



**INDEPENDENT EDUCATION UNION OF AUSTRALIA**

**RESPONSE TO**

**ENHANCING TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM**

### 1. CONTEXT

- 1.1 This consultation arises from an initiative by the Commonwealth Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training to explore the possibility and viability of establishing a new national body to promote teacher professionalism.
- 1.2 It should be said at the outset that a very substantial body of research already exists around the issue of teacher professionalism as described in this present consultation paper. A significant part of that research was initiated by the National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning (NPQTL) in 1991/1992 and was also related to the possibility of establishing a national professional body for teachers.

In the course of that very comprehensive consultation process and public debate, the IEU clearly demonstrated its support for a national professional body for teachers which

- was independent, autonomous, self regulating and eventually self funded;
- had practising teachers as the major partners on such a body;
- was inclusive of the key education industry stakeholders;
- had as a major purpose, a commitment to articulating, maintaining and improving high professional standards to achieve a teaching profession of the highest quality.

The outcome of that process was the establishment in 1993 of the Australian Teaching Council.

- 1.3 Education is an enterprise on a massive scale, the largest industry in Australia in terms of both budget and workforce. It involves a very large number of key stakeholders, ranges across both the public and private sectors, and involves policy making at both the federal and state government levels.

- 1.4 The IEU believes that the recent history of education reform strongly supports the need for a collaborative and co-operative approach to policy development and debate which is inclusive of all the major stakeholders. To not do so is to jeopardise the successful outcome of a particular policy, and to alienate significant groups within the industry. Where the interests of particular interests have not been acknowledged and sought to be accommodated, policy has unravelled. This has occurred at the highest level in for example AEC/MCEETYA meetings as well as at other levels. To some degree, the early difficulties for the ATC can be attributed to this scenario.
- 1.5 A number of examples can be pointed to which show that an inclusive partnership approach produces excellent policy outcomes. The National Schools Network and the National Professional Development Program are two such initiatives.
- 1.6 The IEU believes that the views of the teaching profession, until recently, were already translated effectively at state and national forums, through the collaborative work and partnerships between government and non-government employing authorities and unions, universities, and other associations including subject and education associations.

The model for any organisation whose role and function is as set out in the consultation paper should seek to be at least as inclusive and collaborative as the models previously in place.

## **2. THE ROLE OF THE UNION**

- 2.1 The Independent Education Union of Australia is the federally registered union which represents teachers and support staff in non-government education institutions including early childhood centres, schools and post secondary training institutions, across all the states and territories of Australia. The union currently has a membership of approximately

43,000, which represents some 60-65% of the sector. The membership percentage in the schools sector is higher.

2.2 At the state, territory and federal levels, the IEU's structures are inclusive and facilitate high levels of participation from the membership through conference, council, executive and committee structures and are democratically elected by and from the membership. Membership of the union is voluntary in accordance with the organisation's Constitution.

2.3 The objects of the union as set out in its Constitution are comprehensive and include the following:

- to promote and advance the interests of the members in all matters having a bearing upon or in relation to their employment;
- to encourage and initiate whatever may tend toward improvement of the status, training and qualifications of all members of the union;
- to monitor all legislative or other proposals which may affect members in the discharge of their professional duties, or their status or interests generally;
- to protect and advance the industrial and professional interests of teachers and other staff employed in non-government schools and education institutions.

2.4 Thus the union has a known and understood mandate under its Constitution to advance and defend the industrial and professional rights and interests of teachers and support staff in the non-government sector. To that end, it has seen itself and is broadly acknowledged by all in the education community as having a legitimate role in and contribution to make to the national education and training policy debate.

2.5 Since the early 1990s national policy has sought to strengthen Australian schools through key micro-economic reform strategies. The IEU can point to a myriad of national and state committees, projects, forums, reference groups and statutory bodies on which it has participated with

other key education industry stakeholders in the development and implementation of policy affecting the work and changing roles of all education workers in schools.

- 2.6 It is worth noting that in the context of this significant period of education reform, the federal union has grown from approximately 30,000 in 1990 to its present size. The union can therefore reasonably claim that teachers and support staff in the non-government sector support the union as a legitimate voice for their industrial and professional interests in public policy debate on education.
- 2.7 The IEU believes that the attempt to draw a line between the industrial and professional with regard to teachers' work represents a false dichotomy and is generally politically motivated by those who advance such a view to exclude the unions from public policy debate and development.
- 2.8 Education unions negotiating particular industrial issues with employers or other relevant organisations cannot effectively do so without having a deep knowledge and understanding of the professional role and work of its members. Professional issues concerning appraisal, evaluation, standards, induction, probation, promotion, mentoring, collegiality, career paths, the organisation of teaching and learning, organisational restructuring and the provision and implementation of ongoing relevant professional development and skilling are inextricably connected with the industrial rights and responsibilities of teachers and support staff.
- 2.9 IEU members strongly support the union's taking a leadership role in education policy debate and development, recognising the strength, independence, commitment and resources that the union brings with its advocacy.
- 2.10 The IEU believes that the majority of the teaching profession would find it unacceptable that a judgement has been made that the education unions

should be excluded from a national forum because they demonstrate a “commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning” but do not regard it as a “primary function”. It is quite likely that each of the organisations listed in the consultation paper would not state as their primary function, the above commitment, and would define their specific charters in specialist areas, be they curriculum specific, technology specific, gender specific, disadvantaged group specific etc.

