Reflections on the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group Report

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In February 2014, the Federal Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, appointed a Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) to make recommendations on how initial teacher education in Australia could be improved. Their report, Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers, was released in February 2015, together with a response from the Australia Government. This article examines the extent to which the TEMAG report and the Minister’s response address the central problems facing teacher education today.

The TEMAG focused its spotlight on teacher educators and greater accountability for programs they provide.

“Action to improve the quality of teachers in Australia’s schools must begin where they are first prepared for the profession. It is clear that there is public concern about the quality of teacher education. To address this, the standard across all programs must be lifted. How programs are developed and assessed and how entrants to programs are selected are two key determinants of the quality of teacher education in Australia.” (p. 7)

The report identifies five key areas for initial teacher education (ITE) reform:

- Stronger quality assurance of teacher education courses
- Rigorous selection for entry to teacher education courses
- Improved and structured practical experience for teacher education students
- Robust assessment of graduates to ensure classroom readiness and
- National research and workforce planning capabilities.

If effective action is taken in these five areas, the TEMAG report will make a significant contribution to the quality of teacher education. However, it will not be enough if the accountability spotlight focuses only on teacher educators. The quality of new teachers depends on more than rigorous accreditation of teacher education programs. Teacher education faces a recruitment problem, not a selection problem.

Policies to improve teacher education outcomes need to assure quality at three stages:

1) Recruitment: The quality of students attracted to teaching and the match between supply and demand
2) Accreditation: The quality of teacher education programs and their graduates
3) Induction and registration: The quality of training and support during the induction period and the rigour of the registration assessment.

TEMAG’s brief focused only on the second stage, consistent with the fact that, while the Commonwealth is responsible for higher education, state and territory governments and other employing authorities are responsible for matters such as salaries, conditions of work, induction and registration. However, these three stages are highly inter-dependent and reform efforts need to focus on integrating all three. High achieving countries with high

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1 An edited version of this paper was published in the journal Professional Voice, July 2015, Volume 10, Issues3, 10-18.
quality teacher education graduates have strong quality assurance policies at all three stages.

TEMAG received over 175 public submissions. The concerns raised most frequently were the extent to which governments were meeting their responsibilities in assuring high quality applicants for teacher education programs, the level of investment in teacher education, the burden the practicum places on schools, and the importance of effective induction programs. Most of these concerns are not reflected in TEMAG’s recommendations. Most instead focus on strengthening the extent to which providers are held accountable for the quality of their graduates through more rigorous accreditation processes.

**Accreditation**

Given its limited brief, the TEMAG report has made a relevant and important contribution. It has addressed important issues, especially in relation to giving some backbone to systems for assessing and accrediting teacher education programs. While the current program standards are satisfactory, they are not applied rigorously.

TEMAG asked ACER to prepare a background report on benchmarking teacher education, which pointed out that the methods currently used to accredit teacher education programs are incapable of distinguishing programs that are successful from those that are not. There are no measures of graduate outcomes currently that make this possible, certainly not literacy and numeracy tests alone.

We do not know the answers to quite simple questions about our teacher education programs, such as the extent to which beginning primary teachers are familiar with recent research on learning to read, or knowledgeable about the maths they will be expected to teach and how students learn it. The TEMAG recommendations should help to rectify this situation.

Because our teacher education system lacks the measures to monitor its performance, there is no basis on which to judge whether current accreditation arrangements are improving the quality of teacher education or not.

The demand-driven model of university funding has not been conducive to higher quality teacher education. No one appears to be taking responsibility for ensuring that supply is matched to demand across all teaching areas. Some universities enrol students with little regard to their prospects of coping with the demands of university courses, or the effects their low entry standards will have on the teaching profession. Tertiary institutions do not have a god-given right to provide preparation programs for the teaching profession.

There are too many teacher education providers and programs, especially on-line courses, without the staffing or resources to provide quality school experience or supervision for students. If the current standards for program accreditation were applied rigorously, some programs would lose accreditation, or fail to gain it.

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A national, or a nationally consistent, accreditation system?

