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TIME FOR TEACHING TO ESTABLISH ITS OWN PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATION AUTHORITY¹

Lawrence Ingvarson, ACER

The British Prime Minister David Cameron recently announced that his government would be supporting a proposal from the teaching profession to establish its own, teacher-led College of Teaching, fully independent of government.

Trust is at the heart of our approach to teaching. This is about giving the profession the autonomy and responsibility that it has long needed – because, quite simply, we see teachers as key allies in this critical drive to make Britain’s education system world class. Mr Cameron (<https://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storyCode=11006725>).

What led the Prime Minister to make such an announcement, and in tones rarely heard about teaching in Australia?

Early in 2014, a ‘Blueprint’ for an independent professional body, a ‘Royal College of Teaching’, was launched with professional certification as its core, unique function (www.princes-ti.org.uk/CollegeofTeaching/February2014Blueprint/); a voluntary system providing recognition to teachers who have attained high standards of practice.

The initiative came from a cross-section of the education community, including subject associations and teacher unions, and was facilitated by The Prince’s Teaching Institute, an independent educational charity established by the Prince of Wales. The Blueprint rapidly gained support across the profession during 2014.

Later in 2014, the Secretary of State for Education and the Minister of State for Schools launched a consultation paper, *A World Class Teaching Profession*, which proposed support for the creation of a chartered College of Teaching (www.gov.uk/government/consultations/developing-the-teaching-profession-to-a-world-class-standard).

Teaching should rightly enjoy an equally high status as professions such as medicine or law. But in order to gain that standing, teaching needs strong professional leadership to champion the highest standards of practice and the continuous development and improvement of its members. That is why we are proposing to support the creation of a new, independent body which can support the teaching profession as a whole and act as an advocate for the highest professional standards. The value of a new “College of Teaching” is almost unanimously agreed on by experts – and although we are very clear that such a body needs to be independent of government and led by the professions if it is to be truly successful – we are committed to offering the support that is needed to make its establishment a reality.

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In the same paper, the Secretary of State committed to providing start-up, hands off, funding to support and enable the establishment of the College of Teaching, 'which must be led by teachers', by 2016.

The Blueprint provided the government with clear evidence of leadership at the level of the profession to which the Prime Minister and the Education Secretary for England were able to respond with a promise to entrust teachers with the core responsibilities of a profession.

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In response, the interim College of Teaching Board has proposed a five-year 'incubator' period to the end of 2019, during which time it would receive government seed funding of 11.9 million pounds and by which time it would be self-funding. The College has also received funding from philanthropic bodies.

What about Australia?

In one sense, Australia has been well ahead of England with respect to the idea of professional certification. In 2003, 15 teacher associations put together a National Statement from the Teaching Profession on *Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism*. It recommended that:

A nationally coordinated, rigorous and consistent system should be established to provide recognition to teachers who demonstrate advanced standards . . . The enterprise bargaining process between employers and unions will be an important mechanism for providing recognition for professional certification. All employing authorities should be encouraged to provide recognition and support for professional certification as the process comes to demonstrate its credibility and its effects on professional learning. (p. 4)

The Statement was the culmination of three years work coordinated by Australian College of Educators (ACE). During the 2000s, sixteen professional associations developed certification standards for their specialist field (most with Australian Government funding). All except one wanted their standards to be used in a national certification system.

Ten years later, in 2013, ACE initiated a Roundtable to revisit the 2003 Statement. More than half the original organisations were able to attend and were strongly of the view that the 2003 statement continued to be relevant - and that Australia had not established a professional certification system consistent with that envisaged in 2003.

Implications for Australia

The current policy framework for assuring the quality of Australia's future teachers is clearly not working. If Australia is to maintain and enhance the quality of educational opportunities for its students, we will need more effective policies for attracting our best high school and university graduates, retaining them in teaching and rewarding their professional development.

We will need policies that strengthen teaching as a profession, and trust it with the responsibilities of a profession.

Teaching needs its own national professional body, independent of government and other employing authorities, but working alongside and complementing their role. That body also needs to be independent of unions and not engage in industrial matters such as pay and conditions.

It needs to do what governments, government agencies and unions cannot do. It needs to develop a rigorous system for providing recognition and certification to teachers who attain high standards of practice. This is the means by which professions give direction to professional learning and ensure widespread adoption of successful teaching practices.

A rigorous and independent certification system would enable governments and other employing authorities to link higher salaries to teaching excellence and provide career prospects that will attract a greater proportion of our ablest graduates into teaching.

Unlike most professions, teaching has yet to establish its own national system for providing teachers with a widely recognised and respected certification. While there are many highly accomplished teachers, teaching does not have a profession-wide agency for confirming their level of expertise.

Jurisdiction is key

Jurisdiction over certification is the hallmark of a profession. So far, state and territory ministers of education have denied teachers such jurisdiction. For teaching to claim jurisdiction over certification it must be able to demonstrate that teaching requires expertise, that it can define what constitutes that expertise and that it can distinguish those who have attained that expertise from those who, as yet, have not.

