

NCEC Response to the Inquiry into improving Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is pleased to provide a response to the Discussion Paper issued by the Teacher Education Expert Panel into improving initial teacher education (ITE) and establishing the most highly effective ITE programs to enable confident and capable classroom-ready graduates.

Background

The NCEC is the peak body for Catholic Education in Australia and is responsible for the national coordination and representation of Catholic schools and school authorities.

Working collaboratively with state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, the National Catholic Education Commission advocates through effective liaison with federal, state and territory governments and key national education bodies. Our role is to ensure the needs of Catholic schools are served through funding, legislation and policy.

Our work is to foster a thriving Catholic Education sector that offers parents a choice of, and affordable access to, faith-based education for their children. Catholic Education continues to advocate for fair and inclusive funding that sustains both government and accessible faith-based schools across Australia.

Catholic schools are universal in reach and open to all families who seek a Catholic Education. Australia's 1,759 Catholic schools educate one in five, or more than 794,000 students, and employs over 104,500 Australians. This makes Catholic schools the nation's largest provider of education outside government.

The Context of ITE and Schools

As the Discussion Paper highlights, ITE is an area of shared responsibility between governments, higher education providers, regulators, students and schools/school systems and they all have a role to play in improving ITE.

NCEC strongly supports the Expert Panel's emphasis on evidence-based best practice and its data-driven approach to continuous ITE program improvement as well as its focus on strengthening postgraduate programs which need to offer maximum flexibility to attract mid-career entrants.

Fundamental to improving ITE is adopting a strong partnership model between higher education provider, school/school system and ITE students with robust collaboration and regular communication. NCEC draws the Panel's attention to productive and comprehensive partnerships between the Australian Catholic University and the Catholic school systems in the NSW dioceses of Parramatta, Bathurst and Broken Bay which result in optimal ITE programs and support for pre-service teachers.

NCEC urges the Expert Panel to consider national guidelines for ITE for all jurisdictions to establish a common understanding and baseline of what students are expected to know and to achieve national consistency. Performance measures can be developed alongside national guidelines to set expectations and promote transparency and accountability.

Response to Four Reform Areas in the Discussion Paper.

As noted above, NCEC works collaboratively with state and territory Catholic Education Commissions and has consulted with those jurisdictions in the formulation of this submission. Some of their contributions are specific to their state or territory context and provide a broader perspective of Catholic Education regarding ITE in their local jurisdiction.

1. Strengthening ITE programs to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates.

NCEC strongly agrees ITE program content should be evidence based and endorses the key teaching practices the Panel has identified in relation to brain and learning, effective practices, classroom management and enabling factors such as a foundational understanding of First Nations peoples, family engagement and diverse learners. Specifically, Catholic school authorities refer to the need for evidence-based practices covered in ITE courses to include literacy and numeracy practices and evidence-based strategies associated with basic curriculum requirements such as the teaching of reading. This needs to be included for all subject disciplines, irrespective of individual subject areas.

There is concern however that this approach may be reductionist and other equally important areas have not been identified. These include pre-service teachers having a good understanding of the social context of learning as well as the issue of belonging, particularly for diverse learners. This relates to teaching practices that ensure students feel they belong in a school and as a result are more likely to engage with learning enabling better life chances. Most ITE providers are confident they provide ‘Brain learning’ in their programs but one jurisdiction suggested it might also be seen as “knowledge dumping”. The challenge is how students can apply that knowledge as teachers in the classroom. As well as learning how students process, retain and apply information, ITE courses would be enhanced if they were designed to address the developmental stages of children and young adults. In connection with the element of enabling factors, it would be beneficial for ITE courses to address trauma-informed practice and the impact of trauma on brain development and also cultural and linguistic knowledge.

Given the increasing number of classroom students with diverse needs, indeed the term ‘superdiverse’ classes has been coined for the classrooms that graduates are encountering, often dealing with issues of trauma, diverse bilingual and cultural contexts and additional learning challenges, the Panel might evaluate how well ITE courses prepare graduate teachers for the profession and the development of tools for the protection of mental health and wellbeing. One jurisdiction noted it is not unusual for first year teachers to have 12 students with learning plans from a class of 24

Catholic higher education providers state that they already teach the key practices identified by the Panel. NCEC suggests the focus on these practices as the core curriculum may be misconstrued as the Panel believing that universities are not teaching them. The Panel may consider an approach to ensure these key teaching practices are more explicit.

