Developing a graduate diploma to cater for career-change adults

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A seven-month intensive graduate diploma of teaching course was developed in 2007 to cater for an increasing demand for qualified teachers. The course is developed to university standards and is accredited by teacher registration authorities, with graduates obtaining a qualification as a teacher at the end of the seven month period. The course is tailored to recognise and build on the existing academic attributes and capacities expected of top tertiary graduates, and to be appropriate to academically-experienced adult learning styles. This paper will discuss the process involved in the course development. Aspects related to the student cohort demographics and learning styles will be highlighted. A 'nested case study approach' involving both qualitative and quantitative data collection was used. Questionnaires, surveys, and interviews were used to gather the data from stakeholders (post-graduate students) involved in this aspect of the research. The analysis of the data will provide detail on the aspects of the course which enabled mature-aged students to succeed and highlight future challenges.

Keywords: accelerated learning, mature-age, post-graduate studies

Introduction

In Australia and around the world, there is a growing recognition and considerable evidence of impending teacher shortages (Stokes 2007; Richardson & Watt, 2005). A study by Horsley and Stokes (2005) indicates that a large percentage of teachers (up to 50%) will leave the workforce and that current pre-service teacher trainees do not replace the loss (MCEETYA, 2003). There have been varied responses to this. Some research has looked at the factors affecting why students do not want to take up teaching as a career, or why young teachers do not stay in teaching. Other research has looked at what motivational factors encourage people to move into teaching (Smith & Pantana, 2009). However, no simple solution has been found to increase numbers into teaching. Governments have allowed increases in university places for pre-service teacher courses, in recognition of the declining numbers of people choosing to be teachers. One factor identified by Stokes (2007) was that "from 1983 to 2004 the proportion of higher education students studying Education declined from 21.3% to 9.7%", indicating that even with no population growth, there would be insufficient teachers to cope with eventual demands.

It was into this background that Deakin University decided to attempt to capture mature-age graduates into the teaching profession. Evidence indicates that in America and other countries world-wide, there has been a steady increase in the last 10-15 years in people from other professions retraining to be teachers (Brooks and Hill, 2004). In 2007, Deakin University developed an intensive teacher training post-graduate course for mature-aged entry applicants which promised completion in seven calendar months. As one of the single biggest deterrents for mature-age people wanting to join the teaching profession is the loss of salary and length of training (Stoner, 2009), the course was reduced to the shortest possible time. No course content is lost in the tightening of the course to seven months. Rather, holidays are reduced

and students are expected to work regular hours on campus (35 hours/week) and put in additional reading and homework after hours. The course is tailored to recognise and build on the existing academic attributes and capacities expected of top tertiary graduates, and to be appropriate to academically-experienced adult learning styles.

Prior to the development of the course, meetings were held with teams of school principals to ask them to contribute to an effective course in terms of schools' needs. Arising from the discussions were several key ideas:
- students should come to the course with prior experience with children to minimise the time for developing relationships;
- the reflective practice is so important that students should work in schools in small groups to maximise their opportunities for sharing experiences;
- the practicum in schools needs to be of long enough duration that the students get to know the children, build relationships, can trial whole units of work and can track individual children's progress. It was suggested the 4-6 weeks would provide this.
- Due to the strength of students' prior experiences, the school could adapt programs to make use of the student as a resource.

In addition to the points made above, the discussion with principals included the structuring of the course around theoretical content. In alignment with the teacher registration body, on-campus feed-back sessions were included which linked recent practical experiences with theoretical knowledge. This was considered crucial to the students' reflective critique of their own practice and that of others.

Theoretical underpinnings.

Adult learners
Adult learners have different learning needs to younger learners. The pedagogy needs to be different to that used for young adults who would typically undertake an undergraduate degree in Education. In seminal work by Knowles (1984), it was identified that there were five characteristic aspects of mature age learners which needed to be considered when being involved in their learning. These included that a mature person:
- is self-directed
- has a wealth of prior experience to build learning from
- is ready to learn what he/she wants to learn
- is oriented to learning around 'solving problems'
- is more intrinsically motivated than externally motivated
(adapted from Knowles 1984:12).

In the preparation of the course and the content, the development team were not only aware of these differences, but relied on them to ensure that the course would be a success. Apart from the directed content, the students in the Graduate Diploma of Teaching (GDT) primary level are expected to be self directed when it comes to reading more broadly, in working with others in team environments and essentially in attempting to take in all that the course offers them. The course teaching team uses the students' prior experience to build links between teachers' competencies and skills which are transferrable to teaching. The students coming into the course have all made the decision to move into an alternative career in teaching, so when they join the course they are ready to learn and highly motivated to learn. In an attempt to have the students 'classroom ready', the teaching course is grounded in practice. Theory is linked to practice. To accomplish this, the teaching team consists of a permanent academic staff member and a local practising teacher.

