

## The Victorian Auditor-General did not ‘find’ that conferences are not effective

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*Dr Deb Hull*

*Executive Officer of the History Teachers’ Association of Victoria*

*President of the Council of Professional Teaching Associations of Victoria*

I’m speaking briefly today about what Victoria’s professional teachers’ associations have planned in the professional learning space for 2019. However, I would like to start with some thoughts about a recent article in *The Age* which suggested that the Victorian Auditor-General had found that conferences and seminars were an ineffective form of professional learning for teachers.<sup>1</sup> This is a big issue for us as the providers of Victoria’s **discipline-specific** conferences for teachers.

Firstly, the Auditor General’s report on *Professional Learning for School Teachers* did **not** examine the effectiveness of professional learning for teachers, it examined whether the Department of Education and the Victorian Institute of Teaching had sufficient data to understand the professional learning that teachers are currently undertaking, and whether they are in a position to appropriately advise the Minister on these matters. In compiling the report, the Auditor General consulted with the Department of Education and VIT.

I am quoting here from the report: “This audit did not examine the efficacy of a specific initiative, rather, we evaluated whether VIT and DET have a clear and accurate understanding of the professional learning that occurs in government schools, including its planning, cost, and impact.”

Despite this, the Auditor-General did refer to conferences and seminars. Twice in the whole report. Briefly.

Firstly: “Research suggests that traditional professional learning activities, such as conferences and seminars, have limited long-term effectiveness because they passively convey information with minimal follow-up. These once-off, **generic** events often occur outside the classroom and have limited capacity to explore the diverse needs of every teacher.”

There was no reference provided for this research, so there is no way to assess whether it is relevant or applicable to all types of conferences and seminars, or whether the methodology or the research questions addressed the kind of professional learning we deliver.

In the second instance, the report notes that government school expenditure on conferences, courses and seminars was \$107 million over three years. The Auditor General said “This expenditure represents

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/conferences-waste-teachers-time-and-our-money-auditor-general-claims-20190220-p50z0w.html>

a sizable portion of schools' funding—particularly considering the consensus that attendance at conferences is the least effective form of professional learning. We encourage DET to develop guidance that helps schools to invest in activities known to have the greatest impact on teachers' practices, such as the development of in-school professional learning programs that are teacher led and classroom based."

One might reasonably infer, given this level of investment from cash-strapped schools and busy teachers, that the 'consensus' about the effectiveness of this kind of learning is not as widespread as the Auditor General was led to believe.

Despite the rather strange media coverage of it, the Auditor General's report is really worth reading. It lays out the steps that the Department of Education has taken in recent years to discourage individual government school teachers from identifying and pursuing their own professional learning choices. Mechanisms are being introduced that push teachers to use their VIT-mandated professional learning hours, and the professional practice days set aside for them in their 2017 employment agreement with the Department, to advance the current, overarching change goals of the school.

In 2017 the Department included a professional learning and development section in schools' Annual Improvement Plans. Schools were required to show that the professional learning that teachers were undertaking was linked to the goals in the Annual Improvement Plan which – one might expect - are usually focused on whole-school improvement strategies rather than the extension of teachers' discipline-specific knowledge and pedagogy.

In 2018 the Department introduced the *Performance and Development Guidelines for the Teacher Class*. While requiring principals to support teachers to engage in collaborative practices such as mentoring and inquiry-based research – which we would all agree is an excellent step - the guidelines also note that teachers' Performance and Development Plans should explicitly link to the activities and milestones outlined in their schools' Annual Improvement Plans. "The link between individual and group priorities is pivotal to the Education State's reform agenda, as firmly embedding professional learning into schools' day-to-day routines requires a concentrated, collective effort from DET, principals, and teachers."

