Preparing future leaders

Effective preparation for aspiring school principals

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Australian Institute
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Limited

Contents

Executive summary

This report, *Preparing future leaders: Effective preparation for aspiring school principals,* highlights the key challenges in preparing principals for current and future school needs and provides an up-to-date and comprehensive picture of the current state of play across Australia. The report and its conclusions are based on research, national and international data and broad stakeholder consultation.

The research confirms there are a small number of preparation strategies and development opportunities across Australia's education systems and sectors that have been put in place to see that aspiring principals are well prepared for the challenging and changing school leadership role. Nevertheless, the evidence clearly indicates there is much still to be done.

The extensive research and consultation undertaken in preparing this report have led to five major recommendations for improvement in the current approach to principal preparation in Australia. These recommendations will be of use to aspirant leaders themselves as well as school systems and sectors, professional learning providers, and other groups with an interest in ensuring principals are well prepared for the responsibility of improving school and student outcomes.

1. Take a systematic, standards-based and coherent approach

Principal preparation is too often ad hoc and disconnected. To be effective, principal preparation must be systematic and coherent, based on clearly articulated professional standards and include the following elements:

- a thorough appreciation of leadership demographics and trends

- clear and shared understandings of the principal role, underpinned by professional standards

- a focus on the attractiveness of the principal role so that teachers are eager to make the move into leadership

- responsibility for identifying and preparing future leaders shared between employers, system leaders and the profession

- structured professional development opportunities for aspiring principals that focus on leadership abilities.

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2. Identify and nurture talent

In the best approaches to principal preparation, potential leaders are identified early in their careers and given a range of opportunities to develop their leadership skills. Successful succession planning requires:

- structured, transparent career pathways

- clear selection prerequisites for promotion.

3. Match learning to an individual's capabilities, career stage and context

Principalship is complex and principals require a broad repertoire of skills and the confidence and acumen to deploy those skills with impact. Pathways to advancement should be clear, with professional learning appropriate to each level explicit, well understood and sustained after appointment. Professional learning needs to be timed and spaced to allow aspiring principals to grow in their leadership and management abilities as they move closer to the role, and sufficiently targeted to equip participants to succeed in their context. To be effective, learning for aspiring leaders should occur in three broad stages:

- developing deep and comprehensive pedagogical knowledge as the foundation for strong instructional leadership. This learning can be done relatively early in the journey to principalship as it is compatible with a teaching role

- developing the many higher-order and interpersonal skills required by principals, including strategic thinking, change leadership, and emotional and social intelligence. This learning is best developed over time and should occur well before an aspirant takes on the role of principal

- developing management skills. This learning is best undertaken immediately prior to assuming a principal role, as it can then be consolidated through immediate practice.

4. Use evidence-based adult learning techniques

Highly effective preparation programs reflect an understanding of a range of adult learning techniques that have been shown to be effective and provide a diversity of experiences over time. They include:

- discriminating application and selection processes matched to the learning opportunity

- spaced delivery, blended learning and the opportunity to apply new skills and knowledge, collaborate, gain feedback and receive ongoing support

- a degree of personalisation that takes into account the needs, career stage and context of the individual

- an emphasis on learning from experts and practitioners

- recognition for the learning undertaken.

5. Evaluate programs for impact

To ensure principal preparation programs are high quality and have a positive impact it is critical to engage in rigorous evaluation for purposes of accountability and improvement. Principal preparation evaluations should:

- provide evidence of participant readiness for the role

- measure impact upon take-up of role

- demonstrate growth in the number of well-prepared aspirants available to take up future vacancies.

Why principal preparation matters

"Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school."

Leithwood et al., 2004

Excellent school leaders are fundamental to a high-quality education system. A sustained focus on the professional growth of school leaders will support the achievement of the vision for all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. Successful schools provide their students and communities with a solid foundation in a rapidly changing world and this requires leaders with strength and substance.

The role of the school principal, as defined in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (the Standard), is complex and evolving. With increasing principal autonomy, there are greater opportunities for and demands on principals to make good decisions at the local level and this has implications for the development of a corresponding leadership skill set. If every school leader is to create a culture where teachers and students thrive, they require effective preparation that builds this leadership capability and supports high performance in increasingly decentralised settings.

In many Australian jurisdictions, there is increasing concern about the ageing demographic profile of school leaders, the decline of the appeal of the job, and the implications of this for matching supply to demand. The increasing demands of the job and a perception of high stress levels and poor wellbeing appear to be acting as deterrents to those who might otherwise be interested in the role. This is supported by survey results that show approximately half of current deputy principals do not intend to apply for a principal position in the next three years (ACER, *Staff in Australia's schools 2013*).

There is a need to look closely at demographic data to consider trends, anticipate where shortages will be most pronounced and consider strategies to encourage a strong and vibrant pipeline of well-prepared aspirant leaders, eager to take on the leadership challenge.

Supply is also determined by principal readiness. For this increasingly complex and challenging role it is effective professional preparation that will have a true impact on the capacity, quality and availability of high-potential aspiring principals. However, evidence suggests a coherent and widespread strategy to ensure principal preparedness is currently lacking.

Presently there is little research being done that links the effectiveness of specific school leadership development experiences to school outcomes (Jensen et al., 2015). A stronger focus on evaluating the impact of the professional opportunities that comprise principal preparation is a critical need.

"[T]he quality of training principals receive before they assume their positions, and the continuing professional development they get once they are hired and throughout their careers, has a lot to do with whether school leaders can meet the increasingly tough expectations of these jobs."
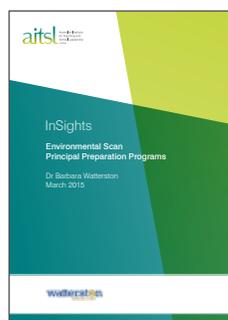
Darling-Hammond et al., 2007

Evidence base for this report

This report is based on an analysis of current practices in Australia and elsewhere which focus on preparing individuals for the 'top' job, and comprehensive research into principal preparation practices. It has been supplemented by a series of national and international survey reports that provide significant information, comparisons and opinion data on the principal role and principal preparation practices and trends. The report has also been informed by extensive face-to-face consultations.
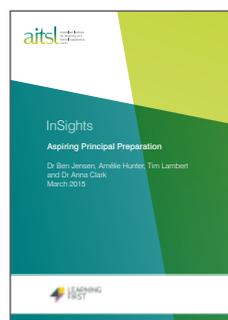
AITSL-commissioned research

In 2014 AITSL commissioned leading educationalists and researchers to identify, analyse and report on successful processes and programs that support the development of aspiring leaders and to highlight issues and areas needing attention. The research resulted in two in-depth reports[1] that form the basis of ongoing work in this area and which have been comprehensively drawn on to develop this report.

- *Environmental scan: Principal preparation programs* prepared by Dr Barbara Watterston of Watterston Consulting

- Literature review and horizon scan: *Aspiring principal preparation* prepared by Dr Ben Jensen and colleagues at Learning First.

