
Establishing a Benchmark for Practice at Proficient Teacher

Introduction

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (the Standards) are a nationally agreed set of professional standards that describe what teachers should know and be able to do at four different career stages – Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher. All teachers must demonstrate that their practice meets the Standards for Proficient Teacher to be fully accredited in NSW.

The judgement about whether a teacher's practice meets the Standards for Proficient Teacher is made by the Teacher Accreditation Authority (TAA) for their school, service or workplace.

There is increasing discussion at a national level about the consistency of judgements at the level of Proficient Teacher.

Under the *Teacher Accreditation Act 2004*, the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) is responsible for overseeing the system of teacher accreditation and monitoring compliance with NESA's teacher accreditation policies.

NESA has conducted research with teachers across NSW to establish a benchmark for practice at Proficient Teacher and build a common understanding of what practice at the benchmark looks like to support consistent accreditation decisions in NSW.

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Research methodology

The process for gaining accreditation at Proficient Teacher requires teachers to submit five to eight items of annotated documentary evidence of their practice against the Standards.¹

A sample of 20 submissions of documentary evidence for Proficient Teacher that range in quality were selected as the basis for the research. Using the selected samples, 51 teachers, principals, supervisors and TAA delegates with responsibility for making decisions about accreditation at Proficient Teacher completed a pairwise comparison activity. Results from the pairwise activity were analysed to produce an ordered scale of the samples based on their quality.

¹ The requirements also include an observation report and a report on the teacher's practice written by their supervisor. While these reports do inform the decision, only teachers' documentary evidence was included, as the primary source of evidence for the purposes of this research.

Using the ordered scale of samples, NESAs ran a series of nine² Evaluating Proficient Teacher Focus Groups with key stakeholders in regional and metropolitan NSW, involving 122 participants. Registration to attend a focus group was managed through an expression of interest process. NESAs received over 400 expressions of interest for the 150 places available. Participants were required to have experience in either supervising teachers with conditional/provisional accreditation through the process of gaining accreditation at Proficient Teacher, or in making decisions about accreditation at Proficient Teacher as a principal or TAA. A teacher's system/sector, context and stage of education was also used when allocating teachers to focus groups to ensure a broad range of perspectives were captured in each group.

The aim of the focus groups was to set a point on the scale of 20 submissions for a borderline successful submission for accreditation at Proficient Teacher. Participants independently reviewed the 20 samples of documentary evidence and identified which one they considered the borderline for a successful submission. Participants' responses were analysed to determine the average (mean) sample. The group then discussed the characteristics of the average sample that make it the benchmark, as well as the key differences between the benchmark and those of the sample just below and/or above it on the scale.

Four questions informed discussion during the focus groups:

1. What are the characteristics of the average sample that make it the benchmark?
2. What are the key differences between the identified benchmark and the sample just below/above it on the scale?
3. What do the samples at, above and below the identified benchmark tell us about the practice of a Proficient Teacher?
4. What types of resources would allow the benchmark to be communicated in a useful way to improve consistency?
5. For decision-makers, what training would support you to make accreditation decisions?

Themes from the focus groups

One of the common, key characteristics cited as being required for a submission at the benchmark was the inclusion of evidence that clearly demonstrates the teacher's application of the practice described by the Standard Descriptors. Participants viewed a submission as successful if the teacher's practice was visible across their documentary evidence. For example, an evaluation that accompanied a learning experience, lesson plan or learning sequence demonstrated that the teacher had implemented the lesson with their children/students, in addition to having prepared for the learning.

Across all focus groups, participants identified that child/student representation in the evidence was an effective way of demonstrating the application of the teacher's practice. The inclusion of teacher notes/annotations that explained how they had differentiated a learning activity to meet the needs of their students was one example of student representation that was discussed. Child/student work samples were also cited as an effective way to demonstrate child/student representation and therefore the application of a teacher's practice.

² The tenth and final focus group, scheduled for 17 March in Hornsby, was cancelled the day prior due to the implementation of social distancing measures in NSW government schools.

Common to all focus groups was discussion about the quality of annotations and their relationship to the item/s of evidence themselves. Participants felt that successful annotations clearly explained how the documentary evidence had been used by the teacher in their own setting. It was also noted across a number of focus groups that the more effective, quality annotations included a level of professional reflection. For example, the teacher explained how and why they had developed and used the documentary evidence and what the outcome was.

Another common theme was the key role that supervisors play in supporting teachers to develop their practice as they work towards accreditation at Proficient Teacher. Participants noted that supervisors' support is particularly important in ensuring the success of aspiring Proficient Teachers in the following areas:

- understanding all aspects of the Standard Descriptors and what they look like in practice
- developing and selecting high quality documentary evidence
- identifying and linking the most relevant Standard Descriptors to the documentary evidence
- writing annotations that clearly describe how their documentary evidence demonstrates the practice in the selected Standard Descriptors.