Perhaps most concerning, the Auditor General found that "DET has minimal insight into how each school's improvement priorities align with the goals of their individual teachers. This is because the targets outlined in schools' SSPs and AIPs **do not prepopulate in teachers' PDPs**, and DET does not conduct any aggregate analysis of the latter's content." As though it would be a good thing if schools **wrote the professional development plans for their teachers**, though the 2017 employment agreement covering government school teachers puts the choice of professional learning in the hands of the

teacher.<sup>2</sup> The assumption built into this thinking is that a teacher cannot be trusted to identify the professional learning that they most need, and that the whole-school learning which is arranged by their employer will be sufficient to meet all teachers' most pressing needs. This is not a differentiated learning approach.<sup>3</sup>

So, if the Auditor-General's report **says** but did not **find** that conferences are ineffective, what **did** the report find?

Among other things, the Auditor General found that "Currently, DET has limited assurance that the budgets provided to schools sufficiently support them to participate in professional learning. It is important for DET to increase its understanding of professional learning costs, as failure to appropriately budget for this activity could compromise the ability of schools to realise DET's reform objectives. In 2018, DET increased schools' total student per capita funding by an average of 1.44 per cent to cover the costs associated with implementing the VGSA's [the Employment Agreement's] professional practice days. These costs could include the employment of CRTs to ensure continuity for students. However, without an accurate understanding of schools' use of CRTs to facilitate both on-site and off-site professional learning activities, DET has limited assurance that this is a commensurate funding increase."

The Auditor General also found that: "VIT does not routinely collect information from teachers about the focus or impact of their annual professional learning activities—it only scrutinises the number of completed hours as opposed to their quality or effectiveness. This hinders VIT's ability to inform the Minister for Education of teachers' developmental needs—a legislated requirement under the ETR Act."

Professional teachers' associations provide conferences, and also a range of other professional learning activities, programs, reading and resources. These are not **aimed** at whole-school improvement, they are aimed at improving the knowledge and skills of individual teachers and teams – of making them more expert in and better teachers of their disciplines.

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<sup>2</sup> "(12) (a) From the commencement of the 2018 school year each teacher is entitled to one day per term (four days per year) release from their scheduled duties, including teaching, to focus on the improved delivery of high quality teaching and learning. These days are in addition to existing pupil free days and pro-rata for a teacher employed part-time.

(b) The work undertaken on these days will be consistent with Departmental and school priorities and selected from the following areas: planning, preparation, assessment of student learning, collaboration, curriculum development, relevant professional development and peer observation including feedback and reflection.

(c) The timing and focus of each day for each teacher will be nominated by the teacher and be agreed in consultation with the principal.

(d) Where the timing and/or focus are not agreed the timing will be determined by the principal and the focus of the day will be determined by the teacher and will be consistent with the focus areas set out in sub clause 12(b)."

<sup>3</sup> "When designing professional learning opportunities, it is important to consider teachers' prior knowledge of curriculum and assessment.... Teachers also have very diverse professional learning needs arising from the specific demands that their particular students place on their teaching skills." *Teacher Professional Learning and Development*, International Bureau of Education, p. 11

[http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publications/Educational\\_Practices/EdPractices\\_18.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Educational_Practices/EdPractices_18.pdf)

Yet we do believe that this is a project which profoundly benefits schools, teachers and students across Victoria. If you are a teacher who is struggling to understand how to implement the VCE Unit 1 study design in Ancient History in a year when your school is focused on the introduction of restorative justice practices, and you are the school's only VCE History teacher, then in-school collaborative professional learning probably isn't going to be the only thing you need. If you are one of the 40% of people currently teaching Geography in Australian schools who does **not have a background** in Geography, or the 14% of English, 25% of History, 25% of Languages, or 21% of Maths teachers who are teaching out-of-field, the school's annual improvement plan might not include a specific focus on what you need.<sup>4</sup>

There is a place for in-school, team based professional learning – of course there is! It is the **only** mechanism that will create some of the whole-school, student-focused changes we need to see. But there is also a place for high quality, out-of-school professional learning that meets the needs of individual teachers in diverse disciplines, and that simultaneously connects them with expert practitioners and helps them network with valuable, beyond-their-school communities of learning. Without it, in-school professional learning becomes a closed loop. A balanced approach would include both.

