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NEW RESEARCH REVEALS WHY TEACHERS ARE LEAVING PROFESSION

New research led by Federation University Australia's Professor Robyn Brandenburg has provided a detailed insight into the reasons why large numbers of teachers continue to leave their profession.

Professor Brandenburg and a team comprised of researchers from University of Southern Queensland, University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney conducted the research which analysed feedback from 255 respondents located across Australia.

Why are teachers leaving?

The research confirmed that teacher attrition is a complex problem, with no single standout contributing factor making teachers leave their profession. Workload, excessive administration, and a lack of respect were all cited as contributing factors, often accumulating over years to drive teachers to make the difficult decision to leave.

Many former teachers stated that their decision to leave teaching was not a rash one; many took months if not years to make the decision to leave.

The following statement from one former teacher summarises the various pressures teachers face.

"As a teacher you have never done enough. You work and work and work, creating, thinking, planning to get the best for each student and it's still never enough. You still can't help so many students, you never satisfy the administration load and so much pressure by parents. When you are a high achieving person, teaching sets you up for failure because you are never enough for everybody."

The results show that teachers from across the career spectrum from early career to midcareer are leaving, creating a dearth of experienced, talented expert teachers.

Where are they going?

Ninety per cent of the respondents are still working after leaving the teaching profession, while 4 per cent retired. Those that are still working are employed in the following areas:

- Forty per cent are still employed in early/primary/secondary education as learning designers, consulting and other non-teaching roles.
- Twenty per cent transitioned to higher education roles.
- Ten per cent of teachers walked away from education altogether.
- The remaining ex-teachers stayed involved in work closely connected to helping people such as social work, coaching, counselling and the well-being industry.

Broad range of respondents surveyed

The research gathered data from across the whole of Australia, with teachers based in metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

Most of the teachers surveyed were based in metropolitan areas (Sixty percent), followed by regional (thirty-five per cent) and rural areas (thirteen percent).

Victoria had the most respondents, with forty-five percent of the teachers located in the state.

The majority of leavers (seventy percent) were in the secondary school system, compared to thirty percent of primary school teachers. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have been an active time for teachers to leave the profession, with sixty-four percent of respondents reporting that they left between 2019-2022.

While over half of those that exited the teaching profession were classroom teachers; a total of 40% were in positions of leadership.

Positive findings and next steps

Although the research showed a significant number of teachers had left the profession, eighty per cent of respondents stated that they had maintained their teacher registration – potentially leaving the door open to a future return. When asked specifically if they would return, half of the respondents were ‘undecided’.

A large percentage of respondents were still passionate about education, finding alternative roles within the sector ensuring that they could still contribute to educating the next generation.

Given the insights provided by their recent work, the researchers, led by Professor Robyn Brandenburg have been invited to a National Forum to present this research and work with other leading educator researchers to address the national teaching crisis.

Quote attributable to Professor Robyn Brandenburg, Institute of Education, Arts and Communities, Federation University

“With this new research we’ve listened to what former Australian teachers have said and it is clear that this is a complex problem that has intensified in recent years. We are now at a critical stage where teachers are leaving in droves. We know that the decision to leave was often heartfelt and agonising and made over a lengthy period of time and that the solution is not a simple fix.

“Our hope is that this research will help reveal what it might take to retain our teachers and halt this exodus. Our initial findings suggest that teachers need to be heard, acknowledged and respected for the work that they do in educating our next generation while being paid a “living wage”, together with a rethink on career opportunities and progression.”

About Federation University Australia

With a history spanning over 150 years, Federation University Australia is Victoria’s premier regional dual-sector university with campuses located in Ballarat, Berwick, Brisbane, Gippsland and Wimmera. From 2018-2022 Federation ranked first in Australia for first-generation student enrolments. In a first for Australia, the globally recognised co-operative education model will be embedded across all Federation programs from 2025.