



# Spotlight

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Professional Learning  
for Relief Teachers

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# Over the duration of their education, students spend up to one cumulative year with casual/relief teachers (CRTs).

As a result, CRTs play a critical role in ensuring learning continues in the absence of the permanent teacher.

CRTs have a greater impact on student outcomes than many might think. It is of benefit to the entire school<sup>1</sup> community that the practice and pedagogy of CRTs remains up-to-date through high-quality professional learning.

Teachers in Australia who do not work under contract are referred to as 'casual', 'relief', 'supply', or 'temporary' teachers. They are found in all 3 sectors of education across Australia. In this report, we will use the term 'casual/relief teachers', although the name does not fully reflect the dedication and hard work these teachers bring to the profession. Research has found that students spend 3 hours a week of their schooling with CRTs, which equates to one year or more of their total schooling (Nicholas & Wells 2017). These teachers play a crucial role in educating students, but recent literature and data is revealing that their professional learning (PL) needs are not being met.

A recent AITSL survey (undertaken in 2018) found that CRTs across Australia are undertaking less professional learning (PL), and at a lower quality. In the twelve months preceding the survey, most respondents completed fewer than 16 hours of PL, which is below the minimum 20 hours required by teachers to maintain registration.<sup>2</sup> Although PL is a requirement of registration, it is often hard to engage with by the very nature of working as a CRT. The most popular activities were online learning and professional reading, both of which are often completed in isolation. The survey also found the main motivators in choosing PL were the associated costs and a need to meet registration requirements, suggesting that practical concerns may take precedence over potential educational benefits.

There is a need for a stronger national focus on the delivery and availability of professional learning for CRTs so that they have the opportunity to 'build on and further improve their teaching expertise'.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'school' has been used throughout but it is always written with the intention of being inclusive of other settings including early childhood services, outdoor education and other non-school settings.

<sup>2</sup> Tasmania does not have a minimum number professional learning hours to meet registration requirements and some jurisdictions may make concessions for CRTs to undertake less professional learning.

## At a glance

- In 2018, AITSL conducted a national survey of 400 CRTs
- The findings indicate that CRTs are not regularly part of in-school PL
- More than 50% had never been invited to undertake PL within their workplace

# AITSL research – high-quality professional learning for CRTs

To develop a better understanding of the PL experiences of CRTs, AITSL undertook research across Australia in 2018. This was a specific and targeted study, following on from research and consultation undertaken in 2017 into the PL practices of all Australian teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017). One of the key components of the 2018 research was a nationwide survey, completed by more than 400 CRTs from all 3 sectors. The major findings of the survey helped to reveal critical insights into the PL opportunities available.

The survey results support findings from previous research that CRTs are not commonly part of in-school PL (Lunay & Lock, 2006; TRBSA 2016).

- While three-quarters of CRTs usually work at the same school on a regular basis, the results still show that:
  - » 59% were never invited to undertake PL within their workplaces
  - » 52% had undertaken fewer than 16 hours of PL in the prior 12 months (Figure 1).

## Figure 1

### Major findings from the CRT professional learning survey



## At a glance

- The job titles and maximum duration of time a CRT can spend in one position varies widely across Australia.
- The number of CRTs working nationally is unknown.
- Teachers work casually for a wide range of reasons.

# Casual/relief teaching in Australia

The roles, titles and the maximum number of days that CRTs can work in one position varies across Australia (Figure 2). Teachers who work casually usually take on one of two roles: filling in for an absent teacher for a specific number of days or weeks; or taking on longer periods of contract work without becoming a permanent employee. The majority (84%) of the survey respondents usually worked on a day-by-day basis with the remainder usually undertaking short-term contracts of a week or more.

**Figure 2**

**Titles and maximum terms for relief teachers across Australia (Sources: State and Territory Enterprise Bargaining Agreements and education websites)**



## How many teachers are working casually in Australia?

The number of CRTs working nationally is currently unknown. A 2012 report found that CRTs constitute 12% of the teaching workforce in Victorian government schools (Pearson, 2012), which equated to over 13,000 teachers. However, there is no publicly available national data on the number of CRTs hired each year or for how many days these teachers are employed.

