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Ms Robyn Kruk AO, Professor Catherine Bennett, and Dr Angela Jackson  
Inquiry Panel Members  
Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

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Dear Inquiry Panel Members,

On behalf of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited (AITSL), I am writing in response to your request to provide a brief submission to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

## About AITSL

AITSL is a Commonwealth company that provides national leadership for the Australian, state, and territory governments in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and educational leadership across schools and early childhood settings. AITSL's focus is on ensuring Australia has a high-quality education system in which teachers and leaders have the greatest impact on every learner's educational growth and achievement.

For over a decade, AITSL has worked to strengthen teaching through our [national frameworks](#) and supported teachers and leaders to reflect on their practice and grow their expertise with a range of tools and resources. Our role also extends to informing the national conversation on teacher workforce supply, characteristics and experiences through the implementation of the Australian Teacher Workforce Data initiative, which AITSL delivers as commissioned by Education Ministers.

## Impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning

There is already some early evidence of how COVID-19 affected teaching and learning including in Australia's schools. Understanding the long-term impacts should be a future priority.

## Impact on teachers and teaching

To understand the impact of COVID-19 on teachers, AITSL added an open-ended question to its 2021 AITSL Stakeholder Survey (conducted between 22 February and 9 April 2021):

*We know that the last 12 months have been difficult on educators and students. How has COVID-19 impacted you as an educator or your students?*

A total of 1,014 stakeholders nationwide responded to this question. Almost half of the respondents worked in Victoria (21%) or New South Wales (27%), where comparatively longer periods of remote learning occurred.

Subsequent to this, AITSL commissioned ORIMA Research to conduct a thematic analysis of the qualitative responses and a literature synthesis to identify and summarise research findings on the impact of the pandemic on teachers and teaching practices, and on students and their learning. This work informed AITSL's June 2021 release of its report, [\*The Impact of COVID-19 on Teaching in Australia: A literature synthesis\*](#).

The main findings of the report are summarised below:

- Almost a third of stakeholders surveyed indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on students (30%). Decreased wellbeing, including elevated fatigue or stress, was most commonly mentioned (10%), followed by decreased academic achievement and students falling behind (9%), or decreased engagement in learning (7%).
- Only 2% of stakeholders mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic positively impacted students, with comments generally related to students gaining more independence and resilience.
- Most stakeholders commented that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on themselves as educators or their students (62%), while less than one in five felt that the pandemic had a positive impact (18%). One in five stakeholders indicated that the pandemic had little to no impact or had a neutral impact (20%).
- Commonly reported negative impacts on educators were increased workload or time requirements (23%) and decreased wellbeing, including elevated fatigue or stress (22%). Almost one in ten comments indicated a lack of support, appreciation, or recognition from schools/leadership/the Department (8%).
- Commonly reported positive impacts on educators included improved knowledge or use of technology or information technology skills (10%). A smaller proportion of stakeholders reported having more time to reflect on and change their teaching practice (3%) and having a better understanding and connection between teachers, parents and the community (3%).
- Upskilling in technology, juggling multiple modes of work and adapting teaching approaches for continued student learning added to work complexity and working hours for most teachers.
- Evidence indicated that teacher wellbeing, both physical and mental health, was already poor pre-pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic, by contributing to teacher workload and pressure, further negatively impacted teacher morale and wellbeing.
- Teachers reported being in a high-risk category for contracting COVID-19 and felt anxiety related to personal risk and risk for family members and their students.
- While student wellbeing was of paramount concern for educators, and directed how schools and teachers adjusted curriculum, teaching and assessment approaches, available data indicated that student wellbeing was significantly negatively affected.

## **Impact on student learning**

The impact of COVID-19 on student learning will vary, as students will have had a range of experiences during the pandemic. Generally, national-level results in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) were steady in 2021 and 2022, despite significant disruptions in some schools. NAPLAN testing was not conducted in 2020, to reduce the burden on schools during the pandemic.

