

# Quality – The Key Ingredient in the National Standards Framework for Australian Teachers

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## Introduction

In 2001, the Australian Council of Educators (ACE) released the Outcomes from a National Professional Summit on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism in a working document 'to be refined and extended in a context of cooperative action' (ACE 2001a, 1). The Summit brought together participants from professional and industrial organisations, as well as from systems and sectors around the nation, including international experts, senior policy makers, researchers, and practising teachers with a commitment 'to identifying where the profession should be in relation to teacher standards, quality and professionalism in the medium term (e.g. five years)' (1). In April 2002, the Australian College of Educators facilitated an Australian Government funded National Meeting of Professional Educators in Canberra. This meeting titled Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism: Towards a Common Approach aimed to 'engage practising teachers in a professional conversation ... acknowledging that dialogue would take place in a context of extensive research and development; new and emerging structures; and ongoing efforts to generate a common and unifying approach' (Cumming 2002). In 2005, the debates and issues identified at these meetings remain pertinent to discussions today and although considerable progress has been made in the development of subject specific professional standards, as formulated by the national bodies for mathematics, science, English and literacy teachers (Althorp, Cockburn, Hayes and Morony 2001), teacher librarians and special education teachers, there is still no generally accepted set of national professional standards for teachers in Australia. This is not to suggest a lack of support for the process but rather reflects the complexity of the task. Common concerns centre on the nature and structure of standards, how they might be assessed and used, developmental versus regulatory approaches, generic versus subject specific structures, and the relationship between standards and registration processes and quality

teaching and students' learning.

The development of a common set of national professional standards for Australian teachers in primary and secondary schools, early childhood, and technical education sector (TAFE), is generally supported by all relevant educational groupings. The Australian Education Union (2003) believes 'their development provides an opportunity for professional recognition and public support and will enhance the status of the profession'. This is consistent with the union's support for teacher registration and the maintenance of high-level qualifications. The Federal Government's Senate Report (1998) highlights the important role registration can play as gatekeeper for entry into employment in schools, and that registration standards are thereby vital to the profession. As the Report states:

*Without standards, a professional body is defenceless. A demonstrated ability to articulate standards for high quality practice is an essential credential if a professional body wishes to be taken seriously by the public and policy makers.*

For others, national professional standards for teachers provide 'an important mechanism for improving the effectiveness of professional development; informing the means for improving career path opportunities; providing incentives for continuous professional learning; and building capacity for leadership, accountability and quality assurance' (ACE 2001b, 2).

Lovat (2002) expresses the view that recent developments to enhance the status of the teaching profession and the role of the teacher through registration and the establishment of standards 'represents a coming of age for the profession' (17).

*'Having spent much of its recent history being perceived as a more-or-less respected apprenticeship-into-trade, the accumulation of educational research, and especially teaching research (the 'new*

*pedagogies'), has finally confirmed what teachers themselves always knew ... that teaching is a highly skilled and complex art and science that requires a rare grasp of content knowledge conjoined with an even rarer skill of disseminating that knowledge within the limitations and constraints of bulk learning in the average, not overly-conducive classroom' (17).*

In addressing the Why? of professional standards, the Australian Government's Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) consultation paper (2003) posits the view that 'defining the standards that distinguish the profession, pays tribute to the complex and sophisticated nature of the tasks that teachers perform' (p.4). Teachers, it is argued, will gain more public recognition and status in the community through a greater transparency of the nature of their work. Standards will also provide a useful form of quality assurance to parents and the public' (4).

## Ownership of the process

There is general agreement that the processes involved in the development of national professional standards should be by the profession for the profession. As Ramsey (2000) highlights, 'good teaching does not come through imposed requirements but through the individual teacher's commitment to high professional standards. The important changes needed in teaching are those that teachers must make for themselves' (p.7).

