

**National curriculum and national  
professional teaching standards:  
Potentially a powerful partnership**

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## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction.....  | 3  |
| Curriculum standards go hand-in-hand with standards for teaching .....   | 4  |
| Agencies responsible for national curriculum and professional teaching standards<br>have distinct but complementary roles .....                        | 7  |
| Implementing curriculum reforms: Messages from the past .....  | 7  |
| Widespread and effective implementation of national curricula will require a radical<br>overhaul of the professional learning system for teachers..... | 8  |
| Where does this leave us? .....  | 10 |
| Concluding comments .....  | 12 |
| References.....  | 14 |

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## Introduction

Two significant developments in Australia education are taking place currently: the creation of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Partnership on Quality Teaching. (NPTQ) Not much has been said so far about the relationship between these two developments, but they have much to offer each other. A partnership between the two would benefit Australian education considerably.

This paper argues that their roles should be seen as distinct but complementary, and mutually reinforcing. The success of each will depend in large part on the success of the other. For example, National curriculum statements will have important implications for what teachers should know and be able to do; that is, for writers of teaching standards. However, successful implementation of a national curriculum will depend fundamentally on the willingness and capacity of teachers to meet those standards.

Australian governments are now addressing the challenge of developing coordinated policies to promote teacher quality; policies that will attract, develop and retain quality teachers; teachers with the capacity to make ambitious educational goals, such as those in the national curriculum statements, manifest in their practice.

The key elements in meeting this challenge have been identified in a recent report that ACER prepared for the Business Council of Australia (BCA, 2008). They include:

- a national, outcomes-based approach to accrediting teacher preparation programs;
- major improvements in teacher salaries relative to salaries in occupations competing for high quality graduates;
- fundamental reform of the pay system for teachers and school leaders;
- improved conditions in schools for teaching and support for teachers' work; and
- policies that will ensure an equitable distribution of accomplished teachers and minimise out-of-field teaching across all schools.

The contribution that a national approach to curriculum ultimately makes to the quality of students' learning opportunities will depend on the extent to which such strategies succeed in assuring the quality of teachers and teaching.

One of the strategies under consideration by the National Partnership is a proposal to develop a national certification system for recognising teachers who attain high teaching standards. As the Business Council of Australia report points out, such a system is critical to strengthening teaching as a profession. Over 20 professional associations for teachers and principal have now developed their own national standards, with the intent that their standards will be used for certification purposes. In no other country to our knowledge, other than the USA, have professional associations mobilised themselves in developing professional standards to the extent they have in Australia. These associations have strong sense of ownership of and commitment to their standards. This provides Australia with a unique and valuable opportunity to make the aims of the COAG reforms a reality. A profession-run certification system that was recognised by employing authorities, in terms of

remuneration and career progression, could provide strong incentives for all teachers to show how they implement ACARA's curriculum goals in their school context.

This paper now turns to several areas where there is potential for a fruitful relationship between the work of an agency responsible for curriculum standards and an agency or agencies responsible for the development and use of professional teaching standards.

### **Curriculum standards go hand-in-hand with standards for teaching**

During 2008 the National Curriculum Board (NCB) began a process of consultation around four national curriculum framing papers; English, mathematics, science and history. These papers describe what students should have the opportunity to learn in these curriculum areas; and each provides a unique justification for including these subjects in the curriculum. They are clearly regarded as worthwhile fields of human endeavour and experience in their own right, with a distinct contribution to make in educating minds. Their educational goals clearly encompass more than teaching generic "essential learning skills."

Curriculum statements such as these are an essential foundation for writing teaching standards (although the content of a full set of teaching standards will include other aspects of teachers' work as well, such as contribution to a school's professional community). These statements provide a vision of what counts as quality learning in each area of the curriculum. The task for writers of professional teaching standards is to articulate what teachers in each area need to know and be able to do to put that vision into practice.

This is the kind of task that national associations for English, history, mathematics and science teachers, among others, have worked through in recent years. The recent NCB curriculum papers therefore provide a valuable basis for these professional associations to revisit and review their teaching standards. This process does not imply "standardising" teaching, or the imposition of "one size fits all". There will always be many ways to teach these subject areas well and to meet the standards, and they will vary with the context of the school.

