

Response to the 5 Year Productivity Inquiry: From learning to growth

Australian Institute for Teaching and
School Leadership (AITSL)

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AITSL acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land, sea country and waterways from across Australia.

We honour and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and future.

Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Building Productivity in Schools.....	5
3. Tertiary Education.....	7

Introduction

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is pleased to respond to the *From Learning to Growth* report produced as part of the Productivity Commission's Five-year Productivity Review.

As the national agency responsible for improving the quality of teaching and school leadership, AITSL welcomes the Productivity Review's focus on education. Increasing educational attainment in a population is one of the most enduring ways to improve productivity. Within the education sector, there is strong evidence that the quality of teaching is the major in-school factor influencing student outcomes, and that school leadership is the second most important influence.

AITSL's work spans three main areas of focus:

- **Initial teacher education:** We provide support, resources and tools to help ensure that every pre-service teacher is classroom ready upon graduation.
- **Quality teaching:** We help teachers be the best they can be, and provide tools and resources to maximise their impact on student learning.
- **Leadership:** We help school leaders become highly-effective by giving them the tools, resources, policies and practices needed to succeed in their important role.

AITSL has made two submissions to the Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement. These provide AITSL's views on the national reforms that could have the largest impacts on school student outcomes by improving teaching and school leadership. Rather than reiterating these points, this shorter submission responds to some of the specific issues raised by the *From Learning to Growth* report (the report) only.

Building Productivity in Schools

AITSL welcomes the focus on improving teaching in the report's chapter on schooling. In considering the innovations proposed, the guiding principle must be to keep teaching and learning at the centre of schooling, and to ensure that reforms are led by the needs of teachers and, most importantly, learners, rather than being pursued for their own sake.

Making best practice teaching common practice

It is important that teachers are made aware of effective teaching strategies with a solid evidence base. Achieving this is not as simple as describing 'best practice' and expecting teachers to adopt it. For a start, making the case for, and adoption of, changed practices is a complex process and the skill of school leaders in change management is critical. Many education ideas and innovations have been unsuccessful due to the complexity of implementation at all education levels. More importantly, teaching in itself is complex, nuanced and contextually dependent work. The skill of the teacher is in selecting evidence-based strategies based on their knowledge of both the students and the content they are teaching, understanding their impact on student learning, and adjusting and improving teaching practice to increase the impact on student learning. Maximum impact for a school occurs when whole-school professional development is blended with knowledge of change management and is cleverly aligned to explicit goals.

The report refers to two highly effective strategies for improving teaching – high quality professional learning and learning from expert teachers. In addition, there is scope for a process that develops a national agreement on what constitutes evidence-based teaching in a particular area, and disseminates this to schools. This could be similar to the work AITSL has done to develop guidance for initial teacher education providers on the best ways to teach early reading¹.

Effective professional learning is the key to improving teacher practice. The *Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders in Australia*, agreed by all education ministers, defines effective professional learning as being 'relevant, collaborative and future-focussed'². AITSL has developed a High Quality Professional Learning Toolkit to assist teachers and school leaders to select the professional learning most suited to their situation³. This resource has been popular, but more could be done to guide teachers and school leaders to the most effective professional learning.

An initiative that would have the potential to make a breakthrough here would be to fund the development of a national online tool that allows teachers to find, manage, record and evaluate professional learning. AITSL has worked with stakeholders to scope such a tool, and would welcome an opportunity to develop it fully.

Teaching Expertise

There is great expertise in the current teaching workforce, but expert teachers are rarely given the chance to spread their expertise beyond their own classrooms. AITSL strongly supports 'master

¹ <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/sample-initial-teacher-education-program-outlines-reading-instruction>

² <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/australian-charter-for-the-professional-learning-of-teachers-and-school-leaders>

³ <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/improve-practice/high-quality-professional-learning-toolkit>

teacher' and similar models that utilise the expertise of our best teachers. AITSL's submissions to the Review of the National School Reform Agreement detail possible national initiatives in this space, including streamlining the process for certifying teachers at the Highly Accomplished and Lead career stages of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, and creating specific roles for certified teachers to share their expertise while remaining in the classroom.

Leveraging digital technology in schools

The report examines the potential for technology to increase the effectiveness of schools, including in specific situations such as where teachers are teaching out of field. There is no doubt that technology has great potential to enhance learning. Emerging technologies such as virtual and augmented reality have shown encouraging signs, although many of the applications are small-scale and difficult to generalise at this stage. It is also true that the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of teachers and in many cases forced a rapid increase in the use of technology. The challenge now is to retain the benefits of those approaches as many schools return to their previous operating models.

Whatever technology is used, it is important that it supports effective teaching and learning. Teachers must have the capacity to shape how technology is used, and be provided with the time and professional learning they need to implement it. Evaluation should focus on the impact of any technology on student learning, and on how knowledge of impactful teaching has driven the use of technology (not the other way around).