The Panel needs to examine current approaches in the preparation of graduates to work and thrive in regional, rural and remote (RRR) schools and centres and how these practices can be strengthened and improved. NCEC refers the Expert Panel to evidence and models of good practice in the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, Department of Education and Training, Commonwealth of Australia, 2018 (IRRRRE)*. The IRRRRE recommends ensuring RRR contexts, challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection and pre-service education of teachers. NCEC believes this should be incorporated into the Panel's recommendations for strengthening ITE programs to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates.

How Early Career Teachers (ECTs) interact with parents is a key area Catholic jurisdictions have identified as requiring more attention in courses. ECTs report they need strategies for conversations with parents including how to interact with parents, how to have difficult conversations, how to sound friendly and confident and how to be inclusive of the parent role.

NCEC is mindful of the extra demands regularly made on the curriculum and is wary of an overcrowded ITE workload. Given there is already so much prioritised curriculum, the Panel needs to exercise caution about adding more and employ considered judgement in identifying key teaching practices. The curriculum must retain time and space for specialty subjects that providers offer such as, in the Catholic system, religious education and special education, to ensure that graduates are able to teach these subjects.

In relation to practicums, NCEC observes that high quality, evidence-based local induction programs are vital to support teachers in their early years in the profession. Programs and frameworks should be developed to assist schools engage experienced teachers on reduced teaching loads so they have time to commit to supporting and coaching ITE students as mentors. Assessments of ITE students must be formative and ongoing rather than highlighting deficits at the end of their course or practicum.

It is also worth noting that there is much variety in ITE programs and accreditation processes in each state and territory. As the only multi-jurisdictional education provider, Australian Catholic University has made the observation that there is probably more rigor around accreditation processes in some jurisdictions than others. For example in Victoria and New South Wales, ACU must have special units in its courses that relate to special education, classroom management and engaging with parents.

Strengthening the link between performance and funding of ITE

NCEC supports assessing the performance and quality of ITE programs using a set of standardised measures but has concerns about linking these performance measures to funding. While an assessment and monitoring structure is important to ensure accountability for quality and outcomes and promote continuous improvement, there is the risk that tying performance to funding could result in adverse and unintended consequences such as league tables being developed along with the temptation for some higher education providers to potentially game the system, for example around retention statistics. The focus should be on using performance measures for the purposes of learning and continuous improvement as opposed to comparison measures. The emphasis on improvement would be a fairer and

more equitable system. The context of the provider is also important to consider; for example Western Sydney University and providers in regional areas have high numbers of low socio-economic students but that does not mean they are not making improvements and receiving a high quality ITE education. In North Queensland, there is only one university offering ITE which may mean it is less likely to attain high achieving status. Any definition needs to be carefully considered to ensure funding is not removed where it is most needed.

NCEC has strong reservations about creating an 'excellence pool' to provide high-performing ITE programs with rewards of additional funding. To ensure that ITE programs remain accessible to all cohorts across Australia including First Nations students, students from regional and remote locations and students from low socio-economic backgrounds, all ITE providers need to be supported to improve to deliver a high-quality course. Noting the drive to increase the representation of indigenous pre-service teachers and that career changers and students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be more likely to study part-time, goals of increasing diverse ITE enrolments and financially rewarding high performing ITE programs may work in opposition to each other. It is possible that the universities in need of increased funding may be those least likely to demonstrate success in all categories. Therefore, the emphasis should instead be on all ITE programs promoting excellence and, if the institution fails to do this, the right measures are put in place to achieve the expected high standards.

NCEC notes that, in relation to the performance of ITE programs, most of the data is already publicly available. For example, the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) website contains attrition information. It has been suggested that the National Data on Attrition is different to the data some providers collect due to different measurements. For example the national data looks at completion after six years but this is not always a good measure as many students are part-time and may take eight years to graduate. Many of these students are working in schools while completing their course which is a positive; we want them in schools as early as possible and for as long as possible. NCEC is supportive of tracking ITE student retention and transition into the workforce and suggests that retention should be tracked until after the five-year mark when many early career teachers choose to leave the profession.

Finally, NCEC supports the notion that a 'high performing' ITE program is one that selects high-quality candidates and prepares them suitably for the classroom but it is important to note that a high ATAR does not necessarily translate to good teaching. Other factors need to be considered, such as a selection interview process.

Improve the quality of practical experience in teaching.

NCEC strongly agrees that professional experience is vital for ITE students and school placements are the key source of this prior to graduation. NCEC urges the development of a comprehensive set of national guidelines that would provide a clear framework for high quality, supportive professional experiences and the support of teacher candidates throughout their placements. The creation of a national set of guidelines would benefit from significant consultation that included school voice to ensure any increase to demand on supervisory schools and mentors was manageable. The preparation of high quality mentors is vital. NCEC considers a key aspect to the provision of high-quality professional experience is the preparedness of mentor teachers. A strategy to increase the quality of professional experience needs to include an effective, manageable and scalable process for the training of mentor teachers. Schools have indicated that support for supervision teachers/mentors to alleviate the additional demands on their time is important so they can provide constructive feedback and engage in meaningful conversations.

