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Lawrence Ingvarson

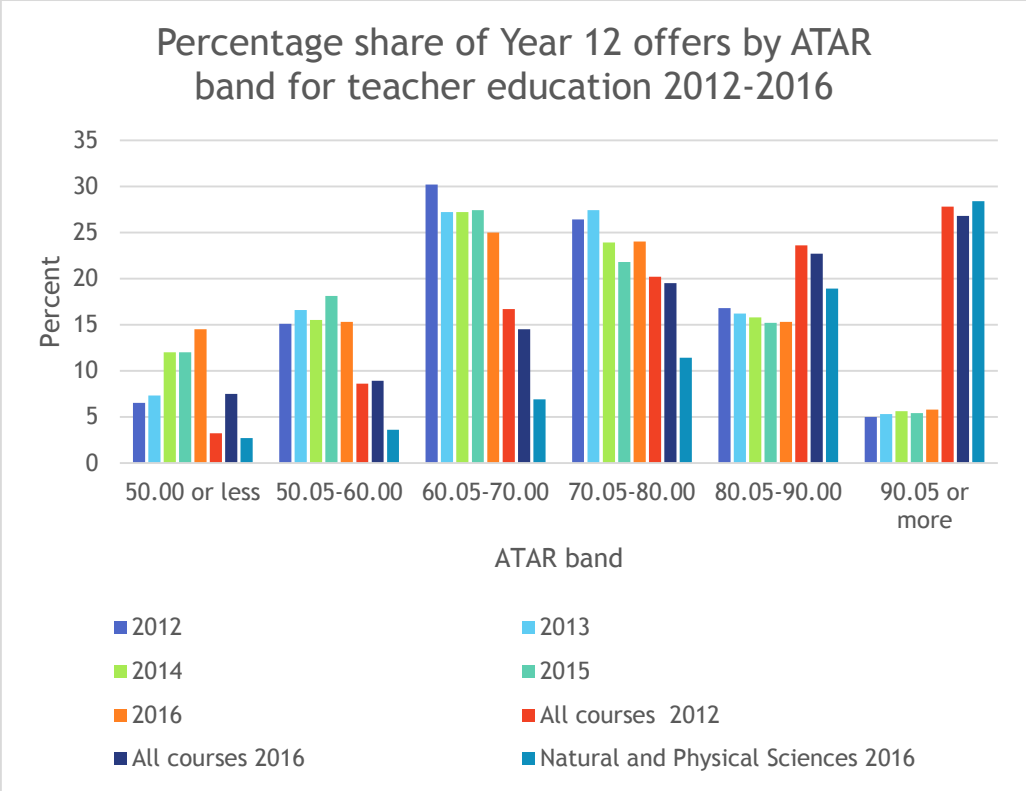
Lawrence Ingvarson explains why it is time to lift university entry standards…

As the smoke clears in the ATAR battle over trainee teacher standards, one thing becomes clear: recruitment, not selection, is the issue.

In recent debates about Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores we have lost sight of what matters most: the recruitment of high-quality candidates to ensure a strong teaching profession.

NSW Minister for Education Adrian Piccoli has been accused of 'attacking students with shameful elitism' with his plan requiring new teachers appointed to NSW government schools to have attained a high standard of English at Year 12 (Bagshaw & Ting, SMH 18 Feb 2016). Recent evidence suggests several of our universities might instead be accused of shameful opportunism in their teacher education offers, showing little regard for the public interest or the teaching profession.

In 2015, while 68.5 percent of all offers for university places were made to Year 12 applicants with an ATAR of at least 70, only 42 percent of teacher education offers were made to Year 12 applicants with an ATAR score of at least 70. The number of entrants with ATAR scores less than 50 has more than doubled over the past four years (Australian Government Department of Education, 2015). This table shows the percentage share of Year 12 offers by ATAR band for teacher education 2012-2016.



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Similar numbers apply to students who applied post Year 12, and we should not be taken in by academics who argue that the rising numbers of non-Year 12 entrants obviates the problem. Most non-Year 12 applicants also have an ATAR score, even if universities do not use these in determining non-Year 12 applications – and the profile of their ATAR scores is even worse.

Like education ministers across the nation, NSW Education Minister Piccoli has good reason to be concerned about the behaviour of some universities, rationalised as serving the interests of disadvantaged students. Quite rightly, he is putting the public interest first. State and territory registration bodies seem powerless to do much about this situation, a situation that would be rectified quickly if it was happening to the medical profession.

It is time to drop the rationalisations and face the fact that we have a problem.

Agreed, ATAR scores may be imperfect predictors of university success, and yet they may nevertheless be better than any other measure we have, but no one can deny that we have created a situation that is not in our national interest.

Minister Piccoli's responsibility is to ensure that teacher education providers meet the national standards for accrediting teacher education providers. These state that entrants should possess levels of personal literacy and numeracy broadly equivalent to the top 30 per cent of the population and be capable of meeting the demands of a rigorous higher education program. We are a long way below that standard.

The demand-driven system is clearly undermining our teaching profession and lowering its status. Universities should not have the freedom to implement admission policies if they have detrimental downstream effects on the supply and quality of teachers, and ensuing detrimental effects on schools and on the profession. Vital professions like teaching need to be protected from the consequences of the demand-driven system.

