

# The Essential Guide to Professional Learning: Innovation

The Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders (the PL Charter) describes the characteristics of a high quality professional learning culture and of effective professional learning. The Essential Guide to Professional Learning series unpacks the research behind key themes of the PL Charter.

This issue of the Essential Guide series expands on the importance of innovation and adaptability in professional learning.

The questions below are intended as a guide to assist you in fostering innovation and adaptability in your school's professional learning culture.

## You will know your school's professional learning culture is innovative when:

- school leaders model innovative practices/approaches in their approach to leadership
- whole-of-school planning engages with cutting edge practices in the wider local, national or international education community as identified in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals
- new or renewed practice is identified through an established cycle of reflective and evaluated practice
- school leaders actively encourage staff to improve practice through well-considered trialling of new or revised approaches
- innovation is not seen as faddish but as an essential response to the rapid changes of contemporary society
- the opportunities for the use of online tools and platforms for professional learning are fully embraced.

### How does your school encourage adaptability amongst staff?

- Are staff encouraged to respond positively to the opportunity to adapt their practice to address external or internal challenges?
- What opportunities are available to staff to seek out and trial new practices?
- Are there opportunities for staff to discuss openly and honestly in a collegial setting, challenges to practice and potential adaptations that may address these?
- How is the capacity for openness and adaptation to changing circumstances modelled by school leaders?

### How is innovation defined in your learning and teaching environment?

- Why is innovation seen as important by the school, collectively?
- Is the school leadership aware of national and international education trends?
- Does the school have a process for determining whole-of-school change priorities?
- Do individual staff have a process for determining what next practice means for them?

### What mechanisms are in place for maintaining awareness of innovative practice?

- Is there time set aside for professional learning for school leadership to engage with new and emerging practices?
- How does school leadership engage with the external community to share ideas about new and emerging practices in professional learning?
- In what ways does the school leadership draw on the expertise within the school to encourage innovation in practice?

### How is support provided to staff to encourage innovative thinking and practice?

- Does the school leadership actively encourage creative thought and practice by staff?
- What types of evidence are used to demonstrate the potential impact of new and emerging practices?
- Are there regular opportunities provided to staff to reflect on and identify opportunities for changes to practice that could enhance, or address problems of, student learning outcomes?
- Are staff encouraged to undertake professional learning that addresses future as well as current challenges?

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*No-one changes unless they, themselves, see a need for change. Unless people understand how future trends impact their organisations and communities, they will maintain their traditional behaviours, attitudes and action. Transformational leaders will need not only to identify trends, but to involve interested people in futures generative dialogue, to see the impact of those trends on fundamental assumptions. The objective is to help others become familiar with the need to develop a futures context within which to think about issues (Levine and Smyre 2012).*

## Innovation in context

The word “innovation” has become a popular buzz word. It can mean different things to different people. Founding Director of the Innovation Unit UK, Valerie Hannon, notes that definitions “tend to be variations on the successful exploitation of new ideas”. Key characteristics of innovation include partnerships and collaboration at all levels, user-centredness, exploiting ICT’s potential, the importance of a highly interconnected approach, a focus on enhancing processes and the empowerment of users and communities.

Below are a number of definitions of innovation:



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## The macro context

It is important to consider innovations that occur in a school's external environment as these can have a big impact on a school's context and operations.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals* provide the context for each of the Australian states and territories to adapt national priorities, such as the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (the Standards) and the Australian Curriculum.

These national initiatives reflect an international focus on the needs of the education of young people in the twenty-first century. One example of the international context of innovation is the 2010 OECD report *The Nature of Learning: using research to inspire practice*, and the complementary *Practitioner Guide*. The extensive international research conducted for this report highlights the reasons for the powerful interest in learning.

