

# In whose company?

The way the National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership is heading, it could be used for political control as much as educational advancement, reports **Steve Packer**.

**A**s the National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL) moves from an interim phase to the real deal, big questions are being asked about what it stands for and who its board members will represent.

After 18 months with an interim board, the actual board will be appointed before the end of the year. It is the latest of many attempts by federal governments to establish a national perspective on teaching and school leadership standards (see box). Everyone agrees that such a body is needed, but several of the main players say they have already been marginalised and are challenging Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson's methods and motives.

"How can it be said that NIQTSL is independent or 'by the profession, for the profession' when it is to be set up as a company whose sole owner is the federal education minister?" says AEU president Pat Byrne. "The board members' first loyalty will be to the company, and we need to have a close

look at corporate law to find out what that means.

"While those around the table will be committed professionals, the structure of NIQTSL gives the minister the capacity to promote his agenda. He could use funding pressure to get what he wants when he can't get agreement from the states and territories. Although NIQTSL doesn't allocate money directly, he could say that, if the states don't adopt certain standards, we'll withhold federal funding."

Byrne sees in the minister's approach the shadow of the government's push for individual contracts and performance pay in the education sector.

Professor Mary Kalantzis, an interim board member and immediate past president of the Australian Council of Deans of Education, says incorporation is a way of giving NIQTSL independence. "However, having the minister in the role of the sole owner produces the perception that the institute is not, as the minister himself insists it should be, by and for the profession. It gives the impression it is a vehicle for the

## AT A GLANCE

■ **The National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership is to be set up as a corporation, with the federal education minister as its owner**

■ **The education unions have been excluded from the institute's proposed board structure**

■ **There are fears that the institute will be used as a means to push for contentious items on the government's political agenda.**

politics of the day," says Kalantzis. "We might have a benign minister one year and a not so benign minister the next. It would be better to have a prominent Australian—preferably an eminent educationalist—in the role [of NIQTSL head]."

Kalantzis also notes that, given its governance structure, NIQTSL is potentially a vehicle for any federal government to intervene in the direction of education. "Nelson's office has grown through direct funding to schools, such as for special programs, science teacher awards and a raft of other things. The states don't mind it when money comes that way, but they don't like losing control."

### Teachers not represented

The AEU and Independent Education Union were represented in a reference group associated with the interim board, and the board proposed that the unions be included in the permanent board structure. "But they have been excluded," says Byrne, "and we would say that the minister has excluded the two most representative groups for teachers and principals."

Some interim board members and interested parties feel they have

**"The board members' first loyalty will be to the company..."**

contributed to recommending a strong model for NIQTSL, but the minister has rejected it outright, preferring his own model.

Brian Lindberg, from the WA College of Teaching, was on the interim board, representing the Australasian Forum of Teacher Registration and Accreditation Authorities (AFTRAA). "The teacher registration authorities have declined a permanent position as a non-voting member of the board," he says. "The decision was based on the fact that we are responsible through our own state and territory legislation to our own members and minister. Given that Dr

Nelson has said the minister will be the sole shareholder, AFTRAA believes there can be and will be a conflict of interest in trying to meet two different sets of obligations. There is also concern that NIQTSL will in fact be 'for the minister, by the minister'."

He says AFTRAA is working with NIQTSL to see if a memorandum of understanding can be reached to enable both organisations to work collaboratively.

A further concern is the cross-over of the roles of NIQTSL and the Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).

#### **A role for the AEU**

The minister will appoint the NIQTSL chairman and an 'eminent education-  
alist', and the organisation's constitution says it is to recommend other appointments. But the minister has unfettered discretion to veto anyone, says Byrne. "Basically he can appoint who he likes. And the minister has expressed the view that the board

members are individuals—that is, not policy holders for organisations. A lot of people have been sitting around thinking they are representing their organisations, but that's not the case according to the constitution."

Byrne says most teachers know little about NIQTSL at this all-important formation stage, so the AEU is writing an issues paper to raise awareness of the context being established.

Fran Hinton, who has been the (non-board) CEO of NIQTSL since late 2004, confirms that, under the Corporations Act, directors will be required to represent the best interests of the

institute as it pursues its objectives, including being the national body for the teaching profession. She describes NIQTSL as "an umbrella body for a range of many professional associations".

"I understand that the AEU would like to nominate someone to the institute's governing body," says Hinton. "We are keen to involve the AEU in the institute's work program, and we are already doing that in a number of areas."

"The cynical view," says Kalantzis, "is that the Commonwealth wants to limit the jurisdiction of the states by having national standards for control over schooling. The other view is that the federal government needs to invest in a national education platform for enhancing our 'knowledge economy'.

"Brendan Nelson gets his view and rhetoric from his own experience with the medical profession, and in that arena 'by and for the profession' doesn't include either the unions or the public employer groups." ■

**STEVE PACKER** is a freelance writer and sub-editor of *Australian Educator*.

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## WWW

### **The website of the Canberra-based National Institute of Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL) states:**

"The institute was set up in June 2004 as an independent body with funding from the Australian government to support and advance the effectiveness and standing of the teaching profession. It is currently operating on an interim basis while permanent governance arrangements are determined in consultation with the profession."

The institute lists its operating principles for "conducting business" as:

- National perspective
- Engaging the profession
- Catalysing action
- Focus on quality teaching and school leadership
- Advocacy
- Collaboration and communication
- Evidence base
- Independence

NIQTSL's stated objectives include "strengthening the teaching profession" and "establishing an organisation that operates openly, collaboratively, efficiently and ethically". The organisation "develops policies, priorities and approaches independently—by the profession, for the profession".

[www.niqtsl.edu.au](http://www.niqtsl.edu.au)