

# Out-of-Field History Teaching in Australian Schools

## Summary Sheet

The Australian Historical Association, 8 December 2023

### Out-of-Field Teaching: An Outline of the Problem

Out-of-field teaching is a significant issue for the teaching of history in secondary schools in Australia, though it is certainly not exclusive to our discipline. The Australian Council for Educational Research and Griffith University define out-of-field teaching as the forced or willing assignment of teachers to ‘subjects or stages of schooling they are not qualified to teach’.<sup>1</sup> Many high school students, particularly those in Years 7 to 10, are studying history under teachers who, while doing their best by them in a thoroughly professional way, have not studied the traditional minimum of a minor (four courses) and might not have studied history at all at the tertiary level. While this problem is less pronounced in senior secondary school classrooms than earlier years, it remains the case that some history teachers find themselves scrambling to meet the demands of particular topics in their curriculum for which they feel ill-equipped. The issue of history teacher training, for the historical literacy and civic capacities of the Australian community, does matter.

#### *The Data*

Reliable data is difficult to come by, partly because the problem has only recently been singled out for measurement, and partly because definitions of out-of-field teaching vary. (Some, for instance, would consider cross-teaching between history and geography to be in-field teaching within the Human Society and Its Environment field, while others would certainly disagree.) However, there is enough data available to conclude that out-of-field teaching is a significant problem for the teaching of history in Australia’s high schools.

- A 2016 Australian Council of Education Report indicated that more than a quarter of Australia’s history teachers had neither the tertiary content training nor the pedagogical methods training for teaching the subject.<sup>2</sup>
- According to Australian Teacher Workforce Data collected by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), humanities subjects in secondary schools (including history) saw out-of-field teacher numbers rising to 33 per cent in 2018, and 36 per cent in 2020.<sup>3</sup>
- The most recent statistics in New South Wales confirm that at least 25 per cent of history teachers are sought from out-of-field.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Report highlights need for more data to tackle out-of-field teaching’, *ACER Discover*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/report-highlights-need-for-more-data-to-tackle-out-of-field-teaching>, (accessed: 8 December 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Figure 1, ‘Proportion of Years 7-10 Teachers teaching out-of-field in selected subjects’, in Paul R Weldon, ‘Out-of-Field Teaching in Australian Secondary Schools’, *Policy Insights*, no. 6 (June 2016), <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=policyinsights>, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> ATWD Key Metrics Dashboard release, March 2023, [https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/atwd-js/march29-2023/atwd-key-metrics-dashboard--march-2023.pdf?sfvrsn=ebd1b03c\\_2](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/atwd-js/march29-2023/atwd-key-metrics-dashboard--march-2023.pdf?sfvrsn=ebd1b03c_2), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Data cited in Linda Silmaslis, ‘High school classes being taught by teachers without qualifications in the subject area’, *Daily Telegraph*, 14 April 2023.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the pervasive nature of this problem. The common grouping of history within the wider HSIE strand of subjects in Years 7 to 10 clearly make history a relatively vulnerable discipline. In a discussion on the Australian Association for Research in Education website in February 2019, teachers described processes in which STEM teaching loads were allocated first, followed by English loads, and then ‘under-load teachers with ART HPE or Drama backgrounds were assigned to 7 to 10 History and Geography’.<sup>5</sup> Another participant noted that ‘humanities teachers usually have to teach geography and history and are usually out-of-field in one or both of these areas!’<sup>6</sup> While these teachers viewed their out-of-field colleagues as ‘professionals’ and ‘highly effective’ teachers, they also saw ‘the heavy toll’ that this work placed on them, and that many of these teachers leave the profession altogether after some time.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Ideal*

This high incidence of out-of-field teaching, including in history, clearly falls short of the ideals articulated by the AITSL’s Standards and Procedures, as well as the various State and Territory Teacher Accreditation bodies.