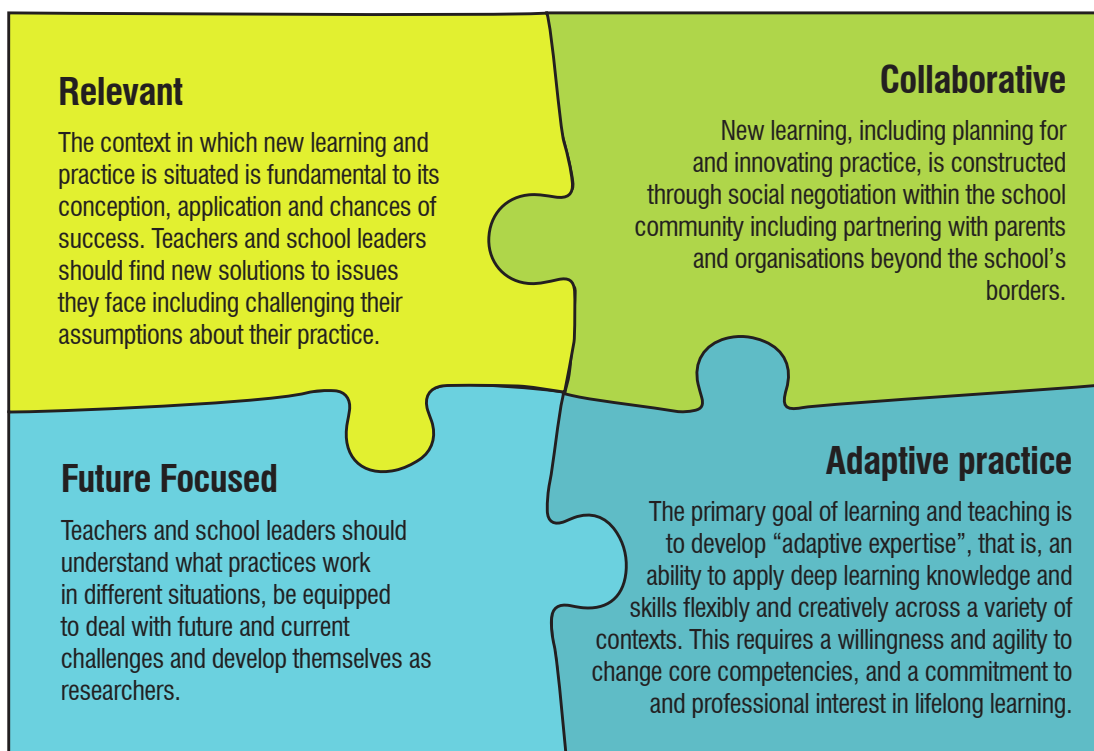
In brief, these include the shift from an era focussed on industrialisation to one in which knowledge will be the most sought after asset. Large scale international testing is also both an outcome and provocation of the new emphasis on knowledge economies.

There has been a growing widespread interest in the understanding of learning itself. In addition, there is a growing distance between the research on learning that is currently being generated and the application of this new knowledge base in educational settings.

Educational institutions are also seen increasingly as public organisations. Research on organisations, and learning organisations in particular, also has an impact on the way in which societies now think about schools and schooling.

## The micro context

Within a school, innovation should be encouraged and fostered through a culture of effective professional learning and adaptive practice.



## The individual context

Teachers, individually and collectively, should encourage and contribute to a school culture which is committed to continuous improvement and innovation. This school culture will use external and internal research and the creative and reasoning capacity of all staff to develop and implement practices to address problems or enhance already strong practice (Standard 3, Focus Area 3.6).



## Innovation in context

The following is a summary of an innovative process to building both professional capacity and satisfaction, conceived and trialled at a regional Western Australian secondary school.

The school leadership team leveraged the introduction of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (the Standards) and the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (the Standard) as a robust and common framework to test an improved approach to collective and individual staff development, aligned to whole-of-school strategic aims (the Standard, p9).

The school has a student population of around 1000 and a stable and experienced staff. The school decided to deliberately focus on quality teaching as a key component of its desire to become an independent public school. A trial process was set up to test what a process for identifying what increasing sophistication of teaching practice looked like in the context of the school.

The school leadership team used the Standards as a nationally agreed framework and language that outlines the contributions of teachers to a positive, collegial learning and teaching environment (the Standards, p2). The Standards provided an external and well-evidenced base for reflecting on and evaluating professional practice and one that could be adapted to the school's particular context.

School leaders described the trial to staff and asked for volunteers from across the career stages (the Standards, p5). Volunteers undertook a process of self-reflection based on the Standards that affirmed their strengths and identified areas for professional development.

Teachers' own judgements were validated using both student surveys and peer observation (the Standard, p10). The latter provided an opportunity for trialling and developing new skills of peer mentoring (the Standards, p7).

