



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

**Response to QCEC Discussion Paper *Pre-service Teacher Education Entry Requirements*  
December 2012**

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes this opportunity to inform discussion on entry levels into teacher education courses at ACU and to address the issues raised in the Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) Discussion Paper *Pre-service Teacher Education Entry Requirements* ('Discussion Paper').

This response addresses the following key issues:

1. Entry into teacher education courses at ACU
2. Supporting students to achieve the required standard before graduation
3. Rigorous standards for practicum placements at ACU
4. ACU graduate quality and employability
5. Supporting locally-based education development and professional research/development

As one of the largest producers of teaching graduates in Australia, ACU has a strong commitment to developing high quality teachers who will foster and advance effective student learning in our schools.

ACU draws upon 2000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition and over 100 years of experience in teacher education in Australia. As a matter of mission we take particular pride in seeking to produce graduates that are "highly competent in their chosen fields, ethical in their behaviour, with a developed critical habit of mind, an appreciation of the sacred in life and a commitment to serving the common good."<sup>1</sup>

The quality of our students is reflected in the high regard in which they are held by the sector, and through the high rate of employment our teaching graduates achieve across the Catholic, government and independent school sectors.

### **1. Entry into Teacher Education Courses at ACU**

ACU notes the Discussion Paper's focus on entry levels to teacher education courses.

ACU's experience is that the focus of debate should be on graduate quality (outputs) rather than on student ATARs or OPs (inputs). The objective of a teaching degree is not to 'take' a teacher, but to 'make' a teacher. Entry levels, particularly ATAR/OP requirements, into Teacher Education courses are not determinative indicators of subsequent graduate quality. A focus on entry requirements as a measure of quality undervalues the role universities play in adding value to the student's knowledge and performance as a teacher. While ACU attracts high ATAR/OP students to its Faculty of Education, it does not believe that a student's ATAR/OP is necessarily a determinant of their success at university or as a teacher.

ACU strongly believes that universities are best placed to determine which students are most suited to undertake their programs. It is imperative that universities retain the flexibility to innovate and implement their own entry requirements for teacher education courses in order to produce high quality teaching graduates. This flexibility is also imperative as a matter of upholding university independence.

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<sup>1</sup> *Australian Catholic University Mission.*

It is important to recognise that an ATAR is not a score. An ATAR does not measure knowledge, skills, aptitude or intellect. It is merely a rank representing the number of students a person performs better than in any given year in their collection of final subject assessments. An ATAR also does not take into account human factors which might affect a person's capacity in high school, university and beyond. It does not measure characteristics such as passion, commitment, communication skills, compassion, enthusiasm, ethics or social disadvantage to name a few attributes which could help or hinder a student, or a teacher, succeeding in the wider world. An ATAR also does not necessarily indicate a student's strengths in subjects of relevance to particular areas of teaching; for example, science, history, drama or music. Furthermore, our experience is that once in university, high and low ATAR students perform similarly; and in many instances lower ATAR students perform as well, if not better than, students who entered on higher ATARs.<sup>2</sup>

The limitations and impact of enforcing minimum ATARs are recognised by the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE). Professor Brenda Cherednichenko, President, ACDE, notes that ATARs also reflect social advantage and parental education, and that it is very difficult to predict ability to be a teacher based simply on an ATAR result.<sup>3</sup>

ACU's entry requirements for teacher education courses recognise the limitations of the ATAR.

Studies have shown that while ATARs are reasonably good predictors of success at high levels above eighty, in the middle tiers of achievement - from about 55 on, where most of the potential is to expand university participation - their reliability declines dramatically.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this, we note that of all the providers of teacher education in Queensland, ACU admits the largest proportion of students on the basis of an ATAR. More than 50 per cent of ACU students gain admission to our undergraduate pre-service initial teacher education programs via an ATAR. In Queensland, the median ATAR for students admitted to Initial Teacher Education courses at ACU is 64. Consistent with the State average 34 per cent of teaching students are admitted to ACU's Faculty of Education with an ATAR of 60 or above.

ACU administers a range of selection methods to choose the best teaching candidates. About 40 per cent of our undergraduate teaching students come from non-school pathways which includes mature entry students and students who have studied at university. The entry requirement for students entering graduate pre-service courses (Master of Teaching) is based on Grade Point Average (GPA) from a successfully completed degree. For secondary teacher education there are also requirements imposed by the discipline which the student wishes to teach. Undergraduate admission pathways include:

- **TAFE articulated agreements** - whereby students are awarded credit for prior study.
- **Associate degree programs** - for Indigenous and Early Childhood students as a pathway for the degree program.
- **Early Achievers Program** - students receive an early offer into university based on the contributions they have made to their community.

