

Practicum and partnerships in teacher education

- 5.1 High quality placements for school-based professional experience are a critical component of teacher education courses. Most universities provide a range of school-based professional experiences, the most demanding and most important of which is commonly referred to as practicum. In surveys drawn to the committee's attention, beginning teachers consistently rate practicum as the most useful part of teacher education courses.

Practicum arrangements

- 5.2 There is no single model of practicum provision in teacher education courses in Australia. There is also little consensus on questions such as how much practicum there should be, when practicum should begin and the best structure for practicum as illustrated in the following summary of the evidence that the committee received on these questions.

Length of practicum

- 5.3 There is a range of requirements regarding the amount of practicum that is included in teacher education programs. DEST's *Survey of Final Year Teacher Education Students* (2006) lists the various practicum requirements for State/Territory registration as a teacher as follows:
- ACT: a minimum of six weeks (30 days) supervised school teaching practice.
 - VIC: a minimum of 45 days supervised teaching practice.

- NSW: no legal minimum but the Department of Education strongly advises a minimum of 20 days for a Diploma of Education (one year fulltime) qualification and a minimum of 80 days for a four year teaching qualification. The NSW Institute of Teachers is currently developing a new policy statement which will make a definitive recommendation.
- NT: The Teacher Registration Board requires a minimum of 45 days practice teaching, or appropriate teaching experience, for registration.
- WA: a minimum of 45 days supervised teaching practice in an English language environment.
- QLD: Professional Standards recommend not less than 100 days professional experience, with a minimum of 80 days in schools and other equivalent education settings.
- SA: no stated minimum requirement but the approved teacher education program must include a practical student teaching component undertaken at a school or pre-school. The usual for a South Australian graduate is 80 to 100 days but the minimum for an overseas trained teacher is prescribed at 40 days. New legislation is being drafted.
- TAS: no stated minimum requirement but the Tasmania Teachers Registration Board looks at equivalence with University of Tasmania Faculty of Education requirements, which are 45 days.

5.4 While there was little consensus in submissions about how much practicum there should be, there were suggestions that the amount had dropped markedly in recent years. Many submitters argued that the length of practicum should be increased. A number of contributors regarded the amount of practicum in one year graduate teacher education programs as particularly insufficient. Few submissions specified an amount of practicum that should be considered as a minimum, although there were some calls for a minimum to be set. However, there were also calls for there to be no mandatory requirements and for universities to be given flexibility in determining the appropriate amount. Many submitters stressed that the quality of the practicum is more important than the number of days.

Starting point for practicum

5.5 Students in some teacher education courses start practicum in their first year; in others, they start much later. Some contributors who favoured an early start to practicum suggested that it provided students with an

opportunity to 'test' whether teaching was an appropriate career choice for them. Other contributors maintained that students were likely to have a more fulfilling and rewarding practicum experience later in their courses when early studies had provided adequate theoretical grounding. One university argued that school leavers needed at least one year between leaving school and their first practicum in a school because they needed to make a transition from being a pupil to being a teacher.¹

Structure of practicum

- 5.6 Practicum structures vary widely from course to course. Most universities have some form of block placements, sending students into schools for a number of weeks at a time. Block placements are often favoured because they provide students with continuity and the opportunity to engage more fully with the broader school environment.² Some universities place students in schools one day a week on a continuing basis, either in addition to or as an alternative to the usual block placements. The concurrent attendance at school and university is considered valuable because it provides students with an opportunity "to integrate theory and practice and reflect upon their experiences in a supportive environment."³
- 5.7 Various universities have developed school-based professional experience programs they describe as an internship.⁴ These internship approaches differ in some respects but typically are based on an extended block placement in one school. Although these extended placements are generally highly valued by students and by schools also, they can present difficulties for students who need to undertake paid work concurrently with their teacher education studies.

