When in my role as AATE President I co-wrote these words as a foreword to the STELLA project, I might well have added words to the effect: 'The same might be said of the evolving educational contexts in which professional standards have been/continue to be developed and implemented.'

Readers of *English in Australia* are well aware of the genesis and development of STELLA, since its evolution has been extensively documented in this journal, beginning in 1999 with Margaret Gill’s call to arms to the profession, ‘If we don’t do it someone else will’ *in English in Australia No 124*, and including the joint *English in Australia Nos 129–30 /Literacy Learning: The Middle Years 9.1* STELLA edition in 2001. Many will remember that STELLA began life as an ARC Research grant involving both AATE and ALEA and ran in parallel with similar research grants involving Mathematics and Science. The research projects collaborated regularly and discovered areas of commonality as well as a major point of difference about the value of a category for the ‘highly accomplished’/advanced teacher achieved through a certification process. Since then there has been a quantum leap in work done and interest shown in the Australian educational context in the development of professional standards for teachers. At the ‘official’ level, all states and territories have established their own standards/regulatory bodies which in turn have developed standards for professional practice for a range of entry levels from pre-service to advanced. The national standards body, Teaching Australia, formerly the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL), is currently exploring the development of advanced teaching standards and standards for principals. Many national professional teaching/subject associations have developed (or are in the process of doing so) standards specific to their subject discipline or field of interest, such as special education or teachers of the deaf. And, while the focus

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**Whither/wither STELLA?**

**A Sea Change, or a Bureaucratic Chore?**

**A Victorian Perspective**

*Terry Hayes*

Standards are not principles set in tablets of stone. They are living and contextualised principles open to critique, adaptation and refinement in the light of evolving professional knowledge.

*(A letter from the Presidents, STELLA www.stella.org.au, 2002)*
on the pre-election education agenda was on the development of a national curriculum (or, more accurately, national curriculum consistency), there are embedded in both parties’ agendas issues related to teacher professionalism, standards for teachers and performance pay.

So where is STELLA in this current state of productive ferment regarding professional standards for teachers? Is it still a relevant focus for productive work, or has it passed its use-by date? In answering this question I will confine my comments to two contexts with which I am familiar. One is the involvement of Teaching Australia in developing standards. I was a member of the interim board of NIQTSL which established Teaching Australia, and have since been involved in its standards work on a number of occasions. The other context is the work of the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT), of which I have been a Council member since its inception in 2002. Now, having declared up front my ‘credentials’, I’d better state my sentiments. I don’t share the prevailing scepticism/indifference/hostility about the value or importance of standards bodies. In fact, one of the arguments I intend to make in this article is that the ‘fact’ of their existence provides an opportunity to give professional standards such as STELLA greater currency and clout than they have at the moment, by providing professional teaching associations such as AATE and its state affiliates with frameworks in which to pursue their standards work.

Teaching Australia has a brief to develop standards for advanced teaching and for principals and is currently working on both. In doing so, it has been mindful of the work that professional teaching associations/subject associations have been doing in developing standards specific to their disciplines or fields of interest. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Teaching Australia regards the associations as ‘natural allies’ in advancing the professional standards agenda. In August 2005, as NIQTSL, it conducted a ‘Sharing Experience’ conference in which associations (and other educational organisations) met and did just that, shared experiences related to their standards work. In 2006 I was commissioned to provide Teaching Australia with an overview/survey of the work being undertaken by subject/professional teaching associations on developing standards which resulted in the publication, Professional teaching associations and profession standards: Embedding standards in the discourse of the profession. I took as my epigraph and my focus, a quote from Bernard Holkner, writing in Australian Educational Computing:

> An enlightened approach to the standards debate ... locates standards in the discourse of the profession ... Naturally teachers are the people best able to recognise and understand good teaching practice, but there needs to be a confidence in the profession’s ongoing and passionate involvement in this work.  

