

Having a different currency?

Teacher shortages and community languages teachers with overseas qualifications

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This report explores the pathways into teaching in NSW for community languages teachers with tertiary qualifications. This is a key time for this report considering the looming teacher shortages, especially in areas of key demand such as Mathematics, Science and Languages. This group of teachers and other professionals with tertiary education qualifications gained overseas and/or in Australia has rarely been considered in any government study, report or initiative.

There are an estimated 5,000 internationally educated teachers and other professionals in NSW. This study focuses on the 3,000 volunteer teachers in government-funded Community Languages Schools: their professional strengths, needs and pathways into accredited teaching in schools.

The title of the study *Having a different currency?* draws on a quote from one of our participants who described her experience working with teachers and realising they had a 'currency' that had no value and was not accepted in Australia. This echoes Reid, Collins and Singh (2014) who found that global teachers must reconvert their human and cultural capital to the new currency denomination of their host country.

Background

The Sydney Institute for Community Language Education (SICLE) was established in 2017 in an agreement between the NSW Government and the University of Sydney to provide an evidence base for community languages education and to establish professional learning pathways for volunteer teachers.

The initial study, *The Skills in Question*, explored the professional learning strengths and needs of community language teachers, drawing on interviews (n=47) and an online survey of over 30% of volunteers in NSW Community Languages Schools (n=856). The typical profile of these teachers is women (89%), lived in Australia for over ten years (59.5%), and returning to work or further study after their children reach school age. The overwhelming majority (87%) have tertiary qualifications and want to become accredited to teach in Australian schools (79%). A significant percentage (44.3%) have qualifications in education while 54.9% have international teaching experience.

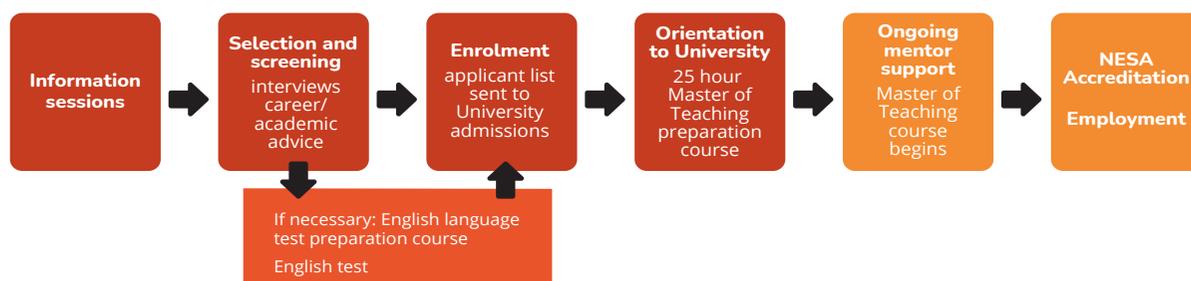
Only 4% of these teachers have managed to (re)enter the teaching profession (Cruickshank, 2021). Data on

the numbers of immigrant teachers from non-English speaking countries is very limited but available statistics indicate that fewer than 3% of the total teaching force have overseas qualifications (NSW DET, 2005).

Pathways

To address the issues identified in the report, SICLE employed four Careers Advisors to overcome the barriers identified in teachers gaining access to information. We established and promoted a website with information in plain English for interested teachers <http://mteach.org.au/>. Teachers then received invitations to information sessions; they could book in for individual meetings with Academic and Careers Advisors, and upload their qualifications, details and questions beforehand.

We ran a series of three information meetings; Careers Advisors also attended teachers' professional learning programs. In the individual sessions teachers explored options based on their qualifications, English language competence and teaching experience.





Teachers who expressed interest in (re)entering the teaching profession and who were identified as needing support in English were directed to classes in pronunciation, speaking/listening and academic writing. Over 100 teachers were assisted in sitting for the (ISLPR) and (IELTS) Academic English tests which are required for teacher accreditation. Teachers were then provided with help and advice in getting their qualifications and translations ready for submission to the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA).

