

THE PLACEMENT FUND

- 1 A \$77 million fund over four years has been set up provide additional \$450 per EFTSL for pre-service teacher education courses that adopt 120 days of placement for 3- and 4-year courses and 60 days for 1- and 2-year courses, and numeracy and literacy standards.
- 2 We are quite bewildered by the imposition of 60/120 days of placement without any evidentiary basis that we can identify. Neither the report of the House of Representatives Inquiry, *Top of the Class*, nor the report of the Literacy Inquiry, *Teaching Reading*, recommended an increase in the number of days of placement. Indeed the latter made no recommendations at all pertaining to the practicum. Certainly, both reports had comments to make about the importance of the placement, but each pointed to the quality and the nature of students' experiences on placement as being the critical issue.
- 3 The typical pattern at present is 40-50 days of supervised placement for 1-year courses and 80-100 days for 4-year courses. Across Australia many universities are experiencing a significant capacity crisis in delivering the existing number of days of placement. As the House of Representatives report into teacher education pointed out, "While universities are required to provide practicum placements for their students, there is no obligation on employing authorities or schools to offer places" (p 70). Given difficulties in making school placements, and universities being at the mercy of others for places, some may be unable to guarantee always being able to deliver the additional placement — crisis will be the operative word. In a time of looming teacher shortage, we could find ourselves in the position of being unable to graduate otherwise successful students who have done their part and who would meet existing state accreditation requirements.
- 4 For the majority of courses, the costs of meeting the additional requirements in terms of days of placement would considerably exceed the \$450 in funding. It is difficult to estimate the cost of other conditions, since they are yet to be described.
- 5 *Top of the Class* recommended a placement fund to support the development of partnerships with schools in order to improve the quality of placements, something that is widely regarded in the sector as a positive direction to take. Trying to extract even further days of placement from schools will lead to a deterioration of relationships rather than an enhancement of them and result in a reduced capacity to improve the quality of the student experience and produce excellent graduates.
- 6 Many of our students, particularly in the 1-year Graduate Diploma courses, already struggle to afford the placement required. More than 40% are over thirty years of age and often are career changers with family commitments. A good proportion will have significant levels of paid employment from which they must take leave and many others will need to fund full time childcare while on placement. For some, 12 weeks of placement in one year will be a final straw. All of this might be acceptable were there evidence that increasing the number of days of placement would improve the quality of teachers.
- 7 We were surprised to find this Higher Education program administered through the Schools portfolio, and have become concerned at the ad-hoc regulations created in relation to pilot projects to increase the length of the practicum. The current interpretation we have been offered of the new Administrative Guidelines (issued 17 October 2007) is that payment for pilot projects in 2008 -- which may or may not turn out to improve quality or support an increase in the quantity of school practicum -- obliges teacher education providers to commit to implementing the increased number of placement days from 2009.

Recommendation

In an evidence-based policy environment, we suggest that the pilot projects conducted in 2008 be regarded as genuine investigations directed towards quality enhancement in 2009. For this reason, we recommend

- that the practicum pilot projects are non-binding trials directed at quality enhancement rather than binding commitments to particular solutions to be implemented in 2009
- that the question of an appropriate minimum number of days of professional placement be the subject of the ongoing discussions around accreditation standards .