(Holkner, 2005, p 23)

The ‘ongoing and passionate involvement’ of the profession – or at least its representatives in professional teaching associations – in this work was readily apparent in the sixteen or so associations I identified as engaged in developing subject/fields of interest specific standards. Some were well advanced in their work; some were more embryonic. Some were government-funded; others undertook the work off their own bat. History utilised an ARC grant. Modern Languages, in particular Indonesian, was a DEST-funded project. While there were some variations in terminology about what teachers believed, valued, knew and did (commitment, engagement, attributes, relationships, values) there was also a convergence of criteria around capabilities of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement – the organising domains of STELLA. There was also a recognition, both explicit and implicit, of the importance of what we have come to think of as the STELLA ‘principle’, that is, the importance of ‘context’ and of teachers articulating their awareness of standards and demonstrating their achievement in the variety of contexts in which they worked, as being crucial to the validity of such standards. The History standards stated: ‘In our opinion the STELLA standards were the most coherent of the three core subject standards and the closest in philosophy to the discipline of history.’ (Hayes 2005, p. 6) and was particularly appreciative of the suite of STELLA narratives. Since the publication of the survey in 2006, Geography has also initiated work on standards through an ARC grant, which used videoing as a variation of the STELLA narrative, as indeed it was used in the STELLA project itself with teacher participants in Western Australia.

What then of the STELLA partners, AATE and ALEA, in terms of their undertaking of follow up work post STELLA? ALEA has put its money where its conviction is. Literally. In 2004 the association funded a national research project (to the tune of $50,000) to investigate ways in which STELLA might be used as a framework for teachers’ professional learning. Eighteen teachers from three local ALEA chapters were awarded STELLA scholarships to work on aspects of the STELLA frame-
work. As well, three respected and experienced ALEA educators were chosen to work as mentors with the 'scholars' in their respective chapters. Each 'scholar' chose one of the standards to investigate and, as with the narrative writers in the STELLA project, they found that a concentration on one standard inevitably led to a consideration of others, thereby emphasising the complex interrelatedness of the standards and the holistic nature of the framework. The ALEA project has been extensively documented by the indefatigable Marion Meiers in Teachers’ Stories. Professional Standards. Professional Learning. Using STELLA as a framework for professional learning in which the scholars provide narratives of their involvement in the project. Included in the publication are reflections by the three mentors on 'Standard 3.3 Professional engagement: Teachers are active members of the professional and wider community.' The classroom-based research and collaborative nature of the project were features valued by the participants as crucial to the success of the project.

There has been no comparable 'official' AATE work as such, though I'm aware of the enthusiastic work undertaken by Karren Philp and ETAWA in promoting STELLA as a model for developing a professional learning framework. Another development has been recorded thus in my survey:

The work being undertaken by teachers and educational researchers who have been intimately involved with the genesis, development and implementation of the STELLA project provides a different, and possibly more challenging, perspective. It is not exactly offered as mea culpa for having embarked on the project in the first place, or as a road to Damascus conversion, but their work has moved towards characterising the whole question of standards development, and their implications for the individual teacher, as problematic. To quote Brenton Doecke, who has been one of the chief architects of this research:

The potential of STELLA lies less in any performance culture than in a 'culture of inquiry' sustained by a professional network involving conversation, collaboration and sharing. Rather than supposing that professional accomplishment can meaningfully be ascribed to individual teachers whose performances can be measured against a reified set of standards, STELLA offers a model of professional learning and engagement that is social in character. The standards themselves are meant to embody a sense of collective identity and joint activity with which teachers can identify. STELLA challenges the narrow, psychologistic view of learning that arguably underpins most examples of professional standards, drawing on the insights of leading educational theorists about the social nature of learning in which people engage as they talk with one another and jointly construct knowledge. (Doecke 2006, p. 44)

(Hayes 2005, p. 17)

Again, much of this work has been documented in English in Australia and readers are aware of the terms of the critique which cluster around a series of tensions involved in standards development. Can one group of committed educators ('insiders') develop standards which an equally committed group of professional educators ('outsiders') might be expected to implement and/or be assessed against? Should standards serve a performance culture or inform, and be informed by, a culture of inquiry? Can one set of standards serve both the managerial regulatory needs of education bureaucracies and systems, and still promote the developmental needs of the profession?