To be fair, the Department acknowledges this in its *Professional Learning in Effective Schools* guide when it states that:

**“Attending seminars and workshops or participating in courses is also necessary when teachers need to learn specific knowledge and skills, such as deepening their understanding of key subject-matter concepts. In cases where teachers attend external learning activities there should be an explicit, school-based process for feeding those learnings back into the school and the practice of teachers.”**

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<sup>4</sup> The definition of an 'in field' teacher that is used here is that they *either* have one semester of study in the subject at second-year tertiary level *OR* studied teaching methodology in the subject. *Out of Field Teaching in Australian Secondary Schools*, Paul R Weldon, ACER. <https://research.acer.edu.au/policyinsights/6/>

“The SiAS survey collected some data on professional development; however, it is not possible to establish a clear sense of the extent to which teachers who are formally out-of-field in a subject – defined in terms of the lack of specific tertiary subject or teaching methodology specialisation – have undertaken further study in that subject. It may be that some teachers with many years of experience in an out-of-field subject have had considerable professional development in the area.” p. 7

“...Early career teachers are put in the position of having to teach outside their subject specialisations considerably more often than their more experienced colleagues. More than one-third of all teachers in their first two years of teaching are teaching out-of-field at Years 7–10 at least some of the time, compared to one-quarter of teachers who have more than five years of teaching experience.” p. 9

“The extent of out-of-field teaching increases with distance from metropolitan locations.” p. 11

“the incidence of out-of-field teaching tends to be slightly higher in schools serving communities with a lower SES.” p. 11.

So let's take a look at a **tiny** sample of what will be on offer from professional teachers' associations in 2019.

- Drama Victoria is offering a 2-day professional learning event called Jumpstart, including a stream that focuses on the new VCE study designs for Drama and Theatre. Their other major professional learning will be the conference at the end of November which will focus on how the drama classroom is a powerful space for inclusion, and for celebrating and exploring diversity. Experts and expert teachers will share how drama can be a tool for change, for acceptance and empathy.
- The Association of German Teachers has an expert guest speaker coming to the state conference who has been sponsored by the Austrian government. They are also running a 'Primary German Matters' event, a 'Focus on Junior Secondary' PD, and Pop Up PDs for teachers of VCE German. They are also coordinating an exchange program for students in Victoria with students from Bavaria in Germany. Right now, 52 Bavarians are being hosted in Victoria for ten weeks.
- The focus of Outdoors Victoria's conference this year is 'Diversity, Inclusion and Care in the Outdoors', bringing teachers into contact with the Chairman of Landcare Australia, a young woman Indigenous Youth Ambassador for the national Youth Commissioner, and an activist and commentator on Queer and Transgender issues.
- The Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools has renowned philosopher A.C. Grayling presenting at one of their Philsothons. (This is just the kind of professional learning teachers cannot access through in-school professional learning – direct access to thought leaders in their discipline.) They are also working with partners such as the Melbourne Museum, Scienceworks, National Gallery of Victoria, the Zoo, and the Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary to produce Trails and Philsothons through the Philosophy in Public Spaces (PIPS) projects
- The Geography Teachers' Association of Victoria is extending its suite of online professional learning modules with a new module on spatial technology, which is about measuring and representing the world around us using innovative cutting-edge tools. Many teachers are intimidated by this aspect of the curriculum. This course, which teachers can do in their own time and which is fully aligned to the Victorian curriculum, will help out-of-field Geography teachers who require basic spatial technology skills and experienced, trained Geography teachers who wish to improve or extend their knowledge.
- The Australian Council of Health, Physical Education and Recreation will be distributing the Personal, Social and Community Health (PSCH) and the Movement and Physical Activity (MPA) 'curriculum support charts'. These were developed in response to teacher feedback that they were having difficulty interpreting the Content Descriptions and Elaborations in the Victorian Curriculum. Both charts provide examples of how each content description across all levels of both Strands could be interpreted as observable learning outcomes. Many teachers have indicated using the charts has helped them in their understanding of content and in planning, teaching and assessment of the content descriptions and achievement standards.

