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Dancing to too many tunes: Contemporary course design in teacher education

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Abstract

Contemporary course designers in schools and faculties of Education are finding themselves dancing to many tunes, arguably too many tunes, in order to have their initial teacher education courses accredited by external agencies whilst satisfying internal approval processes and, critically, maintaining the philosophical integrity of their programs and their institutional watermarks. The "tunes" here are the agendas driven by and the demands made by distinct independent agencies.

The external agencies influencing Education include: TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency) which will assure alignment to the AQF (Australian Qualifications Framework); professional bodies such as AITSL (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership) which now accredits all pre-service teacher Education courses across Australia and assures alignment with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers; and the state and territory regulatory authorities that have an impact within a specific jurisdiction, for example, the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) and the Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia (TRBWA).

This paper – whose findings have been arrived at through a year-long OLT National Teaching Fellowship - will outline the complex and competing agendas currently at play and focus on the disjuncture evident in the fundamental defining of who is a "graduate." It will also attempt to identify where there are synergies between the complex demands being made. It will argue that there are too many "tunes" and the task of finding a balance between compliance and delivering effective initial teacher education may not be possible because of the cacophony of their conflicting demands.

Introduction

Initial teacher education in Australia is dominated by complex and competing agendas. These, fuelled by media campaigns and political rhetoric, have left curriculum designers wondering how to dance to different tunes while maintaining program integrity.

It is widely accepted that "the fundamental purpose of curriculum development is to ensure that students receive integrated, coherent learning experiences that contribute towards their personal, academic and professional learning and development" (Flinders University, 2009, para. 1). This simple aim is currently being overwhelmed by "ensembles of policy" (Ball, 1993) and a surfeit of regulatory agencies with direct perlocutionary control over what is and what is not to be included in initial teacher education programs. This has the effect of creating the "circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or options are set" (Ball, 1994, p.19). Bahr and Lloyd (2011) commented on the potential for fragmentation from over-regulation by offering that, in higher education:

> … curriculum development evolves as the various sequential processes of approval and accreditation, both internally and with external stakeholders, is negotiated. That is, the policy framework drives the course development. … If the key task … is simply identification of curriculum elements and how they might be divided and addressed in each corner of the course, then they will lack the glue to hold them together. When this happens, students will endure fractured and fragmented learning experiences. (pp. 22-23)

This paper will briefly outline the agencies setting the tune in teacher education and discuss, in detail, the disjuncture or discordant notes evident in the fundamental defining of who is a "graduate." This is important as it determines the approaches and demands to be placed upon a course to prepare graduates to become teachers.

Agencies
Public commentary around teaching and teacher education is currently and regrettably one of low standards and failure. Although ill-defined, "quality" is stated as the goal implying a deficit or lack of quality in current practice. A "straw man" of a system in collapse has emerged from a propagandist press and political gamesmanship. On March 6, 2013, the New South Wales Government released a "blueprint for action" entitled *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning* (NSW Government, 2013). Within a week, on March 11, the Federal Government released its "new, more rigorous standards" (Australian Government, 2013). A few weeks later, on April 9, the Queensland state government released an "action plan" entitled *Great Teachers = Great Results* (Queensland Government, 2013). The recurrent theme is of eleventh-hour action to rescue teaching and teacher education.

Outside of public and political pressures, the *external* agencies influencing Education include:
- TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency) including alignment to the AQF (Australian Qualifications Framework);
- AITSL (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership) which accredits all Initial Teacher Education courses across Australia and assures alignment with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers;
- Registration bodies such as ACECQA (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority);
- Jurisdictional regulatory authorities, for example, the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) and Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia (TRBWA); and,
- SCSEEC (Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood).

The *internal* agencies are each institution's own accreditation processes and procedures. This may include a demonstration of graduate attributes or the embedding of a core curriculum or foundational studies.

Graduate identity
This paper contends that there are four competing Graduate Identities. At the simplest level, there are two, namely, a university graduate and a graduate teacher.

University Graduate: The TEQSA Graduate has successfully completed an approved program of study and demonstrated the cognitive demands of the AQF Level ascribed to the program and described in terms of knowledge, skills, and their application. An Initial Teacher Education qualification may be AQF Level 7, 8, or 9 which implies distinctly different depth and breadth of knowledge and mastery of skills.

Graduate Teacher: The AITSL graduate is a graduate teacher, someone in transition from the first day in charge of a class to a time, perhaps two years hence, when he or she is deemed to have reached the Proficient Career Stage. This graduate, as defined through the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, can demonstrate an application of knowledge and skills rather than knowledge or skills in isolation. Further, employing authorities see the Graduate Teacher as a beginner in need of induction support and mentoring.

