

## **HAR07081**

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***Improving Pre-Graduate Teachers' Professional Knowledge, Practice and Commitment: Evaluating a school – university collaboration.***

**Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)  
International Educational Research Conference, Fremantle, November 2007.**

The NSW Institute of Teachers' Professional Teaching Standards provide a clear framework for the accreditation of all graduating teachers. The challenge for teacher education institutions is to structure their programs such that Pre-Graduate Teachers have every opportunity to meet these standards.

The Teaching and Learning Consortium (TLC), an initiative developed in partnership between an Australian university and local school systems, places immersion in a whole-school context at the heart of the Pre-Graduate Teachers' professional experience. This paper reports on student teachers' and school staff perceptions of the learning outcomes of the TLC. These are evaluated in terms of how the program has impacted on the Pre-Graduate Teachers' professional growth within the constructs of Professional Knowledge, Practice and Commitment.

The evaluation employed a mixed-method approach comprising surveys of 125 teacher education students and 40 school personnel, plus focus groups of key stakeholders. The study found that the TLC produced enhanced learning outcomes in terms of the Pre-Graduate Teachers' knowledge of children and how they learn, and in their capacity to create environments to promote this learning. These findings have important implications for the shaping of initial teacher education programs.

### **Introduction:**

Within New South Wales, Australia and much of the developed world, teacher education discourse and practice is increasingly dominated by the rhetoric of quality assurance and accountability. In part a profession-led initiative designed to raise the status of the profession, and in part politically and ideologically driven, the quality assurance agenda has created an environment in which it is mandatory for all graduating teachers to be accredited. In this context, the New South Wales Institute of Teachers' 'Professional Teaching Standards' have been developed to measure graduate teacher competence.

While mandatory accreditation undoubtedly places demands on Pre-Graduate Teachers, it also presents unprecedented challenges for teacher education institutions (TEIs). In addition to needing to produce teachers who are innovative, responsive creators of knowledge to meet the demands of schooling in the new millennium, TEIs must also develop courses which demonstrably meet a set of consistent, measurable professional standards. These two imperatives are not always compatible.

Alongside the professional competency agenda runs a second, sometimes intersecting theme in the call for new pedagogical approaches to meet the ever-changing demands on teachers and to bridge the perceived gap between on-campus theory and school-based teaching practice. One response at the institutional level has been to develop programs which work in close partnership with schools to deliver content and provide opportunities for teacher education students to observe and critically reflect upon current practice.

This paper reports on an evaluation of one such program, Australian Catholic University's 'Teaching and Learning Consortium' (TLC). Using the Professional Teaching Standards as a reference, it examines the extent to which the TLC develops Pre-Graduate Teachers' Professional Knowledge, Practice and Commitment. The study found that the TLC produced enhanced learning outcomes in almost all the domains, particularly in terms of the Pre-Graduate Teachers' knowledge of children and how they learn, and in their capacity to create environments to promote this learning. In addition, stakeholders reported that the program developed the Pre-Graduate Teachers' capacity to interact appropriately with other members of the school community and their understanding of the teaching profession more effectively than a more conventional model of on-campus lectures plus a classroom-based practicum. These findings have important implications for the shaping of Pre-Graduate Teacher education programs.

### **The Origin of Professional Standards:**

The constant call for improved standards in education, and, by extension, in teacher education, is nothing new. Indeed, "*Teacher education has been soundly criticized in every decade since the Second World War*" (Wideen, 1995 p1). While Wideen is

referring here to the UK context, his words could equally apply to Australia. As Dyson (2003) noted, teacher education in Australia has been “*reviewed to the eyeballs*” (Dyson 2003), with a major review occurring roughly every decade from the Murray Report in 1957 to the Ramsey-led *Quality Matters* in 2000. One major response has been a shift towards greater teacher accountability (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004 p31), primarily in the form of teacher licensing or accreditation according to the achievement of ‘professional standards’ against which teacher performance can be benchmarked.