Practicum is only one component of professional experience

- 5.8 Many universities pointed out that practicum is only one aspect of the professional experience component of teacher education courses. Students also engage in professional experience through a variety of other arrangements, including: spending time in classrooms or relevant non-

1 Prof. Faith Trent, Flinders University, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 September 2005, p. 10.

2 Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, *Submission No. 49*, pp. 9-10.

3 Macquarie University, *Submission No. 130*, p. 23.

4 For example: The University of Melbourne offers an internship program as part of its Bachelor of Teaching. Under this program interns 'volunteer' their time to teach for four days of the week and attend university for the fifth day; QUT has internships in its four year degree program but until 2006 they were only available to a select group of high achieving students. In the Macquarie University program, practice teaching is an internship. Under this model students have continuous contact with the school to which they are assigned.

school organisations as part of the requirements for specific subjects, and working with children who visit the university campus from schools for specific sessions.

Concerns about practicum

- 5.9 Despite a range of problems with the provision of practicum, the fact that practicum is consistently rated highly by recent graduates is testimony to the hard work and dedication of many teachers in schools and many teacher educators in universities. Notwithstanding these efforts, much of the evidence received in this inquiry related to concerns about practicum. The issues raised are well known in the educational community and a brief summary of them should suffice.

Shortage of practicum placements

- 5.10 While universities are required to provide practicum placements for their students, there is no obligation on employing authorities or schools to offer places. In the absence of any obligation, universities must rely on the goodwill of schools and individual teachers. As student numbers have increased, so too has the need to find places. Many universities reported that they are having serious difficulties in finding a sufficient number of placements for their students.
- 5.11 Many course providers described an increasing reluctance on the part of teachers to take on the role of supervising practicum students. In part this is attributed to the intensification of teachers' work in recent years; in part, to a lack of incentive to take on the role. Although teachers receive a payment under the Australian Higher Education Practice Teaching Supervision Award 1990⁵, the amount is very small, attracting suggestions that it is a token incentive. There is little evidence that other incentives, such as time off in lieu or opportunities for professional development, are being used to encourage teachers to take on practicum students. Teachers who supervise practicum students generally do not receive any form of accreditation or formal recognition for taking on the responsibility.
- 5.12 The problem of finding placements is particularly serious in secondary schools and even more so in subject areas where there are already teacher shortages. It is also difficult for universities located in regional areas to find placements for all of their students. Universities report having

5 Queensland has an overriding State award.

particular difficulties finding practicum placements for international students.

Weak link between the practicum and the theoretical components

- 5.13 Many teacher education students and recent graduates expressed concern about the weakness of the link between the practicum and the theoretical components of teacher education courses. To a large extent, this is a result of limited communication between universities and schools, with schools often having little input into the content, timing and structure of practicum. The expectations of the universities are often poorly articulated to the schools.
- 5.14 Many universities are providing very limited support to students while they are on practicum with visits from university supervisors being infrequent. There is some evidence that the level of support has significantly decreased over the years. According to one witness, "University Schools of Education are coy about this, but financial constraints have rendered them no longer able to supervise and assess their students' school experiences in the ways they used to, and my understanding is that many of them do not supervise their students in the schools at all, and some do not even assess them."⁶
- 5.15 Where visits do occur, they are often undertaken by part-time non-teaching university staff. Sometimes the use of sessional staff to supervise practicum students is the only way they can survive.⁷ Universities generally concede that having sessional staff supervise practicum students is less than ideal for promoting a strong link between theory and practice and with sessional practicum supervisors often not participating in teaching on-campus units associated with the school experience, the coherence of the experience is threatened.⁸ The use of casual non-teaching staff to undertake the supervision of practicum students not only puts "the overall quality and consistency of trainee supervision at risk, it means the quality and relevance of the university program is not enriched by academics' regular exposure to the realities of today's classrooms. It also means that experienced teachers have less opportunity for professional development that might accrue from discussions of methods with university researchers."⁹

6 Dr David Tripp, *Submission No. 43*, p. 1.

7 Prof. Denis Goodrum, Australian Council of Deans of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 October 2005, p. 16.