There was limited discussion in some focus groups, prior to completing the independent review of the 20 samples and arriving at the group's average, about the concept of a benchmark as compared with an exemplar. In these few cases, during the group deliberation and discussion on the group's identified average sample, general agreement was reached about the difference between individuals' expectations and experiences of teachers in their own contexts and the concept of a borderline successful collection of evidence that effectively demonstrates practice of Proficient Teacher. Overall, participants agreed that a number of teachers are and will continue to be accredited on the basis of evidence that is well above the agreed benchmark, but that no teacher should be accredited at Proficient Teacher on the basis of evidence that does not effectively demonstrate that their practice meets the agreed benchmark.

Focus group participants highlighted the need for training for TAAs and supervisors to support consistency of Proficient Teacher accreditation decisions, for quality assurance purposes and to provide confidence in the decisions being made in all systems and sectors across NSW. Participants expressed the need for all stakeholders to be able to access training on a needs basis and to suit their own individual contexts. Participants from both metropolitan and regional areas noted the importance of training being available online to ensure that colleagues from regional/rural settings had equal access to training and resources and to provide all TAAs and decision-makers with the flexibility to complete the training when it suits them.

The overwhelming majority of focus group participants found the exercise of reviewing 20 samples of documentary evidence that ranged in quality highly valuable. Many participants noted that the exercise provided them with access to a greater variety and breadth of evidence than they would ordinarily have access to in their own educational contexts and that the interrogation and comparison of the characteristics of the samples around the mean helped to further articulate where the borderline sits. For this reason, participants in most focus groups suggested that an activity similar to the one they completed in the focus group - to review the 20 samples and arrive at the benchmark - be included in any training NESA develop, or otherwise be made available to TAAs, supervisors and decision-makers.

Practice at the Proficient Teacher benchmark

A number of themes emerged across the state-wide focus groups and this has enabled identification of a Proficient Teacher's core traits. A Proficient Teacher:

- has a deep knowledge of the strengths, interests and needs of the children/students in the group/class
- is focused on child/student progress and engages consistently with the teaching and learning cycle
- reflects on and evaluates their own practice and learning as well as the learning of children/students
- has a sense of autonomy over their own practice
- collaborates with colleagues and parents/carers
- understands the practice described by the Standard Descriptors at the Proficient Teacher level

Analysis of the evidence items within the benchmark sample identified defining aspects of practice at the Proficient Teacher level. The identified benchmark sample included a teaching and learning program that demonstrated the teacher's understanding of the students' strengths and needs. The teacher incorporated support and extension strategies into the science program to meet the specific needs of students across the full range of abilities. The teacher also included a record of adjustments used to support the learning of two specific students with learning support needs.

The teacher's collection of evidence demonstrated the teacher's application of the teaching and learning cycle. A program and lesson plan were included which demonstrated that the learning and teaching programs had been designed and implemented using knowledge of curriculum, assessment and reporting requirements. A short set of evidence relating to the assessment of student learning outcomes had been included. An assessment task notification had been linked to the syllabus outcomes. Marking criteria and a sample student response had also been included, further demonstrating the teacher's implementation of the evidence item.

The teaching and learning program and lesson plan evidence items showed that the teacher used a wide range of resources including information and communication technology to engage students in their learning. For example, the teacher used PowerPoint presentations, images, articles, video clips, questioning and notes to support demonstrations and experiments, to scaffold the learning and to make it relevant for students.

The teacher demonstrated reflective practice through a comprehensive evaluation that followed delivery of the teaching and learning program. The teacher's program evaluation demonstrated implementation of the program and focused on the:

- learning outcomes achieved by the students
- effectiveness of teaching strategies
- assessment processes and
- use of resources.

The teacher demonstrated reflective practice through a Professional Development Log. The teacher went beyond describing the content of the professional learning activity and explained how the new learning could be applied in their own context.

The benchmark sample demonstrated the teacher's ability to engage in respectful collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their child's learning. A letter to parents/carers and report contained specific information relating to individual student achievement and progress in mathematics. An email communication between the teacher and the parent demonstrated responsiveness in the teacher's communication.

The teacher demonstrated strong knowledge of the practice described within the Standard Descriptors at the Proficient Teacher level. This was demonstrated through the teacher's selection of Standard Descriptors that align with the practice shown by the evidence items. The teacher focused on each nominated Standard Descriptor individually in the annotations and clearly explained how each item of evidence demonstrated the practice described within the nominated Standard Descriptors.

Practice below the identified benchmark

The focus group participants determined that the practice of a teacher who is not yet demonstrating the Proficient Teacher Standards:

- is not responsive to the needs of the children/students in the group/class
- does not demonstrate impact on the learning of children/students
- does not include evaluation or reflection on the outcome of their practice or child/student learning
- does not demonstrate knowledge of the practice described by the Standard Descriptors at the Proficient Teacher level.

