

# Tracer study

Business



A seminal study recently commissioned by a government Committee of Teacher Education Policy (COTEP), the so-called National Teacher Education Audit (henceforth referred to as the Audit), reported that there is an over-supply of teachers in some school subjects (e. g. Biblical Studies) and an under-supply in other subjects (e. g. Science and Mathematics). These findings seem to corroborate widespread news reports that new teachers are not finding employment.

The apparent contradiction between supply and demand alluded to above raises important questions regarding the employment of teachers. Is there, in fact, an oversupply of teachers? Do teacher education graduates find employment in teaching? Do Science and Mathematics teacher education graduates, in fact, fill positions in these assumed critical areas? To address these and related questions, a study was designed to track a cohort of new teachers with the goal of ascertaining their employment status in the years immediately following their graduation. The study used a longitudinal tracer study design to trace the 1995 cohort of teacher graduates of the Faculty of Education, University of Durban-Westville. Data were collected at three different periods: at graduation (July 1996), at the end of the school year (December 1996), and at the beginning of the new school year (January 1997). Survey questionnaires were used for the collection of data from students, while biographical and academic data were obtained from the University records.

The study was restricted to teacher graduates from a single teacher education institution in a single province, viz.

KwaZulu-Natal. The findings of this study are, accordingly, limited in scope and may not necessarily resonate with the claims of the Audit. Nevertheless, the study is useful insofar as it challenges conventional wisdom regarding teacher employment/unemployment. The study focused on two critical questions, viz. • What is the employment status of the teacher graduates? • What is the teaching context of those who were employed as teachers?

A response rate of 55% was recorded.

The majority (88%) ofUDW’s teacher graduates found employment as teachers. This finding contrasts with the evidence presented in the Audit, viz. that there is an oversupply of teachers in general (Le Rowe, 1996: 12) and that many newly-qualified teachers were not able to secure teaching posts because provinces could not afford them (Hofrneyr & Hall, 1995: 30). Eight ppercent of teacher graduates were unemployed, while four ppercent were employed in the private sector or engaged in fulltime s~dy.

For those graduates who found employment as teachers, the teaching contexts varied. Former “ African” schools tended to employ graduates as permanent full-time staff: while former “ Indian” schools tended to employ graduates as full-time temporary staff Permanent employment of newly qualified teachers contradicts the findings of the Audit.

This may be the result of differential needs or employment conditions in schools which, until recently, were administered under different, race-based Departments ofEducation. A large ppercentage (690. /0) of graduates were employed in secondary schools.

Among these were 35% of graduates with primary school teaching qualification. This resonates with the findings of the Audit which indicated a shortage of secondary school teachers in KwaZulu-Natal (pendlebury, 1996: 10). This finding seems to confirm that there is a greater need for graduate teachers at the secondary level with the result that graduates, irrespective of their specialties are being employed in secondary schools.

Added to this fact is that just over half of the graduates (52%) do not teach the subjects they specialized in.

The Audit indicated that there was a shortage of teachers in certain critical areas like Mathematics and Sciences. Contrary to this finding, between 50% and 100% of qualified Maths and Science teachers do not teach these subjects in schools. Ssimilar findings on Physical Science teachers in schools in KwaZulu-Natal were reported (Naidoo & Khumalo, 1997). The findings of this tracer study have implications for large-scale audits, teacher education curricula and teacher education ppolicy and planning. Large-scale audits presents summary data at national level which do not account for rovincial and local variations in teacher employment ppolicy and planning.

Given that teacher graduates may not necessarily teach their subject specialties, two possible options may inform the curriculum ppolicy of teacher education institutions, viz. a sthrong generalist curriculum excluding specialist options; or a sthrong generalist curriculum with relatively small specialist component. Ppolicymakers and planners should refrain from making longterm decisions on teacher supply and demand until such time that more reliable data is available on teacher employment..