

Exploring the opportunities and challenges of teacher professional learning in the early childhood, casual/relief and rural/remote teaching contexts

Findings report

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Early childhood	3
3. Casual/relief teaching	8
4. Rural and remote teaching	13
5. Methodology	19
6. Consultation activity	21
7. Evidence base	22

Introduction

Following a request from Education Council in April 2017, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) conducted a range of stakeholder consultation and research activities into improving the quality of professional learning for teachers. Subsequently, at the end of 2017 Education Council requested that additional targeted consultation and research be conducted into three specific cohorts of teachers that face additional challenges for professional learning: early childhood teachers, casual/relief teachers (CRTs) and teachers in rural, regional or remote (RRR) contexts. This report summarises the key findings following stakeholder consultation and research conducted by AITSL from February to October 2018 for each of the three cohorts.

The following key issues and themes emerged:

- Within these three cohorts, no ‘single story’ became evident as the individuals within each group are working in diverse contexts and have different needs. Teachers within these cohorts feel they are often ‘lumped together’ when it comes to considering their needs, practice and growth. This emphasises the need for granularity and nuance to be considered in finding solutions for each cohort.
- The major perceived barriers across all three cohorts in accessing high quality professional learning were funding (to pay for fees, travel, accommodation) and time (to undertake the professional learning and, in many cases, the time needed to travel to and from the professional learning activity).
- Early childhood and RRR teachers stressed the difficulty of accessing CRTs to cover them while they undertake professional learning. At the same time, CRTs emphasised their feelings of exclusion from professional learning within schools, often because they are brought in as cover while other teachers undertake professional learning. This challenging consequence highlights the difficulties arising from the nature of each cohort.
- Online and technological options may provide possible solutions to relieve challenges surrounding access to professional learning because it is cheaper (sometimes even free) for participants to access and does not require travel time. However, it is important to note that providing more online learning is not a panacea for improving professional learning overall for these groups. Online learning can reduce opportunities for important face-to-face collegial and networking relationships and it is often set up as a once-off rather than providing iterative learning opportunities. Reliable Internet connectivity and a lack of appropriate ICT infrastructure is an issue in some areas, impacting on the usefulness of this approach. In all cases, the quality of any online professional learning is equally as important as the quality of learning delivered through other modes.
- There was a tendency among all cohorts to view professional learning primarily as external ‘conference type’ learning, rather than the potentially more effective job-embedded, ongoing, collaborative learning—a perception that is not uncommon throughout the teaching profession as a whole. Changing this perception is a crucial element of AITSL’s overarching work on high quality professional learning.

Many of the issues identified throughout this report are not new, with previous Australian and international research and reports identifying very similar issues. However, it was encouraging to identify a number of initiatives that are in place or being trialled within different jurisdictions to address some of these issues; these are highlighted throughout this report. There is opportunity for these ideas and others to be profiled, scaled and to become more widespread throughout the Australian professional learning landscape. It is also worth noting that some of the issues highlighted may have industrial implications, however consideration of these matters is outside the scope of this report.

AITSL built on consultation conducted in 2017 on professional learning generally and consulted with 28 stakeholder organisations specifically on these three cohorts in 2018. AITSL received over 1800 responses to three targeted surveys from teachers within the three cohorts. A full list of organisations consulted is included on page 24 of this report. The methodology can be found on page 22.

Early childhood

Research has demonstrated the benefit of a high-quality early childhood education for positive behavioural and learning outcomes in children (Melhuish et al, 2016, p.1). Staff within early childhood education and care services comprise teachers with recognised tertiary early childhood teaching qualifications; educators whose highest qualification is a Vocational Education Diploma or Certificate; and a range of other workers (SIMERR, 2012, p.iv).

The 2017 *Lifting our Game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions* found that the most influential factor impacting quality across all age groups and service settings in this sector was the education, qualifications and training of the workforce (p.63). AITSL's consultation revealed that historically, there has been heavy investment from the Commonwealth Government into professional learning for this sector; however, there was repeated reference to the significant decrease in this funding in recent years.

Feedback throughout the consultation highlighted the shortage of early childhood teachers in Australia, pointing to retention difficulties in part because of teachers moving to school settings for advantageous pay, conditions and support. Consultation also noted that professional learning in the early childhood sector is often seen as a reward for exceptional performance, rather than a necessity for the betterment of the workforce and as an investment in the education of the children.

AITSL's consultation with stakeholders¹ identified that the process and the types of professional learning chosen differ vastly throughout the sector and can vary greatly depending upon the model of service delivery (e.g. long-day care or preschool/kindergarten). Many early childhood site directors/leaders are essentially running small businesses and so face different restrictions, motivations and issues in their choices and range of support available to them for staff professional learning, compared to school principals and larger early childhood service providers. Release time is also a challenge for early childhood teachers. While there are two days of professional learning mandated under a number of early childhood Enterprise Bargaining Agreements, finding casual/relief teachers to enable staff to access this leave can prove challenging.

Lifting our Game recommended that Australian governments should agree to a new early childhood education and care workforce strategy, which should consider opportunities to improve the ongoing professional development of the workforce and the responsiveness of professional learning providers to the sector.