Analysis of the evidence in the sample below the identified benchmark identified that the teaching and learning program had not been evaluated. As a result, it was unclear whether the teacher had implemented the program or reflected on their practice or the learning of their students.

The program did not include differentiated strategies to meet the specific learning needs of students in the class. As a result, it was unclear whether the teacher had developed or applied knowledge of the needs of the students in the class.

The collection of evidence below the identified benchmark sample included an assessment task notification. It was unclear whether the task had been used to assess student learning as the marking criteria and feedback template were blank and no work samples had been provided.

On occasions, the evidence items and the related annotation indicated that the teacher did not have a strong understanding of the practice described by the Standard Descriptors at Proficient Teacher. As an example, Standard Descriptor 6.3.2 had been aligned to minutes from a faculty meeting. The meeting minutes did not demonstrate that the teacher contributed to collegial discussions or applied constructive feedback from colleagues to improve professional knowledge and practice.

Focus group outcomes

Through comparative analysis of the identified benchmark sample and the sample just below it on the scale, focus group participants were able to identify characteristics that distinguish an accreditation submission that successfully communicates the traits of a teacher who is practicing at the Proficient Teacher level from a submission that does not.

Characteristics of the Proficient Teacher benchmark

Focus group participants identified five key characteristics as essential to the evidence submitted by a teacher to effectively demonstrate practice at Proficient Teacher.

The teacher's documentary evidence accurately reflects the practice described in the selected Proficient Teacher Standard Descriptors.

For example, plans for learning experiences/lesson plans with differentiated tasks to meet the specific learning needs of individual or groups of children/students could reflect the practice described within Standard Descriptor 1.5.2.

Application of the teacher's practice at Proficient Teacher is visible in the documentary evidence.

For example, plans/lesson notes where the teacher evaluates the lesson based on the achievement of learning goals could effectively show application of the teacher's practice.

The documents include evidence of the teacher's impact on child/student learning.

For example, work samples that include the teacher's feedback about the child/student's contributions or achievements relative to their learning goals could show impact of the teacher's practice on child/student learning.

The annotations clearly explain how the teacher has used their documentary evidence to demonstrate the:

- **practice described in the selected Standard Descriptors; and**
- **impact of the teacher's practice on child/student learning.**

For example, an annotation that describes how the item of evidence corresponds to the practice described by the selected Standard Descriptors will be more effective than a description of the learning environment context or a paraphrasing of the Standard Descriptors.

Examples of professional reflection are included in the teacher's documentary evidence and/or the annotations.

For example, a teacher's reflections on the quality of child/student engagement and learning could demonstrate that the teacher has reflected on their practice for developmental purposes.

Characteristics of the sample just below the benchmark

Focus group participants cited the following characteristics as being indicative of evidence just below the benchmark:

- the documentary evidence doesn't consistently reflect the practice described in the selected Standard Descriptors, e.g. there is misalignment between the practice

demonstrated in the documentary evidence items and that described by the selected Standard Descriptors

- the application of the teacher's practice is not visible in the documentary evidence, e.g. plans for learning/lesson plans have not been evaluated/analysed and there is no evidence that they have been implemented
- there is little or no evidence of the impact of the teacher's practice on child/student learning
- the annotations are simply a description of the learning environment context or a paraphrasing of the Standard Descriptors
- no examples of professional reflection have been included in the teacher's documentary evidence and/or the annotations.

Next steps

1. Deliver an online training course for Proficient Teacher TAAs

NESA is developing an online training course for TAAs/decision-makers as a matter of priority. The TAA training will be available to all TAAs, Authorised Delegates and principals in the first instance. Completing the training will contribute 1.5 hours of NESA Registered PD.

The key objectives of the online training are to:

- support consistent judgements and decisions about accreditation at Proficient Teacher
- share the defining characteristics of documentary evidence that effectively demonstrate practice at Proficient Teacher, as identified by the NSW teaching profession.

The primary audience for the training is TAAs, Authorised Delegates, principals and supervisors. Due to the large volume of potential participants and the resources required to provide access, it is recommended that access to the training be released in three phases, where possible.

Phase 1 access: TAAs, Authorised Delegates, principals

Phase 2 access: supervisors

Phase 3 access: all teachers, school executive, aspiring school leaders

2. Publish samples of documentary evidence at the benchmark

Sample items of teachers' annotated documentary evidence at the benchmark are being developed by accredited teachers at NESA for publication on the NESA website and use in the online training for TAAs. A NESA annotation will accompany each item to describe how it effectively exhibits the characteristics of the benchmark and demonstrates the teacher's practice meets the Standards for Proficient Teacher.

3. Update existing support materials

NESA's existing video and pdf supervisor and TAA guides and Proficient Teacher evidence guides will be reviewed and updated to include reference to the benchmark characteristics.

4. Explore options for an online pairwise comparison activity

NESA will explore options for developing an online pairwise comparison activity, comparable to that used in the research to establish the quality scale of 20 samples, for teachers, supervisors, principals and TAAs to complete.