Australian Government Department of Education
More Support for Students with Disabilities 2012-2014

Evaluation Case Study

Teacher scholarships to build expertise

MSSD Output 8: Assessing learning levels and adapting curriculum

Department of Education and Training Queensland
Teacher scholarships to build expertise

Abstract

The Department of Education and Training Queensland (DETEQ) has established a priority to build staff capabilities and overall system capacity to respond to the challenges of the rising incidence of Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). The More Support for Students with Disability (MSSD) initiative has supported the development of a teacher scholarship programme to provide teachers who can model enhanced teaching techniques for students with ASDs, and to share and apply their knowledge and learnings within the school, cluster and wider educational community. A total of 90 DETEQ school staff have been selected in three cohorts over 2012-2014 as scholarship recipients for part-time study in the Graduate Certificate in Autism Studies (GCAS) at Griffith University. On completion of the study programme successful scholarship recipients are required to commit to continuing to teach for a minimum service period of two years in a Queensland government school.

Key elements and actions

Originally, up to 60 DETEQ scholarships were to be made available with the first cohort of scholarships awarded for studies commencing in Semester 2, 2012. Strong interest from teachers and demand from regions and schools led to a further 30 scholarships being made available, with all 90 teachers scheduled for course completion by July 2014.

The 40-unit GCAS programme at Griffith University consists of four courses:

1. What are Autism Spectrum Disorders?
2. Engaging with Learning and ASD
3. Communication for Individuals with ASD
4. Social/Emotional Learning, Restrictive/Repetitive Behaviour, and ASD.

These courses are completed over two consecutive semesters on a part-time basis while the scholarship holders continue to work in their roles within DETEQ schools. According to Griffith University course convening staff, the GCAS programme is designed to achieve the following set of outcomes for postgraduate students undertaking the courses:

- be competent, confident and evidence-based decision-makers
- have a specialised knowledge of ASDs and an understanding of the implications for learning and teaching in communities-of-practice
- be willing and prepared to make links between knowledge, theory and practice
- take a holistic, integrated and inclusive approach to implementing learning and teaching practices for learners with ASDs
- demonstrate an understanding of stakeholders’ perspectives (including learners and families) to inform practice
- empower learners and their families to become self-determining and independent citizens
demonstrate an understanding of how research and professional practice translates into positive life outcomes for all key stakeholders.

**Outputs and outcomes**

**Participant motives, expectations and course experience**

A sample of the cohort was surveyed on a range of matters including their motives for applying for the scholarship. North Coast staff were selected for this survey because they represented the largest proportion of scholarship recipients in both cohorts. Working in conjunction with the Regional Coordinator for MSSD resulted in a survey response rate of over 90%. In terms of their school locations: 11 work in primary, 6 in special schools, 4 in secondary schools, and 2 on a regional basis.

The majority of the 24 staff from the North Coast region were motivated to apply for a scholarship by three factors:

1. To gain knowledge and skills to be better able to address the challenging behaviours evidenced by some ASD students (20).
2. To be of more assistance and support to ASD students at the school (14).
3. To gain further qualifications in special education (12).

The experience of two first cohort participants interviewed in the final phase of their studies, illustrate in more detail some of the motives and expectations for enrolling in the programme. Both had clearly demonstrated through their applications the capacity to influence change in schools to better cater for students with disabilities. In one case the teacher had moved their school from a predominately withdrawal model to a more supportive and inclusive approach focused on meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities via enhanced capacity-building across a team of classroom teachers. The other teacher had led pedagogical change by ensuring that all special education and class teachers were engaged cooperatively in planning and reporting processes, that all were working towards greater differentiation within a common pedagogical framework, and that all students were experiencing inclusive environments in curriculum, classroom and assessment.

Both participants saw the scholarship as an opportunity to gain:

- new knowledge to validate many years of special education practice
- extra credibility in influencing teachers on their classroom practices
- further qualifications in special education
- knowledge and skills to be better able to address the challenging behaviours evidenced by some ASD students
- more positive perceptions of school provisions by parents of ASD students.

They also felt that their involvement in the programme should focus the school on being more accountable for meeting the diverse needs of ASD students.

The North Coast recipients were also asked in the survey to rate the extent to which they were able to demonstrate specific practices in their schools as an outcome of the programme. The practices most commonly cited were:

- providing visual aids, research articles and other reading materials to assist teachers in their classroom practice
developing and documenting individual learning goals specific to inclusion for the students with ASDs
using a more rigorous research base for development of school programmes
providing more explicit guidance about data required for behavioural analysis to inform formal diagnosis of ASDs
developing better understanding of ‘Theory of Mind’ issues most relevant for students diagnosed on the Autism spectrum
applying a more considered use of ‘structured teaching’ principles.

