



Queensland Association of Special Education Leaders Leading Linking Learning

QASEL DESE ITE Discussion Paper Response: July 2021

The Queensland Association of Special Education Leaders (QASEL) is the peak professional association for special education leaders across Queensland. QASEL members are Principals, Deputy Principals, Heads of Special Education Services, Heads of Curriculum and other leaders and aspirants, who support students with disability, across all sectors of education in Queensland. Some members are based in special schools, many support students with disability and diverse learners in primary, secondary and early childhood settings.

QASEL welcomes the opportunity to engage with the *Quality Initial Teacher Education Review* and provide a response to the [Discussion Paper](#) published by the *Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE)*. Below is a summary of feedback gained from our members.

1. Attracting high-quality candidates into ITE

In Queensland, there are currently no ITE providers offering a stand-alone post or undergraduate Degree in Special Education. In order to attract high-quality candidates locally available programs must be on offer. QASEL believes there should be incentives for ITE providers to offer Special Education Degrees.

While a gender imbalance exists in all areas of teaching this is even more so in primary school settings and worse again in special education contexts. It is not uncommon in Queensland to visit a medium sized special school with no male teachers on staff. QASEL believes there should be targeted strategies to attract and retain special education teachers, that creates greater gender balance across the sector. The importance of providing a range of role models to all students is critical.

2. ITE program completions and entry into a teaching career

Attracting mid-career professionals to special education may well be a successful strategy to improve ITE completion and retention, however appropriate ITE programs that prepare professionals for a successful career in special education need to be available.

QASEL would also recommend providing post graduate opportunities to teachers currently employed permanently to gain additional qualifications in special education. In the past education regions have partnered with the university sector to provide these opportunities, however these programs have not sustained beyond the tenure of the individual leaders driving them.

QASEL holds the view that all teachers working in special education should hold an appropriate formal qualification (at Degree or Masters level) that prepares them to succeed.

3. Does the supply of teachers entering the workforce match areas of need?

No. Currently the supply of trained special education teachers entering the workforce falls well short of meeting the supply needs of schools in Queensland.

Special schools, even in sought after metropolitan areas of the state, are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain teachers with appropriate skills. This problem grows in more regional centres and remote areas. It is not uncommon to now find “non-teaching” school leaders (e.g. Deputy Principals)

in special schools frequently having to take classes due to supply shortages. It is also becoming increasingly common for schools to run under their allocation of teachers due to the inability to locate suitable teachers.

Special education programs in our primary and secondary settings face similar challenges. Frequently their programs are staffed by teachers with no training in special education and little background or experience. Often teachers are selected to work on these areas based on their willingness to “give it a go”. Most troublingly, over time, this has led to a reduction in the number of trained special education teachers as leaders of these programs. Frequently our Heads of Special Education, while tasked with the role of being the experts in this area, bring no formal university level qualifications to the role. This places everyone, including themselves, at risk.

Anecdotally, special education teachers from other countries (such as the UK) typically have greater access to specialised training and therefore are better prepared for the specialised nature of teaching in special education settings. Recent impacts of COVID travel restrictions have meant that internationally qualified teachers have not been available, thereby exacerbating the current special education teacher shortage.

QASEL is gravely concerned about the workforce capability crisis currently facing the special education sector in Queensland.

4. Are graduate teachers ready for the classroom?

Given that most teachers commencing a career in special education have had no formal training in special education then it stands that most are not ready for their highly specialised role.

Anecdotally, we have seen more ITE providers embed some professional learning about “inclusive education” into their programs. This is a positive change and is welcomed. However, over the same timeframe we have seen a decline in the opportunities for teachers to train specifically in special education (majoring in a range of areas such as intellectual disability, physical impairment, vision impairment, hearing impairment and Autism etc).

QASEL believe that without this body of expert knowledge across our schools, we cannot adequately provide programs to meet the needs of all learners in special, primary or secondary schools. While a sharp focus on inclusive practice is welcomed, it is most successful when coupled with expert knowledge and understanding. Unless there is adequate understanding of the nature of specific disabilities and the way this may impact on learning and wellbeing, teachers are unable to make appropriate adjustments to accommodate students’ needs.

This lack of appropriate training leads to teachers entering very complex settings and roles without the specialised knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy that they require to succeed. Often graduate teachers also lack the emotional preparedness to work in these complex settings, which makes displaying high levels of patience, understanding, empathy and tolerance more challenging. At times they also find it difficult to create the meaningful collaborative relationships with parents that are required for learners to succeed.

5. The role of teachers and school leaders in supporting the next generation of teachers.

School leaders in special education play a disproportionately large role in supporting the capability development of the next generation of teachers. Given that the majority of our new workforce is not job-ready, then a significant amount of training, support and mentoring needs to occur in order to

retain teachers. With a rapidly diminishing skill set in our schools this task becomes more and more challenging over time.

Any mentoring program calls upon the goodwill of other staff who have expert knowledge. This mentoring is over and above an already significant workload of teachers. Without real change, we are heading towards a whole generation of teachers in special education settings who have had no specialised training or experience working with our most vulnerable students.

In the past, *Teacher Education Centres of Excellence* in Special Education have gone some way toward filling this gap in professional learning. However, this program has been discontinued.

In summary, it is the view of QASEL, that the shortage of suitably qualified special education teachers in our state is now at a crisis stage. With no resolution in sight, QASEL holds grave concerns regarding the capacity of schools to meet the needs of the diverse learners in our state. QASEL members are equally concerned about the general safety and wellbeing of students and staff.

QASEL would recommend that DESE creates a deliberate, targeted strategy to encourage ITE providers to produce more job-ready special education teachers across the nation. The needs of our most vulnerable learners should be our highest priority.

QASEL welcomes any future opportunity to contribute to this ongoing discussion.

Regards



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16 July 2021