# ATARs, Zombie ideas & Sir Robert Menzies

### **Robert Lewis**

The December media frenzy over low standards of entry to teaching degrees has become an annual event on Australia's news media calendar. The 2019 headlines were unforgiving: Teachers Fail Up! Sub-par students let into teaching degrees, and ATAR of 50? No Problem-Study Teaching [sic]. Commenting on the news that the Australian Catholic University, the University of Canberra and the University of Newcastle were lowering their ATARs – Australian Tertiary Admissions Rankings – to 49.65, 48.30 and 53.45 respectively, the NSW Education Minister Sarah Mitchell made the extraordinary acknowledgement, 'Some universities are not doing their best to properly prepare teachers for our schools' (Harris, 2019).

Launched in 2010 by the Gillard Labor Government, the ATAR system is the first national unified system for reporting the educational attainment of successive cohorts of Year 12 school leavers. The system is widely regarded as fit for purpose, being both predictive of academic success and rates of completion (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017; Marks, 2007; Wilson, 2020; Shulruf et al., 2018). An ATAR is a ranking on a scale from 0.05 (lowest) to 99.95 (highest), based on a complex algorithm informed by a 50:50 composite of final year exam results and school assessments. The median ATAR depends upon the participation-retention rate of the cohort. In theory, if there were 100 per cent participation, the median-average would be ATAR 50. However, retention rates hover at around 80-90 per cent, falling to around 65 per cent in regional, rural and remote areas. Lower participation rates elevate the median to about ATAR 70. Generally speaking, an ATAR > 80 is well-regarded, whereas an ATAR < 50 places a student in the bottom 30 per cent of the cohort, and therefore far less likely to have the requisite foundation literacy-numeracy skills necessary to meet the demands of tertiary study.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Australian Institute for

Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) infer the minimum entry standards for initial teacher education be set at ATAR 80 and above, drawing prospective teachers from among the best and the brightest. However, this is not the trend, and neither side of politics has a serious national plan to redeem falling standards. Moreover, since its inception, the ATAR system has become increasingly politicised and dragged into 'culture wars' over access, funding, standards and social justice. The aim of this commentary is to highlight the profound systemic problems of falling standards in school student outcomes; in part due to lowered ATARs as well as problematic standards in teacher education.

## Lowered university admission rankings

In 2012, the Gillard Labor Government ushered in the demand-driven domestic market with the idea of increasing access to university degrees for disadvantaged low socioeconomic status (SES) school leavers. With a nudge from the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008), Gillard removed capped funding and discipline quotas on Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs), except medicine. Opportunistically, many universities and colleges lowered ATAR entry requirements to boost their intakes of domestic students, especially in cheapto-run degree programs like teacher education (as well as health, IT and business studies), thus securing the lucrative CSP revenue stream. Between 2009 and 2016, there was a 33 per cent increase in domestic undergraduate enrolments. (Birmingham, 2017).

The trend continued, despite some limitations on funding imposed by the Morrison Government in 2018, not long before release of the Productivity Commission's report: *The Demand Driven University System: A Mixed Report Card* (2019). The Productivity Commission report attributed the significant and rapid enrolment expansion to deregulation

and found that institutions other than the Group of Eight (Go8) procured most of the 'additional students' - an estimated 191,000 between 2009 and 2017 - who would not have attended but for lower standards of entry. Those students were mostly low SES applicants drawn from government secondary schools with low ATAR scores (< 70), many of whom lacked foundation literacy and numeracy skills and 'underperformed academically,' dropping out 'at rates of 57 to 70 per cent higher than other students'. The report stopped short of suggesting caps or quotas be reintroduced but acknowledged that targeting low SES disadvantaged students was not in their best interests due to high rates of attrition, low rates of completion, loss of income, accrued private debt, and so on (Productivity Commission, 2019, p. 37).

The findings of the Commission's report fundamentally contradict the then Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan's logic-defying proposition that low-ATAR degrees are a viable means for redressing social and educational disadvantage. In his speech at the Sydney Morning Herald School Summit on 25 February 2019, the Minister talked up the Morrison Government's approach to 'closing the gap', a key component of which entails supporting local Indigenous secondary students to gain access to teaching degrees and eventually supply local schools (Tehan, 2019). It sounds like a compelling progressive agenda, however if these students lack foundation literacy and numeracy skills, how are they expected to engage, participate and complete training?

