

Australia: National Change in a Loosely Coupled Federal System

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Abstract Over the past 12 years there has been a growth of interest in education policy in Australia. Education policy has become a matter of considerable political interest especially in terms of structures, processes and finances. Even though the constitutional responsibility for education remains with States and Territories, there has been an increasing emphasis on national reform especially in early childhood education, national curricula, assessment and accountability, improving teacher quality, youth transitions, and school improvement. Recently there has emerged a set of proposals for reforms in educational finance.

Keywords Educational governance • Educational reform • School improvement • Australia

Recent years have seen considerable interest in education policy in Australia so that stories about education feature regularly in news media. Education policy has become a matter of considerable interest to both major political parties in terms of structures, processes and finances. Even though the constitutional responsibility for education remains with states and territories, there has been an increasing focus on national reform. This chapter describes the major reform trends that have emerged over the 12 years since the turn of the century. The first section of the chapter describes the context in which educational reforms are taking place. This is followed by a brief description of some mechanisms through which reforms are enacted and which in themselves represent reforms in educational governance. The major focus of the chapter is on a set of reforms intended to improve educational outcomes for students. These include early childhood

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education, national curricula, assessment and accountability, improving teacher quality, youth transitions, and school improvement. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of the possibility of reforms in educational finance that have the potential to shape the immediate and intermediate future even though the detail is not yet clear.

Policy reform in Australian education is guided by a document agreed by all (federal and state) education ministers in December 2008: the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA 2008). It specifies two overall goals for schooling: the promotion of equity and excellence; and the development of successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens. The document outlines more specific goals in early childhood education, teaching and school leadership, curriculum and assessment, accountability and transparency, senior secondary schooling and transitions to further study and work, and improving outcomes for Indigenous young people and those from low socio-economic backgrounds. This set of goals is supported by a 4-year plan that identifies key strategies for each area of action (MCEEDTA 2009). These goals and plans are linked to a *National Education Agreement* (NEA) and related agreements in domains such as those concerned with early childhood, adopted through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as well as other National Agreements. Under the NEA, Australian governments have agreed “to work together towards the objective that all Australian school students will acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy”. This agreement includes a framework for reporting on performance as well as a specification of roles and responsibilities.

1 Context

In 2011 Australia had a population of just over 21,500,000 in an area of 7.7 million square kilometres. Although the overall population density is low, it is a highly urbanised society. Outside the cities the country is sparsely populated; 28 % of primary schools have 100 or fewer students, and 37 % of secondary schools have 300 or fewer students (ABS 2012a, pp. 17–18). Australia is classified as a high-income country. Literacy among adults is nearly universal. In 2011, 57 % of those aged 15–64 years (and 72 % of 19-year-olds) had completed secondary school, and 23 % held a bachelor’s degree or a higher qualification (ABS 2012b). Although the Australian population is mainly of European background, immigration has produced greater ethnic and cultural diversity. In 2011 one fifth of the population (19 %) had been born in a country where English was not the main language (ABS 2012b). About 5 % of Australian school students are Indigenous, and approximately 24 % of the Indigenous population live in remote or very remote locations.

1.1 Education Systems

Australia does not have a single national education system. The states and territories are each responsible for their own educational administrations although the overall structures are similar. Although the role of the federal government has increased in the past two decades, state and territory governments are responsible for providing schooling to all school-age children. They determine curricula, course accreditation, student assessment and awards for both government and non-government schools. They have the major financial responsibility for government schools, contribute supplementary funds to non-government schools and regulate school policies and programmes. State and territory education departments recruit and appoint the teachers in government schools, supply resources and provide limited discretionary funding for use by schools. State and territory governments are also responsible for the administration and major funding of vocational education and training (VET). Some commentators have noted that centralised administrative structures emerged historically to promote uniformity of educational provision for a dispersed population (Kandel 1938).