In addition to standard entry requirements, those seeking to undertake undergraduate education programs in Queensland need to have attained English (4, SA) and it is highly recommended to have completed Mathematics A. The courses include core maths and English/literacy units to extend students

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<sup>2</sup> For example see James, R., Bexley, E., and Shearer, M., *Improving Selection for Tertiary Education Places in Victoria* (2009); Willis, S., *Monash University: A High Quality/High Access University that Successfully Marries Excellence and Equity* (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Trouson, A, 'Uni bid to lift bar for teaching,' *The Australian*, 27 October 2012, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/uni-bid-to-lift-bar-for-teaching/story-e6frgcjx-1226504241172>.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Willis, S., *Monash University: A High Quality/High Access University that Successfully Marries Excellence and Equity* (2011) - Monash University.

knowledge and understanding of the requisite discipline knowledge. The new national accreditation standards require universities to guarantee minimum standards of literacy and numeracy on graduation.

## 2. Supporting Students to Achieve the Required Standard before Graduation

ACU has a number of support mechanisms and programs in place for students. Our initiatives include:

- **ACU Smart** - An academic skills preparation program designed for students entering with an ATAR under 65. Run over three days it introduces students to university study and the demands of academic literacy and numeracy, referencing, academic honesty and study planning.
- **Leap into Learning** - This is a four module online program introducing students to Information Literacy, Academic Honesty, Study Skills and the University Services.
- **Academic Skills Unit** - Students can attend workshops, book individual appointments and meet Academic Skills Advisors in their classes.
- **The ACU Academic Skills Guide** - This is a text which provides information on the requirements of academic work in the University. It explains referencing, assignment types, study skills, planning etc.
- **Peer Assisted Study Skills (PASS)** - This is a peer support program targeting academic performance.
- **Disability Support Unit** - This unit provides information, support and Individual Education Plans negotiated with the Faculty for students with continuing or temporary disabilities or health matters.
- **Counselling Unit** - This counselling unit provides confidential counselling to students to support their adjustment to tertiary study.
- **Career Development Service** - This unit provides course and career guidance, preparation for workplaces, and assistance with applying for employment.

## 3. Rigorous Standards for Practicum Placements at ACU

At ACU, we ensure that all our teaching students meet rigorous standards before allocating them to practicums, so as not to waste limited and costly school resources during practicums. Measures we have in place include the following:

- The first three professional experience placements in pre-service undergraduate programs are enmeshed in academic subjects in which the topics of planning, classroom skills and professional conduct are specifically taught. The first of the three placements is observational and occurs in the first year of these programs, as requested by employing and accrediting authorities.
- A professional experience mentor is appointed each year to work with all students who have difficulty in a professional experience placement. The mentor assists with possible causes of difficulty such as confidence, classroom presence or planning and reports on the readiness of the student to undertake another school placement.
- A student who fails a professional experience placement is required to respond to a formal letter asking them to show cause as to why they should not be excluded from the teacher education program. If, as a result of their response to the “show cause” letter, they are permitted to re-enrol in the program they work with the mentor before being placed in a school again. A second failure in professional experience means automatic exclusion from the program.
- Professional experience placement officers check student records to ensure that academic records are sound before placements are made. To assist them in this task, they are given a list of students who have failed more than one academic subject after the results meeting at the end of each semester.

#### **4. ACU Graduate Quality and Employability**

ACU teaching graduates achieve a significantly high rate of employment after graduation, reflective of their high quality and competency. Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) data for 2011 on students who completed their studies in 2010 and were available for full-time work, indicate that in Queensland nearly 80 per cent of ACU teaching graduates who completed their studies in 2010 secured full-time employment and an additional 18 per cent secured part-time employment.

The Brisbane Catholic Education Office (BCE) has indicated that principals have high satisfaction with ACU's newly graduated teachers. While ACU applicants accounted for 30 per cent of total graduate applicants in 2011 (for school year 2012), they were selected for 40 per cent of the continuing or fixed term jobs gained by graduates. In 2012 (for 2013) there has been further improvement with ACU applicants accounting for 41 per cent of total graduate applicants and gaining 55 per cent of the continuing or fixed term jobs available to graduates.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the BCE recently made a decision to allocate 30 of its 35 continuing positions (available for 2013) to graduates of which ACU graduates gained 20 (or 66.6 per cent) of the 30 continuing positions available.

ACU teaching graduates are highly regarded in the sector and by the schools in which they gain employment. As testament, a Queensland Catholic school principal notes the following of one of our graduates:

*"Lauren...has built relationships with staff, parents and students with great ease as well as members of the leadership team. As a teacher in her first year Lauren had a good grasp of curriculum and what she didn't know she was motivated to find out. Her ability with KLAs is to be noted – her planning is thorough...I feel that Lauren will only go from strength to strength."*

#### **5. Supporting Locally-based Education Development and Professional Research/Development**

ACU strongly supports the development of a close partnership with schools to support locally-based education development and professional research/development. We particularly recognise the value of integrated learning and supporting local school-based teacher educators to collaborate with university-based teacher educators, to enrich pre-service teachers' experiences in schools while undertaking their practicum.

ACU recognises that teacher education operates on a continuum. Universities have an important role to play in preparing teachers for the classroom. However, teacher education does not stop when teachers graduate from university. ACU believes in a tripartite approach to the continuum of professional learning with universities, education sectors (i.e. government, Catholic and independent) and schools sharing responsibility and ownership.

