

Australia Country Summary¹

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¹ The summary was prepared by Phillip McKenzie, Australian Council for Educational Research. The views expressed are those of the author, and not necessarily of any other individual or organisation.

Australia

Country Summary—General Facts and Information

Population, 2005: 20 million (up from 16 million in 1985)

Education expenditures:

- As a % of GDP (includes primary, secondary & tertiary), 2003: 5.5% (4.5% public; 1.0% private)
- Average annual per student expenditure in US dollars (converted using PPPs), 2003: primary education: \$5,494; secondary education \$7788
- Student-teacher ratios (all teachers, including principals; class sizes are larger): Primary schools 16.2 in 2005; 18.2 in 1995. Secondary schools: 12.2 in 2005; 12.7 in 1995

Teachers:

- Number of teachers (including principals, in full-time equivalents), 2005: 236,000
- Gender distribution (% female), 2003: Primary: 79%; Secondary: 55%; All teachers: 67%
- Age profile, 2003 government primary schools 15 % aged <30 years; 28% > 50 years; government secondary schools 12% < 30 years; 32% > 50 years
- Teacher qualifications: teachers cannot be registered to teach without minimum qualifications. Since the late-1980s this has been four years pre-service education in an accredited university course.
- Salary after 15 years experience (equivalent US \$), 2004: \$44,000
- Trends: Increase in average age of teachers, including through greater recruitment of 'mature-age' entrants; growing feminisation; decline in average teacher pay relative to other graduate occupations; although substantial increase in starting salaries since 2000

Students:

- Number of students, 2005: primary 1.9 million; secondary 1.4 million; total 3.35 million (up from 3.1 million in 1995)
- In public (government) schools, 2005: 67%; Catholic 20%; Independent: 13%
- One-third of the Australian population are either 1st or 2nd generation immigrants
- At least 15% of the population speaks a language other than English at home
- About 3% of students are of Aboriginal or Indigenous descent
- Normal starting age at about 5 years; minimum school leaving age is 15-16 years
- Retention of students to final year of schooling (Year 12), 2005: 75% (35% in 1980, 64% in 1990, 72% in 2000)
- PISA performance of 15 year-olds, 2003: Reading mean score 525; Science mean score 525; Mathematics mean score 524. (in top quartile of countries)

Structure of the school system:

- Governance: a federal system in which the six States and two Territories have responsibility for education; while there are many commonalities, there are some differences between jurisdictions in school structure, starting ages, curriculum and assessment
- Australian Government (Commonwealth or federal government) is playing an increasingly important role in school funding (especially non-government schools) and encouraging common approaches to curriculum, assessment and reporting, and teaching standards
- A large non-government sector with a high degree of autonomy; all non-government schools receive some public funding depending on SES of student population (on average Catholic schools receive 75% of funding from public sources; Independent schools 40%). In 2005 33% of students were enrolled in non-government schools, up from 29% in 1995)
- Government schools teachers generally employed by the central State or Territory Education Department and salaries and working conditions are fairly standard; some States have local school involvement in teacher selection, especially for senior positions. Non-government teachers generally employed by the school, although often under a common award. Teaching is highly unionised, especially among government school teachers

Current Education Reform Context in Australia

This section summarises current education reforms in order to provide a sense of the context for the discussion of selected teacher policy initiatives that follows.

Moves towards a common framework across the country

Australia does not have a single school system, but different state and territory arrangements that govern schooling in those jurisdictions. However, the differences among the states and territories are not great and are becoming less so. Partly this is because the states are cooperating in developing common approaches and partly it is because the Commonwealth (federal) government is requiring common approaches as a condition of federal funding. The main mechanism for reaching policy agreements is the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) and is associated joint working parties and taskforces. MCEETYA also coordinates and publishes the annual *National Report on Schooling*.

