

THE AUSTRALIAN

Head or heart...what makes a good teacher?

THE AUSTRALIAN AUGUST 29, 2015 12:00AM NATASHA BITA



Cherrybrook Technology High School maths teacher Eddie Woo shocked his parents by choosing to teach.
Picture: John Feder.

When star student Eddie Woo told his parents he wanted to be a teacher, they were dismayed.

“I was headed towards a career in law so my parents were quite disappointed I was choosing a profession that didn’t have high social status,” the high school maths teacher recalls of his teenage career choice. “Even some of the teachers gave me a quizzical look and told me, ‘But you could do anything!’”

With a tertiary entry score that placed him in the top 2 per cent of high school graduates in 2003, Woo, now 29, had his pick of high-paying professions. Twelve years later, he has never regretted choosing a job where he “makes a difference”.

“I get a real kick out of seeing students broaden their horizons and understanding,” he says. “I think teaching is one of the highest callings and a great privilege.”

NSW Education Minister Adrian Piccoli wants to recruit more high-achievers such as Woo, who teaches maths at Cherrybrook Technology High School in Sydney. NSW is the first state to set minimum entry requirements for teaching, to source future teachers from the top 30 per cent of high school graduates.

Australia's education establishment, however, is split over the best way to improve the quality of teaching. What makes a good teacher? Is teaching an academic pursuit for the smartest graduates? Or is it a "caring" profession, a calling for those with a gift to inspire young minds?

NSW Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards president Tom Alegounarias says it is not good enough for teachers to just like working with children.

"The essential prerequisite of being a good teacher is intellectual capacity," he tells Inquirer. "Having the right character without intellectual capacity is not good enough. We cannot afford to have a profession that is under-represented among high-performing students. The best indication of your intellectual ability is your academic performance."

Academic standards have been falling: just one in 20 school-leavers accepted to study teaching at university this year had an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank above 90, placing them in the top 10 per cent of Year 12 achievement. Those accepted were twice as likely to be in the bottom half of high school graduates, with an ATAR score below 50.

The Australian Council for Educational Research has accused universities of lowering entry standards for teaching degrees, which have been a lucrative source of revenue for cash-strapped tertiary institutions since the former Labor government abolished the cap on taxpayer-subsidised university places in 2009.

Since then, the proportion of low-ATAR student teachers has risen.

In 2013, 49 per cent of Year 12 students offered a university place to study teaching had an ATAR score above 70. This year, the proportion fell to 42 per cent compared with 80 per cent for students studying science and 84 per cent enrolled in engineering.

ACER chief executive Geoff Masters insists education must be held to the same high entry standards as medicine or law.

"We have to pitch the interests of the profession above the interests of the universities," he tells Inquirer.

"It's getting worse because the percentage of offers made to students with ATARS above 70 has been going down. We need to do something about that. We know the top-performing countries like Finland and Singapore have worked hard to draw teachers from the top 10 to 30 per cent of school-leavers. They deliberately target the best and brightest school-leavers."

Federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne has rejected calls to impose minimum ATAR scores or quotas for teaching graduates. But he has introduced a mandatory literacy and numeracy test for teaching students graduating from university this year, and is reviewing accreditation for all teaching colleges to improve course standards.

Pyne has accepted the recommendations of his Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, which concluded that universities needed to recruit student teachers with “the right mix of academic and personal qualities that give them the best chance of becoming effective teachers”.

For the first time, all student teachers will be required to specialise in a core subject such as maths, science or languages, starting next year.

TEMAG chairman Greg Craven says more than half of Australia’s teaching graduates enrolled in a different discipline, such as arts, before switching to education. Craven, vice-chancellor of the Australian Catholic University, accuses education ministers of “talking down the profession”, triggering a 9 per cent drop in enrolments this year.

Imposing entry standards, Craven says, would be elitist and would weed out some lower-achieving students with the potential to make excellent teachers. What counts, he says, is not how well students do at school but how well they perform at university.

Craven insists that teaching is too low-paid to attract the top-ATAR students, who have a choice of more lucrative careers in medicine, law or finance.

“Teaching is not well-paid and a lot of education authorities have themselves to blame for this because they have spent the last three years telling students considering teaching that all teachers are idiots,” he says.

“As long as teachers are paid a certain amount, that will limit the number of people coming in with high ATARS.

“And ATARS are an incredibly weak predictor of who’ll be a good teacher.”

Starting salaries for teachers are, in fact, well above the median salary of \$52,500 for all graduates. Graduate Careers Australia statistics show that a new teacher will earn a median starting salary of \$57,000, compared with \$50,000 for accountants, \$40,000 for architects and \$52,000 for nurses.

Even in medicine, which requires years of extra study, the median starting salary is only \$60,000 a year.