The ACER report pointed out that Australia was more likely to have an effective accreditation system if the eight states and territories did what most professions did long ago - delegate the accreditation function to a single national body with strong professional representation. The current state and territory borders no longer matched the reality.

Some universities have campuses in more than one state. On-line programs have proliferated, recruiting students from several states. Many teachers graduate in one state and teach in another. Jurisdictions like Tasmania, the ACT, the NT, SA and WA have five or less providers making it difficult to make hard decisions about local providers in the local political context. It made little sense to stick with the present inefficient and ineffective system.

Consistent with this view, TEMAG recommended that:

“The Australian Government establish a national initial teacher education regulator through a reconstituted Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to overhaul and manage the accreditation of initial teacher education programs, and work with the states and territories to ensure rigorous accreditation processes operate with teacher registration” (Rec. 4).

This is arguably the most important recommendation in the TEMAG report. Unfortunately, the Australian Government did not support the idea, leaving us with the present situation, which we know is not as rigorous as it needs to be. There is uncertainty about who is responsible for what. Accreditation is a responsibility of State and Territory Ministers. Yet the Federal Minister is responsible for the quality of higher education.

Needed: A national teacher education curriculum project

In the event, the Federal Minister for Education has asked AITSL, a body responsible to the Federal Minister, to develop more rigorous methods for assessing graduates for state and territory regulatory bodies to apply. This will be a complex and expensive operation if the assessment methods and processes are to meet the necessary standards of validity, reliability and fairness.

While new teachers should be literate and numerate at a high level, we should keep in mind that literacy and numeracy tests are not a valid basis for measuring the quality of teacher education programs. If there is any validity to the argument for literacy and numeracy testing, it is at the entry, not the exit stage of programs.

In measuring outcomes, priority should instead be given to developing valid methods for assessing the professional knowledge and teaching skills that graduates should have mastered in their specialist area of teaching by the end of their teacher education programs. These assessments should largely be common for all programs within each specialist field (e.g. primary teaching; secondary mathematics), as befits preparation for a profession.

There is little difference, for example, between what primary teachers in Tasmania or Western Australia should know and be able to do to teach reading or mathematics.

While the TEMAG rightly points to the need for better outcome measures, we need to be careful not to allow the assessment tail to drive the curriculum dog. We need first to
develop a *National Curriculum for Teacher Education*, clarifying what beginning teachers should know and be able to do in the first place.

National clarity and consistency about what future teachers should have the opportunity to learn will be essential if a valid and reliable accreditation system based on graduate outcomes is to be achieved. This work should begin with the current Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) and flesh out what those standards mean for each of the specialist fields that make up the teaching profession as a basis for developing valid outcome measures.

This would be a major and worthwhile project bringing our best teacher educators together with the profession in developing a national curriculum and assessment framework for graduate teachers. (Just think of primary teacher educators and teachers coming to a common understanding of what a graduate should know about recent research on learning to read, or what teaching skills they should be able to demonstrate in managing and monitoring student learning.)

The current graduate level standards provide the headings for such a curriculum, but not the detail. Developing a national curriculum and assessment framework for graduate teachers should be seen as a major research and development project that will take at least three to four years to complete. We should not rely on assessments developed by other countries. Australia has the capacity to develop its own rigorous framework for assessing beginning teachers’ professional knowledge and skills.

**A new model of accreditation is needed**

The traditional ‘big bang’ approach to accreditation is not working and needs to be supplemented or replaced by a simpler model based on continuous and longitudinal data about program outcomes. In the current model, the accreditation ‘event’ takes place once every five years or more. It requires universities to devote major resources in collecting evidence about courses, staffing and resources – mostly ‘input’ data that provides assessors with little reliable information about how effective a program actually is. It is a poor basis for improving program quality and effectiveness.