The idea of a set of standards for the profession has been “*circulating in education policy discourses and debates for much the latter part of the 1990s*” (Sachs, 2003 p175). The Ramsey *Review of Teacher Education* recommended the “establishment and promulgation of performance standards at designated stages of development as a teacher” against which all teachers – beginning and established – could be measured and accredited (Ramsey 2000, p145). Since 2005, the accreditation of beginning teachers against these standards has become mandatory. In New South Wales (NSW) this process is carried out by the NSW Institute of Teachers.

Australia is not alone in its move towards professional standards and accountability. Similar processes have been in place in the United Kingdom (Long, White & Moran, 2006) and the United States (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996) for some time. Bloomfield (2006) locates the standards agenda within a broader international context, noting that similar politics underpin the agenda in Australia.

The aims of professional standards range from providing a benchmark for minimum standards within teaching, to improving the practices of teachers in classrooms and raising the status of teachers (Forster, 2004 p1). In Australia, the espoused aim was to:

“... *advance and support the effectiveness and standing of the teaching profession... It is seeking to engage with the whole profession and work collaboratively within the education community to catalyse action to strengthen the profession in ways that will complement activities of other education and community organisations.*” (Ramsey 2005).

## **Professional Standards: Issues and Contestation**

The assumption that competency standards equals professionalism and/or improved quality goes largely unchallenged yet, as several commentators have remarked, the application of a standards framework is problematic (eg. Forster, 2004). Bloomfield (2006) notes the paradox between providing a supply of “*innovative, flexible, context responsive teachers capable of functioning as creative knowledge producers*” while satisfying demands of a political context which “*favours consistency, coherence, standards, measurable outcomes and control*” to meet goals of “*efficiency, effectiveness and accountability*” (Bloomfield 2006 p2). The danger is that providing a consistent set of standards to which all teachers must adhere risks a loss of teacher flexibility and responsiveness to varying contextual needs.

The very term ‘professional teaching standards’ is widely and uncritically used in both educational and political discourses (Sachs 2003). Firstly, it is used in the sense of providing a benchmark of minimum standards for the profession. Sachs warns that, from this point of view, standards can be applied as a means of “*homogenising and controlling the profession*” (Sachs 2003, p184). Secondly, it is used in terms of public accountability, in order to promote consistency and reliability and as an assessment of ‘quality’ with an aim to raise the status of the teaching profession. Like Bloomfield, Darling-Hammond warns that “*practice could become constrained by the codification of knowledge that does not significantly acknowledge diversity of approaches or advances in the field*” (1999 as cited in Sachs 2003 p176).

Many argue that the Australian teaching profession can learn from the experience of other countries. Kleinhenz and Ingvarson describe the UK attempt to implement teacher assessment against standards as reductionist and characterised by what they term “*loose coupling*” between “*management-conceived models of teachers’ work and the ‘technical aspects of teaching’*” (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004 p32). Another danger is that, even where the standards have been developed by the teachers’ own professional body, the mandatory application of these standards will add to teachers’ already demanding

workload and become an “*ideological tool for teachers to do more under the guise of increasing their professionalism and status*” (Sachs, 2003 p184).

However, while the assumption that professional standards equals improved teaching does not necessarily hold true, it would also be erroneous to dismiss the agenda as purely politically driven and/or counterproductive to the aim of providing quality teachers. Kleinhenz and Ingvarson (2004), for example, argue that they can be used to enhance teachers’ professional development, and their career advancement. Indeed, one of the stated aims of the Ramsey Review (2000) was to “*create the conditions to revitalize teaching by making it possible for teachers to draw on the deep well of their own professionalism*” (Ramsey 2000). The enormous challenge confronting the profession in Australia, then, is to apply its framework in such a way as to enhance professional learning while simultaneously encouraging creativity and a diversity of methods.