Recently released results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) not only confirm that Australia's results in 2022 were similar to those in 2018, but also that this is unusual internationally. Most other countries saw performance decline over this period. Australia, therefore moved up the international performance rankings. This points to the outstanding support that teachers, principals and other school staff provide to Australia's 4 million students, as well as the resilience and adaptability of Australia's students, parents and carers, teachers and school leaders.

## **Impact on AITSL's work**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a range of impacts on the work AITSL was delivering and its functions. An overview of these follows.

### **Delivery of Work Plan**

The impact of COVID-19 was unequal across Australia – for example, with varying duration and frequency of periods where AITSL staff and stakeholders were unable to work from their usual work location, limitations on the viability of national meetings and ability to travel within and between jurisdictions, and delivery of schooling via remote and/or online learning.

This created differentiated impacts and degrees of significance across different components of AITSL's Work Plan in 2020. As a result, there were a number of activities AITSL was not able to deliver at the height of the pandemic, or which necessitated deferral of the delivery of some Work Plan commitments, including:

- on-site filming for resource development
- convening initial teacher education accreditation panels
- Highly Accomplished and Lead teacher (HALT) Summit which had been scheduled to take place in May 2020 (cancelled).
- stakeholder consultation opportunities e.g. case study interviews and workshops with the profession, as some employers requested no contact with schools.

In addition, at the request of the Education Council (now the Education Ministers Meeting), several pieces of work were deferred to later in the year to allow governments to focus on supporting schools, school leaders, teachers and students during this unprecedented time.

On the whole, AITSL was able to effectively pivot to work virtually by moving meetings and stakeholder consultation to online platforms.

## Teacher skilled migration applications

AITSL is gazetted as the skills assessing authority for individuals wishing to migrate to Australia under one of eight teaching occupations through the skilled migration program. AITSL saw little impact on application numbers for international teachers wishing to apply for a skills assessment to support a skilled migration visa.

Prior to COVID-19, AITSL assessed an average of 1,500 applications each year from international teachers wishing to migrate under this visa program. In the 2020 and 2021 calendar years, AITSL assessed 1,378 and 1,933 applications, respectively. There has, however, been an increase of approximately 65% on pre-pandemic application numbers since 2022, with around 3,000 applications received in the 2022 calendar year.

## ITE and professional experience

Initial teacher education (ITE) programs are qualifications accredited by each state and territory teacher regulatory authority (TRA) which prepare individuals to register and work as a teacher in Australia. All ITE programs include professional experience placements (sometimes referred to as practicum or practical experience) in schools or early childhood settings.

AITSL worked closely with TRAs to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of ITE including professional experience placements. Victoria and New South Wales experienced the most significant impacts. To lessen the effect of these impacts, AITSL received notification of changes to ITE accreditation processes, professional experience placements, as well as other components of ITE programs including teaching performance assessments (TPAs) and the completion of the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students (LANTITE) from TRAs in Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory.

The most common changes were:

- out of cycle approval to program changes to accommodate for COVID-19 (QLD, NT, WA)
- extensions to accreditation timeframes (WA and VIC)
- reduction in total professional experience to 45 days across all ITE programs (QLD, VIC and WA)
- the introduction (and expansion in QLD) of the ability to complete professional experience placement days online (VIC, WA, QLD, NSW on a case-by-case basis)
- strengthening guidelines to support students in ITE programs completing their programs while they are employed as teachers.

The majority of these changes applied to programs in 2020 only, except in Victoria which extended changes to the ITE accreditation process and requirements into 2021.

## AITSL's response to support teachers and school leaders

AITSL recognised at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that teachers and school leaders experienced information overload and had minimal time to engage with new materials. Instead of compounding this problem, AITSL curated existing resources and developed new ones that supported teachers and school leaders. These were relevant and released at the point of need. The extensive collection of resources was made available on an [Australian Teacher Response](#) page on the AITSL website.