There are many challenges for a career change pre-service teacher, not the least is the sudden loss of identity, the intensity of the learning and being thrown back into a 'classroom' situation. The course delivery team recognise a number of factors about adult learners which are considered in unit delivery. It is understood that mature age learners do not want to waste time, so they need to know the importance of what they are learning. Just like younger learners, all adults have preferred ways of learning new things. Recognising that fact implies that in the delivery of the unit and in the development of assessment, adult learners need to have a range of modes of learning available to them. Experiential learning is an important characteristic of most work-based learning situations – you learn by doing. In the course, there is an attempt to provide students with strong experiential learning in each of the course units.

Mature age pre-service teachers' requirements/choices
Research by Smith and Pantana (2009) looked at the characteristics, conditions and motivations of mature aged people who changed careers to become teachers. In their study, they found that economic instability often played a part in the decision to become a teacher. Whether this was in the individual occupation or in the general population, people were seeking more dependability around income and ability to pay debts (Richardson & Watt, 2005). Due to the fact that many had lifestyles incorporating family and financial commitments, many were seeking alternative modes of study that would allow them to qualify quickly, or at least continue to work part time (Smith and Pantana, 2009).

In terms of demographics, Richardson, Watt and Tusvaer (2007) found that the average age of career switchers was 30-32 years of age, that 2/3 were female and that many, "after trying other occupations, switched to what they perceived as a more family friendly and altruistically fulfilling career". Although coming from a wide range of previous backgrounds, it was found that many came from fields holding a similar occupational status to that of education (Richardson & Watt, 2006).

Those seeking to become teachers, as a second career choice, were more intrinsically motivated by their desire to shape the future and by making a social contribution (Watt & Richardson, 2007). They perceived that they had the ability to teach. An extrinsic motivating factor, affecting many career-change adults, was the desire to spend more time with their families (Glenn, 2003).

The features of career change teachers which are valued in schools include the students' "maturity, life experience, good work habits, and both depth and breadth of content knowledge" (Kaplan and Owings, 2002). Kaplan and Owings also highlighted how these teachers were able to apply their knowledge to practical situations and were able to solve problems through collaboration. However, it was noted that they did not tolerate the administrative paperwork which accompanied their roles as teachers

Professional Standards of Teachers
Most teaching bodies around the world have a set of professional standards of competence which must be demonstrated by practising teachers. In Victoria, Australia, the professional standards for three areas: professional knowledge: professional practice; and professional engagement beginning teachers are based around.

Table 1: The Professional Standards of Teachers (Victoria)

THEMES	PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE	PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE	PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT
STANDARDS	1. Teachers know how students learn	4. Teachers plan and assess for effective learning.	7. Teachers reflect on, evaluate and improve their professional knowledge and practice.
	2. Teachers know the content they teach.	5. Teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments.	8. Teachers are active members of their profession.
	Teachers know their students	6. Teachers use a range of teaching practices and resources to engage students in effective learning.	

In the development of the course, these professional standards were considered alongside the unit content. Therefore some units were constructed with a focus on (for example) assessment and reporting in mathematics and science education. Yet others had a focus on professional engagement (The teacher as professional educator). Using an imbedded approach ensures that students have an understanding and awareness, not only of the standards, but what they mean in practice.

According to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website (DEEWR, 2010), professional standards for teachers describe the knowledge and skills that teachers must have. Teachers working in Australian schools must demonstrate that they possess the most essential elements in order to improve teaching and therefore improve the learning outcomes for children. The standards are usually divided into categories, ranging from beginning teacher to leading teacher.

The *e*-newsletter for the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER, 2010) comments that having professional standards has other impacts as well. It indicates "To strengthen teaching as a profession, we need a profession-wide certification system. Professional certification would then become a criterion for increased salary." The visible presence of professional standards of teaching could then serve as a means of improving the status of teachers in the community, as well as giving them a target to improve their teaching by articulating in clear terms what the requirements are at each level of teaching performance and outcomes.

Research Design including Methodology and Methods

The research project has a number of aspects which could define the research as sitting within a case-study methodology, however it is a little more complex than this. There is the over-arching study which looks at the Graduate Diploma of Teaching course, a case study in itself, and then there is the case to be built around following one cohort of students through their journey into teaching and beyond. Perhaps the term "nested case studies" could apply?

Within the case studies, both qualitative and quantitative data are collected, thereby using a mixed-methods approach.