### **Challenges for Teacher Education**

Contested discourse notwithstanding, professional standards are now mandatory and will no doubt be with us for the foreseeable future. Since 2005 TEIs need to demonstrate that they provide programs which provide Pre-Graduate Teachers with every opportunity to meet the standards at the level of the Graduate Teacher. Indeed, since the 2006 consultation paper *Teaching Australia* (2006), it is not only teachers but teacher education programs which must meet standards to attain accreditation.

In 2005 the NSW Institute of Teachers implemented a set of Professional Teaching Standards for all graduates, beginning teachers and experienced teachers to use as a benchmark for their knowledge, skills and attitudes as a teaching professional. The standards comprise the three domains of Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Commitment. Each domain consists of seven elements and these are applied across four stages in a teacher’s career. It is the initial stage, that of the graduate teacher, with which teacher educators and Pre-Graduate Teachers must become acquainted.

## **What of Pedagogy?**

The accountability agenda, however, is not the only challenge facing TEIs. In addition to demonstrating their ability to prepare graduate teachers for accreditation, teacher educators must also produce teachers capable of meeting the demands of an increasingly complex society (Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training – House of Representatives, 2007). Successive reviews have noted the increasing complexity of the teacher's role and highlighted the need for new pedagogical approaches which develop teachers' capacity for critical and innovative thinking. As Ramsey notes, "*We must be confident that our systems of teacher education equip teachers with knowledge and skills relevant to the needs of young people preparing for the transition to work and participation in an ever-changing world*" (Ramsey 2000, p9).

A particular focus has often been on the shape and place of school experience. In 1998, Broadbent found that shifting the focus from the university to student independence increased levels of students' satisfaction with their professional experience (Broadbent, 1998). Bloomfield also emphasises the importance of in-school experiences, saying we need to "*provide spaces for safe play*" and to encourage student teachers in "*productively interrogating their experiences*" (2006, p10). Le Cornu & Ewing (2005) suggest that "*conventional practicum experiences may be reconceptualised to facilitate the development of richer learning communities in schools*". They note that there is a need "*to establish professional learning communities that provide a positive and enabling context for teachers' professional growth*".

In response, some systems and individual universities have implemented new pedagogical approaches which address the substantive questions of what it is that teachers need to learn and, just as importantly, what are the most effective strategies for enhancing this learning. Quite often this has taken the form of establishing programs based on stronger partnerships with schools and which increase the role of the school as a site for professional learning. In Britain since the early 1990s there has been a significant shift towards Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) transferring much of the delivery of content and mentoring of student teachers to schools. Funding to HEIs has been reduced

and transferred to schools to facilitate this shift. The introduction of Professional Development School Partnerships in the United States of America has also been strongly encouraged and widely implemented (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1994). Until recently Australia has been cautious of systemically imposing a particular model, however several institutions have taken the initiative on a local level. It is likely that we will see an increase in such programs given a recent Federal policy initiative which specifically targets additional funding to institutions whose programs provide a minimum of 120 days' experience in schools (Australian Government 2007).