## Types of teachers who undertake casual work



newly qualified graduates



international teachers new to Australia



those returning to the workforce



recently retired teachers



those who have chosen to work casually due to the lifestyle, flexibility or variety

The Australian Teacher Workforce Dataset (ATWD) will unite existing national and jurisdiction-based teacher workforce data and collate demographic and workforce experience data from teachers across Australia into one data set. This is expected to provide powerful insights on the teaching profession, including an understanding of the size of the CRT workforce and where they are working.

The ATWD is currently in development. Learn more at <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/australian-teacher-workforce-data>

## Who chooses casual/relief teaching?

Whilst many CRTs may share common experiences in schools and within the classroom, they differ widely in terms of professional experience and development needs. Only half (52%) of new initial teacher education (ITE) graduates take on full time teaching jobs within 12 months of graduation (AITSL, 2018b). As such, it is possible that the most common way for teachers to begin their teaching careers is as a casual or fixed-term teacher (NSW Government Education Department, 2019). Anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers returning to the workforce take on relief teacher work initially as a means of gaining access to full time employment. Another study found many to be semi-retired, highly experienced practitioners who have been involved in education for many years in numerous positions including leadership (TRBSA 2016). The CRT cohort is transient, ever changing and the motivations and reasons for working casually vary (Colcott, 2009).

### Profile 1 – Semi-Retired CRT

*"I'm a semi-retired teacher with more than 40 years of teaching experience and have been undertaking casual teacher work for seven years, primarily at the school where I finished my full-time career. I average 1–2 days per week with the occasional block of 2–4 weeks. I retired from full-time work because my superannuation allowed it, and while my aim was initially to do casual teacher work for five years, I am now planning to do it for another 2–3 years. Casual teacher work has enabled me to work with new students, former colleagues, and graduates, whilst also earning extra money. My main school offers plenty of casual teacher days and access to PL where relevant. However, some of the shortcomings of casual teaching in general include (although this has become easier), gaining access to computers or the school network which can be an issue if required for a lesson, and casual teachers may not always get enough information about the students they are working with."*



## Profile 2 – New Graduate CRT

*“I did CRT work for the first two and a half years after completing my teaching degree. I had a young family at the time so I wanted to work part-time and have the freedom to choose when I worked. I usually got as much work as I wanted, although this was sometimes harder in the first and fourth terms. It was great to work as a CRT straight after university as it allowed me to experience teaching in a range of different schools and to amass a variety of worksheets and resources.*

*Some of the downsides are the instability that comes with having an unreliable wage and it can be a bit lonely and difficult to form collegial relationships with other staff. I extended my graduate term with the registration body as I found it challenging to complete the necessary requirements to get my proficient registration while working as a CRT. This is in part because most principals don't have time to sit down with you to complete the required steps.”*



## Profile 3 – Agency CRT

*“The biggest challenge as a CRT is behaviour management, as you are not their regular teacher and the kids test you. I found that is where your skill set needs to lie as a CRT. For my PL I usually undertake online courses as I can do it from home. A good online course is really engaging and allows you to learn via videos of teaching in action. However online learning that rely more on reading and written case studies are less rewarding... [and] it's not really until you're into it that you know how it's going to be. My agency offered lots of PL opportunities and the continuation of that kind of support for CRTs would be beneficial. However, having said that, the onus has to be on the teacher to take up the opportunity to undertake PL with their agencies. It would be great to have more online learning that can be completed at home and which doesn't require going out to conferences. I don't know if there's a way to get schools to be more opening, welcoming and supportive of CRTs. Schools could invite CRTs to some of their professional learning, but that's more difficult when schools engage staff through agencies.”*



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## At a glance

- Many CRTs find it difficult to access the proportionate yearly amount of PL required for registration renewal.
- Accessing high-quality PL is challenging — cost and a need to meet registration requirements are the main factors in CRTs deciding upon PL.
- More than half of the CRTs surveyed had never been included in in-school PL.
- Most CRTs who are included in in-school PL are only involved on an ad hoc basis.

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# CRTs and professional learning

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## What is “PL”?

