach high standards.

The lesson from recent international studies of student achievement is that successful countries like Finland and South Korea made a commitment to do this more than 30 years ago. It is time that Australia had a similar long-term and bipartisan strategy.

The quality of our teachers is as important to our economic future as other infrastructure such as transport and broadband. Research shows that teachers’ relative salaries are higher in countries that perform well on international tests of student achievement.

Recent figures from an Australian Government report on the quality of entrants to undergraduate teacher education programs in Australia under the new demand-driven system give cause for concern that we are running down our teaching infrastructure.

Whereas Finland selects all of its future teachers from the top 25% of the student cohort in terms of academic achievement, in Australia less than 50% of offers are made to students from the top 30% of the Year 12 cohort.

| Share of Education offers to Year 12 applicants, by ATAR band and state, February 2012 |
|-----------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|                                              | 50.00 or less | 50.05-60.00 | 60.05-70.00 | 70.05-80.00 | 80.05-90.00 | 90.05 or more | Total |
| NSW/ACT                                       | 8.7% | 13.9% | 27.2% | 26.1% | 18.0% | 6.1% | 100.0% |
| Victoria                                      | 8.3% | 25.0% | 30.0% | 23.2% | 11.4% | 2.1% | 100.0% |
| Queensland                                    | 3.6% | 8.2%  | 36.1% | 28.7% | 17.9% | 5.5% | 100.0% |
| WA                                            | 0.9% | 9.1%  | 36.5% | 32.8% | 16.2% | 4.5% | 100.0% |
| SA/NT                                         | 0.9% | 9.8%  | 28.3% | 28.7% | 23.6% | 8.7% | 100.0% |
| Tasmania                                      | 19.1% | 14.0% | 21.3% | 18.5% | 23.0% | 3.9% | 100.0% |
| Australia                                     | 6.5% | 15.1% | 30.2% | 26.4% | 16.8% | 5.0% | 100.0% |

Note: Figures as of 22 February 2012 (third round submission).

The figures in the table (provided by Higher Education Division Department of Industry, Innovation Science, Research and Tertiary Education) are most worrying for the state of Victoria. Only 37% of offers in 2012 were made to Year 12 applicants with ATAR scores

above 70 and only 2% of offers were made to applicants with ATAR scores above 90, less than half the national average.

Alarmingly, over 33% of teacher education offers were to Year 12 students with ATAR scores below 60, placing them in the lower half of academic achievement for the cohort, more than twice the corresponding percentages for Queensland, WA, and SA/NT.

Teachers who are not competent and confident in their subjects cannot teach to high standards. Academic ability, while not sufficient, is certainly necessary to high quality, innovative and challenging teaching. There are also likely to be future challenges in managing the performance of academically weaker teachers.

The report also indicates that, while the number of students choosing teaching as their first preference increased by 4%, the actual number of offers by Victorian universities increased by nearly 12%, much higher than any other state. The increase in offers far exceeds the increase in demand, indicating that teacher education programs in Victoria, in particular, are being used to soak up much of the increase in applications because of the transition to a demand driven funding system for universities.

There is little point blaming university faculties of education for this situation. They can do little to make teaching a more attractive career choice and they are pressured by university administrators to place quantity of enrolments before quality.

However, some universities appear to be ignoring national accreditation guidelines that they should only enrol students from the top 30% in terms of academic ability. Perhaps funded places in teacher education programs should be limited in future to students achieving at this level or above.

Ultimately, governments, both state and federal, are responsible for ensuring that salaries enable teaching to compete effectively from the pool of talent. The recent Productivity Commission Report points out that teachers’ pay has not kept pace with recent increases in other professions.

Australian teachers’ salaries are only 30% above GDP per capita, whereas the average in OECD countries is 65%. Countries such as South Korea, Japan and Taiwan pay effective teachers 2.5 times the starting salary for teachers, compared with 1.47 in Australia. Contrary to recent reports, the net teaching time in hours per year for Australian teachers is well above the average for OECD countries.

Teaching is rated Finland’s “most respected” profession, and primary school teaching its most sought-after career. Some point out that pay is not the reason, as teacher salaries are similar to those in other European countries.
However, on delving deeper, the important point about Finland is that teacher salaries are comparable to other professions. Finland does not have the wide salary disparity Australia has across the professions, meaning that teaching is able to compete with other professions for the ablest graduates. As a result, Finland is able to place high levels of trust in its teachers and spends less on weeding out weak teachers and on ineffective bonus pay schemes aimed at motivating teacher effort.

Several reports from the Australian Government indicate that, although many high achievers consider teaching important and challenging, they do not pursue a career in teaching because salaries, promotional pathways and status are limited relative to other professions.\(^2\)

The research is clear that annual bonus pay schemes are ineffective in improving the quality of teaching or student outcomes or in making teaching a more attractive career. As the recent Productivity Commission Report points out, tiered career pathways are needed that provide strong incentives for all teachers to reach high performance standards, as measured by a rigorous professional certification system.

The teaching profession needs to be trusted with the responsibility to develop such a national system, as characterises most professions. Governments need to pay experienced and professionally certified teachers what they are worth.

\(^2\) Attitudes to Teaching as a Career: A Synthesis of Attitudinal Research (DEST, 2006)