

# A brick wall at DoE - A game of snakes and no ladders

Allan Jones

*Editor's note: Although this story was written in February 2016 it provides us with an important insight into current requirements for employment as a teacher.*

I offer the following as an example of how the aged are no longer welcome in the workforce in spite of the apparent encouragement of our political leaders to do so. I have framed it as a game of snakes and ladders although in my experience there were no ladders. I had assumed that my starting position was at the top of the game having managed to forge a very successful career in education only to find that, at every step along the way to re-joining the workforce, I would be forced to the bottom of the board after encountering a snake at almost stage of the process.

My story goes...

Along with most of my colleagues in the old super scheme (SSS) I decided, after seeking extensive and expert advice, to retire at 60 years of age and take out the full, and very generous, pension. At the time, and in response to many questions from interested folk about what would I do in retirement, I gave my "five pillars" of retirement speech, i.e. I would find:

- Something to do – mainly building projects, many large scale, at home and at the homes of my children and friends
- Something to play and keep fit – golf 2 to 3 times a week, cycling, running, walking etc
- Someone to help – some charity work or assisting others in need
- Somewhere to travel – drive around Australia, go to distant countries etc
- Something to believe in – take an ethical and moral stance on human issues.

At the end of last year, some eight years on, I felt a yearning in the 'something to do' department as I had completed almost all of the projects I had set out to achieve and my back was telling me that my days of heavy construction work were drawing to a close. Travel was limited by a medical condition that had arisen and my golf was not improving.

Now that my part pension had been removed and I had no impediment to earning an income I decided that I should apply to DET to re-enter the teaching workforce as I still felt I had something to contribute to education.

And that is when I discovered that I had become persona non grata and was now playing a game of snakes with no ladders with DET and BOSTES. My 38 years of employment with DET and other educational agencies now amounted to nought.

My application with both DET and BOSTES would be based on the premise that after a five year period of absence from the classroom I no longer had anything to distinguish me from a graduate teacher. Indeed when I enquired of a DET teach.NSW representative she told me that much had changed in teaching and I would basically need to start again. No provision for recognition of prior learning existed and it was back to Square 1 that I went. She did add that I must now realise how silly I was not to have done at least one day of casual teaching each year as a means of keeping my status. I replied that unless kids had now grown two heads and spoke in an alien language then I did possess a substantial skill set that deserved to be recognised. Her reply was that they now used smart boards in schools and that it was quite different to when I last taught.

A substantial slide down the board on the first snake of despair.

However, I accepted that I needed to get the process started as I was only interested in doing the odd day here and there as a casual teacher and I would see from there where that led. And so, swallowing my pride, I headed down to the RMS to apply for my Working with Children Check and paid my \$80 for 5 years' worth of clearance.

I then went online to BOSTES to seek accreditation and began to compile the necessary documentation required by them. After having the originals of this certified by a JP I sent in this documentary proof that I had been and was indeed a teacher. As a backup I rang BOSTES and advised them that DET would have all the information that they required. They in turn advised me that I would have to contact DET and get them to send this information to them. The BOSTES officer was somewhat taken aback with my suggestion that, as they were both state government agencies, surely they had access to the same information as they both knew my teaching number and clearly had access to it. The reply was very much "the computer says NO".

My second slide down a snake and a deepening feeling of despair.

In response to my question as to how much documentation was required to establish my qualifications as a teacher I was advised (and I should add that DET provided me with the same advice) that I only needed to provide evidence of my original training (i.e. B.A Syd Uni. and Dip.Ed. STC). I did not need to provide my further training of a B.Ec (UNE) or M.Ed (UWS).

I obligingly contacted a teach.NSW manager and asked if a copy of my record could be sent to BOSTES and this was agreed to – only for me to find out later that my file could not be located. As I had the necessary documents I was not overly concerned with this although I did wonder that if a complaint about some form of child abuse had been alleged against me would the file still be unable to be located.

My next step was to complete an online application to teach with DET. Again as a backup I contacted the teach.NSW officer and spoke about my disappointment that there was no recognition of prior learning. To retire as a principal, having been awarded an OAM for my service to education and made a life member of the State Principals' Council, would surely have some weight. Not only this, but the fact that within the last five years I had been delivering training and development programs in school (TLSI, principal mentoring), had been selected to work for DET International to review 328 principals in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, acted as a university advisor to graduate teachers for UWS as well as other functions for DET, also amounted to nought. I was to be a first year out probationary teacher on **Band 1** of the salary scale.

I landed on the third snake and a further slide down the board.

