The Australian Association for the Teaching of English
Response to the Draft National Professional Standards for Teachers

The Australian Association for the teaching of English (AATE) is the national umbrella organisation for the state and territory associations for the teaching of English. Established in 1964, the association represents more than 5,000 English teachers and educators Australia wide. AATE is part of an international network of teachers with a commitment to teaching and learning in the English learning area. Members of the association are committed to working together to refine their practice and to endeavour to achieve the best possible learning outcomes for their students. Professional standards therefore matter greatly to us.

AATE has made a significant contribution to the development of professional teaching standards over the past decade and has worked with governments at federal and state level. AATE regularly attended workshops and forums organised by the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership and Teaching Australia and contributed to the development of the national charter for Australian teachers (2008). In 2000 AATE and the Australian Literacy Educators Association began a collaborative venture funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and coordinated by researchers at Monash University, Queensland University of Technology and Edith Cowan University to develop subject specific standards for the profession. The STELLA (Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy) project articulated what teachers of English and literacy should know and be able to do and developed professional standards for English teachers K – 12.

The association supports the project to develop professional teaching standards and we welcome the opportunity to be involved in the conversation. We are committed to standards which are shared by members of the teaching profession and can be used by teachers to reflect on their practice and can provide a platform for professional development.

1. Does the preamble to the Standards give a clear picture of the context for the reason, use and purpose of the Standards?

Although we learn in the purpose that the document is grounded in research there is no clear locating of the standards in any theoretical conception – reference to the ACER mapping reports (2008, 209) gives no hint as to the theoretical rationale for the teaching standards or the particular research literature that informs this iteration of standards.

The purposes of the standards are unclear. It is not clear from the statement of purpose who will use them or how they will be used. We note that under “Levels of professional capability”: “All teachers must demonstrate that they meet the standards at Graduate and Proficient levels. Teachers may achieve accreditation at Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher levels. It is our view that this information should be foregrounded, along with a fuller articulation of the multiple purposes of the standards.
There is also very weak reference in the preamble to the rigorous and internationally recognised professional standards which have been previously developed by subject associations – such as Science, Maths and English/literacy; nor is there adequate reference to the solid work currently being done by other subject associations to develop their own standards. There is little reference to the robust and lively dialogue that has informed and accompanied the ongoing development, work with, and ongoing critique of these professional association developed standards, and the role of the various subject associations in generating, monitoring and disseminating these standards. The status of standards like those for teachers of English and literacy (STELLA) needs to be explained.

The terminology is unclear at times, in particular the use of the term Lead teachers. Some of our members believe that this level relates to principals and is not relevant to classroom teachers. It is our understanding that all levels of the standards apply to classroom teachers. We believe it is important to retain teachers with the capacity to provide leadership in classrooms. We suggest renaming this level ‘leading teachers’. We also note that the Lead teacher descriptor often seems to describe management rather than classroom or even truly educative leadership.

We are also concerned that there is overall a strong sense that teaching is an individual activity. There isn’t, in our view, enough recognition of the collegial nature of teaching or in the partnerships that teachers form with parents, students and the community. This is especially the case in the standards for graduate and proficient levels, where references to collaborative or collegial practices are few and far between.

The language in the document is, we believe, disappointingly bland and fails to capture the challenges and complex nature of teaching which it could celebrate. There could be more acknowledgement of the diverse nature of students too.

2. Do the draft Standards describe a realistic and developmental teacher professional standards continuum?

While the NSW Institute of Teachers has established and sought to embed the structure of four discrete statements to demarcate at each of four levels of accomplishment for every statement (in line with Ramsey review for the NSWIT in 2000), there is much to critique in the conception of these levels (ie. that professional practice can be compartmentalized into unproblematic statements, each of which can be visible and observable, so therefore measurable).