Master of Teaching (primary and secondary) upgrading programs were developed at Western Sydney University (WSU) and the Australian Catholic University (ACU) Strathfield campus. These alternate mode programs were for teachers and other professionals deemed by NESA to require pre-service teacher education.

All teachers were offered a 25-hour preparation program, focusing on academic skills and returning to study. They were also assisted in navigating admission procedures. Ongoing support was offered by two part-time academic positions at each university and by regular tertiary staff.

Methodology

This study explores the issues, barriers and facilitators for Community Languages Schools teachers trying to (re)enter the teaching profession in Australia. It draws on data from all stages of the process looking at: their getting and using information; the decision-making process; their strengths and needs in embarking on the pathway to teaching; the extent to which institutional structures meet their needs; and the supports required to make the pathway to teaching effective. The mixed method design relies on data collection and analysis from program documentation, surveys, and focus group and individual interviews with over 50 teachers, lecturers and other key personnel. The study is a joint project between

researchers at the University of Sydney, WSU and the ACU Strathfield.

Findings

The key finding is that the 7,000 volunteer teachers in Australian Community Languages Schools represent a large and highly qualified potential resource of teachers for mainstream schools.

- The group is diverse in terms of qualifications, languages, experiences and needs, and differs from those studied in international research; there is no 'one size fits all' simple pathway.
- Community languages teachers bring key strengths to teaching: high levels of qualification; teaching experience in the Australian context; high motivation and commitment to being teachers; and skills in areas of shortage such as Mathematics and Science (estimated 40%).

The second finding is that the process of providing information and assessing qualifications is inadequate, lacking in consistency and coherence.

- The present provision of information discriminates against community languages teachers: website information is inaccessible and in English only; there is no way to gain email/telephone or face-to-face advice or information. Some 16% of teachers in our study had acceptable qualifications but did not know how to get these accredited.
- The system of accreditation and assessment is inflexible and lacks consistency and transparency: assessment differs between states/territories, between education providers and between accreditation authorities; many teachers are disadvantaged by coming from different systems of education (for example, reflecting differences in 'middle schools' or early childhood education) and are forced to start teacher training from scratch.

The third finding is that the systems of English language assessment and support are inflexible and inadequate.

- The NSW English language requirements are level 7.5 in IELTS or Level 4 in ISLPR for all teachers who have completed any tertiary study counting towards their teaching qualification in a country where English is not an official language; these requirements differ across states/territories and differ from tertiary pre-service education requirements. There is no evidence of coordination of requirements between accreditation authorities, educational jurisdictions and tertiary institutions. In our study, community languages teachers in the Master of Teaching program at WSU had few or no problems with their English language competence in coursework and practicum but almost half will need to sit an additional English test to gain NESA accreditation. Even those who achieved minimum scores in writing for entry to WSU, succeeded in

exceeding expectations in their academic results as evidenced by their GPA grades. The few difficulties with citation and grammatical structures were seen by academics as common in any student cohort and there were no comments made by the lecturers/tutors about the lack of quality of the student's interactions in class discussion or assignments

- The reliance on English language proficiency testing is inflexible and lacking in research evidence. There is little or no evidence that these tests can predict performance as classroom teachers; the tests assess certain aspects of language proficiency but there is little evidence that they assess the language required for teaching; and there is no evidence of success or not in classroom teaching of teachers who pass or fail these tests.

The fourth finding is that the pathways developed for community languages teachers are effective.

- The provision of the accessible website, of careers advice and of email/telephone/face-to-face contact for community languages teachers is an effective way to support decisions to (re)enter the teaching profession.
- The 25-hour tertiary preparation and English language support programs are highly evaluated by teachers and seen as key reasons for their success in tertiary pre-service teaching.

The final finding is that the provision of alternate mode pre-service teacher education was effective in providing pathways for the cohorts into teaching.