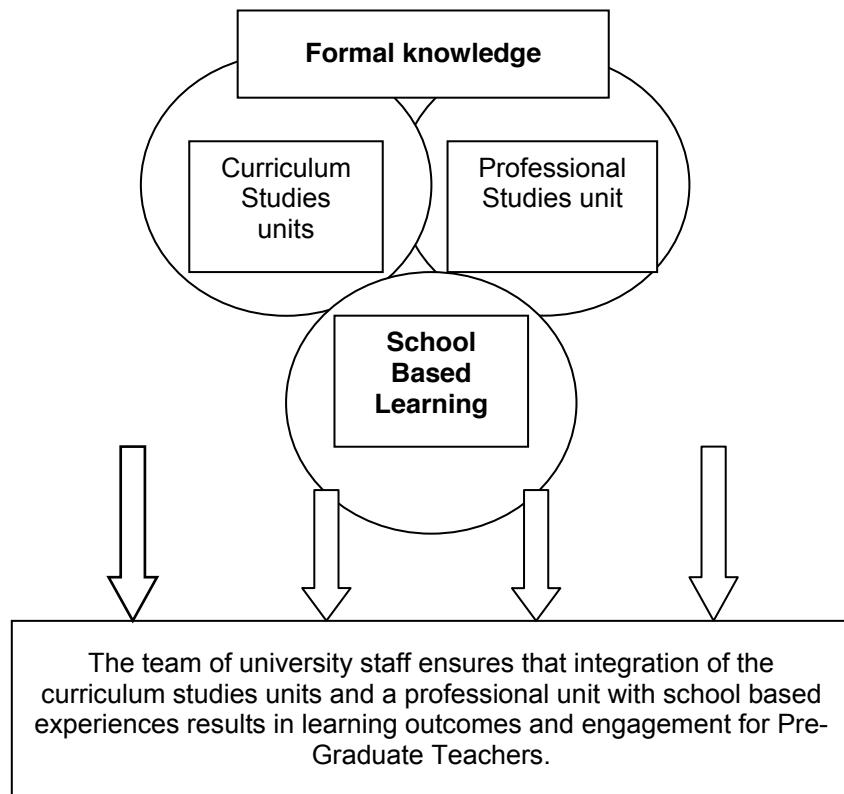
### **The Teaching and Learning Consortium.**

Australian Catholic University's (ACU's) Teaching and Learning Consortium (TLC) is an example of a program which place immersion in a whole-school context at the heart of the Pre-Graduate Teachers' professional experience. Developed in partnership between ACU and local school systems, the program places Year 2 Bachelor of Education (Primary) students in schools for two full days a week, interspersed across the semester. This is facilitated by the allocation of half the normal tutorial time from two Curriculum units (Mathematics Education and Religious Education) and one Professional Studies unit (Teaching and Classroom Management) to the school placement.

The program utilises a team approach both in the Pre-Graduate Teachers' involvement across the school and in university assessment tasks. Rather than being placed with one teacher/one class, the students are placed with a whole school and have opportunities to observe a variety of teachers and participate in a range of learning contexts. They are expected to integrate into the school staff, work with teachers in the design and delivery of curriculum and to develop and trial school based initiatives which enhance their own learning and benefit the school.

In addition to active involvement across the whole school, students are encouraged to critically reflect upon their observations and experiences. University facilitators (normally the lecturers and tutors for the three subjects) visit the schools regularly to

assist the students with making links between school practice and the theoretical component of on-campus lectures and tutorials. The involvement of academics in this manner aims to strengthen the “*weak link between the practicum and the theoretical components*” noted as a significant concern in *Top of the Class: Report on the inquiry into teacher education* (Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training – House of Representatives, 2007, p. 71). This is further facilitated by a structured program of guided observation and reflection activities. Figure 1 summarises the model.



*Figure 1: Integration of curriculum, professional studies and school based learning through the TLC model*

In an earlier study into the impact of the TLC, White (2003) concluded that it is an effective model for developing student teachers’ understandings of teachers’ work. She found that student teachers gained understandings of the complexity of the teacher’s role and the importance of community and collegiality within the school context. She concluded that the TLC model better prepares and motivates student teachers for the profession than models which solely utilise the traditional practicum structures of lectures, tutorials and a practicum experience placed with one teacher in one classroom.

The TLC program has run successfully for ten years. While it has been evaluated on an annual basis, and the results have been predominantly positive (eg, Sutherland 1997), these evaluations have focused largely upon the implementation issues. In 2006, University-based coordinators of the program felt it timely to conduct a more in-depth study to identify the key learning outcomes of the program in order to inform the future shape of the program. Given the current imperative for TEIs to demonstrate that their courses deliver opportunities for students to attain graduate teacher competencies, it was felt appropriate to use the NSW Institute of Teachers' *Professional Standards* as a framework within which to identify these learnings.