- 2.11 The IEU represents its membership in all of these specific charter areas through committees, policy development, publications, research and the establishment of inclusive and collaborative processes to promote special interests. It should also be noted that the IEU represents the views of non-government teachers and support staff and that no other organisation referred to in the consultation paper could claim such a broad base for this sector of the education industry.

### **3. THE PROPOSAL**

Within this context the IEU makes the following points regarding the proposal to establish a new National Body for Teacher Professional Associations:

- 3.1 A key theme running through the consultation paper is the likely tendency for different groups to have different views about the role and purpose, form and structure of any new national body for the teacher professional associations, and the consequences which may arise from these differences and are likely to frustrate constructive work on policy agendas. The comments attributed to some of the forum participants suggest that the link between the agendas of individual associations and that of a national forum as proposed is not clear. The consultation paper notes that the majority of professional associations can be defined as “discrete”, but that “the number of federated, coalition and umbrella groups has increased... (and) tend to act as a focal point for educators who work in similar fields, share common interests or provide networks to promote the profession as a whole.” (p.7) The paper also notes “a

view that the new organisation, should not endeavour to fulfil the role of a 'peak' body of professional associations..." (p 29) and against this "the new body should act as a catalyst, by identifying the commonalities and strengths of professional associations, and extending their capacity to work together toward common and agreed objectives." (p.29).

- 3.2 Nevertheless, the IEU wishes to emphasise its support for the excellent work done by the teacher professional associations in Australia. The discussion paper documents the significant contributions made by Australia's teachers on a mostly voluntary basis to the substantial body of knowledge held by the teacher professional associations.
- 3.3 The IEU supports the notion that form follows function, but believes that there is still a lack of clarity about what such a new body would do to enhance teacher professionalism. Neither is it clear as to whether or not the existing professional associations have clear and agreed views regarding the authority of such a body.
- 3.4 The IEU sees merit in a proposal to establish a national forum (howsoever called) of professional associations which has a national facilitative and co-ordinating role of the existing functions and purposes of its constituency.
- 3.5 Such a forum should have a mandate of role and purpose negotiated and democratically determined across the range groups, based on various principles such as relevance, participation etc. Such a forum would have a role in the facilitating national debate and input within and from the professional associations around issues related to teacher professionalism as defined in the discussion paper.
- 3.6 With this as the main purpose and function of such a body, its structure and resources should be sufficient to allow it to undertake such co-ordination and facilitation or to contract in expertise to do tasks relevant to the particular activity.

- 3.7 The IEU draws a distinction between a forum with a role, purpose and structure as described above, and one which might have an independent, corporate existence with the capacity to supplant the individual associations, groups of them or all of them together and to present itself as independently representative of the teaching profession - that is, to make a claim to greater exclusivity of authority in public pronouncements on issues of teacher professionalism.
- 3.8 To have such a role and purpose would require a different structure, essentially requiring representation from every association on the governing council or executive. This is not practical and consequently the principles of inclusiveness and participation would become the subject of conflict. The possibility of constituent bodies relating to it as a competing organisation to lobby and manipulate policy positions would arise. It would not be able to speak authoritatively on teacher professional issues for all groups.
- 3.9 The issue of resourcing is difficult, and closely related to role and structure. It is essential that any national body seeking to have input into the public debate about teacher professionalism, and essentially purporting to represent the voice of the teaching profession, must be, and be seen to be, independent, autonomous and self governing. It must therefore maintain a critical distance from government, particularly if its main source of funds comes from government.
- 3.10 Given that this initiative has come from the federal government (and is not in response to a call from teachers for such a body) and that there seems to be support from the professional associations, the IEU believes that the bona fide of these associations should be demonstrated via a plan to become self funding. This should be possible if the model established is the co-ordinating, facilitative one requiring a leaner executive structure.

**CONCLUSION**

The IEU reinforces the following:

- The IEU can claim broad voluntary membership, more so than any particular professional association.
- The IEU has a clear constitutional mandate and strong membership support to be involved in and to advance the professional interests of its members.
- The IEU believes that recent national educational initiatives demonstrate that successful policy outcomes are achieved through collaborative work and partnerships involving all the major stakeholders, including education unions.