

# Developing a professional certification system for school principals: The Principals Australia Institute certification project



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## Abstract

In 2014, the Principals Australia Institute (PAI) decided to develop a national system for providing professional certification to accomplished school principals, based on the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's Australian Professional Standard for Principals (APSP). The Australian Council for Educational Research has been assisting PAI in the development of valid and reliable methods whereby principals can demonstrate how they meet the standard. This work has included conceptualising the system; developing an assessment and evaluation framework for certification; and developing guidelines for three portfolio initiatives linked to APSP. The portfolio initiatives were field-tested in 2015, and a group of principals was trained to assess them. The portfolio tasks were rated high on validity and, after training, assessors demonstrated high levels of reliability in assessing portfolio entries, identifying benchmarks and setting standards.

## Introduction

In 2012, after extensive consultation with principal organisations and other stakeholders, the Principals Australia Institute (PAI) decided to provide a voluntary system for the certification of accomplished school principals, based on the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (APSP) issued by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2014). PAI invited the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to assist in the system's development (PAI 2015).

For PAI, the ability to provide a publicly credible professional certification system was seen as a defining characteristic of a profession. Certification was seen as the way most professions promoted widespread implementation of effective practices and drove continual improvement in their members' practice, in the interests of individual professionals and the wider public. With greater school autonomy, there was also an increased need for systems that established profession-wide standards and supported their widespread implementation.

In designing the certification system, the following design principles were important: that the system was owned by the profession; that certification was based on valid and reliable evidence of successful leadership initiatives—not an academic qualification or a curriculum vitae; that certification was portable and not tied to a position specific to a particular school or school system; and that certification was distinct from performance management processes.

The certification system should provide a significant reference point for principals in their professional learning and career development. It should recognise the central importance of leadership for effective schools. It should provide a powerful and respected form of recognition from professional peers. And it should also provide principals with a highly respected and marketable form of professional certification for their career advancement.

Australia had many accomplished principals, but it lacked a system for identifying them and giving due recognition to the central role they played in the quality of schooling. A certification system would aim to provide employing authorities with a sound basis on which to encourage widespread use of effective leadership practices and career pathways for principals who achieved high professional standards.

Essential to the success of a professional certification scheme, therefore, would be the validity, reliability and fairness of the procedures used to determine whether the APSP had been met.

## The brief for ACER

As a first step, PAI asked ACER to:

- review approaches to assessing and evaluating principals internationally
- draw on this review in developing recommendations for building a rigorous and beneficial professional certification system for accomplished principals in Australia (Ingvarson, 2014).

The review found that there were few examples of assessment methods that were suitable for certification purposes. Certification called for methods that reflected the complexity of effective leadership and its impact on the quality of teaching and learning over time. Most existing methods, like 360-degree surveys, were based on perceptions rather than direct evidence of performance or accomplishments.

What was needed for certification purposes were authentic examples of initiatives that principals had led to improve their schools over realistic periods of time. The work of principals is complex; methods for capturing, assessing and evaluating relevant evidence of effective leadership needed to reflect that complexity.

For this reason, ACER recommended that portfolio entries form the main source of evidence for certification purposes. Each of the five professional practices in the APSP called for evidence of capacity to conduct successful leadership initiatives, which meant that principals needed to gather evidence of change over an extended period of time.

Structured portfolio tasks are designed to measure changes over time, such as changes in measures of staff collaboration; professional culture; or student behaviour or achievement. No other method has the capacity to encompass the full story of leading and managing strategic initiatives to improve some specified area of professional practice as effectively as the structured portfolio task.

After an extensive and thorough consultation process with national principal organisations from all sectors, PAI decided to proceed with the development of a certification system based on a set of portfolio tasks that documented school improvement initiatives that principals had led and managed.

## Stages in developing the PAI certification system

Three questions had to be addressed in developing an assessment and evaluation framework for the PAI certification system and setting the standard for certification.<sup>1</sup>

1. *What are we assessing?* The first stage required a clear understanding of what was being assessed. The APSP defined what was to be assessed in the certification system. It includes three leadership requirements (values and vision; knowledge and understanding; and personal qualities, social skills and interpersonal skills) and five key professional practices describing what accomplished principals know and do (see below).
2. *How will we assess it?* The second stage was to identify how the APSP would be assessed. It involved developing valid and reliable methods by means of which school leaders could demonstrate how their practice meets the APSP in their school contexts. The challenge was to ensure that the chosen methods of assessment provided a representative sample of evidence that covered the three leadership requirements and the five key professional practices, and in more than one

form. To meet this challenge, ACER prepared three assessment tasks in collaboration with PAI, in the form of three portfolio entries (initiatives). Each portfolio task provided principals with a clear structure within which they could document how their initiative demonstrated the requirements and practices set out in the APSP.

3. *How will we set the standard?* The third stage was to set the performance standards for each portfolio entry. A standard is the level of performance, on the criterion being assessed, that is considered satisfactory in terms of the purpose of the assessment. A benchmark portfolio initiative illustrates what the standard looks like in practice. This stage required evidence that we could train assessors to assess portfolio entries to high levels of consistency and identify benchmark portfolio entries illustrating different levels of performance. A four-level score scale with rubrics was adopted, in which a score of 3 was defined as the level of performance that met the certification standard.

