

Preservice Teacher Placements – Victoria 2011

Issues and recommendations

Submission to the Productivity Commission Study into the Schools Workforce from the National Association of Field Experience Administrators – Victoria

Introduction

The National Association of Field Experience Administrators is an alliance of administrative and academic staff responsible for the practicum components in a range of higher education programs. While the national association covers a range of disciplines, the Victorian branch concentrates solely on the education sector. All preservice teachers are required to complete a specific number of supervised practicum days in order to graduate. This paper will point to several systemic problems in the practicum field.

1. Professional placements in schools

a) Non-placement of pre-service teachers in scheduled practicum period

It is becoming increasingly difficult for Victorian Professional Placement Officers to find sufficient supervising teachers for pre-service teachers in the period practicum is scheduled to take place. This is illustrated in **Table 1** which shows an increase in non-placement of pre-service teachers within the scheduled practicum period during the past two years across Victorian higher education providers. If a preservice teacher is not able to undertake a practicum in the scheduled time, a placement is usually found at a later time in the semester or year, perhaps after the end of a semester and even in some cases, in the following year.

Table 1 Non/late placement of pre-service teachers

	No. of pre-service teachers affected	Number of higher education providers*
2009 semester 1	107	4
2009 semester 2	81	4
2010 semester 1	206	5
2010 semester 2	118	5
		Total 2009: 188
		Total 2010: 324

* Figures are for some cohorts only (eg just early childhood and not primary or secondary, or just secondary). Complete figures would be higher.

This situation has led to an increase in stress for both the pre-service teachers who have not been placed (especially fee paying students) and for the professional experience staff responsible for the placements. Preservice teachers know they are not able to graduate without the specified practicum days and yet universities are reliant on a sector outside their control to provide a critical component of the training of their preservice teachers. The high stress levels have led to an on-going turnover of placement staff with less than 8 out of 42 placement staff on the NAFEA list staying in their roles for more than 5 years.

Due to the increase in the potential risk of pre-service teachers being unable to complete their program of study by the expected date there is a risk of legal action being taken by a pre-service teacher against the higher education institution concerned.

b) An increase in the number of requests made to schools for placements

Based on raw data from only three or for one cohort, four of the Victorian higher education providers, **Table 2** illustrates the increase in the number of requests for professional placement in schools made for each pre-service teacher (PST) across all Victorian higher education providers. This reflects the increasing number of rejections for professional placement experienced by all Victorian higher education providers over the past two years.

Table 2 Requests per pre-service teacher

Cohort		2009 sem1		2009 sem2		2010 sem1		2010 sem2	
		PSTs	requests	PSTs	requests	PSTs	requests	PSTs	requests
Secondary UG	Yr 1	172	185	158	158	178	198		
	Yr 2	258	363	232	382	353	1088	172	377
	Yr 3	254	423	300	466	274	840	123	287
	Yr 4	522	1795	432	2528	376	2475	27	93
Primary UG	Yr 1	206	228	204	204	221	235		
	Yr 2	300	341	166	186	411	547		
	Yr 3	380	441			175	241	169	237
	Yr 4	317	325	163	163	346	365		
Secondary GradDip*		1102	9,700	1205	8,813	722	10,353	997	8,582
Primary GradDip		179	214	171	204	256	303		
Masters TESOL		14	39			15	28		
Early Childhood	UG	135	153	139	145	220	231		
	PG	44	50	41	46	57	59		
Other		9	14	42	92	12	16		

* data from 4 higher education providers provided for this cohort only

Note: Not all 4 contributing higher education providers have been able to provide data for all cohorts. The above data may include raw data from only 1, 2, or 3 providers, depending on the ability of the Placement Officers to collect data and the programs offered by those providers. The turnover of placement staff and the lack of tracking software place barriers on obtaining more complete placement data.

As rejections increase, so do the number of subsequent requests sent out to schools. This results in a system that is becoming increasingly burdensome for schools as well as inefficient for higher education provider staff.

Secondary postgraduate pre-service teachers are the most problematic cohort in terms of placement. This is illustrated by the data in Table 2 for semester one 2010, when more than 10,000 requests were sent out to place approximately 800 secondary postgraduate pre-service teachers (on average more than 12 requests for each pre-service teacher).

The rejection rate for primary pre-service teachers is not as high as secondary pre-service teachers because:

- primary pre-service teachers can be placed at any one of seven year levels (prep – year 6), whereas secondary pre-service teachers must be matched with their particular teaching methods in a particular location
- there are more primary schools than secondary schools

c) The quality of the placement experience. There is some concern that as more requests and more pressure is applied to schools to accommodate pre-service teacher's, an increasing number of 'unwilling' teachers are being asked to supervise pre-service teachers. There have always been instances of this in the past, but anecdotal evidence suggests an increase in the number of these sub-optimal placements.

d) Increased numbers of pre-service teachers. The numbers of pre-service teachers enrolled in initial teacher education programs has increased over the last five years (Table 3). Similar to other Faculties requiring placement or field work, this increase in numbers is an additional factor in the difficulty in finding enough placements.

