



TOM ALEGOUNARIAS suggests that teachers should be aware of moves towards deregulation masquerading as progressive public policy...

While the world needs an effective teaching profession more than ever before, the essential elements of teaching's professional standing are being discarded in key jurisdictions around the world. It is worth reflecting on how quickly and effectively Australian policy for supporting the teaching profession has evolved, and the implications for continuing reform, in the global context.

In his significant November 2000 Report for the NSW government on the quality of teaching - Quality Mattersⁱ, Dr Gregor Ramsey dubbed teaching the first profession, the profession of professions. He noted that teaching is the professional practice most necessary for building other professions. All others - doctors, dentists, actuaries, pass through our hands on their way to professional status.

Dr Ramsey did not and could not have meant that teaching pre-dates other professions, as the idea that teaching is and should in all circumstances be a profession was still being debated, even among teachers, well into the 1970s. By the time of Dr Ramsey's report there was no question of the importance of professional status among teachers. The point of his report was to describe the elements of professional structures and cultures that would secure the professional status of teaching into the future.

That report was the first of a series of policy and legislative advances that have arguably provided Australia with the most coherent regulatory and policy frame for supporting teaching in the world.

Cutting a long story very short, Ramsey's work led to the establishment of the NSW Institute of Teachers and a Professional Standards Framework which was ultimately adapted and adopted to become the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Australian Professional Standards for Teachersⁱⁱ.

Of course, no important policy flower is ever cultivated in isolation, and this work was nurtured by professional bodies from around Australia, including important contributions by teacher unions, and boosted by federalist government activism, of both the cooperative and competitive sort.

Moreover, in places like Scotland a form of minimum standard for registration as a teacher had been in place since 1965ⁱⁱⁱ. In the United States the work of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was implementing a formal recognition process for outstanding teachers^{iv}. The Australian Council for Educational Research played a key part in bringing many ideas to Australia^v and academic researchers were drawn to the space between theory and application that Professional Standards represent.



So the provenance of success is myriad, and I don't intend to claim exceptional standing when I note that in 2000 I was the CEO of the NSW Institute of Teachers as this particular policy approach was set in legislation for the first time anywhere in Australia or the world. This policy which was transcribed into AITSL's charter shortly after AITSL was established is generally still supported across the profession, including by the teacher unions that were subsequently excluded from AITSL's governance arrangements – but only after the standards charter was adopted nationally.

As a result, I do claim some insight into the policy pressures, sectional perspectives and conceptual breakthroughs that originally resulted in the particular form of the policy. And the relevance here is what insight this might provide for dealing with the current reaction against professional standing for teachers in places like England and parts of the United States.

Unfolding the standards

I won't describe here every element of the Australian Standards Framework and associated policies that make it both unique and significant, but a couple of dimensions are worth noting.

One is the availability of accreditation as an outstanding teacher – either at Highly Accomplished or Lead Teacher. This places outstanding teaching in a context of professional growth with all other teachers. Outstanding teachers and leaders evolve their practice on the basis of knowledge gained as students and in practice, not independently from collegial experience.

The Framework also includes requirements for Initial Teacher Education graduates. The capacity to be accredited or registered at Proficient Teacher level, and subsequently at Highly Accomplished or Lead is built on knowledge gained through a recognised university degree, complemented subsequently by practice and further development.

The Standards were developed by practicing teachers. A range of representative bodies including teacher unions nominated individuals that dedicated months of time to developing drafts that were subsequently independently validated by teachers in different contexts. Teachers themselves exercise judgment as to who meets the standards, within a strict system of oversight, run largely by accredited teachers. Outstanding teachers, for example, are selected from among those that are regarded by their peers, including principals, as indeed being outstanding practitioners, and who are already active in providing leadership and support in their schools and classrooms.

The integration of graduate qualifications with effective and outstanding teaching in a single framework represents teachers' expectations of themselves as a coherent profession.

The Standards are a reference point for determining professional standing. In exercising consistent



judgment against these high standards teachers are issuing an assurance to the community that systems are in place for every student to be taught by a high quality teacher. The Standards describe this expectation. Judgments against the Standards enact it. This is the essence of a profession. It is independent from but related to employment practices. Employers, that is, schools or systems, can and should be able to exercise judgment in selecting individuals to employ as teachers.

The point of a profession is that this choice is exercised within the accreditation processes designed to protect the interests of the community and the status of the practitioners.

This is important and virtuous public policy, and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers make it happen.

Slipping standards

But it would be wrong to present the Australian situation as a heralding of inexorable progress, with variations emerging on recognisable principles in similar jurisdictions. In fact, in many places around the world, the policy dynamic for quality teaching is in the opposite direction.

In these places there is an emphasis on deregulating qualifications and aligning the right to be called a teacher directly and simply with employment status.

In 2010, England abolished its General Teaching Council. Now, if you Google Unqualified Teacher England, you will see endless pages of advertisements placed by schools. In the United States the GFC caused a reversal of previous gains in requiring minimum qualifications for teaching in many states.

In Sweden and Norway, there is what appears a reluctance to even describe what constitutes quality teaching, beyond broad ethical statements, for fear of undermining the individual's autonomy, leaving the formal status of teacher to be a simple function of employment and tradition.

From a policy development perspective, these conflicting approaches from relatively similar socio-economic environments is not a surprise. The two approaches to regulating teaching reflect a deeper set of values being applied to a common challenge.

The challenge is to lift educational attainment. There is increasing awareness among governments of the importance of education to a jurisdiction's relative competitiveness and prosperity.

In a global economy with easily shifting capital flows, the relative advantage of developed economies is in the quality of the 'human capital' which might attract services and creative industry investment. This makes the quality of education a primary social and economic policy lever. The single most direct policy lever for improving educational attainment is teaching.



