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Australia's Professional Excellence Policy Empowering School Libraries

Pru Mitchell

University of Adelaide, South Australia

Abstract

All sectors of Australian education are currently seeking to define and promote quality teaching, and are developing policies on teacher quality and educational leadership. The national Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching sets out agreed foundational elements and dimensions of effective teaching, and provides an architecture within which generic, specialist and subject-area specific professional standards can be developed.

*In 2005 the Australian School Library Association (ASLA) and the Australian Library & Information Association (ALIA) released the joint publication: **Standards of Professional Excellence for Teacher Librarians**, a document that assists teacher librarians to find their place within the professional teaching standards agenda. Developed by the joint ALIA/ASLA Policy Advisory Group in collaboration with the profession and stakeholder groups, the standards articulate the professional knowledge, professional skills and professional commitment demonstrated by teacher librarians working at a level of excellence. They represent the goals to which all teacher librarians should aspire, and provide inspiration for quality teaching and ongoing professional practice.*

This paper will outline the policy framework underpinning the ALIA-ASLA Standards of Professional Excellence for Teacher Librarians and show how the project seeks to empower school libraries by helping teacher librarians evaluate their professional practice. As the primary purpose of the standards document is to provide a framework for the ongoing professional learning of teacher librarians this paper will consider the standards as a tool in the development of a professional learning plan for individuals and the professional associations that serve them.

This paper opens with an extremely abbreviated 'voyage of discovery' through education in Australia, highlighting policy and programs in the area of quality education. It moves on to show how school libraries have built themselves into this scenario and what impact we hope will be seen in future Australian visits as a result of this quality teaching and professional standards policy agenda. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) there are 3.3 million full-time school students being educated in 9,607 schools by almost 230,000 full-time equivalent teachers. These schools vary considerably in structure, curriculum, assessment and teaching thanks to the decision of those drafting the Constitution of Australia (1901) to allocate responsibility for school education to the eight state and territory governments. Teachers and students moving across Australian state borders get a taste of how it would be to move to another country in terms of curriculum, levels of schooling, funding, and portability of qualifications and experience. The complexity of this scenario grows when the Catholic and Independent sectors of schooling (catering for nearly 30% of students) are overlaid on the state and territory government school systems. Each of these 24+ administrative units sets their own qualification, employment and professional development requirements for teachers. While teacher registration boards have been established in some states for many years, other systems have not required registration at all, and for the past thirty years there has been minimal, if any, form of teacher inspection for classroom teachers (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004).

Despite this often-decried fragmentation, diversity and lack of teacher accountability; when measured as products of an Australian education system on international studies such as PISA (OECD 2003 reported in Thomson et al, 2004), Australian students consistently rate quite well. Fifth in mathematical literacy after Hong Kong, China, Finland, Korea, and the Netherlands, fourth in scientific literacy behind Finland, Japan and Korea and second only to Finland in reading literacy. Australian students also reported more favourable student-teacher relationships than the OECD average. Results such as this seem to support the premise that quality education can be achieved without a coherent national system of curriculum, national teacher registration or common ages of schooling across states.

In fact it is no longer the case that states and territories single-handedly control education in Australia. In 1974 the Australian national government took over the funding of universities and with financial control came the opportunity to influence policy direction. The current quality education agenda in Australia is generally considered to have started in the Higher Education sector with the document *Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s* (Baldwin 1991) and included the establishment by 2001 of an Australian Universities Quality Agency as "an independent national agency charged with promoting, auditing, and reporting on quality assurance in Australian higher education." (AUQA 2004) While schools remain theoretically the responsibility of state and territory governments, the Australian national government certainly has policies and programs for schools and provides significant funding to government and non-government school authorities to support 'agreed priorities and strategies'. Through a Council made up of all state, territory, Australian Government plus New Zealand Ministers of Education strategic policy at the national level is coordinated, with negotiation of national agreements on shared objectives and interests. (MCEETYA 2002)

Along with a determined agenda of national benchmarking and reporting, quality teaching has become a strong priority for the Australian Government's involvement in the schooling sector. There is however some disquiet and debate in the school sector about exactly what is meant by 'quality', with many teachers sharing Vidovich & Porter's (2004:110) observation that "quality has become a global policy discourse across private and public sectors, including education, and that many policies of quality in education amount to mechanisms of accountability." Searches of major Australian education thesauri bring up a conflicting range of terms in this area including teacher effectiveness, educational accountability; quality control, best practice, benchmarking and Total Quality Management. Sachs (1994) separates the range of quality terms into two major categories: 'quality assurance' (external, quantitative accountability) and 'quality improvement' which has an internal, employee driven locus of control, devolved and facilitative administrative structures, using peer review and more qualitative indicators of success. Sachs sums up quality assurance as being about control while quality improvement is about empowering participants. The suspicion is that while the Australian teaching profession is looking to standards to address quality improvement and to 'empower the participants', government policy and initiatives are inclining towards quality assurance and measuring quantitative indicators of success.