AITSL's consultation has identified four key areas that pose particular challenges for this sector. While the following list is not exhaustive, it represents the issues most consistently raised throughout the consultation:

- Registration requirements
- Isolation
- Information and communications technology
- Choosing high quality professional learning

¹ 'Survey respondents' in this section of the report refers to the 845 teachers who completed or partially completed the Early Childhood survey. As it was not compulsory for respondents to answer every question in the survey, the number of responses received for each question varies.

Registration requirements

Early childhood teachers are required to be registered in some jurisdictions (SA, NSW, WA and VIC), while in other jurisdictions they must register only if they work within the school sector (ACT, TAS, NT, and QLD). The consistency of registration of early childhood teachers is addressed in the 2018 report *One Teaching Profession: Teacher Registration in Australia*, which recommends that ‘all early childhood teachers in Australia, regardless of their employment setting, [...] be registered by teacher regulatory authorities under a consistent national approach’ (p.28).

Within those jurisdictions that currently require early childhood teachers to register, a specified number of hours of professional learning must be undertaken. It is important that those teachers do not perceive professional learning purely as compliance for registration, but rather see it as playing an important role in their ongoing development, and something that they need to reflect on and implement.

The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST)* have played a role in supporting school-based teachers, leaders and providers to identify effective professional learning. However, as also recommended in *One Teaching Profession: Teacher Registration in Australia*, there is an opportunity to amend the APST to ensure their relevance and applicability to early childhood teachers (p.29). This will help support greater use of the APST by early childhood teachers, including to guide their selection of professional learning.

Work was previously undertaken in 2012 to map the APST to the Early Years Learning Framework in a report by the SiMERR National Research Centre. The report found that the APST could be applied to teachers in this sector, but that the main difference is the language used within these different contexts (p.iv). In 2016, in partnership with the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), AITSL developed a glossary of key terms of the APST to make them more inclusive of early childhood teachers.

Funding adds to this challenge. Many teachers are not supported, either financially or otherwise, in the professional learning they need to undertake. The Australian Community Children’s Services reported that in 65 per cent of centres, teachers had to find their own professional learning in order to meet registration requirements, and that in 75 per cent of centres, teachers had to pay their own professional learning costs.

In a sector where many services operate on a for-profit or cost-recovery basis, it may be difficult for some centres to financially support the professional learning of their teachers. However it should be noted that early childhood teachers are, overall, paid less than school teachers and so their ability to fund their own professional learning is potentially reduced. Issues associated with the ability to pay for professional learning have been compounded by the requirement to undertake a certain number of professional learning hours for registration.

Information and communications technology (ICT)

ICT provides a gateway for a large number of teachers to access high quality professional learning. Online learning is common in the early childhood sector, with 63 per cent of the surveyed early childhood teachers undertaking an online professional learning module or activity in the past 12 months. Many had also found their professional learning via social media.

Online learning can help mitigate two major barriers for professional learning: time and money. Early Childhood Australia recommended that while online learning could be a good starting point, these activities should be combined with other types of professional learning. Stakeholders and survey respondents indicated that online platforms such as Google Drive, Story Park or Yammer could be used more widely/systematically within individual organisations or within regions to facilitate collaboration between early childhood teachers and to share practice or other professional learning resources. Guides for how to use these platforms in order to best facilitate collaboration could be a valuable resource, enabling more centres to engage with online sharing platforms.

While webinars and online learning already provide a useful avenue for accessible professional learning, there needs to be further consideration as to the hours in which these webinars take place. A number of survey respondents said webinars are commonly offered during their working hours (which in this sector can range from 7am-7pm), and professional learning providers need to consider this in setting their schedules. Recording of webinars may also be an option for teachers with inflexible hours. Care needs to be taken, however, that online learning doesn't reinforce expectations for professional learning to be undertaken outside of work hours.

While ICT has its benefits, it requires that the appropriate infrastructure be made available and that staff are confident enough (or provided with the skills) to engage with online professional learning. Bandwidth is an ongoing concern for more remote centres, where non-Internet based ICT options may be required. Further, ICT should be offered along with other modes of delivery to ensure the needs of teachers in this sector are met.

Isolation

Teachers in the early childhood sector can suffer from isolation through being the only degree-qualified teacher in a service or by working with just one or two colleagues. This isolation and minimal collegial interaction can impact both their engagement with professional learning and the types of professional learning that they undertake. While teachers value working in teams with their fellow educators, collaboration and networking with other degree-qualified teachers, as well as with teachers outside of their centre, is also important. This can often be facilitated in larger centres, however it may be more ad hoc in smaller providers.

Within single teacher services there may be no collegial relationships with similarly qualified staff and no one to mentor and induct beginning teachers. For graduate teachers in small centres, the only option for a mentor may be their site director or educational leader (the same person determining ongoing employment), which may restrict the honesty and openness required for a successful mentoring relationship. Stakeholders identified that often beginning teachers are the educational leader for a service as well. This lack of support for beginning teachers in the early childhood sector is one reason cited for teachers moving to the primary school sector where they are able to access increased support. A number of stakeholders talked about improving support by pairing offsite mentors with new teachers within centres that are not able to offer suitable mentors.