I share some of Brenton's skepticism but remain sanguine about the possibility of the above tensions being contained in some sort of creative balance in the exercise of our collective professionalism. There are a number of reasons for my optimism, the chief being the 'realpolitik' regarding standards that confronts teachers in Victoria since the advent of the Victorian Institute of Teaching. It would be fair to say that the work of professional teaching associations who have developed standards has been subsumed into the work of the Institute. A glance at both the STELLA and the VIT Standards of Professional Practice for Full Registration would suggest a considerable overlap in their articulation. Little wonder, since the work in developing the Institute's standards drew heavily on the work of professional teaching associations, particularly those involved in those ARC grants, Mathematics, Science and STELLA. This is as it should be. It would be counterproductive to confront teachers with conflicting terminology and expectations. The successful acceptance of standards by the profession will depend on, among other things, the development of common purposes and processes expressed in a common language by the various organisations, be they regulatory bodies or professional associations engaged in standards work. Currently in Victoria the Institute's standards are used to assess the individual performance of new graduates moving from provisional to full registration. In essence it is a very benign form of assessment, notwithstanding the fact that there have been legitimate criticisms of its implementation which have to do with issues of workload, and the perceived replication of university requirements in terms of analysing teaching and learning. The process
involves mentoring, collaborative practice and, most
important, contextualising. The new graduates are
invited to articulate narratives of their practice and the
ways in which they believe they have achieved the stan
dards, through documentation and interviews. Ideally,
the mentoring ought to be a manifestation of Brenton’s
‘culture of inquiry … involving conversation, collabora
tion and sharing … (reflecting) the social nature of
learning in which people engage as they talk with one
another and jointly construct knowledge.’ (Doecke
2006, p. 44).

Standards in Victoria are now about to move into
another phase, registration renewal for experienced
teachers. It is a phase which has the potential to ensure
that all teachers, not simply ‘we few, we happy few’, we
band of brothers (and sisters) who have been obsessive
compulsive standard proselytisers over the past few
years, take standards seriously. While there is no expec
tation that teachers will embrace registration renewal
with ‘ongoing passion and involvemen the fact is that
if it is mandated it will, to adapt Dr Johnson’s adage
about hanging, concentrate the collective mind of the
profession wonderfully on the ‘fact’ that standards do
exist. In the renewal process all experienced teachers
will be required to undertake 100 hours of professional
learning over five years across categories which seek to
ensure a mixture of that which is internal to the school,
and that which is externally provided by professional
learning providers such as associations. Implicit in the
division into categories is the assumption that while
schools – conceptualised as learning communities –
will be the focus of professional learning, teachers will
be open to new sources of knowledge of the kind
provided by participation in learning communities and
networks beyond the school. A variation on thinking
globally while acting locally. As with the registration
requirements for new graduates the registration renewal
process ideally should maximise teachers’ control over
what constitutes professional learning for them by
requiring them to provide a rationale which links their
learning to the standards. Experienced teachers, too,
will be required to construct narratives about the rela
tionship between their professional learning, their
practice and the standards.

The import of this development for the work of
associations is that there is a genuine opportunity here
to educate their members into seeing registration
renewal as not simply a bureaucratic chore undertaken
grudgingly, but as a genuine sea change which trans
forms registration renewal, in the words of Ariel’s song
from The Tempest, ‘into something rich and strange’ –
professional renewal and growth. That, however, would
also involve associations conceiving themselves not
simply as professional development providers servicing
this or that particular curriculum initiative, but as
genuine professional learning communities which
provide both physical and virtual spaces for their partic
pants to engage collegially in dialogue, practice and
reflection. For VATE that would mean thinking of itself
as an ongoing learning community committed to a
culture of inquiry, a community providing professional
space for English teachers to think collegially about
registration renewal. Such thinking should involve not
only a focus on the import of the STELLA standards
and methodologies but on the implications for their profes
sional renewal and growth of the AATE six Statements
of Belief about the Teaching of English and, going further
back, the recommendations of the five strands from the
2003 IFTE Conference. Collectively, these achievements
represent what the profession, expressed through its
national and international identities, believes, values,
knows and does at this historical moment in its evolu
tion. Registration renewal, conceptualised as profes
sional renewal and growth, ought to be the conduit
through which teachers make those ‘frameworks’ of
professional knowledge, practice and engagement rele
vant and purposeful in the contexts in which they work.

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