The processes involved in developing professional teaching standards should be clearly distinguished, and separated, from those used to develop generic competencies, such as those commonly used by employers in performance management systems, and annual performance reviews. While the latter have a very important role to play in school management, they do not attempt to describe what teachers need to know and be able to do to teach in each area of the curriculum, or at different levels of schooling. They do not, for example, attempt to capture what accomplished teachers of history or science know and do.

### **National curriculum standards reinforce the need for subject-specific and level-specific standards for beginning and accomplished teachers**

There has been a debate for some time about whether teaching standards should remain at the generic level, or whether they should drill down and describe in more specific terms what accomplished teachers and teacher leaders know and do. National curriculum standards in areas such as English, history, mathematics and science, among others to come, will reinforce the need for subject- and level-specific standards for beginning teachers and for accomplished teaching.

As mentioned above, each of the NCB Framing Papers presents a strong case to justify inclusion of their subject area in the school curriculum. Each articulates what is unique about the contribution their subject makes to students' experience and understanding of the world.

It seems appropriate, therefore, to ensure that teaching standards also reflect what is unique, as well as what is common, about what, for example, accomplished English, history, mathematics and science teachers know and do. It makes little sense to have distinct curricula for English, history, mathematics and science, but generic standards for those who teach these subjects.

Research shows that expertise in teaching, as in professions such as medicine, is "domain specific", not generic (e.g. Shulman, 1987; Grossman, 1990). The domain in the case of teaching is the subject being taught and the level at which it is being taught. For example, what an expert teacher in the early primary years knows about learning to read is very different from what an accomplished secondary teacher of art knows about helping students to learn how to draw.

The knowledge and skills of teachers working in different domains are not readily transferable. Teachers asked to teach outside their field of subject matter expertise tend to fall back on didactic, boring and unchallenging methods of teaching (Elliott, 2000). Heather Hill et al. (2005) show how a teacher's understanding of the mathematics they are teaching, and how students learn that mathematics, has a significant bearing on their effectiveness.

In her book, *The Subject Matters*, Stodolsky (1990) compares the teaching methods used by primary teachers when they taught social studies to those the same teachers used when they taught mathematics, where many were less confident in their understanding of the subject matter. Her research shows how teachers who were using innovative teaching methods in social studies that actively engaged students in learning reverted to worksheets with little classroom discussion when they turned to teaching mathematics. Brophy (1991) provides a set of chapters showing how subject matter knowledge and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge has a fundamental influence on the teaching methods that teachers use.

Generic standards are necessarily superficial and inappropriate for professions that have an extensive knowledge base. They underestimate, fail to represent accurately, and often trivialise what effective teachers know and do. None of the standards currently used by states and territories for graduate teachers, for teacher registration, or for advanced status articulates what teachers need to know or be able to do to teach effectively in each curriculum area. Because these standards are generic, they provide

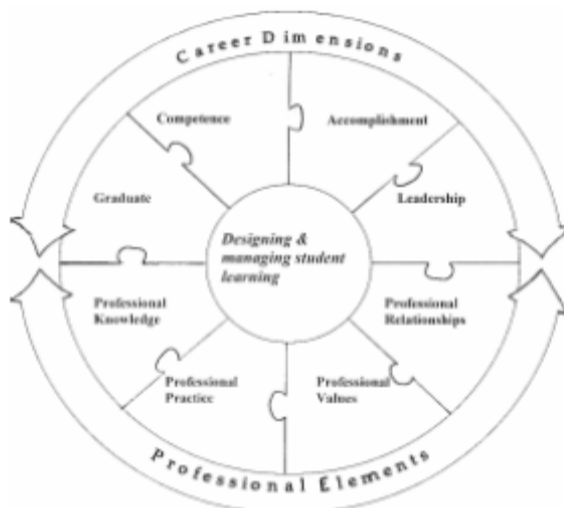
a limited guide as to what beginning teachers should have an opportunity to learn during their training, or what classroom teachers should get better at as a result of their on-going professional learning.

It is important to recognise that most teachers are specialists, and with experience they tend to become increasingly specialised. These differences in expertise are not trivial. Accomplished primary teachers of early numeracy concepts are just as much specialists in their field as accomplished high school teachers of senior mathematics are in theirs. Differences in what they need to know and be able to do need to be reflected in teaching standards if those standards are to be useful for teacher education or professional development. Where possible, standards for each specialist field should be based on recent research on teaching and learning in that field.

