

Submission
No 41

INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF TEACHERS

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Summary

Submission #41

Inquiry into the Recruitment and Training of Teachers

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Submission

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Attachments

How will it be possible to attract quality candidates to the teaching profession when the morale of talented, innovative and hard working teachers, already in the system, is at an all time low and respect for the work of teachers is almost non-existent? My personal experience is testimony to this.

I recently left teaching, after 13 years of service in the NSW Public Education System, as a Science Teacher in high schools and TAFE campuses.

I did not, however, leave because of the students. They were the least of my problems. I left because I suffered a severe nervous breakdown (now given the new-age trendy name of bipolar disorder) because I was not recognised or rewarded by the NSW Department of Education for my loyalty, dedication, qualifications, experience, hard work, abilities and achievements in the classroom and as a creator of educational resources.

Teaching in high schools was akin to being a prison warden, always having to enforce petty and unjust rules. This was the reason I moved into TAFE colleges, but I could only gain employment as a casual teacher – deceptively referred to as a "part-time teacher". There were some pro rata sick leave entitlements, but no pro rata salary payments throughout the 16 weeks of holidays, during which time classes were not held. In other words, I was only paid for the face-to-face teaching hours, not for lesson preparation or resource development or holiday periods.

To add insult to injury, I never received full payment for writing learning materials for an OTEN (Open Training and Education Network, the correspondence school arm of TAFE), as the person in charge of the project conveniently disappeared and I had lost the copy of my contract.

But I persevered in the hope that I would finally secure a permanent job. This opportunity arose in mid-2001, a few months after my father had died of cancer. I was unemployed at the time, having survived a long period of major depression, during which time I tried to commit suicide. Throughout 2000, I had been working as a casual teacher at both Wyong and Newcastle campuses. I had been at Wyong campus for a couple of years and had managed, with minimal funding, to build up some science resources. Prior to that, science teachers were limited in the practical experiences they could offer students, as the Campus Administration (Management) refused to provide a classroom that was adequately (and safely) equipped for practical lessons (science experiments). The equipment that my head teacher and I had managed to acquire had to be stored in the photocopying and storeroom, under conditions which breached OH&S legislation, policies and procedures.

In October 2000, I experienced a manic episode of bipolar disorder and was admitted, on two occasions, to the James Fletcher Hospital, Newcastle, for treatment. I responded well to treatment, and asked my treating doctor (a registrar psychiatrist) to write to my head teacher at Newcastle Campus, explaining why I had suddenly, and inexplicably, disappeared before the end of Semester 2, 2000.

Throughout this time, my father was dying of cancer, and not long after I was discharged from the JFH, I became depressed again. Assuming that the head teacher at Newcastle Campus had received the letter from my treating doctor, which would have been clearly addressed to her, I rang her in February 2001 to enquire about casual teaching work for the first semester of that year. During discussions with her in her office on the campus of Newcastle TAFE, she denied receiving the letter and told me that there was no work available for me that semester. Her justification was that I had left my teaching position without giving any notice or reason, so I explained to her that my abnormal actions had been the result of my illness, bipolar disorder (manic depression). She would not relent and give me any work, so I had to apply for sickness benefits.

About May 2001, my head teacher from Wyong campus phoned me and informed me that a permanent part-time science teaching position was currently being advertised and encouraged me to apply. With the help of excellent staff at the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service (CRS), I prepared what I regarded as an outstanding resume, as well as receiving interview coaching. I attended the interview but later discovered that I did not get the job. Both my head teachers from Newcastle and Wyong had been on the selection panel. In discussions with another teacher at Wyong Campus, I was informed that the Newcastle campus head teacher had actively opposed my selection for the position.

I do not wish to consume more of your time with further details, simply to add that I "copped it sweet" and accepted the work at Newcastle campus that was offered to me for Semester 2, 2001. Bit by bit, I discovered more details which led me to conclude that the position for which I was most qualified and suited had been decided well before the so-called merit based application and interview was held.

I am completely disillusioned with the current system for employing teachers within the NSW TAFE system, and I am certainly not alone. Many casual TAFE teachers leave to set up their own small businesses, but because of my mental illness and lack of funds, I did not have that option available to me.

It was never the students that eventually drove me out. It was the flagrant injustice of a system which does not merely fail to recognise and reward dedicated teachers, but, at times, actively punishes them for their achievements.

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