School attendance is compulsory from 6 years of age in all jurisdictions except Tasmania, where it is compulsory from 5 years of age. However, almost all children commence a preliminary year of school around 5 years of age. Most children continue to Grade 6 or 7 (depending on the jurisdiction) in their primary school so that they complete primary school at the age of 11 or 12 years. Students in Australian primary schools usually have one teacher for most subjects and are promoted to the next grade each year. Secondary education is provided for either 5 or 6 years, depending upon the length of primary education in the state. The first 2 years of secondary school typically consist of a general programme followed by all students. In subsequent years a basic core of subjects is supplemented with optional subjects available to students. Students in secondary schools generally have a different teacher for separate subject areas. In the final 2 years of secondary schools, students have more scope to specialise, and a range of elective studies is provided from which students choose five or six. One of the most marked changes during the 1980s was an increase in the percentage of students who remained to complete secondary school. The percentage of commencing secondary students remaining to the final year of school rose from 35 % in 1980 to 77 % in 1993. It has since fluctuated slightly, and was 79 % in 2011 (ABS 2012a, p. 33).

1.2 Schools

Schooling is provided through both government and non-government schools. In 2011 non-government schools enrolled 34 % of students (31 % of primary and 39 % of secondary school students) a proportion that has risen steadily since 1970 (ABS 2012a). Most non-government schools have some religious

affiliation, most commonly with the Catholic Church (59 % of non-government school students are in Catholic schools). Non-government schools are usually classified as either Catholic or independent. A range of funding sources including government grants supports private schools. In 2004, 43 % of non-government school income was derived from fees or donations, 15 % from state government grants and 42 % from federal government grants. Government grants comprised 72 % of the income of Catholic schools and 40 % of the income of independent schools (MCEETYA 2005).

In 2011 the average sizes (student population) of primary and secondary schools were approximately 271 and 548 students respectively. The figure for secondary schools includes secondary school sections that form part of combined primary-secondary schools; and for separate secondary schools, the average size was 848 students per school (ABS 2012a).

Most government schools are comprehensive and coeducational. Taxation revenues provide almost all the financial resources for the operation of government schools. Although parents are not officially required to pay fees for students to attend government schools, many schools seek voluntary contributions from parents and raise funds from other local sources. There is a small number of selective-entry secondary schools in some states; and in two jurisdictions, the final 2 years of schooling is in separate senior secondary colleges.

1.3 Teachers

Approximately 255,110 (full-time equivalent) teachers were employed in schools in 2011: approximately 130,598 in primary and 124,512 in secondary schools (ABS 2012a, p. 31). In 2010 the ratio of students to teachers was 15.7 in primary schools and 12.0 in secondary schools (ACARA 2012a). Those ratios have not shifted appreciably since 2006. Overall 70 % of teachers are female (81 % in primary and 59 % in secondary schools) (ABS 2011). Salaries are determined at state level and there are differences between states. On average, in 2010 the statutory starting salary for a primary teacher was equivalent to US\$34,029 and that for a teacher with 10 years experience was equivalent to US\$46,318 (OECD 2012). The corresponding figures for secondary school teachers were US\$34,321 and US\$47,455 (OECD 2012). These figures are slightly above the OECD average. Teacher training occurs in universities but states determine acceptable qualifications. Teachers for primary schools normally complete a 4-year post-school course of study that is made up of concurrent academic and pedagogical studies which results in a Bachelor of Education degree. Four years of university education is the normal length of initial training for secondary teachers, typically a 3-year Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree and a 1-year diploma of education. However, a postgraduate Master of teaching degree is becoming more widely provided for both intending primary and intending secondary teachers.

2 National Education Reform in a Federal System: National Agreements and Partnerships

A federal system of government such as that which operates in Australia generates complexities for the implementation of reform on a national basis. Several vehicles have emerged in the past decade that provide bases for educational reform on a national basis in Australia. It needs to be said that there has always been the possibility of joint ministerial action. For some considerable time, ministers of education have cooperated through the *Australian Education Council* (AEC) which, from June 1993, became the *Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs* (MCEETYA) and then, from July 2009, the *Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs* (MCEECDYA). This council of ministers is now, since January 2012, one of several standing councils of the *Council of Australian Governments* (COAG): the *Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood* (SCSEEC). The first set of name changes signifies a broadening of roles, an increasingly national perspective on education and an increased role for the federal government. The most recent change represents a shift to educational governance being seen as one part of a set of national arrangements for government administration. The SCSEEC is concerned with strategic policy on how school education and early childhood development can be coordinated at the national level and through which information can be shared and resources used collaboratively towards the achievement of agreed objectives. It works with and through a number of statutory authorities and ministerial companies to develop and implement reform in specific areas. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) operate as statutory authorities established under acts of parliament. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and Education Services Australia Ltd (ESA) are companies owned by relevant ministers of education.

