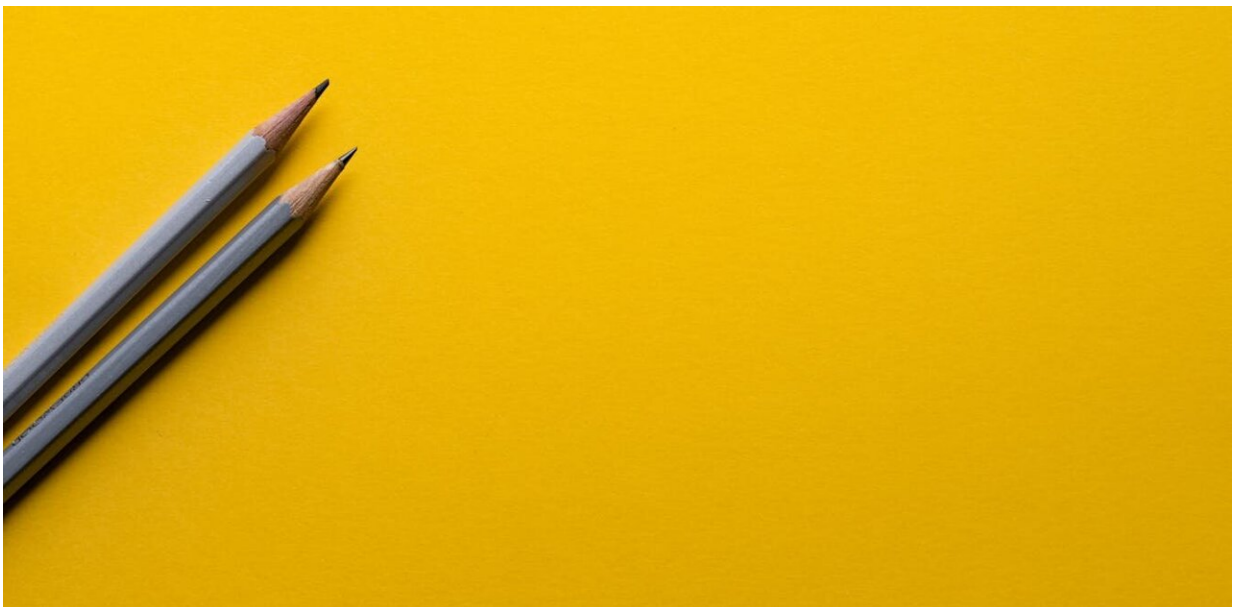


Will free teaching degrees fix the teacher shortage in Australia? It's more complicated than that

September 13 2023, by Paul Kidson



Credit: [Joanna Kosinska/Unsplash](#)

Victorian Premier Dan Andrews has opened a new front in the national campaign to [attract and retain](#) teachers. Amid ongoing [teacher shortages](#), Victoria [will offer fee-free education](#) for high school teaching degrees from next year.

This is similar to the [free nursing degrees](#) Victoria announced in 2022 to

create an "army of home-grown health workers."

But is it going to fix the problem?

What was announced?

On Tuesday, the Victorian government announced a [A\\$230 million teaching package](#).

This includes scholarships to cover the costs of a high [school teaching](#) degree. Students will be required to work in Victorian government schools for two years after they graduate. This is expected to support about 8,000 "future teachers."

There is a further \$27 million to provide up to \$50,000 in incentives for graduates to work in hard-to-staff schools, both in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. There is also \$95.7 million to support and mentor first year teachers.

It's an attractive package. But it's very unlikely to address the core of the problem. That's because access to tertiary study and incentives to relocate are not the root causes of teachers shortages, particularly [in rural and remote areas](#).

History tells us to be cautious

History suggests free degrees will not see a surge of students applying to study teaching.

There was free university education in Australia between 1974 and 1989. Yet 1996 analysis showed the reintroduction of fees under the Hawke government was accompanied by [an increase in university access](#), rather

than a reduction in student numbers.

Greater access to tertiary education also didn't make it easier to find teachers for hard-to-staff schools. A 2019 [University of Canberra review](#) looked at 20 years of evidence around attracting and retaining teachers in rural and remote communities, including [financial incentives](#). It found "we are no closer to solving this perennial issue."

International evidence [is mixed](#). It shows financial incentives can lead to an immediate increase in enrolments for teaching courses, but this tapers off quickly once the incentive is removed (as appears to be the case here at the end of 2025).

Research also suggests cash incentives can convince some students who are open to the idea of teaching, yet undecided, to enroll. But there is [little chance](#) it will bring people into the profession who don't already value teaching.



People with no interest in teaching are unlikely to be convinced by a free degree.
Credit: [Brooke Cagle/Unsplash](#)

It's a question of motivation

Like nursing, the motivation for pursuing a teaching career is driven by a [range of factors](#) largely unrelated to pure financial incentives.

Those who choose, and remain in, teaching beyond their first few years are [typically attracted](#) by the intellectual stimulation, social benefits of teaching and opportunity to have a positive impact on people's lives.

Students motivated predominantly by financial incentives may well get a reality check when they encounter their first practical experience in a

classroom, particularly in a hard-to-staff school.

Schools also need to be positive and safe places to work if we want to attract and keep teachers. In a December 2022 review, the Productivity Commission noted "[low value](#)" administrative tasks meant teachers were not spending enough time teaching.

There have also been repeated reports about [unreasonable expectations](#) and even abuse from parents, as well as student behavioral issues.

Unfortunately many teachers report their work is leaving them stressed and burned out—and wanting to leave the profession.

We need to look beyond teaching degrees

It's good to see almost \$96 million in the package to support first year teachers' transition into the profession through "extra preparation time, mentoring and other professional support."

This is consistent with the [national plan](#) to address teacher shortages, released by federal and state education ministers in late 2022.

But we also need [ongoing measures](#). This includes professional and practical supports.

Adequate housing for teachers amid a housing affordability crisis [remains a challenge](#). The impracticality of being posted to a regional school without housing is self-evident.

Community and [social connections are also vital](#) for new teachers who move to non-metropolitan areas for work.

More questions

This package is an important and welcome response to teacher shortages. But it is unlikely to fix the problem and leaves us with some questions.

The funding is only for [high school](#) teachers. Could this attract students potentially interested in primary teaching and make primary school supply issues a greater problem?

The funding is only for enrolments in 2024 and 2025 and only for government schools. What happens in two years' time? Could the package be extended to private and Catholic schools?

A two-year package with free degrees may seem like good politics (and it makes a good headline). But we need to look at the bigger picture and examine issues such as working conditions, professional development, and the way our society supports [teachers](#) so they can keep doing the essential work they do.

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