The research project records and documents the progress of the Graduate Diploma of Teaching program across several years and several cohorts. The structures and content of the program and the relationships between it and the participants are all explored through an interpretive approach. Subjective meanings (definitions, feelings, interpretations and judgements) are identified including a description, explanation and analysis of these. One focus of the research was to see how each cohort of teachers integrate into the school workforce. Case study methodology was chosen to accommodate the complexity of the situation as it actively engages the changing dynamics within the course, the cohorts of students and the social settings (Campbell, 2000). In undertaking the case study, the researcher wanted to illuminate the distinctiveness of the course, its approach and the pre-service teachers involved

The research allows for the tracking of pre-service teachers over three years, past the point when they become teachers and for two years into the establishment of their new career. At this point in time, the 2009/2010 cohort have completed their studies in June 2010 and have been seeking work or working in the latter part of 2010. This paper will look at the cohort in terms of their selection of the course, their demographics and some of the comments they made about the course. Aggregated data was collected as a part of the normal statistics gathered for any university course. Of the 65 students who completed the course in 2010, 25 agreed to complete a questionnaire.

Questionnaire
1. *What was your previous career?*
2. *What influenced your decision to take up teaching?*
3. *What influenced your decision to undertake the Deakin Graduate Diploma of Teaching?*
4. *If the GDT (Deakin) had been unavailable, what course of action would you have taken then?*
5. *What aspects of the course do you think were most useful in your development as a teacher?*
6. *Do you consider that you covered enough theory? Elaborate.*
7. *Do you consider that you covered enough practical experience in schools? Elaborate.*
8. *What do you think are the best aspects of the course?*
9. *What aspects do you think need improvement?*
10. *With the intensive teaching, several models were used: paired units, week intensive, one tutorial each week for multiple weeks. Did you find any of these to be a superior mode of delivery? Elaborate.*
11. *As a career-change student, how can the course:*
    * *maximise your professional learning,*
    * *instil in you a respect for lifelong learning and reflective practice*
    * *improve your employment opportunities*
12. *Any other comments*
13. *Are you available for a telephone interview as some stage? YES / NO*
14. *Are you available for a focus group meeting at some stage? YES / NO*

In addition to these data, students completed an evaluation of the course units, structure and practicum at two points of time across the course. This provided rich feedback, both to improve the course *as it proceeded*, and for future development.

For this paper, these two forms of data will be used: the questionnaires and course evaluations

Presentation of Data

Questionnaire
From the questionnaire, the following data were collected and reduced to provide an overview of the profiles of the students.

Table 2 Students' Profiles

Aspect	Detail
Age	Range 22 years old-53 years old, average 32 years old
Gender	25% males, 75% females
Previous Careers	public relations, varied occupations – not in psych, orthoptics, admin – not degree, uni lecturer, financial contractor, Operations manager, admin, corrections off, TESOL, Retail banking, inter teacher, geologist, Spec needs aide, Education officer, Entertainer, special needs teacher, outdoor educator, Financial planner, child services officer, festival admin, financial plan, behaviour therapist, secondary teacher,
Motivation for course	accelerated rate/financial (64%), not satisfied with first degree (4%), course completion date (20%), family links (4%), status of uni (16%), close to home (20%), logical follow-up (4%), fits into life (4%), always wanted to teach (8%)
Transition to the field of teaching - reasons	family influence (8%), friends' influence (12%), family commitments (12%), prior work with children/satisfaction (52%), more fulfilment (16%), importance of teaching (8%)
Geography	49% of students lived more than an hour's drive away
Academic level of student qualifications	PhD (1.5%), Masters (9%), BA Honours (1.5%), BA (40%), BSc (11%), Miscellaneous Bachelors' degrees (37%)
Range of academic theory	PhD English, Masters Tesol, M Ed, MSc, BA Honours BA (ministry, business, public relations, graphics, Early childhood education, zoology, literature, anthropology, communication, tourism, outdoor education, sociology, psychology, languages, criminal justice, multimedia) B Dance, B Business, BSc (psychology, biology, orthoptics, geology, biomedical),B Exercise/human movement, B Kinesiology, B Economics/Commerce, B Communication, B Policing, B Health/nursing, B Psychology, B Environment studies

As part of the questionnaire, students were asked the question, "What aspects of the course do you think were most helpful in your development as a teacher?"

The responses included:
- Modelling of teaching from our lecturers (12%)
- Length of time spent in one school for each block (8%)
- All valuable, all necessary (20%)
- Practicum – classroom preparation & behaviour management, (68%)
- Hands-on practical classes (20%)

- Lesson planning for assignments (4%)
- Theory into practice – real life contexts (4%)
- Student interaction (4%)
- Quality of content and lecturers (4%)
- Intensity aided development of understanding (4%)

End of Course evaluations - Student responses to the category "Any other comments or suggestions for improvement"

