

Spotlight

August 2016

**What do we know about
early career teacher attrition
rates in Australia?**

There is a perception in Australia that there is a high attrition rate of teachers both during their initial teacher education (ITE) and within the first five years of graduation from ITE. If this is correct, there are implications for governments that fund ITE and staffing implications for education sector employers and schools. The impact of attrition may be the loss of quality teaching graduates, which could in turn impact the development of a strong workforce of experienced, high calibre teachers – critical for student outcomes.

At a glance

The summary of findings:

- Current estimates of attrition of early career teachers in Australia vary widely.
- Without national data we cannot confirm actual Australian attrition rates.
- Factors driving attrition appear to be multiple and interrelated.
- A linked, national database would support future research and policy development.

Without an understanding of the facts around attrition in Australia, the policy debate remains speculative. Important questions include:

- **When are people leaving the teaching profession?** During their ITE course, early in their careers or at later stages? How does this compare with attrition in other professions?
- **Who is leaving the profession and who is remaining in teaching?** Are we retaining the highest calibre teachers?
- **Why are they leaving?** What are the critical elements of the experience of teaching that promote leaving or facilitate staying in the profession?



At a glance

The meaning of attrition is not consistent. It might mean:

1

Not graduating from ITE



2

Never working as a teacher



3

Leaving teaching in the first five years



What do we mean by attrition and retention?

Understanding the impact of teacher attrition in Australia is currently clouded by the lack of consistent definitions for “attrition” and “retention” across the Australian education sector and research literature.

- There are three major points where early career teacher attrition can occur:
 - during initial teacher education, where students who enrol in initial teacher education programs do not graduate with a teaching qualification
 - between graduation and employment, where graduates never gain employment as teachers
 - during the early years of a career, where teachers do gain employment, but leave the profession inside five years.
- Discussions about attrition and retention are not always clear on which of these stages they are referring to.
- The term attrition in relation to qualified teachers may refer to teachers leaving education to work in other professions altogether or teachers leaving one state, system or sector to work in another. The terminology of retention has the same issues. It can be used to refer to retention in a particular ITE course, in a particular school or in the teaching profession as a whole. Clarity and consistency in definitions would enable us to look at the data and engage in discourse in a clearer and more meaningful way. (Mason & Poyatos Matas, 2015)

At a glance

Completion rates for ITE students are similar to other courses.

ITE students

65%

Other courses

68%

What do we know about retention in Initial Teacher Education courses in Australia?

The problem with recent data

Until recently, Australian data on retention in initial teacher education (ITE) courses relied largely on retention into the second year of the course or on imprecise comparisons of commencements and completion rates in any one year.

- AITSL ITE Data reports (2013-15) collated data on how many ITE students continued from first year to second year of their course. This has consistently been reported to be around 75% - 80% and at a similar level to first year retention in courses in other fields of study (AITSL 2013, 2014, 2015).
- The ITE data report has also reported on total commencements and completions in ITE. Although the report is careful to point out that comparing commencements and completions in the same year does not yield a valid completion rate, these data could be read as implying a completion rate of about 50%. This comparison does not track a single cohort and is likely to be less valid in a time of enrolment growth.

Longitudinal Completion Data

A longitudinal data analysis of the progress of each individual student through their ITE courses suggests that completion rates of ITE courses are comparable to similar courses.

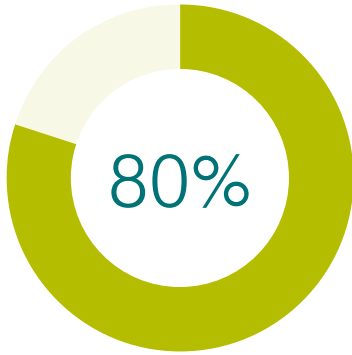
- The AITSL ITE Data Report 2016 includes a new 6-year longitudinal analysis of individual ITE student data to provide a more accurate picture of retention and completion of ITE courses¹. These data were compared with the average retention and completion rates of the same student cohorts from similar courses leading to professional registration including nursing, medicine, veterinary science and psychology.
- This analysis shows us that the completion rate for all students in ITE courses (postgraduate and undergraduate) who commenced in 2008 is not vastly different from that of similar courses. The completion rate of the 2008 cohort of ITE students was 65% compared to 68% for other courses.