The additive practice of including new or different adjectives to enhance lower levels often seems mechanical, while the inclusion of more and more expectations to define highly accomplished and lead teaching levels is laboured and rather pedestrian. In both these respects, the standards fail to capture the complexity of leadership in the work of a classroom practitioner and they often underestimate the day to day work of teachers at graduate levels. We question if it is really necessary or appropriate to repeat all of the lower level ‘content’ of accomplishment in the higher levels of accomplishment?

It is our view that there is a lack of clarity in the statements and therefore an unsophisticated expression of the difference between the levels. We also believe that the teachers will not necessarily move through the levels in a linear fashion but will move in and out of different levels throughout their careers. This should be acknowledged.

This question uses the word ‘realistic’ to describe a sense of developmental continuum for teachers. We interpret this to mean ‘workable’. Given the acutely short time frame scheduled as the validation period for these standards, we believe it is unrealistic to expect that AITSL, educational systems, professional associations, and individual schools will be able to judge whether the standards are workable, realistic or flawed.
The language used to describe Graduate and Proficient teaching is mostly positioning these teachers as passive and lacking initiative. In particular, the standards describe teaching in the first two columns as lacking the capacity to be collegial (there is little acknowledgement that graduate and proficient teachers might learn with others not just from them, that they might influence the learning of others, and indeed that they might mentor others, formally and informally). Teaching practice at this level is, in almost all instances, seen as uncritically compliant (e.g., In Standard 7, graduate teachers are expected merely to “understand and comply with codes of ethics and conduct”, and it is not until the level of ‘Lead teaching’ that they are thought to be “interpreting” codes of ethics and conduct).

It has been suggested that AITSL produce an ‘evidence guide’ (in verbal text as well as in video artefacts, to encourage teachers to reflect on their practices) to accompany the set of professional standards at all levels, and in all areas. This evidence might be used by some regulatory bodies (within schools or outside) and by teachers themselves to help clarify what is intended by a statement, how it might be measured, or how a teacher or teachers might provide evidence of accomplishment in this area. There is a danger, though, that an ‘evidence guide’ might encourage more uniformity in interpretations of the standards and less critical engagement with the multiple interpretations that each statement might suggest in different educational contexts and settings.

3. Do the draft Standards reflect what you would expect teachers to know and be able to do for each of the four levels (graduate, proficient, highly accomplished, and lead teachers)?

There are references to ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ at various places in Standard 2. While pedagogical content is important for teachers at all levels, this term has the potential to compartmentalize the knowledge of educators within narrow understandings of each discipline and it runs the risk of undermining the professional status of flexible creative teachers at a time when significant efforts are being made to improve their status. The Melbourne Declaration explicitly highlights the importance of cross-curricular perspectives and pedagogy. This sort of language could discourage teaching practices that work to cross traditional curriculum boundaries/territory.

In some places the standards are puzzlingly prescriptive – e.g., Standard 1.3, which chooses to specify “the developmental characteristics of students” as “cognitive, social, emotional, physical and spiritual” but fails to mention others such as linguistic, creative, empathic, … . At other moments they are very broad – e.g., most statements in Standards 1 & 2 begin with ‘Know and understand”. If the standards are to be used as prompts for professional inquiry, then this has the potential to be valuable and generative. This has been demonstrated in the range of research published by members of AATE and ALEA who have used the STELLA standards in more aspirational ways for professional renewal and for critical reflection on their practice, e.g., Bellis (2004) and Howie (2008) in English Teaching: Practice and Critique; Philip (2005), Piva (2006), Hayes (2007) and Meiers (2007) in English in Australia; and Meiers’ (2006) edited collection, Teachers’ Stories: Professional Standards, Professional Learning. Whole schools have also used it as a basis for ongoing professional learning projects, eg. Ainslie School, ACT.

Such a generously broad use of language, such as ‘Know and understand’ would however seem to be impractical and problematic when used in the context of evaluation of teacher practice.

While it may be the case that teacher quality is of pre-eminent importance in improving student learning outcomes and wellbeing, there have been decades of research affirming and re-affirming the collegial nature of the teaching profession, where teachers’ knowledge
and practice is always a function of their interaction with a number of colleagues, institutional and curriculum factors (e.g., Bottery, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Delandshere & Petrosky, 2004). Such research vigorously challenges the feasibility and the validity of four discrete levels of standards as proposed in this draft, which seek to ‘pin down’ quality or performance in individual teachers.

