

Teach for Australia gains acceptance

They scoffed, but Teach for Australia is working



Saul Wakerman
Teach for Australia associate

Three years ago, Teach For Australia launched to a mixed reception. The program, adapted from Teach For America and Teach First in the UK which seeks to attract high achieving graduates and professionals to teaching – specifically in disadvantaged areas – was, critics said, too expensive, too idealistic, a recipe for conflict and a veiled criticism of the job Australian teachers were doing.

With the first cohort of graduate trainees having recently completed the first cycle, the opposite looks to be true, to greater or lesser degrees it's been a success and in some cases, as Acting CEO Kallie Rougos describes it, “the catalyst for a bit of magic”.

Teach For Australia associates commit to an initial two-year teaching assignment in a disadvantaged school, where each is matched with a teacher mentor (as well as other support and coaching staff).

The program is driving debate around the current state of education

Rougos recalls one unlikely pairing in Victoria's Grampians region, where the associate was matched with a teacher who was just about retired and inclined towards irascibility.

After working together a strong friendship and admiration has sprung up between the two; the associate has accessed the knowledge gained from years on the job while the older man has rediscovered the reasons why he entered the profession.

“Our associate sings his mentor's praises while the mentor has in some ways gained a new lease on life,” Rougos says.

It seems to be a reoccurring theme, another TFA associate in metropolitan Melbourne, says Rougos, has taken her VCE Politics students' results from some of the worst in the state to among the best.

“She was very quick to attribute her success to the support she had received from her mentor.

“We're now seeing the entire conversation around the topic of TFA change among teachers; principals from the schools involved have almost unanimously said that they would agree to take on TFA associates in the future, it seems to change the lives of all involved.”

The program has been the subject of close scrutiny, DEEWR has commissioned no less than three reports on the program in three

years. Generally, the data have been positive.

Significantly, the program has been successful in attracting much-needed Maths and Physics teachers.

“In our attraction campaign we present the notion of teaching as an act of leadership and try to tap into the candidates’ moral compass and sense of social justice. But even then we’re still blown away by the level of passion and commitment that our associates continue to show.

“A good number of the associates tend to stay on in teaching or progress to other roles within and around the profession.

“We’re interested in how our associates cycle in and out of teaching, one of our sponsors, Ernst and Young envisage a pathway for TFA associates that might involve teaching, followed by a few years at the consultancy and then heading back into teaching – in the class

Acting CEO Kallie Rougos



room or in an administrative or academic role.”

TFA is currently in the process of preparing its fourth cohort, which represents a group with an A–Z of academic backgrounds and who ordinarily wouldn’t have entered teaching.

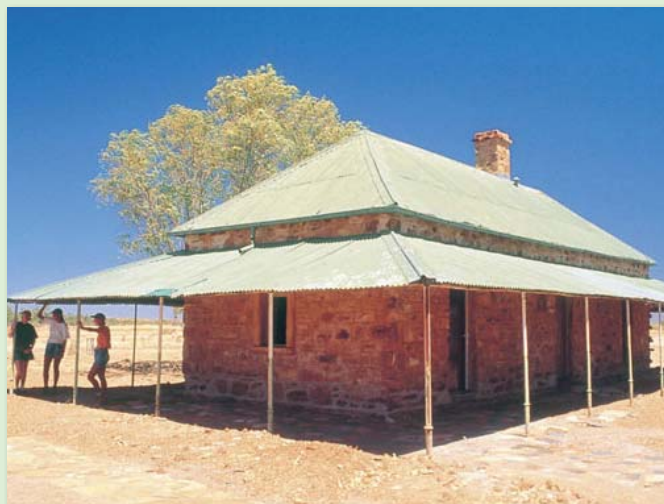
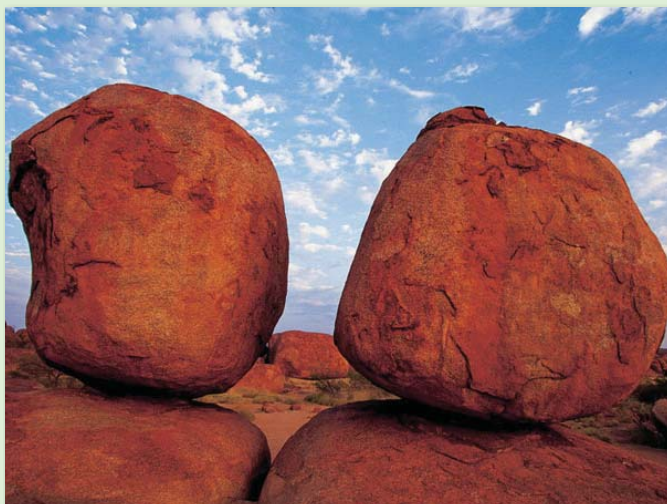
“Each cohort is different, each seems to have its own theme.”

Rougos says that the program is driving debate around the current state of education and the wider issues of attraction and retention of quality teaching staff.

“This is by no means a panacea, but as a small organisation we’re able to drive the conversation around education, our associates are at the coal face and we’re always looking at how we can learn from what they are saying.

“We’re happy to report that our strongest endorsements have come from principals who are keen to take on as many of our associates as we can send them,” Rougos says.

Brigitte Rogan in the NT



The Devil's Marbles outside Tennant Creek NT and the Tennant Creek Telegraph Station

As acceptance spreads so does the program, 2012 saw the first TFA associates take up postings in the Northern Territory, a new location with a new set of challenges.

Brigitte Rogan, formerly of Melbourne, is now teaching in Tennant Creek.

After graduating from University of Melbourne with a Bachelor in Social work and time with the Brotherhood of St Laurence she put her hand up for the NT posting, having always wanted to see the far north.

She says the experience has “exceeded her expectations in both challenges and rewards.”

She admits that her ideas of educating in Tennant Creek were slightly innocent when she arrived; that didn’t last long. She teaches Year 8 and 9 English and Studies in Society and Government.

“I thought that it would be a matter of getting an interesting set of lessons together and that everyone would come.”

Instead she came face to face with the challenges that harrow life

in the Northern Territory, which necessarily have a flow on effect for education.

“I came up against low attendance, irregular attendance, the fact that some of the kids hadn’t slept the night before or had breakfast that morning. Many of the students travel between four or five campsites so it was almost impossible for them to attend regularly,” she says.

The experience has sparked an interest in approaches to educating children who come from challenging backgrounds and who don’t fit into the normal modes of education, a subject that she’s looking to research in the future.

“The rewards have been immense, I’ve been surprised at how quickly one can have an effect.

“I have one student who three months ago couldn’t write a sentence without having to check with me, he had no confidence at all. Yesterday he wrote a 400-word report without any help,” she says.

Brigitte Rogan has grown to love Tennant Creek, “I went on holiday to Melbourne and by the end of it I couldn’t wait to get back here.”