The most tangible indicator of government ideology and intention is where policy effort and financial aid are directed. The first step in the quality agenda for schools came in 1996 with the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teachers, an attempt to come up with a national basic teacher qualification and to improve portability across states and territories. Concern was raised by the profession and teacher unions, particularly about this terminology and the danger of attempting to reduce the complex work of teaching to competencies that cannot accommodate teaching's inherent system thinking, creative and intuitive elements. In 2000, the Australian Government Quality Teacher Project was launched to fund research and teacher professional development projects in national priority areas of literacy, numeracy, mathematics, science, information and communications technology, vocational education in schools, a national safe schools framework and professional standards.

In July 2001 the Ministerial Council established a Teacher Quality and Educational Leadership Taskforce to "foster national collaboration to enhance the status and quality of the teaching profession." In November 2003 this taskforce produced the *MCEETYA National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching*. The discussion and rationale surrounding this framework makes many impressive claims as to the benefits of professional standards. Lane (2001) believes that professional teaching standards will mean for teachers "greater recognition, improved understanding, quality entrants to the profession, greater emphasis on quality, greater emphasis on reflection and evaluation, and an integrated approach to professional development." The framework document itself acknowledges that the quality of teaching and the knowledge, skills, values and practices of Australia's teachers are factors central to improving student outcomes. However, there is no doubt that the framework seeks to address the quality assurance perspective given statements like "increasing public confidence in school education through explicit and defensible standards that guide improvement in

students' levels of educational achievement and through which the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of schooling can be measured and evaluated.” (p.1)

Then in 2004 an Australian government funded National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership was announced to act ‘by and for the teaching profession’ and to raise the status, quality and professionalism of teachers and school leaders throughout Australia. The difficulty of truly acting for the profession, given its mandated functions and dependence on government funding, is a challenge acknowledged by those involved in the Institute. Two of its four core functions of “professional standards and accreditation, professional learning and course accreditation, research and communication and promotion of the profession” seem to sit very clearly in the quality assurance sphere. In April 2005 the Minister for Education promised the continuation of funding for quality teaching programmes, and a further four years of funding for the National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership. In celebrating the almost \$300 million committed to quality teaching by his government since 2000, Nelson stated that “raising the quality, professionalism and status of teachers is the Government’s top priority in schooling. Quality teaching is the most important factor that influences the educational outcomes of our children, accounting for up to 60% of the variation in learning outcomes.”

Running parallel to government action has been activity by teacher professional associations beginning with the Australian College of Educators who organised national meetings to raise awareness of professional standards and to document the teaching profession’s priorities. Sponsored by the Australian Government Quality Teacher Project several professional education associations were already well down the path of researching and developing discipline-specific teaching standards. The Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers’ in 2002 documented ten standards, describing ‘excellent teachers of mathematics’ in the three domains of professional knowledge, professional attributes and professional practice. The Australian Science Teachers Association’s *Professional standards for highly accomplished teachers of science* were being trialled, and the English Teachers Association and Australian Literacy Educators Association produced an in-depth document and website known as *STELLA: Standards for teachers of English and Literacy in Australia* (2001) which attempts to describe “what good English/Literacy teachers believe, know and are able to do.” It is worth noting that each of these projects were clearly intended as ‘quality improvement’ activities inspiring teachers who wished to become ‘highly accomplished’ or ‘excellent’.

A Standards for Teacher Librarians project was first proposed by the ALIA-ASLA joint taskforce in April 2002 following attendance by a taskforce representative at the Australian College of Educator's 2002 National Meeting of Professional Educators. This joint taskforce, along with a policy advisory group, was formed as part of a 2001 partnership agreement between the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and the Australian School Library Association (ASLA) to address common priorities including: “articulating and promoting the role of library and information services and staff within the school community; investigating employment and career path opportunities for qualified teacher librarians; reviewing publishing programs within the two organisations and opportunities for further collaboration; and identifying professional development priorities for currency of knowledge and implementing best practice.” (Sharing the

future, 2001) The professional teaching standards movement represented an ideal avenue to pursue each of these priorities.

