

Up with the standard

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January 31, 2005

The Australian

IT may have a grand name and an ambitious agenda, but the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership is operating in relatively modest surroundings.

The heritage cottage within the grounds of the Australian National University is sparsely furnished, has temperamental phones and computers, and has no air-conditioning: "When it's 38C, you certainly feel it," says NIQTSL's chief executive Fran Hinton.

Notwithstanding technological shortcomings, Hinton is happy with NIQTSL's location and expects it will remain home for some time. Besides, Hinton is acutely aware that she has a lot more to think about than having a comfortable office.

NIQTSL is an initiative of the federal Government, with initial funding of \$10 million, in response to a recommendation arising from a review of teaching and teacher education chaired by r Kwong Lee Dow, then vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne and now deputy chairman of the NIQTSL board.

The review report – Australia's Teachers: Australia's Future – called for a "co-ordinated and collaborative national approach to the advancement of the teaching profession."

In July 2003 federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson announced that a national institute of teachers would be established in 2004; in November 2003 he commissioned a consortium including the Allen Consulting group to provide advice on its form, function and implementation.

The report published by Allen Consulting in April 2004 made a strong case for such an institute. Claiming that student outcomes in Australian schools are inconsistent, at least because of variations in the quality of teaching, the report endorsed the Dow report's recommendations for the development of uniform national teaching standards and quality assurance in teacher training.

"No other profession has such a critical responsibility; the successful outcomes of no other profession are so difficult to demonstrate. Yet, there is enough evidence to demonstrate that appropriate standards can be identified and developed for the profession, and that all students can experience levels of success," the report says.

An interim NIQTSL was launched in June 2004, with an interim board and advisory committee comprising representatives of the four education estates – universities, unions, teacher professional associations and parent groups. Gregor Ramsey, perhaps best known for his report on teacher education in NSW, was appointed chairman of the interim board in June 2004 and Hinton was named chief executive in November 2004.

Although well-known and respected for his willingness to call a spade a spade, Ramsey was not a universally popular choice. NSW Teachers Federation deputy president Jennifer Leete has said that Ramsey is generally seen as anti-union. But

Hinton's appointment was widely welcomed, according to Australian Education Union president Pat Byrne.

"Fran's got a background in education and is highly regarded. Her appointment was well-received," says Byrne.

Hinton's resume shows extensive experience in the upper echelons of Australian education. Recent positions include chief executive officer of the ACT Department of Education and Training and, until her appointment to NIQTSL, president-elect of the Australian College of Educators.

Which is just as well, because she has a tough job to do. In an industry rife with tensions between governments, unions and parents, and with a workforce numbering 250,000 teachers across the country, creating an organisation that represents the entire profession will be no mean feat.

While Hinton acknowledges the difficulties of her job, she is clear and enthusiastic about NIQTSL's role.

"Our role is to draw together the various professional associations, provide a united front for the profession and take initiative on behalf of the profession," she says.

And Hinton is equally clear about what NIQTSL will not do – duplicate or undermine the work of the existing state institutes of teachers.

"We need to add value, not to duplicate. We don't want to reinvent wheels or divide," she says.

This should allay concerns among many of the organisations with which NIQTSL will have to work if it is to be successful. Submissions to the Allen Consulting consortium from unions, professional associations and parent groups argued strongly that a national institute should not be a regulatory body or be involved in industrial relations, which are jobs for the state institutes of teachers.

"I think that the role of the state institutes for the most part have is to regulate the teaching industry. They generally have a regulatory responsibility to license people to teach in Australian schools. That is their fundamental role," Hinton says.

"We are certainly not a regulatory body, and we don't see ourselves as being a government instrumentality. We have been set up specifically by the Australian Government to be independent."

All states and the Northern Territory either have an institute of teachers or are in the process of establishing one. This raises the question of what a national institute will do, if it has no direct legislative relationship with the profession. Will it just be a yet another committee-driven spokesperson, or will it have teeth?

The short-term agenda for NIQTSL reveals that initial teacher registration is pretty much the only area of the profession it is prepared to leave to the states. NIQTSL plans to influence and accredit pre-service teacher training, formulate nationally consistent general and advanced teacher standards, guide educational research, monitor and accredit professional development and provide school leadership training.

Success in the first item on this list will be a strong demonstration that NIQTSL has clout. Pre-service teacher education is instrumental in improving the quality of teaching in schools as well as a way to slow down teacher turnover, by making sure teachers are fully prepared for the real life demands of the classroom.