- Maintaining a separate cohort for at least the first two units of study with a bespoke timetable which took account of work and family commitments provided opportunities for additional tutor as well as peer support.
- Teachers found access to the mentor particularly valuable in preparing them for professional practice through orientation to the culture and expectations of schools in Australia.
- Teachers valued the system of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) at WSU, especially the recognition of the SICLE Community Language courses and teaching in Community Language Schools. This system acknowledged their skills and experience as well as allowing a more rapid progress through the Master of Teaching program.

Recommendations

1. That accreditation authorities, educational jurisdictions, tertiary institutions and unions

- acknowledge and take into account the large numbers of teachers and professionals with overseas qualifications in the planning to address teacher shortages
- develop consistent and coherent information that is provided in accessible ways to diverse communities

- coordinate and develop consistent and coherent advice on assessment and accreditation of overseas qualifications
- collaborate in the funding and development of sustainable induction programs and of sustainable English language and academic preparation programs for teachers.

Community languages teachers are a unique group who are highly committed to education, and have significant linguistic and cultural knowledge as well as experience in disciplines which are much needed in the Australian school system. In addition, these teachers contribute diverse perspectives, reflecting the multilingual and multicultural nature of Australian society as well as enhancing educational opportunities which result in more equitable outcomes for students from non-Anglo backgrounds. However, in order to gain formal accreditation to teach, they need support to access information, navigate institutional barriers and gain additional qualifications.

Greater transparency and coordination among institutions involved in providing information, assessing qualifications, offering university courses and granting formal accreditation would facilitate and encourage greater participation of community language teachers in the formal education system. The role of career advisors in providing support is critical to navigating complex pathways and should be maintained as a service for all community language teachers.

Current accreditation processes need to become more flexible in order to recognise and value the linguistic, cultural and discipline backgrounds of overseas trained professionals. The current criteria for qualifications assessment by the Australian Education, Skills and Employment (Country Education profile) are further narrowed by NESAs through strict Subject Content Knowledge requirements. These criteria tend to privilege



monolinguals and those with mainstream local education, and do not allow any flexibility to acknowledge or embrace diversity or individual experiences and attributes.

Community language teachers also need additional support for English language development and test preparation as well as orientation to postgraduate academic study in an Australian university. A bespoke Master of Teaching preparation program geared to mature age graduates could combine development of English for educational professionals with academic literacy skills. Such a course would help community language teachers to gain confidence, pass the required English and Lantite tests as well as provide orientation to university.

Finally, there are several recommendations for improving the delivery, quality and scope of the dedicated Master of Teaching course for community languages teachers. These measures would enhance teacher student achievement and well-being and program effectiveness, motivation and commitment.

- Universities should provide additional support with enrolment, orientation to university websites and flexible timetables.
- There should be a separate cohort for the initial core subject classes in order to provide additional tutor and peer support prior to students before they transition into mainstream classes.
- There should be a designated mentor appointed to provide ongoing advocacy support, academic advice and preparation for professional experience.

2. That research be undertaken

- to explore how professional standards can better reflect the diversity in the teaching profession
- to determine effective ways to assess the English language proficiency of community languages teachers applying for teacher accreditation
- to determine effective ways to support the English language development prior to and after employment teachers
- through longitudinal studies of educated teachers with overseas qualifications and their impact on diversity in the teaching profession and on student learning.

Research is needed into how skills and attributes of overseas trained professionals can be recognised, defined, acknowledged and valued. Teaching competency frameworks such as the (AITSL) and NESA Teacher Professional Standards provide criteria for describing the domains of teaching: professional knowledge, practice and engagement. However, there is no recognition of how the previous experiences, language and cultural knowledge of community language teachers and internationally educated professionals can contribute to these domains.

While there has been some research into the language demands of teaching, more is needed into what constitutes competent English language for education professionals. Research into how language competence should be assessed is needed so that formal assessment does not depend solely on a single test or on perceptions of non-native English speech, for example accent or even non-language issues such as appearance.

A final recommendation is a longitudinal study into the cohorts from this Master of Teaching pathways program to investigate the long-term employment outcomes for these participants and their school experiences as teachers in Australian classrooms. Such a study would identify some of the challenges these teachers face but would also contribute to understanding the ways



References

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