As a result of the trial, volunteers were acknowledged for their strengths and contribution to the school's learning and teaching environment, and offered highly tailored professional learning provided within the school.

The trial proved so successful that the process was extended to all teachers in the following year, with six major learnings from the trial applied to this next stage of innovation. The learnings from the trial were that:

- teachers could be offered more autonomy in the selection of their professional learning and that this could be more tailored to individual needs when this was identified through the application of the Standards
- ICT was a valuable means of collecting and storing data, such as video footage of classroom learning and teaching activity
- using a variety of qualitative and quantitative information sources offered the most objective means of analysing and reflecting on professional practice
- time and trust were key to the peer observation and feedback processes
- focussing reflection, observation and feedback on a selection, rather than all, of the Standards
- creating opportunities for staff to lead curriculum changes by adopting a distributed leadership approach.

### Features of an adaptive and innovative learning culture

- iterative decision-making (evaluating results and adjusting actions on the basis of what has been learnt)
- feedback between monitoring and decisions
- uncertainty or change in the internal or external environment is explicitly communicated
- embracing risk and uncertainty as a way of building understanding
- information is shared and accessible
- learning is emphasised and valued
- mistakes or failures are not punished
- people are expected to learn constantly.

*Senge (2006) The Fifth Discipline: the art and practice of the learning organisation*



**How do you support and encourage an adaptive and innovative professional learning culture?**

## Strategies for school leaders to foster innovation



Cashman K (2013) 7 Ways Leaders Can Foster Innovation

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## Innovation and adaptability in action

### High Tech High: San Diego, California

Project-based learning has transformed the learning experience and outcomes for thousands of children. Staff engage in sustained and formal professional learning and performance and development that includes:

- half a day every fortnight spent in workshops delivered by specialists from a field, often outside education
- participation in a study group of their choice, which meets every two weeks and is required to deliver useful output to the whole staff
- whole staff weekend retreats that build community and empathy as well as new skills
- an annual summer school that inducts new teachers and refreshes existing ones.

### Hyper Island: Sweden

A private university established by three entrepreneurs from the multimedia sector which offers residential Executive Programs that provide intensive experiences to both international corporates and start-ups, helping them come to grips with the ever-changing opportunities of the digital workplace.

Hyper Island also offer Student Programs which are intense, project-based experiential learning. Both Programs' aims are reflected in their titles: "Learn for Life", "Lead the Change" and "Team is Everything".

### Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan: Sweden

The Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan is the name given to 53,000 adult education study circles operating in Sweden. In total, the circles comprise approximately 400,000 people coming together to discuss a common focus area.

Coordination of the circles occurs through 30 local offices which enable over 150 circles to meet each day. Geographical constraints have been broken down by technological advances that have led to huge advances in social media and unprecedented opportunities for sharing and trialling new ideas collaboratively.

### Merrylands East Public School & Auburn North Public School: Sydney, Australia

Teachers from Merrylands East and Auburn North Public Schools have improved their knowledge of best teaching practices across a number of areas as a result of engaging in self-directed professional learning through Twitter.

Twitter has the potential to connect like-minded, self-directed educators through professional learning networks, to give them the opportunity to exchange dialogue, ideas and resources.

### TeachMeet: Sydney, Australia

TeachMeets are informal, free, teacher-driven events where presenters choose their own topic of expertise, and attendees can pursue their own professional passions.

Teachers have reported that their teaching practice and activities have changed directly as a result of attending TeachMeets. Hearing from engaging and inspiring educators has inspired other teachers to try new ideas and strategies.

### State Library of Victoria: Melbourne, Australia

The State Library of Victoria runs a Professional Learning Network (PLN) program, via face-to-face workshops and online platforms, that seeks to prepare educators to incorporate new technologies into their learning and teaching.

Participants have reported changes in knowledge and practice, including adoption of new forms of technology in learning and teaching and alternative ways to engage students, as a result of undertaking the program which includes action research projects in their schools.

### Anangu Schools: South Australia

At Mimili and Indulkana Anangu Schools, Anangu Educational Workers (AEWs) are being provided time and opportunity to observe highly accomplished AEWs, to reflect upon what they observe and with their teacher team, implement changes in their practice as a result of this professional learning.

The aim of this professional learning is not only to build AEWs' capacity but also to assist teacher/AEW teams to function more effectively.



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