The Productivity Commission signals very clearly that taking low SES educationally disadvantaged students as low-ATAR entrants into teaching degrees, or any degree, is a high-risk strategy with predictably low returns - a strategy most likely to fail many of these students who are unprepared for academic studies. The report states that 'improving the preparation of university students requires raising the skills of school students', that is prior to entry; but the Minister argues that skills prior to entry are less important than skills-sets after four years of university study (Hunter, 2019). He is adamant it is all about 'outputs rather than inputs'. The report reaffirms the widelyheld-view that even a four-year degree cannot compensate for 12 years of educational underachievement. It suggests that, beginning with pre-school students, the logical approach is to build their foundation literacy-numeracy skills step-by-step, especially during the formative primary school years, and that this development is a necessary preparation for secondary and higher education (Productivity Commission, 2019. p.15). This is a widely-held opinion also evidenced by recent research (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011).

Regardless of public pressure, the Minister has not recanted, doggedly determined that low-ATAR degrees remain a permanent feature of the landscape, justified in terms of a highly problematic social justice agenda that raises special pleading to a new low. His position is not evidence-based, but ideologically motivated and politically expedient. In the absence of a commitment to fund higher education teaching and research properly, he persists with the demand-driven market model with its inherent flaws and contradictions. In 2016, the then NSW Education Minister, Adrian Piccoli, conceded that after Gillard, 'universities were using teaching degrees as cash cows to accumulate Commonwealth government funding through HECS debts.' He said, 'universities were putting their reputations at risk, and there was no excuse for admitting such large numbers of substandard students' (Bagshaw & Ting, 2016; Hunter, 2019). It beggars belief that, in pursuing this policy, no consideration is given to the profound and predictable impact on the teaching profession, teaching standards and student learning outcomes.

# Falling standards in schools

Ten years ago, David Gonski, author of the Review of Funding for Schools (2011), highlighted the 'unacceptable link between low levels of achievement and educational disadvantage, particularly among students of low SES and Indigenous backgrounds' (Gonski et al., 2011, p. xiii). He signalled that 'a concerning proportion of Australia's lowest performing students are not meeting minimum standards of achievement'. He was not the first, nor would he be the last to register the problem. Twelve months later, former WA Premier Carmen Lawrence wrote:

Australia's school system is widely-recognised to be one of the most unequal in the world. The link between student background and educational achievement is more marked in this country. On average, differences in students' backgrounds accounted for some 55 per cent in performance differences between schools across OECD countries, but in Australia the figure is around 68 per cent (Lawrence, 2012).

Ten years ago, Gonski recommended that 'a systemic effort' was necessary to remedy the crisis. Clearly successive national governments of both political persuasions have not done enough in this space. Predictably, recent reports evidence the results of historical neglect and dysfunctional intervention.

The 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that Australian students' results in reading, science and maths were all in long-term decline. Back in 2003, Australia was ranked third in reading, fourth in science and ninth in mathematics, behind Japan but ahead of Switzerland. Sixteen years later Australia is ranked 12th in reading, tenth in science and 20th in maths. In the latest 2018 study only 54 per cent of 15 year olds attained the national proficiency standard in mathematical literacy, a downward trend that is said to be 'equal to the loss of more than a year's worth of schooling [since 2003]', positioning Australia alongside Latvia, Russia and the Slovak Republic, leaving our students more than three years behind their Beijing-Shanghai peers and three years

behind Singapore (Thomson *et al.*, 2019). The PISA national project manager, Sue Thomson, has said, 'This has got to be a wake-up call' (Baker, 2019).