The COAG reform agenda is implemented through National Agreements, National Partnerships and other intergovernmental agreements. National Agreements define the objectives, outcomes, outputs and performance indicators and clarify the roles and responsibilities that will guide the Commonwealth and the States in the delivery of services. There are currently six National Agreements in place across healthcare, education, skills and workforce development, disability services, affordable housing and Indigenous reform. The overarching aim of the National Education Agreement is that all Australian school students acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy. Each year, the COAG Reform Council (a body established by the COAG, focused on reporting of government performance) reports on the performance of Commonwealth, state and territory governments against the objectives and outcomes of the National Education Agreement. The five outcomes of the National Education Agreement are the following: all children are engaged in and benefiting from school; young people are meeting basic literacy and numeracy standards, and overall levels of literacy and

numeracy achievements are improving; Australian students excel by international standards; young people make successful transitions from school to work and further study; and schooling promotes social inclusion and reduces the educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children.

National Partnerships are more directed to specific areas of reform and outline mutually agreed policy objectives, outputs and performance benchmarks for national reform. They are formal agreements that set out objectives, intended outcomes (with specific criteria) and financial commitments. National Partnership payments support specific projects, facilitate reforms and some involve base payments and reward funds (based on meeting established criteria). The COAG Reform Council independently assesses and reports on the achievement of performance benchmarks before reward payments are made.

There are three education National Partnerships in education with reward funding: Improving Teacher Quality, Literacy and Numeracy, and Youth Attainment and Transitions. In this sense reward funding refers to part of the funding from the federal government to the states and territories which depends on reaching agreed targets. The setting of those targets and measuring whether they have been reached have been challenging given that there is uncertainty in the measures used to make those assessments and differences among jurisdictions in the breadth of coverage of jurisdictional initiatives. In practice the concept of partial rewards has been introduced as part of the structure. A further five education-related National Partnerships are also relevant: Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities, Early Childhood Education, National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care, Indigenous Early Childhood Development, and Empowering Local Schools.

3 Key Education Policy Reforms over Recent Years

The past 15 years has seen increased public attention given to education and a greater focus on educational policy reform. It has been a period that has seen the emergence of a national perspective on educational governance with an increasing role for federal structures that link state and territory initiatives with each other and with a national perspective. For example, the annual Report on Government Services (ROGS) includes a substantial chapter of education that integrates information about outcomes and developments in policy and provision (SCRGSP 2013). This section reviews educational reforms in several key areas: early childhood education, national curricula, assessment and accountability, attracting and retaining teachers, improving youth attainment and transitions, and school improvement.

3.1 Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education (ECE) emerged over the past 15 years as an important focus for policy reform. Reforms have involved child care and preschool provisions as well as schools. In the late 1990s state and territory governments moved to

provide for smaller classes in the early years of school accompanied with a renewed emphasis on the formal teaching of literacy in those years. For example, in New South Wales government schools, the average class sizes in 1997 for Grades K, 1 and 2 were 24.1, 25.5 and 26.2, and for Grades 3 through 6, the average was 26.8. In 2011 the average class sizes in Grades K, 1 and 2 were 19.2, 21.2 and 22.6, respectively, compared with an average of 26.1 across Grades 3 through 6 (DEC 2011).

A review of Early Childhood and Care (ECEC) had pointed to the complexity of provision through a variety of organisations, varying patterns of government responsibility and diverse frameworks (Press and Hayes 2000). It was argued that the patchwork stemmed from the late nineteenth-century kindergarten movement that focused on early learning and preparation for school and quality care, being charitable and welfare in nature. Not long after this review, the Australian government established the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* through which two nationally representative samples of children (one aged less than 1 year and the other aged 4 years) were followed through life from 2004 onwards (Sanson et al. 2002). This study has provided large-scale, national data on the experiences and outcomes of Australian children, from infancy onwards. There has been a number of publications from this ongoing study. In addition there emerged initiatives to monitor the quality of the provision of child care and to meet the rising demand for preschool education and quality child care (Elliott 2006).