COAG recently agreed to the development and implementation of a National Professional Teacher Standards Framework to replace MCEETYA's generic 2003 version shown in Figure 1 (MCEETYA 2003). The new Framework is seen as critical to achieving COAG's teacher quality reforms, which aim to retain and reward quality teachers, support on-going professional learning and create a "genuinely national, mobile teacher workforce to improve access to quality teaching for all Australian students" (COAG National Education Agreement Fact Sheet).

Critical to achieving these reforms will be a national approach to identifying and recognising teachers "who excel against the national standards". The new Framework will provide a foundation for the development of a national certification process for teachers at the accomplished and leading teacher levels, which employers might use to provide incentives for professional learning and reward quality teaching.

**Figure 1: The 2003 MCEETYA National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching**



A new MCCETYA Standards Framework will be more likely to support widespread implementation of a National Curriculum if it reflects the diversity of knowledge and skill in the specialist fields that comprise the teaching profession. There are probably about 20 to 25 different specialist fields within the school teaching profession. (There are 25 accredited specialist areas in the medical profession, including general practice). Identifying the specialist fields within teaching will be an interesting exercise for the profession.

## **Agencies responsible for national curriculum and professional teaching standards have distinct but complementary roles**

As with any good partnership, the roles of a national curriculum agency and an agency responsible for professional standards and certification will need to be distinct but complementary. ACARA's functions will need to be clearly differentiated from those of a national professional body responsible for teaching standards and professional certification.

For example, describing what students should have the opportunity to learn as part of their schooling and what counts as quality learning is properly the role of a statutory agency such as ACARA, responsible as it will be to MCEETYA. However, describing what teachers need to know and be able to do to promote that learning in each specialist field is a role that will best be delegated by MCEETYA to a separate national professional standards and certification body. This body would bring together accomplished teachers, their professional associations and researchers in writing standards for each field of teaching and applying them to purposes such as professional certification. It is certainly not the function of a curriculum agency to tell teachers how they should teach the curriculum.

Recent experience indicates that teachers' professional associations can be entrusted to develop rigorous teaching standards. This work could be conducted under the umbrella of a national professional standards and certification body. Developing standards would enable the profession to play a stronger role in relating research to practice. It would also build teachers' commitment to the standards. As with the English, history, mathematics and science curriculum statements, this commitment will be much stronger when teachers have developed and are responsible for the application of their own teaching standards.

Again, there is room for a very productive relationship between curriculum and teaching standards here if the parties recognize each others' role and keep their interdependence in mind as they conduct their work. While the role of ACARA will be to describe what should be taught, the role of a professional standards body is to draw on curriculum statements in analysing what the profession expects its members to know and be able to do, as a result of their training and their on-going professional learning.

## **Implementing curriculum reforms: Messages from the past**

Despite reservations in some quarters, most would agree that it would be an educational revolution worth having if the visions in the recent NCB consultation papers were fully realised in all schools. However, widespread and effective use of ACARA curricula will require a clear, long-term implementation strategy. What does the research say about the strategies that have been used in the past?

Research over the past one hundred years in teaching has shown that successful innovations are rarely adopted by more than 25 percent of teachers (Elmore 1996). In the heyday of grand curriculum reform in the 1960s and 70s, little was understood about the problems of implementation. It was assumed that good curriculum ideas

were sufficient in themselves to make their own way into classrooms. In practice they were usually adopted by a small proportion of teachers.

During the 1980s, “school improvement” researchers shed considerable light on factors affecting the implementation of curriculum and other educational innovations, particularly the importance of sustained and high-quality professional learning opportunities. However, even when these conditions were in place, the problem remained about how to encourage most teachers to engage in that kind of professional learning. It became clear there were no short cuts to the widespread implementation of new teaching practices, even when certain practices were shown to be highly successful. Reform in teaching is necessarily a teacher-by-teacher process of change through professional development.

More recent approaches to improving student outcomes have been based on the strategy of aligning curriculum, assessment and procedures for school accountability as a means of ensuring that the intended curriculum is taught. This approach was often called “systemic reform”. The theory here was that assessment drives better teaching practice, and that students’ learning will improve if schools and teachers can be held accountable for that learning on the basis of test results. However, the power of this strategy has proved to be limited. Test results can help teachers to know which topics they should give more attention to, but, alone, they do not contain the information that enables teachers to teach those topics better; that is, to know how to teach what is in the curriculum more effectively.