Teachers attending professional learning in order to build networks and meet colleagues require CRT coverage. CRT coverage can be a challenge to access and also costly to the centre. This reinforces the need for centres to be able to offer professional learning onsite, which research shows, along with collaboration with colleagues, can be one of the most effective forms of professional learning.

One survey respondent noted that finding time to collaborate with colleagues within their centre was difficult:

“We have no time when we are all off the floor at the same time (i.e. not supervising children) except for once a month at an after-hours (6.30pm-8.30pm) staff meeting in which we talk about generic things but do not really collaborate on the program or issues”.

Consultation with stakeholders also revealed the importance of maintaining connections with primary schools and teachers. While communication and interactions most commonly occur around transition, there is very limited joint professional learning between early childhood services and primary schools.

Choosing high quality professional learning

Once other barriers are overcome, choosing appropriate and high quality professional learning can often pose a challenge. Survey respondents and stakeholders indicated that there is a large amount of professional learning available to the sector. However, there are a number of issues with the quality and relevance of the professional learning on offer.

While long day care services make up approximately 46 per cent of the sector, survey respondents said that much of the professional learning that is available is aimed only at this context and doesn't cater for other service types. Another major issue identified was that the professional learning available for the early childhood sector is often simple/introductory content, while many teachers were looking for professional learning tailored for those with more experience that allows for deeper engagement with the content.

Another issue in the choice of professional learning concerned those who make the approval decisions in a service. Many survey respondents said that they felt decisions were often made based on budget and compulsory training considerations (e.g. First Aid) rather than selecting professional learning specifically relevant to teachers or learning of children at the site. In smaller services governed by directors from non-education backgrounds (e.g. parent committees), professional learning is often not a priority and there may be little knowledge of what professional learning would even be suitable for teachers.

Survey respondents supported this, finding:

“I find there is so much 'mandatory' training requirements in my workplace such as first aid, WH&S, Insafe Hands etc that take up a lot of time and makes it harder to find time for quality 'teaching' related training and professional development. I would like to see more opportunities to just visit other workplaces to see how they are set up/gather ideas”

“If you are in a community Kindy then the cost for good quality PD can make it harder to access as it is a non for profit and money is always limited. All PD is always done in your own time- that is just the way it is”

Survey respondents reported they chose professional learning because of a need they identified either with learners or their teaching practice, however these considerations are generally not factored

in when professional learning is decided by others. This issue of effectively identifying professional learning to fund is further magnified in regional, rural and remote services.

Whole site professional learning is becoming more popular for a range of reasons, which can encourage collaboration between staff at a site and cost efficiencies, however often it focuses on children's care rather than education and therefore is not personalised for early childhood degree-qualified teachers. It also reduces opportunities for networking off-site with similarly qualified teachers and exposure to new ideas and thinking.

Stakeholders suggested that more research and profiling of effective practice in this sector is required to aid better decision making on professional learning opportunities and budget. Stakeholders also suggested that it would be useful to have a professional learning facilitator in services who champions and encourages best practice, provides tips for professional learning selection and helps to determine the best use of resources.

Survey respondents said that while there are a number of providers offering professional learning and they frequently receive information about opportunities, the persistent hindrances are finding the time and funding to attend. Stakeholders noted it was difficult to get teachers to sign up or be available to attend face-to-face professional learning that was more than a once-off.

Casual/relief teaching

The definition, and indeed terms of casual, relief, temporary or substitute teacher varies across Australia. Usually, it is someone who works on a temporary basis in a school with the function of replacing a teacher who is absent or participating in other activities. Additionally, the number of continuous days these teachers can be employed varies across jurisdictions, for example 20 days in Tasmania and Western Australia and up to 30 in Victoria. From this point forward this report will refer to this cohort of teachers as the more popular term: casual/relief teachers (CRTs).

Individual motivations and reasons for working as a CRT vary and it is important that CRTs are not grouped homogeneously. Survey respondents also varied in the number of years of experience in the teaching profession.² Some CRTs are newly qualified teachers looking for work; some are teachers who have retired or are returning to the workforce; while others have chosen to be CRTs as a career due to its flexibility. A key early finding of the consultation was the need for more granularity in the understanding of this cohort.

Teachers on casual employment make up a significant cohort of the Australian teaching workforce, however it is difficult to get an accurate picture. The best estimate provided to AITSL was that there are 70,000 CRTs across Australia, or approximately 20 per cent of the teaching profession—however national data is needed to get an accurate figure. The Victorian Institute of Teaching cited that over the course of a learner's schooling they will be taught by CRTs for approximately 10-15 per cent of their education (VIT, 2018).

Through AITSL's survey and consultation, it was found that a lack of support and access to high quality professional learning for CRTs has been an issue for a number of years, and that it remains an issue nationally. Not being a regular part of a school community can hinder the ability of CRTs engaging in school-based professional learning. This has an impact on the education of the children they teach and ultimately impedes a teacher's efforts to gain permanent employment or maintain steady employment as a CRT (Nicholas and Wells, 2017, p.231). A lack of access to professional learning also perpetuates the perception that CRTs are less qualified and less up-to-date (Bamberry, 2011, p.233).