The original aim of the standards project was to “develop, disseminate and promote a statement of standards for teacher librarians in Australia which describes the knowledge, skills and abilities of professional practising teacher librarians in Australia. This statement should represent the goals to which Australian teacher librarians aspire, should inform ongoing professional practice, and provide a basis for pre-service and continuing education of teacher librarians.” (Mitchell, 2003) The challenge of the project was to achieve national consensus on standards of excellence for teacher librarians in Australian schools in order to improve professional practice and enhance student learning outcomes. The project team recognised that teacher librarians would also be party to generic teaching standards produced at the state, sector or national level, but like the Science, Mathematics and English professional associations, the team sought to define the knowledge, skills and engagement that teacher librarians require in addition to generic teaching knowledge and skills.

This period of interest in professional associations developing standards coincided with debates within the literature about the extent to which teacher librarianship is in fact a profession (Bundy 2001, Harvey 2001, Mitchell, 2002, Shannon, 2002, Morizio & Henri 2003). As professions go, teacher librarianship is quite young. In her excellent historical perspective on Australian school librarianship in the *Australian Library Journal* Maureen Nimon (2004) dates the profession from 1966 with the publication of the Library Association of Australia Children’s Libraries Section Committee on School Libraries document: *Standards and objectives for school libraries: a guide to minimum standards and suitable objectives*. Considering the Professions Australia (1997) definition of a profession, “a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and uphold themselves to, and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others,” members of the taskforce worked from the premise that teacher librarians were something more than simply teacher plus librarian. There was definitely a distinctive set of knowledge and skills derived from research that represented teacher librarianship, and it was this project’s task to define it.

The ALIA/ASLA standards project commenced with a literature review, a review of teaching and librarianship standards initiatives internationally and of existing standards documents, with particular reference to the work of other education-related professional associations. In addition to the frameworks appearing in the teaching profession, ALIA and ASLA had a number of existing documents that supported the concept of teacher librarianship as a profession. The key policy publication *Learning for the Future: developing information services in schools* (2001) includes a teacher librarian role statement and significant indicators of effective library and information services provision in schools. The *ALIA library and information sector: core knowledge, skills and attributes* (2003) sets out core knowledge, skills and attributes for those who work in the library and information sector. ALIA also provides a core values statement (2002) and a statement on professional conduct (2002).

The benefits of employing an external consultant was a key question in the early stages of the project as there was some concern about whether ALIA and ASLA publishing their own Standards document raised issues of credibility and lessened the impact of this document. It was pointed out that the existing Australian teacher standards documents had all been published by the relevant professional associations, even if the process had involved funding through the Quality Teacher Project, and the research undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research or a University. Without access to this funding, and following discussion with a consultant used by other associations, it was decided to continue managing the project within the taskforce. In considering the extent and format of the standards the taskforce agreed that while structural consistency with other professional standards documents was a priority, a succinct statement format of the standards document was preferred over a more narrative document, especially as *Learning for the Future* (2001) provided this form of exposition. Thus the document was designed to be readily published on four pages.

The taskforce members worked through the initial material via teleconference and email discussions, gradually refining structure, content, and wording on a consensus model. Following the third draft a consultation phase commenced with ALIA Schools Section committee, ASLA Council and an expert panel of educators reviewing the draft in July 2003. These groups provided a generally positive response as well as suggestions for improvement. State and territory-based consultations took the form of workshops with key stakeholders including principals, academics from both education faculties and library schools, unions, other professional associations and system and sector policy makers. Face-to-face workshops were held where possible and proved significantly more effective than simply sending copies of the draft out for consultation and comment. Following final workshop sessions at the 2003 ASLA national conference a final version was forwarded to ASLA Council and the ALIA Board for endorsement. Design and publication of the standards document was completed late in 2004, and a national launch occurred at the 2005 ASLA conference in Canberra on 13 April 2005 by the CEO of the National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership.

There was strong external support throughout the project for adopting a quality improvement philosophy and thus no attempt was made to define entry-level standards (despite the original project description), or to produce a tool for performance appraisal or external review. These standards describe experienced practitioners who already hold the dual qualifications that define a teacher librarian in Australia, and are intended to be aspirational statements that refer unashamedly to excellent or highly accomplished teacher librarians. The standards were developed 'by the profession for the profession' to guide professional learning and thus improve student learning. Within the broad framework of professional knowledge (what teacher librarians know), professional practice (what they do) and professional commitment (their attitudes, commitment to service and engagement with the profession) there are twelve standards which attempt to encapsulate the complex work of the teacher-librarian. No hierarchical arrangement of statements is intended, rather it is recognised that experienced practitioners draw from a professional palette combining knowledge, skills and attributes appropriate to their context. Each of the twelve standards provides three or four pointers that elucidate that standard.

Professional Knowledge

Excellent teacher-librarians.