At the same time the number of schools available for placements in Victoria has decreased (Table 4).

Table 3 – Numbers of pre-service teachers enrolled

DEEWR statistics on Higher Education, numbers of PSTs in initial teacher education programs, Australia wide		
	Commencing PSTs	All PSTs
2003	21,694	60,480
2004	22,745	61,774
2005	24,509	63,194
2006	25,155	64,975
2007	26,159	68,759
2008	24,825	68,088
2009	26,290	69,516
Ref:	DEEWR Higher Education Publications Higher Education statistics Publications	

Table 4 – numbers of Victorian schools

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS BY SECTOR, FEBRUARY 2009–2010		
	Number of Schools	
Sector	2009	2010
Government	1,574	1,555
Catholic	486	489
Independent	222	218
Total	2,282	2,262
Ref: Victoria, DEECD		

e) Travel time. Pre-service teachers are often required to travel further to their assigned school for their practicum than in previous years. Travel times of two or three hours per day are common. This amount of travelling has the potential to impact on the quality of the pre-service teacher's placement. Spending three hours a day travelling results in less time for lesson preparation, academic work and any research pre-service teachers are required to undertake as part of the placement. In addition, the cost factors involved in increased travel time has an adverse impact on many pre-service teachers' limited financial resources.

f) International pre-service teachers. It is usually more difficult to place large numbers of international pre-service teachers than it is to place local pre-service teachers. The difficulty of placing international pre-service teachers varies by region and sector but is particularly problematic in the

primary school sector in Melbourne. Primary school teachers express reluctance to mentor a pre-service teacher whose language ability might be of a poor standard and who is unable to model correct language skills to primary school children. The recent AITSL announcement that the IELTS score has been increased to an overall score of 7.5 may impact positively on this phenomenon.

g) Funding arrangements. The relevance of the national award rate for the payment for the supervision of pre-service teacher's has become unclear. Victoria University and the University of Tasmania are paying above the national award rate and some Victorian higher education providers have secured funding for additional support for pre-service teachers while on placement. For instance, the University of Melbourne has secured additional funding to support their Masters practicum programs.

h) Partnerships with schools. There is an increasing trend for higher education providers to develop partnerships with groups, clusters or neighborhoods of schools, which limits access to the school for placement of pre-service teachers by other higher education providers. NAFEA – Victorian branch does not see these arrangements on their own as a sustainable long-term solution to the practicum problem. While partnership arrangements can work for one, two or three years, inevitably schools need a break from sustained or intensive periods of accommodating pre-service teacher's, particularly if they are not well supported. Schools will reach a point where they can no longer accommodate the large number of pre-service teachers previously agreed upon due to the needs of their own programs and students. This has been the experience of at least two Victorian higher education providers. While the partnerships might have other benefits, more support (of the kind listed in our recommendations) is needed to make these partnership arrangements a sustainable long-term solution for placements.

i) Practicum associated with online programs. In addition to requests from Victorian higher education providers, schools are also fielding direct requests from pre-service teachers. Providers offering online initial teacher education programs (both Victorian and interstate) normally require the pre-service teachers studying in their programs to find their own placements. There also appears to be an increase in the number of programs offered on-line, which is exacerbating this situation.

j) Disincentives. Reported disincentives in schools include teacher workload issues, performance pressure, the aging workforce and mentoring of beginning teachers. The shifting community expectations have placed a higher and more complex load on the teaching workforce eg the greater diversity of students' languages and backgrounds and the 'mainstreaming' of special needs students. NAPLAN testing and the economic stimulus building program have recently been given as new reasons for schools rejecting requests to accommodate pre-service teacher's. These initiatives require additional teacher time and energy, leaving little time or energy for supervising pre-service teachers.

k) The role of the school based pre-service teacher coordinator. The pre-service teacher Coordinator plays a crucial role in the placement process. However in some instances there are teachers willing to supervise pre-service teachers but placement staff are unable to get past the pre-service teacher Coordinator in the school. Their cooperation varies depending on factors such as their work-load, the attitude of the school Principal, the culture of the school, whether sufficient time has been allowed for this role and how the role is assigned.

2. Topics from the Issues Paper on the Schools Workforce (page reference in brackets)

a) Recent Policy Developments (section 4, p.11-12). The NAFEA group is not opposed to the reforms but would like to alert stake-holders to the implications of these initiatives on the ability of Placement Officers to find placements. None of the current or proposed reforms appear to address the practicum difficulties and in fact some could aggravate the situation. For instance it is likely that the introduction of the national curriculum will adversely affect the ability of Placement Officers to find placements for pre-service teachers in the immediate period. If teachers are under pressure to learn and cover new curriculum material themselves, they will be less inclined to take on the additional role of supervising pre-service teachers. NAFEA staff have experienced this situation already with other new initiatives like NAPLAN testing.

