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Teachers are the key to lifting productivity - but how to help the teachers?

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"I think we'd get a bigger lift if we start off just with mathematics at primary school. I get worried people don't understand the curriculum aspect of this," says Ben Jensen of Learning First. **Brock Perks**

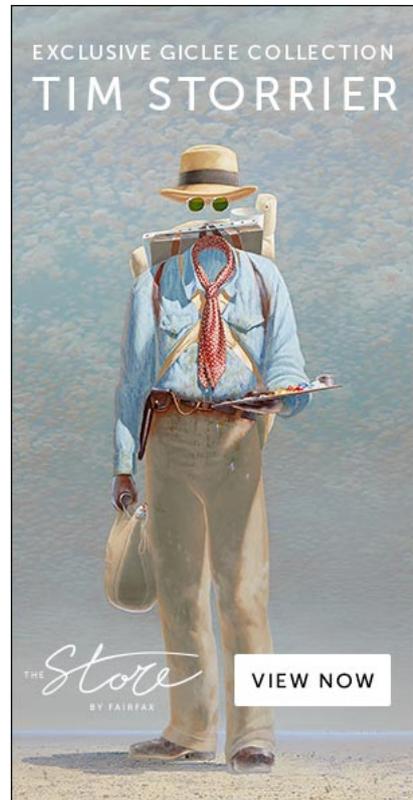
by Robert Bolton

There is a morale crisis for people going into teaching, according to the head of The Australian Catholic University, and author of a key report on teacher training, Greg Craven.

Professor Craven says there are massive falls in the number of people going into teaching courses at university. In Victoria enrolments dropped by 20 per cent last year and in NSW they're down by 30 per cent over the past three years. And there is widespread evidence that entry-point ATARs are falling – pointing to a lower level of achievement for new teaching students.

Professor Craven was chairman of the 2014 report *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers*, which produced a series of recommendations to lift teacher capabilities – all but one of which were accepted by the federal government.

The dismal assessment comes as the government tries to respond to last week's innovation report on the future of the economy which said the key to growth was improving teacher training.



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Australia 2030 sees a weakness in the curriculum.

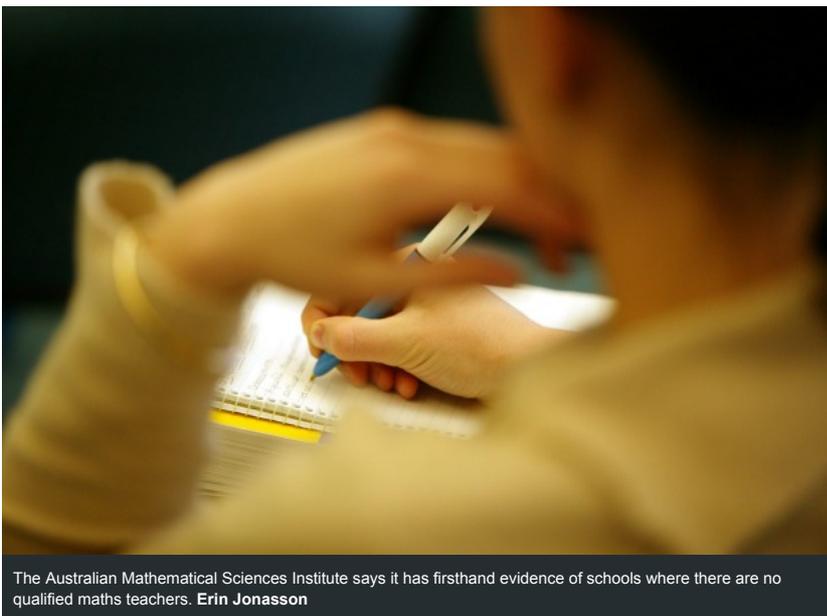
Australia 2030 Prosperity Through Innovation listed five "imperatives" for accelerating productivity – the first of these, ahead of R&D, industry policy, government and culture, was education. The key recommendation was to invest in the professional development of teachers and school leaders.

This touched a raw nerve in the education sector.

The issue attracting most attention is reducing the number of so-called in out-of-field teachers. Nearly 40 per cent of Australia's maths teachers do not have a mathematics-related degree. The minimum requirement is a quarter of their first-year and a quarter of their second-year tertiary study be maths related. That and a teaching diploma is enough to put someone in charge of a maths classroom at a secondary school.

'The information is not gathered'

Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute director Geoff Prince says the first step is to audit for maths and science teacher qualifications. He says Australia needs a better idea of the educational standards people have when they go into uni and the qualifications they exit with.



The Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute says it has firsthand evidence of schools where there are no qualified maths teachers. **Erin Jonasson**

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"You would think this would happen," says Prince. "But the information is not gathered. What's registered is that a person has a bachelor of education. But the discipline in which they have their pedagogy is not registered. There is a definition of what it means to be a qualified teacher but the state registration boards won't be able to tell you what specific skills a teacher has."

Once there is a uniform, transparent standard for new entrants something has to be done for the vast number of under-qualified people already in the system.

Out-of-field maths teachers should be given time and money to re-skill. Ideally that would mean doing a university maths certificate or diploma.

"Professional development has a technical meaning: getting a qualification. But people need opportunity and incentives. Teachers are flat-out. I have the greatest respect for teachers. Out-of-field are doing it tough," he says.

Learning First, an education consultancy, says professional development is important but it's not the best starting point. The wider issue is whether the curriculum is pushing teachers and students in the right direction. For example in recent years there's been increasing emphasis on teaching STEM subjects at primary and secondary level. A better result might be achieved by focusing just on maths – especially at primary level – and letting other subjects follow once a basic skill set has been taught.

"If we say we need all these things in primary school we will get very poor outcomes," says Learning First chief executive Ben Jensen.

"We have to understand there is a sequence, there is a staging and there are building blocks. We don't just want an injection of STEM at every level. I think we'd get a bigger lift if we start off just with mathematics at primary school. I get worried people don't understand the curriculum aspect of this."

Professor Craven says despite the morale crisis it's wrong to be too gloomy. People often compare Australia globally and find fault. "But compared to Shanghai, do we want our kids in school 27 hours a day? Without sport and without mates?"



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