¹ A new six-year cohort analysis of data from the Australian Department of Education and Training was undertaken in 2016 to determine the rate of attrition, retention and completion in ITE courses within six years of a cohort's commencement. A six-year timeframe was determined appropriate because after six years, only a small proportion of ITE students complete. Data from students who commenced in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008 were analysed until completion dates of 2011, 2012, 2013, 2104 respectively.

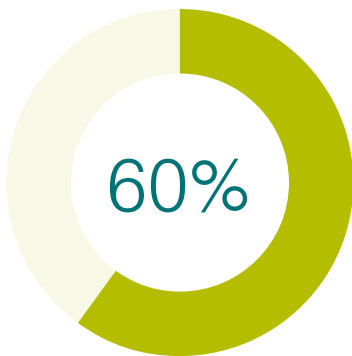
At a glance

Comparison of completion rates for postgraduate and undergraduate ITE students who commenced in 2008.

ITE postgraduates



ITE undergraduates



- The completion rate for undergraduate ITE students decreased by 5% between students who commenced in 2005 (65%) and those who commenced in 2008 (60%).
- The completion rate for commencing postgraduate ITE students has been consistently higher than for the undergraduate ITE students. In 2008, for example, 80% of ITE postgraduates completed compared to 60% of ITE undergraduates.
- This type of analysis requires using data from cohorts commencing some time ago. In this case, students commencing in 2008 began their courses prior to major changes in the sector, including the introduction of national accreditation of initial teacher education and of demand-driven funding for undergraduate courses. The majority of postgraduate commencements are likely to have been in one-year programs, which are now being phased out. The impact of these changes on completion rates cannot yet be assessed.

What do we know about employment rates of graduate teachers in Australia?

Just under half of graduate teachers are employed full-time in schools in the year after graduation. Another quarter find part-time employment, although it is not clear how effective this is as a pathway to full-time or permanent employment.

- The Graduate Destination Survey provides information on whether higher education graduates find employment around four months after graduation. The chart in Figure 1 shows the results from 2013 and 2014 for early childhood, primary and secondary initial teacher education graduates.
- For primary and secondary graduates, just under half had found full-time employment in schools in 2014 (45% primary, 46% secondary). This percentage was lower for early childhood graduates, remembering that the question was specifically about employment in schools. In addition to those in full-time employment, around a quarter of primary and secondary graduates were working part-time in schools.
- Of those working full time in schools, only around a third had permanent employment. It is the alignment between numbers of graduates and the availability of permanent jobs that is often the subject of public debate.
- These data provide a snap shot of employment at a point in time, from a sample of students. It is not clear how many graduates end up finding some form of teaching employment, or how effective part-time and casual work is as a pathways to full-time employment.

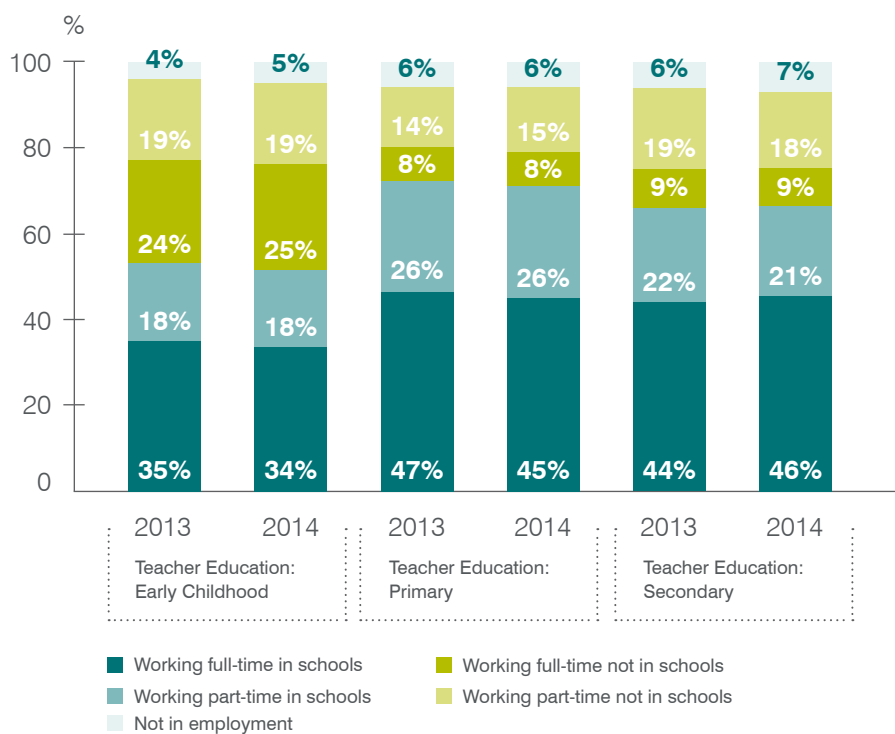
At a glance

Around four months after graduating, about 45% of ITE graduates were employed full-time in schools in 2014.