In this regard, a National Forum on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism held in Canberra in 2003 brought together more than 230 practising teachers, school leaders and other educators from around Australia to discuss, primarily, the development of national professional standards for teachers. An outcome of the Forum was a clear commitment by the participants to engage in continuing work on teacher standards, quality and professionalism. In May 2003, a *National Statement from the Teaching Profession on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism* was released by the Australian College of Educators for the Department of Education, Science and Training. This followed collaborative work conducted by members of the profession over a period of approximately three years. The National Statement aimed to demonstrate, once again, its 'collective capacity to inform and contribute to national policy and program development on these three interconnected and interdependent areas in a way that complements the work of governments, systems and sector authorities' (ACE National Statement, 2003, 4).

The National Statement argues the need to make explicit the critical relationship between what teachers know, do, expect and value and the key role they play in shaping the lives and futures of their students, along with an acceptance that 'teachers do make a difference'. Research conducted in Australia and internationally supports this assertion (Darling-Hammond 1997, Hill 1997, Ingvarson 1998, Cuttance 2001, Education Queensland 2001, Rowe 2002). The MCEETYA National Framework Consultation Paper (2003) also states that: 'teacher quality has a greater role in explaining student achievement than many of the factors associated with either the teaching environment such as classroom resources, curriculum guidelines, and assessment practices, or the broader school environment such as school culture and organisation' (p.3). Of importance, is concern that any discussion related to teacher quality remains cognisant of 'the diversity of contexts and conditions in which teachers work, including class size, time release, administrative support, well-resourced education settings and access to high-quality ongoing professional development' (ACE National Statement, 2003, 5).

The National Statement also outlines a set of principles agreed upon by national teacher organisations and stakeholders to guide the future development and application of professional standards. The professional standards for teaching should:

- be the responsibility of, and be owned by, the teaching professional in collaboration with key stakeholders
- be applied in the interests of learners, the profession and the public
- be firmly grounded in an accurate and comprehensive understanding of teachers' work
- provide a framework for teacher qualifications and registration
- recognise the value of both generic and subject-specific standards
- be clear to the profession and the wider community
- enhance the public perception of and esteem for teachers and their work
- promote teaching as a desirable career, thus contributing to recruitment
- focus on high-level capabilities and be described in terms of professional knowledge, understanding, skills and values
- promote engagement in professional learning throughout a teacher's career, allowing for different points of entry and re-entry to the profession
- acknowledge that context and resourcing will have an impact on implementation and sustainability
- acknowledge the responsibility of employers and the profession to establish conditions conducive to developing and maintaining profession-defined standards (ACE National Statement 2003, 5-6).

The strong connection between professional teaching standards and professional learning provides yet another focus for discussion. If standards are used to facilitate authentic engagement in continuous professional learning and development, teachers are able to control the process; that is, 'the process is done by and with teachers, not to or for them' (ACE National Statement, 2003, 5). For others, professional standards will provide the 'means by which individual teachers determine their current position on a learning continuum and chart 'their own course for higher order learning and professional recognition' (ACE National Statement, 2003, 5). From this perspective, the attainment of high professional standards emanates from active engagement in effective professional learning over many years. Understandably, teachers' professional learning will take many forms, including, for example, involvement in pre-service teacher education, improved qualifications through post-graduate study, school-based curriculum development and action research.

The collaborative work carried out by the profession in developing the ACE National Statement (2003), generated confidence in the profession's capacity to carry the agenda forward. Nevertheless, some caution was advised and further discussion needed in regard to the following questions:

- What are the distinctive contributions that employers, unions, governments, parents and other stakeholders can make in relation to teacher standards, quality and professionalism?
- How can the profession and other stakeholders work towards further common understanding of these concepts, purposes, processes and intended outcomes?
- How can professional teaching standards be used to create new knowledge and diversity in professional practice (that is, standards not standardisation)?
- What is the interface between professional teaching

standards, performance review and assessment, and other industrially based workplace practices?

- What processes should be initiated for the ongoing review of teacher standards, quality and professionalism?
- What is the best way to achieve national coordination and consistency with regard to the implementation of professional teaching standards and professional certification for highly accomplished teachers? (National Statement, p.7)

## National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership

Speaking at the National Forum on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism (2003), Dr Brendan Nelson, Minister for the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training concludes:

*'We strongly support current moves into teacher professionalism. This should not be mandated by governments. That is a recipe for failure and added to that, mediocrity. It must be something that is supported and nurtured by governments. It needs to be led and driven by the teaching profession. It will never work if it is not supported, developed, understood, enunciated and promoted by you and your colleagues' (13).*

At the Forum, Nelson also signalled that the Australian Government had more to do in terms of providing leadership in the area.

