

INDEPENDENT REVIEW INTO REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION

Submission from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) acknowledges the challenges educators and students face in regional, rural and remote areas. These include small schools where the principal often has a teaching load, or is taking on their first leadership position. Likewise, as remote schools can be difficult to staff, teachers in their first few years teaching often find their first jobs in the most challenging schools. This can lead to burn-out and teacher transience, contributing to a cycle of short-term and inexperienced staffing within schools.

There is a need and a demand for high-quality teaching in Australia's remote schools. Improvements are being made in initial teacher education to better prepare teachers for the various challenges they face when beginning their careers, but there is a need for expert teachers to take on roles in remote schools as well as those who are just starting out in the profession. These expert teachers are needed not only to improve the learning opportunities and outcomes for students but also to provide guidance and mentorship for their less experienced colleagues.

In order to support the engagement of experienced teachers in regional, rural and remote areas, and the retention of beginning teachers, AITSL suggests a range of tools and approaches that will help leverage the expertise within the profession for the benefit of schools all over Australia.

Of the nine suggested focus areas set out in the independent review, the following three are most relevant to our work and therefore the focus of this submission: teachers and teaching, leaders and leadership, and curriculum and assessment.

Teachers and teaching

Initial teacher education reforms

One of the challenges rural and remote schools currently face is attracting quality teachers. This can be offset by improving the expertise of new graduates, who are more likely to find a position in rural schools. AITSL is continuing implementation of the TEMAG (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group) reforms, which seek to attract quality entrants (assessed on both academic and non-academic criteria) to initial teacher education. All preservice teachers must successfully pass a robust assessment of teaching performance prior to graduation to ensure they meet the Graduate career stage of the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* and through this maximise student learning.

TEMAG also recommended primary school teaching graduates obtain specialisations in subjects across the Australian Curriculum. This requirement means that graduates will continue to be prepared to teach across the curriculum, and in addition will have deep skills and knowledge in one learning area. This balance between the capacity to teach across the curriculum and a depth of knowledge in a particular subject areas is especially important in smaller schools, where it is not possible to have specialists in all leaning areas on staff.

An important strategy to encourage graduates to teach and remain in rural and remote locations is to provide experience in these schools during initial teacher education. To do this effectively requires strong school-university partnerships, and ways of ensuring pre-service teachers are well supported even if they are far from where they are studying. Further work on how best to achieve this would be valuable.

Beginning teacher induction

Graduate teachers face many challenges as they begin their career. These include effective time management, engaging their students, forming professional relationships with colleagues, determining their immediate professional learning needs, and ensuring their own wellbeing. These challenges are often magnified in remote settings, where beginning teachers may have fewer colleagues and resources to draw on.

AITSL has published *Graduate to Proficient: Australian guidelines for teacher induction into the profession* which was endorsed by all Education Ministers in July 2016, to support high-quality induction of beginning teachers. This will help create a sustainable workforce by guiding beginning teachers and their mentors in the development of professional practice, as well as supporting professional identity and wellbeing which is vital in the first years of teaching. The implementation of the guidelines is the first step, with practices adopted at the school level, and supported at the system level.

There are also additional challenges for teachers who have moved from major cities or regional centres, including adjusting to a new lifestyle, finding accommodation, and often living independently for the first time. Therefore, in remote settings, induction should focus on the community as well as the school, helping new arrivals adjust to and thrive in the local context. Schools can provide their teachers with an instrumental entry point, as demonstrated in the induction case studies developed by AITSL, including [‘Induction to school and community’](#) filmed at Baynton West Public School in Karratha, Western Australia. The implementation of the guidelines is also supported by the use of the My Induction mobile app. This can be an important touchstone for isolated beginning teachers, as the curated resources and access to expertise via the question bank provides a “mentor in their pocket.”

Supporting beginning teachers to find their place in their new communities will help reduce teacher transience, which has a flow-on effect to students. When teachers leave, they take the relationships they have built with students, and their firsthand knowledge of their progress with them. This can be demoralising for students who are not able to form or maintain connections with their teachers, and also impact their progress as new teachers need to familiarise themselves with their individual students’ needs. Additionally, teachers who have a long-term presence in remote communities are able to form relationships with parents, carers and other members of the community who have a connection to students’ lives. This helps to develop strong, cohesive and ongoing support networks for students’ learning.

Access to expertise

Access to the support and expertise of experienced colleagues is vital for the professional growth of all teachers, particularly beginning teachers. AITSL emphasises the importance of collegial support in the role of Highly Accomplished and Lead teachers (HALTs) in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*. National certification of Highly Accomplished and Lead teachers supports the recognition of expertise, and surrounding initiatives such as the HALT Network provide avenues for these teachers to effectively support colleagues throughout Australia. For example, the My Induction mobile app provides access to a question bank that includes advice from HALTs on common problems faced by beginning teachers, as well as the opportunity to ask further questions. This provides beginning teachers, regardless of their location, access to the expertise of some of our best teachers, overcoming the isolation challenge facing beginning teachers in remote and very remote locations.