The 2018 and 2019 NAPLAN further evidenced the same downward trend. Aside from marginal improvements in mathematics for Year 3 and 5 (above 2008 levels) there was a continued decline in writing skills among Year 7 and 9 students (below the 2011 baseline). Nearly one-in-three Year 4 primary school students did not meet the intermediate literacy benchmark, 36 per cent in Year 8. The Grattan Institute's Peter Goss has said, 'In Year 7 a third of the kids might still be in that learning-to-read stage and yet they are expected to start covering more and more content.' He added, 'Secondary school teachers are not specialists in teaching kids how to

read. Even if individual literacy problems were identified, they are unlikely to be fixed. The 2015 Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) had Australian students flatlining in mathematics and science, with conspicuous gaps in achievement between

Indigenous and non-Indigenous students remaining as they were 20 years ago! (Thomson *et al.*, 2017; Martin, 2019)

The PISA scores also highlighted falling standards at the extremities of the performative scale, among the brightest students at the top and those at the bottom end, suggesting that this downward trend is sector blind and system-wide. Rachel Wilson, University of Sydney academic, whose recent report, *A Profession at Risk* (2020), highlights declining conditions for teaching and learning in NSW schools, made the comment: 'When we look broadly across Australian education at the moment, there are lots of really disturbing indicators in terms of declines in performance... Those indicators are systemwide, they're not [only] among disadvantaged students, and they're across all states and territories' (Robinson, 2018).

The Director of the Australian Mathematical and Sciences Institute (AMSI), Tim Brown, has also raised the alarm over falling standards across secondary schools, signalling the critical shortfall in secondary maths and science teacher numbers. Brown has said that 'urgent action is needed to strengthen the teacher workforce and reverse the trend' (Watson, 2019).

In Federal Parliament on 19 December 2019 the call for urgent action was met with bullet-point apologia from the Education Minister, who boasted of the billions being spent on Australian schools – disproportionately less on public/government schools – while countries like Estonia, he maintained, have achieved more with less (Hull, 2019). Evidently, the Minister would have the public believe that the national crisis in school education is not his problem as

responsibility rests not with the Federal Government, but elsewhere in the system. For many observers the Minister is not part of the solution.

# Declining standards in teacher education

Dr Rachel Wilson has published extensively on ATARs and the teaching profession. She makes the elemental point that 'within teacher professional accountability systems internationally, both assurance of high standards and stability in those standards are minimum starting points for successful education systems' (Wilson, 2020, p. 5). However, many students enrolled in teaching are of an 'unknown academic standard'. In 2017, applicants' ATARs were reported for

only 17 per cent of the cohort entering teaching degrees, and no other indicators were available. 'More than 65 per cent of entrants would have an ATAR granted within the prior two years, but this data was not recorded if entry was on a basis other than ATAR'

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(Wilson, 2020, p. 9).

The available data shows that, for teacher education, the number of low-ATAR entrants (between ATAR 30-50) has increased five-fold over the past decade; and those between ATAR 51-60 has tripled. Those with ATARs of between 70 to 90 have fallen. Only 51 per cent of high ATAR students who began their studies in 2012 completed within six years. Teaching is a minimum three-year program. Overall, completion rates for low-ATAR entrants are much lower than among those with higher ATARs (Baker, 2020). Lowest completion rates are among those enrolled in online courses. Over the past two decades, some initial teacher education providers have moved away from dedicated primary or secondary degrees to 'one-size-fits-all' three or four-year programs; a retrograde trend seen to be a further consequence of market forces.

When the quality of recruited undergraduates declines and 'less able' graduates enter the school system, their lack of expertise, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy pedagogy and STEM, can profoundly impact student learning outcomes (Wilson, 2020, p. 35; Fitzgerald & Knipe, 2016). Wilson and Mack (2014) have reported on the contracting numbers of primary and secondary students studying STEM, and the commensurate increase in school leavers undertaking teacher education degrees without achieving adequate maths or science, a trend which is likely to generate 'a vicious cycle of declining engagement' (Wilson & Mack, 2014, p. 35). The reverse of this trend is always a possible alternative (Wilson, 2020, p. 48). However, since the rapid expansion in initial

teacher education programs post-2012, reportedly there has been a corresponding rapid decline in the quality of provision and graduate outcomes (Maslen, 2013; Lloyd, 2013).