- Standard 3.7 of AITSL’s [Standards and Procedures](#) says that pre-service teachers enrolling in a graduate teaching degree (commonly Masters of Teaching [Secondary]) should ‘have a discipline-specific bachelor or equivalent qualification relevant to the Australian Curriculum or other recognised areas of schooling provision’. For secondary teachers, this includes ‘at least a major study in one teaching area and, preferably, a second teaching area comprising at least a minor study’. Some Australian universities, it should be said, do not structure their general secondary teaching degrees in a manner that facilitates the study of a minor. AITSL has set these standards since 2010 but teachers who graduated from university prior to 2010 were accredited in a wider array of disciplines and specialist areas (some of them now no longer represented in the curriculum), and were accredited against a variety of standards.
- The New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) clearly outlines its mandatory [subject content knowledge requirements](#) for pre-service teachers. It states that the graduand’s ‘undergraduate studies must align with the area or areas [they] intend to teach’. The example of Modern History as a Second or Additional Teaching area is offered specifically. The bare minimum requirement for a Modern History teacher, they state, is a ‘minor in history drawn from areas such as Australian history, contact and Aboriginal history, early modern history, historiography and modern history. One unit in ancient or medieval history must be included.’
- The Victorian Institute of Teaching says in its [teacher registration policy](#) that pre-service teachers need to complete four years of full-time study at a higher education institution, at least one year of which needs to be ‘inclusive of teaching methods’, and 45 days of which need to be ‘supervised practice teaching’.

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<sup>5</sup> Comments in response to Anna E. du Plessis, ‘Out-of-field teaching is out of control in Australian schools. Here’s what’s happening’, *EduResearch Matters*, <https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=3778>, accessed 25 August 2023.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

- The remaining states appear not to diverge from the AITSL in any significant way. (NB: South Australia’s Teaching for Effective Learning framework does set out a very particular model of the ideal teacher.<sup>8</sup>)

These requirements, which are designed to guarantee professionalism and ensure that expertise is applied to the work of teaching, have been found hard to apply in many Australian classrooms although through no fault of teachers themselves.

## Universities: Adjacent to the Problem?

Universities may play a role in the perpetuation of out-of-field teaching, but it appears not to be a leading one. In the case of history, Australian universities do not currently appear to be structuring their degrees in ways that would incentivise out-of-field teaching. In theory, graduate pre-service history teachers are required to have completed either a History minor, or the equivalent of a History minor (under the guise of a ‘Secondary’ or ‘Additional Teaching Area’).

A preliminary evaluation of nine Australian universities’ education offerings suggests that it would be difficult to be accredited as a secondary history teacher without having completed at least four separate courses in history at the undergraduate level which is equivalent to a minor (such as two first year courses and two second year level). The specific requirements vary across universities, but each program appears to be designed to produce teachers with at least some undergraduate training in two or three disciplines. The six examples below are illustrative:

- The University of New England’s Bachelor of Education (K-12 Teaching) would require graduates to have completed four pedagogical courses in HSIE, along with 10 courses in history (if it were their main teaching area), or six courses (if it were their secondary teaching area), or four courses (if it were their additional secondary teaching area).
- La Trobe University’s Bachelor of Education (Secondary) requires its graduate teachers to have completed six courses in history (if it is their major teaching area) or four courses (if it is their minor teaching area). Entry to a Master of Teaching would require students to have completed the appropriate undergraduate disciplinary training.
- The University of Newcastle’s history teacher training would appear to directly correspond with the requirements articulated by NESAs, insofar as graduate teachers who wish to teach Modern History would be required to complete one Ancient History course, as well as four courses at first- or second-year level, and at least one at third-year level.
- The University of Queensland’s Bachelor of Education (Secondary)/Bachelor of Arts dual degree would require pre-service teachers to structure the Arts component of their study in a manner that provides them with disciplinary training in at least two teaching areas. A course on ‘World History: Global Connections’ spanning 1200 CE to the end of the twentieth century appears to be a compulsory unit.
- The entry requirements for the University of Western Australia’s Master of Teaching (Secondary) include ‘a bachelor’s degree’ and ‘six units in a discipline that is relevant for the school curriculum major, with at least two of those units studied at second year university level and two at third year university level’.
- Flinders University’s Bachelor of Education (Secondary) requires students to study eight courses to satisfy the requirements of a Major/Specialist Area. Entry to Flinders’ Master

