



**Queensland Association of Special Education Leaders
Leading Linking Learning**

QASEL POSITION BRIEF: AUGUST 2021

Subject: Workforce Capability, Special Education Teachers

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/Department 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.

This brief seeks to clarify QASEL's position in relation to the workforce capability of special education teachers in Queensland. QASEL welcomes the opportunity to actively participate in continued conversation regarding workforce capability and remains committed to the success of every student.

Background:

- In Queensland, there are currently no Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers offering a stand-alone undergraduate Degree in Special Education. The supply of trained special education teachers entering or returning to the workforce is falling well short of meeting the supply needs of state schools in Queensland.
- Most teachers commencing a career in special education have had no formal training in special education. As such, most are not ready for their highly specialised role.
- More ITE providers are now embedding some professional learning about "inclusive education" into their programs. This positive change 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 disability specific areas such as intellectual disability, physical impairment, vision impairment, hearing impairment, autism spectrum disorder, etc.,).
- 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 of the special education sector in Queensland. 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 and consequently about the general safety and wellbeing of students and staff.
- While a gender imbalance exists in all areas of teaching, this is even more so in primary school settings and even more extreme again in special education contexts. It is common to find minimal gender diversity in special schools. QASEL believes there should be targeted

strategies to attract and retain special education teachers that creates greater gender diversity across the sector. Providing a range of role models to all students is critical.

- Special schools in Queensland metropolitan areas, that are historically sought-after locations, are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain teachers with appropriate skills. This problem grows exponentially in regional centres and remote areas. It is not uncommon to now find “non-teaching” school leaders (e.g. Deputy Principals) in special schools having to take classes, due to supply shortages. Due to the inability to locate suitable teachers, it is also becoming increasingly common for schools to run under their staffing allocation.
- 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 in 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 and Deputy Principals Special, while tasked with the role of being the experts in this area, bring no formal qualifications to the role. This places everyone, including themselves, at risk.
- 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.

Position statements:

- 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.
- In order to attract high-quality candidates, locally available programs must be on offer. QASEL would recommend that the Department of Education seek to partner with ITE providers in Queensland to create a deliberate, targeted strategy to produce more job-ready special education teachers. The needs of our most vulnerable learners should be our highest priority. Strategies might include:
 - providing incentives for ITE providers to offer Special Education Degrees at an undergraduate level
 - developing strategies to attract mid-career professionals to special education through programs such as *Turn to Teaching*
 - providing post graduate opportunities to teachers currently employed permanently to gain additional qualifications in special education and disability specific areas
 - providing micro-credentialing opportunities.

Summary:

QASEL believes that without a strong 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 disability knowledge. Unless there is adequate understanding of the nature of specific disabilities and the way this may impact on learning, engagement and wellbeing, teachers are unable to make appropriate adjustments to accommodate students needs. Again, QASEL welcomes the opportunity to actively contribute to these discussions.

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