Establishing a national certification system for teachers: How are we doing?

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A recent conference organised by the Queensland Teachers Union was titled “Reclaiming the Professional Agenda”. A question that hung in the air was, “how could this be done”? On what grounds might teachers claim to be members of a profession? How might teachers demonstrate their professional “credentials?”

There are many aspects to this question, but, undoubtedly, building its own independent professional certification system would have to be one of the key strategies for strengthening teaching as a profession. A certification system is a system for defining high-quality teaching standards, promoting development towards those standards and identifying those who reach them. If you can’t do that, you don’t qualify as a profession. Professions are normally trusted to run their own certification systems.

Certification is the way most professions drive continual improvement in their member’s practice, in their own and in the public interest. It is the means by which they maintain control over their own professional learning system (which teachers appear to have lost). They provide novices with high performance standards to aim for over several years. They provide a rigorous and independent system for assessing when they have attained those standards. Successful applicants gain a respected certification that employers are willing to pay for, thus creating a strong market for their knowledge and expertise. They gain the esteem of having “made it” in their profession.

Recent history

A remarkable consensus emerged in Australia during the 2000s about the desirability of a national certification system for accomplished teachers and school leaders. In 1998 a Senate Inquiry into the Status of Teaching recommended that:

A system of professional recognition for teachers must be established, which is based on the achievement of enhanced knowledge and skills and which retains teachers at the front line of student learning. Such knowledge and skills should be identified, classified and assessed according to criteria developed by expert panels drawn from the profession. Education authorities should structure remuneration accordingly. (p. 7)

The Senators recognized that a professional certification system has two components essential to its success: a rigorous process for the certification of teachers who attain high standards; and recognition for the value of that certification in terms of substantial salary advancement and new career opportunities. Responsibilities for these two components should be kept distinct, for good reasons. The first rests with the profession; the second with governments and other employing authorities if they are committed to promoting high standards.

In 2003, 15 teacher associations, including teacher unions, 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 2003 National Statement was consistent with the Senators’ recommendation and with several other major reports at that time, such as Business Council of Australia (Dinham, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2008). During the 2000s, sixteen professional associations developed certification standards for their specialist fields. Teacher unions were supportive provided teachers would be assessed by an independent and fair process and rewarded through salary increases.

By 2007, the in-coming Labor Government had promised to establish a rigorous standards-based certification system for recognizing accomplished teachers. In an address to a Teaching Australia and BCA Symposium (15 October, 2008) the Minister for Education, Julia Gillard MP, stated

_In broad terms, both the Business Council’s and the AEU’s proposals for a rigorous national certification system are consistent with the approach currently being examined by COAG and MCEETYA._

Following this, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) was established in 2010, with responsibility “for developing and implementing a nationally consistent certification function”.

**What happened to the ideal of a professional certification system?**

AITSL has made considerable progress in several areas, but it is becoming apparent that it does not the capacity to ensure that Australia gains the respected profession-wide certification system that it needs. Several factors have undermined its chances of success.

**Lack of independence and authority**

The first factor, perhaps the main one, is AITSL’s lack of independence and authority. In no sense have we created an independent professional body that can speak out on equal terms with governments about matters of professional practice. There are no practising teachers on its board. It reports to state and territory Ministers of Education and representatives of other employing authorities. Because of this, AITSL’s capacity to develop a rigorous national professional certification system has been undermined.

AITSL bears little resemblance to national certification agencies in other professions. In fact it was prevented from providing certification. The Council of Australian Governments directed that AITSL develop a “nationally consistent”, not a national, system of certification. Jurisdiction to operate a certification system in the way that applies to other established professions has not been granted to AITSL.

Instead, MCEEDYA members directed that the certification function be delegated to state and territory “jurisdictions”, meaning that Australia could have at least eight different certifying bodies, and probably several more. In effect, state and territory Ministers of Education and other employing authorities have successfully hijacked responsibility to operate their own local certification systems, a role that they do not play for any other profession – nor would dare to.

Most established professions in Australia and England received their “jurisdiction” through some form of Royal Charter many years ago. More than twenty professional associations in Australia now operate under a jurisdiction overseen by the Governor-General. It may be time for the Australian teaching profession to seek a charter similar to the one a Select Committee of the House of Commons recently recommended for teachers in England.
We acknowledge and support the case for a new, member-driven College of Teaching, independent from but working with Government, which could play important roles, inter alia, in the accreditation of CPD and teacher standards. We recommend that the Government work with teachers and others to develop proposals for a new College of Teaching, along the lines of the Royal Colleges and Chartered Institutions in other professions.