In 2008 the COAG resolved to make substantial improvement to early childhood education through the *National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education* (NPAECE) (COAG 2009; Dowling and O'Malley 2009). This agreement among federal and state governments set out to ensure that by 2013 all children in the year before formal schooling would have access to high-quality early childhood education programmes. This meant programmes delivered by degree-qualified early childhood teachers, for 15 h per week, 40 weeks of the year, in preschools and child care institutions. There was an additional *National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development* which was to deliver integrated services, including early learning, child care and family programmes in areas of high disadvantage and for a high proportion of Indigenous children.

The reform of early childhood education has been supported by several associated initiatives. One of these was the development of a national *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR 2009). That framework stresses developing literacy and numeracy, monitoring children's development and learning, identifying activities that most enhance opportunities for age-appropriate child development, and facilitating cognitive, social, psychological and physical developmental outcomes through participation in formal/informal learning programmes. The importance attached to the quality of provision is evident in "the growing emphasis on regulation and accreditation of early childhood education and care" (Maguire and Hayes 2011). A *National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* covers day care providers, preschool and out-of-school-hours care programmes. Care providers are required to meet certain minimum standards, such as in staff-to-child ratios and staff qualifications. The *National Information Agreement on Early Childhood Education and Care*, endorsed in 2009, facilitates the collection, sharing and reporting of early childhood education and care information

among Australian governments and key data agencies. It is intended to provide the basis for monitoring and reporting on the provision of early childhood education.

Another parallel initiative has been the introduction of the Australian Early Development Inventory (AEDI). The AEDI was implemented in 2009 to gather data about all children in their first year of full-time school. It is a population measure of young children's development based on a teacher-completed checklist covering five domains of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills (school-based), and communication skills and general knowledge (Goldfeld et al. 2009). Data from the AEDI are used to facilitate planning the provision of early childhood education and care so as to direct resources to areas of greatest need. The survey was conducted again in 2012.

Data from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* were used to examine participation in early childhood education among two cohorts 4 years apart (i.e. 2005 and 2009) (Maguire and Hayes 2011). Both of these were before the implementation of the reforms in early childhood education. It was reported that the vast majority of children attended an education/care programme with fewer than 7 % of 4–5-year-olds not attending any programme. Most children attended some sort of preschool programme in spite of an apparent decline between 2005 and 2009 (92 % of the older cohort and 81 % of the younger cohort children). In addition children from the older cohort were less likely to attend a preschool programme in a school or in a child care centre but more likely to attend a preschool programme outside of a school, and much more likely to attend a child care programme without also attending a preschool programme. It was also evident that children from more disadvantaged families were more likely not to attend any school or care centre. The first evaluation of the National Partnerships on Early Childhood Education pointed to the limitation of infrastructure on expanding the number of hours of preschool education and sustaining an adequate supply of appropriately qualified early childhood teachers (Urbis 2011).

3.2 *National Curricula*

Although authority for curricula rests with state and territory governments, a key recent reform has been the development of national curricula that set broad content standards to be interpreted and implemented by jurisdictions. An *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* (ACARA) was established in late 2008 as a statutory authority that would bring together the functions of national curriculum, assessment and data management, analysis and reporting. This is intended to bring about national reforms in curriculum covering the full span of schooling and a full range of learning areas: English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities and Social Science, the Arts, Languages, Health and Physical Education, and Technologies.

The process has involved developing a statement of the shape of the area, writing materials, and implementation and evaluation. It began with an overall paper entitled *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* which established broad parameters

(ACARA 2012b). Then curricula frameworks (shape papers) in English, mathematics, science, and history were published. Curriculum materials in these areas were drafted and approved in 2010 subject to validation in 2011. The next phase of the process involves the learning areas of geography, languages, and the arts. Shape papers have been published and writing has commenced. The third phase will include the development of curriculum for health and physical education, technologies (including ICT as well as design and technology), civics and citizenship, business and economics.

In addition to specific learning areas, the national curricula are intended to include general capabilities: knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that link curriculum content in each learning area with cross-curriculum priorities (literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology capability, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding and intercultural understanding).

