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Changing initial teacher education: Limitations to innovation in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

In 1996, the University of Sydney implemented a two-year postgraduate form of initial teacher preparation, the Master of Teaching degree. The program incorporates an integrated core study based on use of a distinctive case methodology, together with reflective approaches and portfolio assessment. After meeting practicum requirements, candidates will enter an internship with a conditional "licence to teach". This paper will examine the processes which led to the devising and introduction of the M.Teach, including factors which could hinder achievement of its goals. Conditions for revision and innovation in Australia will be compared with those applying in the United States and the United Kingdom, with a view to identifying some current trends which are affecting the preparation of teachers world-wide.

The move to introduce a two-year postgraduate program of initial teacher education at the University of Sydney resulted from a number of factors, including calls for more demanding academic education in content fields directly related to teaching, (Shulman, 1990; Tom and Valli, 1990), long-term dissatisfaction with the one-year diploma program as an adequate form of preparation for the first years of teaching in today's schools (Watson, Hatton, Squires and Soliman, 1991), and current moves to postgraduate professional preparation in other fields, notably medicine, drawing on the demonstrably successful problem-solving case-based approaches instituted at the University of Newcastle (Cowdry and Kingsland, 1993).

Extended preparation, in particular for intending secondary teachers, has long been advocated, but current pressures on funding for public education, together with an over supply of teachers in New South Wales, have ensured that there has been little room for major innovation in programs of initial teacher education in the past decade. However, a history within the Faculty of Education of willingness to respond to current changes through more effective preparation of intending teachers (Turney, 1977), coupled with the transfer of some undergraduate numbers to the University of Western Sydney and a desire to increase postgraduate enrolments, created the conditions for yet another significant shift in the pattern of teacher preparation at the University of Sydney.

Predecessors to the M.Teach include the first four-year Bachelor of Education program in primary education, devised and introduced by Turney in the 1950s: the degree involved students in the concurrent study of academic subjects in the Faculties of Arts, Science and Economics with professional preparation and education courses - officers of the NSW

Department of Education said that graduates would not be appointed, as they would be overqualified! This pattern was soon extended by Killin to include physical education. There was also the University's distinctive one-year diploma course, the Teacher Development Program, devised by Dufty, Owens and Hatton in 1970 (incorporating a distinctive Australian version of microteaching, continuous in-school experience and a related core teaching and learning program called Situational Teaching - the TDP later grew to incorporate school-based elective components). Then, during the early 1980s, the B.Ed pattern was extended by Hatton, Arnold and Smith to include preparation of secondary teachers, still beginning with microteaching, but extending in third and fourth years to include psychodrama pedagogy and reflective approaches in a core Teaching and Learning program designed to prepare for, support and follow up structured practicum experiences.

Eltis, as Dean of the Faculty, took the latest initiative in 1994, calling together a working group which proposed a case-centred two year program, the Master of Teaching, based upon demanding postgraduate forms of learning, including cooperative inquiry (Feiman-Nemser, 1990; Jaques, 1991; Kleinfeld, 1992; Pugach and Johnson, 1990; Tabachnik and Zeichner, 1991); utilisation of cases (Doyle, 1990; Hutchings, 1993; Kagan, 1993; Kowalski, Weaver and Henson, 1990; Merseth, 1991; Schon, 1987; 1991; Shulman 1992; Silverman, Welty and Lyons, 1992, 1994; Sykes and Bird, 1992; Wasserman, 1993); use of information technology (Williams, 1992; Merseth and Lacey, 1993); and the fostering of reflection (Valli, 1992; Richert, 1991; Smith and Hatton, 1993; Gore and Zeichner, 1991). Close partnerships with schools were to be developed for each cohort, to support a substantial internship which would address induction issues as participants worked alongside prepared mentors (Oja, 1990, 1993; Posner, 1993; Hagger, Burn and McIntyre, 1993; Field and Field, 1994). They were, as conditionally-certificated unpaid teachers, to assume half a normal teaching load, thus creating time for staff to undertake professional development and address important educational issues within their schools. Writing teams for Study 1 (the core teaching and learning case-centred component), Study 2 (the specialised curriculum areas) and the practicum (50 days of structured school-based experiences, leading up to the 50-day internship) were formed, their work and documentation of the M.Teach proposal being coordinated by Hatton.