NSW pays the most — \$62,282 for an entry-level, four-year trained teacher, \$92,892 for a senior classroom teacher, \$106,904 for a subject head teacher in high

school and \$159,654 for a high school principal. The average wage in Australia is \$77,194.

Teaching offers other benefits, too: job security for permanent staff and a work-life balance that is the envy of other professions, with regular and family-friendly work hours and up to 12 weeks a year of holidays.

Even so, federal Education Department data reveals that high-achieving students would prefer to study agriculture or creative arts than teaching.

While 39 per cent of students enrolling in science or engineering degrees this year had a 90-plus ATAR score, only 5 per cent of the smartest students chose teaching. They were twice as likely to choose a degree in information technology, agriculture or environmental studies. A creative arts degree is three times more popular than teaching for Australia's smartest school-leavers.

Australian Education Union president Correna Haythorpe says the decline in ATAR scores for teaching is a "major concern for the profession".

"An ATAR score is not the only thing that makes a good teacher, but we need to recognise that a teacher's academic ability is important," she says. "We need to lift entry standards for teaching degrees. We need stronger regulation of teaching courses and to shift all courses to a two-year postgraduate degree."

Australia's universities are resisting the push to impose entry standards for teaching courses. Universities Australia deputy chief executive Anne-Marie Lansdown says the existing demand-driven system ensures disadvantaged Australians, too, have the chance to become teachers.

"Imposing such a blunt measure ignores the many other academic and non-academic capabilities that universities look for in their students to determine who is suitable," she says. "By remaining quota-free, we ensure the door is completely open for low SES (low-income), regional and indigenous students who may otherwise be left behind."

Frustrated by the universities' intransigence, NSW has imposed its own entry standards. As the nation's largest employer of teachers, it has decreed that NSW school-leavers entering teaching degrees next year must have achieved three "band five" results in the Higher School Certificate, including for English — representing the top 25 per cent of school-leavers. The most recent data shows that, in 2012, barely one in three students starting a teaching degree met this high standard.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership is reviewing teacher accreditation rules. In a position paper circulated to the profession this week, it says teachers must "know students and how they learn", and "know the content and how

to teach it". It proposes that school students' opinions be included in formal assessments of graduates' stints in the classroom for work experience.

"Students are pretty good judges of teacher quality," says AITSL general manager Edmund Misson. "Students know whether they're learning, and they know how the teachers treat them."

Misson says teachers "do have to be smart". "You have to know the content you're teaching and how to teach it," he says. "You also need the interpersonal skills of persistence and resilience."

West Australian Education Minister Peter Collier — a former teacher with 23 years in classrooms — is watching NSW's reforms closely but has not yet decided to follow suit.

"There has been a deterioration in standards," he says. "Very frequently people are going into teaching as a second, third or fourth choice."

Collier says Western Australia's system of independent public schools — where principals have freedom to hire or fire — is improving the calibre of teachers.

"We're getting hundreds of teachers applying for one or two positions so that will automatically lift the quality of teaching," he says.

"But ultimately we do need to look at a particular standard in terms of ATAR scores. Having a top ATAR score doesn't necessarily mean that person will be a quality teacher but that doesn't mean we have to go the other way and reduce requirements for entry."

South Australia's Education Minister Susan Close says empathy and enthusiasm are also important traits for great teachers.

"We don't want to see teaching as a profession that attracts low-ATAR students," she says.

"As long as they get a reasonable ATAR, other qualities are equally important. They need the capacity for critical thinking and problem solving, to engage young people, to teach to a range of different students in class, to deal with behavioural or disability issues. Teaching is about creativity, empathy, energy, enthusiasm, optimism."

Northern Territory Education Minister Peter Chandler says governments need to ensure "decent pay and conditions" for teachers. In the Northern Territory, teachers who work in a remote community for four years qualify for a year's paid study leave.

“I agree with the philosophy you need highly intelligent people to become teachers but, if you’re going to set higher standards, their income has got to reflect that,” he says.

“There are always going to be budgetary concerns. What could a person with that skill earn outside the teaching profession? It’s probably a lot more.”

Australian Council of Deans of Education board member Christine Ure, who heads the school of education at Deakin University, says Australia already has high standards for teacher training. Eight universities are ranked in the top 40 internationally for the quality of their education courses.

“The ATAR issue is completely overplayed,” Ure says.

“There are small numbers of students with an ATAR under 50 but they can’t graduate unless they meet the course standard. We don’t want to be screening students out of university too early.”

Woo, who is already a head teacher of mathematics, chose his career so he could “turn the light on” for school students.

“I couldn’t see myself pushing paper around all day, it would drive me mad,” he says.

“It’s a hard job but tremendously worthwhile, personally and in terms of society.”