However, there is great variability in the way universities across the country train new teachers. It is up to individual education faculties to decide on course content and graduation criteria, and although there is some monitoring of these standards by the Teacher Quality Advisory Panel, there is no national assurance or accreditation process.

This is a void NIQTSL intends to fill by reversing the traditional focus of teacher training to put the nuts and bolts of teaching at the centre, relegating educational and social theory to the supporting role, and by putting the NIQTSL stamp of approval on courses that make the grade.

"We see pre-service teacher education as a key focus. We see that as a very real responsibility of the profession," Hinton says. "We have started work already, particularly around the practicum. From the perspective of the profession, we see the practicum as the central element of pre-service teacher education, with the theory underpinning that."

Next on the list, but first cab off the rank in terms of visible action, is school leadership. NIQTSL announced last week that it would establish a national school leadership program and invited proposals from institutions to "design, develop and deliver" the program for the next three years.

"This will be the first time that school leaders and the teaching profession will have access to a high status national program," Ramsey says.

Perhaps the most daunting task facing NIQTSL, however, is the development of national teaching standards, because of the number of people involved and the inevitable difficulties of trying to please everybody while maintaining integrity and rigour.

"One of the challenges in developing teaching standards is that the profession has been at the forefront of developing standards. What we need to do is work with professional associations as partners and think about the way we can build on their work and develop a national system that isn't diminished by having separate standards for every aspect of teaching," Hinton says.

Lawrence Ingvarson, director of research on teaching and learning at the Australian Council for Educational Research, is on the NIQTSL advisory council. An internationally recognised authority on professional teaching standards, Ingvarson believes that the development of unified standards is one of the two most important objectives of NIQTSL, alongside pre-service teacher training.

"Profession-wide teacher standards are a way of bringing the profession together. They are the bridge between research and practice," Ingvarson says.

There would, of course, be little point in devising standards as a theoretical exercise. How to put them into practice is tricky question, but one that has got to be answered.

Ingvarson says there is a "very big danger" that standards could be ineffectual, but the way to avoid this is to ensure they are rigorous and tied to professional development and key stages of teacher career development.

"Standards can be trivial, but if well-written they capture what teachers should know and be able to do," he says. Ingvarson sees standards as a potential means of extending teachers' "very flat" salary scale. If used in this way, "standards offer substantial recognition for good teachers and incentive for all teachers. [They] can be used to reform the professional development system so it is not just an ad-hoc process."

Lessons can be learned from comparable efforts overseas, particularly the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in the US, which was established in 1987 to certify teachers demonstrating advanced teaching standards. It is a voluntary process in which teachers pay \$2300 to be assessed against the standards, with the expectation their salary will increase in return. Only 24,000 of the 3.9 million school teachers in the US have taken up the offer.

"It is early days to be figuring out how to put [advanced teaching standards] in place, says Hilton. "I don't think there's a system around the world we could pick up and run with.," Ingvarson, however, is more hopeful, saying that a similar scheme in Australia is entirely possible – "We can do it as well if not better." Cost disincentives should be weighed against the cost of masters degrees of about \$10,000 a year, which don't necessarily lead to higher salary, he says.

With only about six months to its official launch, the interim NIQTSL has clearly defined goals, but their implementation will require a delicate juggling act. Keeping powerful groups such as unions and governments on side will be necessary, but could threaten the ability of the institute to vigorously pursue its agenda.

Things have been running smoothly so far, according to Hinton. "The board consists of deans and teacher and principal representatives. We recently had a meeting of the interim board and advisory council, and the parent and union representatives expressed strong support for the national institute," Hinton says.

"NIQTSL has a very large agenda which we regard as very positive. There is a general sense of that around the table. There are questions though about resources, having enough time and enough people," AEU president Byrne says.

Putting all the talking and listening into action is key to the survival of NIQTSL, which Hinton acknowledges, but she is also aware that this creates another tension.

Hinton says "we need to achieve some balance around getting action to show we're doing something, while also developing a strong research base and making sure we are well-informed. NIQTSL needs to be sustainable and it is critical that we don't leap to simplistic answers to complex problems."

The Australian Council for Educational Research puts it more strongly in its submission: "The National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership will live or die according to the rigour of its certification."

Ingvarson agrees. "If NIQTSL sticks to its brief, it can make real, big and unique contributions to education."

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