### **Research Design:**

In 2006 a research grant was awarded to three ACU lecturers who had played a role in the TLC, and (N) from one of the partner employing bodies, Parramatta Catholic Education Office. The research team thus comprised personnel from both key partners. The study sought contributions from all key stakeholders – the Pre-Graduate Teachers, university personnel and school staff. This paper reports on these participants' perceptions of the learning outcomes of the TLC. These are analysed in terms of how the program has impacted on the Pre-Graduate Teachers' professional growth, primarily employing the constructs of Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Commitment as measures.

The evaluation employed a mixed-method approach. The first phase comprised surveys of 125 teacher education students and 40 school personnel. The same survey instrument was used for both student teachers and school staff, with only slight changes in wording to acknowledge the different perspectives. The second phase involved focus groups of key school staff and university personnel. This paper reports on the findings from phase one, the survey component of the study.

The Survey consisted of three sections. The first section asked respondents to make a comparison between the effectiveness of the TLC program and other more conventional modes of on-campus lectures and tutorials plus a class-based practicum. The seven

questions in this section were general in nature, covering the impact of the TLC on Pre-Graduate Teachers' understandings of student learning, of the operation of the whole school and of the teaching profession, and their ability to link theory with practice. It also asked whether respondents believed the program effectively prepared student teachers for their block practicum and whether the program is worthwhile for both Pre-Graduate Teachers and for schools. A five-point Likert scale was applied, asking participants to rate their responses as "*Much more than*", "*Somewhat more than*", "*About the same as*", "*Somewhat less than*" and "*Much less than*" the mode of on-campus tutorials/lectures plus morning-a-week visits to schools.

The second section focused specifically on the professional standards, with seven subsections covering each of the elements within the domains of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional commitment. Again, a five-point Likert scale was employed, asking participants to rate their responses from "*Strongly Agree*" through to "*Strongly Disagree*". The final section of the survey comprised three open-ended questions, where participants were asked to describe what they considered to be the most important learnings from the TLC and what features of the program enabled this learning, with an opportunity to add additional comments.

All students in the 2006 cohort – approximately 150 – were invited to complete the survey. 125 participated, giving a response rate of 83 per cent. All twelve partner schools in the Parramatta region were invited to take part. Schools were asked to select only school executive and those teachers who had worked closely with the university students in the TLC and subsequent practicum. Fifty-four surveys were sent out and forty were returned, resulting in a 74 per cent response rate.

## **Results and Discussion**

Overall, the findings indicate that the TLC produced enhanced learning outcomes in all domains and that the model is more effective than a more conventional model of on-campus lectures plus a classroom-based practicum. Particularly positive responses were reported in terms of the Pre-Graduate Teachers' knowledge of children and how they

learn, and in their capacity to create environments to promote this learning. All stakeholders also reported that the program developed the Pre-Graduate Teachers' capacity to interact appropriately with other members of the school community and enhanced their understanding of the teaching profession as a whole.

### *Section 1: The Program Overall*

Responses to this section were overwhelmingly positive. On average, 87 per cent of school staff and 81 per cent of students believe that the TLC is more effective than the conventional model of campus learning plus practicum. Responses from school staff were generally more positive than from the students, with 95 per cent reporting that the TLC model was more effective at developing the students' understanding of the whole school compared to 89 per cent of students. Similarly, 90 per cent of school staff felt the TLC is better at developing a full understanding of the teaching profession, compared to 89 per cent of students. Table 1 summarises the responses to the first seven statements:

Table 1: *Percentage of school staff and students who believed that the TLC enhanced learning more than the mode of on-campus tutorials/lectures plus Morning-a-Week visits to schools.*

Statement	Percentage of School Staff	Percentage of Students
<b>1.</b> Through the TLC I [the Pre-Graduate Teacher] gained important knowledge about student learning.	85	82
<b>2.</b> Through the TLC I [the Pre-Graduate Teacher] gained a fuller understanding of the teaching profession.	90	89
<b>3.</b> Through the TLC I [the Pre-Graduate Teacher] gained an understanding of the operation of the whole school.	95	93
<b>4.</b> The TLC enhanced my [the Pre-Graduate Teacher's] capacity to make links between theory and school practice.	80	70
<b>5.</b> The TLC school projects were of value to the school staff and children.	85	86
<b>6.</b> After the TLC I [the Pre-Graduate Teacher] feel orientated and prepared for the block practicum.	85	63
<b>7.</b> The TLC is a worthwhile program in the development of Pre-Graduate Teachers.	90	84