A new model is needed based on data collected annually across a range of indicators and measures. These measures should be based on an assessment framework showing how they cover all seven standards in the APST and the APS. Essential indicators include:

- Data about the academic quality of entrants and their course progression
- Measures of impact and outcome including:
  - Assessments of *knowledge* about students and how they learn, content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge
  - Assessments of *performance* using observations and structured portfolio tasks during intern or induction periods
- Surveys of first year teachers about perceptions of their *preparedness* for the first year of teaching.
- Surveys of cooperating schools about the *quality of clinical practice* and their partnerships with universities.
- Indicators of employer satisfaction.
The new model would aim to build a longitudinal data system useful to universities as they monitor trends in the outcomes of their programs and adapt courses accordingly; and more useful to regulatory bodies as they seek to promote continuous improvement in the teacher education system and monitor its quality.

Selection

The TEMAG recommendations that more rigorous selection methods for entry to teacher education programs be implemented should also to be welcomed. It is noteworthy that ‘selectivity’ is one of the key criteria for accrediting teacher education programs in the USA and the UK; programs are assessed in terms of the academic quality of the students they are able to attract.

Courses with higher entry standards attract higher quality students academically. (Some states like NSW are already on the right track in this respect.) Research also indicates that the quality of a teacher education program and the academic background of entrants are inter-related. The prior knowledge and level of achievement of entrants affects the quality of teaching and learning activities in a university program as well as the intellectual demands lecturers can place on them.

Some Australian university administrators rationalise or downplay concerns about their low entry standards, sometimes revealing a misplaced conception of social justice, as if the role of teacher education programs is to remediate limitations in secondary education. Teacher education programs cannot be both remedial programs and high quality professional preparation programs. There is no social justice in sending poorly qualified teachers to teach students in disadvantaged schools.

There is no need to become embroiled in debates about the validity of ATAR scores as predictors of university success to recognise we have a problem. Over the past ten years, we have reached a point where almost everyone who applies now finds a place in a teacher education program. Fewer and fewer of our most successful Year 12 students are applying. In 2013 less than 7% of Year 12 students entering undergraduate programs in Victoria from Year 12 had ATAR scores of 80 or more, out of nearly 5000 entrants, compared with at least 50% for other university programs.

Some universities are ignoring the spirit of the current Program Standards for accreditation, which require entrants to undergraduate programs to be selected from the top 30% of Year 12. In 2015, the proportion of offers to students with ATAR scores less than 60 was over 30% (2236 students). Over 58% had scores less than 70. The proportion of Year 12 entrants in undergraduate programs with ATAR scores less that 50 doubled over the past three years.

While it is true that nearly 50% of applicants do not come directly from Year 12, the evidence indicates that their ATAR scores are even weaker than for those entering direct from Year 12.

The TEMAG recommendation for greater transparency in selection methods should be embraced by all regulatory bodies. However, it is a symptom of, not a solution to, the real problem.

Australia has a recruitment problem more than a selection problem. While there is no doubt that selection standards should be high, tougher selection alone will not ensure that many
more of our brightest graduates will see teaching as an attractive career option and increase
demand for places. Surveys of secondary school students indicate that long-term salary
prospects and status are the main reasons why able students are not choosing teaching,
even though they regard it as an important profession.

These are responsibilities that rest with our governments and, ultimately the public. The
policy goal should be to ensure that Australia attracts sufficient students from the top 30% of
the cohort, making selection a non-issue. Australia is unlikely to match the quality of
teacher education graduates in high-achieving countries unless concerted policies are in
place that enable teaching to compete with other professions in salary and career
development terms and thereby to attract a much higher proportion of entrants with a
successful academic track record.

What is the theory of action underlying the TEMAG report?

In a recent article (The Australian, March 28, p. 10), Ben Jensen, a member of TEMAG,
articulates, perhaps more clearly than the TEMG report itself, how its recommendations are
designed to improve teacher education. In contrast to the evidence from several
international studies that high achieving countries apply strong filters at the point of entry to
teacher education programs, TEMAG argues for strong filters at the end of these programs.
Jensen states that:

“Reforms are more effective when they focus on the later stages of teacher
education, closer to when teacher seek their first job in schools rather than selection
into education degrees.”

This statement is not consistent with findings from international research on teacher
education. The evidence is that high achieving countries apply strong quality assurance
mechanisms at all three stages above. It is not a question of either one or the other.