I then waited expectantly for my provisional accreditation to arrive by email from BOSTES only to receive an email stating that my supporting documents were incomplete as my Diploma in Teaching from Sydney Teachers College did not contain "your teacher education program or evidence of your teaching methods/subjects". I contacted BOSTES to inform them that the transcript I supplied was the one Sydney University had supplied to me (and luckily my wife had kept a copy). My application stated clearly that I was a secondary trained teacher who had taught for 38 years in secondary school in the HSIE KLA. The BOSTES officer's response to that was that the documentation does not support that and there was no means to determine if I was primary or secondary trained. After pleading with the officer for this insanity to stop she agreed that she would accept a statutory declaration that I was indeed a secondary trained teacher.

Another bad throw and I had landed on another snake. This snake almost took me back to the very start of the game and the edge of my sanity.

Embarrassingly I prepared a statutory declaration, had it witnessed, and duly sent it to BOSTES.

My DET application was now almost ready and I determined that I should take all of the documents they required to the Blacktown Office to be handed in to the officer in person. One last requirement was that I

needed two people who were not relatives to vouch for my fitness to teach children and act as referees. Two SASS members of my last school (it was the first day back this year and the teaching staff were flat out) said they would be honoured to do so and completed the paperwork. When I arrived at Blacktown my documents were taken in the foyer and photocopied as required. The two references were discarded as unnecessary and I was advised to wait for confirmation of my approval. A week later I received an email from teach.NSW that my documents were incomplete as they were awaiting the BOSTES accreditation.

Another snake but this time only a small slide down the board as I knew that my statutory declaration would carry the day and all would be good. Or so I thought!

A week passed and an email arrived from BOSTES advising that I had been granted provisional accreditation. But DETs previous email had stated that they needed a certified copy of my accreditation from BOSTES. BOSTES had sent me an email with an attachment of the accreditation and I would not ask a JP to certify that an attachment on my computer constituted an original document. I emailed BOSTES and asked for a hard copy only to be advised that BOSTES did not send hard copies. I then took three deep breaths and emailed my accreditation email on to DET. It worked. They accepted it as if there was no problem in spite of their written direction to applicants to send a certified copy of the original.

Not a ladder but at least confirmation that the game was not all downward slides. Or so I thought!

The BOSTES accreditation stated that the subjects I was approved to teach in NSW schools were Geography and Modern History.

I was NOT approved to teach Commerce, Economics and Legal Studies.

I mistakenly ignored this thinking that DET had at least some record of my training and teaching (at the very least as supplied by me) that confirmed that I had taught Economics, Legal Studies and Commerce over many years. I have a B.Ec from UNE that includes Economics 2 and 3 as well as Economic Statistics. My statutory declaration stated that I had completed teaching methods in Economics and Commerce (Legal Studies did not exist in 1969). Again how wrong can you be. DET provided me with an Interim Casual Approval listing my approved teaching subjects as History (Modern), History (Years 7-10) and Geography. I HAVE NEVER TAUGHT HISTORY AT EITHER THE JUNIOR OR SENIOR LEVEL. I have however marked HSC over many years (from 1971 – 2000) in Geography, Economics and Legal Studies. NO HISTORY. I have asked for this to be rectified. But to date have received no reply.

This was the cruelest snake of all. Again my career counted for nought. I had slid back to a position on the board where I not even begun. I was ready for a primal scream.

I have an interview to determine my suitability for employment as a teacher with DET on the 29 February at which point I will raise these very same issues with the interviewing senior officer. Probably not the best time to raise such issues but this has been galling to say the least and I need to be heard. Those who know me know that I have ample amounts of patience. But the process that I have experienced in simply wanting to re-enter the teaching profession and do what I do well has denied my very existence as a dedicated teacher, effectively making me almost persona non grata. My patience is spent.

I acknowledge that the teaching profession has changed, especially with the role of accreditation, and I support the changes that would strengthen the quality of teachers. That an outcome of these changes would be that older teachers wishing to re-enter teaching would be forced to begin their careers afresh without any acknowledgement of their experience and training is unconscionable, as it would be in other professions where recognition of prior learning is considered to be a vital part of the process of re-employment and re-engagement of older professionals.

I am happy for this story to be disseminated as it may allow others considering the same path to learn from my experiences. I should also add that I am taking this up with my local State member and, pending

whether it gets a hearing, will take it to the local Federal member as the matter has equal relevance across state boundaries.

### **Contributor details**

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Allan was deputy principal and then principal of St Clair High School from 1992-2008. Since retirement he has worked in various capacities for DET, including leadership training, principal mentoring and an exotic role with DET International where, as part of a team of recently retired principals, he was a senior interviewer for the Abu Dhabi School Leadership Program. He now enjoys a number of voluntary roles within his community, the occasional game of golf and reminiscing about the 1960's and the groovy clothes and dance moves as captured in the photograph.