There are two other, perhaps more provocative, identities emerging from state and federal government agencies: an illiterate and enumerate person, and a low achiever.

An illiterate and enumerate person

The Hon Peter Garrett, Minister for School Education and Minister for Early Childhood and Youth, in an address to the Eidos Institute in Brisbane (December, 2012) said that:

> We are already some way down this reform path, with all Australian Education Ministers agreeing in 2011, to a national approach to assuring *the quality of initial teacher education courses*.
>
> … we agreed to measures to improve the quality of entrants into initial teacher education, and to make sure that graduates have been assessed to ensure they have the knowledge and skills they will need in the classroom.
>
> … we want to ensure new teachers are *top of their class*. To achieve this we are committed to drawing our new teachers from *the top 30 per cent* of the population in literacy and numeracy.
>
> <div align="right">(Garrett, 2012, paras. 54-56, emphases added)</div>

This sequence begins by calling on the authority of "all Australian Education Ministers" to establish a national problem with the quality of teacher education, a pathological condition to be cured. This then flows to the quality of program entrants. Lastly, committing to graduates being the "top of their class" reinforces the deficit. This is then equated directly to literacy and numeracy with an arbitrarily applied notion of "the top 30%."

This is understandably aligned with AITSL Program Accreditation Standard 3.1 which states that:

> All entrants to initial teacher education will successfully demonstrate their capacity to engage effectively with a rigorous higher education program and to carry out the intellectual demands of teaching itself.
>
> To achieve this, it is expected that applicants' levels of personal literacy and numeracy should be broadly equivalent to those of the top 30 per cent of the population.
>
> <div align="right">(AITSL, 2012, p. 13)</div>

The magical "top 30 per cent" is repeated in the *Higher Standards for Teacher Training Courses* (Australian Government, 2013). This announced a four point plan which included "a new literacy and numeracy test, requiring students to be in the top 30 per cent of the population for literacy and numeracy by the time they graduate" (Garrett & Bowen, 2013, para. 11).

The apparent synergy between the AITSL Program Standard, the Minister's 2012 speech and the 2013 joint ministerial statement represent a "genre chain" (Taylor, 2004) because, taken together, they are one message rather than discrete texts. The last link in this chain, however, added an exit test for graduates. This aligns with, but is not attributed to, a recommendation from the Masters Report (Masters, 2009) commissioned by the Queensland College of Teachers that led to significant but unresolved development of a pre-registration test for graduates. Interestingly, it is planned that the test be part of students' coursework and thus become the institutions' responsibility (Australian Government, 2013).

The NSW *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning* (NSW Government, 2013) makes further demands:
- Entrants into teacher education will be high academic performers, have well developed literacy and numeracy skills and show an aptitude for teaching.
- Entrants to NSW undergraduate programs will require HSC Band 5 results in a minimum of three subjects, one of which must be English.
- Teacher education students will need to pass a literacy and numeracy assessment before their final-year professional experience placement.

A curious pattern of testing emerges from this chain of pronouncements. That is, to enter teacher education, you must be in the top 30% of literacy and numeracy. This may be through Year 12

results and/or from a proposed national test. To exit teacher education, you are tested to show you are (still?) in the top 30%. Further, in New South Wales, a literacy and numeracy test must be passed before final field studies, that is, in the fourth year of undergraduate studies. A graduate entry program might thus see three rounds of literacy and numeracy testing in its two-year or four-semester duration.

This emphasis on literacy and numeracy is a curious recursion to the first days of colonial settlement in Australia. Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, and Le Cornu (2007) reported that the first teachers, typically paid by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, were "selected for the work on the basis of their literacy, good behaviour and ability to discipline the children, who were seen as uncouth and unruly" (p. 26). Burkhardt (2012) identified the 26 men and 4 women who taught in New South Wales schools from 1788 to 1810. The majority were convicts (*n*=17, 56.67%). Thus literacy and numeracy were sufficient to ignore a criminal conviction.