The process of moving towards a common framework, though, has not been smooth; the states have often differed among themselves as well as opposing what they see as federal government intervention in schooling, which constitutionally is a state responsibility. In recent years state-federal relations have been complicated more than usual by the fact that the Labor Party is in government in all eight states and territories, while the federal government is a coalition of Labor's political opponents, the Liberal and National Parties.

The main elements of the common framework are:

- An agreement reached in 1999 on the *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*. This identifies the knowledge, skills and qualities students should possess at the conclusion of their education. It is built around eight key areas: the arts; English; health and physical education; languages other than English; mathematics; science; studies of society and environment; and technology. Students are also expected to have participated in vocational education and training programmes and in programmes which develop their enterprise skills. The National Goals do not specify curriculum content, which is the responsibility of state and territory Ministers of Education. The need for a national curriculum has recently been argued by the federal Minister, but opposed by the states.
- National reporting of student achievement, by state and territory, against agreed benchmarks in some of the areas in the National Goals (the intention is to eventually report on them all). Since 1999, all students in Years 3 and 5 have been assessed each year in reading and writing, and in numeracy since 2000. Students in Year 7 have been assessed annually in reading, writing and numeracy since 2001. From 2007, Year 9 students will also be assessed annually in these three areas. The assessments are conducted by the states and territories and equated nationally. Science assessments of 15 year-olds are provided through the OECD's three-yearly PISA study.

These developments have helped raise the political profile of schooling: the annual assessments are reported and debated extensively; and in some states individual schools are required to report

their comparative performance to parents, and the results are used to guide state programmes. Although the main reference point for schools, principals and teachers is still the state/territory level, national developments and frameworks are becoming increasingly important.

The changing balance of central and local control

School governance and policy in most states and territories has traditionally been highly centralised in the Minister of Education and the Education Department. Two factors are reducing the degree of centralisation. First, non-government schools are growing rapidly, and in 2005 enrolled 33% of students (compared to 22% in 1980). While all non-government schools receive some public funding and have to meet registration requirements, they have a large measure of operational autonomy including on staffing. Second, in the government school sector, while some state education departments still retain a large measure of central control over the day-to-day operation of schools and the appointment of staff, there is a growing trend towards devolving such decision making to principals, teachers and elected school councils or representative boards.

The moves towards decentralisation in the government school sector have been driven by views that schools were best placed to make decisions around the selection of staff (especially the principal and other senior teachers), budget priorities (there has been a move towards 'block' financial grants to schools), and the particular organisational arrangements that would best meet student needs. Curriculum, however, remains largely centrally determined and schools have to satisfy extensive accountability requirements.

The principals of most government schools are required to work with their staff and community to develop strategic plans with clearly articulated outcome targets and improvement strategies. In some states these include reporting students' performance against state averages and schools with similar student populations, as well as surveys of teachers' job satisfaction, surveys of students' views, and surveys of parents' views on the school. Principals and, increasingly, teachers are assessed against to which the targets have been reached.

In most states decentralisation of decision making to school level is located within a framework drawn from the research on effective schools and school improvement. In New South Wales, for example, *Public Schools - Quality Education in Every Classroom* identifies the following as key elements in developing quality schools:

- effective leadership
- culture that supports continuous learning
- shared vision, clear expectations, high standards
- commitment to and support for school improvement
- support for continuous school improvement.

The school is increasingly the focus of efforts to improve teachers' professional learning, and of evaluation of teachers' performance against agreed school and system goals.

An increased emphasis on teaching quality

A common thread in these and other policy developments is an increased emphasis on teaching quality. This is a major focus of initiatives at all levels of government. The emphasis seems to spring less from concerns that Australian teachers are not performing well, and more from beliefs about the key role teachers play in ensuring that all students are equipped for the challenges of modern society. There are major debates, though, about how to define and measure teaching quality, how to encourage teachers' continuous improvement, and the implications of a sharper focus on quality for teachers' pay and career structures.