**Professional Learning includes, but is not limited to, peer learning, coaching and attending courses/seminars.**

*“PL is the **formal or informal** learning experiences undertaken by teachers and school leaders that **improve their individual professional practice, and a school’s collective effectiveness, as measured by improved student learning, engagement with learning and wellbeing.** At its most effective, PL develops individual and collective capacity across the teaching profession to address current and future challenges.”*

– Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders (p.3)

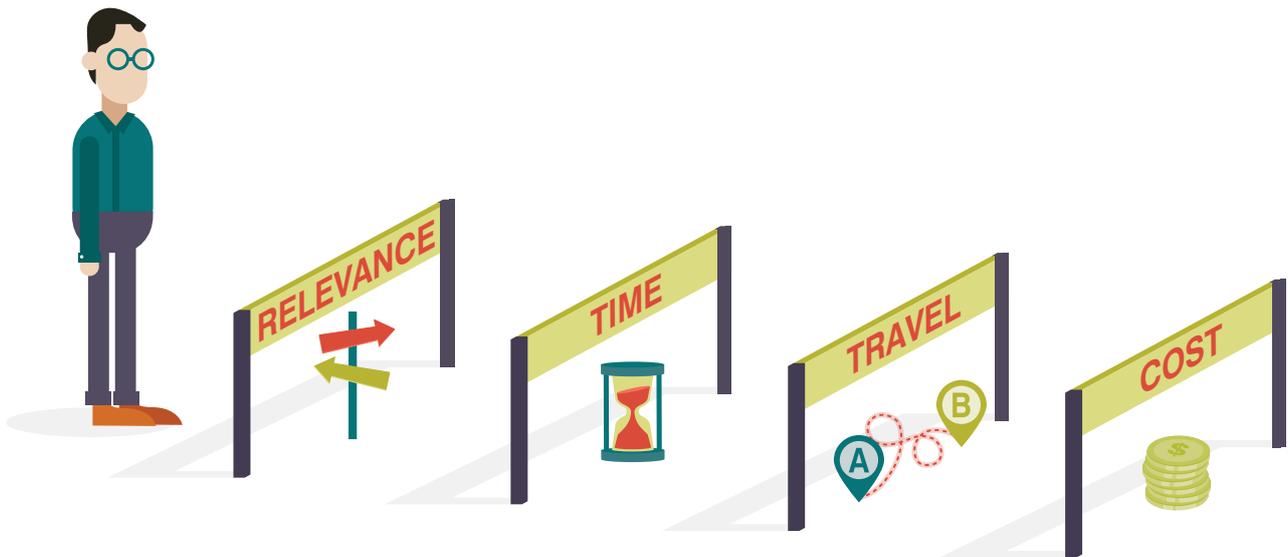
The AITSL PL survey found that there are significant barriers for teachers working on a casual basis in accessing PL opportunities (Figure 3). Similarly, a recent survey undertaken by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) found time, relevance and cost as barriers in undertaking PL (VIT, 2018a). This in turn can potentially restrict a CRT’s ability to maintain teaching standards. A lack of access to development opportunities could hinder the efforts of those wanting to achieve steady employment or gain a permanent position (Nicholas & Wells, 2017) and it contributes to a perception among permanent teachers that CRTs are less qualified and less up-to-date (Bamberg, 2011).

## CRTs may be undertaking less PL

CRTs, as with all teachers across Australia, must complete around 20 hours of professional learning that meets registration requirements (excluding Tasmania). However, 52% of the survey respondents had undertaken fewer than sixteen hours of PL in the twelve months prior to the survey, with 28% undertaking fewer than six. While this is not necessarily problematic, as many registration authorities look at PL undertaken over several years, ideally teachers would be undertaking PL on a consistent basis, in order to further strengthen their teaching expertise. Additionally, VIT found that 69% of respondents identified meeting the required 20 hours of professional development the greatest challenge in renewing their registration (VIT, 2018a). Typically, schools ensure that permanent teachers engage in PL across the year, including in-school activities, funded external courses, or through facilitating collaboration with other colleagues via professional conversations or observation. CRTs are often required to find PL, fund it themselves, undertake it in their own time and travel long distances to attend (Charteris et al, 2017b), which may be resulting in less PL being undertaken.