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<sup>8</sup> Department of Education and Children’s Services, *South Australian Teaching for Effective Learning* (South Australia: Government of South Australia, 2010).

of Teaching (Secondary) program requires applicants to have studied at least two teaching/curriculum areas at the undergraduate level. This effectively means that they can only select two majors (eight courses within each), with no option to do a minor. Additionally, Flinders has created a bespoke degree for health and PE teachers (BEDSHPE Bachelor of Education [Secondary Health and Physical Education]), but with no option to undertake a history minor, whereas in the past the combination of health/PE and History was popular, as it is at many other institutions.

Universities have not seemingly been actively structuring their degrees in ways that would incentivise out-of-field teaching. How strictly they maintain entry requirements for Master of Teaching (Secondary) programs and monitor prerequisite undergraduate training is another matter entirely. Universities may further enable the problem of out-of-field teaching by allowing pre-service teachers to be assigned to classes they are not trained, or training, to teach, during their compulsory placements.

However, it appears that the bulk of the problem derives from the pressures on the teaching workforce and the allocation of human resources at the school level. While primary and secondary teachers are well represented among tertiary History graduates in Australia (possibly in the order of 21 per cent), it remains the case that there are often too few history teachers to satisfy demand in Years 7 to 10.<sup>9</sup> According to one departmental estimate, 20 per cent of teachers in Years 7 to 10 English and history classrooms were not trained to teach these subjects.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, evidence from NSW suggests that teacher shortages are common across all fields (if still most dramatically acute in the areas of maths, science and technology), and that the trend is similar if not identical in government and non-government high schools.<sup>11</sup> The key causal factors appear to be a steady increase in student enrolments, a decline in the number of enrolments in secondary education degrees, and ageing workforce.<sup>12</sup> The problem of teacher burnout is both a contributor to and consequence of the prevalence of out-of-field teaching.<sup>13</sup> These forces place significant pressure on schools to place teachers in front of classrooms each day, regardless of specialist knowledge and expertise.

The publicly available evidence indicates that out-of-field teaching is less pronounced in primary schools. However, it remains important to ensure that primary school teachers are sufficiently equipped to help cultivate their students' historical literacy. Currently, the University of Newcastle leads the way in ensuring that their pre-service teachers are trained in at least one Australian history unit. This core unit is designed to ensure that primary school teachers are equipped with the necessary contextual knowledge for teaching younger students about the history of their

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<sup>9</sup> Table 11: In which sector are you currently primarily employed?, in Emily O’Gorman, Nancy Cushing and Rochelle Chand, *History ‘Opened Many Doors’: The Australian Historical Association’s History Graduates Survey*, June 2022, pp. 57–58.

<sup>10</sup> Jordan Baker, ‘One in Six Teachers Working Outside Their Area of Expertise, Documents Reveal’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 October 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/one-in-six-teachers-working-outside-their-area-of-expertise-documents-reveal-20211007-p58y28.html>, (accessed: 14 November 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Jordan Baker, ‘Public School Teacher Shortages Raises Fears They Will “Run Out of Teachers”’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 October 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/public-school-teacher-shortage-raises-fears-they-will-run-out-of-teachers-20211003-p58wtq.html>, (accessed: 14 November 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Baker, “Run Out of Teachers”.

<sup>13</sup> This point is made powerfully in Science Teachers Association NSW, Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry Into Teacher Shortages in NSW, July 2022, p. 3, [https://www.stansw.asn.au/common/Uploaded%20files/Organisation%20Documents/2022/NSW%20Parliament%20Inquiry%20on%20Teacher%20Shortages%20-%20Submission%20\(3\).pdf](https://www.stansw.asn.au/common/Uploaded%20files/Organisation%20Documents/2022/NSW%20Parliament%20Inquiry%20on%20Teacher%20Shortages%20-%20Submission%20(3).pdf).

communities. Other universities should be encouraged to make this a requisite feature of their primary education degrees.