Linking high stakes decisions about schools and teachers to student outcome measures, may also distort the intended curriculum and undermine the kind of teaching it is trying to promote (Barker, 2008). At best this strategy is flawed, at worst it alienates teachers and lowers morale.

In brief, the message from the past is that none of the curriculum implementation strategies used so far has been successful in ensuring most teachers engage in the kind of professional learning that leads to improved learning opportunities for students. School systems worldwide that are attempting to recruit and retain quality teachers need to consider more sophisticated strategies that give due recognition to the professional nature of teaching.

### **Widespread and effective implementation of national curricula will require a radical overhaul of the professional learning system for teachers**

As noted by Peter Cole (2004), professional development activities can be a great way to look busy while actually avoiding change in the classroom. Successful use of national curricula will require a strategy with the power to ensure all teachers want to engage in effective modes of teacher education and professional learning. A standards-based professional learning system (Ingvarson and Kleinhenz, 2006), linked to professional certification provides such a strategy.

Implementation of the Framework will need a new way of thinking about professional learning – a standards-guided professional learning system.

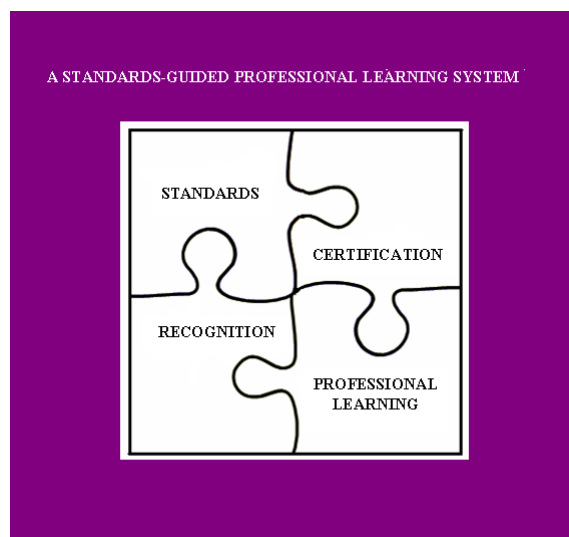


The main components of a standards-based professional learning system are:

- *Profession-wide standards* that articulate what teachers and school leaders should get better at and provide direction for professional development over the long term
- An *infrastructure for professional learning* that enables teachers and future school leaders to gain the knowledge and skill embodied in the professional standards
- A rigorous voluntary system for providing *professional certification* to accomplished teachers and school leaders based on reliable and valid methods for assessing professional performance
- *Recognition Career paths* that value high standards of teaching and leadership and provide substantial incentives and for teachers to attain these standards

These components can be conceptualised as four pieces of a jigsaw, whose interlocking character is captured in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Standard Based Professional Learning System**



Each component has its own functions and characteristics, but each is less effective without the others. Taken together, the four components form a ‘system’ of interdependent and mutually supportive parts. If one were taken away, the system would lose its capacity to function effectively as an instrument for encouraging and recognising evidence of professional learning.

Standards, in essence, describe what the profession expects teachers to get better at with experience and professional learning. They give thereby direction and provide long term goals for professional learning. The purpose of a professional certification system is to provide a rigorous assessment to validate that they have attained those standards. When employers and teacher unions agree to recognise and reward that certification in their enterprise agreements, it provides powerful incentives for teachers to engage in the kind of professional learning that helps them meet those standards of professional performance.

Teachers gain a great deal from compelling and exciting visions of their work, such as the curriculum statements recently issued by the National Curriculum Board in English, history, mathematics and science. Translating those visions into classroom practice will require investment in high quality training, long term professional learning and working conditions that enable teachers to do their work as well as they can.