National and international data

The AITSL-commissioned research was supplemented by a number of recently released data reports[2] which were able to illustrate the information in the research reports. These reports were:

- *National teaching workforce dataset data analysis report 2014*, Australian Department of Education

- *Staff in Australia's schools 2013*, ACER for the Australian Department of Education

- *Teaching and learning international survey (TALIS) 2013 results*, OECD

- *Australian principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing survey*, 2014, Australian Catholic University.

Consultation with stakeholders

AITSL's research into preparation of principals has been broadened through extensive consultation with the profession[3]. A number of strategies including face-to-face meetings, teleconferencing, social media and an online survey were used to seek the views of aspirant leaders, leaders, and system and sector representatives from around Australia, with the aim of gaining widespread and diverse input.

Environmental scan: Principal preparation programs

[1.4MB PDF]

Literature review and horizon scan: Aspiring principal preparation

[1.4MB PDF]

Current principal preparation in Australia

Some 35 per cent of surveyed principals in Australia have had no school administration or principal training, and 30 per cent have not undertaken any instructional leadership training. In fact, 45 per cent reported receiving average or weak leadership training as part of their formal education.

OECD, TALIS, 2014

While there are many educational leadership programs offered in Australia, those focused solely on developing and preparing aspiring leaders for the principalship are less common. Each of the government, Catholic and independent systems and sectors has its own approach to principal preparation. While few offer a program/ activity specifically designed for preparing principals, many have strategies and approaches that target leadership development as part of more generalised leadership programs.

The *Environmental scan* identified a total of ten dedicated principal preparation programs in Australia at the beginning of 2015. These programs have a small reach and do not represent a coordinated and strategic approach to the ongoing, systematic and effective preparation of school leaders for our nation. The ten programs are listed at Appendix 1, along with their key design features.

Dedicated principal preparation programs are just one component of leadership development (Pont et al., 2008). In the same way that teaching skills continue to be developed throughout a career – for principals and teachers alike – leadership development is an ongoing process and requires a long-term approach. As illustrated in Figure 1, the effect and type of principal preparation activity is impacted by where the specific experience sits on the continuum of individual development.

Specific principal preparation programs and training in school administration and instructional leadership targeted to the needs of principals prior to and on taking up the position are likely to yield the most tangible results for student achievement (OECD, TALIS, 2014).

Figure 1: Continuum of leadership development
Source: adapted from Jensen et al., 2015

Development of leadership skills

Development of teacher skills

Coaching and forms of leadership development

Specific principal preparation

Ongoing coaching and leadership development

Begins teaching

Begins school principalship

Selection into principal preparation

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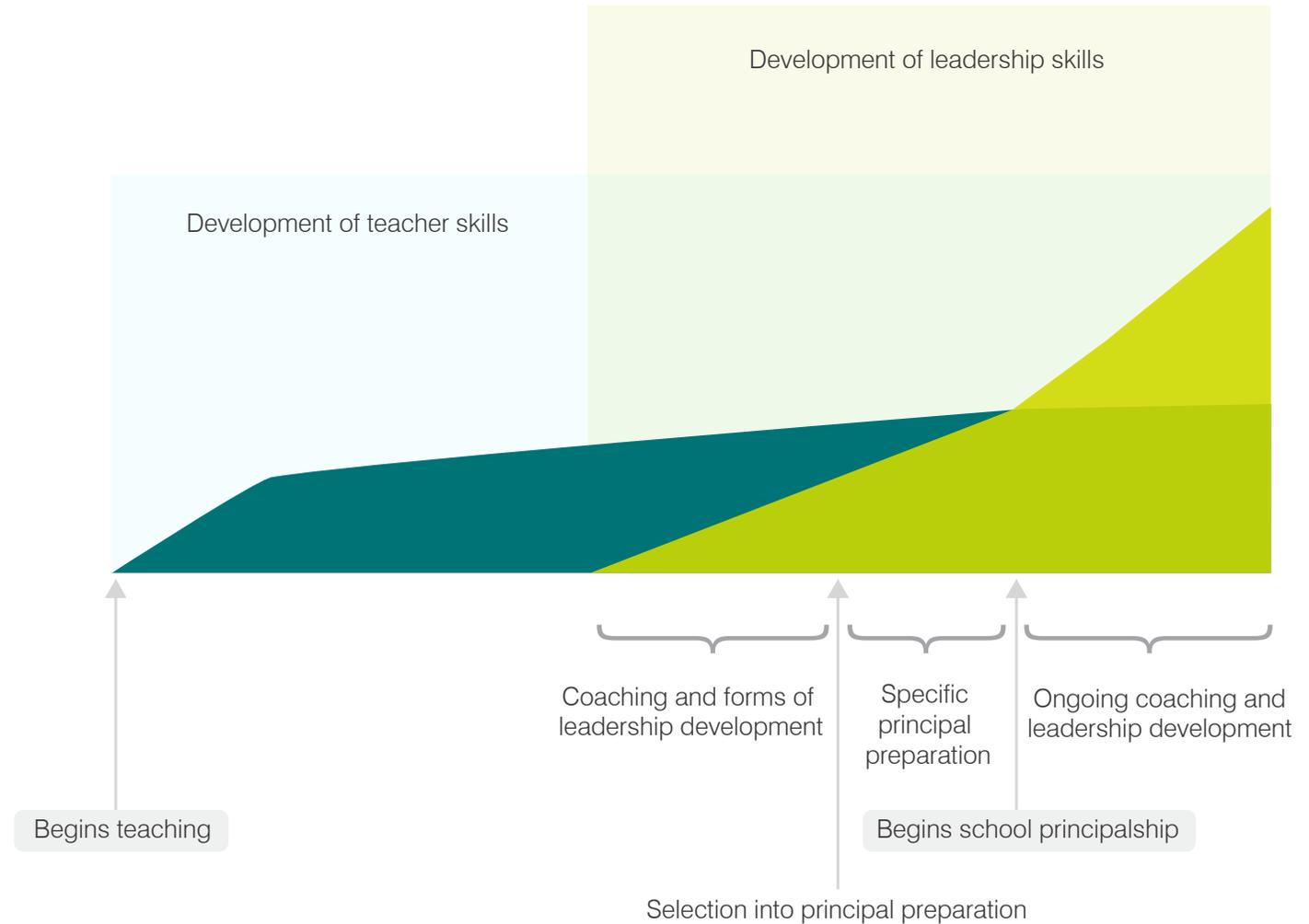
Strengths of current principal preparation offerings

Generally, principal preparation programs and activities delivered across Australia are based on sound principles of professional learning including:

Evidence based

Programs and activities use evidence-based research to inform their development and content, including learning from national and international experts and examples.

Aligned to the Standard and frameworks

Programs and activities are informed by, and explicitly connected to, the Australian Professional Standard for Principals. In some instances, design and delivery of programs and activities is also aligned with system/sector values, initiatives, priorities and local frameworks.

Multiple delivery modes and activities

Programs and activities are based on a range of adult learning techniques including spaced delivery and blended learning models — face-to-face, online and experiential learning. Programs and activities emphasise learning from the profession — peers, in-situ opportunities and expert practitioners.

Recognition of learning

In a number of cases providers engage proactively with universities so that programs and activities are accredited and count towards formal qualifications. This encourages participation and provides a measure of quality assurance.

A number of programs/activities currently being delivered report having a significant positive impact on levels of principal readiness, as well as contributing to an increase in the number of high-calibre applicants and successful appointments for leadership roles. However, it is difficult to objectively evaluate the broad impact of current preparation initiatives and there is little evidence being gathered to show a correlation between specific preparation strategies and improved leadership and school outcomes.

Recommendations for improving principal preparation in Australia

1. Take a systematic, standards-based and coherent approach

"The critical question is what we can learn about policies and practices that could make the provision of high-quality learning opportunities for principals a regular occurrence rather than an exceptional event."

Darling-Hammond et al., 2007

A major aim of principal preparation is to ensure a supply of suitably qualified and skilled applicants when and where they are needed. Achieving a match between high-quality supply and local demand is unlikely to happen if left to chance. A comprehensive approach is required that promotes principalship as a desirable career path, ensures quality learning experiences are available to all those ready to undertake them, and matches program content and aspirant availability to future school and system needs.

Current situation

Currently in Australia, 71 per cent of principals are over the age of 50 (Willett et al., *National teaching workforce dataset*, 2014). This indicates an urgent need to ensure a pipeline of leaders ready to fill the gaps left when the ageing workforce reaches retirement.

With one-third of school leaders seeing principal and deputy principal positions as 'unattractive' or 'very unattractive' to qualified applicants (ACER, *Staff in Australia's schools 2013*), the desirability of the role and how it is perceived threaten the capacity to fill these vacancies as they arise.

Consultations with system and principal association leaders around Australia have provided anecdotal evidence that several systems and sectors face difficulty recruiting suitably qualified and experienced principals due to a paucity of qualified applicants.

These trends create an imperative to raise the status of principalship and ensure the role attracts a steady stream of competent, well-prepared future leaders who are willing to take up the post. To achieve this, the role of the principal needs to be visible, clearly understood, positive and attractive. The Australian Professional Standard for Principals helps achieve this goal.

Respondents to AITSL's online survey and social media discussion clearly indicated there is a current lack of understanding about the varied and complex aspects of a principal's job. They expressed a need for the role to be 'demystified'.

If future leaders are to be well prepared, effective professional learning opportunities need to be available. The relatively small number of specialised principal preparation programs that exist in Australia does not appear to be an adequate response to this challenge.
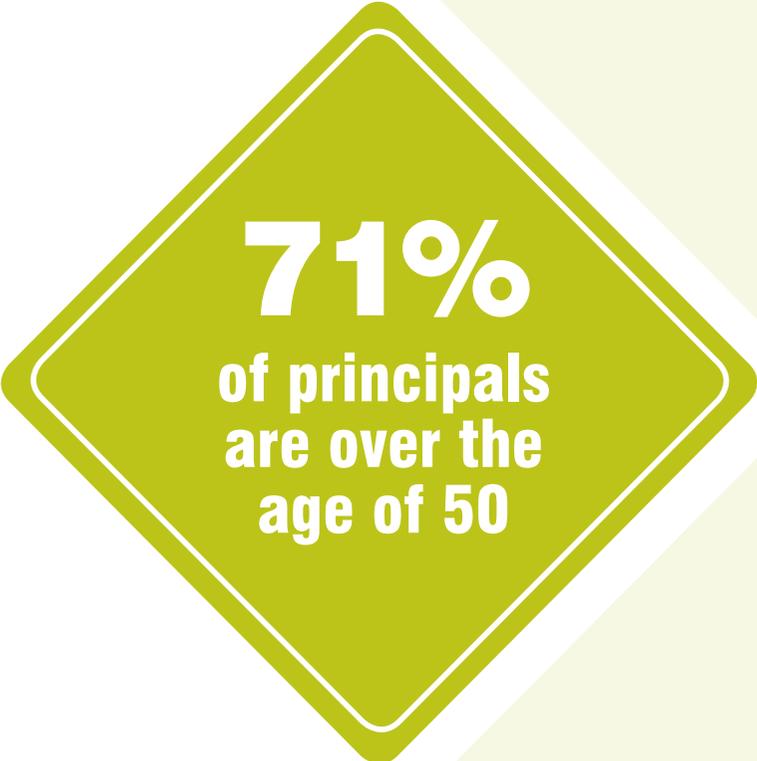
71%
of principals are over the age of 50

Future directions

To have long-term impact, a more systematic, structured and coherent process is required to deal with the demographic challenges facing the leadership of Australia's schools.

This national approach would be based on the agreed skills, knowledge and abilities required of Australian principals detailed in the Standard (see Figure 2) and the associated Leadership Profiles. It would seek to promote the positive aspects and status of the principal role on a national scale. Secure and ongoing funding for programs and initiatives is a key part of the success of such a systematic approach.

Alongside system leaders and employers, principals themselves are integral to the success of any national principal preparation initiative and have a key role to play in developing the capacity of potential leaders. Involvement in local initiatives such as shadowing, coaching and mentoring activities is an important aspect of the responsibility of the profession in building future leaders.

Through greater alignment, systems, sectors, universities and private providers can develop principal preparation opportunities that create leaders with a strong and knowledgeable focus on improving student outcomes.

It is recommended a strategic national approach to principal preparation be developed based on the Australian Professional Standard for Principals that positively positions the work of school leaders and prioritises the importance of appropriate learning opportunities. This should be a collaborative and collective responsibility across government, Catholic and independent sectors.

AITSL's future work in this area will involve ongoing consultation with all systems and sectors across Australia to promote the importance of a systematic and coherent approach to principal preparation. Ongoing dialogue will be based on the recommendations in this report.

The standard for principals

《《 Leadership Requirements 》》

Professional Practices ⌄

| Vision and values | Knowledge and understanding | Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills |

Leading teaching and learning

Developing self and others

Leading improvement, innovation and change

Leading the management of the school

Engaging and working with the community

High quality learning, teaching and schooling

Successful learners, confident creative individuals and active informed citizens

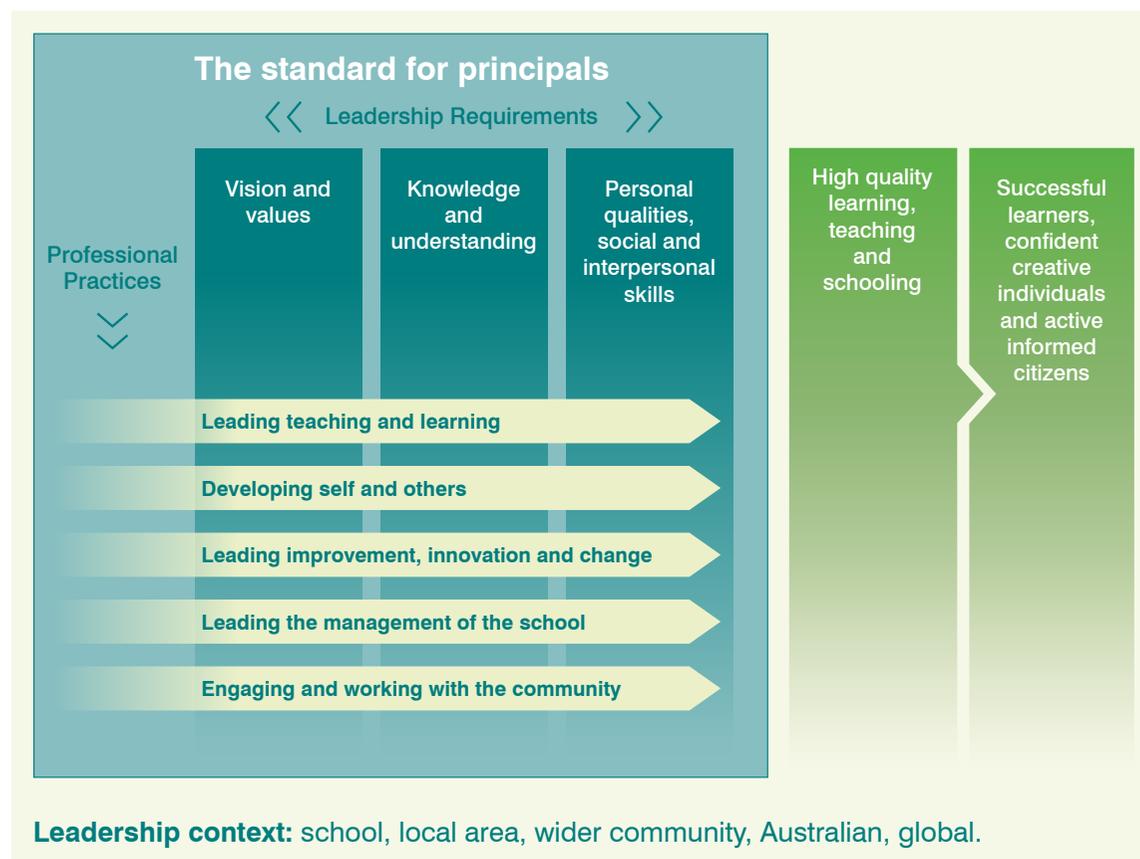**Leadership context:** school, local area, wider community, Australian, global.

Figure 2: Australian Professional Standard for Principals

Source: AITSL, 2011

2. Identify and nurture talent

Fewer than ten per cent of surveyed principals intended to be a school leader when they started teaching. Yet within their first few years of becoming a teacher, *one-third of current principals* had decided to seek out a leadership post. The biggest factor for more than three-quarters of leaders in their decision to take up the role was that they were encouraged and supported by the leaders in their school.

ACER, *Staff in Australia's schools 2013*

Early identification and development of high-potential aspirant leaders is crucial to ensuring a pipeline of future principals. Early identification allows for strategic and strong preparatory experiences that form the foundation for building the confidence, skills and professional knowledge necessary for future leadership.

Leadership potential not only needs to be identified early, but career pathways and ongoing support and opportunities for practical experience also need to be provided. The best identification strategies will fail if there are no clear opportunities for the aspirant leaders to advance their careers.

Current situation

Early identification of potential school leaders is not the norm in Australia. The average length of teaching experience of principals is 26 years, six years more than the OECD average (OECD, TALIS, 2014). This longevity in the role can act as a barrier to leaders being encouraged early and fast-tracked into leadership roles.

In addition, feedback from consultation indicated that in many cases leadership was seen as a type of inheritance, and by simply 'doing time' in a school, long-serving teachers felt entitled to move into the leadership role. This is amplified by the lack of formal methods to identify, prepare and then promote individuals with the necessary skills for leadership.

Profession-wide criteria for identifying the attributes and dispositions of future leaders do not currently exist in Australia. While the Standard and associated Leadership Profiles articulate the leadership role at increasing levels of sophistication, to develop a pool of capable aspirant principals it is also necessary to be clear about the prerequisites for principal preparation and promotion opportunities, and to define what support is needed at each career level and how that support should be provided. Some international educational systems do this very well. In Singapore, for example, participants are usually selected early in their career and placed on a leadership career track where they are provided with a series of structured leadership experiences and ongoing leadership coaching.

Currently career pathways – where present – are not always apparent to aspirants. There are often multiple pathways to the principal job, something that is seen as positive by practitioners consulted for this report. However, clarity around which steps to leadership are most effective would enable aspirant leaders to see the way forward more easily.

Future directions

To ensure a healthy pipeline of potential leaders, well-articulated and explicit pathways to leadership are required. Leadership career pathways should clearly identify the opportunities for people to progress, the skills and leadership behaviours required for progression and the feedback and performance management systems that support the progression.

Having clear leadership career pathways helps signal leadership development expectations and builds coherency and purpose in the opportunities available for aspiring leaders. This ensures that individuals know where they stand and are able to gradually develop the complex leadership capabilities and technical skills they need as they progress. Part of the pathway may be the provision of opportunities for leaders to practise in various middle management and deputy roles, ideally in a range of schools, and to 'act' in those positions to which they aspire.

While a cohesive, well-articulated process for talent identification is the collective responsibility of the profession and the employer, the role of current principals in identifying, supporting and recommending potential

principals is vital. Principals are assisted in this task by clear and widely agreed guidelines of what to look for in aspiring leaders.

It is recommended that employers across Australia consider ways to more transparently describe the pathways to leadership within their sector, the knowledge, skills and attributes required at different leadership levels and the development opportunities available.

AITSL's future work in this area will involve the development of an online resource to illustrate the common and essential characteristics of leadership development pathways. By highlighting individual journeys and drawing parallels between experiences, the resource will underline the key elements most helpful in leadership preparation and explore how these opportunities were made available. Understanding the key elements of individual leader pathways will provide aspirants and systems/sectors a clearer understanding of what is required in the transition to school leadership.

3. Match learning to an individual's capabilities, career stage and context

"Leadership development is broader than specific programs of activity or intervention. It requires a combination of formal and informal processes throughout all stages and contexts of leadership practice. This implies coherently supporting the school leadership career through these stages."

Pont et al., 2008

The content and timing of principal preparation activities are just as important as their availability. Principal preparation opportunities and experiences must provide aspiring principals with the skills to lead schools to improve student performance and wellbeing

Principals today are required to fulfil a role that is, in many respects, different to that performed by their predecessors, and they need the skills and knowledge to meet these changing expectations. To achieve this, programs must be future focused and not simply rely on a traditional understanding of the principal role.

Within a nationally agreed framework, aspiring principals should also be prepared for the contexts in which they are likely to lead. Effective leadership development activities should align with an organisation's objectives, and different priorities may well inform local preparation needs, emphasising particular skill development across different contexts.

Understanding the support that is appropriate to an aspirant's level of development is crucial for systems, sectors and aspiring leaders. Opportunities and experiences tailored to a participant's particular career stage will be more likely to deliver learning that can be put into practice on the job, therefore helping to ensure the newly acquired knowledge translates into improved capabilities and behaviours.

Current situation

Participation in formal learning is a significant, but not stand-alone, factor in developing talented individuals and their confidence to achieve career advancement.

There are a number of key learning priorities for aspiring principals. The pathway from teacher to principal can vary considerably, with principals across all systems and sectors in Australia traditionally coming from the teaching ranks. The difficulty of the transition from teacher to principal should not be underestimated – experience as a teacher does not necessarily develop the required knowledge, skills and leadership abilities for the role of principal. Prospective leaders need to be provided with deliberate and timely opportunities that help them develop the broader, more strategic perspectives required in their future roles.

Currently in Australia, leadership development programs tend to focus on developing technical management skills. This approach assumes that a career as a teacher has already positioned the aspiring principal to be an instructional leader, yet 30 per cent of Australian principals report not having received any instructional leadership training (OECD, TALIS, 2014). Current approaches to preparation also risk ignoring higher-order leadership skills, with 45 per cent of principals in Australia reporting having had average or weak leadership training.

Targeting individuals for formal learning is one way systems and sectors currently address specific areas of need. An example of this is the leadership experiences and opportunities for women promoted in some systems/sectors. With women being significantly under-represented in principal roles (ACER, *Staff in Australia's schools 2013*), such initiatives go some way to addressing this imbalance and may provide some insights into effective mechanisms for talent identification.

> **In Australia, females hold 65 per cent of the leadership positions in primary schools and 48 per cent of leadership positions in secondary schools. While these proportions are higher than in 2010 (59 and 41 per cent, respectively), they remain much lower than the proportions of female classroom teachers at the two levels of schooling (81 and 58 per cent, respectively).**
>
> ACER, *Staff in Australia's schools 2013*

Future directions

There is a clear sequence for the development of the different leadership capabilities described in the Standard. While much learning takes place after appointment to the principalship, this sequence should inform the design, timing and delivery of principal preparation programs.

Instructional leadership
(Australian Professional Standard for Principals: Leading teaching and learning)

In education, critical leadership knowledge is about teaching and learning. Principal preparation must emphasise leadership of teaching and the knowledge of how this will impact student outcomes. Instructional leaders promote the development of teachers who understand student learning needs and the impact of their teaching on the learner. They assess the effectiveness of teaching in their school and know how to use assessment data and student feedback to help improve teaching practice and learning experiences.

Instructional leadership is clearly linked to the pedagogical skills of teaching, and its development should begin relatively early, when aspirant principals are still in teaching roles. However, it should not be assumed that even the most effective teachers will automatically become instructional leaders – deliberate attention to developing these skills is needed.

> **"It's no longer acceptable for a principal not to be an instructional leader."**
>
> School principal, ACT

Higher-order and interpersonal skills
(Australian Professional Standard for Principals: Developing self and others; Leading improvement, innovation and change; Engaging and working with the community)

The job of the principal is constantly evolving to respond to a rapidly changing school environment. Effective preparation for this complex and demanding role includes the development of a range of essential higher-order and interpersonal skills, which are articulated in the leadership requirements described in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals.

Vision and values: Principals need to be able to provide direction through their vision and strategy, and establish the school's environment, culture and structure. To do this leaders need to understand the context and policy frameworks in which they operate. Leaders also need to understand what drives good performance in different contexts and how they can use that knowledge to form effective strategies.

Knowledge and understanding: Effective leaders are able to recognise the need for change and identify causes of, and solutions to, problems. They use their knowledge and understanding to create the culture and conditions needed to be successful, and engage the people in and around the organisation in their vision. This involves a complex synthesis of skills, knowledge and attributes applied to suit the context and timing.

Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills: Effective leaders must be able to demonstrate emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. A leader's awareness and understanding of their own values and emotions impacts the decisions they make, their behaviour as a leader and the way they interact with others. Developing identity as a leader is an important foundation of leadership development. How principals or aspiring principals perceive themselves can impact how they play out the role – the decisions and judgements they make and their interactions with others. It can also impact the motivation and behaviour of people they lead. School leadership also requires a range of social capabilities which include personal and relational skills and effective communication and partnership building. There is considerable need for attention to skill development in the emotional aspects of interactions with others (Riley, *Principal wellbeing survey,* 2014).

The development of higher-order and interpersonal skills takes time and should begin well before an aspirant takes up a principal role.

> **"The transition to school principal normally requires aspiring principals to 'let go' some of their identity as a teacher and embrace a new identity as a leader of others."**
>
> Ibarra et al., 2014

Management skills
(Australian Professional Standard for Principals: Leading the management of the school)

Principal preparation should assist aspirants to understand effective managerial practices as they will need appropriate capabilities to fulfil a range of specific and important managerial functions. These include understanding governance protocols and practices, contracting, budgetary and finance processes, human resource procedures, building and technology infrastructure requirements, and government regulatory requirements.

Consultation with stakeholders revealed there is a real demand for management training for school leaders. As new management skills are best adopted when the learning can be immediately embedded on the job, preparation for this aspect of the role is optimal either close to or at actual job start.

> **"The greatest source of stress for all principals and deputies/assistants in every state and every sector is the sheer quantity of work, closely followed by a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning."**
>
> Riley, *Principal wellbeing survey*, 2014

It is recommended that principal preparation be sequenced to first focus on instructional leadership, followed by the development of higher-order and interpersonal skills and that management skills be taught immediately prior to or on take up of the principal role.

AITSL's future work in this area will focus on the development of an online resource that aims to build aspiring leaders' interpersonal and management skills through engagement with school-based leadership scenarios. Users will be required to make decisions and resolve issues around commonly encountered leadership tasks, particularly those that challenge new leaders.

4. Use evidence-based adult learning techniques

"Professional learning will be most effective when it is relevant, collaborative and future focused, and when it supports teachers [and leaders] to reflect on, question and consciously improve their practice."

AITSL, 2012

Resources for principal preparation, including the time of aspiring leaders, are scarce. It is important that programs are of high quality and use effective techniques to develop the right skills and capabilities at the right time. This is made easier if the desired outcome of the program is clear and there are formal selection procedures to assign aspirant leaders to programs that match their level of development.

Effective principal preparation programs are designed according to adult learning principles. Adult learners are self-directed, they bring a wealth of prior experience to education, are ready to learn, problem-centred in their learning and best motivated by internal factors (Jensen et al., 2015).

Adults learn more effectively when learning involves collaboration with peers, and when they can apply their knowledge and receive feedback on their behaviour and learning (Jensen et al., 2015).

Current situation

The current range of principal preparation programs in Australia is variable in quality and design. While there are many examples of evidence-based programs that follow principles of adult learning theory and are likely to be effective, other programs do not seem to have a strong evidence base. The difficulty of designing effective programs is increased by the lack of a clear career pathway and consistent leadership expectations at different career levels (see section 2 above).

Currently in Australia, entrants largely self-select into principal preparation opportunities and experiences. Self-selection affects the design and implementation of principal preparation strategies as the background and capabilities of participants can vary greatly and there is little opportunity for external confirmation of the appropriateness of their participation. Activities are often taken opportunistically rather than strategically, and consequently learning can be compromised.

Additionally the intended purpose of a program is often not explicit: is it to improve knowledge or develop management skills or leadership behaviours or a combination? This lack of clarity can also contribute to poor program content, design and/or delivery, and participant satisfaction.

Participants validated the importance of university partnerships and the formal recognition or accreditation of the learning, including course completion advantaging participants in recruitment and principal selection processes.

Future directions

Engagement in a diversity of learning experiences over time best supports effective development and learning. This is the ideal for all aspirant leaders.

Principal preparation opportunities and activities that are designed with expert knowledge of content and adult learning techniques, clear purpose and based on rigorous selection processes to ensure a match between participant skills, knowledge, prior experience and expectations, should be the norm. These programs may also involve formal credentialing or form part of pre-selection requirements for principal roles.

Assessment of individual needs before embarking on any preparation experience should be used to ensure that content is appropriate to the capability levels of those participating. Selection and assessment processes can include written applications, face-to-face interviews, group interviews, references, problem solving, and written and oral tasks.

Spaced and blended learning is essential to successful preparation, with aspirants having a range of opportunities to engage in, practise and reinforce their learning at times that best suit their current positions and time restrictions. Embedding strategies that allow for ongoing reflection

and feedback is also highly valuable, particularly the use of 360-degree diagnostic feedback.

Additionally, learning is enhanced if the theory and skills being learned can be applied in real-life contexts. When experiences, readings and information sessions are combined with a cycle of collaborating with peers, applying knowledge and receiving feedback on behaviour and learning, individuals are able to consolidate their knowledge and are more likely to change their behaviour. Shadowing, skilful mentoring and coaching can be very powerful tools to assist aspirants to develop their leadership skills. For example, in the New Leaders Program in the United States, selected aspiring principals undertake a year-long, fully paid school internship. They are mentored by the school's established principal and work alongside them as part of the management team. They are also assigned an individual coach who works with them to develop an individual development plan and document evidence of success and growth.

Appendix 2 describes in greater detail some effective learning designs and activities currently used in best-practice leadership programs nationally and internationally.

It is recommended that principal preparation programs and activities deliberately screen, select and match participants to the level and purpose of the learning and use content and adult learning experts to design effective development offerings.

5. Evaluate programs for impact

"The relationship between professional development and improvements in student learning in these real-world settings is far too complex and includes too many intervening variables to permit simple causal inferences… Isolating the effects of a single program or activity under such conditions is usually impossible. But in the absence of proof, you can collect good evidence about whether a professional development program has contributed to specific gains in student learning."

Guskey, 2002

Principal preparation programs should ultimately aim to have a positive impact on student outcomes. As preparation programs are only one element in a broader raft of practice and policy, their effect on student outcomes can be very difficult to measure. Among other challenges, evaluators have to deal with the long causal chain between principal preparation activities and student learning, along with the fact that intermediate outcomes like 'good' leadership behaviours are hard to define and measure. Figure 3 illustrates the likely linkage from principal preparation to student outcomes.

Current situation

There is no established practice of rigorous evaluation of principal preparation programs in Australia although some effort is being made to address this gap. There is an emerging level of sophistication that recognises the need for longitudinal data gathered using multiple methods and from multiple sources.

In the absence of strong information on outcomes, all those with a stake in principal preparation face challenges in deciding where to invest their resources. Individual aspirants have difficulty selecting the programs most likely to help them progress, systems and sectors face difficult decisions about which programs to support, and professional learning providers do not have the information needed to improve the impact of their programs.
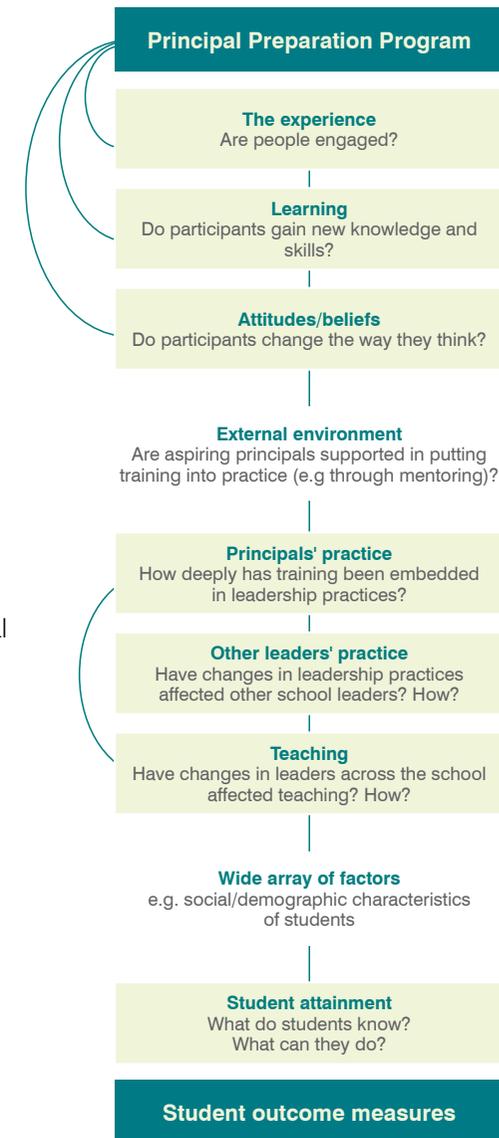

Principal Preparation Program

The experience
Are people engaged?

Learning
Do participants gain new knowledge and skills?

Attitudes/beliefs
Do participants change the way they think?

External environment
Are aspiring principals supported in putting training into practice (e.g through mentoring)?

Principals' practice
How deeply has training been embedded in leadership practices?

Other leaders' practice
Have changes in leadership practices affected other school leaders? How?

Teaching
Have changes in leaders across the school affected teaching? How?

Wide array of factors
e.g. social/demographic characteristics of students

Student attainment
What do students know? What can they do?

Student outcome measures

Figure 3: Likely linkage from principal preparation to student outcomes (simplified)

Future directions

Strategies to address the challenges of measuring outcomes include using multiple methods and sources of information, and taking a longitudinal perspective. Figure 4 shows some of the difficulties in evaluation and suggests some ways of ameliorating these. It is imperative attention be given to establishing an evidence base about what works best in principal preparation for purposes of accountability and improvement.

Figure 4: Evaluation challenges and potential remedies

Challenges	Potential/partial remedies
Long causal chain	Focus on intermediate outputs (e.g. principal behaviours)
Defining what to measure (e.g. behaviours that constitute 'good' leadership)	Create a clear and agreed-upon evaluative framework, ideally during the design of the preparation program
Hard-to-measure outputs	Use mixed methods and multiple sources
Impact takes time	Evaluate over time (longitudinal studies)
Evaluations are under-used	Create feedback loop; evaluations published in peer-reviewed journals.

Source: Jensen et al., 2015

With more sophisticated approaches to evaluation, professional learning providers can shape the most appropriate activities, experiences and opportunities for aspirant principals according to information about what works, and using a range of feedback mechanisms to capture the outcomes of activities and incorporating this into future design and implementation.

Given the outcomes of principal preparation programs are diverse and difficult to measure, multiple methods must be used to gain feedback on program impact. These can include student outcomes as well as more intermediate impacts such as aspiring principal behaviour. Ideally, evaluations will take a longitudinal perspective and include methods such

as self-reports, interviews, independent observations and documentary evidence of policies and practices in schools. Importantly, program impact can take time so an evaluation framework needs to take this into account.

While not detracting from the importance of focusing on student outcomes, evidence of impact can also be determined in other ways. Systems/sectors can use employment data to assess whether strategies are leading to increases in the number and calibre of applicants for positions, including less attractive positions. Additionally, by tracking program participants' career moves, the proportion of program graduates who move successfully into a principal role can be determined and conclusions drawn from this.

It is recommended that a concerted national effort be made to create an evidence base about what works best in principal preparation to assess the value and worth to participants, schools and systems and to guide ongoing program development.

AITSL's ongoing work in this area includes the development of an evaluative framework to guide assessments of impact. This will prompt those shaping and delivering processes, programs and activities in principal preparation to be clear about desired impact and how to measure it.

Conclusion

While there are some promising initiatives in principal preparation in Australia, broadly speaking it is an area greatly in need of a more strategic and cohesive approach. Too much at present is left to chance. Those principals who feel they were well prepared for the role often put it down to good fortune, usually in the form of a great role model, rather than good planning.

School leadership is too important to be left to chance. The research is backed up by widespread system, sector and principal association leader consensus that principal preparation is of vital importance in creating best-practice schools and improved student outcomes. There is agreement across the Australian education community that a more strategic and comprehensive approach to principal preparation would help address observable gaps in principal preparedness. This includes ensuring the 'right' people are given the 'right' opportunities at the 'right' time.

The principal job is a challenging one and the knowledge and capabilities required in order to meet all aspects of the Australian Professional Standard for Principals are broad and multi-faceted. Unfortunately, too many principals are left to find their own career pathway and the learning and development available does not always adequately prepare them for the realities of the role. While the range of skills required to be a principal today is great, there is general accord within the profession regarding the priorities and focus areas for principal preparation, with a strong emphasis on instructional leadership, higher-order skills and interpersonal competencies followed by an intensive focus on managerial skills just prior to taking up the role.

In the 21st century, every principal should feel supported to undertake this complex and highly responsible role. For aspiring principals this involves receiving targeted leadership learning over time, matched to their needs and career stage, continuing after take-up of the principal role. This would embrace support from the profession, including from experienced principals, coaches and professional networks.

While there is much existing knowledge about what sort of professional learning is needed to prepare aspirants for the job, comprehensive evaluation of principal preparation experiences, opportunities, activities and programs that would allow impact to be defined and measured more rigorously, is scarce. A strong evidence base is needed to help decision makers, providers and participants choose the most effective strategy for preparation for the role.

Getting principal preparation right is a big challenge for the education system, yet the rewards are great. An incredible 96 per cent of principals would choose the role again if given the chance (OECD, TALIS, 2014), which speaks to the depth of job satisfaction possible in leading a learning community to ensure all students reach their full potential.

Notes

1. This report is based on the findings of the following two research papers commissioned by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership:

- Jensen, B, Hunter, A, Lambert, T and Clark, A 2015, *Aspiring principal preparation*, Learning First, report prepared for the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).

Aspiring principal preparation includes a review of contemporary theory and research on the topic of effective leadership development and how leaders are prepared for and supported in their roles. The report sets out key considerations for the design of principal preparation by looking at what can be learned from exemplary activities, experiences and programs from around the world. Importantly, the report extends this knowledge with best practice from other sectors with a strong history of leadership development. These include the military, executive education, health administration and professional service sectors.

The report identifies some key considerations in developing principal preparation approaches. Important considerations include how preparation experiences and opportunities fit within broader leadership development and align with the education system's strategic objectives to improve teaching and learning. Addressing these issues helps to determine the content, design and timing of preparation activities. *Aspiring principal preparation* emphasises the need for evaluation, and while recognising the difficulty of measuring impact indicates that this was of critical importance and suggests strategies for gathering evidence.

- Watterston, B 2015, *Environmental scan: Principal preparation programs*, Watterston Consulting, report prepared for the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).

Environmental scan: Principal preparation programs represents a scan of professional learning activities in Australia that support aspiring school principals to prepare for the role of leading a school. The research looked at how principal preparation is meeting the contemporary needs of the profession.

The research focused on principal preparation activities currently being delivered by a range of systems/sectors/community and commercial providers around Australia and identified the elements of those that are seen as most effective. Information for the report was collected from all eight government systems in Australia, a number of Catholic dioceses, independent school sector associations, principal professional associations, commercial providers and universities.

The *Environmental scan* looks at the effective components of principal preparation activities, highlighting those features that are considered to be working well (for example, programs are evidence based and aligned to standards). It examines the enabling conditions, which include the collective responsibility to support a leadership pipeline and ensure a steady stream of effective, well-prepared aspirants to take up the principalship. It identifies the ingredients for success, and the importance of a rigorous application and selection process in contributing to the quality and efficacy of principal preparation. Measuring success by gathering explicit evidence that experiences and opportunities have had an impact on leaders' skills and practices is identified as a challenge.

2. This report is informed by data from the following research reports:

- Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) 2014, *Staff in Australia's schools 2013: Main report on the survey*, Department of Education, Canberra.

- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2014, *TALIS 2013 results: An international perspective on teaching and learning*, TALIS, OECD Publishing.

- Riley, P 2014, *Australian principal occupational health, safety and wellbeing survey: 2011-2014 data*, Australian Catholic University, Victoria.

- Willett, M, Segal, D and Walford, W 2014, *National teaching workforce dataset data analysis report 2014*, prepared by Ernst and Young, Department of Education, Canberra.

