Masters degree partnership places School in national spotlight

An innovative programme has been introduced at The Rockhampton Grammar School in which teachers will undertake a Master’s Degree as part of their annual professional development studies. Announced to staff at the end of 2012, the programme – underway since January – has been developed in partnership with Griffith University, enabling teachers to acquire new understandings in areas specific to their teaching needs.

The partnership is believed to be the first and only programme of its kind in Australia.

“Some of the great strengths of the course is that it allows us to overcome the gap between theory and action and provides a pathway to integrate theory into the classroom as much as possible.” Headmaster Dr Phillip Moulds told The Australian in an article published on 25 February.

“I am hopeful that I can be successful,” says teacher and mother Mirinda Broadbent, who last studied at university 15 years ago. Director of Teaching, Mrs Nanette Murphy, says the rigour of university makes the level of learning in the RGS Griffith programme higher than that of standard professional development programmes.

“This Masters is teacher-centred. Teachers have come to me very enthused that this degree will focus their learning on their own special areas of interest,” says Mrs Murphy, an architect of the programme who is herself enrolled in the degree. She and Dr Moulds – they have each written Masters level courses for universities here and overseas – will also design and create content for the RGS Griffith Masters.

“Teachers fundamentally make a significant difference to learning outcomes of the students. So we want the best teachers [working] with students to get the best possible learning happening.” Dr Moulds says.

“This programme will help us achieve that.”

It has been applauded by the Queensland Independent Education Union’s Terry Burke who told the ABC he saw the initiative as a positive move to enhance teaching outcomes. Dr Moulds welcomes the Union’s support.

“We want to make sure we’re facilitating teachers’ ongoing development at a very high level, if you want ongoing significant reflective learning you have to tackle it on an institutional level,” explains the Headmaster. A few study groups of teachers have formed. They meet on campus up to three times a week.

“Making time at school to study is invaluable,” has been very rewarding,” says Mrs Broadbent, who gathers with five other staff to review notes.

“Teachers appreciate and value the opportunity to engage in learning that is at the centre of their work. They can engage in the learning without feeling guilty about the time they need to put into it.” Dr Moulds adds.

The cost of the programme is already factored into the School’s existing annual professional development funding for teachers.

“It’s a valuable investment, which over time is not over and above traditional professional development costs. What’s special here is that whilst teachers are advancing their skills they’re modelling life-long learning to their students,” explains Dr Moulds.

Griffith University’s Dean and Head of the School of Education and Professional Studies, Professor Donna Pendergast, is hopeful other schools will consider duplicating the model established by The Rockhampton Grammar School.

“It is totally integrated, it’s contextual and it’s relevant,” Professor Pendergast said.

“It’s such a great initiative,” declared Justine Ferrari, The Australian’s education correspondent. She looked but could not find another programme like it in Australia.

“It’s so good to see schools get behind their teachers like this.”

Left: The Australian reported on 25 February (page 2) that the School had worked with Griffith University to tailor a Masters Degree in Education catering for the specific needs of its teachers.

Below: Griffith University lecturer Dr Steve Hay (far left) with RGS Teachers, enrolled in the Masters, during a workshop at the School on 28 March.