## PAI assessment framework

The guiding conception of leadership that underpins the PAI certification process draws on the work of leading researchers such as Michael Fullan and Richard Elmore. As these researchers see it, leadership in a school setting entails mobilising and energising others with the aim of ensuring high-quality teaching and learning. This is consistent with the PAI approach of focusing the certification process on building a portfolio containing evidence of successful leadership initiatives.

<sup>1</sup> It is important to understand that, while the APSP describes what good school leaders know and do, it is not a 'standard' in the strict sense of that term. The standard needed to be operationalised, which meant that clear and reliable procedures had to be developed for assessing portfolio initiatives and 'setting the standard'—that is, determining what level of performance counted as meeting the standard.

Australian Professional Standard for Principals	Portfolio Initiative 1 Focus: Improving teaching and learning	Portfolio Initiative 2 Focus: Developing professional community	Portfolio Initiative 3 Focus: Building school–community partnerships
Leadership requirements			
Vision and values			
Knowledge and understanding			
Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills			
Professional practices			
Leading teaching and learning			
Developing self and others			
Leading improvement, innovation and change			
Leading the management of the school			
Engaging and working with the community			

**Figure 1** Assessment framework for Principals Institute Australia certification

Figure 1 shows the assessment framework developed by ACER for the PAI certification system. The left side shows the leadership requirements and professional practices in the APSP. The three portfolio initiatives are the methods by which principals show how they meet the standards.

The heavily shaded areas in Figure 1 show the particular professional practice on which each portfolio initiative focuses (Portfolio Initiative 1, for example, focuses on leading teaching and learning). The lighter shading shows that preparing each initiative necessarily draws on and provides evidence related to most of the other leadership requirements and professional practices in the APSP. Together, the portfolio initiatives therefore provide multiple sources of evidence related to each requirement and practice in the APSP.

## Portfolio initiatives

This section provides summaries only of the guidelines for each portfolio task.

### Portfolio Initiative 1: Improving teaching and learning

This portfolio task invited principals to undertake and document an initiative that they had led and managed, in collaboration with relevant sections of their teaching staff, to meet a need to improve achievement for a designated group of students in a particular area of the curriculum. The initiative involved:

- gathering evidence about the current achievement level of a designated group of students in relation to expected levels
- identifying goals for improving the students' achievement
- developing and implementing a strategic plan for lifting the effectiveness of teaching in that curriculum area
- documenting evidence that the initiative had led to significant improvements in the level of student achievement.

### Portfolio Initiative 2: Developing professional community

This portfolio entry invited principals to undertake and document a project over an extended period of time that would strengthen their school as a professional learning community. The initiative involved:

- gathering evidence about the current status of their school as a professional learning community
- identifying areas of need or opportunities for improvement
- developing and implementing a strategic plan for strengthening their school as a professional community
- documenting evidence that their initiative has strengthened the level of professional community activity in their school and thereby improved the quality of student opportunities for learning.

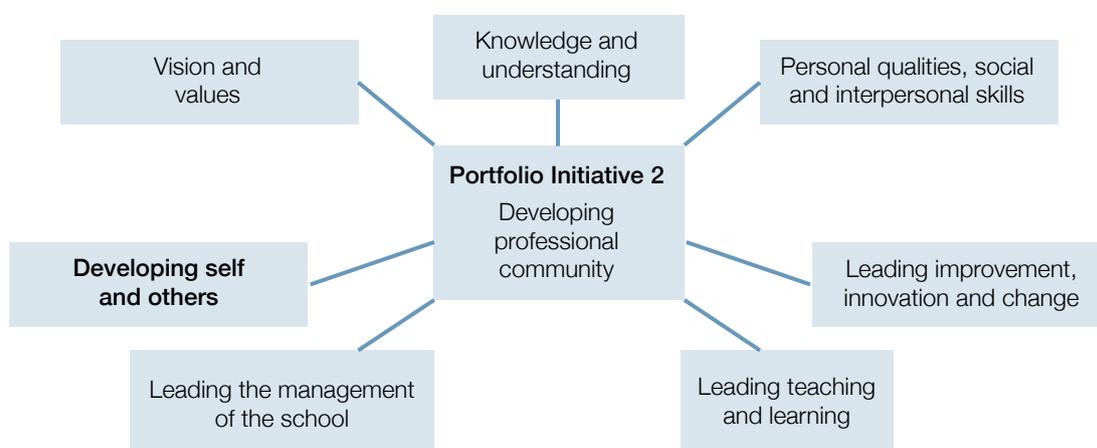
### Portfolio Initiative 3: Building school–community partnerships

This portfolio entry provided principals with an opportunity to demonstrate how their leadership has strengthened partnerships with their school's wider community. The initiative involved:

- identifying the significant need or education opportunity that the partnership was set up to address
- establishing a project plan to address that need, or grasp that opportunity, in close collaboration with partners
- ensuring that the plan was successfully implemented
- documenting evidence that the partnership has improved student outcomes
- providing evidence of continuing commitment of partners to the partnership and the initiative.