Low achiever

The gravamen of recent times is the presumption of program entrants' inappropriate character, idle disposition and low aptitude for teaching. This was first given public voice in an address by the Hon Christopher Pyne, Shadow Minister for Education, to the Sydney Institute entitled *Achieving Teacher Quality: The Coalition's Approach* (July 16, 2012). The transcript of the speech offers that:

> A 2009 survey of school leavers revealed that only 1 per cent of 'high achievers' (defined as TER over 90) had teaching or education as their first preference for university.
>
> … those people who wanted to study education were the most likely of all school leavers to rate the "level of HECS" and "having confidence in meeting the demands of the course" as major influences on why they wanted to study education. Rated less important than other fields was the idea that teaching "extended on subjects liked as a part of Year 12."
>
> *So, this evidence suggests that increasing numbers of students are choosing to study education, because they think it is cheap, easy and it does not extend or deepen the knowledge they gained during Year 12.*
>
> When I think about the pipeline of new teachers that we need to address our slipping student outcomes, these are not the characteristics that I would like to distinguish it.
>
> (Pyne, 2012, paras. 36-39, emphases added)

The *New Directions for School Leadership and the Teaching Profession* paper released by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (June 2012) adopted spurious human capital modelling by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research to claim that:

> For Victorian students to catch up with their peers in the top performing jurisdictions, our 15-year-olds would need to progress an extra six months in their learning by the time they enter Year 10. If we invest in the right reforms to support quality teaching, 15-year-old Victorian students could bridge the gap within a decade.
>
> Improving the quality of new teachers entering the profession (through more selective entry and better courses) could improve our system by about two months of learning;
>
> Exiting the lowest performing 5% of teachers … and replacing them with more effective teachers could improve our performance by an additional two months of learning.
>
> (DEECD, 2012, p. 5)

While less polemic but similar in intent, concern with "quality" is evident in another of the federal government's four points to improve teacher education. This calls for: "more rigorous and targeted admissions into university courses, potentially including interviews, demonstrated values and aptitude, and a written statement" (Garrett & Bowen, 2013, para. 11). Further, the NSW *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning* plan aims to attract more of the "brightest and motivated" to teaching

by offering incentives and providing options for earlier entry into teaching for high performing pre-service students (NSW Government, 2013).

Discussion
This discussion will consider the validity of the claims made in regard to the "quality" of entrants to initial teacher education programs. Firstly, the need for more rigorous entry scores can be questioned. Yelland (2013) suggested that "the current debate over teacher quality is erroneous and masks the complexities in this fundamental issue" (para. 1). Entry scores typically depend on available places and other resources. Institutions may ask for interviews, folios or auditions or proof of English language proficiency through IELTS (International English Language Testing System) scores. In its *Initial Teacher Education: Data Report,* AITSL has debunked much of the concern by showing that:

> Twenty-seven percent of all students commence … on the basis of senior secondary results (expressed as an ATAR) …
>
> … those students who enter initial teacher education based on their ATAR, the majority have an ATAR of between 61 and 80, and 28% have an ATAR 81 and above.
>
> Over 70% of students are non-ATAR admissions. The … mechanisms used to admit [them] take the form of interviews, additional testing, previous qualifications and work history.

<div align="right">(AITSL, 2013, p. 8)</div>

The ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) is a percentile awarded to Year 12 students for undergraduate-entry university programs in all Australian states except Queensland. The maximum is 99.95 with a minimum of <30.00 and increments of 0.05. ATAR replaced state-based indexes such as TER and ENTER in 2009. From the AITSL (2013) data, it can be seen that the "magical 30%" has generally been met. The highest ATAR (94.3) is required for entry into the B Economics/B Education (Secondary) at the University of New South Wales while the lowest noted is ~59. The majority of teacher education programs require an ATAR of ~70, well within the desired top 30%. Although some institutions have lowered their ATAR entry score in recent years, to accuse a lack of rigour at entry would seem to be tilting at non-existent windmills.

Secondly, university entry has been broadened to meet community calls for wider participation in higher education, specifically by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (see the Behrendt Report (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012) and the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008)). Data released by the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE, 2012) indicates that there was, in 2012, 1918 Indigenous students enrolled in teacher education programs. This represents 18% of all Indigenous students enrolled in higher education (*N*=10635). Further, and importantly, this represents 2% of all students enrolled in initial teacher education and matches that recommended by the Behrendt Report as representative of the Indigenous population recorded by the Census and double that of representation across all higher education (*N*=10635, 1%).

Conclusion
Who is a graduate is just one point of tension revealed through the OLT Teaching Fellowship that underpinned this paper. The TEQSA/AQF and AITSL Graduates are necessarily the outcomes of quite different courses of study. The former is theoretical, the latter performative. Both require institutional compliance with graduate attributes and respective missions or watermarks. Balancing these poses a significant challenge to curriculum designers.

The challenge is how to design a cohesive course which meets program accreditation, is both theoretical and performative, meets three levels of the AQF, which deals with students who are presumably low-achievers and illiterate and innumerate, and to simultaneously broaden and raise

participation. That is, to dance to the tune of TEQSA, AITSL, the jurisdictional authorities, and the state and federal government. Curriculum design in initial teacher education in Australia has never been so difficult.

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