Survey respondents varied in the number of hours of professional learning they reported completing in the past 12 months. A significant 43 per cent of respondents reported less than ten hours in the last 12 months. Considering the continual rise in CRTs employed annually since 2012 (Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report, 2016), this low number of professional learning hours is potentially concerning and will become increasingly salient.

AITSL's stakeholder consultation identified two key areas that pose particular challenges for this cohort. While the following list is not exhaustive, it represents the issues most consistently raised throughout the consultation:

- Lack of community and inclusion
- Choice of targeted and high quality professional learning

² 'Survey respondents' in this section of the report refers to the 442 teachers who completed or partially completed the Casual/Relief Teacher survey. As it was not compulsory for respondents to answer every question in the survey, the number of responses received for each question varies.

Lack of community and inclusion

Despite the high number of CRTs in Australia and the significant role they may play in a learner's overall education, there is relatively little known about them and their experiences. Research into CRTs across Australia and internationally has consistently reported feelings of alienation, isolation and marginalisation among these teachers (Nicholas and Wells, 2017, p.230).

While more than three quarters of survey respondents said they usually work at the same school on a regular basis, 59 per cent of respondents said they are never included in the professional learning offered on-site at the schools where they teach. Of those who were included, half said it happened on an ad hoc basis—indicating that even if the teacher is included in the school-based professional learning, it is not on a regular or predictable basis.

Only 1 in 5 CRTs are included in school-based professional learning on a non ad hoc basis.

Of the survey respondents who said their inclusion in school-based professional learning was dependent upon the length of their contract, one third said they would need to have been there for at least a term. This is a considerable period of time required before a CRT is invited to participate in school-based professional learning, considering the number of consecutive days of work usually undertaken by CRTs at a school.

Some of the chief reasons cited by survey respondents for not being included in school-based professional learning were:

- Professional learning for CRTs was not budgeted for
- The teacher was not considered affiliated with a particular school
- Schools told CRTs that the professional learning was 'school specific'
- The CRT believed they had not been at a particular school for enough days to ask or be invited.

An overwhelming number of survey respondents expressed their simple desire to be included in school-based professional learning. They sought for schools to be 'open and accepting', 'make them feel more welcome to join in', and for the schools to be more 'friendly and accommodating'.

Previous research into this cohort has found that often no one (schools, registration authorities or otherwise) assumed responsibility for monitoring the overall quality and supporting the development of CRTs. The impact of this isolation can be seen in a Canadian study which found that "...substitute teachers stayed away from situations in which they felt isolated, thus isolating themselves even more by remaining in their classrooms before and after school and during breaks" (Duggleby and Badali, 2007, p.32).

Merici College, Australian Capital Territory

Merici College Principal Loretta Wholley recognises the importance of having a positive and enduring relationship with each of the College's casual teachers. To facilitate this relationship, Ms Wholley and the College include its regular casual teachers in its start of year professional learning – up to 5 hours of which is accredited by the ACT Teacher Quality Institute (TQI). By inviting casual teachers to participate, Ms Wholley is creating opportunities for the casual teachers to develop their practice, while also meeting the ACT TQI's registration renewal requirements.

Where budget allows, Ms Wholley also invites casual teachers to participate in learning throughout the school year. By being involved at the start of the school year, and throughout, casual teachers do feel like a part of the school community. In addition, casual teachers can access a shared e-mail inbox to stay in touch with what is happening in the school while they're relieving. Ms Wholley is also available to the casual teachers at the College to sign off their teacher-identified professional learning hours for TQI.

By including the College's regular casual teachers in the school's professional learning community, the school benefits from having a regular and reliable pool of casual teachers who are available and an appropriate fit for the College.

All ACT principals are encouraged by the ACT TQI to 'adopt' casual teachers that they regularly employ and include them in school-based professional learning.

Not only do CRTs commonly not feel part of a school community, they are often disadvantaged by not knowing what professional learning (if any) is available to them, and by having limited collaboration opportunities with other teachers. Some of the suggestions from survey respondents were:

“As part of the introduction to the school, let me know where to find information about upcoming PD opportunities. Follow up with me about what PD would be useful for the students/issues at that school. Help me feel like a part of the school community.”

“Put us on the central e-mail so we can receive the same information as other teachers and can be proactive.”

A number of survey respondents also emphasised how school flyers or noticeboards outlining the professional learning accessible to CRTs (either within the school or the surrounding local area) would be hugely beneficial to build inclusiveness.

Victorian Institute of Teaching

The Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) as the teacher regulatory authority in Victoria recognises that it is uniquely positioned as a central point for CRTs in Victoria. Following a survey of CRTs in Victoria, the VIT is providing additional support to address the varying needs of this important group in the teaching profession.

The VIT reaches many casual relief teacher through a mailing list with regular communication going out to provide additional support and information to a group that may not receive this in their schools. On its website, the VIT promotes CRT Networks across the state for CRTs to join. These Networks meet regularly and give CRTs the opportunity to collaborate with their CRT colleagues.

VIT is cognisant of the CRT perspective when addressing professional learning requirements to all teachers. VIT acknowledges that CRTs may not be offered professional learning opportunities through their workplace, so it promotes a variety of online and free professional learning including that offered by the Teacher Learning Network (TLN) that has been developed specially for CRTs.

The Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) funds one full-time equivalent position within VIT to work specifically on CRT supports and provisions. The Victorian DET also provides funding for TLN to develop and deliver a range of courses in various modes for CRT professional learning.

One stakeholder emphasised that if all teachers at a school were to have the same base knowledge and were aware of school processes and programs, it would result in better outcomes for the students. The stakeholder also suggested that an emphasis from leaders to staff and students on the importance of CRTs would aid in increasing the status of CRTs within schools.

However, not all CRTs hold the same feelings, as noted by one CRT:

“It would be nice to sometimes have the chance to become involved, but don't forget that one of the reasons I do this is so that I can go home at 3.30 and don't have to carry any of the politics or issues home with me.”

This illustrates the important point that although many CRTs feel excluded and desire to be embraced within a school culture, caution should be paid so that teachers who do not wish to be included are not mandated to do so.

Nicholas and Wells (2017) recommended that “government, schools or other invested agencies [need] to develop strategies and policy which will ensure that CRTs become recognised, valued members and are encouraged to participate in the school communities in which they teach” (p.244). This was further reflected in the findings of the AITSL survey.

Choice of targeted and high quality professional learning

Nicholas and Wells (2017) further found that CRTs “have the ability to identify their own professional learning needs and have some confidence in demonstrating an understanding of the rationale for continued professional learning, suggesting a desire for ongoing professional development” (p.242). Stakeholder consultation revealed that while a diversity of professional learning is desired by CRTs, a lot of the professional learning attended assumed that CRTs were able to implement strategies in their teaching, something that is very difficult for them to do on a regular basis. More experienced CRTs were also more interested in broadening and deepening their skills, whereas a lot of the professional learning targeted at CRTs was aimed at new graduates.

Almost half of the survey respondents said that it was difficult to select relevant or appropriate professional learning as a CRT. The major reasons cited for this challenge were cost; the time commitment (namely having to take unpaid time off to attend); the distance to the professional learning; and not finding professional learning tailored towards the needs of a CRT. It was noted by survey respondents that CRTs have to complete the same number of hours of professional learning as a classroom teacher while not having an ongoing school to access or subsidise this professional learning, and the inequities this creates.

Fifty-nine per cent of respondents found the cost of professional learning to be important when selecting what to attend, noting that there are a number of websites where a range of free or low cost online professional learning is offered to teachers, which were often accessed by CRTs. Survey respondents expressed the view that CRTs should be able to attend training sessions at a subsidised rate to account for the lack of support generally available from a school level.

Teaching Standards in Action – NSW Department of Education

The NSW Department of Education developed the Teaching Standards in Action (TSA) website to provide all teachers with practical information on the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) and accreditation (registration) processes in NSW. It brings together Department of Education, NSW Education Standards Authority and AITSL policies into one easy-to-use website, distilling key requirements and research that assists teachers across the profession to use standards-based practice that supports their accreditation. As well as being a source of information, the website is also a platform for online professional learning.

The NSW Department of Education recognises the importance of CRTs and their unique journey from the Graduate to Proficient career stage. The Teaching Standards in Action website supports CRTs to see how the APST are applicable to them. The online professional learning courses offered on the TSA website are free and accessible to CRTs.

The Department also provides CRTs with the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers, reflect on their classroom practice and improve their pedagogy with well-supported advice and scaffolds.

Rural and remote teaching

In May 2018 the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (IRRRRE) report was released following 300 submissions and extensive consultation across Australia. The report held 11 recommendations with 53 actions that concerned the key issues, challenges and barriers of regional, rural and remote (RRR) education settings. Two of these recommendations stressed the need for the RRR contexts, challenges and opportunities to be explicitly considered in the ongoing professional support of teachers and leaders.

The report asserted that more needs to be done to grow the expertise of teachers who are already in RRR schools by resourcing professional learning that is delivered mostly in-situ and in partnership with a recognised professional learning provider, like a university or a peak professional body (Halsey, 2018, p.43).

The challenge of accessing professional learning in RRR contexts is not a new one, as shown from a 2006 study of rural and regional schools which found that the issues facing teachers in accessing professional learning and support were:

- lack of time to attend professional learning
- few expert or experienced teachers to mentor or provide professional learning
- lack of access to casual/relief teachers
- the need for significant travel
- lack of adequate ICT systems (Beswick & Brown quoted in Stack et al, 2011, p.3).

Most of these issues identified in 2006 also surfaced during AITSL's consultation and survey in 2018, illustrating that the current issues are not dissimilar to those from over ten years ago.

A key point raised in AITSL's stakeholder consultation was that within the RRR cohort, the needs and challenges do vary between regional, rural and remote areas. There are large regional and rural schools that do not face the same challenges as smaller rural and remote schools (e.g. one to two teacher schools). While distance is still a factor for larger schools, the compounding effects of other barriers such as release time are lessened, compared to smaller rural and remote schools. Therefore a key finding of our consultation was the need for more granularity in the support for this cohort.