8 Murdoch University, *Submission No. 159*, p. 7.

9 Open Universities Australia, *Submission No. 33*, p. 4.

Quality of supervisors

- 5.16 Most universities do not have the luxury of demanding particular qualities or levels of experience in teachers who supervise their practicum students in their classes. In most cases they have little control over who takes on this role and in some instances have no other choice than to place students with teachers who are not particularly suited to the task. With the challenge being often simply to find a place, insufficient attention is given to matching students with the most appropriate supervising teachers.
- 5.17 The role of supervising and mentoring student teachers is a very different role to teaching one's own class, and there is little evidence of specific assistance being given to prepare teachers for this task. While there are some notable exceptions, the committee's impression is that school teachers acting as practicum supervisors have little contact with the university prior to a student arriving, and only minimal contact while the student is at the school. Supervising teachers are often unclear about the universities' expectations of them generally, and particularly in relation to assessing students. They are also sometimes unfamiliar with the theoretical background that the universities are providing students, and with the capabilities expected to be achieved by students. This is a consequence of the weak link between universities and schools referred to above.

Inadequate funding

- 5.18 Most universities claimed that inadequate funding hindered their capacity to ensure high quality practicum experiences for their students. Expenses relating to practicum include: payments to supervising teachers; administration costs of arranging practicum; and travel and salary costs of university staff visiting and supporting both the students and the teachers supervising them. The issue of funding for practicum is explored in more detail in Chapter 8.

Rural and remote placements

- 5.19 Despite the value for students in undertaking practicum in rural and remote areas, the costs borne by students accessing these opportunities can be prohibitive. Costs include travel and accommodation and, in some instances, lost income from part-time work. The family commitments of mature-age students also prevent many from leaving their local area. Where students do undertake practicum in rural and remote areas, universities can find it difficult to provide these students with adequate face-to-face support and to visit them for assessment purposes.

- 5.20 Some contributors suggested that rural practicum placements would lead to more teachers taking up positions in these schools. This is because the experience of living and working in rural and remote communities can persuade graduate teachers of the value of working in schools in these areas. The committee notes that some employing authorities have introduced measures to encourage students to take up country practicum placements.

Rethinking practicum

- 5.21 The problems with practicum have been outlined in nearly every report addressing teacher education in the last decade. The fact that these problems have still drawn so much attention in this inquiry indicates the need for major reform in this area, involving all players and all aspects of the system.
- 5.22 While there are a number of initiatives in place designed to improve practicum and there are also many teachers who individually are outstanding teacher supervisors, it is unacceptable that the quality of practicum is as variable as it is reported to be. It is particularly disappointing that universities are experiencing difficulties finding a sufficient number of schools and teachers willing to accept teacher education students for practicum placements.

Features of a high quality practicum

- 5.23 In 2004, Teaching Australia (then the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership – NIQTSL) commissioned Dr Vivian Evers to identify the desired characteristics of quality practice within the practicum component of pre-service teacher education programs. The guidelines produced in conjunction with the report noted that there is a high degree of consensus within the teaching profession on the characteristics of quality practicum.

...What does the practicum set out to do?

A high quality practicum:

- integrates theoretical knowledge and professional practice across the three domains of a teacher education program; 'content' knowledge gained through a liberal education, professional knowledge, pedagogical skills and insights

- is designed and implemented within a partnership involving teacher education institutions (TEIs), schools, school systems and relevant professional bodies
- articulates clear and progressive stages for the development of the acquired knowledge, skills, attributes and dispositions of beginning teachers
- provides diverse experiences in a range of school contexts and with a variety of students
- assesses against clear delineations of purposes, roles and expectations of TEI student activity and performance
- includes an assessment of resource needs and implications
- is flexible and encourages innovation
- involves ongoing evaluation and response.

...How is the practicum planned and implemented?