**Figure 3**

Barriers for casual teachers to engage in high-quality PL.

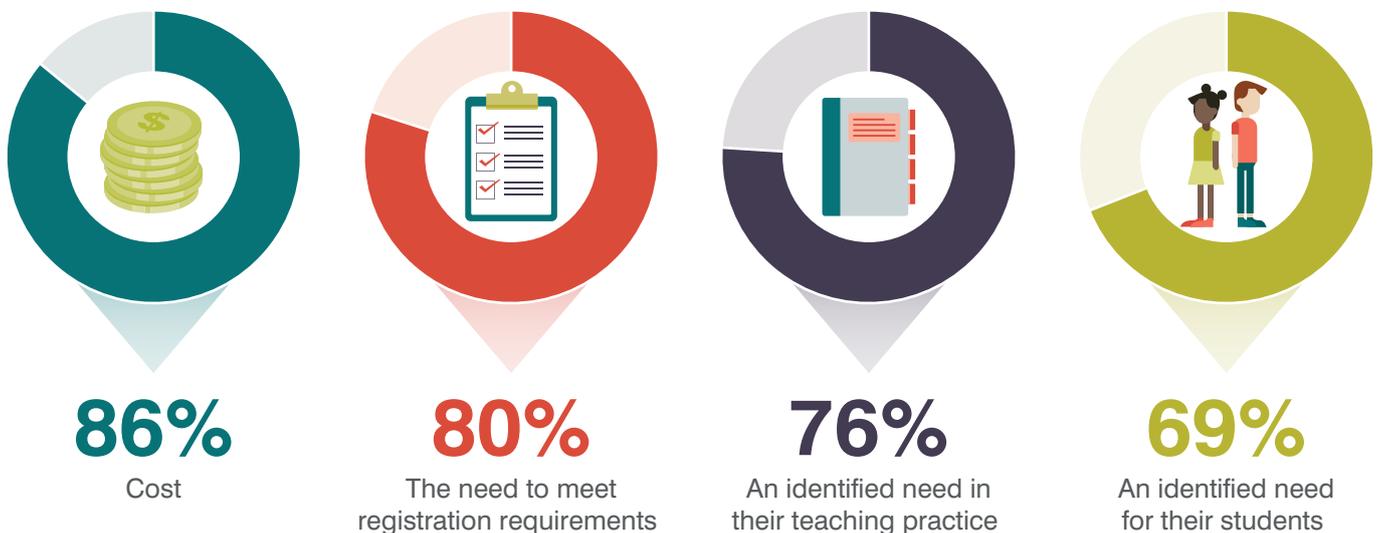


### CRTs may be settling for lower quality PL

When it falls to CRTs to identify, attend, pay for and evaluate their own PL activities, then the emphasis often falls on compliance and affordability. While most CRT teachers report choosing PL based on an identified need of their teaching practice (76%) and/or an identified need in their students (69%), cost and meeting registration requirements were also major considerations for CRT teachers (Figure 4). In the survey the two considerations nominated most commonly as 'Important' or 'Very Important' in selecting PL were cost (83%) and the need to meet registration requirements (80%) followed closely by teaching practice (76%) and student need (69%).

**Figure 4**

PL considerations ranked 'Important' or 'Very Important' by surveyed CRTs.



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Other evidence also suggests that CRTs may have more limited access to high-quality PL – in particular the opportunity to collaborate and learn from other teachers. The two PL activities most undertaken by the surveyed teachers were professional reading (61.6%) and online learning modules, webinars or resources (55.8%). This supported a 2016 study which found that, compared to permanent teachers, CRTs were likelier than permanent teachers to undertake online learning and research (peer-reviewed literature and self-conducted research) based PL (TRBSA, 2016). It is likely that the popularity of these activities is because they remove some of the barriers to accessing PL; they can be completed at home and are often free. While these activities have the potential to provide meaningful learning experiences, they do not provide opportunities for CRTs to collaborate, network with, or learn from other teachers.