- 1.1 understand the principles of lifelong learning
- 1.2 know about learning and teaching across curriculum areas and developmental levels
- 1.3 have a rich understanding of the school community and curriculum
- 1.4 have a specialist knowledge of information, resources, technology and library management

Professional Practice

Excellent teacher-librarians

- 2.1 engage and challenge learners within a supportive, information-rich learning environment
- 2.2 collaboratively plan and resource curriculum programs which incorporate transferable information literacy and literature outcomes
- 2.3 provide exemplary library and information services consistent with national standards
- 2.4 evaluate student learning and library programs and services to inform professional practice

Professional Commitment

Excellent teacher-librarians

- 3.1 model and promote lifelong learning
- 3.2 commit to the principles of education and librarianship
- 3.3 demonstrate leadership within school and professional communities
- 3.4 actively participate in education and library professional networks

Standards of professional excellence for teacher librarians 2004

Despite the broad range of groups represented in the consultation process, there were surprisingly few challenges in negotiating a national set of a priorities and the subsequent standards. This may be due to the lack of employer-based advisory services for school libraries which means Australian teacher librarians are used to looking to their professional associations for leadership. It is interesting to note that the single issue to cause significant debate was the inclusion in statement 2.4 of the phrase 'evaluate student learning'. There were a number of teacher librarians, particularly in secondary schools, who did not see this as part of their role while the ascendant opinion was that evaluation of student learning was such an essential function of being a teacher that to omit it from a description of excellence was to seriously compromise the professional credibility of the teacher librarian.

Throughout 2005 both associations will continue to promote understanding and use of the standards by teacher librarians, employers, tertiary institutions and member associations through articles, conference papers and workshops. Ongoing professional development for practitioners is an acknowledged component of a profession. Just as we hope that our doctor, dentist and accountant have continued to undertake professional education since they graduated, the community should be able to assume that its teacher librarians have undertaken ongoing professional learning, keeping up with the latest knowledge and practice. If teacher librarianship is a specific discipline with unique skills, knowledge and attitudes, then we as a profession have a responsibility to ensure that our practitioners maintain their knowledge. ALIA has in place a Continuing Professional Development programme through which professionals

register their professional development plan and the activities undertaken to maintain their professional knowledge and skills. This provides not only a framework, but also recognition of the practitioner.

It is hoped that teacher librarians will use the standards to guide collection of evidence of professional excellence. We look forward to teacher librarians telling their stories, contributing to the ASLA best practice project or the EdNA Online teacher librarian community and writing for journals and conferences. Work is also planned on the use of professional portfolios, e-portfolios or personal learning journals whereby teacher librarians record samples of student work, teaching related documentation, videotapes and personal reflection and commentary to support professional growth. While nothing like the US National Board for Professional Teaching Standards currently exists in Australia there is a possibility that the National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership may pursue a similar programme of recognition for highly accomplished practitioners. Ingvarson et al (2005) have initiated research into the challenging area of the links between teacher professional development and student learning outcomes, highlighting factors such as relevancy, active learning and the importance of belonging to a professional community. Professional associations will benefit from ongoing research in this area and should encourage evidence-based practice as part of their expectations for advanced practitioner status.

Alongside this attention to quality and professional standards has sprung up a new enthusiasm for awards and recognition schemes for Australian teachers and teacher librarians. For several years the Australian government has funded quality teacher awards, and Science Week awards, while commercial scholarship funds sponsor general teacher awards nominated by parents. In 2003 ASLA was pleased to accept the suggestion and sponsorship of Pledger Consulting to institute a Teacher Librarian of the Year Award. This award recognises and honours an exceptional Australian teacher librarian in a school setting whose professional practice has a positive impact on student achievement and information literacy. ASLA regards such awards as a means of celebrating excellence and as an effective advocacy strategy, however the philosophical foundation and intent of the *Standards of professional excellence for teacher librarians* is for each teacher librarian to develop a personal professional learning plan that addresses the fundamental question of whether the individual is learning and growing as a professional, whether they are closer to excellence today than they were last week or last year, rather than how they compare with others.

The joint ALIA/ASLA Standards for teacher librarians project has been responsible for developing national professional standards in conjunction with teacher librarians, administrators, policy makers and academics from both the education and librarianship sectors. Having developed these standards, had them accepted as policy by ASLA and ALIA, the success of the project will now be measured by the extent to which teacher librarians, tertiary education providers, education sector, unions, employers of teacher librarians and the community share this definition of quality, and recognise it when they see it. Future action by the professional associations will involve monitoring the progress of the standards, evaluating the standards and their use over the medium term, and in the light of the current Australian funding of quality teacher projects to apply for funds to implement, research issues and what difference quality teacher librarians make to

student learning, and thus continue as key contributors to quality education in Australia.

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