Universities are best placed to enable the pre-service teacher to develop the necessary discipline pedagogical knowledge, and theoretical framework that will support them in their ongoing professional learning.

Schools are best placed to demonstrate the implementation of ideas and strategies introduced at university, to support pre-service teachers in their teaching and provide feedback and mentoring in learning to teach.

Teachers in schools are best placed to assess whether the pre-service teacher has the appropriate personal, interpersonal and communication skills to be an effective teacher. It is at the school, through

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<sup>5</sup> Data as at 21 October 2012.

practicum<sup>6</sup> that the pre-service teacher can learn how different schools operate to address the needs of, and interact with, the local community.

Universities cannot prepare teachers for all contexts. On-the-job training is provided by employers in other professions. Education is no different. Additionally, if we are to attract and retain the very best teachers, we must find ways to make teaching a more rewarding career. ACU also welcomes the opportunity to be more heavily involved in producing a higher quality professional development experience for teachers.

ACU is already involved in initiatives which support strengthening partnerships with schools, and school leadership, as well as the development of ongoing professional practice. We are supportive of further engaging in locally based education development and professional research/development with Queensland schools. Some of our current initiatives are listed below.

***Strengthening School Leadership:***

- ACU and its predecessor colleges have engaged in postgraduate teaching and research in educational leadership for over 30 years.
- *ACU Master of Educational Leadership degree* is currently being offered in every Australian State except WA, as well as New Zealand and Mauritius. The practice has been that Catholic Education Offices sponsor cohorts of students and ACU staff to travel to the diocese to teach the program in intensive mode, making appropriate adjustments for local contexts. Participants also study in on-line and web-enhanced modes. This practice has been highly valued by employers. Participants in the program include both those in senior positions and those aspiring to leadership. Graduates currently hold some of the most senior positions in leadership in Catholic education across Australia and internationally. ACU delivers this masters degree using a positively evaluated model which shapes cohort programs to employer needs and delivers for individual systems. Such programs are best shaped by drawing on local research, and ACU has been able to integrate the findings of its own research programs and that of its higher degree students in areas such as leading for learning, the ethical bases for leadership and alternative models of leadership.
- *New Master of Educational System Leadership degree* - commenced in 2012 with a cohort of nineteen, from Catholic Education systems from every state in Australia. It focuses on the specific capabilities required by leaders in systems which have been identified, in consultation with systems, and by access to the best current research. It exposes participants to current research and scholarship as well as input from system leaders in education and other fields from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Scotland and England. It builds connections among participants across systems and encourages collaborative and futures oriented approaches to learning.
- *Leaders Transforming Learning and Learners* - the *Centre for Creative and Authentic Leadership* has been involved in this project for the last seven years, (basically in NSW). This project combines elements of significant research as well as school based improvement processes, school improvement and teacher and leader learning. Firstly, the research dimensions of the project have been developed in collaboration with schools and systems, so that the questions about leading and learning respond to real needs. Secondly, rather than a simplistic recourse to concepts like “improvement” or “excellence,” schools are challenged to explore core values and notions of authentic learning and apply these to their practices as a basis for deciding on actions that are called for. Thirdly, the processes in which participants engage are informed by best-practice literature, and based on developing a culture of evidence. This feeds into the knowledge base of the project which has been fed into later iterations. There is also a significant body of publications which has emerged from this work. ACU would encourage further support and expansion of this program, to help encourage other education leaders to be

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<sup>6</sup> Encompasses a range of in-school professional experiences including internships.

involved in research projects that assist them to focus on teaching and learning priorities, to enhance student learning outcomes.

To strengthen leadership capacity in schools and school systems a comprehensive and coherent leadership learning framework is required. The framework should cover aspiring leaders, curriculum leaders, school executive leaders and leaders in systems. Teacher/Leaders need to be introduced to different leadership pathways with support from mentors and coaches being provided to back up the theoretical framework.

***Developing and Maintaining Professional Practice:***

ACU recognises that the professional learning teachers undertake should be relevant and high quality. Our Faculty of Education provides professional development programs in schools, and we can play an expanded role in providing excellent professional development programs. We currently provide the following development opportunities for teachers and their leaders:

- ACU School of Education QLD is collaborating with the sector to provide a number of professional learning programs. ACU has a Master of Educational Leadership focused on producing top class educational leaders and we are renowned internationally for research within educational leadership.
- ACU has a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (with specialisations) delivered by means of blended learning over one semester, including three intensive weekend workshops.
- ACU has a Graduate Certificate in Education Law which equips educators with the knowledge and skills needed to deal effectively with legal issues and to develop educational policy within a legal framework.
- ACU has a *Grammar for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy* workshop program. These workshops are delivered over six days per year. They provide teachers with the knowledge to improve the quality of their students writing skills.
- ACU holds an annual Primary Teachers Mathematics Conference and Annual Secondary Teachers Mathematics Conference – Both these conferences attract around 200-250 participants each year.
- Ongoing Professional Development Workshops, locally, nationally and internationally, are offered in a range of disciplines.

ACU welcomes the opportunity to strengthen its partnerships to further support and ensure the delivery of quality teacher education along the continuum of professional learning.