In general, school staff and university students reported that the structure of the TLC provided students with a more accurate view of the ‘real’ world of teaching. This was apparent in the comments in the open-ended section, with 15 school staff and 42 students reporting that the TLC helped them to gain a greater understanding of the operation and context of the whole school community. One teacher remarked that:

*“The program places the Pre-Graduate Teacher in a real teaching situation in a real teaching environment in a real school community. They get to experience teaching as it happens each day with ups and downs while being supported by experienced and supportive colleagues”.*

Similarly, another commented that:

*“Having the opportunity to become part of the school community many weeks prior to their practicum is so valuable! The more time they have to do this the better. Schools are living, breathing organisms – this gives students a great opportunity to experience the reality of schooling (with all the unforeseen changes, etc., that impact on each day!)”*

Others felt that the experience helped students to close the perceived gap between the theoretical component of their university course and school practice. Comments such as “*The experiences they gain can open up any theoretical knowledge gained at university – the experience often makes more sense*” were common. This sentiment was echoed by the students’ comments, with one remarking “*Through working in TLC I have been able to see how theory becomes practice*”; and another saying “*There is so much more to a school compared to what we learn at uni. You can learn how to deal with a situation better after dealing with it in a class rather than reading about it in a book.*” It would seem that the TLC is an appropriate model for strengthening the often “*weak link between the practicum and the theoretical components*” (Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training – House of Representatives, 2007, p. 71).

## *Section 2 – Professional Knowledge*

Again, responses were very positive with, on average, 75 per cent of school staff and 70 per cent of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that the TLC improves the Pre-

Graduate Teachers' knowledge of learners and how they learn. Interestingly, there was a significant difference between student and staff responses with regard to how effectively the program develops their content knowledge, with 80 per cent of school staff agreeing or strongly agreeing, compared to only 57 per cent of students.

One of the lowest ratings was for the effectiveness of the TLC in enhancing students' skills with respect to information and communication technologies (ICT) in the classroom. Only 38 per cent of students agreed TLC enhanced their skills in this area. While this is of some concern to the program coordinators, it possibly says more about the state of ICT in schools than the impact of the TLC or any other program. More positive were perceptions of how the program enhanced the Pre-Graduate Teachers' understanding of their students and how they learn. 85 per cent of school staff and 78 per cent of students agreed that the TLC enhanced their understanding of school students' different backgrounds, typical stages of development, and different approaches to learning. Table 2 summarises rates of agreement in the two elements within the domain of professional knowledge:

Table 2: *Percentage of school staff and university students who agreed or strongly agreed that the Pre-Graduate Teachers' knowledge of content and capacity to teach it and of learners and how they learned were enhanced.*

<b>Element</b>	<b>Percentage of school staff agreement</b>	<b>Percentage of university student agreement</b>
Teachers know their subject content and how to teach that content to their students	75	57
Teachers know their students and how they learn	76	71

The effectiveness of the TLC in delivering these outcomes is largely attributed to the amount of time spent in schools, and to the program structure which provides opportunities for students to observe a range of teaching styles and strategies in a range of learning contexts across the whole school, rather than being placed with the one teacher or class for the entire professional experience. For example, one teacher remarked that:

*“As the TLC allows for observation of a variety of classrooms/teachers over a number of weeks it enables the students to see a range of strategies, teaching methods, management styles rather than being exposed to only one teacher. The block practicum which follows allows opportunity for strategies observed to be implemented with a class group”.*

Several students made similar observations, for example one commented that:

*“Being able to experience all stages and grades allowed me to see all the different aspects of students of different ages and seeing many different styles of teaching and classroom management skills – no one is the same”.*

Clearly, the TLC experience is encouraging students to become more open to new ideas and responsive to the various needs of individual learners.