In mid July 2003, Nelson announced the Australian Government's intention to provide an initial \$10 million to establish a National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL). Involvement of the teaching profession in the establishment and operation of the Institute was believed crucial in ensuring its success, and its potential functions might include school leadership, professional teaching standards, teacher and school leader professional learning, quality assurance and research. Four major objectives guide the NIQTSL's work: to support and advance the quality of teaching in Australian schools; to support and advance the quality of school leadership; to strengthen the teaching profession; and to establish an organisation that operates openly, collaboratively, efficiently and ethically. Since its inception, the NIQTSL Board has given consideration to teacher professional standards, pre-service teacher education, the teaching practicum, the National Awards for Teaching, and the future shape and focus of the Institute.

Development of the National Institute has much to commend it, and its acceptance of teacher professional associations, at both the national and local level, has been generally received positively. The enhanced status and recognition of professional associations by the NIQTSL Board reflects a willingness to acknowledge the important role of national bodies such as the Australian Joint Council of Professional Teaching Associations (AJCPTA), which represents over 120,000 teachers in all systems and sectors in early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary and adult learning. Members of the AJCPTA are representative of all curriculum areas, cross curriculum areas such as ESL and Teacher Librarians, and leadership and administration. As a member of the NIQTSL Board, the AJCPTA is closely linked to the decision-making process and has worked diligently to strengthen its position in terms of providing a voice for the profession and advancing national agendas; for example, it regularly prepares submissions in response to government enquiries such as the recent NIQTSL Guidelines for Quality in the Practicum. It has also assumed responsibility for the coordination of national professional development projects,

such as the Values Education project, and is able to allocate funds to local affiliated members for the implementation of these projects. This position has nevertheless, not been without its tensions, given the strong position of the AJCPTA on the NIQTSL Board (five positions) compared with other significant national professional associations that are subject-specific or representative of a single professional group, and who have less representation on the NIQTSL Board.

In November 2003, the Australian Government's MCEETYA Teacher Quality and Educational Leadership Taskforce released *A National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching*. This Framework was 'designed to be evolutionary, providing a vision, principles and structures for jurisdictions and the profession to align current or proposed standards for teaching' (p.8). Its focus has been to identify the parameters within which standards might be developed. Through the provision of core dimensions and attributes of standards it 'allows the development of generic, specialist and subject specific standards' (8) and is underpinned by the following principles that aim to strengthen 'the definition and articulation of teachers' work' (8). The Framework supports the development of professional standards that:

- acknowledge the link between quality teaching and improved student learning outcomes;
- ensure consistency and enable recognition of quality teaching;
- reflect authentic and extensive knowledge about teaching and learning;
- encourage teachers to aspire to a higher level of performance;
- have regard for the future but are grounded in current effective professional practice;
- reflect the theoretical knowledge of specific content and pedagogy and the practical application of that knowledge to improve student learning;
- are outcomes-based to ensure strong links between standards for teaching, their evaluation and professional learning;
- reflect teachers' professional experience and growth on a continuum from undergraduate preparation to professional leadership; and,
- promote, support, recognise and reward quality teaching in the full range of social and cultural contexts in which teaching occurs (MCEETYA National Framework, p. 8).

The National Framework identifies: firstly, *Career dimensions*, which frame general and recognisable aspects of professional capacity and achievement including graduation, competence, accomplishment and leadership; and secondly, *Professional elements*, including professional knowledge, professional practice, professional values, and professional relationships. This National Framework recognises the interdependency and overlap between these categories and acknowledges the difficulty in capturing the complexity of teachers' work.

## Challenging assumptions and differing perspectives

In July 2005, NIQTSL convened the National Conference for the Teaching Profession *Sharing Experience: Ways forward with Standards*. While acknowledging the substantial effort and sound basis provided by the profession in work related to the development of professional standards (for example, the Australian College of Educators), this Forum highlighted the changing nature of the educational landscape in Australia in which Federal agendas have been driven more vigorously across

state-based responsibilities and processes. Further concerns rest on the potential for national professional standards to assume, in time, a regulatory, rather than developmental role, for members of the profession.