They also provided open-ended comments in the survey on what they had been able to do to date to advance understanding and practice concerning ASD students beyond their own schools. The activities included:

- networking with staff from other school and networking with local businesses in relation to transition needs of the students and how best to support them (Head of Special Education Services)
- discussion with neighbouring HOSES/Guidance Officers around issues associated with ASD and the Disability Discrimination Act and how to begin to identify and plan for individual student needs (A/Advisory Visiting Teacher)
- professional development session to school teams – FBA process and how it can be used to support students with challenging behaviour (Guidance Officer – Behavioural Management)
- networking with staff from other special schools in other regions and assisting with transition of transferring students to other areas (Head of Special Education Services)
- providing information and professional development to parent support groups. Worked collaboratively within a multi-agency group to assist with provisions for students both inside and outside of school (Head of Special Education Services).

Practical school applications stimulated by Graduate Certificate studies

As members of the first cohort of scholarship holders, the two teachers interviewed were in the final phase of the Graduate Certificate course, having completed two subjects in 2012 and finalising their assessment tasks for the remaining two subjects. They identified four specific areas of the Graduate Certificate programme that had improved their work in schools.

1. Through greater knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorders, for example, by:
   - applying a more considered use of ‘structured teaching’ principles to enable three students with an ASD to access regular classrooms on a daily basis, and one to transition to a full-time mainstream class
   - providing more explicit guidance about data required for behavioural analysis to inform formal diagnosis of ASDs.

2. In gaining insights about communication for individuals with ASD and engaging with learning, for example by:
   - developing better understanding of ‘Theory of Mind’ issues most relevant for students diagnosed on the Autism spectrum
- increasing the focus on development of individual learning goals specific to inclusion for the students with ASD, documenting goals, and developing functional implementation strategies in Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)
- using a rigorous research base to guide the development of a junior school oral language programme, to specify requirements for assessments by a speech pathologist
- using resources such as Support A Talker materials (that is, going beyond ‘what to use for specific students’ to ‘how to use’ resources and ‘what outcomes’ to aim for).

3. In gaining knowledge about social/emotional learning, restrictive/repetitive behaviour and ASD, for example, by:
   - implementing the Functional Behaviour Analysis approach to reduce the frequency and intensity of challenging behaviours for ASD students by providing more systematic environmental and curriculum adjustments
   - forming a broader team for data collection
   - implementing effective practice change for behavioural challenges
   - combining with conference attendance by school leaders to stimulate a review of the school behaviour management model.

4. As a result of overall development of knowledge and skills arising from participation in the course the selected scholarship recipients also highlighted how they were able to provide visual aids, research articles and other reading materials to assist teachers in their classroom practice via:
   - information sessions on aspects of ASDs
   - increased collaborative curriculum planning using Universal Design features
   - further development of Individual Learning Plans
   - input into school leadership team discussions and decisions
   - implementing a school wide positive behaviour support programme
   - further development of Individual Learning Plans on ASD issues.

Both teachers interviewed commented on the demands of the GCAS courses, especially the amount of research and reading required to complete time-consuming assessment tasks while also in full-time work. However, they considered these tasks to be very worthwhile applications of their theoretical learning. Opportunities to check their understandings with Griffith University staff and to network with other scholarship holders during the two-day intensive sessions during school holidays were particularly appreciated as excellent features of the GCAS programme.

Lessons learned

Key observations

The use of scholarships to build staff capability to meet the challenges of high-priority or emergent concerns has a long history. At this stage, DETEQ’s scholarships programme for completion of Griffith University’s Graduate Certificate in Autism Studies holds promise of becoming an important strategic initiative with lessons relevant to other MSSD programmes. On the basis of the observations to date, it appears to be making an impact in some important respects, for example:
• The scholarships programme has clearly signalled to schools that DETEQ as a system understands the urgent need to build both staff capabilities and school capacities to respond to better meet the needs of the growing incidence of enrolments of students with verified ASDs.

• The first cohort scholarship recipients appear to be successfully applying their university learning to better meet the most urgent needs of students with verified ASDs in their schools.

• Interest in applying for the DETEQ staff scholarships has grown since the programme commenced, both in absolute numbers and in the diversity of the locations and work roles across the cohorts of scholarship recipients.

• DETEQ has responded to this demand by expanding significantly the number of scholarships offered under the auspices of the programme.

**Sustainability**

DETEQ is consolidating the operation of specific ASD expertise networks and also in more general ways acting as a positive model for addressing other systemic priorities that emphasise the building of both staff capabilities and school capacities.

By July 2014, there will be at least 90 DETEQ staff grounded in the current state of knowledge about autism and with expertise in applying it with ASD students in their schools. In the main, they are experienced female teachers, especially of special education, and many are in designated leadership positions in their schools. Most currently work in metropolitan and regional areas where the largest increases in numbers of students with verified ASDs have characterised student enrolments over recent years. By mid-2016, all 90 GCAS scholarship holders will have fulfilled their contractual obligations to teach within DETEQ schools.