## Prospects for Advocacy

In recent years, the History Teachers Association of Victoria has been a critic of out-of-field teaching. In an article in *The Age* last year, Deb Hull discussed the issue:

[Q]uite a few of the people who are teaching history in primary and secondary schools have no prior training in history and are not required to do any training.

[...] Out-of-field teaching in history wouldn't be such a problem if schools were required to support these teachers to do regular professional learning in history. That's how out-of-field teachers in both primary and secondary schools can become experts in the subject. History can be a very sensitive subject; it needs to be taught well by people who know it and know how to teach it.<sup>14</sup>

### *Recommendations for the AHA Executive Committee*

While there are clearly opportunities for the AHA to contribute to and support this kind of advocacy, it will need to draw on the experience and expertise of its History Teachers Association of Australia representative and other teaching contacts. The AHA may also wish to call on the expertise of other members with relevant expertise if it makes any public statement, or media-based advocacy (in *The Conversation* or elsewhere) for this work.

**Recommendation 1:** That the AHA EC consults with Megan Tucker, Anna Clark and others with relevant experience and expertise in advance of any public advocacy or statement.

**Recommendation 2:** That the AHA helps to raise awareness of this issue in forums such as *The Conversation*, *Inside Story*, and similar outputs.

Appropriate opportunities for advocacy on this matter will likely arise in the coming months. The NSW Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Education has, in its report of February 2023, formally recommended that the state set targets for 'in-field teaching' to support student success, and the collection and publication of better data on the problem of 'out-of-field teaching'.<sup>15</sup> In December 2022 a meeting of all Australian education ministers outlined the need for 'nationally consistent teacher workforce projections based on consistent standards, disaggregated at regional level and by subject specialisation, to enable a national understanding of teacher demand'.<sup>16</sup> This data will become available in late 2023 and 2024.

That data may furnish further evidence with which to make more definitive claims about structural problems in the teaching workforce.

**Recommendation 3:** That the AHA Administrative Officer report to the EC on this data when it becomes available.

The Heads of History Forum, which is next scheduled to meet at the AHA's annual conference at Flinders University on Monday 1 July 2024, is perhaps the most appropriate forum in which to

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<sup>14</sup> Deb Hull, 'What you don't know about how history is taught in Victorian schools', *Age*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/what-you-don-t-know-about-how-history-is-taught-in-victorian-schools-20220206-p59u58.html>, accessed 25 August 2023.

<sup>15</sup> NSW Legislative Council, Report 48, *Great Teachers, Great Schools: Lifting the Status of Teaching, Teacher Quality and Teacher Numbers in New South Wales*, November 2022, Recommendation 9, p. x.

<sup>16</sup> Education Ministers Meeting, *The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan*, December 2022, p. 27.

raise these matters. Although there is always plenty of other urgent business to discuss in that forum, this may well be a matter on which the Heads can shed further light.

**Recommendation 4:** That this matter be included in the agenda for the next Heads of History Forum, Flinders University, Monday 1 July 2024.

Any correspondence-based advocacy about this issue will likely need to be targeted to the federal minister for education, the Hon. Jason Clare, and to his state and territory counterparts. It may be appropriate to try and co-badge this advocacy with the History Teachers Association of Australia.

**Recommendation 5:** That the AHA writes directly to the office of the Hon. Jason Clare setting out our view of the problem, a number of remedial actions that federal and state governments could take, and requesting his reaffirmed commitment to expertise in primary and secondary history and humanities teaching, and specifically history as a stand-alone subject. The letter should advocate for the minimum standard of a History minor as a prerequisite for Years 7 to 10 history teaching, and a major for Years 11 and 12 history teaching, along with at least one core unit in Australian history for primary school teachers. Using the language of the University Accord, the letter should advocate for greater opportunities and funding for training and professional development opportunities for out-of-field teachers, and an affirmation of micro-credential courses as appropriate vehicles for supporting out-of-field history teachers.

**Recommendation 6:** That the AHA approach the HTAA with a view to longer term joint advocacy on this issue, including the possible co-accreditation of micro-credential courses.

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