

E. So are educators leaving? - Attrition issues

One disgruntled teacher (Stroud, 2022) is symptomatic of the attrition claims by internet bloggers. She argued that teachers were now leaving because schools operate under a business model, treating students as customers and teachers as expendable and being told rather than working as “autonomous professionals tasked with the unique and complex responsibility of guiding young people’s learning.” She cites some anecdotes about teachers not being respected, trusted, or valued, claiming that the expectations have become too great, there is too much stress and lack of job security, increased casualisation, and class sizes are too large. But, of course, these claims have been made since teaching began, so what is the evidence?

Many claims about teachers intending to and leaving the profession are based on a misleading question: ‘Do you intend to stay in the profession over the next 5 or 10 years’. This is highly misleading and has a zero correlation ($r = .03$, Gundlach, 2021) with actual leaving behaviour (except when the question is “Do you intend to leave within the next year?”. When asked the opposite question – How many more years do you intend to work in schools, OECD TALIS data indicate that Australian teachers intend to work as a teacher for another 16.3 years (above the TALIS average).

An online survey of 930 Australian K-12 teachers noted that teachers stayed in the profession because of their connections with students, positive collegial relations, and because of financial commitments (e.g., mortgage). The reasons for leaving a school included the positive (promotion, new role, new challenge) and the negative (poor department or school culture). Gundlach (2021) concluded that the top reasons for attrition was “a poor culture of the department or school, dissatisfaction with working hours and workload, superior pay and benefits elsewhere, superior career prospects in other industries, a lack of connection with students, and a loss of passion for teaching.” Leadership, collegial issues, and lack of professional growth opportunities were the major reasons for leaving one school for another.

Gundlach (2023) completed a meta-analysis of 186 studies on reasons for leaving and staying in a school and the profession. The bottom line is that teachers leave due to conflicts with leaders and stay because of their keenness to teach their students. Similarly, school leadership and collegiality have large effects on intentions to stay in schools ($r=.39$) and stay in the profession (.28). No surprise, teachers who are satisfied with their jobs are much less likely to intend to leave or leave (.20). Satisfaction with being a teacher was a function of autonomy (.30), presence of school behaviour systems (.37), quality and quantity of professional development (.22). They also stay for the salary reasons (.47, the alternatives jobs are not necessarily as secure or as highly paid). In addition, there were lower relations for mentoring (.06), staff-student ratios (.18), and parent relations (.00).

Leaving is not a quick decision, and often the negative reactions build over time, such as low job satisfaction (-.54), lack of commitment to the profession (-.68), depersonalisation (-.46), burnout (-.59), lower self-efficacy (-.26), lack of resources (-.36), and sense of safety (-.23). Special education student status (.00), students with limited English proficiency (-.19), student academic standard (-.13), and student misbehaviour (-.05) had a very small association with leaving. The major factors for staying in the profession were the availability of worthwhile professional development, and strong administrative support (but its absence close to zero for leaving). Stress, workload, and burnout often magnify the decisions to leave, but leadership conflicts lead to attrition from schools and the profession.

The Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) provides attrition rates from schools from 2017 to 2022, averaging 4.6% (<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/australian-teacher-workforce-data>). By international standards, this attrition of Australian teachers is comparatively low (AITSL Spotlight, 2022).