Additionally, qualitative evidence from the survey indicated that generally more experienced CRTs were not interested in external PL, as they felt much of it was aimed at new graduates and therefore would not broaden or deepen their skills. However, even if a teacher was to find a collaborative and relevant PL activity, the barriers of travel, unpaid leave and personal funded costs emerge.

“It is very difficult to find free or cheap PL experiences that are not one-off webinars or online reading modules. I find these brush the surface of a topic but do not provoke the quality reflection and inspiration that seminars or ongoing PL has done for me in the past ... As a casual teacher I simply cannot afford to register and pay for these myself and have not been invited to any through the schools I work at casually ... I love learning but it can be very challenging to find relevant PL that will actually make an impact on my teaching and the outcomes of students.”

– Survey respondent

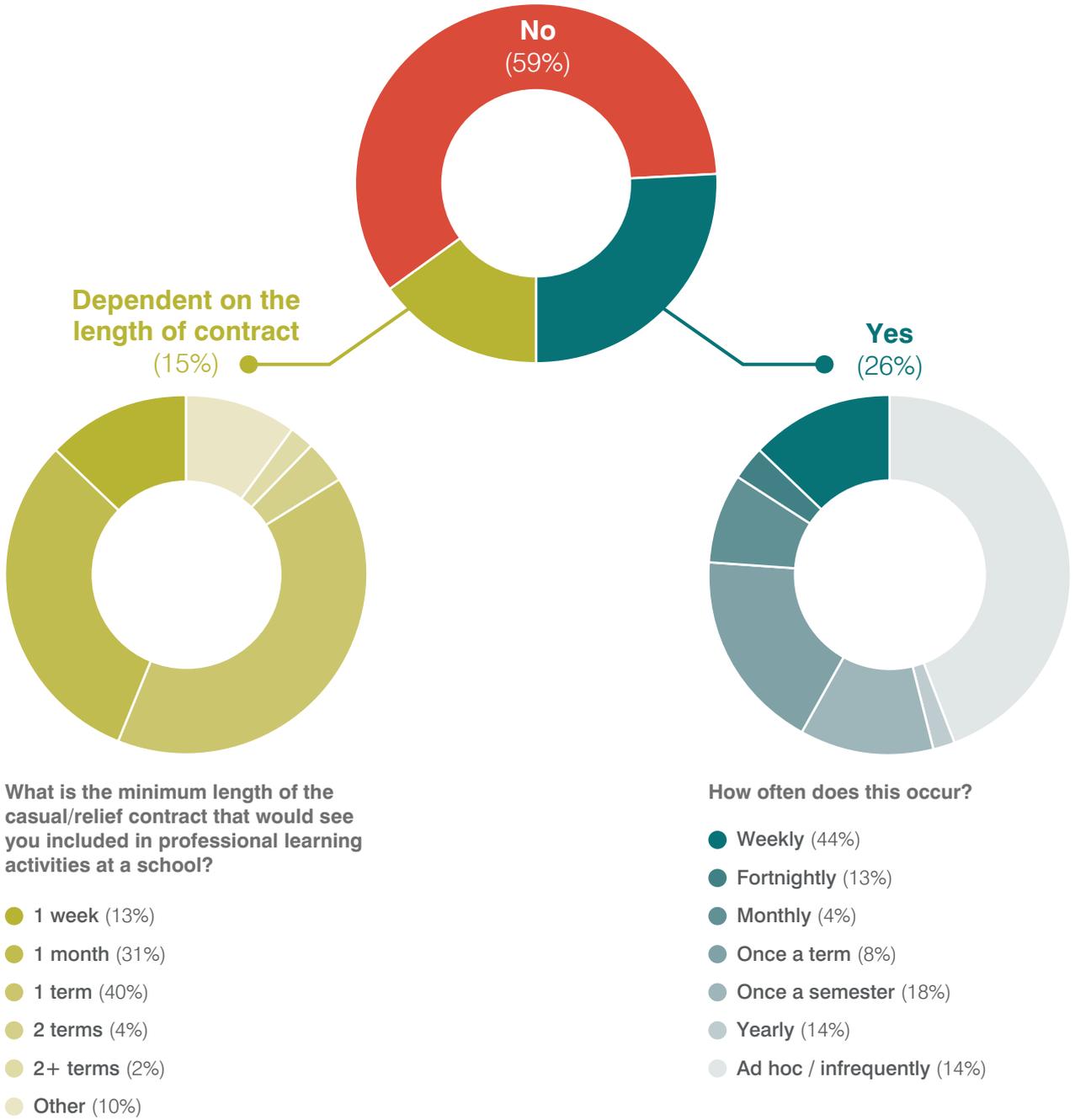
## CRTs and in-school PL

CRTs often do not have the same access to information and opportunity to undertake school-based PL (Colcott, 2009; Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Reference Committee, 2013). Ideally school-based PL is frequent, ongoing, collaborative and formulated around evidence-based strategies with an overarching aim to improve teaching practice (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2018a). When in-school PL is offered to CRTs, it not only provides high-quality learning experiences but also reduces cost and travel barriers. However, more than half (59%) of the relief teachers surveyed by AITSL had never been part of in-school PL, at the schools they work at (Figure 5), despite an overwhelming 75% expressing a desire to be included. Not including CRT teachers in school PL impacts their access to high-quality PL and makes it difficult for CRTs to plan for PL or build ongoing networks with other teachers.

**Figure 5**

Levels of relief teacher inclusion in in-school PL (AITSL Survey).

**Are you included in PL at the schools you work at?**



## Key themes

### Perceptions of CRTs about why they are rarely included as a part of in-school PL (total n=142):

- The teacher is not considered a part of the school and/or they are simply not invited or included in the PL (70%)
- CRTs are not factored into a school's PL budget and/or the teacher incurs an out of pocket expense to participate in in-school PL (22%)
- A lack of communication between schools and CRTs about PL opportunities (for example, because they are not included in school email lists) (19%)
- The CRT does not believe they have been working at the school long enough to ask – or be invited to – PL opportunities (14%).
- Some CRTs identified more than one reason, consequently the percentage does not add up to 100.