Professions are usually entrusted to manage their own advanced certification systems. Jurisdiction over advanced certification for most established professions has usually taken the form of a royal 'charter' giving a profession authority to provide that service.

Historically, most established professions in Australia, such as the Royal College of Surgeons and Engineers Australia, inherited their charter from a time when they were linked to parent British associations. The charter for nearly 20 professional associations now rests with Australia's Governor-General. It is time to add teaching to their number.

The recent announcement by the British Prime Minister shows the idea is not as far-fetched as it might seem. However, Australian educators need to provide similarly convincing evidence of professional leadership. This is, in essence, the bargain that all professions make with society. The profession guarantees the competence of members in exchange for professional autonomy over standards of practice and certification.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

In 2010, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) was created with responsibility for establishing a nationally consistent system for the certification of Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers. AITSL reports to the Federal Minister of Education, State and Territory Ministers of Education, and representatives of other employing authorities are also on its Board.

While AITSL was not established as an independent professional body, it was given the role of establishing a national standards framework, now widely accepted, which includes standards at the Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher levels. It was also asked to develop guidelines for assessing applicants for certification at those advanced levels.

Unlike England, however, 'jurisdiction' over assessment and certification operations was not granted to the profession. The AITSL Board deemed that authority to rest with State and Territory Ministers and other employing authorities, although there was no legal basis to support this claim (except in NSW). At last count, AITSL has recognised 25 different certification authorities in NSW, SA, WA, the NT and the ACT (Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania are not participating). Each authority is controlled by a government or employer agency. Each operates its own interpretation of the AITSL assessment guidelines.

How rigorous is the current assessment and certification process?

A certification system must meet high standards of rigour if it is to gain the confidence of the profession and the public. It needs to be informed by expertise in performance assessment and meet high standards of educational measurement. Serious attention must be given to meeting these standards before proceeding further.

As yet, no research has been conducted on the validity or reliability of the current AITSL guidelines for assessing teacher performance. It needs to be clear that the assessment methods are providing valid evidence of highly accomplished teaching and that they distinguish teachers who are more successful from those who are not. They must show that assessors can apply the standards consistently and with minimum bias. We are a long way from establishing a rigorous system for assessing teachers at the Highly Accomplished and Lead levels.

So far, few teachers have completed the present assessment process as set out in the AITSL guidelines. The current process for gathering evidence is cumbersome and expensive. The guidelines need greater clarity and a task-based structure if teachers are to interpret them in similar ways and if assessors are to reach necessary levels of consistency. Much more work is needed before a transparent and replicable process of developing benchmarks, setting standards and training assessors can be established.

The present process for assessing candidates for certification will face major difficulties in going to scale if thousands, rather than a handful, of teachers apply each year. This is likely to happen in NSW, where salaries for Highly Accomplished Teachers will rise by \$8000 in 2016.

Experience elsewhere, for example the Scottish Chartered Teacher scheme, indicates it would

be unwise to begin providing financial recognition for certification before the assessment process had proved its rigour and credibility. Nothing will kill a certification system more quickly than growing doubts about its ability to distinguish teachers who can meet high performance standards from those, who, as yet have not. We need research that recognises the challenges involved in developing administratively feasible and valid standards-based methods for assessing teacher performance.

Strengthening the profession

The present situation invites two propositions, each suggesting how Australia might move toward a certification system owned and operated by the profession and, thereby, providing enhanced opportunities for leadership at the level of the profession.

- Given AITSL has recognised many certifying authorities in several states and territories, it seems reasonable to recognize one provided by professional associations, similar to that being developed by the College of Teaching in England, and based on a similarly sound 'Blueprint'. A professional certifying authority could provide a pathway to certification available to all teachers and recognised nationwide.
- Given that it is unlikely that we have come up with the one best approach to assessment as yet, it would seem sensible to charge this professional certifying authority with responsibility for developing and demonstrating psychometrically sound methods for assessing teaching at the Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher levels.

While AITSL is not a professional body, it still has an important 'enabling' role it could play in facilitating the development of an independent professional certification authority. This is one of the most effective ways in which I think AITSL, as a body that brings Federal, State and Territory Ministers together with other employing authorities, can best promote the quality of teachers and teaching in Australia.

A recurring theme in a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report is that successful educational reform is inseparable from strengthening teaching as a profession:

Successful education systems are those that promote leadership at all levels, encouraging teachers and principals, regardless of the formal positions they occupy, to lead innovation in the classroom, the school and the system as a whole.
(Schleicher, A. (2015), *Schools for 21st-Century Learners: Strong Leaders, Confident Teachers, Innovative Approaches*, International Summit on the Teaching Profession, OECD Publishing)

Building an independent and respected professional certification system is a necessary condition for strengthening teaching as a profession.

