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Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
Response to Productivity Commission Draft Report on the
School Education Workforce

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The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) welcomes the draft report of the Commission's inquiry into the school education workforce. Overall, the draft report provides directions and recommendations that can contribute to the development of the workforce, thereby contributing to improved student outcomes.

AITSL made an initial submission to this inquiry. This second submission does not replace that initial submission, or re-visit ground already covered. Rather, it addresses some specific issues raised by the draft report. It should be read as a supplement to the initial submission.

Developments since the initial submission

Since AITSL's original submission, there have been a number of developments relevant to the inquiry. At the October 2011 meeting of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) Ministers reached some significant agreements on AITSL's work.

Ministers authorised AITSL to conduct a national conversation on a Professional Learning Charter. The draft Charter outlines the characteristics of effective professional learning, and invites feedback on how professional learning can best support major improvements in Australian education.

Ministers also authorised consultation on a proposal for certification of highly accomplished and lead teachers, requesting that a final proposal be presented to the first Ministerial Council meeting of 2012.

Ministers agreed to request that AITSL develop a National Framework for Teacher Performance and Development. This will support performance improvement for all Australian teachers and has the potential to advance many of the issues identified by the Commission. The development of such a framework was foreshadowed in the Australian Government's Rewards for Great Teachers election commitment. In November 2011 the Commonwealth Minister for School Education and Youth Affairs announced that payments to teachers under this initiative would go to teachers certified as meeting the highly accomplished and lead career stages of the National Professional Standards for Teachers. This approach will assist in linking these payments to a broader effort to create a standards-based career structure for teachers.

Issues addressed in this submission

There are four broad sets of issues raised in the draft report that AITSL wishes to address in this submission:

- the value of a comprehensive, standards-based career structure for teachers
- approaches to teacher performance and development
- improving initial teacher education
- potential further work for AITSL.

A standards-based career structure

The draft report recognises the potential benefits of a more comprehensive and coherent career structure for teachers and seeks feedback on issues in implementing a performance-based career structure. Many of the issues raised are matters between teachers and their employers, and fall outside AITSL's remit. However, there are important ways in which the National Professional Standards for Teachers can underpin such a career structure.

The Standards are explicitly structured to support career progression, describing what teachers should know and be able to do at four career stages. They provide a framework for teachers to reflect on and improve their practice, as well as acknowledging more formal milestones in a teacher's career. Under recent national agreements, all new teachers will need to demonstrate achievement of the Standards at the proficient career stage to achieve full registration. Many teachers will seek and achieve certification at the highly accomplished and lead career stages. Initial teacher education programs will be accredited largely based on their capacity to produce graduates who meet the Standards at the graduate career stage.

There are many ways in which the use of the Standards can be linked to career structures. Probationary arrangements for newly graduated teachers can be linked to achieving full registration. Some arrangements link salary increases to teachers achieving various existing forms of certification. Others make certification a prerequisite for accessing particular positions, often in needy or hard to staff schools. Evidence collected against the Standards can be used as part of a selection process for particular positions. Using agreed national standards for these purposes provides coherence to a career structure and eliminates the need to develop alternative frameworks for describing good teaching. Specific arrangements need to fit particular contexts, and will need to be negotiated between employers and employees.

The Standards provide a common language for defining and talking about quality teaching. Teacher performance and development is not only about moving through formal milestones. It is about continuously improving performance. As teachers become more comfortable working with the Standards, they can provide a basis for self reflection, for receiving feedback from peers and school leaders, for planning and evaluating professional learning, and for identifying individual, school and system level priorities for improving teaching. Having a single set of standards that are used for a variety of purposes will reduce confusion and duplication and increase clarity in discussions of what constitutes quality teaching.

Specific ways of using the Standards need to be developed to suit specific contexts. However, there would appear to be great potential in using the Standards to support a more comprehensive and coherent career structure for Australian teachers.