While the practicum can be implemented in a variety of ways, the general nature and planning and operation of a quality practicum can be summarised:

- The practicum is devised as a clearly identifiable part of a program to prepare beginning teachers. While from its legal responsibilities a TEI takes a leading role in developing a plan in concept and in detail for the practicum as part of the whole program, it does this in active partnership with the schools, school systems and other relevant professional parties.
- The practicum typically consists of 'on-campus'¹⁰ and in-school components/units which are closely related or integrated with one another, and which progressively lead the TEI students towards developing and demonstrating a set of well-regarded knowledge-based skills, capabilities and dispositions that the profession agrees are essential for a teacher at the beginning stages of a professional career...
- The TEI practicum staff are well-qualified and capable professionals who can work across both campus and school settings, earning and enjoying a high standing both with their academic colleagues and with their counterpart teacher colleagues in the schools.
- TEI administrators acting in cooperation with schools and school-systems locate schools willing and capable of providing quality places and support for the school-based professional experiences required of its students.
- Selected teachers in those schools have the knowledge, skills, dispositions and time to work in collaboration with their TEI colleagues, and together they support, mentor and evaluate the activities of the TEI students through progressive stages

10 These days, 'on-campus' can mean 'on any relevant site' where the instruction for that part of the program involves TEI staff. It includes schools or other appropriate settings.

towards their goal of gaining an initial qualification as a teacher.

- Led by the mentor teachers, collaborative reports are prepared which clearly and reliably document the practicum-related attainments of the students, enabling the TEI to confidently certificate their achievements.¹¹

5.24 In the course of this inquiry it became evident that a number of course providers are already working hard to improve the professional experience component of their courses and their links with schools. Some of the approaches they have developed reflect all of the principles outlined above. Many reflect some. All of the initiatives described to the committee are based on the development of strong relationships between universities and schools. Many of these partnerships and initiatives are described in extracts of evidence reproduced in Appendix E. The committee commends these efforts.

5.25 The persistence of the problems with practicum can largely be attributed to the current division of responsibilities for delivering teacher education and the lack of a sense of shared responsibility between the major parties. The key to achieving high quality practicum for all teacher education students is the establishment of strong authentic partnerships between all parties. It will also require a significantly increased level of effort by all parties. What follows is an outline of the committee's views on the contribution that each of the stakeholders should make to a partnership approach to delivering practicum.

The Australian Government

5.26 The Australian Government should continue to be responsible for funding aspects of the practicum. In Chapter 8, the committee recommends that a detailed assessment of the real costs of a high quality practicum be undertaken. The assessment should determine a value which enables course providers to build productive relationships with schools and mentor teachers. The funding level should be sufficient to enable universities to thoroughly prepare teacher mentors for their role. It should allow for adequate face-to-face visits to schools to enable collaborative mentoring, supervision and assessment of the students undertaking practicum. Funding for practicum should be paid to the universities as a separate payment from the rest of the Commonwealth's course contribution. Universities should be required to account separately for the practicum component.

11 V. Eyers, *Guidelines for Quality in Practicum*, NIQTSL, Canberra, 2005, pp. 1-2, see also V. Eyers, *Developing Guidelines for Quality in Practicum*, NIQTSL, Canberra, 2005.

- 5.27 Every practicum student should be under the guidance of a high quality supervising teacher. The development and implementation of professional standards for teaching at levels of accomplishment and leadership would facilitate the identification of teachers who could be expected to take on this role. The committee hopes that a combination of higher status and higher remuneration that ought to be attached to higher levels of registration will eventually replace the need for universities to pay teachers to supervise practicum.
- 5.28 The Australian Government should take a leadership role in developing a partnership approach to delivering practicum. One option would be to commission the national body for the teaching profession, Teaching Australia, to take a leading role in promoting, strengthening and evaluating partnerships.

