Supporting teachers who support teachers: Effective PD for Higher Teacher Accreditation applicants

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Teacher certification can be used to regulate teacher quality and to support the development of future educational leaders. This paper presents a professional development program that was designed to support teachers through the process of gaining Highly Accomplished or Lead Teacher certification under the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. In doing so, it responds to the question: what should an effective professional development program for schoolteachers undertaking higher accreditation look like? The construction of the professional development program was guided by a set of design principles for effective professional development that incorporated both academic and practitioner views. The content of the professional development program was determined by data collected through stakeholder analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the higher accreditation process. These stakeholders included teachers, school leaders and academics in related fields. Thematic analysis was then undertaken to code and categorise the qualitative data. Data-informed decision-making, reflective practice, instructional leadership, and coaching/mentoring were identified as key content in the professional development program. The content also aligns with current literature around the development of school middle leaders and supports researchers and policy makers to advance democratic values and praxis-oriented professional learning for emerging educational leaders.

Introduction

Rationale

Formal recognition and credentials for high-performing teachers can lead to increased motivation (Phytanza & Burhaein, 2020) and improved student outcomes (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2016). In a time of widespread teacher shortages (Eacott, 2024; Sullivan et al., 2019), provision of this support is also critical in equipping teacher-leaders with a praxeological skillset to protect students and wider democracy from ever-evolving threats (Levinson & Solomon, 2021). This paper presents a practical tool, in the form of a professional development program, that supports teachers through the process of gaining Highly Accomplished or Lead Teacher (HALT) certification under the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) and in accessing the formal benefits associated with higher teacher certification in Australia.

HALT certification is a national mechanism to 'recognise high quality teachers' (AITSL, 2019, p. 9) in Australia. However, the number of certified HALTs is significantly below the program's initial targets (Dinham et al., 2008) and subsequent federal government targets (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022). This is a significant problem for education systems across the country as it was intended that HALTs play an important role in schools as classroom-based leaders and peer-mentors (AITSL, n.d.; NESA, 2024).

Concurrently, the work of school leaders has become an increasingly complex endeavour that involves balancing the 'performativity' and 'humanity' of education (Netolicky, 2020). As such, the distribution and delegation of leadership tasks to others within schools has become a ubiquitous practice (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). The result of this is an increase in the number of 'hybrid' roles within schools that have both teaching and leadership responsibilities (De Nobile, 2018). These roles can be referred to as middle leadership roles. Like HALTs, middle leaders occupy a highly complex and contextually dependant leadership space within schools that often has a pedagogical focus within a managerial role delegated or distributed by more senior positional leaders (Grice, 2019).

Middle leadership can be defined as 'teaching alongside "out-of-classroom" responsibilities' (Forde et al., 2019, p. 299). It is often used interchangeably with the terms 'teacher leadership' which can be thought of as a more generic, ubiquitous term, and 'middle management' which tends to highlight managerial responsibilities over leadership practices (Grootenboer et al., 2015). This article is deliberate in using the term 'middle leadership', which has become the dominant nomenclature in Australian discourse over the past two decades (AITSL, 2022) but does not suggest that this precludes the article's applicability to other, related terms.

With established national standards of practice for teachers (AITSL, 2011) and for principals (AITSL, 2014), the role and expectations of middle leaders has only recently been formally articulated in Australian education systems (AITSL, 2024). Formal role statements for middle leaders are also a relatively new phenomenon within education systems (NSW Department of Education, 2021, 2022a). Prior to this, the decision of whether to delegate formal leadership responsibilities and the selection of those responsibilities had typically been left to principals (Leaf et al., 2024). As a result, middle leadership roles can look vastly different across different teaching sectors and jurisdictions (De Nobile et al., 2024).

The APST at the *Highly Accomplished* and *Lead Teacher* levels, whilst being a far from exhaustive description of the role of middle leaders (Lipscombe et al., 2020), demonstrate significant overlap with the work that middle leaders perform in Australian schools (AITSL, 2023). They place significant emphasis on many of the practices associated with instructional leadership which is consistent with some models of middle leadership (Tang et al., 2022). However, instructional leadership, in isolation, does not fully explain the complex work that school leaders undertake on a daily basis (Day et al., 2016) and an over-rigid adherence to this model of leadership can lead to detrimental outcomes (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Since Australian professional teaching standards were in their infancy, HALT certification has been discussed as a possible prerequisite for formal middle leadership positions (Dinham et al., 2008) although this requirement has never been formally implemented in any Australian teaching systems. One of the key principles of the HALT certification process is that it 'offers a pathway for excellent teachers to grow … while remaining in teaching positions' (AITSL, 2019, p. 16). Many teaching systems have also moved to standards-based salary scales which tie remuneration to registration status (NSW

Department of Education, 2017). This offers HALTs higher salaries than their non-certified counterparts to remain in classrooms. It is worth noting, however, that these salaries are still considerably lower than those of teachers in formal middle leadership positions.