AITSL's stakeholder consultation and survey has identified three key areas that pose challenges for this sector.³ While the following list is not exhaustive, it represents the issues most consistently raised throughout the consultation:

- Access to a wide range of professional learning
- Choosing and participating in professional learning
- Information and communications technology (ICT)

³ 'Survey respondents' in this section of the report refers to the 608 teachers and school leaders who completed or partially completed the Regional, Rural and Remote survey. As it was not compulsory for respondents to answer every question in the survey, the number of responses received for each question varies.

Access to a wide range of professional learning

AITSL's survey established that the focus and methods of professional learning undertaken by teachers in a RRR context is highly variable. The most common methods of professional learning undertaken by RRR teachers in the past 12 months were courses delivered at their workplace (75 per cent); professional reading (65 per cent); professional discussion (61 per cent); online learning modules (56 per cent); courses or activities external to their workplace (52 per cent). This data demonstrates that teachers in the RRR context are undertaking a wide range of professional learning types, including through their school, externally, and individually. This was reaffirmed by stakeholders who said they believed that a mixture of regional networks/external professional learning and in-house professional learning is most useful.

When asking about RRR professional learning and the challenges associated with it, AITSL observed that stakeholders and survey respondents tended to almost exclusively refer to external face-to-face professional learning and the challenges accessing this form of professional learning, despite school-based professional learning being one of the most common types of professional learning reported.

This is not dissimilar to teachers' perceptions generally about what constitutes professional learning and their decisions around choosing which learning to participate in, suggesting that some of the challenges with professional learning for RRR teachers could be minimised with a change in perception about what effective professional learning is. This could lead to a reduced reliance on face-to-face external professional learning which presents a number of challenges for this cohort.

Survey respondents said the most valuable and useful professional learning was that which is student learning focused and relevant to the current educational programs and practices at their workplace. Conversely, professional learning aligned to the APST and professional learning that addresses the issues faced by teachers in regional, rural and remote areas were ranked the least important of eight focus areas. For teachers who are interested in a range of topics and professional learning types, access to a variety of high quality professional learning is often the biggest challenge within the RRR context.

Choosing and participating in professional learning

Thirty-two per cent of survey respondents said it was difficult, and 44 per cent said it was very difficult, to choose professional learning as a teacher in a RRR context. Although many survey respondents said that relevant professional learning can be easy to find, the time and costs associated prove major barriers as, in their view, 'most high quality professional learning is only available in metropolitan areas'.

Survey respondents also said that the quality and value of professional learning available varied greatly, making it difficult to weigh up the potential benefit of prospective professional learning against the associated time and costs. In some cases, even once a teacher identifies professional learning, getting support from school leaders to participate can prove a further challenge. Many of these issues such as release time and budget availability are magnified in small schools (e.g. schools with one to three teachers).

Funding

When professional learning is not held in an accessible location, the costs related to fees, travel and accommodation were noted. This financial challenge for schools and individuals can sometimes result in teachers being focused only on undertaking professional learning that is mandatory and not necessarily relevant to the needs of students or teacher practice. While personal spending on professional learning varies among teachers in this cohort, survey respondents who were required to travel to undertake professional learning personally spent more than those who did not travel. Some survey respondents noted that due to the excessive costs to attend professional learning, often only one teacher can attend (usually a senior teacher), as noted by one survey respondent:

“To fly to Perth from anywhere in WA is ridiculously expensive. This restricts any professional learning and it is usually senior teachers or a selected teacher who will go. To self-fund is too expensive.”

Professional learning offered in RRR areas

One of the actions recommended in the IRRRRE report was to “improve the availability and diversity of in-school/locally based professional development for teachers in RRR schools and communities, including by using visiting curriculum and pedagogy specialists” (Halsey, 2018, p.45). Through consultation it was established that enticing quality professional learning facilitators to travel to RRR areas and work with schools remains an ongoing challenge.

Victoria Department of Education and Training

Like many rural schools across Australia, teachers and school leaders in the Gippsland area of Victoria face challenges in accessing high quality professional learning. Due to its location of up to 500km from Melbourne and given the cost and time required for expert consultants to travel, it is difficult to get the required expertise to this area.

The South Eastern Victoria Region of the Department of Education and Training is facilitating a program of collaboration between metro schools located in the Bayside Peninsula Area of Melbourne and Inner and Outer-Gippsland schools. This approach utilises online tools of Skype and Polycom with support from the Regional Virtual Learning Coach to enable teachers from the metro areas of the region to collaborate with teachers in rural schools.

This innovative approach allows teachers from Gippsland to build strong, ongoing relationships with expert teachers. The program has started with a focus on teaching English at VCE level and soon will be expanded to other curriculum areas.

One stakeholder asserted that when professional learning is offered in RRR areas, it is well attended and therefore more funding could be provided to bring professional learning providers to these areas. Another stakeholder said that in order for professional learning providers to offer professional learning in RRR areas a minimum number of teachers for attendance is required e.g. 40 teachers. This can be a major challenge as unless it is delivered on a student-free day, there are not enough CRTs available to cover that many teachers in a region. It was suggested that this minimum number threshold should be lowered to a more realistic number; however this raises cost efficiency issues for providers.