Employing authorities

- 5.29 Teacher education course providers are expected to find practicum placements for all their students. Employing authorities, who have a strong interest in recruiting graduates who have benefited from high quality preparation, should bear much more of the responsibility for ensuring that placements are available in their schools. The Australian Government should consult with the employing authorities in each jurisdiction about the number of teachers needed before commencing negotiations with universities about the allocation of places. Having had input into the number of teacher education places allocated in their jurisdiction, employing authorities should ensure that sufficient placements for practicum are available in their schools.
- 5.30 The committee is not suggesting a centralised system of allocating practicum placements nor advocating that employing authorities should ever compel teachers to take on a practicum supervisory role. But there are many other ways in which employing authorities can fulfil their responsibilities for ensuring that placements are available and that practicum experiences are of high quality.
- 5.31 Employing authorities should provide liaison officers to work alongside university administrators in liaising with schools on practicum placements. In some jurisdictions this is already occurring to a limited extent.
- 5.32 Employing authorities should create the conditions which will encourage quality teachers to take on the role of supervising students undertaking practicum. They should also take greater responsibility for guaranteeing the quality of school practicum supervisors and supporting them in this

role. As mentioned above, the development of national professional standards for advanced teachers could provide a mechanism for identifying teachers with the likely aptitude and experience for the role of supervising practicum. Employing authorities should ensure that the attainment of advanced teacher status or higher levels of registration such as might apply to practicum supervisors attracts increased remuneration. This would provide a material reward to advanced teachers for the responsibility of supervising practicum. The committee appreciates that attaining higher levels of registration or advanced teacher status may require a minimum period of time. In some situations, teachers might be identified as suitable practicum supervisors prior to reaching advanced teacher status. Employing bodies should work closely with universities to develop courses and processes that will enable teachers in this position to become practicum supervisors.

- 5.33 Employing authorities should provide adequate time for school practicum supervisors to engage effectively with universities from which the students undertaking practicum have come. Employing authorities should also ensure that the teachers who are supervising practicum students are provided time to accommodate their additional responsibilities. This clearly has implications for school staffing ratios.
- 5.34 Better integration of the theoretical and practicum components of teacher education demands that university academics are more in touch with developments in schools and the classroom. School teachers have the potential to contribute to educational faculties as researchers and as teachers in education faculties. The committee would like to see regular exchanges between university and school teaching staff. One of the major obstacles to this is the disparity between the salaries of teachers and academics. Most teachers going from a school to a university environment would be disadvantaged financially. Employing authorities and universities need to work closely to develop ways to address this issue. Employing authorities and universities could also look at developing some positions as joint appointments. Teachers appointed to these positions would work in both schools and universities and salaries could be jointly paid.

Teacher education course providers

- 5.35 Universities must find ways of maintaining close links with students while they are on practicum. The committee recognises that there is a complex interplay of factors that affects the priority that universities are able to give to practicum supervision and teaching. These include university mechanisms that attach greater value to research output for both the

promotion of academics and the allocation of funding to faculties.

Notwithstanding these pressures, universities must give greater priority to properly supporting students on practicum. Teacher educators need to be provided with sufficient time to devote to this aspect of their role.

- 5.36 It is essential that universities build strong relationships with schools. In order to ensure that the practicum is linked to theory, school staff must be more involved in the design of the curriculum around practicum. Clearly, schools will be more inclined to welcome practicum students if they stand to benefit from doing so. Where universities have put considerable effort into these relationships, benefits to the schools have taken the form of professional development for staff; opportunities to have input into what future teachers are being taught and opportunities to gain from research undertaken by the university in their school and beyond.
- 5.37 Universities need to provide ongoing support to supervising teachers throughout the practicum period through regular contact (not just in response to problems). Universities should make clear to teachers what is expected of them as practicum supervisors. They should also make explicit any relevant theoretical background that the students have been given in their course. Universities should develop and provide specific and substantial preparation processes for teacher supervisors.

Regulatory authorities

- 5.38 The importance of practicum demands that measures are in place to ensure consistently high quality practicum in all courses. An assessment of how well practicum arrangements comply with program standards developed and agreed to by the profession should be part of the program standards requirements for the accreditation of courses. The work that has already been undertaken by Teaching Australia on developing guidelines for quality practice within the practicum components of teacher education courses provides a strong foundation for such standards.
- 5.39 Regulatory authorities can also encourage teachers to take on the role of supervising practicum students by establishing a link between that role and higher levels of teacher registration.

