Eye opener

Cross-cultural teaching and learning

INTERNSHIPS IN AUSTRALIA ARE OPENING THE EYES OF BUDDING AMERICAN TEACHERS TO THE WORLD BEYOND CLASSROOM, AS **STACEY HARTMANN** EXPLAINS.

For Toni Duchatelier, a student teacher from North Carolina in the United States, an upcoming internship in a Sydney school represents an incredible professional opportunity to both educate and be educated on the contrasts of the Australian and US systems.

Duchatelier is part of a group of 24 American students from Queens University of Charlotte, North Carolina, arriving in Australia in May for six-week internships in Sydney primary and secondary classrooms. The matches for the unpaid internships, arranged by the international education organisation AustraLearn, are part of the prestigious Queens Teaching Fellows Program and will provide academic credit and a focus on exploring a larger world beyond classrooms in the US.

'I'm extremely excited because I've never been outside of the country, so this is big to me,' says Duchatelier, a third-year undergraduate who aspires to teach history in secondary schools. 'I want to see how a school system works in another country so I can apply this in my classroom. I also want to see the different cultural aspects and the history of the land, because I'm always interested in the back story of the place I'm going.'

Duchatelier plans to bring her personal spark to her Sydney internship in part by using theatrical teaching style, which she believes brings history lessons to life. 'Everyone teaches differently,' she says. 'You see what you like and put it into your little book. By the time you get into the classroom, you have your own ideas of how you want to teach.'

Internationalisation: the key to globally aware teachers

Queens has sent individual teaching students to Australia before, but the group of 24 arriving in May will be the inaugural cohort from the program, with each successive class of third-year undergraduates to follow annually, says Jennifer Collins, assistant professor of education and director of the teaching fellows program. Collins expects to witness many life lessons learned as her students push outside their comfort zones to get to know people in another country, experience different customs, find their way in unfamiliar locations and challenge taste buds with new foods.

'I feel these 24 students are very fortunate,' Collins says. 'Teachers need to be flexible creatures. Nothing is static in education, ever. You've got one curriculum one day, and the next day the principal comes in, and the emphasis might change. Flexibility is a skill that has to be mastered, and this is a great opportunity to do so.'

Each year, the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program selects about 500 outstanding high school seniors to receive four-year scholarships to attend one of the state's 17 universities, 12 public and five private. In return, graduates agree to teach for four years in a North Carolina public school. The program typically attracts applicants from the top seven per cent of their high school graduating classes and awards scholarships after a rigorous application process. 'From the time they came in as an undergraduate, they've been working in schools,' Collins says. 'By the third year of their undergraduate degree, they're in the midst of their methods classes. Instead of observing, they've been involved.'

Internationalisation is a major focus at Queens, where 90 per cent of students study or intern abroad with the help of university stipends. At the end of their Australian internships, the Queens teaching students are given assignments to compare the positives and negatives of the two educational systems. 'The US educational system is so different from anywhere else in the world,' Collins says. 'I think it will be interesting for them to see how another system works, and what are the benefits.'

Jeremy Tucker, one of just a few of the Australia-bound students who has travelled outside the US, chose the Queens program in large part because it included a teaching experience in Australia.

Tucker has travelled to Europe, Canada and Honduras, and knows firsthand how seeing other places in the world – especially locations of historical significance – tie directly back to teaching. 'You can share that with your students,' he says.

