

Teach for Australia kicks off

Some of our best and brightest have joined the Teach for Australia program

Brimming with enthusiasm, the first crop of Teach for Australia associates has arrived at some of Australia's toughest rural and metropolitan schools for Term 1. Drawn from a raft of applicants, the 45 accepted into the program represent a cross section of our best graduates and young professionals who will, hopefully, act as positive role models for disadvantaged kids.

It's unlikely to be all plain sailing though. The Australian Education Union (AEU) has voiced criticism about the amount invested – some \$22 million – in the project and has questioned whether associates will have had adequate teacher training to be effective in the classroom.

Mary Bluett, AEU Victorian president estimates the cost per associate produced at \$500,000. "It is a very expensive program, if we're looking to address a shortage of teachers we could have got a hell of a lot more out of other strategies like rural scholarships and HECS relief.

"The people involved in Teach for Australia are coming with the of best intentions and we wish them every success. But whether a six-week course is adequate in comparison to a four-year teacher training course is questionable," Ms Bluett says.

The AEU worked with federal and state governments to establish better conditions for the Teach for Australia associates than their overseas counterparts enjoy, including a 0.8 workload – the remaining 0.2 will be spent in learning and assessment and with appointed mentors.

Associates are committed to the program for two years. It's hoped that a significant number will stay on but they are under no pressure to do so. Some overseas data indicate that a good number do stay involved in education past the initial period, if not in teaching, then in administration or government.

Mary Bluett has a different reading: "The associates will cover areas where there is a shortage of teachers, but whether they stay on is another matter. As far as we can see, a lot of the associates overseas leave the profession.

The program, however, does not cost host schools anything. "Principals were contacted and gave their approval for the program to run in their schools, the costs are not being funded by their internal budgets," Ms Bluett says.

Teach for Australia CEO Melodie Potts Rosevear says that high-level longitudinal studies have shown the positive effects of the program in the USA.

"The data have shown that academic performance has improved across the board in schools involved in the Teach for America program.



Associate Shoba Singh and Teach for Australia CEO Melodie Potts Rosevear

"We are providing a pathway into education for graduates who might have toyed with the idea but were not sure how to enter teaching. By attracting this level of associate, we're increasing the prestige of the teaching profession," Ms Potts Rosevear says.

Teaching Associate Shoba Singh

Just how the program pans out in Australia remains to be seen, but 23-year-old Shoba Singh, one of Teach for Australia's first associates is excited about the task before her.

"I think that, as the program is very new, there isn't all that much information available about it and that might be contributing to some of the criticism we're facing," she says.

In the middle of her intensive six-week teacher training course at Melbourne University when *Education Today* spoke to her, Shoba said that she was looking forward to teaching in the same area that she lives in, Bundoora, a suburb in Melbourne's north.

Coming from the neighbourhood means that she's sure to see a few familiar faces at Bundoora Secondary College and is well aware of the kinds of problems kids there face. The area is disadvantaged with a high number of ESL households.

"I think that a goal is the best thing you can have. If you don't have something to work towards it's easy to slack off. It would be great if I could help some of the students to take a look at tertiary education," Shoba says.

Shoba holds a double degree in arts and law and entered the program just days after her legal studies were complete.

"I was very excited by Teach for Australia and I wanted to get involved with its first year."

She jokes that she likes to collect degrees, but does admit to a love of learning, which might have been instilled by her parents – both teachers. The family emigrated from Fiji eight years ago, specifically for the educational opportunities afforded in Australia.

She will be teaching Year 11 Legal Studies, Year 8 Humanities, Year 9 and 10 Commerce and a VCAL subject *Work related experience*.

Asked about possible discipline problems she might run into, she's about five foot and change, her response is measured: "There's often a reason why students play up. It's a matter of finding out what the problem is.

"A good teacher has to form a relationship with the students, show that they care and that they're there to help out. If a teacher isn't into it, the students very quickly realise."

Associates will operate in pairs or in threes and Shoba says that she has formed strong friendships with the members of her team and with others in the Teach for Australia program.

"There is a strong sense of camaraderie in the group and an enthusiasm which I think will help us push through what's ahead. The associates are very committed, some of us have left really well paying jobs to do this."