Under what conditions is Australia most likely to build a rigorous certification system that is recognised nationwide as a valid basis for lifting salaries to levels that attract a much higher proportion of our ablest graduates from high school and university? It is certainly unlikely to happen with 25 different certifying authorities, a situation that other professions find hard to believe. And a clear sign that our governments do not believe teaching is up to the task.

A first step might be for AITSL to encourage the profession to develop a proposal for a national certifying authority, to complement the current certifying authorities, and to provide an avenue for teachers in states that do not have an AITSL recognised certifying authority to apply for certification.

However, teachers and their associations should not necessarily wait to be granted this responsibility – they can simply claim it and get on with building their capacity to do it, as professional associations have done in England. This is what Australia's school principals and their associations are doing. Brought together by the Principals Australia Institute (PAI), they have been developing a professional certification system for accomplished principals over the past two years. On present trends, it will be ready to accept its first candidates in 2016.

An Australian College of Teaching

Like England, it is time for the profession to show governments and other employing authorities, as well as the public, that it is willing and able to establish its own certification system. Professions have a responsibility to provide governments with a clear direction and a viable program for promoting quality practice. It is time to demonstrate that the profession is willing and able to assume such a responsibility and play its part in ensuring that Australia has strong teaching profession.

The current Australian Professional Standards for Teachers provide a framework within which a College of Teaching could provide professional certification. Establishing a successful certification system will also require a stable policy environment. As the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education in the UK recognised, independence is essential for stability. However, the first essential will be for the profession to build a coalition across the profession around the concept of an independent profession-run certifying authority and to present that concept in a form that Governments and the public welcome and find irresistible.

The proposed College of Teaching in England will be:

- Independent
- Voluntary
- Run by teachers for the ultimate benefit of learners
- Subject to governance model that ensures no single interest group can dominate.

These would seem to be features that should also be central to an Australian College of Teaching. As proposed, the primary and unique function of an Australian College of Teaching would be to provide a highly respected professional certification system:

- It would not be a regulatory body

- Its certification would not be compulsory
- It would not have a disciplinary role
- It would not be a commercial organisation – any surplus should be invested towards teachers' continued professional development.

Governance

It seems unlikely that any existing body would gain the necessary support of a majority of teacher organisations or associations to form a professional certifying authority alone. Nor could any existing body provide the independence essential to providing a rigorous assessment and certification system.

To ensure the integrity of a professional certification system, a new body would need to be created. Its governing board will need to be administratively independent of any other professional organisation. Its sole responsibility will be to construct a rigorous certification system and its members will be composed primarily of those who are already highly accomplished practitioners. Its value to Australian education - and its survival - will depend on the rigour of its certification system and the respect that system gained across the education system. While its independence is essential, a College of Teaching would need to be in constant dialogue with its constituents and responsive to their suggestions and concerns.

How would an independent professional certification system play a key role in Australia's education system?

If a standards-based professional learning and certification system was working well:

- Teachers would have a strong sense of ownership for the system
- Teachers would regard the standards as challenging and worth pursuing as a guide to their professional learning over the long-term.
- It would lead most teachers to seek professional learning experiences that helped them reach accomplished teaching standards and thereby improve learning outcomes for their students.
- It would thereby support widespread use of successful teaching practices
- Teachers would take greater responsibility for establishing their own professional learning system, within and across schools, and in collaboration with universities, to support teachers preparing for certification.
- Teachers would regard the assessment methods as valid, reliable and fair.
- Employing authorities would regard certification as a reliable basis for recognising accomplished teachers and providing salaries and career opportunities that retained the best teachers close to the classroom.
- It would improve the attractiveness of teaching as a career and thereby enable teaching to compete more effectively with other professions for achieving high school and university graduates.
- A professional certification system would provide a sound basis on which to link teacher salaries to quality of practice, without the negative effects of bonus pay or merit pay schemes.

Next steps:

What would be involved if the teaching profession in Australia decided to work toward establishing its own independent professional certification system with these characteristics? I suggest that part of what would be involved is developing a Blueprint for an Australian College of Teaching, similar to that developed by educators in England. This would require:

- Building a coalition among professional associations, unions, leading educationalists, Deans of Education, and other stakeholders in support of the concept of an independent College of Teaching
- Establishing a working group to develop a draft Blueprint for a College of Teaching. This Blueprint will need to set out:
 - A vision for the College of Teaching
 - A rationale for the College's role in professional learning and certification
 - An implementation plan for the establishment of the College as a legal entity, including an interim governance structure with a financial plan
 - Proposals for funding and timescale
- Extensive consultation about the Blueprint with the profession, professional associations, teacher unions, governments and other employers.
- Redrafting and revision of the Blueprint
- Building a wider circle of awareness and support from leading Australians and "Champions of the Profession" for a national professional body and the Draft Blueprint
- Further consultation and signing off of the Blueprint by professional associations and other stakeholders
- Gaining employer recognition for certification
- Applying to be recognized as Certifying Authority by AISTL or applying for a charter from the Governor-General.

This is a venture that matches the aspirations of teachers to build a profession of teaching.

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