Examples of the resources AITSL developed include:

- Two 'Spotlight' evidence summary publications:
  - [\*What works in online/distance teaching and learning?\*](#) (viewed over 144,000 times)
  - [\*The role of school leadership in challenging times\*](#) (viewed over 79,000 times).
- A Teacher Resource Hub on the AITSL website provided access to relevant resources from a variety of sources. This Hub has now been decommissioned and had over 26,000 users during the period it was in operation.
- A series of short videos in which education experts discuss key issues that arose during the pandemic, teacher and student wellbeing, and teaching practices that are important in remote learning.

In addition, AITSL created the [\*Teachers Supporting Teachers\*](#) Facebook group. This is a dedicated Facebook group for teachers and school leaders to ask questions, share what works (and what doesn't), and provide support to each other. The purpose of this page was to provide a platform on which teachers could help teachers by supporting each other and sharing their expertise. The Facebook group is still live today and has 10,670 members.

## Data on the impact of COVID-19 on the teacher workforce

### Workload and career intentions

The [\*Australian Teacher Workforce Data \(ATWD\)\*](#) initiative provides robust insights into the short and long-term impact on the teacher workforce which coincided with COVID-19.

The data shows that some changes experienced during 2020, such as reduced face-to-face teaching hours (including online teaching), had returned to pre-pandemic levels by 2021. Other changes, such as reduced time spent on administrative tasks by classroom teachers during 2020, quickly returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2021, before continuing to increase post-pandemic.

Casual relief teacher (CRT) roles are common in the lead up to ultimately retiring from the profession; and in 2019, 43% of CRTs had 30 or more years of experience. Across 2020 and 2021, there was an increase in the proportion of CRTs who were approaching retirement, reaching 50% in 2021. In 2022, pre-pandemic patterns returned. This suggests that COVID-19 may have temporarily delayed retirement for some teachers, masking the extent of workforce challenges over this period.

During 2020, intentions to leave the profession before retirement were at their lowest point since 2018 (21%), potentially due to the uncertainty of the pandemic. Since this time, intentions to leave the profession before retirement have steadily increased to 34% (as of 2022). There were no changes to the reasons provided by teachers who indicated they intent to leave the profession, with workload and coping remaining the most often given reason.

### Student behaviour and classroom management

Data in the ATWD also reflects a considerable increase in the amount of time that teachers and leaders spend on student support and supervision, as well as addressing wellbeing and behavioural issues. In 2021, the proportion of classroom teachers reporting that they spent more than 10 hours per week counselling or supervising students increased by 21 percentage points (to 30%), and this has continued post-pandemic.

Anecdotally, key stakeholders attribute much of this growth to an increase in absenteeism, classroom disruption or poor behaviour by students, due to their social and emotional development having been affected by extended periods of learning from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As outlined in [\*Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System\*](#), data from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) indicates that student attendance levels declined from 73.1% in 2019 to 71.2% in 2021 and dropped considerably to 49.9% in 2022.

Additionally, [recently released data](#) on Australia's performance in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing and associated surveys shows that following the pandemic, many Australian students study mathematics in a disciplinary climate that is not favourable to learning. In 2022:

- approximately 25% of students reported that they cannot work well in most or all lessons (OECD average: 23%)
- 33% of students reported they do not listen to what the teacher says (OECD average: 30%)
- 40% of students reported they get distracted using digital devices (OECD average: 30%), and 37% reported being distracted by other students who are using digital devices (OECD average: 25%).

To support teachers in addressing these issues, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has recently released [classroom management resources](#) for teachers, commissioned by the Australian Government through its *Engaged Classrooms* initiative.

### Further information

Thank you for the invitation to provide a submission to this inquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact me via email to [ceo@aitsl.edu.au](mailto:ceo@aitsl.edu.au) should you require further information.

Yours sincerely,



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