Several factors ensured ready acceptance of the proposed two-year masters program. Informed by the outline, staff members, initially Laws and Harman, undertook extensive reviews of the relevant literature on approaches which might be suitable for such a postgraduate course. Then, with quality assurance funds provided by the university, a substantial review of the literature was undertaken and published (Hatton, 1995), while relevant articles, books and materials were collected, especially examples of developed cases. The course proposal was finalised, utilising research-based developmental frameworks derived from concerns of beginning teachers (Fuller, 1970; Hall, 1985), the domains entailed in teachers' work (Turney, Eltis, Fowler and Wright, 1986) and types of reflective approaches (Hatton and Smith, 1995)

In putting together the M.Teach proposal, account was taken of current trends in Australia, the United Kingdom and United States in teacher education. Of particular importance was the national and NSW work on competencies for beginning teachers, which helped shape the goals and objectives of the degree. The views and interests of major stakeholders in the

outcomes of such a program of teacher preparation were also canvassed and taken in as part of the preparation process. The outline was discussed with representatives of the major employers (including the NSW Department of School Education and the Catholic Education Office), with parent bodies, with the NSW Teachers Federation and other teacher groups, and with teachers and principals from State and independent schools. All were very positive about the M.Teach, the only reservations expressed relating to whether systems would be prepared to employ five- year-trained graduates (four-year-trained cost less), and a possible suspicion amongst some existing teachers about newcomers starting out with a masters qualification.

In the planning and first stages of implementation, the limiting factors which could be identified included the urgency of time frames, given the decision in principle to begin if all parties approved in 1996, so that in effect the proposal had to be finalised within 12 months from its conception. (The Faculty of Medicine suspended intake for one full year, working intensively to prepare detailed course outlines and problem cases ahead of introducing the new Sydney postgraduate program for preparation of doctors.) These time constraints, coupled with relatively low levels of funding for the whole operation, meant the extent of research and advanced preparation was somewhat curtailed. While some consultation with those experienced in working with case methods occurred beforehand through Special Studies Programs (Print, 1995; Hatton, 1995), there was little opportunity to incorporate their findings into the program.

Further, it became clear that what was being proposed at Sydney had not occurred anywhere else in the world. While individual teachers in the US have employed cases extensively (Merseth at Harvard; Welty and Silverman at Pace; Shulman and Barnett at the Far West Laboratory in San Francisco), their use has been limited to a particular course or in-service program. Case methodology was not the core approach for a whole degree in teacher education. As well, while there were many excellent examples of cases, most were distinctly American, and would have to be adapted or specially developed to suit the Australian context. (The exceptions were some cases focused upon mathematics and social science teaching, which address subject-specific curriculum issues of a universal kind.) So a major difficulty was to prepare suitable cases and the staff members who would teach them within a very short time frame. Experts from medical and nurse education contexts were invited to conduct in-service workshops for staff, which proved helpful in deciding upon a distinctive approach in teacher education. But the most useful work occurred once the staff who were to teach the program began to devise, with input from experienced teachers, distinctive Australian case material to meet the aims of the M.Teach program.

While faculty members have had considerable experience in designing courses with accompanying experiences and assessment tasks which encourage the use of different kinds of reflection (Smith and Hatton, 1993), they were not familiar with use of portfolios (Doolittle, 1994; Vavrus and Collins, 1991), so they have been working hard to assemble materials which will provide guidance on how they might best be employed in the M.Teach program. Further, the concept of an internship has been given many meanings in teacher education (Huffman and Leak, 1986; Huling-Austin, 1990; Hagger, Burn and McIntyre, 1994), but there was a determination to create for the M.Teach the kind of workplace experience that is a bridge between initial training and actual employment, for instance as it is

in medicine. The basic specifications for the internship were, in fact, derived from DEET's own guidelines (correspondence, 1993-1995). The key issue still being addressed is how best to prepare teachers for what will be a new and quite distinctive mentoring role, one of standing alongside an entrant into the profession, providing help and support in a manner quite different from a cooperating teacher during practicum periods.

From the beginning, it had been proposed to incorporate information technology into the M.Teach program. One fond dream was to develop a "virtual school" which would provide participants with on-line access to information about individual students or teachers, examples of school projects or policies, related to cases being dealt with. Another was to use the capacities of the Internet for access to sources of information in education across the world, as well as LAN access to electronically stored articles providing perspectives on cases being dealt with. Yet another was to use the available communication means to enable interaction between students, staff, teachers and others on educational issues and problems. Once again, time and resources were limited, and though substantial grants have been obtained to devise information technology applications, the developments are occurring in a "just-in-time" fashion as the program is implemented.

However, it is of considerable significance that the M.Teach program at Sydney is up and running. Other Australian universities appear to be waiting to see what eventuates. While there are various five-year programs being initiated across Australia, such as those in Tasmania, or at Melbourne and Newcastle, most seem to be based on existing diploma patterns with a one-year extension. One of the fears expressed initially was that students would not be prepared to take the additional year of unpaid study before any prospect of employment, but that has proved unfounded, and the target figure of 200 was met, though there were relatively few applicants in mathematics or science. In fact, many of the students taking the degree have worked previously in other spheres, and are making a career change. The program will be monitored extremely closely, including a number of research projects evaluating the effectiveness and impact of its innovative methodologies. What appears to be most significant though is the fact that the program was put together from first principles, and was not merely a reshaping or recombination of existing courses.