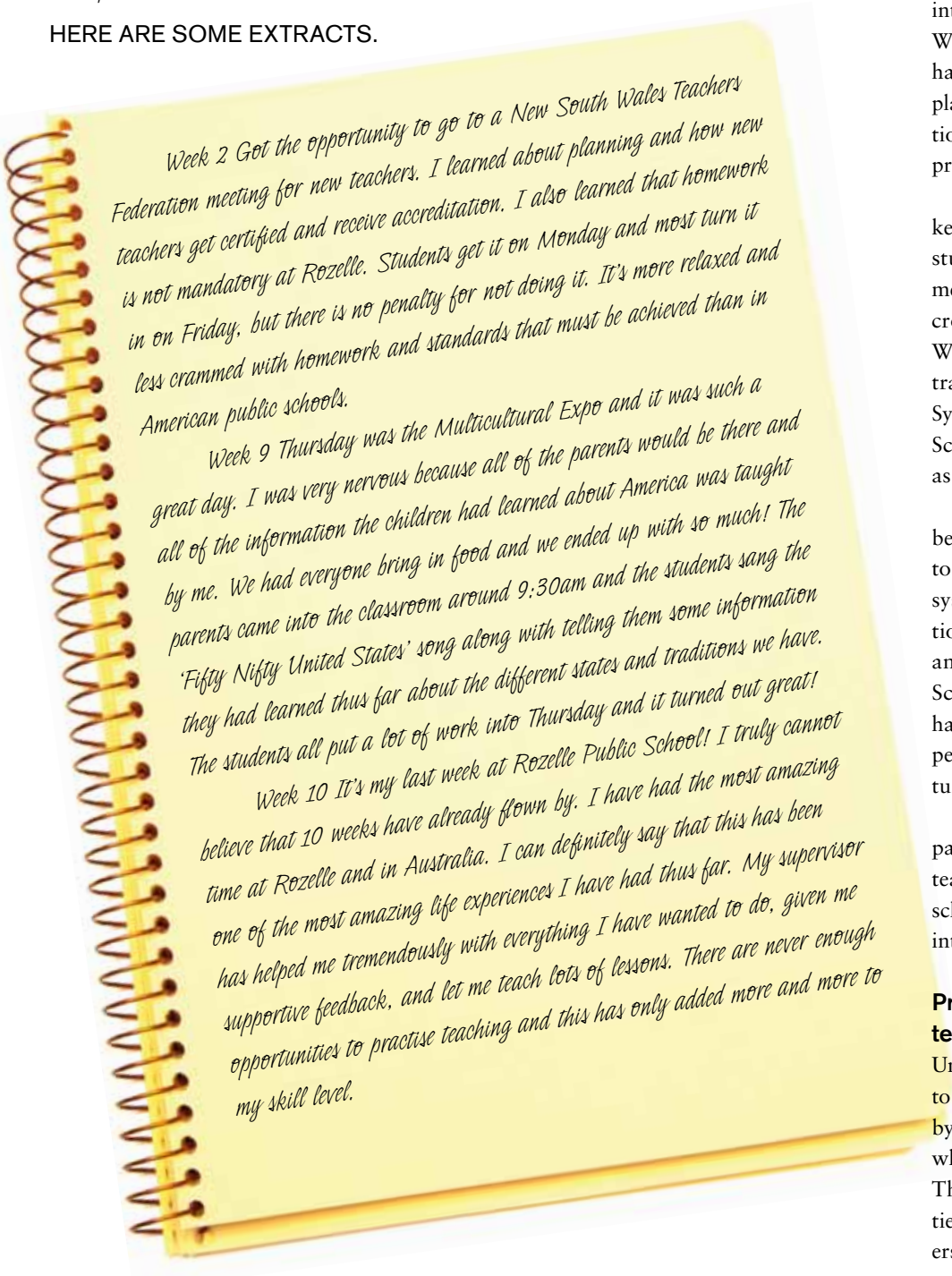
Tucker is hopeful his six weeks in an Australian school and home-stay arrangement will give him more insight into the culture than he would get as a tourist. 'We'll get to be with the kids more and see how they learn and what they do,' he says. 'I just think we'll experience their culture more.'

In-country expertise vital in internship arrangements

Planning for the Queens teaching internships in Australian got underway about two years ago when the university contacted

Snapshot

KELSEY SMITH, NOW IN HER FINAL YEAR AT UNIVERSITY AND ANTICIPATING HER PRACTICUM IN THE NORTHERN SPRING, WAS REQUIRED TO KEEP A JOURNAL DURING HER AUSTRALIAN INTERNSHIP. IN IT, SHE DESCRIBES THE POWER OF A MULTICULTURAL EXCHANGE. HERE ARE SOME EXTRACTS.



