



AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION

**AEU RESPONSE TO
“A CHARTER FOR THE TEACHING
PROFESSION”**

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Introduction

There are many pressing matters currently on the professional agenda and the AEU would not consider the development of a Charter for the Teaching Profession a high priority amongst them. The profession is in need of considerable advocacy in the face of the number of reactionary and conservative attacks both on it and on schools and curriculum in general, and the AEU, amongst others, has expressed its view that this should be a major focus for Teaching Australia. The AEU is not convinced that a Charter will serve this purpose to the extent that it should become a priority for TA, nor that of itself it is an activity worthy of the necessary time and resources.

The AEU is also sceptical of some of the claims made in the section “Some reasons for a charter”, in particular the extent to which it will be adopted by individual teachers and become an uncontested and unambiguous unifying document with wide community acceptance.

Nevertheless, the AEU is not opposed in principle to the development of a Charter.

There are, however, a number of important issues that need to be dealt with before it supports TA proceeding to develop such a Charter. These issues go to the purposes it serves, the content of the Charter, the way in which the Charter is developed, and the “ownership” of the finished Charter.

1. The purpose of a Charter

As noted above, the teaching profession is in need of strong advocacy at a time when there are sustained political attacks upon it and its work.

Whilst the profession may “serve the community”, this must take place within the context not only of the responsibilities to the public, but the right of the profession to play a key role in determining what takes place in schools.

It is therefore important that the content and tone of a charter assert the rightful role of the teaching profession in formulating and informing what takes place in schools. It should, for instance, support teachers in their desire to ensure professionally appropriate assessment and reporting procedures and explain why professional judgement rather than judgement of teachers is the appropriate approach.

Part of the problem of TA expressing its objectives as a commitment to “strengthening of the profession and enhancing the quality of teaching and school leadership” is that such wording lends itself too readily to a deficit approach to teaching. It is all too easy, from such statements, to slip into language which supports current criticisms and accepts that there is a degree of inadequacy in current practice.

As a body claiming to represent the profession, it must tread a fine line between talk of continuous development of practice through a professional culture of ongoing personal and collective learning and rejecting the ill informed and often bigoted criticism which has become an all too familiar part of the education scene. This must be reflected in the Charter.

The charter must make teachers who read it feel strengthened and uplifted, not guilty. It must provide something they feel justifies and legitimises their professional perspectives and causes, and justifies their actions, not be a stick to be used against them. Whilst it should be aspirational, it must not be a set of standards they must strive to live up to.

The purposes of a Charter should therefore be to:

- Clearly define goals and values of the teaching profession.
- Promote the profession and its value to Australia.
- Advocate for the professional growth of teachers.
- Promote the professional, industrial and civil rights of teachers.
- The Charter should be constructed by teachers for teachers – the wider community is a secondary audience.

2. The content of the Charter

As noted above, the content of the charter must be an assertion of the role that teachers, as professionals, play and should play in shaping schools and society.

Three elements are suggested in the pamphlet: the importance of teaching, our commitment as a profession and a distillation of our teaching role. The AEU suggests that this is not a sufficiently comprehensive basis with which to deal with the issues raised above. Whilst accepting that the charter offered is only a sample for discussion, the AEU is concerned that it reads more like an oath of office, or a wish list from employers, than a charter for the profession.

It concentrates on the obligation of teachers to individuals and ignores the obligation to wider society, the future of that society, and any sense of professional rights.

As such, it is considerably less than both the Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO 1990) and Australia's own Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century. As noted by Hayes and others (Teachers and Schooling: Making a Difference, Allen and Unwin, 2006, pp.137-138):

Both declarations affirm the importance of education for the future of young people as individuals, for the societies of which they are part, and for the world as a whole. Both affirm the importance of education for participation in and development of knowledge economies.

In particular, they place education in a context of values and social justice.

Whilst it is the case that these are concerned with schools and education rather than the profession, it is the profession which must take the responsibility for implementing these high ideals, and a professional charter should make explicit both this responsibility and the environment and professional rights necessary to carry it out.

In its recent publication (*Educational Leadership and Teaching for the Twenty-First Century*, AEU, 2006), the AEU expressed it this way:

The responsibility of teachers therefore includes giving students the capabilities to find fulfilling and rewarding work, to ensure that they have a range of employment-related skills which will enable them to cope with a work environment which is rapidly changing and where they may need to find their own career paths through a variety of employers and jobs.

Equally important, however, is that students are given the skills and understandings which will allow them to participate in the political, cultural and social aspects of life. They must develop a sense of their own culture and where it fits into the broader spectrum of Australian and world culture; a capacity to build and maintain social relationships in a society where there is considerable mobility and change, and a dominant global monoculture. They must also be given an understanding of society and how it works to the benefit of some more than others, and a sense of justice and equity as basic values. Students should see themselves as part of a world community which is caring, to which they contribute and on which they draw. (p.21)

It is important that the Charter capture this responsibility and the context necessary for it to take place.

It is our view that the Charter must contain:

- A clear description of the role that teachers and schools should play in the formation of both individuals and society;
- A statement on the qualifications, ongoing support and resources necessary to achieve this;
- An assertion of the professional environment necessary to ensure that it can be achieved, and of the values base that underpins it;
- Some description of the complexity of the process of teaching and what it is seeking to achieve.

Within this context, it would be able to assert the broader role that teaching should play, assert professional qualifications, experience and judgement, and the right of teachers to play a key role in educational decision making at all levels, and provide a document to broaden community understanding of the higher aspirations of teachers.

3. The process of developing a Charter

The AEU notes that the pamphlet describes Teaching Australia as “a national professional body”. The AEU concurs with this description in contrast to that in other of its material in which TA refers to itself as “the national professional body”. This is an important distinction with serious implications for the way in which TA proceeds with the development of the Charter.

The appropriate role for TA to play is that of co-ordinator and facilitator in helping “the teaching profession develop a national charter”. It is therefore vital that the process maximise the involvement of organisations with some claim to being a stakeholder. The tradition in these matters, prior to the emergence of TA has been for stakeholder organisations to send a single representative regardless of size. Even the AEU, despite it being by far the largest organisation representing the teaching profession, normally has a single person to represent the views of its 170,000 members. This is not satisfactory if other organisations are given greater weighting through TA controlling attendance through the financing of different numbers of representatives from a variety of organisations selected by TA.

This representation should be open and seek consensus, but be based around a representative steering group of major stakeholders. A forum with large and distorted representation could not on its own claim to be an endorsement.

4. The “ownership” of the finished Charter

A statement on behalf of the profession should seek endorsement from as many relevant stakeholders as possible in the form of actually putting their name to the agreed and finished document.

In this sense the document would be collectively ‘owned’ by those organisations endorsing it, rather than TA or any other single organisation.

This is important if the document is to in any way be “a unifying set of commitments and understandings”. Since no one organisation can claim a monopoly in representing the profession, a statement “owned” by one would be open to contestation and alternatives.