

What is Classmates?

Classmates is a new collaborative initiative between the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET). *Classmates* offers an exciting mode of delivery of the UWS Bachelor of Teaching (Secondary) degree in that *Classmates* candidates are linked closely to a particular school in south western Sydney during their teacher education. NSW DET plays a major professional role within this teacher education program.

What is the philosophy underlying Classmates?

A key responsibility of the NSW public education system is to ensure that all students in all public schools have equal access to quality teaching. This is especially important for students whose chances of success at school are jeopardized by family poverty, low levels of parental education, family mobility, and recent migration.

The *Classmates* project aims to prepare beginning teachers to work effectively in schools where many of the students come from backgrounds such as these. *Classmates* will operate in Priority Action Schools (PAS) schools and other schools that might not be so classified but share many of the same characteristics. An evaluation study of the Priority Action Schools program indicated the importance of professional development related to productive pedagogies and to explicit and systematic teaching. PAS schools that focused on these pedagogical strategies showed the greatest gains in student outcomes in literacy and numeracy (Groundwater-Smith & Kemmis, 2004). For the *Classmates* project this is an important finding: it indicates that the problems that make it so difficult for students in PAS schools to succeed academically can be countered if their teachers are appropriately prepared.

PAS schools are typically hard-to-staff. They are schools that receive disproportionate numbers of beginning teachers and experience high rates of teacher turnover. High turnover results, in part, from the operation of the transfer points system. However, recent research indicates that beginning and early career teachers will only remain in hard-to-staff schools if their initial preparation is better matched to the complexities of the contexts they enter, if they have sufficient knowledge and skills to help all students learn, and if expert teachers are available to serve as leaders and mentors (Glennie, Coble & Allen, 2004). A specific recommendation made in this US-based research study was that teacher education providers should improve beginning teacher preparation by providing well-supervised field experiences which demonstrates how effective teaching practices can be carried out in hard-to-staff schools. These experiences should be situated in such schools, not in University classrooms.

The NSW Public Education Council (PEC) Report (2005) identified 85 schools in NSW that received a disproportionate number of the beginning teachers who were appointed in 2004. Over half (47 out of 85) of these schools were in Western and South Western Sydney. In these schools, beginning teachers typically comprise between 10 and 20

percent of the teaching staff. Since this pattern is repeated year after year, the schools of Sydney's West and Southwest often have only a small minority of teachers who have more than five years of experience and very few who have remained in the same school consistently over a longer period of time. The Report notes that three percent of the schools of NSW are responsible for inducting about 30 percent of beginning teachers. Thus, the high schools of the West and South West play a key role in 'making or breaking' beginning teachers.

A central feature of the *Classmates* project is the designation of schools that are hard to staff and that tend to receive large numbers of beginning teachers might as professional practice schools. This proposal is entirely consistent with the recommendations of the PEC Report. It is worth noting that the PEC report makes the following recommendations which are also consistent with the goals of *Classmates*.

- professional practice schools should become centres for nurturing new teachers, giving them the time and attention they need to develop their skills;
- professional practice schools should build on the successful strategies of the Teacher Mentor Program and would apply some of the successful features of the PAS program;
- professional practice schools should develop strong and focused partnerships with Universities or other outside experts.

Classmates will involve pre-service teachers (the UWS students) and supervising teachers in a process of systematic reflection on professional practice. Participation in this process will be voluntary and will be come under UWS ethics approval. Its goal will be to make the tacit processes that experienced teachers use on a daily basis more explicit. In the hurly-burly of life in classrooms and playgrounds much is done on the spur of the moment and much of this intuitive action is not codified. This is especially true in hard-to-staff schools, and as a result, beginning teachers have little access to the knowledge they need in order to become effective. *Classmates* proposes that the expertise developed through partnership between professional practice schools and the University will be published and made available more broadly to other schools within the public system.

The *Classmates* program in 2006

At the beginning of 2006, a small cohort of students was be selected for positions in the *Classmates* mode from the three curriculum methods of Mathematics, English, or Science. These are the only curriculum methods available in the *Classmates* mode of the B. Teach (Secondary) and are determined by the demand in particular key learning areas in schools. There are currently 17 students enrolled in this mode of the B. Tch (Sec) as this is the pilot year of the program.