While not a replacement for personal interaction, technological solutions such as My Induction can provide timely support that will help teachers persevere and build resilience in challenging

circumstances. This will contribute to the retention of beginning teachers and help ensure the educational workforce in rural and remote areas is sustainable, long-term and of a high quality. However, it is important that teachers are assisted to build communities of practice so they can support and learn from each other as part of their ongoing professional growth. AITSL provides a number of resources to help teachers and schools get started, including Illustrations of Practice such as '[A collaborative professional learning community](#)' filmed in the Victorian regional centre of Shepparton, and the '[Professional learning communities](#)' strategy document in the Feedback resources. AITSL's induction resources also include a [case study](#) of a professional learning network specifically for graduate teachers, 'A network for beginning teachers.' Communities of practice can also exist online, and AITSL supports online learning spaces through its [website](#) and [social media](#) presence, alongside other nationally available resources such as Education Services Australia's [Scootle Lounge](#).

Better understanding and use of workforce data

Turnover of staff in rural and remote schools is often high with beginning teachers often starting out their careers in such locations before moving on to more metropolitan areas. But many teachers start and stay in regional, rural and remote schools. These teachers need to be also recognised as important to the future of these schools and communities. In order to minimise the impact of teacher turnover on students, Australia needs to have a clearer national picture of the teaching workforce. AITSL has been commissioned by Education Council to implement a National Initial Teacher Education and Teacher Workforce Data Strategy (NDS) to address this critical issue. The NDS will inform education systems' understanding of where teachers are going, in comparison to where they are needed. A more nuanced understanding of teacher supply and demand, particularly in rural and remote locations, will enable all stakeholders to target policy more effectively, and to take a more data-driven approach to workforce planning. Detailed information on local workforce entrances, exits and retention across the entire nation will enable policy makers to respond to the drivers of transience in the workforce, and support the deployment of expertise where it is needed most. This data will also be critical to evaluating initiatives designed to attract and retain quality teachers in rural and remote areas.

Leaders and leadership

Principal preparation

School leaders make a crucial contribution in raising student achievement at all levels, creating and sustaining the conditions under which quality teaching and learning thrive, and influencing, developing and delivering on community expectations. The role of the school leader is challenging, especially in rural locations where support may be more limited and there is often an insufficient supply of well-prepared school leaders.

The pathways to school leadership are also diverse, often with multiple entry, exit and re-entry points. Often, to fill leadership positions in rural, remote or regional areas, these pathways can be fast tracked. AITSL's work in school leadership seeks to improve the development and preparation of all aspiring and new school leaders so they are better prepared to meet the challenges of their role. Initiatives to support school leaders include a national leadership development framework, on which AITSL is currently consulting.

This framework will complement and support the ongoing work of systems and sectors, including initiatives in locations where development and preparation often need to be accelerated. Quality professional learning must be accessible to all teachers and leaders, regardless of location. Opportunities should include online delivery of programs, as well as building localised networks with peers to establish further connections and learning opportunities.

The framework will provide a shared language around effective leadership development and set out a nationally agreed, coherent approach to developing school leaders. This will help ensure new principals have the knowledge and skills needed to be effective in the role. It will help to develop a diverse cohort of teachers who aspire to leadership positions across all schools, including those in rural and remote locations, who will be ready to lead in a way that maximises their collective impact on learning outcomes.

Curriculum and assessment

Formative assessment

NAPLAN and PISA provide a useful picture of trends across Australia and the world. However, for teachers to make informed decisions about how to most effectively teach students, they need timely data on each individual's progress. This is true regardless of whether the student is a gifted high achiever, is struggling, or is performing in the middle. For teachers who teach classes across multiple year levels, a common occurrence in rural and remote contexts due to small school sizes, a technological solution that provides easy to access, timely formative assessment data could provide the key to stronger impact.

AITSL is working on initiatives to support the use and spread of high-quality formative assessment practices in Australian schools. These practices will enable teachers to better target their teaching to individual students, taking into account their contexts, strengths, and areas for further growth. We have the technology and expertise in Australia to develop a solution that would help teachers do this. This is particularly important in a rural context, where teachers will need to respond to a variety of contextual circumstances, and need access to high-quality data to ensure gaps in learning are addressed.

A technological solution to the provision of ongoing and timely formative assessment would also help address the problem of student transience. Readily available data on areas of strength, and areas for growth, would enable teachers to respond quickly to the needs of new arrivals in their school. This is particularly important in addressing the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as stated in the guiding principles of AITSL's 2017 – 2020 Strategic Plan: "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education needs are understood, respected and supported in all actions." As a cohort, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have a higher likelihood of transience, which can have a significant impact on their schooling outcomes. Timely, high-quality formative assessment solutions are needed to ensure that teachers can respond to the needs of these students, who are strongly represented in remote areas, effectively.

When teachers have access to information about individual students' progress they can be more targeted in what and how they teach. They can identify gaps early, including areas where a student may have missed core concepts in learning. This is very important, as concepts or skills that are missed early on can block the take up of new skills down the track. Focusing on progress will help ensure students achieve at least a year's growth for each year of schooling. Equally, when schools have rich data on student learning, school leaders can support teachers in meeting the needs of learners, and target resources across the school.

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