- Social Education Victoria will be launching a new initiative for Level 7 to 10 Civics and Citizenship - the *Make Change Happen* pilot program centred on one regional and one metropolitan area. Working in teams, Civics students will identify an action project in their local area. In March, they will attend a workshop that will explore instances of local action and highlight the processes needed to make change happen. Students, back in their classrooms, will then write up and present their action plan to a relevant local authority, and the teachers involved will have delivered a program that is curriculum aligned and inquiry-led.
- The Mathematical Association of Victoria, in partnership with the Mathematics Education Group at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, have developed a two-year school improvement program for Primary Schools in Victoria. This program will allow schools to develop the tools and techniques to implement and measure improvement, while working with a network of like schools striving for improvement. The program offers an extensive 2-year program of workshops, webinars, in-school consultancy and networking. There are already 39 schools signed up for the program, and it will be delivered for just over \$21,000 per school. Please remember those numbers for later, when I will be talking about another project – that was 39 schools, two years, multi-modal, and around \$21,000 per school.
- The Design and Technology Teachers' Association is offering The *Big Wool Day Out* on June 20th - an annual teacher PL partnership with the National Wool Museum. This year, the theme is *Ethical Fashion*, and there will be contributions from Oxfam, Cotton On and Tarni Jarvis, a young indigenous designer from Ballarat. The event will also explore ways to successfully engage students in STEM and sustainability through Design & Technology Textiles programs.
- At the History Teachers' Association, we will again proudly offer our three major conferences which continue to receive evaluation feedback like 'I went home and rewrote my lesson sequence for the whole semester' and 'I used something I learned at the conference in my classroom on the following Monday'. 92% of evaluation survey respondents from HTAV's last conference said they would recommend it to other History teachers. We will also offer our smaller professional learning event for teachers who are 'New to Teaching History Levels 7–10'. This event, which is a collaboration between HTAV and the VCAA, attracts new, experienced and pre-service teachers, and we receive feedback like 'I signed up to learn how to navigate the curriculum. But what I received was so much more' and **'More information provided re curriculum and lesson planning in 3 hours than in 1.5 years of my Masters course.'**

HTAV is unlikely to be the only professional teachers' association receiving feedback like this. We have been piloting, implementing and refining our professional learning offerings for years in response to what teachers have told us they find useful and relevant. We know how difficult it is for teachers to get out of the classroom and so we are intensely focused on providing value for money and time. In light of this, it is truly mystifying and sometimes demoralising to be told that the teachers are mistaken to value it, and that we have all somehow got hold of the wrong end of the stick.

I would like to finish with a case study from the Auditor General's report about another professional learning pilot.

The Department of Education recently piloted the Professional Learning Communities initiative. Professional learning Communities are in-school teacher teams that work together to achieve a common goal, led by 'Instructional Leaders' who are exemplary teachers with an aptitude for leadership. (This team-based professional learning is an important concept, and it offers the potential to create collective and transparent teaching practices, and to foster daily or weekly professional learning moments in schools.)

64 schools were given \$60,000 grants to participate in the pilot. That's almost \$4million before the costs of delivering the program are factored in. It included 4 modules of **off-site** training over four days for school leaders, and five modules of **off-site** training over five days plus three modules of school-based activities over three days for the identified Instructional Leaders in each school. All attendance costs including CRT were covered by the Department. However, in the evaluation at the end of the pilot, the evaluation survey was said to have returned 'fairly positive' results.

While the pilot schools did report an increase in regular time set aside for professional learning, only **33%** of teachers responding to the evaluation survey reported receiving 'useful' feedback from their school and instructional leaders. This result was not considered a reflection on the program. It was instead attributed to the fact that 'most schools lack a strong culture of trust and reflection'.

Due to the **success** of the pilot, the Auditor General reports, DET allocated \$32.3 million to implement the initiative across 800 government schools.