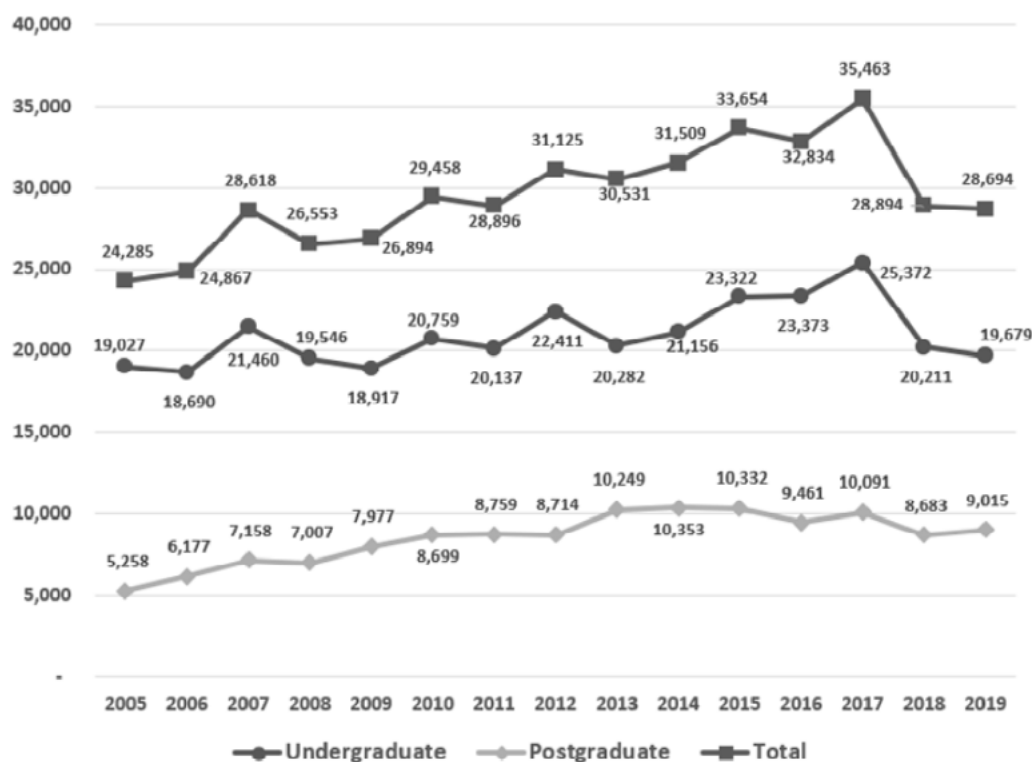
| State | Sector | Attrition | State | Sector | Attrition | | | |
|----------|------------------|-----------|----------|---------------|-----------|---------------|-------------------|------|
| Victoria | ECE | 3.2% | SA | Govt teaches | 5.7% | | | |
| | | 5.6% | | | ACT | Govt teachers | 4.5% | |
| | Primary | 4.1% | | Queensland | | | Graduate teachers | 3.6% |
| | | 4.3% | | | | | | NSW |
| | Secondary | 5.3% | | Gov Sec | 4.5% | | | |
| 4.8% | | 4.9% | | | | | | |
| Victoria | Catholic primary | 5.7% | Tasmania | Govt teachers | 1.2% | | | |
| | | 4.7% | | | 5.8% | | | |
| | Catholic sec | 7.2% | | | 1.6% | | | |
| WA | Govt teachers | 5.4% | | | | | | |

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The mobility rate across all employment categories in Australia has hovered between 8-10% since 2012 (Black & Chow, 2022). Post-COVID across Australia, 9.5% of employed people changed jobs. The post-COVID rate was highest in professional jobs for 20 to 30-year-old workers, and about 10% more than pre-COVID years left to get a better job or just wanted a change. Black and Chow (2022) concluded that “the increase in job switching appears to be partly driven by strong labour demand for some high-skilled jobs, coupled with workers catching up on planned job changes put on hold during the pandemic. High levels of job switching tend to be associated with higher wages, both at the individual and aggregate level, in a tight labour market.” Educators have maintained a much lower attrition rate, although there are hints this may increase and is worth watching.

Some people worry about the retirement rate, and there are often claims it is a major contribution to the supply issues. However, in 2020, 18% of teachers were 60+ and thus likely to retire within 5-10 years, but 18% were in their first five years – hence there remains a balancing of the retirement exodus.

Others are concerned about numbers in initial teacher education. Everyone seems to have the solution for ITE, yet first-year teachers contribute less than 3% of the school workforce, and any changes to ITE have very long lead times to see improvements. The pipeline into teaching from ITE has been declining since 2017. Compared to the peak in 2019, undergraduate commencements have dropped by 22% and postgraduate by 11%. The major reason is not related to requiring higher or lower entry standards, but the rise from 2005 to 2017 was mainly due to removing the caps on the number of students. Universities were permitted to enroll, but in 2017 a freeze was implemented, and funding was capped at the 2017 level.



Since 2017, the completion of the course degree has dropped 12% (7% UG and 20% PG), and the PG drop has been particularly noted since 2015 when there was a move from a 1- to 2-year program. This drop, however, is not a reason to lower standards but to find more efficient ways to complete the Masters or Bachelors program in a shorter time (e.g., making the two-year PG degree able to be completed within one year foregone earnings and having more paid apprenticeship in schools during the program – provided both the ITEs and schools collectively support the teaching in situ).

The problem seems less about the numbers coming into the profession and less about the major (in many ways misleading) claims about the increase in attrition, but how do we make it attractive for students considering careers to choose teaching? This begs whether our profession recognises, esteems, and rewards expertise. As the Grattan report (2022) demonstrated, those students in the top 30% of the school population are most aware that after 5-10 years as a teacher, their salaries rapidly decrease relative to moving into other professions. They are smart, not choosing to teach. Herein lies a serious problem.