AustraLearn, which creates special custom programs in all fields of study for US and Canadian universities and regularly places teaching interns in Australian and New Zealand schools.

'Our goal is to listen to the needs of the US universities' teaching departments and international education offices so we can create customised internship programs that integrate with their curricula,' says Barbara West, manager of internship programs. 'We handle all arrangements for the internship placements, from housing to cultural education opportunities to monitoring of student progress.'

AustraLearn's role is to bring together key stakeholders – North American students, university academic departments and overseas partner schools – for cross-cultural learning opportunities, West explains. In the past two years, AustraLearn has matched teaching interns in Sydney schools including Randwick Public School and Rozelle Public School, as well as Rose Park Primary School in Adelaide.

The teaching internships are mutually beneficial, West says. Students are exposed to another country's culture and school system so they can learn different instructional methods, curriculum approaches and behavioural management techniques. Schools also get an extra set of helping hands, as well as the excitement of a new person in the classroom with different cultural perspectives to share with students.

'The hope going forward is that strong partnerships will evolve between the US teaching programs and local Australian schools,' West says, 'so we can foster more intercultural literacy in teacher education.'

Pros and cons to international teaching interns

Understandably, Australian schools want to encourage their workforce of the future by making Australian students a priority when it comes to practicum placements. This, coupled with the per diems universities pay local schools to take student teachers, makes it a challenging environment to

find placements for international teaching interns, West says. Even so, some Australian educators already welcome international teaching interns.

Adam Willis is one of them. The Rozelle Public School teacher hosted two interns from America, one in 2009 and one in 2010. He did so in part because of his own overseas practicum in Fiji in 2006.

'I find that having an intern from another country, particularly the US, is a great asset, as they come with a different set of experiences and levels of expertise that they are able to share with the students,' Willis says. 'This exposes the students, and me, to a variety of teaching styles and learning experiences. I also find that the classroom students like to "teach" the international interns about Australia and get a real kick out of showing what they know about their own country.'

Willis says he's benefitted from hosting the interns in terms of his own teacher education. They've taught him plenty about the history of the indigenous peoples of the US, for example, but also about school structures and curriculum. 'I find that the international internship offers two-way learning,' he says.

What about drawbacks? Willis says he hasn't seen any so far, in part because of modern communication. He was able to contact Kelsey Smith, his 2010 intern from Sweet Briar College, through email and social networking in the months before she came to Australia so both were prepared for her three-month stint.

'I've certainly recommended accepting international interns to my colleagues in my local area,' Willis says. 'I believe that being able to share what you know, particularly with another teaching professional from another country, strengthens the teaching profession, not only on a local scale, but globally. I hope to have the opportunity to repeat this experience with yet another intern from America this year.'

Willis praised Smith in his evaluation of her internship and described how her efforts supported the local curriculum.

'During her internship Kelsey developed a brilliantly stimulating unit of work entitled "My Great American Road Trip." This integrated unit of work linked with the New South Wales Social Science outcomes for world cultures as part of a country study. The students learned about each of the 50 states that make up the US in preparation for a whole-school multicultural exhibition. This culminated in the presentation of the students' work and newly acquired knowledge to a gathering of students, teachers and parents who were all very impressed by the level of deep understanding the students had attained.'

For Smith, interning in Australia put teaching in a different light. It gave her new ideas about how classrooms and schools can function. Most significantly, she learned it's possible to teach many things without depending on textbooks.

'It may be different for every school system, but the only textbook I used while teaching (in Australia) was for reading short stories,' she says. 'There's so much more students can gain outside of a textbook, and I've been able to apply that in my learning, as well as in my practicum work in the classroom this past year.' T

Pictured, Rozelle Public School's 'My Great American Road Trip' integrated unit of work linked with the New South Wales Social Science outcomes.

Stacey Hartmann is editor of the GlobaLinks NewsWire, an online news site on international education topics and the AustraLearn, AsiaLearn and EuroLearn study abroad programs of GlobaLinks Learning Abroad.

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