In his keynote address *Mapping the territory: Standards for accomplished teaching*, presented at the National Conference, Lawrence Ingvarson outlined research conducted by the Australian Council of Educational Research regarding current developments, nationally and internationally, related to advanced standards for teaching. Lawrence argued that two facets, Standards as emblems or flags, and Standards as measures, remain pivotal to the discussion. Key questions for consideration are: What is it we value in teaching? and What is it that teachers should get better at? Teaching standards, he argued, should embody the professional values that teachers develop over time, and provide evidence of a deeper understanding of content from the learners' point of view; a deeper knowledge and awareness of students as individuals; a capacity to provide useful feedback; learning how to let your authority 'go' and promote independent thinking and learning; and an ability to make assessment a vehicle for student learning. Effective professional learning, he believes, equals a long term, personal quest. If we are to adopt the 'Standards as measures' premise then three essential questions must be asked:

- What is to be measured? (What is accomplished teaching?)
- How will it be measured? (What evidence is valid/relevant?)
- What counts as meeting the Standard? (What level of performance is good enough?)

Professor Judyth Sachs, of the University of Sydney, challenged participants at the NIQTSL conference to 'move outside their taken-for-granted assumptions' through an analysis of the different schools of thought regarding the 'why, how and where to' of advanced standards for teaching. Her discussion centred on the following three tenets:

- For standards to contribute to the broad project of quality teachers for the future they must be dynamic rather than static.
- In their most strategic and far-sighted form they can be seen as a touchstone for teaching as it moves into whatever the future holds for teaching and learning rather than to remain anchored in the past.
- Standards are not value free nor politically neutral; they serve particular interests and they have effects.

Sachs argued that the development of national professional standards should not reduce the importance of teachers' professional judgement and stressed that important distinctions need to be made between regulatory versus developmental emphases. International experience had shown that excessive regulation led to depression, lack of morale, a sense of powerlessness within the profession, and a reduction of good teaching to a set of basic skills. Clearly, she argued, there is a strong need to inform the public that teaching is a creative endeavour and requires intellectual work. Teaching is also about relationships, learning relationships, and conversations about practice and a need to ensure the language is sufficiently sophisticated, rather than being merely 'common sense' she argued, to strengthen opportunities for learning across disciplines and from each other.

Based on Saul's (2001) definition of 'common sense', Kennedy (2002) argues for some accommodation of this notion. As defined by Saul, 'common sense' is:

*An expression of shared knowledge, which links us to each other and acts as a foundation of undefined commonality, which allows us to engage in conversation (Saul 2001, 20).*

Saul asserts that 'there is a commonality within us, and that commonality is based in our humanity' (46). In furthering the case, Kennedy suggests the commonality within the profession is 'based on the practice that we share' (46) and this provides a focus for advancing the discussion regarding the development of national professional standards for teachers.

## Conclusion

Building on the strong support from the profession, the process for the development of a National Framework has the potential to work effectively to encourage a proactive and collaborative endeavour aimed at productive outcomes. Continued collaboration by relevant professional associations and by individual members of the profession that addresses issues and problems that emerge throughout the developmental process, should ensure that national professional standards are owned by teachers and reflect the values and aspirations of the profession and other key stakeholders.

If handled well, the development of national professional standards should improve teacher quality by engendering a sense of national identity and professional cohesion through a clear focus on national perspectives and common goals and aspirations. It should strengthen teachers' engagement in the work of their profession and provide encouragement for ongoing collaborative discussion, critical reflection, and examination of practice. Ideally, it has the potential to provide a framework for the enhancement of teacher education programs, induction programs, the quality of the teaching and learning process and operations within schools, career pathways, and increased dialogue across systems and sectors. As Lovat (2002) highlights:

*'Teachers truly are a precious commodity for any society that wants a future for its kids. The issues and challenges for the role of teacher; ... need to be addressed in light of this overwhelming fact' (17).*

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