One possible course of action for universities is to provide generalist undergraduate programs that enable students to reach the standard required to enter and cope with a rigorous teacher education program. The solution, if they are unwilling to do this, is to move all teacher education to the post-graduate level.

In all the flurry about ATAR scores, we have lost sight of the real problems.

The first is that teaching has a recruitment problem much more than a selection problem. We can introduce all the filters and selection tests we like, but they won't make any difference unless our governments improve the attractiveness of teaching and demand from our ablest graduates for teacher education places.

Australian Governments are not doing enough to ensure teaching is an attractive profession that can compete with other professions for our best graduates. Talk about the importance of teacher quality needs to be matched by polices that ensure high quality entrants to teacher education.

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Australians must be willing to pay demonstrably accomplished teachers what they are worth – which means that they should be able to attain significantly higher salaries based on professional certification of their expertise.

Salaries matter. Salaries and status are the main reasons our ablest students do not choose teaching, despite regarding it as a worthwhile profession (Department of Education, Science and Training 2006). International research shows that what distinguishes high-achieving countries, in terms of student achievement, are teacher salaries at the top of the scale, relative to other professions (Carnoy, 2009; Akiba et al. 2012; Dolton et al. 2011).

The second problem is the presumption that universities alone should determine who gains entry to teacher education programs. Given the current situation, this presumption is no longer tenable, despite the inevitable flag-waving about university autonomy. Autonomy is not unconditional; it's a two-way street. Autonomy, or trust, is what the public gives in return for practices that are in the public interest.

No one is arguing that it is not a good thing to expand opportunities to gain a university education. However, this does not mean that students should be channelled directly into professional preparation programs like teacher education regardless of prior academic achievement. This may suit the financial interests of universities in absorbing more students, but it is not in the interests of the public or the teaching profession.

Implicit in the arguments some teacher educators use to justify their low entry standards is that teacher education programs should be remedial programs, or bridging courses. Plans to require basic literacy and numeracy tests after graduation also imply that course time should be spent remedying basic academic deficiencies. Is there any other profession where this line of argument would be accepted or taken seriously?

A high-quality teacher education program cannot be both an effective preparation for the demands of teaching and a remedial program.

Minister Piccoli is right to argue that the simplest and most efficient pathway is to require evidence of high level results in English and two other subjects at Year 12 level before being eligible to enter a teacher preparation program. The most appropriate stage for basic literacy and numeracy testing is at entry, not graduation.

A remarkable feature of the ATAR debate is what little consideration some universities give to the effects of their low entry standards on our schools and the teaching profession. The arrogance is breathtaking. The thought that they should consult with, or to listen to, the concerns of the teaching profession seems not to arise.

By all means remove unfair barriers to disadvantaged students who for one reason or another have not had the chance to follow the traditional pathway into tertiary education, but channelling applicants directly into teacher education programs for which they are unprepared will not be in the interests of those disadvantaged school students they may finish up teaching.

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The brutal fact is that high-performing schools are unlikely to shortlist job applicants who come from universities with low entry standards. As a result, we run the risk of creating serious differences in teacher quality across schools serving students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.
The recent report of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) missed the opportunity to address the recruitment problem.

With little evidence, it claimed that the main problem was the quality of teacher education courses themselves, not recruitment and the quality of applicants. The TEMAG report successfully diverted attention away from governments and their responsibility to ensure that teaching attracts sufficient numbers of our ablest students to meet the demand. Instead of addressing the recruitment problem, the TEMAG report advocated more robust selection methods at entry and at graduation. These alone will do little to increase the quality of applicants.

An argument in currency last year was that, with the prospect of more 'robust' outcome measures of their graduates, universities would quickly fall into line and lift their entry standards, because it would threaten their accreditation status if many of their graduates failed. That argument lost all currency this year. Instead of falling, the proportion of offers to students with ATAR scores lower than 60 rose again in 2016 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2016).

Our present approach to teacher education is very wasteful, compared with countries like Singapore where the number of entrants accepted into and graduating from teacher education is broadly in balance, where supply and demand are broadly in balance and where most new graduates remain in teaching long term, unlike Australia. The primary reason is that teaching is a high-status profession offering attractive career paths and working conditions.

It is true that we do spend a lot of money on our education system, but we have not been spending it on what matters. Smart countries make sure their education system is strong, both in terms of quality and equity, by making sure their teaching profession is strong in terms of recruiting and retaining successful graduates from schools and universities. In the long run, these policies save money.

We need to establish effective measures for holding our governments accountable for teacher quality

Ultimately, our governments are responsible for ensuring that teaching offers salaries and conditions that attract sufficient applications from students who can cope with a rigorous professional preparation program. Our governments are accountable for ensuring that teaching can compete with other professions for our ablest students, and our collective responsibility is to hold them to account. To achieve this, we must require governments to gather evidence annually showing that their teacher quality policies are lifting the academic quality of students being attracted into teaching.

Teacher education is too important to be left to the vagaries of university admission policies.

If the present trends in recruitment continue, we should consider diverting funding for teacher education from universities to a national teacher education authority, for which the primary responsibilities should be to ensure that: supply of new teachers matches demand; teacher education services are purchased from accredited providers; funded courses attract sufficient students from the top 70 percent of the age cohort; and teacher education program accreditation is conditional upon evidence that graduates meet specified high standards for professional knowledge and performance.

Lawrence Ingvarson is a Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Council for Educational Research.

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