4. **Are there other descriptors the draft Standards should include?**

The following are some of the areas of professional practice that are missing from or under-represented in the current draft. Their inclusion would at least go some way to strengthening the validity of a document that claims to be “rigorous, profession-wide approach to identifying Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead teachers”.

- Creative/innovative
- Collegial
- Linguistic (i.e. especially with respect to linguistic diversity)
- Mentoring (acknowledging that professional learning inheres in this for both the mentor and the mentee)
- Flexibility
- Ethics of assessing and reporting
- Cross-curricular knowledge and practice
- Risk-taking
- ICT skills

5. **Will it be possible for educators to use the Standards to evaluate teacher practice (with substantial support materials)?**

At present, for all of the above reasons, it is felt that any system of high-stakes evaluation of teaching practice, even with substantial support materials, would be unreliable, unethical and unworkable.

If the primary purpose of the standards is indeed to evaluate teacher practice, then this needs to be made more explicit. At the moment, and without a significantly longer period of time for honing the language of the standards and for trialling them in the validation period, it would be dangerous to try to implement these standards. Teachers will not work with a set of standards where it is felt their professionalism is not being reflected and represented.

The preamble mentions that the standards provide a “basis for professional learning”. If standards are to be the basis of some form of teacher evaluation we hope that it is possible to avoid the process becoming a mechanical tick-the-box accountability regime, where the time and energies spent by teachers in preparing documentation for evaluation hardly contributes to these teachers’ professional learning. There is much research evidence documenting how some teachers have engaged in a process of using standards for professional reflection as well as to meet accountability regimes.

If the standards are to be used as a tool for measuring performance the language needs to be tightened so that teachers know what they have to do and supervisors know what they have to observe when they are assessing.

**General comments**

There are several problems in the language of what is included in these standards as well what is, to this stage, absent from them. In order to address these problems there needs to be more extensive and long-term consultation, critical ongoing conversations with teachers and professional associations (rather than one-off consultation ‘events’), as well as in-depth
study of existing standards documents (and projects and studies associated with them). This all takes a commitment of time and sustained collaboration with subject associations. The current timeline makes this impossible.

Fundamental questions remain unclear or unanswered in this draft, also, about the primary purposes and uses of the standards, and about how they might work in relation to existing subject specific standards that have been developed by professional associations such as AATE. Such standards continue to be used as the focus for professional learning and development (individual and collegial), and importantly they are not considered to be set in stone, but are themselves a focus for critical interpretation and inquiry. In considering the value and feasibility of the proposed national standards, one must ask whether the proposed standards are better or more effective than those currently in place. The current timelines proposed leave little time for these complexities to be adequately addressed.

The consequences of not addressing these will be a profession which is unwilling to work with these standards. Research across the world (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Doecke, 2006; Hayes, 2007; Mayer, 2009; Petrosky, 2006; Sachs, 2005), and AITSL itself, acknowledges that teachers need to feel they are able to work with these standards if the standards are to be effective in promoting quality in teaching and in the profession overall.

We note that these standards are being developed as part of the National Partnership on Teacher Quality. The notion of a partnership is that there is something shared and that those involved both listen to and heed the concerns of each other.

The timeline for the development and implementation of the National Professional Standards for Teachers is both unreasonable and prejudicial to the success of the standards, no matter how good they may be. The final document needs to be robust and it needs to be something that teachers and their professional bodies feel they have some ownership of.

Standards must recognise the collegial nature of teaching. Standards which focus on the performance of individual teachers are likely to discourage the development of collegial cultures, of sharing professional knowledge and perspectives. There is also in this draft an absence of references to the creative, flexible, imaginative work of teachers and teacher groups. This has potentially dire implications for teacher autonomy, professional innovation and risk-taking.
References