In 2014, only two years after the onset of the demanddriven system, the Tertiary Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) reported, 'National standards are weakly applied' across the 48 providers of initial teacher education programs. 'Whilst there are examples of excellent practice, there are also significant pockets of objectively poor practice'. Furthermore, programs were operating 'without providing practical teaching experience in schools.' The review noted that there were 'gaps in crucial information (such as ATAR entry data)' and 'insufficient support for beginning teachers.' Recommendation 2 stated reassuringly (!), 'The Australian government acts on the sense of urgency [sic] to immediately commence implementing actions to lift the quality of initial teacher education... The full impact of the implementation of the Accreditation Standards will not be in place until 2023' (Craven et al., 2014. p. xvii, emphasis added)! Australian Catholic University Vice-Chancellor Greg Craven told the press, 'There is no doubt that some courses are substandard... Some universities may stop offering teaching degrees altogether and that would be a good thing [sic]... The process of accreditation is much laxer than we would like. We have excellent national standards - the problem is they are not being applied.' But TEMAG were soft on transparency and standards, and solid on institutional self-regulation. On the question of low-ATAR entry, Craven lined up with the Minister, 'You can't select quality teachers by looking at a mark branded on their forehead [ATAR] when they are 17 [years old]. What matters is how teachers come out of university, not how they go in' (Knott & Cook, 2015).

In 2015, facing a tsunami of public criticism, concerns that initial teacher education graduates were unprepared and complaints that 'some programs lacked rigour', the then Federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne resorted to the unprecedented introduction of a pre-graduation literacynumeracy test (Hurst, 2014; Knott & Cook, 2015). It was and remains an extraordinary admission of failure on the part of government - a self-evidently damning proposition - the necessity of testing the basic literacy and numeracy skills of prospective teachers just weeks prior to graduation! In 2016, when the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE) was first implemented, one-in-ten pre-graduates failed to pass! The following year the failure rate dropped to five per cent (Doyle, 2017). In 2018 it was back up to ten per cent. Late 2019 private tutoring colleges reported an influx of enquiries from pregraduates (prospective teachers) wishing to improve their English and maths skills before sitting the LANTITE. All of this presents woefully poor optics around the quality of undergraduates exiting initial teacher education programs, raising doubts about the quality of prospective teachers in training as well as many who have already entered the national school system.

## The politicisation of ATARs

In September 2018, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) obtained a confidential report that showed that applicants with an ATAR 19 or below were being admitted to teacher education degrees. The author, retired professor John Mack, released the data and commented, 'It was clearly not in the interest of universities to make this data available, [as] it evidences that the general quality of applicants has gone down'; he added, 'It was worrying that offers were made to students that would have exceptional difficulty coping with first-year university' (Robinson, 2018). His report also suggested the scale of the problem was much greater than expected. For instance, in 2015, 'students who scored in the bottom thirty percent of school leavers, with an ATAR 50 or less, made up half of all those offered places in teaching degrees' (Conifer, 2019). Mack's leak to the media was clearly in the public interest, as breached accreditation standards were reported as early as 2013 but no action was taken (Ingvarson, 2013; Craven, et al., 2014).

In a number of significant reviews supposed to investigate falling standards in teacher education, ATARs did not rate a mention – a remarkable omission (TEMAG, 2013; Bahr & Mellor, 2016). Other studies acknowledged that the ATAR system had become highly politicised, even if conceding the inherent utility of ATARs. Notably, some Victorian universities and colleges abandoned ATAR-based selection, adopting instead psychometric or personality testing (Lloyd, 2013; Wurf & Croft-Piggin, 2015), marginalising ATARs as a common currency for reporting standards of entry to teacher education.

Perhaps the most disturbing behaviour has been the overt disparagement or demonisation of the national ATAR system (Jones, 2013; Craven, et al., 2014; Devlin, 2016; Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2019; Park, et al., 2020; Zaglas, 2020). Some voices from mostly non-Go8 universities have pressed the message that 'ATARs are just a marketing tool', more or less irrelevant for entry to a university program. A prominent voice among them is the Chancellor of Western Sydney University and former Howard speech-writer Peter Shergold, who has been running the line that 'ATARs are distorting both the final years of schooling and students' subject choices', grimly declaring that 'the ATAR will face a slow death over the next five years' (Zaglas, 2020). He advocates for a new mode of matriculation, the Learner Passport, to replace ATARs (Park et al., 2020). In another op-ed piece the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University, Anne Jones, has justified lower ATARs as a 'flow-on effect' due to increased

enrolments, not the other way around: lower ATARs increasing enrolments. She concedes low ATAR entrants need to be supported, and concludes assuredly, 'That's not about dumbing down', perhaps inviting the reader to logically draw the opposite conclusion (Jones, 2013).