Other proposed developments which might affect placements are:

The uncapping of student enrolments. There is potential for further placement problems with the increase in enrolments in initial teacher education programs when capping restrictions are removed for 2012. Consideration needs to be given to the capacity of the school system to accommodate any further increase in pre-service teacher numbers.

New providers. There is an increase in the number of higher education providers offering initial teacher education programs, with TAFE and private providers introducing initial teacher education programs in Victoria. This will add a new stream of pre-service teachers who will also require placements in schools. With the placement system already at capacity with the existing providers, this additional demand on the limited number of school placements will add to the existing systemic problems.

b) Training and professional development (p.14)

Any proposal to improve pre-service training by increasing the practicum component will face difficulties in the current practicum climate. If there are already problems finding placements under the existing regime of 80 days for undergraduate courses and 60 days for 2 year courses, it will not be possible to increase the practicum days above that without some structural changes to the system.

Courses do place sufficient emphasis on the practicum component but NAFEA – Vic consider the resourcing provided by some universities to cover placement staff and related resources (like databases) has not always been adequate in the past.

The timing of assessment of aspiring teachers. There needs to be continual assessments throughout the course – before, during and after placements. It would be helpful – but is not always possible - to have the authority to ask specifically targeted preservice teachers to undertake additional preparation before they undertake a practicum. For instance asking students from non-English speaking backgrounds to undertake additional language training before a practicum.

c) Remuneration and performance evaluation (p. 15)

Risks and costs associated with performance based pay. The proposal currently under consideration for a performance payment system for teachers could create another level of disincentive for the supervision of pre-service teachers. Teachers concerned about their performance based pay or bonus system will be reluctant to hand over their class to an inexperienced preservice teacher under whom the class might not make as much progress as the mentoring teacher would like. However if there is provision built into the performance-based system that requires some level of mentoring or supervision, then this initiative could be turned around to have a positive affect on placements.

d) School Leadership and autonomy (p. 16-17)

School leadership and autonomy. The attitude of the leadership team is a critical factor in whether a school is receptive to accommodating preservice teachers or not. If some positive incentive can be built into the system to encourage the leadership team to support preservice teachers, that would be great.

3. Summary and recommendations

The pre-service teacher placement system in Victoria is under stress and any future education initiatives should include incentives to encourage the accommodation of pre-service teachers for placement in schools. The stress is evidenced by increasing instances of pre-service teachers not being placed in the times scheduled by providers for practicum and the increasing rejection rates. The placement of secondary pre-service teachers in secondary schools is most at risk but primary placement is becoming increasingly problematic. Placement in other sectors such as Early Childhood, VET and TESOL are starting to be of concern.

NAFEA – Victoria branch would like consideration of a system to monitor the overall placement situation, particularly in the primary and secondary school sector. This could be either one person or an existing multi-party/discipline group who assess any education initiatives or changes for impact on placements and reports to stakeholders with recommendations. This might be managed under VIT, AITSL the VCDE or ACDE or DEEWR. All stakeholders need to be aware of the impact of any changes or new initiatives in the education sector have on the placement system.

Possible incentives or improvements to the placement situation could include:

1. Recognition of the importance of the role of the school based pre-service teacher Coordinator with the provision of incentives such as sufficient time for the role in schools and/or financial rewards.
2. The supervision of pre-service teachers linked to performance review and/or promotion
3. The supervision of pre-service teachers linked to professional development
4. Bonuses paid – or credits for higher education programs – for the supervision of pre-service teachers
5. Limits on the number of initial teacher education students able to enroll.
6. Limits or quotas on the offering of some methods/subjects and/or a rationalization of secondary methods offered by every university
7. A review of the award rate for the payment for the supervision of pre-service teachers with a view to increasing this amount or offering time off in lieu (eg half day for each week of supervision).
8. A review of the placement system with consideration given to a central allocation system.
9. Acceptance of the recommendations 6 and 7 from the 2009 VCDE report *Exploring Models of Practicum Organisation in Teacher Education:*

Recommendation 6.0

That school teacher employers develop a workload model for schools that includes consideration of:

- a staffing formula related to numbers of supervisory placements
- the development of a statement of responsibilities and accountabilities of school staff engaged in supervision activities.

Recommendation 7.0

That the full cost of the school placement component in teacher education programs be recognised, and that:

- the VCDE monitor whether recent increases in student contributions for education units enable providers to better support the placement component of teacher education programs
- the VCDE propose that the Commonwealth Government commission a review of the cost to the higher education sector of the school placement component of teacher education programs to inform future budget decisions

Please refer to the full VCDE report for the other recommendations.

NAFEA – Victorian branch acknowledges that there have been problems with placements for many years. However the recent situation is becoming increasingly complex to negotiate and NAFEA – Victorian branch is not in a position to resolve such entrenched systemic problems ourselves.

Thank you,

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On behalf of NAFEA – Victorian branch
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