Teachers who have attained HALT certification are more likely to engage in higher degrees of middle leadership practices (Grootenboer et al., 2023). A strong certification system also enables leadership at all levels and strengthens schools as professional learning communities (Ingvarson, 2018). This study seeks to support the professional development of teachers where these concepts intersect, enabling the professional and praxeological growth of high-performing teachers and providing formalised recognition for the important work that they undertake.

Professional development is another key term used in this paper. It can be defined as 'any experience of workplace learning that is deliberate or can be measured' (Graham et al., 2024, p. 1260). The term is often used interchangeably with 'professional learning', but some would argue significant differences between the two terms. Professional learning can be defined as any activity that 'results in improvements in teachers' knowledge and instruction' (Murray, 2014, p. 9). This improvement may be in relation to standards or policies that define teacher quality (Creemers et al., 2013) or a broader, praxeological skillset (Mahon et al., 2019). As such, it can take a wider range of forms. It can also be theorised to be an outcome of effective professional development (King et al., 2023; Liou & Canrinus, 2020). Whilst the findings of this paper may be applicable to the broader range of professional learning, its focus is on planned and structured forms of learning that are often categorised as formal professional development (Netolicky, 2019).

Effective professional development has the capacity to improve teacher practice (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018; Naylor & Sayed, 2014) and, at least indirectly, student outcomes (Fischer et al., 2018; Sancar et al., 2021). What constitutes effective professional development is contextually dependant, but some common traits can be found in research (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Sims et al., 2021). Effective middle-leadership practices support the effectiveness of professional development (Hallinger & Kulophas, 2020) and, in turn, effective professional development contributes to the growth of middle-leaders (Lipscombe et al., 2023). This paper puts forward an intervention that can be inserted into this developmental loop to promote teacher agency (Kemmis, 2021) and educational equity (Poekert et al., 2020) in the face of neoliberal and political threats to schools and education systems.

Context

This study was undertaken in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. In NSW, 'certification' is referred to as 'accreditation'. As such, both terms are used in this paper. The two terms can be read interchangeably but the authors have chosen to leave the term 'accreditation' as it appears in literature, policy and interview data specific to NSW. Professional development is also mandatory for all practising teachers across Australia and is overseen by state regulators. This professional development is expected to align with the APST (AITSL, 2011). It is also a requirement for teachers to be registered under the APST and

regularly demonstrate the APST through performance management and certification processes.

The APST comprises of four career stages. Upon graduating from an initial teacher education program, teachers begin their careers at the Graduate level. They are then required to achieve and maintain registration at the Proficient level for as long as they continue to teach (AITSL, 2011). This is done by developing a portfolio of evidence that demonstrates that their practice aligns with the teaching standards at the Proficient level (AITSL, 2016).

The final two levels of certification are voluntary. Proficient teachers can apply to become either Highly Accomplished or Lead teachers. These two levels of certification are often grouped together and referred to as 'HALT". Becoming a HALT involves a similar, albeit significantly more arduous process of portfolio creation, teaching observations and the provision of referees to demonstrate alignment with the APST at the highest levels (AITSL, 2017).

In NSW, the process of applying for HALT certification is divided into two modules, with feedback provided to applicants in between. Completing a module requires applicants to submit annotated artefacts of their teaching practice, referred to as evidence. This evidence needs to demonstrate to assessors that the applicant's practice aligns with the APST at either the Highly Accomplished or Lead level. Applicants must demonstrate 20 standard descriptors over the course of two modules. There are relatively few restrictions or guidelines for what 'evidence' looks like, but applicants are encouraged to group evidence into coherent 'evidence sets' within modules to demonstrate the impact of their work (NESA, 2024a). For the purposes of this paper, 'evidence' is grouped together to form 'evidence sets' which, in turn, are grouped together to form a 'module'. There is no time limit for completion of each module but six months per module is often used as an indicative guide (NESA, 2024a, 2024b).

