

SEEL Placement Panel – 8th June 2023

I attended the SEEL (South East, East and London) Placement Panel 2023 as the Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) representative. The purpose of my role was to observe the placement panel process and, alongside other panel members, to ensure the fairness of the process, including maintaining trainee anonymity and lack of bias of Principal Educational Psychologist's (PEP) in decision making. The panel was held in-person at University College London (UCL) and was made up of six PEPs representing different regions of SEEL, the Bursary Bank lead, and the TEP representative. One of the PEPs was the chair of the panel and led the process.

The panel chair began by explaining the placement panel process and the principles that guide the process. It was explained that the process aims to balance providing the highest placement preferences for as many TEPs as possible, with ensuring that all local authorities have at least one of their pledges for a TEP filled. In the past, due to placement pledges outweighing the number of TEPs and also due to TEP placement preferences for popular placements, some local authorities had previously not had pledges filled. Based on feedback from London EP services, a decision was made that London EP services would pledge for 2 TEPs maximum in order to increase the spread of TEPs across London. I feel that a focus on this issue is important as local authorities should be able to feel confident that their pledges will be filled and a spread of TEPs across SEEL means that both TEPs and placement providers will be able to share different experiences and learn from each other. I feel that the panel worked hard to prioritise the wellbeing of TEPs alongside fulfilling placement pledges, such as considering TEP preferences and journey times. It would be interesting to review if there are patterns of particular local authorities that struggle to have their pledges filled and how this can be supported.

Before beginning, the panel chair asked for any conflict of interest to be declared, to which there were none. Panel members were presented with all TEP's placement preference forms, which were suitably anonymised as identifying information was removed and each form was assigned a number. In order to support the allocation process, the panel chair had already completed a draft of panel decisions and this was cross-referenced throughout and used to aid decision making. Acknowledgement of the significance of these decisions in terms of the impact on TEP's lives was highlighted and agreed by panel members, including reference of the increasing cost of living.

The allocation process began with TEPs who had cited medical needs or exceptional circumstances. Panel members read the provided information and discussed whether the circumstances were eligible for priority placement. This was an interesting part of the process to observe as the needs cited varied considerably, with some needs being clearly accepted as a priority and some prompting further discussion. There was discussion amongst the panel regarding whether some of the medical needs identified for special consideration, were in fact exceptional. The panel recognised that Programme Directors (PDs) had seen documentation regarding the specific needs of the trainee that were not available to view by the panel. The panel chair explained that it is important to have a robust rationale if they are going to reject the medical needs/exceptional circumstances noted so that the process is fair and so TEPs understand the decisions made. I felt that a strength of a panel was how they challenged each other and continually reflected on key issues and the decisions they were making. TEPs may benefit from further guidance as to what will be considered by the panel as an appropriate medical need/exceptional circumstance so that only relevant information is shared. One recommendation from the panel was to change the application form so that PDs can indicate if they have seen relevant documentation, and also that they are in agreement that the needs identified are exceptional. The panel chair said that she would take this back to the SEEL Executive Committee for consideration by the Task and Finish group.

A challenge of this year's panel was that there were specific groupings of placements that were chosen often by TEPs, resulting in it being very difficult to place all of the TEPs who had the same placement preferences. This was difficult for the panel due to their simultaneous duty to the TEPs to allocate a placement of their preference, and also their duty to placement providers to fulfil a spread of pledges. The panel engaged in lots of discussion regarding how to solve this issue in a fair way. After discussion, the panel agreed to contact a cluster of popular local authorities to request one additional pledge, to which one local authority responded and agreed. The panel reflected on the difficulty of this issue and noted that more time should be dedicated to the overall panel process moving forward to decrease the time pressure that was felt this year. Furthermore, there was discussion about the potential role of AI or ICT in supporting the allocation process and it would be interesting to explore this further.

Overall, I felt the panel showed reflectiveness, collaboration, empathy, and transparency throughout the process. The process felt fair and objective and the decisions made were considered carefully. All panel members contributed to decision making and I was also encouraged to ask questions and clarify the process where needed. I was satisfied that the decisions made were effective and fair and were made with the aim of supporting both TEPs and placement providers as much as possible. The panel chair acknowledged that there will need to be dedicated time for reflection and consideration of decisions made following the panel. The panel chair also shared that there will be a Task and Finish group to review the SEEL guidelines and terms of reference.

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