Lack of a stable policy context

A second factor limiting AITSL’s capacity to deliver an effective certification system has been that ministers of education keep changing or adding to its agenda. Recent Government decisions have undermined the concept of certification itself. It takes a stable policy environment to establish a successful certification system and a patient long-term trust in the capacity of teachers to ensure its rigour.

For example, during the last election the Australian Government suddenly announced that it would introduce a Reward Payments for Great Teachers bonus pay scheme if elected. The task of developing what was called The Australian Teacher Performance Management Principles and Procedures scheme was handed to AITSL, in addition to its previous certification brief.

This bonus pay scheme was clearly inconsistent with AITSL’s original brief to develop a certification system. It bore all the hallmarks of what politicians will say to win elections. Bonus pay schemes are the business of employers and it was inappropriate for a federal governments to be imposing one. In addition, the methods listed were undeveloped and untested, the scheme would be expensive and a burden for schools, and would have a negative effect on staff relationships.

This proposal ignored the original certification role the Ministers had given to AITSL. Quite apart from the fact that this scheme was an ill-conceived election promise, it placed AITSL in an awkward, if not contradictory, position. Was its main role now to establish a nationally consistent certification system, or was it to provide school managers with procedures for their performance management and annual bonus pay schemes? The latter represented an unprecedented Federal intervention into an area of school functioning.

In effect, the Australian certification scheme was transformed into a performance management and bonus pay scheme. Under the current directions from the Australian Government Minister for Education, teachers who apply successfully for certification were to gain a one-off bonus, not a certification recognised in terms of advancement to higher salary levels.

Given the increasingly unstable political context recently, AITSL’s initiatives appear unlikely to gain national acceptance and support. After recent elections and changes in government, two states, Queensland and Victoria have opted out of the AITSL certification system. The Victorian Government rejected the idea of certification in favour of a unworkable merit pay scheme.

It is apparent that Australia provides a good example of a problem that Elmore (2011, p.35) identifies in the USA:

I used to think that policy was the solution. And now I think policy is the problem . . . To policy makers, every idea about what schools should be doing is as credible as every other idea, and any new idea that can command a political constituency can be used as an excuse for telling schools to do something. Elected officials . . . generate electoral credit by initiating new ideas, not by making the kind of steady investments in people that are required to make the educator sector more effective. The result is an education sector that is overwhelmed with policy, conditioned to respond to the
immediate demands of whoever controls the political agenda, and not in investing in the long-term health of the sector and the people who work in it...

For the future, I am putting my energy into building a stronger profession, not into trying to repair a desperately dysfunctional political system

**Failure to appreciate the complexities of standards-based assessment**

Third, the timetable imposed on AITSL to develop valid and reliable assessment methods for advanced certification reflected little understanding of what it takes to do it well. AITSL was given a few months to develop the assessment methods and processes for training assessors before the system went “live”, something we know takes several years normally. The risk is imposing a system that lacks credibility and respect with the profession.

Reliability in judgements seems unlikely, as the current guidelines about “evidencing the standards”, are not structured in ways that will ensure teachers interpret them in the same way. The assessment guidelines need greater clarity about how a teacher might show they meet the standards and what counts as meeting the standards. This calls for carefully designed assessment tasks that provide evidence relevant to several standards at the same time, such as structured portfolio entries. Contrary to expectations, research indicates that structure is welcomed by teachers and leads to perceptions of fairness in the assessment process. Transparent structure breeds confidence in a system.

Current AITSL guidelines for assessment methods are being implemented in different ways across states and territories. Several states such as WA, SA, and NSW are going their own way, using previous methods “deemed” to be equivalent to the AITSL guidelines. It will be difficult to ensure the levels of consistency required for a credible certification system.

Reliability also requires that the assessment methods together cover all the National Standards and provide adequate evidence from each of the Domains. However, under current guidelines, evidence for the Knowledge Domain is poorly sampled, even though research indicates the critical importance of knowledge about teaching and learning subject matter in a teacher’s specialist field.

Current guidelines also need to recognise the need to ensure **generalizability**; that is, the need to gather a sufficient sample of teacher’s knowledge and performance to be able to generalise confidently about their capability to meet the standards. A rag-bag of disjointed evidence in a portfolio is unlikely to provide sufficient evidence to make a reliable and valid judgement about a teacher’s capacity to meet the standards. At a minimum, for example, a primary teacher’s portfolio should contain several independent entries showing their ability to promote learning in each of the main key learning areas of literacy, numeracy, science and social studies.