For the strategies to be sustainable beyond this time, DETEQ will need to consider the capacity of the three levels identified in their Guidelines for Scholarship Recipients — the school, cluster and wider educational community — to be able to apply their learning. Although DETEQ have clearly attempted to ensure statewide coverage across regions and schools amongst the successful scholarship recipients, there remains the challenge of ensuring sufficient staff expertise in ASDs is available for rural and remote schools. Online, teleconferencing and videoconferencing strategies are currently being trialled to address learning opportunities in rural and remote areas. As well, staff of the GCAS programme at Griffith University report significant interest and enrolment in the programme from teachers across Queensland, thus continuing to build the pool of expertise in schools across the state.

In their current school it is likely that scholarship recipients will be acknowledged as formal or informal leaders regarding ASDs, and that many others at the school will value that they are able to model enhanced teaching techniques as per the DETEQ Guidelines for Scholarship Recipients. Upon completion of their course, scholarship recipients will be facilitated by their Regional MSSD Coordinators to take on roles as tutors in the ASD Online Training package and be supported in addressing some needs of school clusters as identified within each region.

The Department’s strategic plan, *United in Our Pursuit of Excellence*, identifies an objective of ‘high quality teaching practices’ which requires schools to plan to meet this objective through the school annual implementation plan. In addition, DETEQ advises that it expects that the school audit process would seek continued improvements in the area of differentiation in subsequent teaching and learning audits of schools across Queensland, and that school leadership teams will use the expertise
of their staff to implement inclusive practices, including those students with an ASD. Leadership, planning and auditing of progress become even more significant for sustainability of capability and capacity at regional and system levels, as there are further challenges of information-sharing, coordination and quality control.

At this stage, scholarship recipients are not all equal as regards their abilities to lead improvement, innovation and change in all aspects of ASDs. Advice from DETEQ suggests that the department has multiple strategies in place to manage the difference in recipient personal capabilities so that there is wider coverage of this and other strategies. Over time, perhaps some of them will build bridges across their islands of expertise in specific aspects of implementing enhanced programmes for students with ASDs, for example in social skill development, behaviour management, differentiated classroom pedagogy and assessment and be part of networks of skilled practitioners across Queensland schools. There is some tangible evidence of this opportunity in the DETEQ model currently operating at a regional level in Far North Queensland, where teacher leader expertise is being closely connected with other related initiatives such as the Autism Centre of Expertise as part of coordinated and strategic regional activities.

Three projects proposed by the North Coast Regional MSSD Coordinator give a sense of the potential for sustainable action to build on the expertise by the scholarship recipients:

1. **Participate in and tutor MSSD Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder Online courses.**
   To date one (out of 24) of the regional recipients of the ASD Postgraduate Scholarship has been trained in the relevant Online Training Course and is also a tutor for the programme. To increase this number, the MSSD project will email each participant and their Principal with the EOI for the upcoming Online Training Courses inviting them to enrol in the course with the view to becoming a tutor and running the course for classroom teachers in the region.

2. **Mentor classroom teachers to support students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders.** As there is a spread of scholarship recipients across the region they will be grouped geographically and a lead person will be appointed to the group, possibly Principal Education Officer Student Services, with the regional AVTs ASD also being part of this group. The role of the participants in these groups would be to provide a service to schools who request additional support for their teachers in adjusting for students who may have additional needs in relation to ASDs. The support would be in the form of the scholarship recipients working with AVTs ASD to provide coaching and mentoring for the classroom teacher. The mentor programme would support the school through visits to the mentor teacher’s classroom to observe best practice, support the mentor teacher in discussions with the classroom teacher and SEP teacher/support teacher to plan the adjustments required to the curriculum, assessment and reporting for the student as per the P – 12 Curriculum Framework. To enable scholarship recipients to become mentors MSSD project funds will be used to provide relevant professional development via by the already established North Coast regional mentor programme. The MSSD project could support schools to release staff to attend the mentoring programme and to carry out the role.

3. **Whole group professional development in Autism Spectrum Disorders.** The project would survey schools (Primary, Secondary, Special) in the different areas of the region to ascertain what the PD needs are for school leadership teams in providing whole school adjustments for students with ASD and for classroom teachers/SEP teacher/Support teachers in adjusting curriculum, assessment, reporting for individual students and providing support for them in the whole school environment. The regional groups formed
from scholarship recipients and AVTs ASD would conduct PD sessions across the region based on this information.