The *Classmates* mode of the B. Tch (Sec) offers a strong commitment to face-to-face teaching experiences in schools. This means that *Classmates* students are:

- located in schools in the metropolitan south west region of Sydney for 2-3 days per week (depending on the semester's timetable), with volunteer supervising teachers. This will enable *Classmates* students to gradually be immersed in teaching, to become familiar with the ways in which schools work, and to form a sound professional relationship with other pre-service and qualified teachers.
- attend university lectures/tutorials at Bankstown campus for approximately 1-2 days per week depending on the semester and the requirements of the units that they are undertaking. At times, *Classmates* students will be expected to attend 'intensives' (concentrated comprehensive university sessions). These will generally be held in school/university holidays or occasionally on a Saturday. Attendance at the lectures/tutorials and the intensives will enable *Classmates* students to complete the formal instructional component of the B. Teach (Secondary) degree. (See the DRAFT timetable below to see how *Classmates* will be implemented in first semester, 2006).
- participate in some of the professional learning in-services conducted by DET and/or UWS for teachers already employed in the service in the south west region of Sydney. This will not only provide *Classmates* students with information on current DET initiatives but will simultaneously provide *Classmates* students with the opportunity to develop and nurture professional networks within the region.

What are the benefits of becoming a *Classmates* student?

Classmates is a demanding but potentially very satisfying way to undertake the B. Teach (Secondary) degree at UWS. Its commitment to face-to-face teaching means that the University strongly recommends that *Classmates* students not undertake paid employment for more than 8 hours per week. However, there are many positive benefits to being a *Classmates* student, and the advantages strongly outweigh the time commitment required to be successful in this mode of the course. Some of these advantages are outlined as follows:

- Successful *Classmates* students will complete the formal in-school professional experience component of their degree by the end of university Semester 1, acquiring Associate Teacher status in school Term 3. This means that by term 3, successful *Classmates* students will be allowed to teach 2 days per week unsupervised within the classroom. This will provide them with the opportunity to develop and reinforce their skills within the supportive environment of their host school.
- Successful *Classmates* students will receive an interim casual employment approval number from the start of Term 4, 2006, along with other finishing UWS students. This means that if all academic and professional experience requirements are fulfilled, *Classmates* students will be able to begin their teaching careers in school Term 4, 2006. *Classmates* students will have spent considerable time being immersed within the region, potentially opening doors to various employment opportunities.

- *Classmates*’ students will have the opportunity to refine their teaching skills within a supportive and familiar environment in which they have gradually become accustomed over a sustained period of time. Like practicing teachers, *Classmates* students will over time become ‘part of the furniture’ in their host school, enabling them to potentially develop sound relationships with students, colleagues and the broader school community.
- The *Classmates* mode progressively introduces students to teaching practices, policies and pedagogies in a school-based context over three school terms. *Classmates* students will begin their professional experience by observing teaching practices, then working with individuals and/or small student groups, then team teaching and eventually developing the confidence and expertise to teach whole classes.
- *Classmates*’ students will have excellent opportunities to form professional relationships with schools in a region which offers the greatest opportunity for casual, temporary and permanent employment. Being immersed in one particular school and being able to attend some regional professional learning activities means that *Classmates* students have the opportunity to network with other beginning and early career teachers located in other schools in the region.
- *Classmates* offers sound opportunities for developing strong professional relationships and support networks with other *Classmates* students which may extend beyond the duration of the course.

References

- Glennie, E. Coble, C. & Allen, M. (2004) Teacher Perceptions of the Work Environment in Hard-to-Staff Schools. US Education Commission of the States.
- Groundwater-Smith, S. & Kemmis, S. (2004) Knowing makes the difference: Learnings from the NSW priority action schools program. NSW Department of Education and Training.
- NSW Public Education Council (PEC) Report (2005). Building on strong foundations. NSW Department of Education and Training.

Further notes – numbers of schools, students, etc

The *Classmates* project is a unique collaboration between the University of Western Sydney and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) South Western Sydney region which aims to deliver and keep new teachers where they’re needed most.

Classmates aims to prepare pre-service teachers to work effectively in south-western Sydney schools where high school students *chances of success* are often jeopardized by family poverty, low levels of parental education, family mobility and recent migration.

Professor Margaret Vickers and Dr Tania Ferfolja from the UWS School of Education are leading the unique pilot program, which involves 15 first-year students in of the Bachelor of Teaching (Secondary) at UWS.

“The *Classmates* initiative is designed to operate in schools which are typically hard-to-staff. They often have a disproportionate number of beginner teachers and high rates of teacher turnover,” says Professor Vickers.

“Recent research has shown that beginner and early career teachers will only remain in these schools if their initial preparation is matched to the challenges they will face.”

“The high schools of Sydney’s west and south- west play a key role in ‘making or breaking’ beginner teachers as they are responsible for inducting about 30 percent of new teachers,” Professor Vickers says.

The *Classmates* initiative sees pre-service teachers combine their studies with practical on-site training allowing them to become immersed in the school environment and develop professional relationships with other pre-service and qualified teachers.

“*Classmates* is an option within the UWS Bachelor of Teaching (Secondary) degree which links UWS students to a particular school in south western Sydney as part of their teacher education,” she says.

“The pilot program is currently operating in four Priority Action Schools (PAS) schools - Punchbowl Boys, Belmore Boys High School, Merrylands High School, Holroyd High School and Concord High School which is not a PAS but shares many of the same characteristics.”