Quality Matters

Revitalising teaching:
Critical times, critical choices

Gregor Ramsey, November 2000
Dear Minister

I am pleased to submit this Report following my review of teacher education in New South Wales. I appreciated the flexibility you accorded me in this task by making me the sole reviewer. In consulting widely and taking into account a range of views, I have endeavoured to test ideas against three criteria. What would be in the best interests of young learners in this State? How can the professional interests of teachers be advanced? How can the necessary changes be brought about?

The quality of teacher education and of teaching matter in ways which are matched in few other occupations, callings or professions. I am convinced that the quality of professional practice in classrooms, in government and non-government schools and other educational settings, will be improved by reconnecting universities and schools in initial and continuing teacher education and by strengthening teacher professionalism. The proposals contained in this Report are designed to align teacher education and teaching with the needs of our times; in too many current instances this seemed not to be the case. Unless new approaches are developed in a number of important areas, my belief is that like the twenty previous reviews of teacher education of national significance over the same number of years, little will happen as a result of this Report and good ideas will languish.

I believe solid support exists for the proposals contained in the Report. While the imperatives for change are great, the need to respond to them is now well recognised, by the education community and more broadly.

The issues at stake are largely professional. They will be best addressed by dealing with them through structures and processes which make teaching the quality profession so many want it to be.

I see the report of the Review as a step in an on-going process of change which has now begun.

Thank you for the opportunity to undertake this Review, especially given the critical importance of teaching for the future of the State and the people of New South Wales.

Yours sincerely

Gregor Ramsey
Acknowledgements

The Reviewer is alone responsible for the conclusions, recommendations, directions and indeed all aspects of this Report. Yet none of this would have been possible without the tremendous support of the Review Team. The opportunity for professional discussion and debate, the testing of ideas with members of the team was particularly important in coming to terms with the wide range of issues we have canvassed.

My particular thanks go to the Executive Officer, Bruce Mowbray and to John Moore, Helen Gregory and Sera Gandolfo who were with the Review from the beginning. Kim Vu came later and found herself embroiled with the rest of us in pulling it all together.

Mike Horsley, on part-time secondment from the Faculty of Education, University of Sydney worked with the Review on the chapter on other professions; Louise Watson from the University of Canberra Lifelong Learning Network worked with us on the chapter on Resourcing Teacher Education. Vivian Eyers, AO and Graeme Speedy, both of whom had been involved in previous reviews, gave valuable advice on a range of issues. Paul Brock, Director, Strategic Research in the Department of Education and Training provided a significant analysis of past reviews on which the Review was able to draw.

Regular seminars with the Director-General and Deputy Directors-General of the Department of Education and Training were most valuable, as were individual discussions and a range of data and information provided by the Department.

The cooperation of the universities was greatly valued. They arranged forums and provided many opportunities for discussion among the various stakeholders.

Many provided insightful written or verbal advice to the Review, reflected significantly in the chapter on Issues and Directions. A special thank you to the teachers, student teachers, students and parents who made submissions and who participated in forums and consultation meetings.
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1. Introduction

Teaching has a long and proud tradition of service to children, young people and to society. Most can recall a teacher who changed their life for the better by broadening their horizons and giving them new understandings about their potential as a human being. Over the decades, people have chosen teaching as their life’s work because they genuinely believed that they could make a difference to the lives of children and adolescents. So it is now for the majority of those who are teachers or are preparing themselves to be part of the teaching profession.

The society we have is largely created in our schools. It is primarily from teachers that a love of learning is acquired. The intellectual energy underpinning our society begins in classrooms where teachers develop the talents and capacities of their students. In partnership with parents, teachers have an important role in shaping the values and attitudes of young people. These include core values about respecting the rights of others, compassion for those who are less fortunate and a commitment to democracy and equality. Teachers have been at the forefront of creating modern Australia by teaching and modelling these important values. The results of their work are everywhere to be seen.

We live in a society where to be well educated is a necessity. Modern life demands that our citizens have the greatest possible range and depth of knowledge and skills. A basic education is no longer adequate as a preparation for life. The days are long past when it was possible for a young person to leave school with only minimal learning and have expectations of success in adulthood. We are a ‘learning society’, increasingly reliant on the creation of knowledge, the acquisition of new skills and the communication of information. The boundaries between learning, work and social participation are becoming blurred. The work of teachers in such a society becomes more, not less, important.

In our rush to focus on the instrumental goals of education we must not lose sight of the important social goals of schooling. This applies particularly in a society where, despite the move to greater globalisation, there is increasing tribalisation at the local level. Teachers have a central role in addressing often complex issues, including the development and maintenance of social cohesion.

The community acknowledges that the work of teachers is not easy. This is especially so in times characterised by uncertainty about what the future holds in terms of how society functions, the kinds of employment available to people and the ways in which they will go about their work. Given that teaching is becoming more important, society and teachers themselves need to be sure that the work of teachers is of the highest possible quality. We must be confident that our systems of teacher education equip teachers with knowledge and skills relevant to the needs of young people preparing for the transition to work and participation in an ever-changing world. These are critical issues, and teachers have a vital role in addressing them.

The community at large has always had substantial expectations of its teachers. These are coming more sharply into focus because of the new demands on learners in a society where the creation, acquisition and communication of knowledge are increasingly critical. Our highly pluralist society with its diverse sets of values and expectations puts a level of pressure on teachers the like of which they have never before encountered. Parents, who have primary responsibility for decisions about their children’s education, want to know how well they are progressing. They now have a level of interest and knowledge that challenges teachers in a way that some at least have not experienced previously.

For a new teacher, on their own and without the level of support other professions give their new entrants, it can be all too daunting. Views were expressed in advice to the Review which indicate that many experienced teachers feel that the authority and respect they once enjoyed as teachers are now declining. Some express a loss of confidence in their capacity to make the kinds of differences in the lives of children and young people which first motivated them to become teachers.

Teaching as a profession has powerful antecedents. Over centuries, we can look to the contributions of teacher-philosophers such as Socrates, Confucius, Arnold, Montessori, Dewey and Bruner and in Australia to Winifred West, Harold Wyndham and Garth Boomer. It compares with any profession that has a profound effect on the community at large. A four-year degree or its equivalent is now the norm for entry into teaching, which