Impressions gathered from the Special Studies Programs undertaken during 1995 to investigate current developments in teacher education (notably in use of cases, reflective approaches, portfolios and internships), serve only to underline the significance of what has occurred with Sydney's M.Teach. In relation to current trends in the United States, while there are a large number of five-year masters programs, most of these are small-scale special-purpose funded projects whose life is uncertain beyond the funding period. Often what is involved is a semester or full year of unpaid (or with a small allowance) internship following completion of a four-year bachelors teaching degree. Such projects are usually aimed at facilitating collaboration between a group of schools and the university to achieve improvements in the delivery of learning at the classroom level (e.g. the Professional Development Schools project in the Flint District run by Putnam from Lansing, Michigan, or the Communities of Inquiry program run by Oja from Durham, New Hampshire). Each involves fewer than ten schools, thirty teachers and fifty interns.

Further, there is evident frustration in American universities at the severe curtailment of possible major changes in patterns of teacher preparation because employment requirements for teachers are legislated by the state, often right down to the particular courses which students must have taken in order to gain a job. Staff feel they cannot undertake significant innovations or wholesale revisions. And there appear to be no mechanisms for negotiating change anyway. While pressure groups constantly lobby politicians for additional legislated requirements (for instance, principals in Connecticut for Middle School mandated courses of preparation before employment), there is little discussion with the providers of the teacher education programs, namely the universities. Most tellingly, there are genuine attempts to address the problems of minorities, again with mandated requirements for teacher education programs, but few of the institutions visited were able to reshape their programs to adequately grapple with the real issues, particularly through practicum arrangements. So the ultimate irony continues in the large urban areas where there are serious shortages of qualified teachers meeting the state's prescriptions, which are at once waived in order to recruit unqualified persons who are given a brief program of preparation then thrown in to fill the gaps! (Watson and Hatton, 1995).

The issues in the UK are rather different, and stem from other causes, though it is interesting to note that the responses to perceived shortcomings, as in the United States, have been dealt with through legislated requirements, in particular that two-thirds of any secondary PGCE program shall be school-based. In part this is due to a long period when schools and teachers have been isolated from the universities (apart from some notable exceptions such as McIntyre's Internship Program at Oxford). One element has been that for years students have undertaken lengthy unpaid practicums in schools, with little direct involvement by academics in school-level activities or supervision. This isolation is exacerbated by the lack of university postgraduate programs for ordinary classroom teachers, as opposed to administrators or subject-specific studies. In a sense, teachers accepted the government-instituted changes, at least initially, because they perceived universities to be doing such a poor job in preparing intending teachers to work in contemporary British school settings, again particularly in more demanding locations such as the very big multicultural cities.

These features of the situations pertaining in the UK and USA stand in fairly marked contrast to the Australian scene. At least until very recently, programs at the University of Sydney have maintained school-based supervision of students by tertiary staff during all practicum periods. Though this degree of involvement is under threat again, because of continuing funding cuts, such a presence gives credibility to the program and the university in the eyes of school teachers, and helps to ensure that teacher educators do not forget realities their graduates are facing in contemporary schools. That credibility has been enhanced by a large masters degree program, not just for administrators, but as a valuable means of in-service education and refreshment for all teachers. Again, the scale of this operation is under threat because of uncertainties about future in-service provisions and their funding at the school level.

From this brief analysis of certain limits which apply when changes are being made to programs of teacher education, several cautionary conclusions can be drawn. They relate to the key stakeholders in the business of initial teacher preparation, and the need for clear lines of communication between all parties.

1. ***Mechanisms need to be in place for continuous consultations between parties with a major interest in effective preparation of those who intend to work in today's schools.***

   Representative bodies such as MACTEQT in NSW or the Australian Teaching Council nationally have a role to play, and universities should consult widely when considering substantial changes to teacher education courses. Program Advisory Committees are also helpful in providing ongoing guidance about program design, outcomes and impact.

2. ***Employing authorities should exercise considerable care in mandating particular requirements for teacher education programs.***

   While they have every right to set standards to be met for employment, highly specific demands such as particular courses or prescribed hours in a defined area of study place further constraints on already crowded programs. The net effect may be to prevent larger scale revisions which might better address current issues in learning to teach more effectively than tinkering at the edges of, or merely adding onto, existing courses.

3. ***Universities ought to ensure that time and resources are made available for evaluation, review and innovation in teacher education.***

   It is clear that the pace of change in society, and therefore in schooling and priorities in learning, is very rapid. Wholesale changes in methodology and use of information technology are costly, and need to be based on research studies and careful theorising, together with clear thinking about desirable outcomes and how these might best be achieved and assessed. The necessary accompanying staff development also takes considerable time and effort.

4. ***Direct involvement in activities which are school-based remains a central requirement for teacher educators.***

   Different staff members may take on differing roles, though some should always be involved in the direct supervision and evaluation for program purposes of student teachers in their classroom action. Others may be more active in school-based staff development or applied research projects connected with teaching and learning in schools. Faculties of Education in particular need to maintain and extend their role as inservice providers, exploring alternative patterns for credit, and ensuring credibility through ongoing links with teachers at all stages during their careers.

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