Some of the surveyed teachers commented that while they had reached out to be included as a part of in-school PL, these requests were either not followed through or they were told it was not appropriate for them to attend. Some respondents even indicated they were told they would need to pay if they wanted to be included (11%). Others saw themselves as an added expense and were of the mindset that schools were justified in not accounting for them as a part of in-school PL.

“Please include us wherever possible in your after-school meetings/ professional learning. By notifying us of resources, changes to curriculum etc you are keeping us in the loop and assisting us to be the best CRTs we possibly can be!”

– Survey Respondent

Some CRTs are consistently included in the learning that takes place at their places of teaching. One in four (26%) of CRTs in the survey indicated that they were included as a part of in-school PL. However, consistent access seem to be more likely for those with longer term relationships with schools.

Of those who accessed in-school PL, around a quarter (25%) have been included at least once a month. Notably, the majority of these respondents worked directly with one school suggesting that building stronger relationships within schools was positively associated with being included in in-school PL. On the other hand, a large proportion of CRTs (44%) were only included in in-school PL on an ad hoc or infrequent basis (Figure 5).

Fifteen percent of all respondents said that their participation in in-school PL was dependent upon the length of their contract with the school. A large proportion (46%) of these respondents reported having to be at a school for *at least a term* to be included (Figure 5).

## At a glance

- Research has found CRTs feel alienated, isolated and marginalised.
- Including CRTs in school-based PL:
  - » develops familiarity with programs
  - » builds relationships between all school staff
  - » ensures the quality of relief teaching in schools.

What are HALTs; Nationally certified Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers (HALTs) are expert teachers and reflective practitioners who lead and support colleagues towards better outcomes for learners.

For more information about HALTs please [click here](#).

# Benefits of including CRTs in school-based professional learning

CRTs are some of the most alienated, dissatisfied and unsupported workers within the Australian education sector (Charteris et al, 2015b). Research has found that casual teaching is often characterised by a lack of continuity, status and support (Shilling, 1991) and that CRTs commonly suffer from alienation, isolation and marginalisation (Nicholas & Wells, 2017). One study found 90% of respondents linked their feelings of alienation to a lack of equity with tenured colleagues, including inequitable access to PL (Lunay & Lock, 2006). Isolation can also reduce a CRTs personal motivation, causes communication breakdown, contributes to stress and can lead to ineffectiveness (Webb, 1999). This isolation can then in turn become self-fulfilling, with CRTs staying away from “situations where they felt isolated, thus isolating themselves even more by remaining in their classrooms before and after school and during breaks” (Duggledby & Badali, 2007, p.32).

