



‘For the profession, by the profession?’

TEACHING AUSTRALIA *(formerly THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE for QUALITY
TEACHING and SCHOOL LEADERSHIP (NIQTSL))*

Issues Paper by

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INTRODUCTION:

In June 2004, the Federal Minister for Education, the Hon. Brendan Nelson announced a government initiative entitled: The National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL). The proposed Institute's aims were, *inter alia* to 'support and advance the effectiveness and standing of the teaching profession in Australia'.

The Minister has provided \$30 million in funding over three years to help establish the enterprise.

The Minister has claimed a significant status for the initiative, namely that the proposed Institute would be operated by the teaching profession in its own interests – 'for the profession, by the profession.' This has been repeated frequently since the announcement and the phrase has been used in draft material produced by public relations consultancies engaged by the interim board of NIQTSL.

The significance of the claim does not rest only in the fact that the Minister claims for NIQTSL a role in representing the interests of teachers, though this alone should be enough to elicit the close and serious attention of every teacher. If the Minister is right, the public voice of the teaching profession on issues of significance to teachers and to the community generally will be represented in the activities and representations of this new body. The Minister claims that '... the Institute will offer a strong cohesive national voice and be an important source of professional information'.

In all nations and communities the formal and public voice of the teaching profession is quite rightly regarded as a serious and often necessary contribution to public discourse. The respect and authority that is accorded to teachers arises partly from the crucial responsibility inherent in the role of teaching and partly from the careful and principled way in which the profession participates in public policy discussion and voices its collective view. This is the role that Minister Nelson has ascribed to NIQTSL.

It is anticipated that the Minister will shortly announce the composition of a permanent Board for this body.

It is both necessary and timely, then, to examine the extent to which the Institute can, in fact, claim to be 'for the profession, for the profession.'

CONTEXT:

Given that this is a major policy initiative of the federal government with potentially significant implications for teachers and the community generally, it is important to consider the political context in which the Institute has been established.

Coalition policy has long favoured 'small' government and market relations: ie a minimalist role for governments in which their primary role is to encourage economic growth. This generally occurs in largely de-regulated environments where the emphasis is on codes of practice rather than enforceable regulations. A major component of this philosophy is the promotion of individual choice over collective or community considerations.

The proposed changes to industrial relations legislation, for example, are predicated on the notion of individual contracts as opposed to collective bargaining agreements. The changes are being presented as an opportunity for workers to choose what best suits them as well as giving them the capacity to negotiate performance pay arrangements.

Private health care is promoted over public; transport and communications systems have been or are being privatised; competitive tendering has been introduced to a range of previously government funded services and the notion of 'user pays' is now commonly accepted in areas that were once government provided.

The government's education agenda has, over the last ten years, been consistent with this approach. The government has actively promoted individual choice. This is the rationale for its schools funding policy which, it says, is aimed at providing parents with greater choice of schooling by creating an environment in which more private schools flourish.

Similarly, in higher education, university degrees are seen as individual investment decisions and increasingly expensive with students required to pay full fees or commit themselves to a large debt for the future.

In the context of the Australian government seeking to generate substantial and fundamental change on a number of education policy fronts in line with the broad policy directions outlined, it is important that the interests of teachers, parents and students are understood. Moreover, it is crucial that these views are legitimately represented, rather than appropriated in the interests of perspectives and interests that do not genuinely align with those of the profession.

Any body which claims to speak on behalf of the teaching profession has to meet a high burden of credibility among all members of the profession. The requirements for such a body are not only that its processes and structures are representative and transparent and that its pronouncements and activities are manifestly in the interest of the profession and the community, but also that it actively engages with, and is seen to speak independently on, issues such as those that the Federal government itself is now generating.

It is commonly understood that the teaching profession jealously protects its carefully accumulated reputation for speaking plainly and publicly on issues of principle such as social justice. For most teachers, contributing to this understanding is part of a professional's role. Perhaps this is why such a premium has been placed on the voice of teachers in the establishment and promotion of the NIQTSL initiative so far.

In any case, the credibility and representative status of an organization such as that which is proposed is not a function of a Ministerial pronouncement; it is a question of professional judgment and credibility.

Even at this early stage of the government's NIQTSL's initiative, there are issues that go to the fundamental nature of the proposed body which, if they continue to be implemented as they have to date, will preclude it undertaking a significant or credible role on behalf of teachers.

NIQTSL: OBJECTIVES AND FUNCTIONS:

The stated aim of the National Institute is to raise the status, quality and professionalism of teachers and school leaders throughout Australia, thereby enhancing the profession.

The aim, of course, is laudable but does not of itself constitute a positive effect. Whether or not the Institute serves the professional interests of teachers will be a function of its processes and outcomes. The processes need to be transparent and representative. The outcomes have to address and express the interests of teachers as they align with the interests of the community.

At this stage, the main focus of the Institute appears to be on the individual, not the profession generally. It is assumed that improving the 'status, quality and professionalism' of individual teachers will, of itself, enhance the profession. This is consistent with a government philosophy which sees education as more of a private good, a personal gain, than a public benefit; it reflects a model of professionalism which currently applies in professions such as medicine and law where the majority of practitioners are in private practice.

It is also consistent with the push towards individual contracts and performance pay arrangements, both of which are now required in universities and TAFE institutes and which will also be prerequisite for schools in the very near future.

Introducing an individualised, competitive bargaining regime will act as a major incentive for teachers and principals to embrace the work of NIQTSL as it becomes more and more necessary for teachers to meet particular standards and requirements in order to maintain 'employability' or to gain performance pay benefits.