We teachers may want to emphasise complex contextual factors that influence our effectiveness, but for decades now the story has been a simple one among legislators – lift teaching to lift educational outcomes to lift investment.

The broad approaches to achieving this objective represent archetypal public policy values. The deregulatory approach has been the most common frame for policy reform of the past 30 years.

Put crudely, it places trust in the judgments of individuals pursuing their perspective, with dispersed and localised accountabilities. Having been, over these decades, a focus of political contestation, it is perhaps better understood than the regulatory approach represented by formal standards.

The regulatory standards approach draws on principles of collective, or at least organised and shared, responsibility and faith in technical expertise. In the case of teaching it also relies on government recognising that expertise.

A true profession

The principles represented by a regulatory Standards approach go to what constitutes a profession in the first place. The history of professions draws on collective protection of standards on an ethical basis. The idea and history of professions is also closely tied with the establishment and growth of universities.

It is also arguable that professional status and formal professional standards draw intrinsically from principles of evidence and observation and order that are inherent in modernity and even enlightenment thinking. Faith in the role of professional judgment and expertise is the shared method in matters requiring expert judgment, whether that be law, engineering or accounting. And in each of these there are statements of practice that act as a common reference point for validating that judgment.

It is not possible to have a profession without common and agreed standards of practice. Not necessarily as prescriptions, but as bases for connecting judgments and therefore being in professional practice.

When the current teaching Standards approach was being developed in the early 2000s in NSW it represented a new perspective on teaching for legislators. As they considered what was then and for them a completely new way of thinking about teaching, some ‘first principle’ arguments came to the surface.

Those most opposed to Standards for teachers argued exactly that teaching was not a profession. It was either an ethical vocation or a form of paid public exposition. They also argued that creating a



Standards and Accreditation framework would give teachers the sort of power over labour supply that only 'real' professions can be trusted to exercise. While those opposed were a minority, in bureaucratic and legislative circles there were regular murmurings intoning Dracula and blood-banks.

There were two arguments that the deregulators brought up as practical examples of why teaching should not be regarded as a profession.

The first was that the quality of initial teacher education did not warrant it, that individuals emerge from degrees without the uniformity of quality that a true profession would insist on. In professions the relationship between the practice and the theoretical base is tight and individual members of the profession are vigilant to ensure that quality is upheld.

The second argument was that teachers resist recognising and celebrating outstanding quality from among their members, which a true profession uses to drive both status and improvement. The solution from their perspective to addressing the challenge of quality teaching was: Part 1, Deregulate entry so that teaching qualifications as such are not required for appointment as a teacher; Part 2, Instigate a system of performance pay linked directly either to principal/employer judgment, or to outcomes data.

Maintaining high standards...

Deregulators highlighted the advantages of such an approach above the Professional Standards approach. Getting teachers to agree on a set of Standards that would also make sense to the broader public would be impossible they said; and a deregulated approach would be a lot cheaper to maintain.

I am hoping that at this stage of the article the reader will recognise the currency of those arguments in recent public debate.

Abolishing licensing or registration requirements for being a teacher and implementing crude performance pay systems are common reflexive responses to perceived crises in education internationally.

The arguments most often emanate from outside education^{vi}.

Education policy sways with the winds generated by the bigger debates on how to run a modern society and economy.

It's the market versus the government, again.



The contest of ideas on how to promote teaching is not over, including in Australia, and arguments made against Professional Standards have not been defeated. While the Chicago School has disciples they will be vigilant on professional teaching Standards, waiting for data.

The areas of vulnerability first identified by de-regulators with regard to Professional Standards are still demanding attention. Accreditation of teachers at the higher levels of Highly Accomplished and Lead is advanced in NSW, where forms of financial recognition are either in place or about to be introduced across all school sectors. But some states are not committed, and internationally only the most secure (but effective) jurisdictions, like Singapore, have taken up the challenge. To hold off the performance pay push accreditation processes for Highly Accomplished and Lead must maintain the quality in professional judgment demonstrated so far. But it must also accelerate the rate of recognition of outstanding teachers. Being resistant or even lethargic in identifying and rewarding quality teaching is akin to issuing an invitation to deregulators to come on in and have a go.

The most active area of policy work since the establishment of the Standards has been Initial Teacher Education. The previous Federal Government's introduction of unlimited funded undergraduate places has complicated efforts to ensure that all graduates meet the appropriate standards, in all disciplines. It is not in fact clear in what circumstances and in what ways Initial Teacher Education qualifications can be regarded as professional degrees, or generalist degrees. That is not a comment on the quality of those qualifications, but on the distance we still need to travel towards professional coherence with initial teacher education. An authentic webbing of the work of teacher educators and teachers has not yet been achieved and must be a priority.

The policy reversals for the teaching Standards project in some important jurisdictions is best understood as a deregulatory public policy approach being applied to teaching, rather than an evolution of educational policy thinking.

The deregulation option was there when the Professional Standards Framework was first being formed in NSW, and it is still available to any policy maker who loses faith in the value of accrediting teachers against Standards.

What is at stake is the status of teaching as a profession.

Endnotes:

- i. <http://www.nswteachers.nsw.edu.au/IgnitionSuite/uploads/docs/Quality%20Matters%20-%20Report%20of%20the%20Review%20of%20Teacher%20Education%20-%20Gregor%20Ramsey%20Nov%202000.pdf>



www.cpl.asn.au/journal

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- ii. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers>
- iii. <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/about-gtcs/who-we-are/history-of-GTCS.aspx>
- iv. <http://www.nbpts.org/national-board-certification>
- v. http://research.acer.edu.au/teaching_standards
- vi. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/georgeleef/2013/10/24/a-key-reason-why-american-students-do-poorly>

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