Increasingly ATARs are being connected with the issue of 'precarious futures' for young people, critiqued for being 'out of step' with the culture, values and incentives of the business world. The authors of Beyond ATAR – A Proposal for Change (O'Connell, 2019 ) and The Australian student voice on the soft skills needed for the future - And how universities can integrate these skills into their teaching (OUP, 2020) are touting the alternative to Shergold's Passport: learner profiles, which are supposed to replace ATARs and report an individual's competencies and 'soft skills': emotional intelligence, critical thinking and creativity. This next wave of neoliberal prescriptions is being funded by the likes of Oxford University Press, or consortia of corporates, not-for-profits and universities, their collaborations sometimes un-authored and/or subject to disclaimers to assure the reader they are thoroughly independent. Typically endorsed by a line-up of vice-chancellors, corporate high-flyers and state officials, they all enthusiastically embrace unfettered entry to the higher education marketplace, and the demise of ATARs.

Despite what some may say, the ATAR system is not broken per se (even if much abused) and doesn't need 'fixing'. According to the Productivity Commission report, 'the ATAR remains important for Year 12 applicants' entry into the most selective courses' (Productivity Commission, 2019). The Go8 and other high performing universities continue to promote high ATAR cut-offs, both for selection and to distinguish their degrees from the market competition. In so doing they maintain academic standards and the positional value of their degrees, as well as their reputation in the global and domestic marketplaces. In general, perceptions of courses and institutional reputations underscore students' selections, as course entry ATARs 'serve as a proxy for quality' in the eyes of prospective students. (Marginson, 2004, p.185)

#### Final remarks

Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman speaks of 'zombie ideas' – ideas that are not held in good faith but are 'brought to life' to undermine political debate – ideas that should have been killed off by the evidence, but just keep shambling along, negating or suppressing rational discourse. The recruitment of low-ATAR (< 50) entrants to teaching degrees is such a 'zombie idea'. The full weight of nearly a decade of low completion rates should be sufficient impetus to kill off the idea. This level of attrition speaks to the fact that a university degree cannot be both *remedial* and 'higher education', as further evidenced by the precipitous resort to pre-graduation

testing, the LANTITE, an admission that significant numbers of prospective teachers were not up to scratch! Add to this the social costs to private individuals and wastage of taxpayer dollars; then the spectacular undermining of the status of the teaching profession. Notwithstanding further disruptions due to the pandemic, it is highly unlikely that future PISA and NAPLAN studies will do anything but continue to report declines in literacy, numeracy and STEM results, as much the legacy of policy ineptitude as 'force majeure'.

Falling standards in school student education are obviously not solely attributable to 'low-ATAR teaching degrees', however teaching standards should be under the spotlight. Teachers are widely acknowledged to be the key drivers of improved learning outcomes, and so too the reverse is always possible. The renowned Brazilian educator, Paolo Freire, reminds us that we may fail in our work with predictable (even if unintended) consequences for our students.

'Incompetence, poor preparation, and irresponsibility in our practice may contribute to their [students] failure. But with responsibility, scientific preparation, and a taste [love] for teaching, with seriousness and testimony to struggle against injustice, we can also contribute to the gradual transformation of learners into strong presences in the world.' (Freire, 2005, p.62)

The actual impact/s of ten years of 'low-ATAR teaching degrees' are impossible to quantify in meaningful terms, given the lack of transparency around ATAR reporting. The continuing practice of recruiting applicants below the published ATAR settings via alternative pathways, matureage entry, 'forced offers' and the like, impedes accountability around standards, falling or otherwise. Ten years ago, before the rise of the demand-driven market, there were legitimate concerns around the underrepresentation of disadvantaged minorities and low SES students. Today there is no doubt that this 'progressive agenda' has improved the numbers, but at what cost? Some public good has surely been served where academically competitive low SES students have achieved and completed degrees. But there is a sense in which credentialing and market economics, when applied to higher education, no longer confer upon the recipient any guarantees of employability. Recent graduates are taking jobs that not so long ago might have gone to high school graduates. When all is said and done, neither neoliberal prescriptions nor higher education are necessarily the solution for the vicissitudes of global capitalism in the throes of stagnation, still capable of producing unparalleled profits and pauperisation (Means,