### *Section 2 – Professional Practice*

Responses to this section were the most positive for school staff with Element 5, relating to the development of classroom management skills, the highest rating section overall. 95 per cent of school staff and 83 per cent of students agreed that the TLC enhanced the Pre-Graduate Teachers’ capacity to plan and implement lessons to engage students and address learning outcomes. In addition, both school staff and students believed that it enhanced their capacity to use a range of resources and teaching strategies.

With regard to the standards within Element 3: “*Teachers plan, assess and report for effective learning*” (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005), there was wide variation in the responses. While most agreed that the TLC enhanced the Pre-Graduate Teachers’ ability to plan and implement engaging and coherent teaching strategies, only a low percentage – 43 per cent of school staff and 50 per cent of students – believed that it improved their understanding of the principles and practices of assessment and reporting. This is quite likely to be due to the fact that the TLC took place in the beginning of the school year so students were not in schools at the time when teachers are normally involved in report writing. Nonetheless, it does indicate an area which may need attention in the future.

The section which rated most positively was Element 5: “*Teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments through the use of classroom management skills*” (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005). All but one of the school staff participants responded that the TLC enhanced the Pre-Graduate Teachers’ ability to create a positive learning environment, and all but two (95 per cent) reported that it enhanced their knowledge of practical approaches to managing behaviour and their ability to engage students in purposeful learning activities. While students’ responses to these statements were not quite so high, they were still overwhelmingly positive. 88 per cent agreed that the TLC enhanced their ability to implement strategies to create a positive learning environment and over 80 per cent reported that it enhanced their knowledge of behaviour management principles and practices and their capacity to develop rapport with all students. The responses to the three elements of Professional Practice are summarised in Table 3:

Table 3: *Percentage of school staff and university students who agreed or strongly agreed that the Pre-Graduate Teachers’ knowledge and capacity were enhanced in the three elements comprising Professional Practice.*

<b>Element</b>	<b>Percentage of school staff agreement</b>	<b>Percentage of university student agreement</b>
Teachers plan, assess and report for effective learning	74	61
Teachers communicate effectively with their students	84	73
Teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments through the use of classroom management skills	89	82

These views are further supported in the open-ended section, with students commenting that “*Classroom management became less of an overwhelming challenge*” and

“*Through participation in the TLC the most important knowledge I acquired was how students learn and the importance of building a strong and positive rapport with the students*”.

Once again, the opportunity to observe a range of contexts and practices was seen as critical in promoting this development, as is evidenced by comments such as:

*“I was happy with the fact that we were able to visit many different classrooms which enabled us to learn more about stage outcomes and disciplining differences between children of different grades”.*

### *Section 2 – Professional Commitment*

Within Element Six, one of the highest rating components was that of the importance of teamwork. This rated very highly for both students and school staff, with 93 per cent of school staff and 89 per cent of students reporting that the TLC enhanced knowledge of the importance of teamwork in an educational context. 85 per cent of school staff and 79 per cent of students also believed the program enhanced the Pre-Graduate Teachers' capacity to accept constructive feedback in order to improve teaching practices. Both of these aspects are critical competencies in the current climate with its emphasis on teachers continually improving their knowledge. Table 5 provides an overview of responses to this domain:

Table 4: *Percentage of school staff and university students who agreed or strongly agreed that the student teachers' knowledge and capacity were enhanced in the two elements comprising Professional Commitment.*

<b>Element</b>	<b>Percentage of school staff agreement</b>	<b>Percentage of university student agreement</b>
Teachers continually improve their professional knowledge and practice.	71	77
Teachers are actively engaged members of their profession and the wider community.	62	80

Student and staff comments attribute this effectiveness to the structure of the program, specifically its emphasis on critical reflection. School teachers in particular stressed the importance of student teachers being encouraged to critically reflect upon their observations and their own practice, with one noting that