Another 25% were employed part-time in schools.

Figure 1

Employment status of bachelor graduates in teacher education, 2013 and 2014



At a glance

Consistent national data are required to determine the attrition rate of teachers in Australia.

What do we know about attrition of qualified teachers following employment in Australia?

The current rate of attrition of early career teachers in Australia can only be estimated and these estimates are highly variable.

- A review of literature on attrition by the Queensland College of Teachers reported a wide range of estimates described in the Australian literature: from 8% to 50%. (Queensland College of Teachers 2013). However, estimates in the Australian literature often appear to be based on information from the UK or US where national data are more comprehensive.
- A 2007 Commonwealth Parliamentary Committee inquiry into teacher education suggested that up to 25% of beginning teachers may leave teaching within the first five years. This figure was drawn from a submission to that inquiry² (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training 2007).
- A 2014 Commonwealth Government report on national teaching workforce data indicated that 5.7 % of teachers are leaving the profession in any year. This report analysed point in time data on the number of lapsed registrants from regulatory authorities in each of the Australian states and territories to draw a national picture. There were some recognised limitations to data, including combining different data collection methodologies between jurisdictions and access to, and comparison of, data across government, independent and Catholic sectors. (Willet, et al., June 2014). This figure relates to all teachers, without a focus on recent graduates.
- In the USA, research findings on attrition are supported by comprehensive and representative national survey data from teachers and school administrators that has recorded independent cycles of survey data since 1987. These data can be examined over time, identifying trends in the teaching workforce. Attrition rates for US teachers of around 40-50% have been calculated and referred to in a series of papers³ (Ingersoll 2003) (Ingersoll & Merrill 2012) (Ingersoll et al 2014). It should be noted that the calculations for attrition rates in the first five years do not account for those who later re-enter teaching, which can be as many as 25% (Ingersoll 2003).

² The submission was made by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training. p.85 of the Top of the Class Report. Available at: aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_committees?url=evt/teachereduc/report.htm (Accessed 6th June 2016)

³ The data derive from the US Schools and Staffing Survey and its supplement, the Teacher Follow Up Survey. Attrition is calculated as cumulative proportional loss for each year of experience

At a glance

Surveys that ask about intentions to stay or leave teaching cannot indicate actual attrition or retention.

What do we know about why teachers choose to stay or leave?

Intentions to leave data

Intentions to leave data are sometimes used as an indicator of attrition but the connection between intentions and attrition is not necessarily clear.

- Intentions to leave data are usually obtained from survey questions to teachers about their intentions to either stay in teaching or to leave within a certain number of years and is also highly variable.
- In a recent example, the Staff in Australia's Schools Survey 2013 of 5,213 Teachers and 765 school leaders from primary schools and 10,349 Teachers and 874 school leaders from secondary schools found that only 5% of primary and 8% of secondary teachers indicated they intended to leave teaching permanently prior to retirement. These figures were slightly higher (7% and 11%) for early career teachers.
- Most importantly, there is no certainty that intentions translate to actual attrition and we do not have the longitudinal national data to understand the relationships between intentions, experiences and behaviour (Mason & Poyatos Matas 2015).

At a glance

Many factors seem to contribute to attrition.

Original motivations for entering teaching are also important to consider.

Why do early career teachers leave?

It would seem that there is not one single factor that can explain teacher attrition or retention but a wide variety of factors that interact with each other. These will require additional research (Mason, 2015).

- A consistent finding across much of the attrition literature is that most teachers enter the profession with positive motivations to teach (Ewing & Manuel 2005) (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty 2015) (Watt, Richardson & Wilkins 2013) and a desire to be good teachers (Buchanan et al. 2013). The reasons these motivations shift to a desire to leave appear to be many and varied.
- Most of the Australian studies that look at decision-making in leaving/staying in teaching are small, qualitative studies based in one or two states. Literature from these studies indicate that high workload, and a lack of support from leadership were cited as common reasons for leaving (Buchanan 2010) (Gallant & Riley 2014) (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty 2015) (Mason & Poyatos Matas 2015) (Mayer et al, 2015).