Potential for adoption in other contexts

There are no significant barriers to other educational systems or jurisdictions deciding to develop or adopt such a scholarship programme in autism studies as

1. The Griffith University Autism Centre of Excellence is still in its early phase of development and appears interested in extending its educational stakeholder base.
2. Current GCAS student enrolment levels appear to be manageable, since most theoretical course learning largely occurs via online activities.
3. Graduate Certificate in Autism Studies courses are still being refined, based on feedback from staff and students involved in the DETEQ scholarship programme.
4. As part of GCAS assessment requirements a student is expected to apply theoretical learning to practical outcomes evident in their specific contexts of managing students with ASDs in their schools.

There is some evidence from recipients surveyed that there are potential issues with programme implementation that may require further clarification. Other educational systems or jurisdictions wishing to ensure that investment of graduate student time and school/system money in such a scholarship programme is likely to result in sustained improvements in school practice for students with ASDs may need to clarify at least the following issues in advance of such a decision:

- how the scholarship programme is expected to inter-relate with other relevant initiatives
- the extent to which such a teacher leader with updated knowledge and skills is expected to act as a model of practice for other teachers in a school
- the specific roles and expectations for the teacher leader in working with staff from other schools to build their capacities
- the responsibilities and accountabilities of the principal and other school leaders for the impact of these efforts on school planning, professional learning and student outcomes
- how school, regional and systemic expectations from the programme are meant to align.
Background

MSSD Output

Output 8: Supporting school staff to assess the current learning level of students with disabilities, adapt the teaching curriculum to suit their current level of ability and report on student progress against adapted curriculum.

Case study methodology

The focus of this case study is the cohort of 90 Education Queensland school staff selected as scholarship recipients for the Graduate Certificate in Autism Studies (GCAS) at Griffith University in three programmes over 2012-2014.

Elements of the methodology were:

- an interview with DETEQ representatives to confirm the intent and parameters of the programme
- an interview with the Inaugural Professor of Autism Studies, and the Academic Convenor of the GCAS programme, at Griffith University
- an analysis of Griffith University material provided on the four courses and included in the GCAS programme - course requirements, study guide explanations, online teaching and learning activities, and assessment items
- an analysis of available data concerning the first cohort of 30 and the total set of 90 scholarship holders
- a survey of all scholarship recipients working in the North Coast region of DETEQ
- interviews and analysis of scholarship applications for two volunteer members of the first cohort of scholarship holders.

Description of activity

DETEQ faces an acute challenge in building staff capabilities and system capacities to deal with a rising incidence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). As part of the MSSD initiative DETEQ aims to build a critical mass of teachers with the knowledge, skills and confidence in teaching students with ASDs.

The scholarship strategy is one of three interrelated strategies designed to increase the overall capability of school staff across Queensland to address the learning needs of students with ASDs. The other two MSSD supported strategies are developing two Centres of Expertise in ASD linked with Bond and Griffith Universities and a tutored 20-hour online practical learning programme in classroom strategies for use with students with this disability. By the end of 2014 it is expected that approximately 3,900 teachers will have completed the latter programme.

This scholarship programme is available state-wide to permanent state school teachers (full time or part time) with a genuine interest in gaining or maintaining skills and knowledge in teaching students with ASDs. Applicants must also hold current registration as a teacher in Queensland with the Queensland College of Teachers, and meet Griffith University admission requirements of the Graduate Certificate programme. Scholarships were offered on a merit selection basis determined by the written application. Applicants were assessed with respect to the following criteria:
- demonstrated exemplary leadership within the school community
- demonstrated capacity to lead pedagogical change within the school and wider educational community
- reasons for wanting to undertake the Graduate Certificate in Autism Studies.

Individual teachers who have demonstrated these criteria in their school community were encouraged to apply. School clusters or groups of teachers within a school were also encouraged to consider nominating teachers to develop stronger links in professional practice, and principals were also encouraged to foster groups of applicants.

Successful scholarship recipients are required to commit to continuing to teach for a minimum service period of two years in a Queensland government school after completing the Graduate Certificate programme. The Department also expects that, on completion of the scholarship programme, recipients:

... will share and apply their knowledge and learnings within the school, cluster and wider educational community, (and) ... model enhanced teaching techniques and lead improvement, innovation and change in working with students with ASDs.

Of the 30 teachers in the first cohort 24 were female and 25 had taught for five or more years with DETEQ. All except three of these teachers were working in special education and more than half already had a relevant qualification in special education.

While the typical ASD scholarship recipient works as a teacher either in special education or in mainstream classroom situation, almost a third occupy a designated leadership role in their school as either a Head of Department of Special Education Services or of Curriculum, or as a Deputy Principal.

The majority were working in schools located in Metropolitan, North Coast and South-East Regions. When school representation is considered, each region has 6 – 10 per cent of its schools directly covered by a scholarship recipient. Rural and remote schools tend to have less representation among the scholarship recipients, although the largest growth area for students with validated ASDs is Far North Queensland which also has a strong representation of scholarship recipients.

_This case study is part of a longitudinal study and will be updated in 2014._