Time

Time (both travel and time away from school) was repeatedly identified throughout the survey and consultation as creating a barrier to accessing professional learning. Seventy-six per cent of RRR survey respondents said the distance to travel to professional learning was an important or very important factor when making decisions about professional learning. One stakeholder suggested that the time (and funding) is best utilised by organising a number of professional learning days in a row in order to make travel more worthwhile.

Some schools are avoiding the time lost in sending multiple teachers to professional learning by implementing a 'train the trainer' approach, in which one teacher undertakes professional learning and then returns to the school and delivers to the other teachers. However, there are drawbacks with this approach such as learning being lost or misinterpreted in the transfer of knowledge; the perception that it's second-hand learning by those who didn't attend; and the additional requirements on the 'trainer' to bring others up to speed on what they have learnt.

A number of regional offices are undertaking initiatives to minimise the time and travel requirements for teachers to attend professional learning. This is strongly linked to the recommendation in the IRRRRE report to "improve the availability and diversity of locally based professional learning". Through activities such as coaching or in-school workshops, regional offices have tried to avoid reverting to offering online learning as the standard for RRR areas and are instead investing in having expertise and support in the area.

Queensland Department of Education and Training

Recognising the unique challenges facing teachers and school leaders living and working in rural and remote Queensland, the Queensland Department of Education is establishing four new Centres for Learning and Wellbeing. The first two centres are based in Roma and Mt Isa, with an additional two centres to be established in Central Queensland and Far North Queensland in 2019.

Centres will run satellite services to ensure service delivery reaches across a wide geographic area, including the most remote locations of the region. The professional learning is tailored to teachers' contexts and their development needs at all stages of their career. District relief teachers will travel with centre staff to provide teacher release so local teachers can engage with professional learning and receive wellbeing support if required.

Other stakeholders talked about bringing in expertise to regions on a regular basis. These 'experts' conducted in depth learning and one-on-one support with teachers while in the region and school and then provided ongoing remote support throughout the year as needed. This was particularly successful when schools worked together to broker an expert for a common focus area, jointly funded by schools in the area.

Survey respondents indicated that collaboration with other schools in their area is limited: 45 per cent said this sometimes happens, 35 per cent said this almost never happens, and 12 per cent said it never happens.

Only eight per cent of respondents said collaboration with other schools in their area happens on a regular basis.

When this collaboration does take place it often takes the form of informal/social opportunities or network/cluster meetings. Survey respondents suggested that time and distance to opportunities, difficulties in organising and facilitating networks, cross-sectoral barriers and limited access to CRTs were factors in why collaboration did not occur more frequently (if at all).

Shortage of CRTs

A major challenge in accessing professional learning is the 'chronic shortage' of CRTs in RRR areas. CRTs are either too expensive, or it is 'just not possible' to find a CRT to cover. If a CRT is not available, it places a burden on the other teachers within the school to cover classes, take extra students or combine classes. This issue is exacerbated in very remote schools. Eighty-five per cent of survey respondents in very remote schools said securing CRT cover was a very important factor in choosing professional learning, compared to 54 per cent of respondents from inner regional schools and 64 per cent of respondents from outer regional schools. One stakeholder commented that the incentive to undertake professional learning becomes quite shallow when it is balanced against an absent teacher affecting the learning environment and how the time required to attend professional learning impacts on the work/life balance of other teachers.

Department for Education, South Australia

Taking one day out of the classroom to attend a professional learning conference or workshop is a huge challenge for teachers and school leaders in remote South Australia. In addition to the travel time and costs to attend a professional learning opportunity in a metro area, finding a temporary relief teacher (TRT) to cover their classroom can be extremely difficult.

In 2017, the South Australia Department for Education (DfE) piloted a program to address the lack of TRTs available in two remote areas of South Australia to cover planned professional learning and staff development. The DfE provided an incentive to regional and metro based TRTs to travel to a remote location for between 5 and 19 days to cover teachers attending professional learning.

The TRT's travel and accommodation costs are covered by the DfE and the only cost to the school is the TRT's daily rate. Schools in each area work together to identify their TRT needs and utilise this program to ensure they have TRT coverage.

Following the pilot in 2017, the program has been expanded to all country areas.

A number of stakeholders commented that in order to address the challenge of limited numbers of CRTs in RRR areas, they were exploring options to conduct professional learning outside of school hours e.g. twilight sessions and within school holidays (at no cost to teachers).

Information and communications technology (ICT)

The IRRRRE report noted that optimally functioning ICT can lead to more professional development opportunities for staff and students and greater opportunity to build networks and share information locally, nationally and globally (Halsey, 2018, p.70). The emphasis on 'optimally functioning' ICT is important because with many ICT solutions, the appropriate technology is either not available, or the connectivity and reliability of internet services is not strong enough to support them (as is the case in many remote schools).

One stakeholder commented that they believe online learning is not ideal as it restricts face-to-face learning and networking, but that it is often easier than undertaking professional learning that requires a day of travel either side (totalling three days away from school). Other stakeholders stressed that for ICT solutions to be accessed, there needs to be quality online professional learning content and incentives need to be created so providers offer more video-conferencing professional learning.