The process of developing a national curriculum appears to have been valuable in focussing on a reappraisal of curricula that had grown through a series of processes of accretion and excision. The shape papers thus far have provided overviews of where those processes have led and how well they match the modern context. However, much remains to be done in terms of developing the curricula in the remaining areas and articulating the curricula in learning areas with the cross-curricular capabilities. The process of implementation is also a work in progress in that the national curricula need to be articulated in the frameworks of jurisdictional authorities and supported in the way they are used by teachers in schools.

3.3 Assessment and Accountability

The first national assessments of student achievement in Australia were sample-based minimum competency assessments of literacy and numeracy among 10-year-olds and 14-year-olds conducted in 1975 (Keeves and Bourke 1976) and 1980 (Bourke et al. 1981). These generated much public debate at the time, and debates about large-scale assessments have continued since then, often focussed on the scope of the assessments and the potential for narrowing the implemented curriculum. Following the introduction of the Basic Skills Tests in New South Wales in 1989 (Masters et al. 1990), most Australian jurisdictions introduced assessment and monitoring programmes focussed initially on literacy and numeracy in selected primary school grades. The programmes gradually extended to secondary school grades and encompassed other learning areas. Those jurisdictions that had initially used sample-based assessments moved to population testing by the end of the 1990s. These assessment programmes made use of modern measurement techniques (item response theory) and approaches to scaling.

In 2000, the ministers of education endorsed a set of national key performance measures as a set of measures that would provide nationally comparable data on aspects of performance against the national *Goals of Schooling* that had been

adopted in 1999. These were specified in the *Measurement Framework for National Key Performance Measures* which was implemented from 2003 onwards to extend to 2011 (MCEETYA 2006). A *National Assessment Program* (NAP) was part of that framework and included achievement data concerned with areas identified in the 1999 statement of national goals: literacy, numeracy, science, information and communication technology as well as civics and citizenship. It encompassed the annual full-cohort tests in literacy and numeracy tests (initially the state and territory tests that were “equated” at minimum competence level), 3 yearly sample assessments in science literacy (2003, 2006, 2009), civics and citizenship (2004, 2007, 2010), and information and communication technology (ICT) literacy (2005, 2008, 2011) and the Australian data from international assessments (PISA for 15-year-olds every 3 years, TIMSS for Grade 4 and 8 every 4 years and from 2010 PIRLS in Grade 4).

From 2008 onwards the NAP included a *National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) as an annual assessment for the full cohort of students in Grades 3, 5, 7 and 9 in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (spelling, punctuation and grammar) and numeracy. These national tests replaced the former State- and Territory-based literacy and numeracy tests. In 2008 the scales for the assessments in NAPLAN were established. In subsequent cycles, tests were equated to the original NAPLAN scales so that the results could be compared with those for previous and subsequent years. Test equating, using common-person equating techniques, enables the results from NAPLAN tests in different years to be reported on the same scale. The scales are also equated over grades using common-item methods so that any given score denotes the same achievement level regardless of the grade. This means that some items are common between the adjacent levels that are tested (e.g. the Grade 5 assessment contains some items that also appear on the Grade 3 assessment and some that also appear on the Grade 7 assessment). One of the critiques of NAPLAN tests is that the coverage of the areas is too limited because they have too few items and they do not use a rotated test design. Participation in NAPLAN is high, with participation rates around 96 % in Grades 3, 5 and 7, and 92–93 % in Grade 9.

NAPLAN produces a detailed national report each year which provides analyses of results including breakdowns by jurisdiction and student background characteristic such as sex, language background, Indigenous status, geographic location and parental education and occupation. These data are also reported as time series. Individual reports are provided to all students who participate in NAPLAN and reports are provided to schools and jurisdictions. NAPLAN data are used by jurisdictions for planning, decisions about resource allocation and for the implementation of specific initiatives.

NAPLAN results for individual schools are also reported on a public website (*My School*—<http://www.myschool.edu.au>). *My School* provides information about the average achievement of students in NAPLAN, the distribution of performance across performance bands, and indications of progress over time. The website also reports values on the *Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage* (ICSEA) which is based on data about parental occupation and education and other characteristics of the school population that are combined in a way

that generates the greatest correlation with school average performance on NAPLAN. This is used to identify schools serving students from statistically similar backgrounds and to compare the results of schools that have similar scores on the index. In addition *My School* contains financial data on a comparable basis across schools and a profile of the school.