The production of teaching 'portfolios' is a relatively new feature of the profession in Australia, but evidence collection and managerialism are not (Mockler, 2022). The APST are espoused to the profession as a common language to support reflective practice and professional learning, but they can just as easily be used as a neoliberalist tool to monitor and regulate (Larsen et al., 2023). Whilst it is commonly accepted that reflection and evidence-based practices support the work of teachers (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020; Molla & Nolan, 2020), the additional pressures that evidence collection and datafication place on teacher workload and morale are the trade-off (Holloway, 2020).

Less than 1% of current Australian teachers have achieved HALT certification since its inception (AITSL, 2026; Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2025) which has led to calls for change in current certification processes (Willis et al., 2022) and prompted governments to implement targets and initiatives aimed at increasing the number of HALTs to roughly one per school (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024; NSW Department of Education, n.d.). This raises the question of whether the current dearth of certified HALTs reflects teaching quality in Australia or

whether high-performing teachers are simply not being recognised through the current HALT certification process. Graham (2025) suggested that the answer is the latter. Therefore, supporting teachers to gain that recognition is what drives this paper.

Objectives

The professional development program presented in this paper is designed to support applicants in the process of gaining HALT certification under the APST. Specifically, it aims to build participants' skills and knowledge in line with the APST, and complimentary areas identified through stakeholder analysis. The program is designed to be delivered to schoolteachers in New South Wales (NSW), Australia and is part of a broader, design-based research study that answers the research question: what are the design principles for an effective professional development program targeting professional accreditation? The protocols for the broader study are published in Graham et al. (2023). This paper represents Phase 2 of that study and specifically answers the research question: what should an effective professional development program for schoolteachers undertaking higher accreditation look like?

Methodology

The professional development program reported on in this paper was designed using a set of refined design principles for effective professional development that were iteratively developed over the course of the broader study and are published in Graham (2025). Table 1 shows these design principles.

Table 1: Revised design principles for effective professional development (Graham, 2025)

Revised design principle (DP)	Principle (effective professional development should…)
DP 1	be collaborative and promote active participation of participants
DP 2	be tailored to the needs/context of participants
DP 3	be evidence-based and align with current school/system priorities
DP 4	be sustained and provide teachers with adequate time/resources for change
DP 5	provide opportunities for participants to enhance skills/knowledge
DP 6	challenge participants and encourage reflective practice
DP 7	determine its impact through rigorous evaluation *of* and *by* participants
DP 8	clearly articulate its goals/learning intentions
DP 9	be aligned to relevant professional standards and seek to improve student outcomes

The specific form and content of the program was informed by data collected through stakeholder analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of key stakeholders in the process of gaining HALT certification in NSW. Semi-structured interviews are a structured data-collection tool that also allows researchers to ask tailored follow-up questions based on each participant's role in and experiences (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interviews were conducted using Zoom (Zoom Video Communications Inc, n.d.) which allowed the researchers to meet with a wider range of

stakeholders and remove some of the geographical inhibitors of in-person interviews (Oliffe et al., 2021). See Appendix A for the data collection tool used in the interviews.

Participants

Participants were recruited and selected from professional networks within the three NSW education sectors and those known to the researchers, in line with the protocols published in Graham et al. (2023). Due to participant availability, some variations were made to the stakeholder groups outlined. Specifically, no 'teachers who have been unsuccessful in the higher accreditation process' (Graham et al., 2023, p. 1391) were able to be recruited. A total of 16 participants were interviewed, and a summary of the stakeholder groups is shown below:

- Representatives of academia with relevant research around the APST (2)
- Representative from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (1).
- Representatives of teacher accreditation authority (NSW Education Standards Authority) (2).
- Representatives of teacher employers:
  - NSW Department of Education (2);
  - Catholic Schools NSW (1); and
  - The Association of Independent Schools NSW (2).
- Representatives of the profession i.e., teachers who have:
  - been accredited as either a Highly Accomplished or Lead Teacher (2);
  - started but not yet finished the higher accreditation process (3); and
  - been identified as suitable but have chosen not to start the higher accreditation process (1).