Teacher performance and development

AITSL welcomes the draft report's focus on teacher performance and development. Although community, family and social factors have a major influence, teacher quality has been identified as the most important in-school factor influencing student achievement. An explicit and consistent approach to teacher performance and development can make a significant contribution to improving student outcomes. As mentioned earlier in this submission, Ministers have asked AITSL to develop a National Framework for Teacher Performance and Development. This is in response to the same evidence cited by the Commission identifying the importance of performance and development, and that, despite some existing good practices, there is potential for major improvement in this area in many Australian schools. This combination of importance and currently variable quality makes this a promising area on which to focus in seeking major improvements in educational outcomes.

AITSL is in the early stages of its work on developing a National Framework for Teacher Performance and Development, and intends to conduct an extensive process of research, consultation and consensus building before presenting a final position to Ministers. However, even at this early stage, there are some important directions that largely confirm the findings of the Commission.

First, it is important to take a broad approach to improving performance. As the draft report notes, most Australian schools have a performance management system of some sort, and many of these are, on paper, well designed and comprehensive. Major improvements will not come from designing a more up to date approach to performance management, without also creating supportive conditions in schools.

Consequently, to ensure that any framework for teacher performance and development is effective in creating positive change in schools, there are a number of matters that require serious attention. Foremost among these is creating a performance and development culture in schools. Such a culture would focus on improvement in teaching, would promote discussion of teaching and how to improve it, would provide teachers with prompt and useful feedback on their performance, and would focus heavily on quality professional learning as a way of improving teaching.

Leadership, at both the school and systemic levels, is critical in creating this culture. A great deal of effort must be devoted to supporting and developing leaders who are able to confidently implement comprehensive approaches to performance and development, and who are able to provide useful feedback on teaching that leads to improvement. The National Professional Standard for Principals provides a framework for thinking about the leadership capabilities required.

Access to quality professional learning is critical to lasting improvement. It is not sufficient to provide teachers with feedback on areas for improvement and expect improvement to result from this alone. Teachers must be given the support they need to improve. AITSL's draft Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders provides evidence on the characteristics of effective professional learning.

Another critical issue is the balance between school-level approaches and central support. AITSL supports the Commission's view that approaches to performance management should be tailored to school circumstances, and that principals and teachers require a significant say in how this is done. At the same time, schools will require guidance and support to develop the best possible approaches, and there may be a case for specifying the core characteristics of an effective approach. AITSL expects that much of its work in this area will involve identifying the support that is useful to schools, and working to provide it.

A related issue is the relationship between the National Professional Standards for Teachers and performance and development approaches at the school level. The draft report identifies some uses of the Standards that could lead to a cumbersome or overly standardised process. AITSL does not advocate that teachers are assessed annually against all focus areas of the standards. Nor does it argue that assessment against the Standards should be the sole measure of a teacher's performance. Assessment of teacher performance will take into account a range of factors, including the impact of teaching on student outcomes.

At any time, a teacher will have a set of priorities for improvement. It is unlikely that these would specifically address the full range of the National Professional Standards for Teachers. These priorities must be discussed, agreed and understood if they are to be acted on. The National Professional Standards for Teachers provide a common language for these discussions, and will become more effective for this purpose as they become more widely used. Pilots of the use of the Standards suggest that they are effective for this purpose.

There is much work to be done in improving teacher performance. AITSL believes that the current focus on teacher performance and development, reinforced by the Commission's draft report, is a productive focus for our efforts to improve school performance.

Improving initial teacher education

The draft report identifies the importance of initial teacher education as the foundation for successful teaching careers, and notes the recent agreement to a national approach to accreditation of initial teacher education. It also notes the difficulties of trying to develop standards for program accreditation in a situation where there is limited research on the effectiveness of different types of initial teacher education programs, and where it is difficult to disentangle the impacts of different types of initial teacher education programs, and where it is difficult to disentangle the impacts of different aspects of any program that appears to be effective.

In April 2011, all Australian education Ministers reached a historic agreement on a national approach to accreditation of initial teacher education. This approach to accreditation focuses on the outcomes of programs. Programs are accredited largely on the basis that they will produce graduates who meet the National Professional Standards for Teachers at the graduate career stage. This allows flexibility for providers to develop programs that will achieve this aim in a variety of ways. At the same time, there are also program standards that outline the required elements of a program. This recognises that new programs will need to be accredited before they produce any graduates, and that measurement of student outcomes is not precise enough to entirely replace a focus on the characteristics of programs.