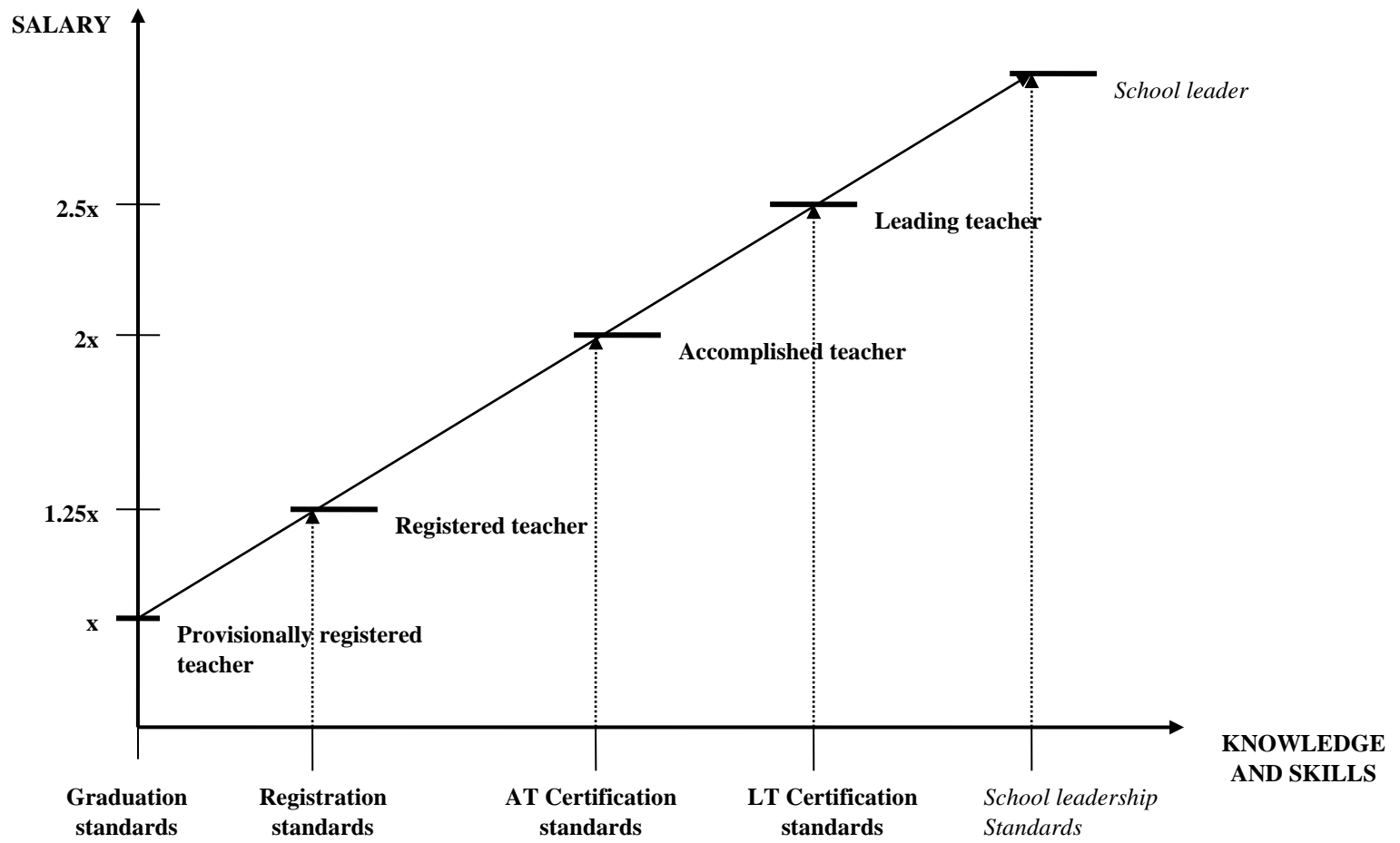
But we must also find ways to strengthen incentives for teachers to show evidence of their professional learning. A complementary strategy to existing strategies is needed, which, potentially, the National Partnership on Teacher Quality can provide. This is to create strong professional normative structures for accomplished teaching that are external to individual teachers and their immediate working environment, and to provide recognition and rewards to teachers who can show how they are meeting those standards through a rigorous certification process. Such a system would provide incentives for all teachers to reach those standards after a certain number of years. It might also lead teachers who cannot, to consider alternative careers.

As mentioned earlier, teaching standards have been created already by teacher subject associations for English, history, mathematics and science, the same four fields as those covered in the curriculum statements recently issued by the NCB. These subject associations are saying through their standards that good teaching is more than a set of personality traits and “doing your own thing” in the classroom. Their standards are creating potentially powerful normative structures for a profession of teaching. Their standards embody the idea that accomplished teachers look outward at challenging conceptions of practice, in addition to looking inward at their values and practice. As profession-wide standards, they transcend particular jurisdictions and school systems.