In a recent study of teacher education programs in seventeen countries3, ACER found that
countries that do well on international tests of student achievement have strong quality
assurance policies and mechanisms at all three stages of a teacher education system. They
make teaching an attractive career option for high academic achievers, they match supply to
demand and they set high standards for admission to teacher education programs. They
have regulated teacher education systems and rigorous procedures for the accreditation of
teacher education programs. And they require and support a period of mentored induction
or residency coupled with rigorous assessments of readiness for full entry to the profession.

The theory, as expressed by Jensen, seems to be that if we introduce valid and reliable
methods for assessing the professional knowledge and performance of graduates, and the
results of these tests are made public and used to determine accreditation, then providers
will see that it is not in their interest to enrol students who are likely to fail four years later.
As Jensen puts it:

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education context, structure, and quality-assurance arrangements in TEDS-M countries. Findings from
the IEA teacher education and development study in mathematics. Amsterdam: International
Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.
“This would completely turn the current system on its head. Universities would have clear incentives to improve their courses because students would baulk at paying money for a teacher education course that is not good enough to get them registered as a teacher. . . In the end, these reforms will drive up the entry requirements. Student teachers with poor academic abilities will not pass and universities will not want to be seen to have high failure rates. This is more effective than simply regulating higher entry requirements for courses.”

This is, of course, the theory that is supposed to be in place already. It is the way accreditation and registration are supposed to work – they go hand in hand. A course should not be accredited if its students fail to gain registration. Teachers should not be registered if they have not graduated from an accredited program. There is nothing new about the theory. The problem has been the implementation. Current accreditation and registration practices lack rigour. (And no one I know is arguing that “simply regulating higher entry requirements” is the answer – this is a straw man line of argument.)

The ACER report argued that the theory is more likely to work if we have one national accreditation authority rather than eight state and territory accreditation authorities. And that a great deal will depend on the validity and reliability of other, yet to be developed, outcome measures. As mentioned already, literacy and numeracy tests are not a valid basis on which to evaluate the quality of a teacher education program. We need measures better tailored to what graduate teachers should know and be able to do as a result of their teacher education program.

Who should be held accountable for the quality of recent teacher education graduates and their literacy and numeracy levels? Before we blame teacher educators, we might keep in mind that these levels may be more a measure of the difficulty they face in attracting sufficient numbers of high quality students - because our governments, and we as a society, do not place sufficient value on teachers’ work. If university administrators do not feel accountable for the low quality of applicants currently, will they accept fewer students with low ATAR scores because those students might fail a literacy and numeracy test four years later at the registration stage?

Final reflections

The brief for TEMAG focused on important issues and its report is providing a catalyst for needed reform in outcomes-based accreditation, greater transparency in selection, in school-partnerships and quality practical experience. However, its scope was narrow in relation to the range of issues that Australia needs to address if all entrants to the teaching profession are highly qualified and competent - and in relation to the stakeholders who needed to be around the table if its recommendations were to be embraced and implemented.

The quality of new teachers should be seen as a shared responsibility between governments, the profession and providers of teacher education, for which each should be accountable. ‘Teacher quality’ is a key component of Government policy, but it is an empty slogan without action to make teaching as attractive to our ablest graduates from secondary schools and universities as other professions. Nearly 30,000 students enter teacher education programs each year, two thirds of whom enter undergraduate programs. Of these, less than 50% have ATAR scores in the top 30%. We cannot ignore the need to ensure that sufficient numbers are recruited from the top 30% of the age cohort.
It is time that the profession had a stronger voice in matters vital to its future – in particular, decisions about who gets into teacher education, who is eligible to train them, what future teachers should learn in their courses, and finally, who gains registration and full entry to their profession. In the CAEP model of an independent national professional body, teachers’ professional associations are deeply involved in the all three stages as partners with providers and employing authorities. Potentially, the TEMAG report presented an opportunity to engage the profession more deeply in these matters. It is to be hoped that these opportunities will be taken up as the TEMAG recommendations are implemented.