Making the best use of school staff

The report identifies increasing expectations of teachers, and notes the need for a definition of the role of the teacher. The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Teacher Standards) are a nationally agreed statement of what teachers should know and be able to do. They provide the best starting point for defining what the work of teachers is, and identifying tasks or activities that do not contribute to improving student outcomes. For example, employers should explicitly reference the Teacher Standards in their recruitment advertising.

AITSL's submissions to the Review of the National School Reform Agreement propose that it would be timely to review these Standards, in the light of changes to expectations of teachers in the decade since they were endorsed. Issues regularly raised around the Teacher Standards include better applicability to early childhood teachers and their context, whether they are up-to-date in relation to issues such as inclusive education and trauma-informed practice, and whether they are specific enough about the elements of effective classroom teaching.

There is also a strong case for better understanding the roles, deployment, and most importantly impact of auxiliary or non-teaching staff in schools. Support staff can take on administrative tasks that might otherwise take teachers away from teaching, while teaching assistants and teacher aides and other pedagogy support personnel help teachers in the classroom. In remote communities, local assistant teachers often have vast cultural knowledge and experience, and can be the point of continuity where teacher turnover is high. These staff may also be future teachers, and there is increasing interest in programs that provide them with a pathway to teaching qualifications.

There is limited evidence on what teaching assistants are doing in Australian schools, how teachers relate to them, and what their impact is on student learning and teacher workload. Potential national initiatives in this area could include:

- establish an evidence base on the effective use of auxiliary staff in schools, to optimise student outcomes and teacher quality, drawing on national and international sources
- develop evidence-based national guidelines for the use of auxiliary staff in schools as well as guidance on connecting with parents around their child's education
- develop a suite of resources to support teachers and school leaders in the most effective use of auxiliary staff and improved connections with parents
- develop programs that provide auxiliary staff with pathways to becoming qualified teachers, with an initial focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators

Tertiary Education

The report makes suggestions to improve productivity in both vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. AITSL's focus is on registered teachers working in schools and early childhood settings. However, many of the issues facing teachers and the strategies that are likely to be effective for improving teaching are common across VET and higher education.

AITSL has a direct interface with the higher education sector through its role in setting standards for initial teacher education and could easily leverage this.

Quality in initial teacher education

AITSL's submissions to the *Quality Initial Teacher Education Review* and the *Review of the National School Reform Agreement* provide detailed proposals for further improvements in the quality assurance of initial teacher education. The issues faced in implementing effective accreditation of initial teacher education programs mirror many of the issues raised in the report about measuring and rewarding quality in initial teacher education more generally. There would be much to learn from professional accreditation in other professions as well.

Accreditation of initial teacher education programs is based on the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, at the Graduate career stage. Programs are accredited on the basis that each of the focus areas within the teacher standards is taught, practiced and assessed within the program, and that assessment gives confidence that graduates will have reached the appropriate standard⁴.

In recent years this focus on outcomes has been reinforced by the development of Teaching Performance Assessments (TPAs), a watershed development across Australia's 47 providers of initial teacher education. All initial teacher education programs in Australia now use a TPA that has been independently assessed by a national Expert Advisory Group as a valid and reliable measure of teaching practice. AITSL's submissions to the Review of the National School Reform Agreement provide more detail on TPAs and the steps AITSL proposes to improve their quality assurance. It is worth noting that the TPAs have succeeded where the other examples of more generic graduate assessments discussed in the report have not. Having an agreed set of graduate outcomes, in the form of the teacher standards, has been critical to this success.

The report also canvasses options for measuring quality in higher education. Again, there may be a role for discipline-specific measures. Education ministers have agreed that the Teacher Education Expert Panel will report on measures of quality in initial teacher education, with a possibility of these being linked to funding⁵.

Improving teaching in tertiary education

AITSL strongly supports the report's focus on the quality of teaching in higher education. The discussion of VET in the report does not focus on teaching, although the quality of teaching is critical across all education sectors. Indeed, a recognition, based on evidence, of the importance of teaching

⁴ <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/deliver-ite-programs/standards-and-procedures>

⁵ <https://www.education.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review/teacher-education-expert-panel-0>

quality in schools, has been central to recent reform efforts. AITSL has examined issues relating to teachers of vocational education and training in schools⁶. This work found that more support is needed to develop a workforce that can deliver high quality vocational training and meet the needs of school-aged learners. Although vocational education and training in schools is only part of the sector, the same issues of combining industry currency with quality teaching apply across the sector.

It is unlikely that major changes in teaching quality can be made without significant attention and investment. This could include the development of professional standards or other descriptions of quality teaching, access to evidence on what works best in adult learning, time for coaching, observation and mentoring, and the provision of high-quality professional learning. Given teacher movement and attempts to maximise this, any attempt to implement measurement of and accountability for the quality of teaching must be matched by national support that gives teachers in all sectors capacity to improve.

⁶ https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/national-review-of-teacher-registration/building-a-high-quality-vet-workforce.pdf?sfvrsn=552d93c_2

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