### Portfolio initiative example

As an example, Figure 2 shows how undertaking Portfolio Initiative 2 draws on and provides evidence related to most of the leadership requirements and professional practices in the APSP.



**Figure 2** Portfolio Initiative 2 relationships to the leadership requirements and professional practices in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals

## Portfolio initiative considerations

Why three entries? While the greater the number of entries, the lower the probability of making an incorrect certification decision, the law of diminishing returns applies. The basic question here was whether adding more entries would change a certification decision. Answering that question will require research at a later date. Another important factor was the need to ensure that the work involved in applying for certification was manageable for principals.

For PAI, it was also important that the certification system was both a professional development system and a system that had flow-on benefits to schools. Once principals signed on as candidates, the system would provide collegial support as they led and managed their action plans to improve their schools.

In this sense, the portfolio initiatives were to be prospective, not retrospective; they were to be based on initiatives that principals undertook once they decided to become candidates for professional certification. They were not to be based on simply gathering existing evidence or on a curriculum vitae of past achievements. Once a principal decided to apply for certification, they committed to undertaking the portfolio tasks in their school. This meant that schools would benefit from the certification system because their principals would be implementing the APSP.

## Key considerations in developing the certification system

### Content validity

This required that the assessment system provided evidence against all the leadership requirements and practices in APSP, and in more than one form. The challenge here was to ensure a representative sample of a principal's achievements in relation to the APSP—that is, a sufficient sample of evidence from which to generalise and make reliable judgements about a principal's accomplishments.

### Construct validity

This required that the assessment process provided evidence of highly accomplished leadership. The challenge here was to ensure that the assessment tasks (the portfolio initiatives) were authentic—that is, representative of action plans that, according to the APSP, effective principals would normally be expected to implement as part of their practice. Principals should not see the tasks as artificial hurdles but rather as part of the normal documentation of their action plans.

## Consequential validity

This required that the process of preparing for certification had valuable flow-on effects, so that it was in itself a valuable vehicle for professional development. It also required that the process did not disadvantage any group of principals, so that all had equally good opportunities to meet the APSP.

The challenge here was to ensure that principals found that the process of planning and documenting leadership initiatives necessarily engaged them in effective professional learning—that is, in describing, analysing and reflecting on their practice in the light of what the research said about what effective school leaders know and do.

It was also important that the process of preparation for certification was manageable. To facilitate this, the portfolio initiatives closely matched the kind of work in which principals would normally engage, and the evidence required closely matched what principals would usually gather as they monitored implementation of their action plans.

A future validity consideration will be to conduct research demonstrating whether principals who gain certification are more successful (based on independently gathered evidence) than principals who apply but are judged not yet ready.

## Field test

In 2015, 50 principals volunteered to field-test limited versions of the portfolio tasks. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, participating principals had to base their portfolio entries on readily available evidence generated from previous school improvement projects, not new initiatives. However, 30 principals did provide sufficient evidence for their entries to be assessable.

## Training assessors, setting standards and identifying benchmarks

The key challenge in setting standards for certification purposes was to find out if it was possible to train assessors (other principals) to high levels of consistency and set standards by identifying benchmark entries to provide examples of the standard in practice.

Eleven assessors from different states and school systems were trained to use a four-level scale for judging portfolio entries, in which a score of 3 meant assessors agreed the entry provided clear evidence of meeting the standard. A score of 2 meant there was evidence, but it was insufficient and a score of 1 meant there was little or no evidence. A score of 4 meant the evidence more than met the certification level and was uniformly convincing, coherent and consistent.

Training of assessors took place at ACER late in 2015. The first step in identifying benchmarks was to ensure that assessors had developed a deep understanding of the three leadership requirements and five key professional practices in the APSP. The second was to ensure that they developed a clear understanding of the three portfolio tasks—what each task measures and what evidence to look for, as described in the relevant evaluation guide and assessment record forms. Assessors were also trained in bias control.

Assessors then began judging entries. High levels of agreement emerged among assessors about the level of performance each entry represented, particularly entries at the certification level. Benchmarks representing performance at each of the four score levels were identified. Benchmarks will be essential to later training of other assessors. Assessor trainers will use these to make sure that assessors gradually improve their ability to discriminate between portfolio entries that represent different levels of performance. They will also use them to show trainee assessors that, although different in approach, portfolio initiatives may nevertheless represent the same level of leadership.

## Final comments

At this stage, the PAI certification system is still a work in progress, and PAI is currently setting up a framework for future research. The field test demonstrated that

PAI is well on the way to establishing a rigorous and feasible approach to assessing a principal's leadership in relation to the APSP. A certification system lives or dies according to its rigour. It must be able to demonstrate that it can set standards and discriminate consistently between leadership initiatives that meet the standards and those that do not if it is to gain recognition and support from employing authorities as well as the profession. This is also crucial if the system's procedures are to be transparent and legally defensible.

## References

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