Thematic analysis

Upon completion of the interview process, thematic analysis was used to code and theme the data. This approach was selected as semi-structured interviews can often require a flexible and more broadly applicable analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) due to non-uniform data that can be problematic to analyse using more rigid methods (Galletta, 2013). Transcripts of each interview were coded by the lead author and verified by the co-authors. An iterative process of inductive and deductive theming was then used to determine key content to be included in the program. The Graham (2025) Revised Design Principles were then used to construct a professional development program around this content. This process is discussed further in the next section.

Results and discussion

Thematic analysis of the interviews produced six key themes which were used to guide the content of each session. This section discusses the professional development program, how the Graham (2025) Revised Design Principles were implemented, and the content selected for each section. An overview of the professional development program can be found in Graham (2025, Appendix I, pp. 170-185).

Program design

The majority of stakeholders interviewed noted that the professional development program would need to be delivered over multiple sessions to be effective. This aligns with Revised Design Principle 4 and other literature in the field (Harwell, 2003). Due to the time constraints of the study, it was decided that program would be implemented over a period of six months and support participants to complete one module of the HALT certification process. There were a range of different suggestions from stakeholders for the frequency of sessions but 'two to three times per term' reflects the general consensus. One stakeholder also suggested 'they go for a couple of hours' and that 'you have to have deliverables between the sessions'. These suggestions were included in the design of the professional development program.

A range of stakeholders also suggested that the professional development program be delivered via video conferencing. Video conferencing allows equitable participation from those living or working in geographically remote locations, or those with competing commitments (Vrasidas & Glass, 2006). 'Convenience', 'reducing travel time' and 'equity of accessibility for people in rural and remote areas' were cited, by stakeholders, as the main benefits. One current teacher also spoke of the collaborative ways in which video conferencing can be used, suggesting 'having those little breakout rooms just to get a little bit more personal is helpful'. Another teacher noted 'there's a real role for that collaboration for people going through the journey to be able to support each other'. These suggestions also informed the design of the professional development program. There was no consensus amongst stakeholders on an optimal number of participants but in order to facilitate collaborative practice in line with Revised Design Principle 1 and be able to provide rigorous feedback in line with Revised Design Principle 7, the program was designed to be delivered to groups of between six and 30 participants.

Whilst the professional development program supports participants in completing one module of the certification process, it focuses on the production of smaller evidence sets, providing participants with more manageable milestones to achieve over the course of the program. This also allows the professional development program to achieve more than a binary 'pass/fail' outcome. Where a participant does not complete an entire module over the six-month period, they may still complete and receive feedback on one or more evidence sets which can be submitted as part of a module at the participant's convenience.

In addition to supporting participants through the certification process, the professional development program will be used to test and evaluate the Graham (2025) Revised Design Principles and produce a set of final design principles, contextualised for HALT applicants under the APST in line with the protocols published in Graham et al. (2023). To achieve this, the professional development program was designed using the Graham (2025) Revised Design Principles. How each principle is reflected in the program is outlined below.

Revised Design Principle 1: Effective professional development should be collaborative and promote active participation of participants

Designated time for participants to collaborate on both the session content and their evidence sets has been explicitly allocated in the professional development program. Each of the first five sessions devotes 55 minutes to these activities. Participants are also encouraged and supported to produce and submit a series of evidence sets over the course of the program, providing an additional opportunity to practise the skills taught in each session.

Revised Design Principle 2: Effective professional development should be tailored to the needs/context of participants

The recruitment methods used in this study were devised to allow any eligible teacher to participate. This intends to draw a larger number of participants but could also lead to a wider range of different contexts and participant needs. The specialised nature of the professional development program, and complexities of recruiting participants caused by the coronavirus disease of 2019 (Covid-19) and prolonged teacher shortages across the targeted systems necessitated this approach. Future researchers may wish to consider recruiting and grouping participants based on contextual factors (e.g. primary schools, subject/year specialisations).

In this study, the 'breakout room' function in Zoom was to be used to group participants and address this design principle. The use of breakout rooms also allows the presenters to address specific contextual questions in smaller settings, reducing interruption for other participants. Participants are also encouraged and supported to produce and submit a series of evidence sets, that will be unique to their own context. This aligns with the requirements of the HALT accreditation process (NESA, 2024a, 2024b) and provides further agency for participants to choose how to apply the learning in their own context (King, 2022). Participants will receive individualised feedback on their submissions using the Evidence Set Evaluation Tools from Graham (2025).

