

# Executive summary

Despite many years of reports and recommendations, teaching out-of-field, that is, assigning teachers to teach subjects they are not qualified to teach, remains an increasingly critical issue in Australian schools. While teaching out-of-field is used by school administrators as a solution to the teacher shortage crisis, it is not an adequate solution. It “inadvertently masks the extent of teacher shortages” (Hobbs & Törner, 2019a, p. 313), shortages caused by a lack of teachers in particular subject areas, unequal distribution of teachers, or recruitment practices that preference qualities other than teacher specialisations (Hobbs & Törner, 2019a). However, assigning a teacher to teach a subject they are unfamiliar with is like expecting dentists to meet the shortfall in country doctors. While Australian teachers are highly qualified, knowing the subject and how to teach it is a standard held high in our preparation of teachers, yet this standard is challenged when teachers are assigned or employed to teach out-of-field.

This issue has been raised in inquiries for some years. For example, in 2017, the Parliamentary [Inquiry into Innovation and Creativity: Workforce for the New Economy](#) called for an end to teaching out-of-field:

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, through COAG, require jurisdictions to develop and submit strategies which phase out the teaching of STEM subjects by non-STEM trained teachers over a five year period. (Recommendation 6)

They also recommended creating pathways for re-specialisation through “credentialing and incentives for teachers to enhance and update STEM knowledge” (Recommendation 7), and a system-side approach to generating workforce data as “workforce estimates for STEM teaching needs and report them publicly” (Recommendation 8). These recommendations highlight the need for highly qualified and appropriately specialised teachers, and the importance of transparency and public scrutiny of the crisis facing our schools.

Similarly, the 2022 report [NEXT STEPS: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review \(QITE\)](#) adds further support to the value of explicit discipline knowledge and in-field teaching, emphasising the need to attract high-calibre mid-career change applicants to initial teacher education with skills in areas of high demand (STEM is an explicit focus), and then provide the necessary support to retain new teachers to ensure a sustainable pipeline of teachers with the right subject qualifications in the right locations.

These recommendations from earlier inquiries are relevant for attending to the issues and challenges imposed by having a relatively high proportion of teachers teaching out-of-field (Weldon, 2016). Attracting the teachers we need and having appropriate pathways for re-specialisation are both pivotal to maintaining a teacher workforce that can offer deep disciplinary and pedagogical expertise across the full range of subjects in our curriculum.

This report summarises the outcomes of a National Summit on Teaching Out-of-field held on October 21-23, 2022. The Summit was initiated by a consortium of researchers, teacher educators and organisations interested in raising the profile and attending to this issue plaguing our schools. The impetus for the Summit arose from the momentum that has been building in Australia fuelled by research (e.g., Caldis & Kleeman, 2019; Hobbs, 2013; Hobbs & Porsch, 2022; Du Plessis, 2017, 2021; Weldon, 2016), school need, and government initiatives (Department of Education & Training, 2019) in response to national data (e.g., Weldon, 2016) relating to the extent of out-of-field teaching. Also pressure and interest from subject associations, unions, and other government organisations call for serious recognition and action in relation to the issues associated with out-of-field teaching.

The Summit drew on the expertise and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders in education, such as teachers, researchers, teacher educators, professional learning providers, teacher registration/accreditation boards, education-related associations and unions, and departments of education to put a spotlight on the multi-layered structures that create the need for, and the implications of, teaching out-of-field.

Analysis of the outcomes in relation to the five themes of the Summit has led to the development of 22 actions and 46 recommendations to inform policy, practice, and research. These are outlined below.

## **Theme 1: Data needed to inform policy**

Policy design needs reliable data and evidence to ensure improved outcomes for teachers, students, and schools (Lingard, 2015). Currently, Australia has limited systematic and system-wide data collected nationally and at the state/territory levels. The [Australian Teacher Workforce Data](#) initiative will hopefully provide useful data, but a range of data is needed. The actions and recommendations address three areas: an agreed definition of out-of-field teaching to ensure legitimate comparison of statistics across educational jurisdictions; longitudinal data obtained through strategic partnerships between relevant stakeholders to develop deep understanding of the long-term experiences and effects of out-of-field teaching; and systematic workforce data collection for monitoring the teaching workforce profile and targeted policy development.

## **Theme 2: School management & leadership**

School leaders are at the coal face of dealing with teacher shortages and allocation. How principals and middle leaders (such as heads of department) support and mentor out-of-field teachers can determine the nature of the 'lived experience' of teachers, and teachers' capacity to learn to teach out-of-field. Early career teachers, and teachers in rural and regional teachers, are at greatest risk of experiencing the negative effects of out-of-field teaching. The actions and recommendations address five areas: School leader awareness of the issues; the need for school leaders to build relationships with staff; system-level support for leaders; developing middle leaders; and teacher support in schools.

## **Theme 3: Initial teacher education**

The reality of out-of-field teaching is an identifiable feature of transition into the teaching profession. Teachers often teach subjects out-of-field on their placement during initial teacher education, and as early career teachers while gathering evidence of their ability to meet the Australian Professional Teacher Standards and gain full registration/accreditation and 'Proficient' teacher status. The actions and recommendations address four areas: a need for further research into pre-service teacher and early career teachers' lived experiences of out-of-field; exposure to initial teacher education programs to prepare teachers for the reality of out-of-field teaching; sustained and purposeful collaboration between educational stakeholders for networking and resource creation; and teacher accreditation and registration practices.

## **Theme 4: Teacher registration/accreditation**

Teacher registration and accreditation are state responsibilities and important for ensuring teachers are suitably qualified as teachers before entering the profession. These policies also lay the foundation for cultural expectations for and documenting of teacher subject specialisations, with only New South Wales having policies that ensure that teachers have approval to teach their

specialisations. The actions and recommendations address four areas: teacher registration and pathways to becoming in-field; research into the effects of accreditation and registration policies on teacher professional learning uptake and pathways; the legislative function of relevant bodies; and systemic data collection associated with teacher registration.

## Theme 5: Teacher professional learning

Maintaining the quality of teaching while teachers learn to teach out-of-field requires ensuring the system settings give teachers the time, support, and access to subject-specific expertise that can assist with teacher learning. Teacher professional learning includes both formal and informal opportunities that lead to changes in teacher knowledge, attitudes, and practice. The actions and recommendations address six areas: a need to understand the professional learning needs of out-of-field teachers through research; a national priority for mentoring and support for teachers; jurisdiction support for a coordinated approach to tending to the issue; school focused support for teacher professional learning; an increased role of professional associations in providing professional learning in collaboration with other stakeholders; and offering a range of professional learning opportunities that cater for the varied needs and career goals of out-of-field teachers.

In summary, these actions and recommendations call for changes in research and data collection, cultural practices in schools and education governance, structures and policies, and professional learning for teachers and educational leaders. In summary to these actions and recommendations, the key messages from this report are to:

