

Uncovering the current state of professional learning for teachers

Summary findings report

December 2017



Introduction

This report summarises the key findings of activities undertaken by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) between June and September 2017, as agreed by Education Council in April 2017. This includes AITSL, in consultation with the Australasian Teacher Regulatory Authorities and other key stakeholders, considering a broader evidence base and options for improving the quality of professional learning for teachers, including possible national criteria aligned to the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Teacher Standards), and reporting back to Education Council in December 2017.

Key findings include:

- The *Australian Charter for Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders* (Charter) and the *Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework* (Framework) provide effective guidance that can be adapted to local contexts and system requirements. However, this is an opportunity to update the two policies and strengthen the implementation and use of them in schools.
- Teachers advocated for programs and opportunities that communicate clear objectives, identify target participants and make clear connections to practice so that teachers can make relevant choices and connections to the Teacher Standards.
- Teachers also want further opportunities for job-embedded learning, action-research and mentoring arrangements.
- More opportunities are needed for teachers who currently experience barriers to access high-quality professional learning.
- School leaders should support teacher agency and identify opportunities for alignment between school improvement plans and individual professional learning goals.
- School leaders should also leverage a broad range of expertise within and beyond their schools to support and promote professional learning that is:
 - job-embedded
 - practical, action-oriented and enables incremental application and review.
- The impact of professional learning should be evaluated at the school level by school leaders, and teachers need support to do so at an individual level.

Methodology

In preparing this report, AITSL looked at recent research projects, undertook stakeholder consultation and reviewed literature.

A number of recent international, national and jurisdiction-specific research projects were consulted to summarise the most significant areas of need that must be addressed to improve the quality of professional learning. These included the:

- 2017 High-Quality Professional Learning Survey by AITSL
- 2017 *Teacher Professional Development Survey Reports* by the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA)
- 2016 *Professional Learning Project Research Report* by the Teacher Registration Board of South Australia (TRBSA).
- 2013 *Teaching and Learning Survey* (TALIS) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

AITSL undertook a survey in August 2017 with the aim of learning more about what professional learning Australian teachers undertake, how they undertake it and whether it is effective. The survey focused on the drivers and influences behind selection of professional learning, and aimed to uncover how professional learning is implemented in schools. AITSL sought responses to the survey through publicising it in AITSL's eNews and social media channels, and by seeking stakeholder assistance to promote it on AITSL's behalf to teachers and school leaders.

Over 1500 responses were received and the illustration over page shows the number of responses by state and territory. It is worth noting that there are statistical constraints on the conclusions AITSL has drawn due to the sample size of AITSL's survey.

Key questions asked in the survey included:

Teachers

- In the past 12 months, what type of professional learning activities did you undertake and what was the focus of the activity?
- How might your most recent professional learning activity have changed your practice? Was there something specific you wanted to do or change in your teaching after finishing that activity, or as a part of that activity?
- How important was it that your most recent professional learning activity offered something new you can do, or a change you could make, to your teaching?

School leaders

- Who was responsible for selecting the professional learning activities for teachers in your school?
- Could you tell us why you chose to have professional learning selected by the school?
- When teachers select their own professional learning, how do you and the other leaders of your school find out about those activities?

Professional learning providers

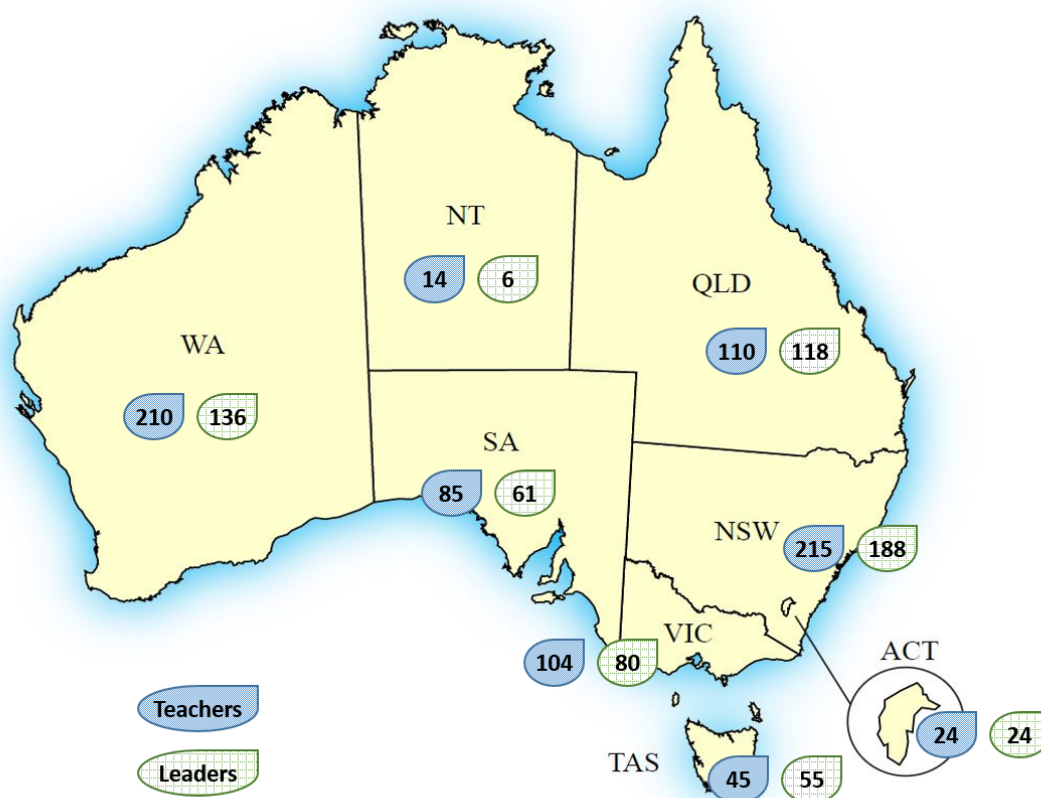
- We'd like to ask you about the professional learning activity you most recently delivered in your role, or that your organisation delivered or billed for. How was this activity delivered?
- Thinking of the last professional learning activity you worked on, how would teachers evaluate changes in their work prompted by that activity?
- Thinking of the last professional learning activity you worked on, are the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers present in the activity?

The NESAs 2017 study aimed to identify and better understand the professional development needs, experiences and profiles of teachers in New South Wales. The TRBSA study aimed to understand the professional learning experiences of teachers in South Australia and its impact on their professional growth. Results from the OECD Teaching and Learning Survey (TALIS) in 2013 also provide insights into the professional development being undertaken by teachers in Australia.

Between July and September 2017, AITSL also conducted consultations with representatives from education jurisdictions and regulators in all states and territories, the Australian Council of Deans for Education, and a reference group of teachers.

In addition, AITSL reviewed the literature published since the release of the Charter and Framework in 2012 to determine whether the essential characteristics of professional learning described collectively in these policies was still appropriate.

Number of responses to the AITSL High-Quality Professional Learning Survey 2017 by state and territory



Summary of findings

Participation in professional learning

The AITSL survey found that most teachers (64 per cent) had undertaken at least four separate professional learning activities in a 12-month period. The average time spent by teachers on their most recent professional learning activity was six hours.

Few teachers (4 per cent) had not done any professional learning in the past 12 months. Of particular interest is that 27 per cent of casual or relief teachers fell into this category compared with only 3 per cent of those with a permanent position in a school. These participation results are similar regardless of location, years of experience and the education setting in which teachers work.

Key findings from the 2013 TALIS data indicated that Australian teachers have one of the highest participation rates in professional development, 96.6 per cent compared with the TALIS average of 88 per cent (Freeman, O'Malley and Eveleigh, 2014 p.78).

Additionally, 2013 TALIS data shows a trend towards teacher participation in a broader range of professional learning opportunities. Interestingly, teachers' participation in a formal induction program is an important predictor of teachers' participation in professional development in later years (OECD, 2014).

Reasons for non-participation

The reasons that were cited for not undertaking professional learning related to difficulty accessing an opportunity. The barriers for casual or relief teachers are most obvious as they lack a consistent school to provide and fund their professional learning. Other teachers cited extended leave, budget or time constraints, difficult approval mechanisms or lack of relevant opportunities as reasons for not participating in professional learning.

Other research projects indicate similar reasons for non-participation. The NESA survey found that teachers are most likely to say that cost or conflict with work schedules are barriers. The TRBSA project found that casual teachers in particular find it difficult to participate, citing fear of missing out on paid work.

Casual teachers find professional learning more accessible and more affordable when they are invited to participate in an activity offered by a local school (TRBSA, 2016).

Data from the 2013 TALIS (Freeman et al, 2014 p.93) reveals a range of perceived barriers to professional development. The ones most commonly reported were:

Barrier	Australia	TALIS average
Professional development conflicts with my work schedule	58%	50.6%
No incentives to participate	39.6%	48%
Professional development is too expensive/unaffordable	38.8%	43.8%
Lack of time due to family responsibilities	32.7%	35.7%
No relevant professional development offered	24.6%	39%
Lack of employer support	23.9%	31.6%

Some of the teachers surveyed by AITSL who said they had not participated in professional learning over the past 12 months suggested they had undertaken informal activities with other teachers, but hadn't participated in anything outside their school.

This finding might indicate misconceptions about what counts as professional learning, suggesting teachers are under-representing the amount and the nature of professional learning they undertake. It may also suggest that teachers are not participating in job-embedded professional learning within schools.

The survey cannot conclude how many teachers under-report professional learning, but such responses are a concern. Misconceptions about what constitutes high-quality professional learning could lead to teachers missing out on important opportunities for growth.

Content of professional learning

Results of the AITSL survey indicate that professional learning activities tend to be focused on student learning and teaching (33 per cent), content and subject knowledge (34 per cent), or assessment (15 per cent).

The results found differences in what types of content appealed to different groups of teachers when selecting professional learning.

- Casual or relief teachers are more likely to attend professional learning focused on classroom management (14 per cent compared with 4 per cent of those in schools), as are those in their second year of teaching, after which participation in this content type declines rapidly with years of experience.
- Those in their early years of teaching are more likely to attend learning specific to their career stage than are teachers generally.
- Teachers in special education settings are less likely to attend content/subject area specific learning (22 per cent compared with 35 per cent of all teachers).

Of interest is the fact that many teachers chose to describe professional learning as belonging to an 'other' category. Reviewing the 'other' descriptions revealed that teachers who could have categorised their learning often opt not to. This could indicate that teachers find aligning their

individual experiences with broad categories difficult, which could have implications for reporting and tracking requirements for professional learning.

All professional learning cited in the AITSL survey constituted relevant professional learning activities for teachers. However, the TRBSA project found a section of teachers reported activities that were not developmental in nature (i.e. professional practice or not relevant to education and teaching).

Modes of professional learning

The AITSL survey showed that some modes of professional learning are very common, accessed by two-thirds of teachers or more in the last 12 months. These include:

- discrete courses externally or in the school
- professional reading
- online learning
- professional conversations on teaching and learning.

In addition, within the last 12 months, approximately half of teachers took part in each of the following:

- observation and feedback
- coaching or mentoring
- network conversations
- reading or conducting research.

Most of these results are similar for teachers across different geographical locations. However, regional and remote/very remote teachers participate slightly more in professional conversations (68 per cent for both compared with 65 per cent for metro teachers), online learning (74 per cent and 84 per cent compared with 66 per cent for metro teachers) and reading or conducting research (56 per cent and 52 per cent compared with 47 per cent for metro teachers).

The TRBSA project found that the common modes of professional learning (with more than 75 per cent participation) were face-to-face learning, study, research, communities of practice and online learning. This project also noted that teachers in 'country' areas were less likely to access face-to-face learning, with some evidence that they would have preferred this option.

Within the results of the TRBSA project, communities of practice are ranked second on their perceived impact on teaching. However, when the modes of professional learning actually undertaken are considered, communities of practice are one of the least accessed.

It is possible that while teachers see the value of communities of practice, they also find them more difficult to take part in than other modes of learning. Embedding strong supports for this form of professional learning in schools could see more teachers taking part, with the resulting positive impacts on practice.

TALIS data (Freeman et al., 2014 p.82) shows similar results in the types of professional development undertaken by Australian teachers. The five most commonly reported in the 2013 survey were:

Types of professional learning	Australia	TALIS average
Courses/workshops	85.7%	70.9%
Education conferences or seminars	56.3%	43.6%
Participation in network of teachers for the purposes of professional development	51.5%	36.9%
Mentoring and/or peer observation and coaching as part of the schools formal arrangement	44.4%	29.5%
Individual or collaborative research on a topic of interest to the teacher	37.4%	31.1%

Selection of professional learning

The AITSL survey found that the responsibility for professional learning selection varies, but resides largely with the school. When considering their most recent professional learning, 37 per cent of teachers undertook compulsory professional learning provided by the school, 20 per cent optional professional learning provided by the school, and 30 per cent undertook an activity found and selected or created by themselves. The results were similar regardless of location, tenure, years of experience or the education setting in which teachers work.

Similarly, NESA's survey found 60 per cent of teachers accessed professional learning through their school, but showed variation with teachers in remote schools and casual teachers who were less likely to undertake school-provided learning. In both cases, the number of these teachers surveyed was small and so the results have limited reliability.

AITSL asked teachers to consider how satisfied they are that the professional learning their schools select and provide meets their needs, career stage, preferred mode of learning and the needs of their students. Teachers reported, on average, that they are two-thirds of the way towards being perfectly satisfied.

Where teachers made their own decisions around professional learning, they indicated that it is moderately important or essential (81 per cent) to choose professional learning that enables them to learn something new or make changes to their teaching practice (AITSL, 2017).

In a related finding, NESA's survey showed that teachers were more likely to use an understanding of their own needs, rather than the needs of the school, to select professional development.

The AITSL survey found teachers tend to select professional learning by looking to professional associations or other providers directly, or by searching online. This finding indicates that individual selection could reinforce use of traditional models of professional learning that rely heavily on expertise external to the school.

When school leaders are responsible for professional learning selection, the most common drivers indicated were contribution to the school needs and aims (90 per cent), and ensuring consistent quality of professional learning for all teachers (40 per cent).

Application and perceived impact of professional learning

The vast majority of teachers surveyed by AITSL (76 per cent) were able to identify a specific action or change they wanted to make as a result of participation in a recent professional learning activity. There was a notable difference for teachers on short-term contracts in schools, who showed a lower rate of identifying actions from professional learning (58 per cent).

Teachers with more than 10 years' experience were more likely than those earlier in their careers to suggest they had not learned anything that was new or relevant (AITSL, 2017).

As teachers with more than 10 years' experience do not tend to access career-stage specific professional learning, this suggests the need for more tailored provision for this group. All teachers would be best served by access to explicitly stated intended outcomes of professional learning, so they can ensure it will meet their particular level of expertise. Consultation indicates that regulatory authorities and systems and sectors have identified this as an area of focus.

It is positive to note that the vast majority of teachers had begun implementing identified changes or actions (67 per cent), or still intended to do so in the future (28 per cent), as a result of undertaking a professional learning activity. NSW teachers, as surveyed by NESAs, were similarly positive about their capacity to identify and implement change.

Where challenges to implementation of learning were encountered, teachers described time pressures and lack of resources that would be needed to apply new knowledge, and difficulty reconciling the school environment with the changes they would like to make (NESAs, 2017).

TALIS 2013 also looked at teacher perceptions on the effectiveness of the professional development. Across all professional learning content areas, Australian teachers reported a moderate to large impact on their teaching, 5 to 15 per cent below the TALIS average (Freeman et al, 2014 p.85-6).

Guskey (2014, 2016 & 2017) provides insights into evaluating professional learning. Guskey's 2014 paper provides a five-step process for planning professional learning that allows context-specific elements to be considered. This process starts with student learning outcomes and analysing the current student achievement data, and ends with planning and selecting the professional learning activities that will be undertaken to address these areas.

Guskey (2016) also identifies five levels of data that can be gathered, in hierarchical order, to evaluate the professional learning undertaken with the school. These correspond to the five levels for planning professional learning.

Alignment between individual needs and school priorities

In AITSL's survey, teachers who did not identify an action or change as a result of a professional learning activity suggested that the learning was not relevant, had already been implemented before the learning took place, or that it conflicted with current approaches in their schools. Some teachers said they required support from school leaders and/or other teachers to fully implement a change in practice.

These issues could be overcome by school leaders guiding selection of professional learning towards areas of alignment between individual learning needs and the strategic priorities of the school, and having school leaders committed to the benefits of professional learning.

Research on the conditions for effective professional learning shows it needs to be connected to the day-to-day work of teachers, supported by the school leaders and involve peer collaboration (Cordingley, Higgins, Greany, Buckler, Coles-Jordan, Crisp, Saunders and Coe, 2015). Many of those consulted, particularly school leaders and systems/sectors, also felt that for professional development to be effective leaders must direct the selection for teachers so that learning is aligned to school improvement priorities and informed by student data.

Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull and Hunter (2016) found that in high-performing systems professional learning is developed around an improvement cycle, which transforms into a "culture of continuous professional learning that, in time, turns schools into true learning organisations". Jensen details a number of key components showing how this can be achieved at a school level, including where "teachers and school leaders share responsibility for not only their own professional learning but the learning of other teachers".

However, the AITSL survey also found that for teachers to see professional learning as relevant and potentially impactful, it must also meet their individual needs. The teacher regulatory authorities AITSL consulted supported this position, asserting that teachers need 'agency' over their professional learning in order to achieve impact on learning.

Calvert (2016) describes teacher agency as "the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of colleagues".

Further consultation with nationally certified Highly Accomplished and Lead teachers and school leaders indicates that the most successful professional learning is realised when all of these areas align.

In this ideal state, school leaders understand the current professional development needs of teachers, and teachers recognise the strategic priorities of the school and the implications for their professional development.

They work together to set individual goals that are directed towards meeting their needs, the needs of their students and their school. These individual and school-wide goals are then considered when selecting professional learning, regardless of who is doing the selecting.

Teachers' experiences of professional learning

AITSL's consultation with a small reference group of teachers from across systems, sectors and type of employment offered significant insights into their general experiences of professional learning and what they need to be able to make sustained changes to their practice.

Teachers undertake a range of professional learning and this is not always reflected in the data reported to compliance sources. AITSL found that they are most likely to report modes of learning that are easiest to record and evidence (for example, using certificates from workshops, conferences or online learning). In fact, they felt that compliance processes meeting these proofs of participation can inadvertently skew some teachers' selections as a result. Teachers feel that compliance processes can also reinforce misunderstandings about what is considered to be effective professional learning, as they do not often receive feedback on their record of learning submitted for compliance purposes.

These teachers said they want:

Programs and opportunities that communicate clear objectives, specify target participants and clear connections to practice	Alignment between learning objectives and the Teacher Standards and Principal Standard
Further opportunities for job-embedded learning, action-research and mentoring arrangements	Support to share longer term evaluation findings among and between teachers and external learning providers
Consistent provision of ongoing strategies and support from learning providers to help transfer and apply learning in context	Stronger relationships among employers, regulators, schools and other professional learning providers guiding more consistent approaches and aligned processes
Strong, consistent approaches to evaluation and application of the resulting data to improve professional learning approaches	More opportunities for teachers who experience barriers in accessing high-quality professional learning

Investment and support for professional learning

School leaders, and the learning culture they build in the school, are vital to the success of professional learning. Their promotion of and participation in professional learning with teachers is the most impactful leadership practice (Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe, 2008).