Revised Design Principle 3: Effective professional development should be evidence-based and align with current school/system priorities

The professional development program was developed through a process of developing and revising a set of evidence-based design principles (Graham, 2025; Graham et al., 2024). The program also aligns with the still unmet Australian Government target of producing 10000 teachers certified as HALT or equivalent by 2025 and NSW Government target of committing 2500 HALTs to that number (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022; NSW Department of Education, 2022b). Sessions 4 and 5 of the professional development program also focus on specific elements of leadership development in line with the language embedded in the APST (AITSL, 2011). These sessions and much of the HALT accreditation process asks applicants to consider their impact in line with school and system targets, referred to as *School Excellence Plans* in most NSW schools (NSW Department of Education, 2025).

Revised Design Principle 4: Effective professional development should be sustained and provide teachers with adequate time/resources for change

The professional development program is delivered in six sessions, over six months. This timing was informed by stakeholder suggestions for frequency and indicative timelines published in relevant policies (NESA, 2024a, 2024b). Allowing sufficient time between sessions provides the opportunity for participants to embed learning in their own context and increases the likelihood of sustained improvement (Cordingley et al., 2015). The program also provides explicit time and support for participants to reflect on learning and apply it in the production of a series of evidence sets. This reduces the administrative workload outside of scheduled sessions, intending to improve retention and participation rates (Archibald et al., 2011).

Revised Design Principle 5: Effective professional development should provide opportunities for participants to enhance skills/knowledge

The specific skills required to gain HALT certification are explicitly taught to participants over the first five sessions of the program. The latter part of each session provides time and support for participants to discuss and practise these skills in a collaborative setting with colleagues and researchers. Additionally, participants are required to use these skills to produce, collect and submit evidence of the impact of these skills in their own contexts.

Revised Design Principle 6: Effective professional development should challenge participants and encourage reflective practice

Reflective practice is explicitly taught to participants in Session 3 of the professional development program. The skill is heavily referenced throughout the certification process (NESA, 2024a, 2024b, 2025) and is a key component of effective professional development (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).

The professional development program supports participants through the voluntary process of gaining HALT accreditation. As such, there is an assumption that participants have signed up to learn the skills and knowledge required to achieve this. Each session challenges participants to develop these skills through explicit teaching and guided practice. The skills are then applied independently in the production of participant evidence sets.

Revised Design Principle 7: Effective professional development should determine its impact through rigorous evaluation of and by participants

The professional development program in this study is evaluated in two distinct ways. Evaluation *of* participants is achieved through participant submission of evidence sets. The extent to which evidence sets demonstrate the APST is considered to be indicative of participant skills and knowledge at the end of the professional development program. Participants are also asked to self-assess their learning each week on a 1-5 Likert scale rating their knowledge of the topic before and after the session. This provides the researchers with self-assessment data of participants' perceived change in knowledge.

At the end of each session, participants are also asked whether the session met the proposed standards and outcomes to facilitate evaluation *by* participants. A group of participants will also be selected to participate in a focus group discussion upon

completion of the professional development program. The evaluation questionnaire to be used in these focus groups is shown in Appendix B.

Revised Design Principle 8: Effective professional development should clearly articulate its goals/learning intentions

Each session of the professional development program has a distinct topic, set of learning intentions, and related set of teaching standards. These are shared with participants at the beginning of each session by the presenter. Additionally, Session 1 allocates extra time to this and explicitly explains the HALT application process and the expected overall outcome of producing a module or series of evidence sets over the six sessions. It is also disclosed to participants that the professional development program is concurrently testing a set of design principles.

Revised Design Principle 9: Effective professional development should be aligned to relevant professional standards and seek to improve student outcomes

This professional development program has been specifically designed to align with the professional standards and the wider government system priorities that surround them. Each session is also aligned to specific standard descriptors which are shared with participants at the beginning of each session. This is common practice in Australian professional development and supports participants to record the learning in order to meet mandatory professional development requirements (NESA, 2025).

Program content

The Graham (2025) stakeholder analysis and relevant policy documents informed the overall design of the professional development program and each of the six program sessions. The rationale for the content of each session is discussed below.

Session 1: Orientation and accreditation processes

The primary outcome of the professional development program, for participants, is the successful completion of a HALT accreditation module. This is a long and rigorous process for teachers who aren't necessarily trained in how to produce evidence and build portfolios of work (Willis et al., 2021). One teacher-stakeholder described how an effective professional development program has the capacity to simplify an otherwise complicated process:

> It gives people this sense of "Oh, so what am I going to be doing? I'm doing this. I'm going to complete a module. I'm going to submit that. I'm going to be observed. I'm going to have an interview here". So that kind of pathway, I think is very helpful.