However, while members of the profession certainly want their status, quality and professionalism recognised, they do not want a professional body which is driven by government priorities at the expense of what the profession itself sees as priorities. The federal government has already determined the core functions of the Institute; it can not now be seen to be pursuing its own policy objectives within those functions if NIQTSL is to have legitimacy within the profession.

REPRESENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY:

Under its proposed constitution, NIQTSL is to be a company with a single owner – the Federal Education Minister. The Minister appoints the Chair of the Board as well as 'an eminent educationalist.'

The Minister also appoints persons to the Board, following nominations from organisations. Under this corporate structure, Board members are actually directors of the company and under corporate law have a primary responsibility to the company – over and above any other constituency from which they come.

Further, the Institute has no process of membership, either individual or organisational, to make it accountable to any group or constituency beyond the Minister and the Board.

It is made up of organisations chosen by the Minister, which in some instances have little if any accountability to the teaching profession as a whole.

This structure, coupled with the fact of the Institute being solely government funded, raises several questions. For example, if government policy on a particular issue lies in a different direction from that of an organisation from which a Board member comes, what is s/he to do? The Minister is the sole owner and funding source for the organisation. There is no constraint on the role of the Minister on any issue and no public or transparent accountability process. He may at his discretion overturn or ignore the organisation's constitution.

Within the proposed constitution the Minister has 'unfettered discretion' to nominate a person should he not wish to appoint a nominee provided by an organisation or if an organisation chooses not to nominate a person. This provision reflects the clearly expressed view, of both the Federal Minister and the Interim Chair of the Board, and supported by the NIQTSL constitution, that Board members sit as individuals, not as representatives of their respective organisations.

This could be significant in a number of ways. At the very least it belies the claim of NIQTSL to be representative of the profession. Of more concern, however, is that NIQTSL's structure allows an appropriation of the profession's legitimacy through the members of the board without any real accountability or transparency to the profession. In the context of the government's overall approach to public policy the effect could be to use the credibility of individuals and organisations that are seeking to advance the interests of the profession, to undermine those same interests.

The Minister has already exercised his personal influence in the determination of the composition of the Board, overruling the Interim Board's preferred option. For example, education unions, which are directly accountable to a membership which includes most teachers and principals, have been specifically excluded from Board membership at the behest of the Minister.

Employing authorities and parent representatives are also excluded from Board membership.

This, of course, has implications for Board members as well as the organisations which have nominated them.

First, it is a situation which sits uncomfortably with the concept of 'by the profession'. If Board members are indeed at the table as individuals, this further undermines the claim to be 'by the profession'. Rather, the Board comprises individuals who, because of the Institute's governance structure, are obliged by law to put the interests of the Board ahead of those of their constituent groups.

Second, while the Minister and Chairperson do not think of Board members as representatives of particular professional associations, it is clear that the associations themselves have a different view as, doubtless, do the individual Board members. It is worth asking then, whether the national 'representative' on the Board is actually representing the views of the state associations and for those organisations to consider how they ensure that their representatives are informed of the views which are to be represented on their behalf. Also, what structures and processes are in place to ensure that the constituent bodies are kept informed of the discussions and decisions of the Board?

OPERATIONS:

NIQTSL has declared its preferred mode of operation to be complementary to existing arrangements and activities and that the work of the Institute will be carried out in partnership with existing professional and education related organisations in a spirit of collaboration.

A number of projects are already underway: so far we have seen work on standards (both leadership and advanced teaching), the teaching practicum and the scenario building project going to private consultancies.

For many teachers, the processes undertaken by these consultancies have been their first experience of NIQTSL. Concerns have been expressed at the pace of the consultation processes, which most school-based personnel feel is far too rapid for them to feel that their views are being genuinely sought.

Other issues have been the convening of advisory groups after the project brief has been determined; responses to position papers being directed to the consultant rather than to the Board of NIQTSL itself; the use of consultancies closely associated with government;

It is understandable that issues such as these contribute to a sense that the Institute's agenda is being driven by the Minister rather than the profession. Initial feedback from teachers and principals is to the effect that the outcomes are pre-determined and their belief that their views will be overlooked if they differ from those of the federal government.

Indeed, while NIQTSL carries out the bulk of its work through commissioned, private consultancies and without an agreed and understood consultation process, it will be vulnerable to allegations of failing to represent the interests of the profession.

CONCLUSION:

The professional standing of teachers is too often used for political and other purposes extraneous to the professional interests of teachers themselves. When a body claims to have a mandate to speak in a unitary voice on behalf of the 300, 000 or so teachers, it invites some questions. In the case of NIQTSL the questions are answered, it seems, from the outset and found in the very nature of the institute being established.

NIQTSL is not representative and cannot be representative because it is owned wholly and simply by the Federal Minister. Its advisory processes are not representative and there are no processes for the profession as a whole or even in substantial parts to proscribe or prescribe its views and activities.

This is not an ephemeral or theoretical issue that does not affect teachers' every day lives. This goes to the heart of what it means to be a teacher in this country. There are substantial and tangible consequences from a process that appropriates the credibility and expertise of some teachers without allowing for any teacher input or control. The consequences can go to the way teachers do their work and the way in which the community perceives that work. And if it doesn't go those issues then why undertake the expensive enterprise in the first place?

The status of 'for teachers, by teachers' cannot be declared by a Minister or driven by any individual or small group of teachers. It has to be earned. So far the NIQTSL initiative has shown a disregard for the views and perspectives of the teaching profession as a whole.

NIQTSL cannot afford to have these sentiments being widely felt if it is to be a legitimate voice for the profession. The issues raised in this paper need to be urgently addressed if NIQTSL is to truly enhance the teaching profession.

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