The public reporting of achievement data on *My School* has been, and continues to be, controversial. It is argued that this process of reporting places unreasonable pressure on school principals and teaching staff and does not adequately take account of contextual differences, and that it results in a narrowing of the implemented curriculum because of pressure to teach to the test. In addition it is argued that the results for small schools are not sufficiently reliable and that differences may be the result of year-to-year fluctuations in the school population. Against this it is argued that these data provide information to schools that helps them judge their performance, to parents that helps them choose schools and to education systems to guide the nature and focus of interventions.

3.4 Attracting and Retaining Teachers

One of the important areas of current activity in education concerns the implementation of a range of reforms that aim to attract, train, place, develop and retain quality teachers and leaders. There has been concern that more students are graduating from teacher education programmes in universities than are required by school systems, that the areas of expertise among those graduates do not match the areas of expertise required in schools, and that there has been a decline in the levels of achievement of those entering teacher education programmes (New South Wales Government 2012). Education Ministers have agreed to the creation of new professional standards, a framework to guide professional learning for teachers and school leaders, and national consistency in the registration of teachers. Other strategies focus on changed pay structures to reward quality teaching, improved support for teachers in disadvantaged and hard-to-staff schools and national accreditation of pre-service teacher education programmes (ACARA 2012a).

Reforms concerned with teaching and teachers are the focus of a 5-year *National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality* that commenced in 2009. Its focus is on attracting better entrants to teaching, including mid-career entrants; more effective training for teachers, principals and other school leaders; placing teachers and principals in ways that minimise skill shortages and enhance retention; developing the skills and knowledge of teachers and school leaders throughout their careers; and rewarding and retaining principals, teachers and school leaders who have demonstrated high levels of competence and improving teacher workforce data (COAG 2009). This is an area in which there is a variety of existing provisions that operate through teacher registration authorities in many jurisdictions.

One of the key reforms has been the development and implementation of a national professional teacher standards framework and an accreditation process for

accomplished and leading teachers (AITSL 2012a). The standards are to provide a nationally consistent basis for recognising quality teaching by making explicit what teachers should be able to do and what is expected of effective teachers across their career. The standards are organised into four career stages (graduate, proficient, highly accomplished and lead) across three domains (professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement). The stages reflect the continuum of a teacher's developing professional expertise from undergraduate preparation through to being an exemplary classroom practitioner and a leader in the profession.

There is a number of important issues in the development and implementation of national professional teacher standards (Ingvarson 2002). One issue concerns the extent to which content standards need to be specifically concerned with particular areas of teaching (each with its own content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge) and the extent to which more general content standards covering broader areas of teaching are possible. A second issue concerns the ways in which the standards become manifest in certification as discussed in the document *Certification of Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers: Principles and Processes* (AITSL 2012b). A third issue is the extent to which the development of standards is shaped by the teaching profession and the extent to which it is determined by employing authorities.

In addition to the development of national professional teaching standards, there has been a range of other important activities initiated by individual jurisdictions including the establishment of Centres of Excellence, recognition of Highly Accomplished Teachers, expanding non-traditional pathways into teaching (such as *Teach for Australia* for high-achieving graduates and *Teach Next* for experienced professionals from other fields), enhancing the quality of professional experience programmes in initial teacher education courses and trialling processes for rewarding excellence with pay.

There is a key role in these reforms for the *Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership* which began in 2010. It has responsibility for the development of national professional standards for teachers and school leadership, implementing a system of national accreditation of teachers based on those standards, supporting initiatives in professional development and professional learning for teachers and school leaders, and supporting a national approach to the accreditation of pre-service teacher education courses (AITSL 2011). In addition it engages in research, administers annual awards for teachers and leaders and works with other stakeholders in the field.