Whilst the details of the process can be found in policy documents, most stakeholders agreed that an effective professional development program would need to promote a shared understanding of this process amongst participants and ensure a baseline level of participant knowledge to facilitate more informed collaborative discussion. One former teacher noted 'it's got to explain to them a bit about the process of accreditation so that they are aware of what the requirements are'.

Another feature of HALT certification is that it comprises of two levels. Four stakeholders referenced the importance of understanding the APST at both Highly Accomplished and Lead and then making a self-assessment of the more appropriate level to apply for. One system leader suggested that this be explicitly embedded in the content of the program, stating 'I think there needs to be a balance between this real clear recognition of what the different career stages are about'.

There was a minority of stakeholders who did not see the value of embedding the accreditation process in session content, arguing that it is merely restating what is already publicly available and readily accessible. One teacher noted 'if you are at that level, you are reading the documentation of what is needed and what the process is. So, what would be value adding is maybe a walkthrough or to model it'. Both viewpoints were considered, and it was determined that 30 minutes would be sufficient to 'walk participants through the process' and deliver the required knowledge for them to engage in the subsequent sessions and evaluation. Session 1 was also designed to align with Highly Accomplished and Lead standards 6.1 and 7.2 (AITSL, 2011).

Session 2: Data and evidence

Great teachers have an impact. It can be easily felt and heard through conversations with colleagues, students and parents. However, measuring this impact and demonstrating it in a portfolio of evidence is far more challenging (Gore et al., 2023). Portfolios of evidence, while valid, are also a time-consuming way of demonstrating and assessing competency (Shepherd & Hannafin, 2013). Multiple stakeholders spoke about the importance of teaching participants how to collect and analyse data, and how to use that data to produce a coherent portfolio of their work. These are skills that have not traditionally been taught to teachers through initial teacher education courses and are a noted barrier for teachers in achieving HALT accreditation (Kertesz & Brett, 2020). One current HALT applicant questioned 'how do people keep track of all this information? How do they annotate? What does an annotation require? For me it was more just [needing to understand] that practical part of it'.

Some stakeholders suggested that applicants should be provided with example portfolios to demonstrate what evidence looks like, but others pointed out that this could lead to formulaic and inauthentic evidence sets. One current HALT expressed that 'I think we've got to get the balance right where we might be showing examples of what it could look like but actually provide support for people to see what this could look like in their context'. Incorporating data and evidence analysis into the content of the program supports participants to apply these skills to their own contexts and evidence. This, in conjunction with the content of Session 1, reduces the need for the provision of example portfolios and supports participants to apply this knowledge to their own context to achieve outcomes beyond simply generating evidence for the purpose of certification. The session was also designed to align with Highly Accomplished and Lead standards 5.4 and 6.3 (AITSL, 2011).

Session 3: Reflective practice

Nine of the 16 stakeholders interviewed discussed the importance of reflective practice in the process of gaining accreditation and in the process of making positive change in

schools. This sentiment is also reflected in wider literature (Cappelletti & Sajon, 2022). One system leader specifically noted that the process of reflection needs to build on that of data analysis, calling for the program to 'explicitly teach reflective practice and how to evidence'.

The content of this session aligns with Revised Design Principles 4 and 6, and supports participants to understand their role in school change and improvement. It also allows them to plan for future effective teaching and leadership practices. One academic stakeholder commented that 'I think that individuals need to go back to their school and look at what they're doing and do a big self-reflection process'. This session also aligns with Highly Accomplished and Lead standards 6.3 and 6.4 (AITSL, 2011).

Session 4: Leading learning

Instructional leadership practices are expressed, in the APST, as a key component of the role of HALTs. Lead teachers 'initiate and lead activities that focus on improving educational opportunities for all students' (AITSL, 2017, p. 5). This was also acknowledged by stakeholders, with several calling for the professional development program to go beyond supporting participants to collect and annotate evidence, and empower them to become the leaders that the APST describes. One academic stakeholder stated, about an effective professional development program, that 'most importantly, it's got to give them the leadership skills that they need to support other teachers'.

