Setting the scene on the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) reform agenda: An opinion.

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There have been more than 100 reviews of teacher education in Australia since the 1970s. Reforming teaching and teacher education appears to have been seen as a ‘policy problem’ by successive Australian governments for a long time.

The Commonwealth Government’s latest ITE reform agenda appears to be motivated by responding to an apparent plateau in Australian primary and secondary school students’ performance in literacy, numeracy and science subjects in comparison those in other developed nations.

The Conversation noted that during the same reporting period ‘... 1995-2015 – high-performing countries such as Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong, Chinese Taipei and Japan made steady improvements, while other countries including Canada, England, Ireland, Northern Ireland and the US have improved and now outperform Australia.’ In addition, it seems to also be a reaction to international trends where policy driven approaches to reforming teacher education quality have already been implemented.

A report titled Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers was prepared by the Tertiary Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) for the Commonwealth Government and was published in late 2014. It advocates for improving teaching by ‘attracting higher quality’ students into ITE degree programs in universities. It advocates simultaneously increasing regulation on universities regarding demonstrable learning outcomes for students in ITE degree programs and in program accreditation.

Action Now drew upon wide consultation from stakeholders, including from Universities Australia, the peak body for Australian universities. The Commonwealth Government published its response to the report in February 2015. Collectively, the submissions, reports and publications highlighted the need for significant structural change in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and the support required for early career teachers. The underlying driver seems to the perceived need to improve teacher quality through the imposition of recruitment requirements for prospective students into teacher education degree programs.

The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), at the behest of the Commonwealth Government, has begun collecting data on the teaching workforce, producing the 2015 Initial Teacher Education Data Report. Despite the fact that AITSL has just begun this process a series of mechanisms are already being implemented, beginning in 2016, that will dramatically change student recruitment into ITE programs.

State Governments have the responsibility to implement many of these changes. The Victorian Government announced its Excellence in Teacher Education policy on 23 November 2016. Their media release titled ‘Raising the bar: Top 30 per cent of students for teaching,’ outlined the State Government’s approach.
In essence, two strategies are proposed that are likely to have an immediate and significant impact upon both applicants and university ITE programs.

First, applicants must prove ‘academic capability’ by achieving a minimum ATAR threshold score for all ITE programs in Victoria (65 in 2018, which will be raised to 70 in 2019). The aim is to recruit students into ITE programs from amongst the top 30% of school leavers. A successful record at prior university level or vocational studies, or successful completion of professional qualifications may take the place of an ATAR score for non-year 12 applicants.

An ATAR score above 70 places the VCE school leaver in the top 30%, but how the State Government arrived at this figure is not explained and no case is made that it will make a significant difference upon school student achievement. There are long standing debates about the efficacy of the ATAR score as a mechanism for selection into university (or as a measure of career suitability). Catholic Education Melbourne Executive Director Stephen Elder has described the focus on ATAR as a ‘blunt approach’ that ‘…risks both a shortage of teachers and larger class sizes.’

The second strategy imposed by the State Government on universities to supposedly recruit more capable students is to require universities to screen applicants for personal attributes suitable for a career in teaching (motivation, interpersonal and communication skills, willingness to learn, resilience, self-efficacy, conscientiousness, organization and planning skills). Testing for personal attributes to enter professional preparation is not new. The Law Admissions Test (LAT) and Undergraduate Medicine and Health Sciences Admission Test (UMAT), both administered by Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), include testing for career attributes. A number of institutions require applicants to take a Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT), another aptitude test, to be considered for entry into certain courses.

In the absence of a dedicated test for teachers it appears that many Victorian universities with ITE programs will be using a video based test (CASPer) developed by a Canadian company Altus Assessments.

This is an online, scenario based test where the applicant responds to a series of short videos of various social situations that require resolution. The cost for taking the test is borne by the applicant.

In addition, all teacher education students must pass literacy and numeracy skills competency testing prior to graduation. These tests are conducted by ACER. To pass a student must score in the top 30% of the total Australian population for literacy and numeracy skills. The cost for taking the test is borne by the student.

Who are these reforms likely to impact upon?

Students entering ITE programs who do not meet the ATAR thresholds will be impacted immediately. Predominantly this impact will fall upon school leavers from low SES backgrounds, who do not score as well in VCE as their counterparts from wealthier postcodes. This will hit especially hard in regional and remote communities. It will also impact upon students who cannot afford, or are not prepared, to take a punt on the non-academic capability personal attributes test.

It is also likely that students with limited life experience or ability to articulate the personal attributes listed above will struggle to demonstrate the non-academic capabilities. It can easily be argued that school leavers are just as likely to develop these attributes during their university years as have them as an inherent trait.

The impact will also fall upon universities with ITE programs. The vice-chancellor of Australian Catholic University, Greg Craven has warned that ATARs are a crude measure of whether someone would be a good teacher, and has suggested that the reforms risk ‘annihilating the teacher workforce’.

How some universities will cope with a collapse of student numbers commencing teaching degrees is likely to play out very quickly. Universities are likely to respond with alternate pathway programs and
undergraduate degrees that prepare students to undertake a Master of Teaching degree. Whether potential students wishing to undertake a teaching degree will be able to navigate their way to alternative pathway programs or be willing to study a non-teaching degree for three years prior to commencing a post graduate teaching degree is completely unknown. If the answer to these questions is 'no' there will be a dramatic re-shaping of ITE in Australia, with the possibility of regional students and universities being hardest hit, and the resulting impact of teacher shortages impacting on those communities.