> *Great course which allows mature age students to change career. Provided great materials, assessment to make transition to teaching possible.*
>
> *Flexibility throughout by Coral and other lecturers*
>
> *Loved the flexibility and understanding*
>
> *Loved everything about the course but did not enjoy driving 20 minutes to do rounds.*
>
> *I loved this course – yes it was intensive but I found it fantastic.*
>
> *Good to have one placement in our home towns to assist with jobs*
>
> *Workload was huge, but acceptance by lecturers/staff of late assignment submission was the saving grace.*
>
> *Additional week before rounds to finish off assignments would be useful*
>
> *Very disappointed with placement – teacher feedback and attitude*
>
> *Great Course – maybe too much assessment work during teaching rounds, but not sure how to change this in an intensive course.*

Discussion of Results

It is interesting to compare the results of the student demographic information with that cited in the theoretical discussion. We find that this cohort of students relates strongly to prior research into this are. With an average age of 31 years, they fit into the range 30-32 as indicated by Richardson, Watt and Tusvaer (2007), although the gender ratio is slightly different. Previous research indicates that at least one third of career-change pre-service teachers are male although the cohort this year has one quarter of the student group being male. This may change from year to year and a more longitudinal study will provide better statistics around this. Although a degree was required for entry into the course, 12% of participants had higher degrees, indicating that they hadn't found complete satisfaction with what their degree had provided in terms of employment.

There is a broad range of previous careers, ranging from financial contractor to festival administrator to someone who had moved from job to job with little satisfaction. The research indicates that many coming into teaching as a second career come from similar or related professions. This is certainly true with just over a third of students coming from professions where they would deal with children or students. When we look at the motivation for undertaking the particular accelerated teaching course, it was clear that financial considerations played a large part in the decision making. Sixty-four percent of students indicated that it was the nature of the shortness of the course which drew them to it, mainly as they had financial or family commitments which would not allow them to be out of the work

force for too long. This confirms the previous work by Smith and Pantana (2007) where they found students with financial commitments needed to qualify quickly. Another factor taken from the data supports this. Just on 50% of students travelled more than an hour to attend the course. Some were travelling two and a half hours each way, each day by public transport, just to get their teaching qualification. Such dedication or desperation, indicates how strongly students wanted to gain teaching qualifications in the quickest possible time. Other motivational factors of significance included that the course was close to home and finished mid-year which gave the students and edge in terms of getting onto the job market a few months in advance of a December-finishing course.

Looking at the data on their motivation for taking up teaching, the single biggest factor was that half of them had worked with children previously and had gained satisfaction from doing so. This links in with the other research data where one third of them had dealings with children in prior professions. Many (16%) anticipated that teaching would be more fulfilling whilst an eighth of them cited family reasons and commitments. This confirms previous work by Watt and Richardson (2007) and Glenn (2003).

When viewing the range of types of undergraduate degrees studied, the general Bachelor of Arts was most prevalent. However, even this was quite diverse when looking at the academic content of the degree. What is of real concern was that not a single student had an undergraduate mathematics degree and only 11 % had any science background. These are typically the hardest areas to teach in primary school, yet comprise a significant proportion of the curriculum (at least mathematics does).

In response to the question, "What aspects of the course do you think were most helpful in your development as a teacher?" students overwhelmingly (68%) indicated that undertaking the teaching practicum was a highly valuable experience. They discussed the development of relationships, classroom management and gaining an understanding of the diversity of a teacher's role. Hand-on practical classes and other aspects which linked them to the real contexts of school were also appreciated.

The final data analysis looks at the qualitative responses students gave on their final course evaluation in June 2010. This was an open-ended response item *"Any other comments or suggestions for improvement"*. In general, students liked the course and appreciated various aspects, such as having a volunteer round so that they could work in their local school. Most commented on the workload and made suggestions for improvement, not in terms of reducing workload but in terms of course structure which could allow workload to be more manageable. Another factor cited by many was the flexibility in the course. This flexibility played out in working around students' individual needs whether it was related to placements in schools or extensions for assignments. All lecturers recognised that given mature age learners, with the characteristics mentioned earlier in this discussion, most would be diligent, hard-working and attempting to work within guidelines. If this wasn't possible, then flexibility had to come from the course and course team.

Conclusion

The data collected through student evaluations and this research project present a strong picture of the course and the student body. The elements built into the course to ensure that students gain an understanding of teaching seem to be working – at least from the point of view of the student teachers' final comments. The investigation of the demographics of the students aligns with previous studies undertaken in Australia and overseas. So, to this point in

time, the course appears to be fulfilling its commitment to provide a career-change course for mature age students which takes into account their special needs and characteristics.

The course is now in its fourth presentation and student evaluations have informed improvements for each iteration of the course. What is not known from the course evaluations or research data is whether the students are in fact 'classroom ready' when they enter the teaching workforce. This is the next phase of the project: to track each cohort across the first few years of teaching to gain their impressions of their 'readiness'.

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