Schools

- 5.40 Principals should actively encourage suitable teachers to pursue opportunities to supervise practicum students, and to undertake appropriate professional development for this role. School leaders should also promote a culture in which the whole school takes part in supporting practicum students to develop the art, craft and science of teaching.

- 5.41 As mentioned above, employing authorities need to factor into school staffing formulas sufficient time and resources to support teachers who supervise practicum students. Where systems have devolved authority for staffing to school principals, principals should make equivalent provision to support supervising teachers.
- 5.42 School principals should work closely with universities to identify ways of facilitating staff exchanges. They should also promote within their staff an awareness of their potential to conduct research in collaboration with university education faculties that will contribute to the enhancement of classroom practice.
- 5.43 Schools should contribute to creating a better link between theory and practice by developing and maintaining genuine partnerships with universities, employing authorities and, in some instances, other schools.

Teachers

- 5.44 As professionals, teachers should be willing to prepare new entrants to their profession by supervising practicum students. The committee is sure that were teachers provided with the appropriate preparation and support to undertake this role, and were given professional recognition for doing so, they would be more willing to contribute in this way to the development of their profession.

Promoting partnerships

- 5.45 In the course of this inquiry the committee has heard about many outstanding partnerships in teacher education particularly around the provision of practicum. These partnerships are often the result of determined efforts by inspired individuals in universities, schools and systems. Key ingredients in these partnerships are the awareness that teacher education is a shared responsibility and a willingness to work in partnership with other parties to fulfil that responsibility.
- 5.46 The Australian Government should exercise leadership to encourage and support the partnerships that could be the vehicle for achieving high quality teacher education across the nation. While research into what makes partnerships effective is important and should be undertaken, particularly into how to sustain effective partnerships over the long term, there are already a number of models of effective partnerships (*see* Appendix E). The time has come to move beyond research and pilot

studies to concerted and systematic action to encourage the development of authentic, effective and sustainable partnerships.

- 5.47 The Australian Government should establish a National Teacher Education Partnership Fund controlled by a board representing all key stakeholders. Universities, schools and employing authorities would be invited to submit joint proposals for funding for initiatives in delivering quality teacher education. While collaborative approaches to practicum arrangements should be a priority, the Fund could also support other partnership activities in research, induction and on-going professional development. The Board would establish guidelines and criteria under which applications would be assessed.
- 5.48 The committee's proposal would see the Australian Government invest significant financial resources into supporting partnerships. The level of financial support needs to be substantial for it to be effective in supporting partnerships right across Australia. The bar for getting access to that support should also be set at a high level. While the Australian Government would contribute financial support, all partners would be expected to make a substantial contribution in a manner and to a level consistent with the description of responsibilities in this chapter. Each partnership supported would be expected to involve at least three major stakeholders in addition to the Australian Government: a teacher education course provider or providers; a school or group of schools; and an employing authority. A condition of funding would be that the 'consortium' conducts research and evaluation as an integral part of the partnership program and that participants do not use the funds in place of existing resources applied to the particular activity.
- 5.49 The committee considers that the proposed investment would improve the quality of teacher education and improve the quality of schooling. An alternative recommendation could have been to establish a number of 'professional development' or 'teaching schools'. However, the approach that the committee is recommending would ensure that the benefits of partnerships were experienced more broadly and in many more schools.
- 5.50 Over time, a partnership approach to teacher education, perhaps based initially around practicum but ultimately encompassing all aspects and all stages of teacher education, will transform the way in which teachers are prepared and supported in this country. It is an investment that the committee strongly urges the Australian Government to make.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a National Teacher Education Partnership Fund, for the purpose of establishing collaborative approaches to practicum, research, induction and professional development, which should distribute up to \$20 million per annum for three years with subsequent funding levels being determined on the basis of the first three years' achievements.