At a glance

Retention is linked to teachers' sense of being effective.

Studying the effectiveness of teacher education
(Mayer et. al 2015)

- The 2013 SIAS survey of a more extensive sample supported these conclusions and found that the two most important reasons for intended early departures were “workload too heavy” and “insufficient recognition and reward.”
- A lack of ongoing employment, job security and salary levels with experience have also been identified as factors (Plunket & Dyson 2011) (Mason & Poyatos Matas 2015) (Mayer et.al, 2015).
- However, several studies found that practical considerations (for example, income, job security and work-life balance) were lower in teachers' priorities than the personal fulfilment of teaching (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty 2015) and the support received in the early years of teaching (Buchanan et al. 2013). A thematic content review of 20 studies on teacher attrition in Australia found that salary was raised as an issue but was not generally considered the key factor in the attrition of teachers (Mason & Poyatos 2015).
- It appears that a range of issues that relate to professional skills and training, relationships and cultures within a school, personal factors and structural issues such as employment conditions more broadly combine to influence retention and attrition (Mason and Poyatos 2015).

What supports early career teachers to stay?

Different studies have examined in-school, motivational and initial teacher education related factors contributing to retention in teaching.

- A large Australian mixed-methods study of 5000 early career teachers and 1000 principals found that retention was linked to teachers' sense of being effective, work satisfaction, a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards and support systems such as induction and mentoring. (Mayer et. al 2015).
- An ongoing longitudinal study tracking Australian and US teachers through completion of their teaching degree and early career experiences found a link between teachers' initial motivations for entering teaching, their level of engagement and their plans to stay with the profession upon completing their teaching degrees. Some people entering teaching degrees may not plan to teach for their whole career even at that point (Watt, Richardson & Wilkins 2014).
- The Queensland College of Teachers report (2013) included results of a survey of 398 graduate Queensland teachers who were not registered at the time of the study. The respondents identified types of support that may have helped them stay: support from experienced teachers; an allocated mentor; stable employment; manageable classes; access to online resources; being supported through an online community.
- An Australian survey study of 133 teachers and former teachers found that retention strategies should be linked to improving supportive relationships in the school, addressing workload, greater job security and providing opportunities for professional development (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty 2015).

- However, a US study that analysed nationally representative data from the national surveys found that teacher preparation was of prime importance in determining whether teachers stay or leave in their early years of teaching. What appeared to matter most was the content and, in particular, the pedagogical preparation they received in their course. The more pedagogy, the less likely to leave teaching in the first year. (Ingersoll, Merrill & May 2014).
- It may be that in the reality of a more fluid and mobile 21st century workforce that the nature of work has changed and it should no longer be assumed that teachers will remain for a lifetime in one field (Watt & Richardson 2008). Teaching graduates working in other fields may simply reflect the reality of the contemporary workforce (Glover & Robinson 2016). The education sector may be no more immune from this mobility than other professions and may need to develop new ways to attract and retain teachers.



At a glance

Estimates of attrition of early career teachers vary in Australia.

It is difficult to confirm rates without national data.


More research is required to understand factors that contribute to attrition.

Conclusions

- The best estimate of completion rates in initial teacher education in Australia is that around 65% of those commencing in 2008 eventually completed. However, there have been a number of significant policy changes and strong growth in enrolments since 2008. It is not clear what impact this has had on completion rates.
- The Graduate Destination Survey suggests that under half of all initial teacher education graduates find full-time work in schools, mostly on a fixed-term or casual basis. A further quarter of graduates are employed part-time in schools. This is a static picture, and it is not clear how far these employment types lead to sustained employment.
- Estimates of attrition through the first five years of a teaching career are highly uncertain and range from 8% to 50%. Many of these appear to have originated from UK or US studies.
- Factors driving attrition appear to be multiple and include unstable patterns of employment, heavy workload and the increasing complexity of teachers' work. Factors that improve retention appear to include supportive school environments, the ability to find stable permanent employment and adequate pedagogical preparation.
- There are important policy questions relating to early career teacher attrition, but this analysis shows that there are limited data available in Australia to shed light on these questions. There is a strong case for more comprehensive and better linked data collections to provide a basis for future research and policy development.

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