Methodology

This report presents findings from stakeholder consultation across Australia; three targeted surveys with early childhood, casual/relief and rural/remote teachers; and a desktop review of research and publications concerning the professional learning of these specific cohorts of teachers.

AITSL identified a range of stakeholder organisations and individuals across the three cohorts to consult with between February and June 2018, building on consultation that was undertaken into professional learning generally in 2017. A full list of those who were consulted is included on page 24 of this report. Consultation focused on current professional learning opportunities for teachers in each cohort; the barriers that they encounter; and what could be done to improve the quality of professional learning across Australia.

Of particular relevance are two recent Australian Government reviews concerning teachers in the areas that are referred to within the report:

- 2018 *Independent Review into Regional Rural and Remote Education* (Commonwealth Government).
- 2017 *Lifting our Game – Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions* (Commonwealth Government).

Additionally, the 2018 *One Teaching Profession: Teacher Registration in Australia* has recommendations relevant to both professional learning generally and early childhood teachers. These reports, in conjunction with other literature in this field, have been used to supplement the consultation and survey findings.

AITSL conducted separate online surveys with each of these teacher cohorts. The surveys included questions about the amount of professional learning undertaken; motivations for selecting activities; types of activities; amount of their own funds spent; and evaluation techniques. The surveys were initially sent to the groups with whom AITSL consulted, for circulating to their broader networks. This approach resulted in higher representations of teachers from some states and contexts. For this reason, AITSL reopened the three separate surveys and promoted them through social media and other channels.

Over 1800 responses were received across the three surveys. It was not mandatory for survey respondents to answer every question in the survey. As a result, the number of responses received for each question varied.

Key questions included:

Early Childhood Teachers

- How easy or difficult is it to select relevant and/or appropriate professional learning as a children's education and care teacher?
- How frequently do you collaborate with colleagues at your workplace? What type of collaborative activities do you undertake with your colleagues?

Casual/Relief Teachers

- Are you included in professional learning activities at the schools you provide casual/relief teaching for?
- What advice would you give to principals, school leaders and colleagues in the schools you teach in relation to the professional learning requirements of casual/relief staff?

Rural, Regional and Remote Teachers

- How easy or difficult is it to select relevant and/or appropriate professional learning as a teacher working in a rural, regional, or remote location?
- As a teacher in a rural, regional, or remote location, what type of professional learning do you find most valuable and useful?

Consultation activity

AITSL consulted representatives of the organisations and groups listed below between February and July 2018:

- Australian Association for Research in Education Rural Education Special Interest Group
- Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority
- Australian Community Children’s Services
- Australian Education Union
- Australian Government Department of Education and Training
- Catholic Schools NSW – Armidale Diocese
- Catholic Schools NSW - Wagga Wagga Diocese
- Catholic Schools NSW - Wilcannia-Forbes Diocese
- Country Education Partnership
- Early Childhood Australia
- Early Childhood Teachers Association
- Early Learning and Care Council of Australia
- Early Learning Association Australia
- Independent Schools Queensland
- Independent Education Union
- Mitchell Institute
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principal Association
- National Catholic Education Commission
- New South Wales Department of Education
- Northern Territory Department of Education
- Rowville Casual and Relief Teacher Network
- South Australian Department for Education
- Tasmanian Department of Education
- Tradewind Education and Social Work Recruitment Agency
- Victorian Department of Education and Training – South West Region Office
- Victorian Department of Education and Training – North East Region Office
- Victorian Department of Education and Training – South East Region Office
- Victorian Institute for Teaching

Evidence base

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2018) *One Teaching Profession: Teacher Registration in Australia*. Carlton, Australia.

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Duggleby, P., & Badali, S. (2007) Expectations and Experiences of Substitute Teachers. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, vol 53, no 1, pp. 22-33.

Halsey, J. (2018) *Independent Review into Regional Rural and Remote Education*, report, Commonwealth of Australia.

Melhuish, E., Howard, S., Siraj, I., Neilsen-Hewett, C., & Kingston, D. (2016) Fostering Effective Early Learning (FEEL) through a professional development programme for early childhood educators to improve professional practice and child outcomes in the year before formal schooling: study protocol for a cluster randomised controlled trial. *Trials*, vol 17, no 1, pp1-10.

Nicholas, M., & Wells, M. (2017) Insights into casual relief teaching: casual relief teachers' perceptions of their knowledge and skills. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 45:3, 229-249.

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Victorian Institute of Teaching (2018) CRT Support Survey infographic
<https://www.vit.vic.edu.au/news/news/2018/vit-support-for-crt-prts>

Victorian Institute of Teaching (2018) 'Supporting provisionally registered CRTs'
<https://www.vit.vic.edu.au/news/news/2018/supporting-provisionally-registered-crts>

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Victorian Department of Education and Training (2018) *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report, 2016*. Melbourne

The logo for AITSL, featuring the lowercase letters 'aitsl' in a sans-serif font. The letters are colored with a gradient from light green to dark teal.

Australian Institute
for Teaching and
School Leadership
Limited

A decorative graphic at the bottom of the page consisting of two overlapping triangles. The left triangle is dark teal and points to the right. The right triangle is light green and points to the left. They meet at a diagonal line that slopes upwards from left to right.

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