*“By observing and being immersed in the school situation and having the opportunity to reflect on their observations with their TLC peers enables this learning.”*

Another teacher made a similar observation, saying:

*“I believe the TLC program is very beneficial to any prospective teacher as it gives them real experience that they can take back to uni to discuss with other peers. It is also good for teachers to take time out to reflect on our own thinking practices as this may need refining from time to time also.”*

Students, on the other hand, were more inclined to value the importance of teamwork and collaboration. In the open-ended section, 46 students reported that the most important benefit from the TLC was in the development of their communication skills and their understanding of the importance of teamwork and of developing positive relationships with all members of the school community. This is reflected in comments such as “*I learned how important group collaboration is in a school. Teachers working together is essential*” and

*“Working as a group was challenging at times due to various opinions, but it was useful because that is what the teaching profession is about – communicating/collaborating with grade partners and other staff members when programming”.*

When it came to rating the TLC against Element Seven, on teachers becoming actively engaged members of their profession and the community, there were interesting differences between student and school staff perceptions. Both staff and students found the TLC effective in developing the skill of communication with other education professionals, with 87.5 per cent of school staff and 95 per cent of students agreeing that the TLC enhanced the Pre-Graduate Teacher’s capacity to liaise, communicate and interact effectively and appropriately with colleagues and other members of the school community. This was the most positive section among the students’ responses. The extent to which the students valued their learning in this area is evident in the following:

*“I learned the importance of the whole school working together to ensure that the needs of the students are met. It also gives us an idea of how complex schools’ structures are and the value of working co-operatively in teams to achieve goals that benefit the school.”*

When it came to home-school communication, school staff rated this section lowest, with only 50 per cent believing the TLC developed the Pre-Graduate Teachers’ understanding of the importance of effective home-school links and of involving parents in the educative process. This compares with 70 per cent of students. This may be because, as the student teachers are only in the second year of their degree, teachers often do not feel it appropriate to allow them to communicate with parents. Several teachers made comments to that effect, some even suggesting that universities should not be assessing this component at all. Finding strategies with which to develop these competencies in the school context remains a significant challenge for teacher education institutions.

## **Conclusion**

In New South Wales and much of the developed world, the call for higher standards in teacher education has created a climate within which it is mandatory for all graduating teachers to be accredited against a consistent set of professional standards. This presents a new challenge for teacher education institutions, which now need to demonstrate that their courses provide Pre-Graduate Teachers with sufficient opportunities to attain these standards.

Alongside the quality assurance agenda runs a second, sometimes competing agenda, that of the need to develop new approaches which will equip beginning teachers with the knowledge and skills to operate in an increasingly complex and ever-changing world. The challenge for TEIs is to develop programs which address the need to produce teachers who can think critically and act creatively and responsively while adhering to a set of consistent pre-determined standards. A particular focus has been on school experience programs, which have come under the microscope in recent years. Several universities have developed new models of school experience, often placing greater emphasis on

partnership with, and more time spent in, schools. The Teaching and Learning Consortium is an example of such a model.

This evaluation of the TLC indicated that the program produced enhanced learning outcomes in the three domains of Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Commitment. All stakeholders reported that the TLC is more effective than a more conventional model of on-campus lectures plus a classroom-based practicum. The findings demonstrate that it was particularly effective in enhancing Pre-Graduate Teachers' knowledge of children and how they learn, and their capacity to create positive learning environments. In addition, the program was seen to effectively develop the Pre-Graduate Teachers' capacity to interact appropriately with other members of the school community and to enhance their understanding of the teaching profession as a whole. It seems fair to conclude that, according to the perceptions of student teachers and school staff alike, the TLC is an appropriate and effective model which does equip graduate teachers with the necessary competencies for teaching in an ever-changing world. These findings will inform the future shape of the TLC program and may have broader implications for teacher education programs in general for, as one student expressed it:

*“Seeing the theory being put into practice by experienced classroom teachers... I observed many things which I believe will help me become a more effective teacher. TLC was a great preparation for practicum and future teaching.”*

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