3. Consultation with the profession included input from key AITSL stakeholder groups of principals and aspirants (Focus Group of the Profession; School Leader Quality Advisory Committee) where practitioners were invited to share their opinions and experiences of preparation pathways and to give feedback on the key considerations arising from the research.

In addition, a total of 18 meetings were held with system and sector representatives across every state and territory in Australia. In New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia face-to-face meetings were held separately with government, Catholic and independent system/sector representatives. Joint meetings were held with counterparts in the Northern Territory, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory. These meetings were dedicated to discussion of the key considerations for principal preparation. Feedback and input were extensive and relevant to each representative's specific context.

National and state principal associations were similarly involved in the consultation process. In every state and territory, representatives of the key government, Catholic and independent principal associations were invited to provide feedback and input around the challenges and issues that had been synthesised from the findings of the research. The national principal association presidents also provided their insights and perspective on the issues. In total, ten meetings were held to canvass the views of principal associations.

The voice of practitioners, with a particular focus on seeking the opinions of aspirant principals, was captured through wide-reaching social media channels. The AITSL *eNews*, which reaches 65,000 subscribers, was used to disseminate the key considerations for principal preparation and prompted engagement in an online survey and Twitter chat. Practitioners provided detailed comments and opinions on issues relevant to principal preparation and, through the power of social media networks, key messages reached upwards of 100,000 people globally.

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Appendix 1: Features of investigated principal preparation programs

Program/provider	Funding[1]	Duration	Maximum # of participants	Mentoring, coaching, companioning	Face-to-face residential	Online (Online community)	Action learning (via project)	Peer learning[2]	Internship, shadowing	Exemplary school visits	360° profiling tools	University accreditation
Government Sector												
Principal Preparation Program Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership Department of Education and Training VIC	Fully	1 year	42	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Monash University
Tomorrow's School Leaders Program Centre for School Leadership and Charles Darwin University NT	Shared	1 year	25	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	CDU
Take the Lead Department of Education and Training QLD	Fully	2 years	25	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
The Shadowing Program for Aspiring Principals Department of Education TAS	Shared	4-6 months	15-20	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	University of Tasmania
Catholic Sector												
Stepping Up Brisbane Catholic Education QLD	Fully	1 year	30	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓[4]	✓	✓	ACU (Masters Level)
re:th!nk Aspiring to Principalship: Leadership Development Program Catholic Leadership Centre, Catholic Education Office (Melbourne) VIC	Shared	2 years	50	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓ (3)	ACU
Emerging Principals Program Catholic Education Office Sydney NSW (in partnership with QELi)	Fully	1 year with an optional further 6 months	20	Commencing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓[5]		✓	ACU
The Aspiring Principals Program Catholic Education Office WA	Fully	2 years	20 (10 in year one and 10 in year two)	✓	✓	Including forums and modules	✓		✓		✓ (2)	University of Notre Dame Australia (Fremantle)
Independent Sector												
The AIS Leadership Centre Flagship Program Leadership Centre, Association of Independent Schools, NSW	Mixed[3]/partial scholarships from external providers	1 year	30	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	UNSW, QUT, Macquarie, CSU and others in process
Providers												
Emerging Principals Program Queensland Education Leadership Institute	Mixed[3]	1 year	30	✓	✓	Collegiate tutorials	✓	✓			✓	Several

1 Fully funded programs may also have a small relief teaching component shared by the school. Shared funding refers to those programs where schools, in addition to relief teaching, also contribute to associated accommodation and travel costs.
2 Referring to processes where participants form smaller groups (e.g. collegiate/hub/home groups) which interact with a specific focus via face-to-face and inter-session activities throughout the program.
3 e.g. self, fully, 50/50 shared central/region/school.
4 Part of mentoring if desired.
5 Exploring this more fully now the program has commenced.

Source: Watterston, 2015

Appendix 2: Learning designs

The following are examples of varied learning designs that offer different learning experiences to participants.

Individual needs analysis and learning plans

Individual needs analysis can help target professional learning. Individual learning plans can be developed in conjunction with a coach or mentor to combine feedback with individual support. Consistent with adult learning principles, this process helps individuals to set goals, receive feedback and track their progress over time. Individual learning plans can be part of a formal program or part of ongoing support for development in the workplace.

Diagnostic tools

Various reflective diagnostic tools are used in many sectors and leadership programs, although 360-degree feedback is most common. These tools can provide multiple sources of feedback on individuals' performance, and working and communication styles. This enables participants to objectively assess their skills, helping them to reflect and build self-awareness.

Collaborative learning

Peer-to-peer learning and collaboration play an important part in effective leadership development. Where participants learn in cohorts, they can discuss, negotiate and assimilate new information with their existing knowledge and frameworks. They can learn new ways of thinking and push their thinking further than what is possible individually.

By working in small groups to discuss theories and case studies, participants are able to engage their prior knowledge. Participants can model the type of team building that is used or encouraged in their schools. It also provides the opportunity to create a network of peers as sounding boards for new ideas, which may develop into ongoing supportive professional networks.

The quality and benefits of cohort learning depend on both the make-up of the cohort – the breadth of experience and background of participants – and learning experiences that enable group discussion, reflection and feedback.

E-learning modules

With developments in technology, many learning programs within and outside education combine face-to-face delivery with e-learning modules. Modules can be undertaken over a period of time and provide opportunities for individuals to access theory and develop technical skills that can be expanded on during face-to-face sessions.

Mentoring and coaching

Mentoring and coaching provide individuals with advice and direction as well as constructive feedback to aid their reflection on their behaviour and performance. This assists them to evaluate their learning and the impact of new practices that integrate new knowledge, skills and abilities.

Mentoring and coaching are included in effective leadership development in multiple ways. Mentors and coaches may be assigned to individual participants as part of formal learning programs, for the duration of placements and internships, or for ongoing support once the formal program has concluded. Careful selection of an appropriately matched mentor or coach is crucial; effective programs develop strategies for ensuring the best fit between mentor and mentee, and for monitoring the progression and benefits of the relationship. Informal mentoring from colleagues and peers can also be hugely beneficial.

Case studies

Case studies are used in many sectors to provide real-world examples of problems and dilemmas faced by those in similar positions. Participants can immerse themselves in the decision-making process, extrapolate case issues to their personal experience and the challenges they face in their own workplace.

Simulations, games and role plays

Role plays and games enable participants to explore new situations they are yet to face, and can bring elements of case studies to life. Simulations can be particularly effective for learning how to navigate complex real-life situations that require a range of skills and good judgement.

Reflective journals and learning logs

Consistent with adult learning principles, journals and logs encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and assimilate new knowledge with their existing understanding of leadership. This helps cement learning and behaviour change.

Applied learning – internships, placements, shadowing and real-world projects

Time spent in schools through internships, shadowing and visits is vital for leadership development as participants can apply and reflect on their newly acquired management and leadership skills in a real-life context. When this is provided in different schools and settings (even in other industries), participants gain exposure to a range of practice as well as guidance and modelling from various accomplished leaders.

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