Attracting ITE students to undertake professional experience in regional, rural and remote areas is an ongoing challenge. This has a flow-on effect with students not knowing what it is like to teach in these regions. Catholic schools in Rockhampton, Toowoomba and Townsville have implemented programs to attract pre-service teacher placements as an avenue to contract staff to their school upon graduation. However the increased costs involved (including travel and accommodation as well as time away from employment for the ITE student) means that it is often difficult to engage students. NCEC suggests that, if professional experience in rural and remote locations could be coordinated at a system or national level, it could ensure that sufficient numbers are conducted in these neglected areas and additional funding is available to support these placements as required.

Another area where it is difficult to attract ITE students is in the teaching of STEM subjects despite programs to boost enrolments. It is also hard to get these graduates to work in regional areas. One Catholic School Authority reported that there had been some success with the National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS) program in NSW and Queensland and that a national rollout was planned.

One model that has been suggested is for school systems to 'grow their own' and recruit from within their own areas and regions where ITE students already have established community links and support. NCEC draws the Panel's attention to the Australian Catholic University's "Step Up Into Teaching" (SUIT) program where, in Ballarat in Victoria, for example, 10 students have been recruited from the local region.

ACU's early entry university program sees Year 11 students study two units of ACU's ITE program for which they receive an unconditional offer into the ITE course and credits for the units. Modules include *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges, Histories and Cultures* which develops students' understanding of, and respect for, Indigenous culture, and *Digital Cultures and Capabilities*, which helps students understand the influence of digital technologies on contemporary life. Many students are first in family to attend university and benefit from a transition-based pedagogy. ACU's SUIT program has operated in Sydney for more than 20 years and will expand to the Catholic dioceses of Wollongong and Broken Bay.

See: *Step up into teaching: Increasing the engagement and academic self-efficacy of school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds* by Miriam Tanti and Elizabeth Labone (2011) *Journal of Catholic School Studies* (83) 1, pp 64-73.

<https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/item/8v17q/step-up-into-teaching-increasing-the-engagement-and-academic-self-efficacy-of-school-students-from-low-socioeconomic-backgrounds>

Increasing numbers of ITE providers are investigating innovative ways of conducting professional experience. This has included the use of Permission to Teach appointments within ITE courses to support ITE students to gain more practical experience in the classroom, while receiving an income, prior to graduation. The success of these programs depends on a collaborative approach involving all education sectors, ITE providers and the relevant Teacher Regulatory Authority and accessibility is a barrier particularly in rural areas. Training provided by the Queensland College of Teachers (Queensland's teacher regulatory authority) for supervising preservice teachers has received very positive feedback from the sector and increasing availability to similar training would be welcome particularly for teachers in rural and remote areas.

There is little evidence about the optimal time for professional experience. The University of Notre Dame offers a 10-week placement so ITE students can experience a full term in a school which the university believes is ideal. In New South Wales, the University has partnerships with Catholic dioceses of Armidale, Lismore and Wilcannia-Forbes to place four to six, 4th year ITE students for professional experience while being paid.

Improve post-graduate programs to attract mid-career entrants.

NCEC supports flexible program options to attract mid-career entrants as well as accelerated programs but believes these should be offered alongside more traditional modes of delivery. For example, while the Teach For Australia program has been successful and offers an intense educational immersion experience, this option is not for everyone and the approach should be to support the suite of successful existing programs. NCEC supports a paraprofessional initiative whereby ITE students receive credits in recognition of days spent working as a teacher aide.

Other issues to note include:

- Mid-career entrants are often earning a higher salary than teachers.
 - Need to promote the benefits of teaching such as work/life balance and contributing to the greater good to counter media stories about huge teacher workloads and the number of teachers/principals planning to leave the system.
 - NCEC welcomes diversity but it is limiting to only target certain subgroups such as First Nations students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and higher achievers with ATAR results over 80.
 - Data revealing higher attrition rates for ITE students aged over 31 (mid-career entrants) combined with higher attrition rates for students studying online mean mid-career changers are at a higher risk. 'Flexible arrangements' need to be more than just the opportunity to study online.
 - Tasmania has good examples of mentorship and cadet programs working well such as St Thomas Aquinas School and Department of Education \$30k internships.
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- Should you have any further questions in relation to this submission, please contact me via phone 02 8229 0808 or via email jacinta.collins@ncec.catholic.edu.au. Yours faithfully



Jacinta Collins
Executive Director

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