

Wednesday 9 February 2022

Teaching students to work in Catholic schools to address the COVID-19 teacher shortage and plan for future workforce needs

In a joint partnership between Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), teacher education students will be employed in NSW Catholic schools as paraprofessionals to address the growing shortage of teachers and provide paid, in-the-classroom experience.

The plan will not only address the short-term challenges posed by COVID-19, it is part of a long-term strategy to place highly trained, workplace-ready graduates into Australian Catholic schools and early childhood education centres.

From this week, paraprofessionals will be employed as Education or Learning Support Officers, joining the workforce in NSW Catholic schools that are challenged by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Other states and territories across Australia are expected to join the program as part of a national roll out.

Teacher education students, who have already undertaken substantial in-school professional experience, will be directly involved in supporting teachers in the classroom and those working remotely. This will support the continued delivery of high-quality learning and teaching in our schools.

The paraprofessionals will be employed up to four days per week with in-school mentoring and support from ACU. This flexibility ensures they have time to complete their university studies and to meet the requirements of their final professional experience so they can graduate and join the workforce.

Photo/on-camera interview opportunity:

St Clare's Catholic High School, Hassall Grove (Western Sydney) has employed five ACU pre-service teachers as paraprofessionals commencing this week.

Available for interview: ACU and NCEC spokespeople, School Principal and Paraprofessional.

Comment

Australian Catholic University (ACU) Vice-Chancellor and President Zlatko Skrbis

“As the largest provider of teachers in the country we have a responsibility to the teaching profession, in times of uncertainty and challenge, to assist in any way we can. Our preservice teachers engage in rigorous teacher education programs and have already spent a significant amount of time in schools where they are mentored by high-quality teachers. We see this as an opportunity to add breadth and depth to their experience whilst helping the profession meet current workforce needs and prepare adequately for upcoming demand.”

National Catholic Education Executive Director Jacinta Collins

“We are developing a long-term strategy to build teacher capacity and address the teaching workforce needs of Catholic schools, particularly in rural, regional and remote areas. This is an exciting partnership that enables teaching students to find employment and extend their experience in Catholic schools where they are most needed. Supported by mentors, school and tertiary professional learning, this initiative will provide the opportunity of paid teaching experience.”

School Principal: Kevin Jones, St Clare’s Catholic College, Hassall Grove

“At St Clare’s we are acutely aware that the experience undergraduate teachers gain in schools is invaluable. We believe the role of paraprofessionals in Catholic schools will benefit these young aspiring teachers, the experienced teachers they work with, our students and the community as a whole. Their work will be a tremendous support to hard working professionals both in the learning spaces and in terms of preparation, resourcing and organisation. We are very excited about the possibilities.”

Q&A

Will the paraprofessionals be paid for their placements?

Yes. Paraprofessionals are usually classified the same as Education or Learning Support Officer.

What will the paraprofessionals be doing at schools?

Supporting teachers and students in the classroom including marking and providing feedback to students, collecting evidence of learning, creating resources, supervising practical lessons, personalising learning materials and digitising resources for student needs and playground supervision.

Does this mean that some students may be taught by yet-to-be qualified teachers?

No, because they are engaging in a paraprofessional capacity in a support role for teachers. This is an opportunity for pre-service teachers to be mentored by professional teachers in the classroom.

How many teacher education students will be going into schools?

This is in the early stages and we are still calling for expressions of interest. There has been strong interest from pre-service teachers. The number of placements will be determined by the needs of schools. For example, St Clare’s Catholic College, Hassall Grove has already

employed five paraprofessionals. Over the longer term, we anticipate this will be a well-supported and continuing program.

ACU is a national university with campuses in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Ballarat, Canberra, and through ACU Online. It provides undergraduate and postgraduate courses to train pre-service teachers and early childhood carers, as well as other degrees in education and arts, health sciences, law and business, and theology and philosophy.

NCEC is the peak body for Catholic Education in Australia and is responsible for the national coordination and representation of Catholic schools and school authorities. There are 1,755 Catholic schools across the nation, educating over 777,000 or one in five Australian students and employing over 100,000 teachers and staff.

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