

# Teaching degrees misused as university cash cows

## EDITORIAL

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How is it that after four years at university, education graduates can't teach? That question, central to the education and working lives of current students and future generations, is posed in *Inquirer* on Saturday. Answers are to be found in the admissions policies of universities to their education faculties and in the content of teaching courses. The early education, primary and secondary curriculums taught in classrooms are also relevant. So is student behaviour and discipline.

Starting from first principles, the (usually young) men and women embarking on teaching degrees need the intellectual capacity, commitment to learning and desire to inspire students that teaching careers demand. Parents, employers and many experienced teachers are dubious about universities offering places in education degrees to school-leavers in the bottom 40 per cent of academic achievement in year 12. Teaching is too important to be misused by universities as an easy cash cow under a system that provides university funding on the basis of student enrolments.

Maximising the number of bottoms on seats in lecture halls is an inadequate criteria for selecting future teachers. Universities with low Australian Tertiary Admission Rank cut-offs have long claimed otherwise, contending that those who struggled at school, failed subjects and left with low ATARs can make successful teachers. Perhaps, in some cases. But with half the nation's trainee teachers dropping out of their degrees as universities lower entry standards, the system is heading in the wrong direction. The patterns offer federal Education Minister Jason Clare an opportunity to intervene to reverse the trend before more taxpayers' money is wasted and weaknesses become endemic.

Analysis by *The Weekend Australian* shows a clear link between low ATAR scores and high dropout rates among student teachers. Half of all students enrolled in teaching courses in 2015 failed to finish. Completion rates at some universities are abysmal – as low as 20.8 per cent at Melbourne-based Swinburne University of Technology, 32.7 per cent at the University of Southern Queensland, 39.4 per cent at Central Queensland University and just over 40 per cent at the University of New England, Charles Darwin University and James Cook University. The strongest completion rates, in contrast, are found at the institutions where entry standards to teaching degrees are among the nation's highest. They include the University of Sydney, University of Technology Sydney, Monash University and the University of NSW. Universities refusing to raise the bar for admission to teaching courses are undermining the nation's future. Excuses such as that of the Australian Catholic University, declaring that higher standards would worsen the teacher shortage, are irrelevant. Solving the shortage by trying to push through students poorly suited to the profession, most of whom drop out of their degrees anyway, is pointless, apart from the taxpayer funding they draw to universities. University of Sydney Associate Professor Rachel Wilson, who says it is unethical for universities to be allowed to enrol students unlikely to finish a degree, is correct.

Another aspect of the problem is the content of teaching courses, which are often overly theoretical with insufficient attention paid to preparing trainees for classrooms. Innovations such as allowing student teachers to work as interns make sense. But in education theory, students undertake units on “sociological perspectives in education” exploring “key issues concerning difference and inequality in education -including ‘race’, social class, religion, gender, sexuality, cultural diversity, and indigeneity”. Those issues will only be exacerbated by the fact that, by year 9, one in 10 girls and one in five boys fail to meet the minimum standard in writing in NAPLAN testing. Preparing future teachers for the classroom is one of Mr Clare’s most urgent challenges. Recruiting candidates who are up to the task is a good place to start.