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Victoria, the education state?

Proposals announced yesterday by Education Minister James Merlino to attract more talented teacher education candidates underline the importance of teacher quality to student learning.

We have allowed teaching to become a much less attractive career option for academically successful secondary school students. Allowing the current trend to persist would have a detrimental effect on school students and on education in the long term in Victoria.

Future teachers can apply for undergraduate teacher education programs through two different pathways; through Tertiary Admissions Centres at the state level, or directly to a university.

Most of those applying through a Tertiary Admissions Centre come directly from Year 12. From 2005 to 2014 the proportion with Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores above 70 fell from 79 per cent to 59 per cent.

Increasing numbers of teacher education applicants are applying through Tertiary Admissions Centres a few years after Year 12, but their ATAR profile is much worse. Over the same period, the proportion with ATAR scores above 70 fell from 66 per cent to 31 per cent. Recruiting older entrants does not solve the problem.

About 40 per cent of students now apply directly to a university instead. While universities do not publish information about their previous academic achievement, there is no reason to believe that their ATAR profile is any better.

Responsibility for reversing this decline ultimately rests with our governments. How well are they doing?

The figure below shows that Victoria and New South Wales face the greatest challenge. In 2016, only 25 per cent of Year 12 students entering teacher education programs in Victoria had ATAR scores above 70. Thirty per cent had ATAR scores below 50.
The situation is not unique to 2016. Victorian universities have been enrolling significantly greater proportions of students with ATAR scores below 60 than any other state for several years.

Since 2012, Queensland, Western Australian, South Australia and Tasmania have managed to maintain, or increase, the proportion of students entering undergraduate teacher education programs with ATARs above 70. For Victoria and New South Wales, however, the proportions have fallen from 35 to 25 per cent and 50 to 43 per cent respectively.

The figure also shows the ATAR profile for all university courses. Overall, we have allowed teaching to slip to a situation where it attracts a smaller proportion of high-achieving students than any other field of higher education. Not a smart thing for a country worried about student performance to be doing.

Why is Victoria so different from most other states?

It may have something to do with differences in job opportunities between the states, but this cannot explain such large differences. Salaries differ little across states, although Victorian teachers are paid slightly less on average than most states.

Victoria is alone in allowing TAFE institutions to become accredited providers of teacher education, but the numbers they enrol are small compared with universities.

Thirty years ago, when training colleges were part of the Education Department, the State Government was able to match the supply of new teachers to the demand. When teacher education moved into the university sector controlled by the Australian Government, it lost that capacity.

Since it was introduced in 2012, the ‘demand driven’ system has led to a significant increase in student applications and broadened participation in higher education, but not necessarily an increase in programs for which students can apply successfully. Teacher education programs have been used to soak up a larger proportion of applicants with lower ATARs than other programs.

Accreditation by the Victorian Institute of Teaching requires universities to enrol only students who can cope with a rigorous professional preparation program. In practice, it is difficult for Victorian Institute of Teaching to enforce this requirement, partly because the locus of authority over initial teacher education is spread over different levels of government, and partly because universities have autonomy when it comes to student selection.

What is being done?

The NSW Education Minister, Adrian Piccoli, has focused on selection. From 2016, entrants to accredited undergraduate initial teacher education programs must have achieved above average standards in at least three Year 12 subjects, including English. This policy has reduced the number of enrolments by 10 per cent, but it is not attracting greater numbers of high-achieving students. And universities are finding ways to get around this requirement.
The Australian Government Education Minister, Simon Birmingham, has asked the Higher Education Standards Panel to advise him on options to improve the transparency of higher education student admissions policies. This is also clearly a high priority.

And now Victorian Education Minister, James Merlino, has proposed entry on the basis of an ATAR threshold with minimum study scores for English and two other VCE subjects.

The residual problem we still face, however, is that while more rigorous selection criteria and greater transparency are needed, they only partly address the main problem. The challenge is to make teaching more attractive to academically successful students.

If Victoria is to reverse the serious decline in the quality of applicants, we need to face the fact that we have a major recruitment problem, not just a selection problem. Teacher salaries in Australia relative to GDP per capita have been declining for many years.

The rhetoric about teacher quality needs to be matched by concerted policies to lift the status and career rewards afforded to expert classroom teaching, the most important determinant of quality learning for our students.

The crucial need is not only policies that steadily increase the quality of students entering teacher education programs, but also robust measures of their impact. Ensuring that all entrants to initial teacher education have an ATAR score of 70 or higher would be a good place to start.

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