Nicholas and Wells (2017) recommended that schools and governments develop policies and strategies to ensure that CRTs are encouraged to participate within schools and thereby become recognised and valued members of the community. Their inclusion has a mutual benefit to teachers, schools and system more broadly by building relationships and developing familiarity with programs (Colcott, 2009). Further, a change in the practice of a CRT through having space to experiment with new strategies, opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, and a chance to receive feedback, would undoubtedly have an impact on the entire school and therefore student outcomes. Whilst in-school PL is critically important for the reasons outlined above, PL delivered beyond a school setting also needs to be made more accessible to CRTs.

Finally, it is important to note that while in-school PL would be of benefit to all CRTs, there are professional growth opportunities that are vitally important for teachers at the beginning of their careers, such as induction and mentoring. McCormack and Thomas (2005) suggested the provision of trained teachers to provide specific advice and support for beginning CRTs. For example, there may be an opportunity to utilise Highly Accomplished Lead Teachers (HALTs) in supporting CRTs in accessing high quality professional learning. Furthermore, the recognition and support of school communities has been found to play a major role in where beginning CRTs choose to keep working (McCormack & Thomas, 2005).

“The best CRTs can read the school culture in a matter of minutes and are a valuable source of knowledge and insight. The effectiveness of these teachers is shaped by how collaborative the school is – if there is a lot of team teaching and interdisciplinary work, they come in as part of the team, if not, they are more on their own.”

– Andy Hargreaves, Research Professor, Boston College

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## At a glance

- Principals and other school leaders should provide CRTs with relevant induction and welcome information, including how to access in-school PL.
- CRTs can also take the lead by requesting feedback on their practice, identifying gaps and areas of strength, thereby starting a conversation about PL.

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# How to include CRTs in school-based professional learning

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There is considerable opportunity for schools to better leverage and ensure the ongoing expertise of their CRT workforce by including them in the PL plan. In AITSL's 2019 stakeholder survey, almost half (44%; n= 337) of those responsible for teachers' professional development, indicated involving CRTs in in-school PL only 'some of the time' or 'hardly ever'. Schools could work towards building an "ethic of care" in which the knowledge and experience of CRTs is respected, valued and built upon (Charteris et al, 2017b). This would not only provide them with an affordable, collaborative and accessible means of development, but would acknowledge that they are valued and respected members of school communities and the teaching profession more broadly.

Stakeholders across the education sector all have important roles in expanding the involvement of CRTs into in-school PL programs. This includes school leaders ensuring CRTs feel welcome, systems and sectors increasing funding, and CRTs expressing interest to be involved. Together this will ensure all teachers have the same opportunities to grow and develop as world class educators.

"I feel that casual teachers are not aware or invited to undertake PL within schools. If we are allowed to we are not made aware. Maybe this could be changed?!"

–Survey respondent

## The role of the school and permanent teachers

Suggestions for avenues through which schools could expand access for CRTs to be involved in PL opportunities include:

- CRTs are provided with essential information about upcoming PL opportunities (either in-school or within the local area). For instance, this could either be in their welcome information, on noticeboards or flyers around the staff room and through inclusion in staff group emails, social media notifications or group text messaging. Make it clear they are welcomed and encouraged to attend.
- CRTs are offered the opportunity to observe expert teachers within the school to help them build their professional practice. As most CRTs are not afforded free periods in their daily allowance, this may require an offer for them to observe on days they are not teaching or for there to be an allowance made on their behalf.
- School Leaders and leading teachers offer to observe a CRT's classroom

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and provide feedback for their professional development.