In this context, AITSL does not support the recommendation in the draft report that the decision of Ministers should be reversed, and two-year graduate entry programs should be optional, rather than mandatory. AITSL believes that there is sufficient evidence to justify mandating two-year programs. There is some international evidence that two-year programs are more effective, including the fact that they are the norm in high-performing jurisdictions. This international evidence is given strong support in the Australian context by the views of stakeholders consulted by AITSL in developing the national approach to accreditation, and surveys of graduate teachers, such as those cited by the Commission, which point to teachers feeling under-prepared for their first years of employment.

For many of the fifty years or so since the introduction of one-year graduate entry programs in Australia, coursework was undertaken during university terms and practical experience (usually about 40 days or 8 weeks) occurred during university vacations and term breaks. Today, the university teaching year has reduced to generally 26 weeks, of which at least 45 days or 9 weeks need to be committed to supervised practice teaching.

It is important to consider the two-year requirement in the context of the overall approach to accreditation. Spending additional time in initial teacher education will not create improvement by itself. Rather, it provides time for the elements of a quality program to be delivered. Many of these are identified in the Commission's draft report, such as increased practical placements, closer connections between theory and practice, and a solid grounding in the curriculum that graduates will eventually teach.

This is the model provided by the University of Melbourne's Master of Teaching, which has been positively evaluated. In this program, the additional time has not been used to deliver 'more of the same' under a traditional model of initial teacher education, but has been used to move to a 'clinical' model, with much closer connections between theory and practice.

This supports the conclusion that increased duration is likely to be necessary, but not sufficient, for improved graduate outcomes. Poor quality programs will not produce strong graduates, regardless of their length. However, AITSL believes that there is sufficient evidence that longer programs can produce benefits, and that the elements of a quality program, many of which are supported by research, can not be delivered in much less than two years of full-time study. In this situation, the more prudent course is to require two-year programs until there is more evidence that shows the requirement is unnecessary.

AITSL sees this as a critical issue, and has therefore commissioned Professor Brian Caldwell to undertake further work on the evidence base for requiring two-year programs. Professor Caldwell's report is attached to this submission.

It is important to note here that a national approach to initial teacher education, based largely on graduate outcomes, can be a powerful impetus for additional research in this area. AITSL supports the Commission's recommendation for a longitudinal study of new teachers. Combined with a growing body of local and international research on teacher preparation, this would allow further refinements to the national approach to accreditation to be based on an improved evidence base. It is worth noting that the approach agreed by Ministers contains an explicit commitment to research, evaluation and review of the approach.

Potential further work for AITSL

There are several points in the draft report where the Commission identifies matters that could be referred to AITSL for further work. AITSL's work program is set through a letter of expectation provided by the Commonwealth Minister and agreed by all education Ministers, and final decisions on AITSL's role will be the result of this process. This applies in particular to specific topics such as workforce composition and job design. These are important matters on which Ministers are likely to want advice, but the decision on AITSL's role in addressing them rests with Ministers.

The Commission also points to the role of AITSL in providing access to data, research and evaluation in relation to the schools workforce. This has already been part of AITSL's role through initiatives such as the Clearinghouse on School Leadership Development Strategies, and also through a commitment to evidence-based policy development, evaluation and connecting with and sharing the best Australian and international research on what works.

However, it is reasonable to expect that AITSL's focus on research, evaluation and innovation will increase in the future, as reforms such as the National Professional Standards for Teachers are rolled out and the focus shifts to implementation and what works at the local level. AITSL would welcome a continued emphasis on this aspect of its role.

Finally, the Commission proposes a review of AITSL and ACARA in five years, with a focus on their effectiveness in improving access to research and data. Such a review would be consistent with AITSL's commitment to evaluation and improvement. Ideally, it would focus on the breadth of AITSL's role and its effectiveness in meeting Ministers' expectations of the Institute.

Conclusion

In conclusion, AITSL sees great potential in the current focus on teacher and school leader effectiveness, which is reinforced by the Commission's draft report. The findings and recommendations in the draft report will assist in the further development and implementation of this agenda. AITSL welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft report, and looks forward to the final report and the further debate it will no doubt generate.