Initiatives to Improve the Attractiveness of Teaching

In broad terms, the overall current supply of teachers is in line with demand, and shortages seem to have eased since the late 1990s. However, there are shortages of teachers in different parts of the system – among teachers of special needs students; teachers of mathematics, science, information technology and languages; and among some schools in disadvantaged or remote locations. There are also concerns about an apparent decline in the willingness of teachers to move into school leadership positions. Although the current supply of new teachers is broadly in line with demand, large numbers of teachers (and school leaders) are projected to retire in the next 5-10 years, and there are concerns that widespread shortages will re-emerge.

Improving beginning teachers' salaries

Over the past 20 years or so, average teacher salaries have not risen as fast as in other graduate occupations. The decline in teachers' relative salaries has been a factor affecting teacher supply in both quantity and quality terms, although data on the latter is limited and mixed. Since about 2000, however, there has been a concerted effort to lift teacher salaries across the board, and particularly for beginning teachers. The starting salaries for teachers are now broadly competitive with most other graduate occupations.

The number of university students training to be teachers has risen by about one-third since the late-1990s. There is also some evidence of a recent improvement in the academic quality of those applying to become teachers (after this appeared to have been in long-term decline, at least as measured by students' final secondary school examination scores). The number of teacher education places is influenced by government funding as well as student demand, and it is difficult to isolate the impact of improved salaries alone. It does, however, appear to have made a difference.

Other strategies

Across the different states and territories, other strategies to improve the attractiveness of teaching to new recruits have included:

- scholarships for final year education students offering tuition fee reductions and living allowances, generally linked to guaranteed employment for 2-3 years after graduation,

often in areas of greatest need such as in mathematics and science education, or teaching in remote locations;

- public relations campaigns by governments, professional bodies and teacher unions on the importance of teaching and the benefits of a teaching career;
- schemes to attract ‘mature age’ students and career changers into teaching, including credits for previous qualifications and experience, and support in the teaching practicum and the early career (the strongest growth in trainee teachers is among those aged over 25 years);
- ‘single shop’ points for information about teaching and for processing applications for initial appointments; and
- improved collaboration among teacher employers, teacher education institutions, and teachers’ associations to better align teacher supply and demand, and to facilitate the transition from pre-service teacher education into the profession, including a greater emphasis on induction.

Despite the apparent success of these initiatives there is widespread recognition of continuing issues with teacher supply, including the under-representation of males, shortages in key curriculum areas, the variability of early career support, and retention of experienced teachers.

Initiatives to Improve Teaching Standards

Clarifying responsibilities

Almost all states and territories have now established teacher registration authorities for the purposes of establishing clearer, more consistent professional eligibility requirements for teaching. Most of these authorities have been introduced since the late 1990s. In most state authorities practising teachers and school leaders constitute the majority of the governing board’s membership. The teacher registration authorities were initiated to both regulate standards as well as to provide the teaching profession with a voice. A major part of the authorities’ function is to enhance the status of teaching, and they have contributed to the strategies outlined in the previous section.

In general, it is now mandatory for teachers to be registered with the relevant state registration authority before they are legally able to teach in the state concerned. In most cases, those who were teaching at the time the relevant authority was established were awarded automatic registration, and so the focus of the authorities to date has generally been on registering new teachers. The Victorian Institute of Teaching, for example, has developed standards and processes for teachers moving from provisional to full registration. The standards, which were derived from research and extensive consultations, apply to eight areas grouped in three broad categories: professional knowledge; professional practice; and professional engagement. New teachers are required to provide evidence of their performance in each area, and the evaluation is carried out by trained mentors and school leaders.

Other states have broadly similar standards and processes in place, and the registration authorities are co-operating on mutual recognition so that a teacher registered in one jurisdiction should be eligible to teach in any other, thereby reducing costs and facilitating teacher mobility.