Likewise, a secondary teacher’s portfolio should contain several independent portfolio entries, each from different classes and year levels.) Early indications are that some certifying authorities are asking for limited direct evidence of highly accomplished classroom practice and ability to advance student learning compared with evidence about activities beyond the classroom.

As yet is unclear what procedures will be used for setting standards and arriving at a final decision about whether or not to certify a teacher. This is a complex process, not be dealt with in a casual way. It involves decisions about the relative weighting that will be given to the different types of evidence. It involves developing a defensible process for amalgamating the assessment scores and setting the standards for certification; that is, for deciding what levels of knowledge and performance represent meeting the standard. This depends on developing rubrics based on the standards that clearly distinguish qualitatively different levels of performance. However, the current National Standards do not provide an adequate basis
for developing such rubrics, as they do not provide elaborations of the standards describing the key indicators and critical attributes of highly accomplished practice.

Without developing and testing such procedures, doubts about the validity and comparability of certification will spread quickly – its ability to distinguish teachers who meet the standards from those who do not needs to be established by well-resourced trials and research. Previous research indicates it would be unwise to proceed before confidence in the validity of the certification process has been demonstrated.

**Quality of the National Professional Standards Framework**

Several concerns about the rigour of the assessment procedures stem from the generic and somewhat politicised nature of the National Professional Standards Framework itself. Consequently the standards are not well grounded in contemporary research on what accomplished teachers know and do in the various specialist fields of teaching. (e.g. what should a graduate teacher know about recent research on teaching reading? What should a mathematics teacher know about identifying and rectifying misconceptions in learning important mathematical concepts? And so on.)

Nor do the levels reflect an underlying theory about the development of expertise. For example, no distinction is made between “highly accomplished” and “proficient” teaching of English, physical education or drama, etc., in terms of classroom skills.

There also needs to be much more clarity about what accomplished teachers are expected to be able to show they can do in different fields of teaching. What a highly accomplished teacher of music should demonstrate is very different from what a highly accomplished science teacher should demonstrate.

These weaknesses make it difficult to develop rubrics that distinguish different levels of knowledge and performance. Consequently, it will be difficult to train assessors to the levels of reliability essential for a credible certification system.

**Governments are not living up to their side of the National Partnership Agreements.**

The National Partnership Agreement on teacher quality contains an agreement to provide recognition and reward to teachers who reach high standards and gain certification. This is an employer’s task if they accept responsibility for promoting quality teaching.

The final and perhaps most important factor limiting AITSL’s capacity to deliver an effective advanced certification system is that several state and territory governments and the Australian Government appear to be withdrawing from their side of the bargain, which is to use certification as the basis for substantial salary advancement beyond the top of current incremental scales. As a result, certification will not realise its capacity to become a powerful driver toward widespread use of successful teaching practices.

At a time of national concern about the ability of teaching to attract and retain high quality graduates, this seems short-sighted and irresponsible. As the recent Productivity Commission report points out, teachers’ salaries have not kept pace with increases in other professions especially at the top of the salary scale. Teachers’ salaries in Australia are only 30% above GDP per capita, whereas the average in OECD countries is 65%. Recent research shows that it is the salaries of experienced teachers relative to other professions that distinguish countries with higher student achievement.

**Concluding remarks**
Governments are ultimately responsible for ensuring that salaries and career pathways enable teaching to compete with other professions for the best graduates. A rigorous certification system gives the profession a sound basis on which to press governments to meet this responsibility. Rhetoric about the importance of teacher quality is hollow if this responsibility is not met. Likewise, for the profession’s side of the bargain; teachers wanting greater respect and rewards must embrace the responsibilities of a profession to set their own high standards and demonstrate their ability to assess those who have reached them.

The possibility of establishing a standards-based professional learning and certification system in Australia remains uncertain. A splendid opportunity to professionalise teaching and treat teachers as trusted professional partners appears to be slipping away once more.

It is hard to see how teaching can make a convincing case for better salaries without building its own professional learning and certification system. Despite a lot of talent, expertise and good management within AITSL, it looks once more as if we may need to start all over again. It is to be hoped that next time governments will understand that it is in their interest to support a genuinely independent national professional body with salaries that encourage all teachers to gain its certification.