- School Leaders help CRTs apply, evaluate and reflect on the impact of new approaches that have come about from professional learning. Transferring learning from PL into a change in practice and learner outcomes is vital for growth (Naylor & Sayed, 2014).
- Develop a strong school wide support system for CRTs. This could include explaining “well known policies and procedures, high expectations of student behaviour and a well thought out and consistent communication system among all school staff” (Tannenbaum, 2000, p.72).
- Develop an inclusive culture within schools and the sector more broadly. This would aid in increasing the standing of CRTs within the learning environment, promoting inclusivity and developing a culture which recognises the contribution of CRTs to learner outcomes.

These strategies could work towards CRTs not only feeling included but encouraged to participate in a school community where leaders and other teachers value their professional development.

## The role of the CRT

CRTs also play a role in expanding their inclusion in a school's PL activities. They could actively request feedback from HALTs and other school leaders available to them, track this feedback and then identify any gaps and needs that could be assisted by PL. With an understanding of their own learning needs, this allows for a more nuanced conversation with leaders about their inclusion in in-school PL. Inclusive practices from within the school would also foster and encourage this.



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## At a glance

- Systems, sectors and schools themselves have an important role in enabling access to PL for CRTs through:
  - » Increasing funding and time spent on PL for both schools and individual CRTs,
  - » allowing CRTs access to ICT,
  - » continuing and expanding support for CRT networks.

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# The role of systems and sectors

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Some of the surveyed CRTs (11%) commented that the reason school leaders did not invite them into their PL was due to a lack of school funding. Systems and sectors could ease this financial barrier by providing additional funding specifically for schools to open their in-school PL to CRTs. In addition, systems and sectors could provide funding to build in time for CRTs to engage in PL that is relevant and focused on problems of practices in their individual context. By offsetting some of these costs usually assumed by the CRT, systems would allow them to balance requirements and autonomy in the choice of some PL activities without financial barriers.

Systems could also ease CRTs access to PL by providing them access to appropriate information communication technology (ICT), for example including a system/school email account. The lack of a school email was raised by some CRTs as one reason for being unable to find out about upcoming PL. A staff/professional email would allow CRTs to receive newsletters, staff and system announcements and other important information about the 'PL opportunities available'. Furthermore, a recent report by VIT, recommended greater collaboration between the Department, schools and VIT themselves to both improve communication regarding the availability of PL and methods to improve inclusion of CRTs in PL activities (VIT, 2018a).

Systems and sectors have been vital in establishing and supporting CRT networks and could further increase their impact in this space by linking in with employment agencies that generally have large education networks. These networks create a space in which CRTs come together, share practice and engage in PL activities relevant to the needs of the cohort. An expanded and continued support for those networks would allow these collaborative spaces to grow across all jurisdictions. While some teacher registration authorities (TRAs) support professional learning by linking in with casual teacher networks and others deliver professional development directly, these services vary between jurisdictions. Having a consistent and robust professional development service across TRAs may further increase accessibility to PL amongst CRTs.

The **Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT)** provides support for multiple casual teacher networks across Victoria. These networks exist to provide CRTs an opportunity to develop their professional knowledge and to share their experiences and ideas with colleagues. They are run by volunteers and meet either face-to-face or online. Network leaders organise PL activities which may be run by an external PL provider, an expert teacher, or a teacher from a local school '(VIT, 2018b).'

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# Conclusion

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**CRTs are a vital and necessary part of the teaching workforce and it is of benefit to the entire education community that they have access to opportunities for professional growth and are included as valued and respected members of the learning environments.**

Although meeting 20 hours of PL is a registration requirement for almost all teachers (excluding those employed in Tasmania), research indicates that the very nature of being a CRT can be restrictive in meeting these demands. Overcoming some of the barriers to PL for CRTs include reducing their personal costs, schools providing information regarding upcoming PL activities, leaders encouraging CRTs to attend school-based PL activities, and systems and sectors building and fostering CRT networks.

Together, key stakeholders can work together to ensure all CRTs are undertaking collaborative, ongoing, job-embedded and high-quality professional learning. Ensuring CRTs are encouraged and have opportunities to participate in in-school and high-quality PL will help them feel a part of the community, build their teaching expertise and continue to expand their pedagogy skills — ultimately benefiting the quality learning of students.

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