In 2003 the Commonwealth Government established the National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership, which in 2005 was renamed Teaching Australia – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. This body is intended to promote the teaching profession and provide a national forum for profession-led views on quality teaching and school leadership. The Commonwealth has provided substantial funding to the new body. In addition to sponsoring national awards for quality schooling, it has initiated a range of projects, including to:

- review research on quality teaching and school leadership;
- develop voluntary school leadership standards;
- develop voluntary advanced standards for teaching;
- develop options for national accreditation of pre-service teacher education; and
- engage teachers in scenario-building for the future of schooling and teaching.

Teaching Australia is a new player in the complexities of state-federal relationships and the range of other stakeholders and agencies involved in the teacher policy area, and it remains to be seen how its role develops. Nevertheless, it is likely to be significant given the commitment of Commonwealth funds, the involvement of teachers' and principals' professional associations, and the general moves towards common frameworks across the country noted earlier.

Frameworks for teachers' professional learning

The last few years have seen widespread recognition of the need to view teachers' professional learning as a continuum from pre-service education, induction into teaching, and on-going development throughout the career. The standards frameworks noted in the previous section are starting to be used to guide teachers' professional learning, although as yet in most states and territories they are only mandatory for registration of beginning teachers.

The volume of resources being invested into induction and on-going development by state and federal governments, agencies and professional associations has undoubtedly increased. However, given the great variety of types of professional learning and the wide range of different providers, it is a difficult field to document and it is recognised that coverage is uneven. While the large majority of teachers would participate in some form of professional development during the year, including through a set number of days negotiated as part of working conditions, the take-up is largely a matter of individual teacher and school choice.

One of the major sources of funding for professional learning has been the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme which has provided support to a wide range of activities in collaboration with government and non-government employers and teachers' professional associations. An evaluation of four AGQTP-funded programmes concluded that the most effective forms of teachers' professional learning required a clear theoretical foundation supported by research, modelling in real settings, and opportunities to practice the new skills and receive feedback (Ingvarson et al, 2005).

The use of standards frameworks to guide the professional learning and development of school leaders is a notable development in recent years. All states and territories now have such frameworks in place or development. While the details differ among jurisdictions they commonly map the stages of leadership growth from aspirations through to beginning in leadership roles, consolidation and achievement, and transitions to other roles. Such continua are being developed to support the preparation and ongoing professional learning of school leaders. This is an area of major activity given research on the importance of leadership and concerns about attracting and developing effective school leaders.

Initiatives to Improve the Information and Research Base

In recent years teachers and teaching have become the focus of substantial reviews, and government-commissioned research studies and data collections. Most states have had public enquiries into teacher education, both pre-service and in-service. Common themes and recommendations have included the need to provide more pathways into teacher education and to lift its appeal, to build stronger partnerships between teacher education institutions and schools, to improve the quality of trainee teachers' field work experiences, and to strengthen induction and on-going professional development. A federal parliamentary inquiry into teacher education is expected to report soon, and this is likely to be particularly significant given that the federal government controls the funding of universities, where pre-service teacher education is based.

Some of the research and development projects commissioned during 2006 include a study of career changes who enter teacher education, and the effectiveness of programmes to support them (by the federal government); a review of the effectiveness of different models for providing teachers' professional learning (Queensland); the effectiveness of the teachers of exemplary practice scheme (Northern Territory); and an on-line database for documenting teachers' professional learning experiences (Victoria).

The federal government has commissioned ACER and the Australian College of Educators to run a major new Australia-wide survey of teachers and school leaders, *Staff in Australia's Schools*. The survey, which is being conducted in late 2006, is intended to address concerns that data limitations have made analysis and forecasting of teacher demand and supply difficult. The survey is intended to provide a comprehensive picture of the teacher and school leader workforces, the experiences of early career teachers, professional learning priorities for teachers and school leaders, as well as information on work attitudes and career intentions. A second component involves consultations with key stakeholders around Australia regarding possible longer-term collaborative approaches to workforce data collection processes.

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