3.5 Improving Youth Attainment and Transitions

Improving the educational attainment of young Australians has been a focus of educational reform for some time. A high-level committee had reported a review of post-compulsory schooling to the Australian Education Council in 1991 including

recommended targets (Finn 1991). Over subsequent years there have been a number of initiatives intended to lift levels of educational attainment predicated on the belief that the completion of senior secondary schooling leads to better labour market outcomes. Research based on longitudinal data supports that belief (Ryan 2011). These initiatives have often included vocational education and training (VET) studies as part of general senior secondary school so that by 2006 up to 90 % of secondary schools offered some VET subjects (Lamb and Vickers 2006). Also, some education systems devised whole courses with an applied or vocational focus. In addition there has been a parallel emphasis on providing vocational education in non-school institutions although the evidence for the success of these for labour market outcomes is more mixed (Lim and Karmel 2011).

More recently there has been a renewed emphasis on support for the senior years of schooling and the provision of pathways that facilitate transitions between further study, training, and employment. Under the terms of the *National Partnership for Youth Attainment and Transitions*, the COAG has established a target to increase to 90 % the percentage of 20–24-year-olds who have attained Year 12 or an Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Certificate II or above by 2015 (and by 2020 that 90 % of 20–24-year-olds will have achieved Year 12 or equivalent or an AQF Certificate III or above). Support for this is through requirements for participation in education, training or work until age 17, which extends the period of compulsory education and effectively raises the minimum educational leaving age. The provision also creates an entitlement to an education or training place for 15–24-year-olds, which focuses on attaining Year 12 or equivalent qualifications and includes participation requirements as part of eligibility for income support. Some initiatives that have been developed include trade training centres in schools, school business community partnerships and programmes directed to re-engaging people who had left school.

3.6 School Improvement

A more recent reform focuses on school improvement by incorporating different types of indicator. It includes a national school improvement tool that looks at indicators of school practice as well as measures of student outcomes (Masters 2012). The tool was developed first in Queensland where there was a focus on improving schools that were not achieving satisfactory outcomes in literacy and numeracy. It was then applied in other jurisdictions before being adopted nationally and included in the *National Plan for School Improvement*. It has been made available to all Australian schools for use in their school improvement planning since 2013. The tool involves assessments of the quality of practice (low, medium, high, and outstanding) on eight aspects of school practice: an explicit improvement agenda, analysis and discussion of data, a culture that promotes learning, targeted use of school resources, an expert teaching team, systematic curriculum delivery, differentiated classroom learning, and effective teaching practices. The tool used in Queensland

also included reference to school-community partnerships, but the version adopted nationally does not. The tool does not describe everything that effective schools do, but focuses on those practices that are most directly related to school-wide improvement; nor does it exclude direct measures of student outcomes, and it sees those as part of the process of monitoring school improvement. The experience of its application in Queensland indicated that audited ratings of these aspects of school practice could be reliably measured and applied to monitor improvements (Masters 2012). The challenge is to implement the tool on a large-scale national basis in which the results are linked to funding rewards.

4 Potential Future Reform Trends: School Finance

The approach to school funding in Australia reflects the complexities of a federal system in which finance derives from both federal and state sources. Those resources support both government and non-government schools (making up 72 % of the income of Catholic schools and 40 % of the income of other non-government schools), and the regulatory frameworks, including those covering curriculum, operate under state authority (Keating 2011). These complexities have been compounded by the shift of enrolments from government to non-government schools (Watson and Ryan 2009) with the result that school funding arrangements have become obscure (Dowling 2007).

A review of school financing has recommended substantial changes to the bases for financing schools (Gonski 2011). The review noted the complexity of current funding arrangements and lack of coordination between federal, state and territory governments as well as lack of coordination of infrastructure funding. It recommended substantial increases in school funding with proportionately greater increases to government schools on the basis of the characteristics of their students. It proposed a new schooling resource standard as a basis for funding and an independent National School Resourcing Body to monitor that standard. In addition it recommended planning authorities be established to coordinate new school building and expansions. The schooling resource standard would establish per student amounts (to be indexed and reviewed every 4 years) for each primary and secondary school student, with loadings for the additional costs associated with various educational needs. Non-government schools would be funded at a level that took account of the expected level of income from private sources (with a minimum public contribution of 20–25 % of the standard).

Reforms to school finance following this review have yet to be determined, and the detail of its operation is yet to be spelled out. However, it is clear that the question of school finance has been made a central part of the debate about educational reform for the immediate future. Its recommendations are being considered at a time when the federal governance of education in Australia has become less loosely coupled. The reforms over recent times have been part of an emerging national perspective.

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