### **Where does this leave us?**

Development of a National Curriculum for Australian students is now underway. A national framework of professional teaching standards may not be too far behind. A Communiqué emerging from the recent Council of Australian Governments meeting (29<sup>th</sup> of November 2008) indicated that the National Partnership for Teacher Quality will seek to facilitate reforms that could create a rigorous national certification system to recognise the contribution and expertise of accomplished teachers and school leaders. These proposals are consistent with the standards-based career structures proposals put forward recently by the Business Council, the ALP and both the AEU and the AIEU (Figure 3). We are at a point in time where there is a consistent view about a critical element in strengthening teaching as a profession.

Figure 3 A Standards-based Career Structure



It is vital to its success that a certification system be profession-wide; that the major stakeholders come together to support the establishment of an independent body commissioned to provide a national certification system for teachers no matter where they teach. All the well-established professions have a single national approach to professional certification. Teachers are more likely to seek a certification that is portable across states and school sectors. A single system will be more efficient than systems operating within each jurisdiction. The processes of assessing teachers will be more rigorous if it is operated by an independent agency, as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in the USA has demonstrated (Ingvarson and Hattie, 2008; National Research Council, 2008).

In anticipation of such a system, MCEETYA and COAG decided recently to initiate a project that will inform the preparation of a national professional standards framework for accomplished teachers and school leaders. It is intended that this Framework would guide professional development and provide a basis for certification and professional progression.

If this Framework has clear links to future ACARA curriculum statements for the various specialist fields of teaching, it could provide a much more powerful strategy for implementation of high-quality curriculum than we have had in the past. Such a system would provide powerful incentives for most teachers to engage over the long term in effective modes professional learning and evaluations of their practice. Once again we can see the possibilities of a productive relationship between the role of the ACARA and the role of a professional certification system.

### **Concluding comments**

Implementation of a national curriculum will benefit from a strong partnership with a national body for professional standards and certification. This body would work with teachers' professional associations as they develop and refine their standards, based in part on relevant national curriculum statements. This process would need to be conducted in the full view of unions, governments and other employers as they seek to build rewards for professional certification into their EB agreements and conditions for career progression. It must have their full confidence and be responsive to their needs and concerns.

To ensure a productive relationship between curriculum standards and teaching standards Australia needs a single national agency, alongside the ACARA, with one clear and distinct function – to develop teaching standards in each of the specialist fields that comprise school teaching and to provide a certification system for all teachers and school leaders who believe they have met those standards.

How should such a body be created and what form should it take? The most likely option has to be the one that brings to the table all the parties who must be there if the certification system is to be rigorous and rewarded by employing authorities. However, while it will be important for professional certification to be recognised and rewarded by governments, employers and unions, operation of the certification system should be conducted by an independent body. Ultimately its survival will depend primarily on the credibility of the assessment and certification service it provides.

Paradoxically, therefore, the new body will need to be responsive to, but independent from all stakeholders if it is to operate a rigorous professional certification system.

One way forward might be to reconstitute Teaching Australia so that it embraces all stakeholders and focuses on providing a certification system. Another way forward would be to look again at the way in which the Australian Medical Council was created in 1985 by state Ministers of Health and state medical practitioner boards responsible for registration. Although Ministers created it, they delegated its accreditation and certification operations to the experts, the medical practitioners, medical educators and medical researchers.

This is starting to happen in the accreditation of teacher education. It now needs to happen in the certification area so that accomplished teachers and teacher leaders across Australia can have access to a nationally recognised endorsement of their expertise. Since we are moving to a national curriculum, it makes sense to move to a national system for the certification of teachers who are able to teach the various components of that curriculum.

Employers will find a variety of ways in which they can provide incentives and recognition for teachers to develop toward those standards, but it would make little sense economically or professionally for employers in every state and territory and sector to develop their own certification system. This does not happen in any other profession and it would undermine the intention of the National Partnership to strengthen teaching as a profession.

It is time to trust the profession to develop its own national system for defining high quality teaching of the curriculum, promoting development toward those standards and providing recognition to those who reach them. Such a system can be a means by which the teaching profession can protect itself against ill-conceived approaches to teacher evaluation and school accountability. It can also be a means by which the teaching profession can give clearer direction to professional development and improve its ability to ensure widespread use of effective teaching practices (Elmore, 1996)

There is now a broad consensus that Australia should create a national agency with responsibility for providing professional certification for accomplished teachers and school leaders. Together with a national curriculum agency, this will provide two strong pillars to support quality teaching and learning in Australian schools. These two agencies would have the capacity to reinforce and support each other's work and to ensure a productive relationship.

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**Figure 3**

**A Standards-based Career Structure**