“The leadership dimension that is most strongly associated with positive student outcomes is that of promoting and participating in teacher learning and development. Because the agenda for teachers’ professional learning is endless, goal setting should play an important part in determining the teacher learning agenda. Leaders’ involvement in teacher learning provides them with a deep understanding of the conditions required to enable staff to make and sustain the changes required for improved outcomes. It is the responsibility of leaders at all levels of the system to create those conditions.” (Robinson et al, 2008)

AITSL’s survey indicated that, as much as they would like to, only half of school leaders are allocating time to professional learning. Only 20 per cent of them are involved in some or all of the professional learning activities of their school.

Particular concerns for school leaders are that teachers lack the time to implement professional learning, to reflect on the learning and areas for improvement and to evaluate impact.

They identify several barriers to overcome to allow better implementation of learning, including:

- access to timetables that embed professional learning within them
- better processes for determining and allocating funding
- incorporating professional learning into school strategic plans.

TALIS 2013 data also looks at the support provided to teachers. Australian teachers reported one of the highest percentages for having time for professional growth during regular work hours – 79.5 per cent compared with the TALIS average of 54.5 per cent (Freeman et al, 2014 p.88). This would suggest that teachers are reasonably supported to undertake professional learning by school leaders despite teachers identifying conflict with work schedules as a barrier to professional development.

For professional learning to be effective, a number of conditions should be in place to ensure that learnings can be implemented by teachers within their practice. Those most commonly referenced in the literature include:

- being connected to the daily lives of teachers and their work, and often occurring within the working day
- being supported by school leaders who are involved in creating the conditions and the visions within school that promote a learning culture, such as structuring the day to allow time, resources and collaboration to occur between teachers (e.g. observation and feedback), and monitoring the progress of the learning
- access to evidence and research about effective teaching
- the need for learning to occur over a period of time, during which teachers can experiment and reflect on the learning and receive feedback on how they are going.

Implementation of national policies

From our broad consultation, we found that professional learning policies in systems and sectors are regularly shaped by and reviewed against the Charter and the Framework. Implementation of these policies varies across Australia, but there are many examples of them being carried out.

AITSL has also found two areas where focused support would positively impact the quality of professional learning. The first of these is implementation support for existing policies. The second is shifting the mindset of school leaders and teachers about what an effective professional learning process looks like.

Our findings indicate several opportunities to more consistently reinforce and more broadly implement policy around effective, high-quality professional learning through:

- compliance processes that closely reflect the practice of high-quality professional learning in schools (such as systems for tracking, recording and providing feedback on professional learning decisions)
- supports for collecting evidence and recognition of evidence for a variety of modes of high-quality professional learning
- guidance to reflect on learning transfer and impact on practice
- regular evaluation by individuals and schools that provide feedback on professional learning processes
- improved inclusion of groups who face particular barriers to accessing high-quality professional learning opportunities (including rural and remote area teachers, casual relief teachers, out-of-area teachers and teachers on extended leave).

Consultation activity

AITSL consulted representatives of the organisations and groups listed below between June and October 2017:

- Association of Independent Schools South Australia
- Australian Capital Territory Teacher Quality Institute
- Australian Council of Deans of Education
- Australasian Teacher Regulatory Authorities
- Independent Schools Queensland
- New South Wales Catholic Education Commission
- New South Wales Education Standards Authority
- Professional Growth Network
- Queensland College of Teachers
- South Australian Department for Education
- Tasmanian Department of Education
- Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory
- Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia
- Teachers Registration Board of South Australia
- Teachers Registration Board of Tasmania
- Victorian Department of Education and Training
- Victorian Institute of Teaching
- Western Australia Department of Education

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