For the Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan to acknowledge publicly the crises and instabilities in the national education system might prompt further questioning around falling standards, and the interrogation of his legacy and that of his predecessors. There is perhaps no less

disturbing evidence of crisis and instability than high attrition in teacher education programs and among those graduating and recruited into schools. Recent reports estimate that some 30-50 per cent of teachers entering the school system leave within five years (Dadvand & Dawborn-Gundlach, 2020). High staff turnover most profoundly disrupts the education of students attending majority low-SES disadvantaged government/public schools in regional, rural and remote areas. The inextricable nexus between teacher education and falling teaching standards in schools, particularly for these areas, has become a 'chicken and egg' situation: prospective teachers with low ATARs recruited from disadvantaged low SES majority schools then become 'less able' teachers who teach in disadvantaged low SES majority schools. This is not a solution but looks for all intents and purposes to be an exercise in 'creative destruction' or class decomposition. As Wilson and others have argued, this trend only generates a 'downward spiral of disengagement' (Wilson, 2020), lowering standards - a form of educational or intellectual disenfranchisement, or 'dumbing down'.

While the conditions conducive for learning continue to be eroded for the two-thirds of all school-aged children attending comparatively resource-poor public schools, this is a disastrous situation. Only an elite among the broader population can secure access to the most prestigious schools and 'a world class education', leaving Indigenous and non-Indigenous working class Australian children stripped of a basic human right: a comprehensive secular education that might enable them to reach their full potential. Not even foundation numeracy and literacy skills are guaranteed, despite all the promises and motherhood statements.

In June 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Education Minister set in train fiscal measures to incentivise university degrees in areas of predicted employment growth, like teaching. Instead of confronting the evidential crises that permeate the national school system, instead of developing a national plan to raise standards or announcing a Royal Commission into the system-wide crisis dating back some 20 or more years, he looks to another instalment of neoliberalism, to feed public perceptions and reassure universities that they are supported when struggling with the collapse of the international student market. Impoverished low-ATAR teaching degrees, just like micro-credentials, are emblematic of instrumentalist designs on higher education, which look set to manufacture intellectually hollow training credentials for the surplus population or precariat. In the absence of viable public policy that might get ahead of the curve and address issues around structural unemployment, environmental degradation, climate change, the war economy and 'the social dilemma' of corporatised popular culture, young Australians are being subjected to 'a holding pattern' of lifelong training, to be job ready...

Teacher education should be the flagship of quality university degree programs because of its importance for societal and economic development. After all, education is a public good, and higher education institutions should accede to the moral imperative of serving the national interest. As far as the ATAR system is concerned, it should be used for a better purpose, to raise standards of entry, to lift the status of teachers and to improve the effectiveness of teaching, and thus ameliorate student learning outcomes across Australia's primary and secondary schools. However, this is not the present trend. The Australia Institute's chief economist, Richard Denniss argues that the neoliberal pendulum has swung too far to the right, and questions whether it is so desirable for our public universities to turn a profit. He argues that 'no public good has been more commodified than a university degree' which 'has come at the expense of the university sector's ability to explain the broad contribution it makes to society' (Denniss, 2020). By shedding standards and diminishing the cultural value of the institutions of higher education and mass public schooling, there is a sense in which the state is trashing the post-war social contract, and failing to meet its mutual obligations to workers, their communities and Australian society. Even the longest-serving Liberal-Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, despite his association with the complicated history of state aid, recognised the transformative potential of education. In his words (from 1964): 'Our great function when we approach the problem of education is to equalise opportunity to see that every boy and girl has a chance to develop whatever faculties he or she may have, because this will be a tremendous contribution to the good life of the nation' (Furse-Roberts, 2019).

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