Whilst instructional leadership is not a complete model for effective school leadership and change, it promotes organisational growth through improved planning, delivery and evaluation (Hallinger, 2005). Research around instructional leadership has traditionally centred around principals and those in formal leadership positions, however, discourse and literature are becoming increasingly focused on teacher-driven instructional leadership (Neumerski, 2013). This session delivers an overview of elements of the instructional leadership model and provides opportunity for collaboration and discussion about how participants can use this model to improve educational opportunities in their own context, exhibiting several standard descriptors in the process. One system leader stated that 'for a program to be effective, the number one indicator is just an improvement in learning in the school'. The session was also designed to align with Highly Accomplished and Lead standards 6.3 and 6.4 (AITSL, 2011).

Session 5: Coaching mindset

Another key role of HALTs is that of coaching and mentoring colleagues. The APST states that 'they are skilled in mentoring teachers and pre-service teachers, using activities that develop knowledge, practice and professional engagement in others' (AITSL, 2017, p. 5). When asked what they would like to see in a professional development program designed to support aspiring HALTs, several participants noted that building the capacity of those around them is critical for both the process of accreditation and broader school and system improvement. One academic stakeholder explicitly called for the program to target 'coaching, mentoring, all of those kinds of skills that you would want to give teachers to support other teachers'.

Mentoring can be defined as 'a one-to-one relationship between an experienced and less experienced person for the purpose of learning or developing specific competencies' (Tonna et al., 2017, p. 211). Conversely, coaches tend to follow a defined process and 'respond to observed teacher needs, prompt teachers to critically consider elements of their practice, and, in some cases, provide more directive feedback to leverage improvement' (Cohen et al., 2020, p. 212). Whilst the two concepts are distinct, stakeholders in this study tended to use the terms either grouped together or interchangeably.

One current HALT called for a more consistent approach to developing teacher-mentors, stating that 'I know that many of the researchers in this area, have advocated for a mentoring curriculum, and we could expand that to a HALT curriculum'. This is consistent with research in this field (Athanases et al., 2008) and such a curriculum is an opportunity for further research. The session was also designed to align with Highly Accomplished and Lead standards 6.3 and 6.4 (AITSL, 2011).

Session 6: Presentations and evaluation

The final session provides participants with the opportunity to present the evidence sets developed over the course of the program to colleagues and presenters for evaluation and feedback. Stakeholders generally wanted more opportunities for HALT applicants to collaborate with other applicants, with one system leader calling for 'feedback and then they are able to share that feedback with their colleagues'. A teacher-stakeholder noted, of the certification process, that 'benchmarks for what is good enough are not readily available'. Several stakeholders suggested that embedding this process into the professional development program would allow participants to reflect on their portfolios against colleagues at similar career stages to potentially make a more accurate determination of their practice against the APST. The session was also designed to align with Highly Accomplished and Lead standards 6.4 and 7.4 (AITSL, 2011).

Program evaluation

Evaluation is an important element of effective professional development (Borg, 2018). It can be used as a tool to measure impact and to initiate improvement during planning, and both formative and summative appraisals (Merchie et al., 2018). As such, selecting what to measure and how to measure it is a highly contextual decision that is difficult to standardise and is best made on an individual basis (Desimone, 2009). In line with Revised Design Principle 7, evaluation of the professional development program in this study is conducted *of* participants and *by* participants.

The selection of evaluation methodologies, in this study, was guided by the Five Levels of Professional Development Evaluation model (Guskey, 2000). The model articulates five critical levels of information that are increasingly complex to measure. The levels are: participant reactions, participant learning, organisation support and change, participants' use of new skills and knowledge, and student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2000).

Evaluation *by* participants is achieved in two ways. Fidelity checks are conducted at the end of each session as a formative evaluation tool. These checks provide the presenters

with data on participant reactions and participant learning to inform decisions around adapting the content and delivery of future sessions to meet participant need (Guskey, 2002). The questions asked in these fidelity checks are published in Graham (2025, Appendix J, pp. 186-190).

Additionally, focus groups will be held after the completion of the professional development program to determine the view of participants across all five levels of data. Focus groups have the capacity to generate deep data as a result of spontaneous and dynamic interplay between participants (Mardis & Hoffman, 2007). This same interplay can be a limitation of focus groups and care should be taken not to attribute the views of the group to each individual within that group (Kitzinger, 2006). Appendix B shows the focus group questions that will be asked at the completion of the professional development program.

Evaluation *of* participants is achieved through participant submission of one or more evidence sets. Submissions are to be assessed against the criteria shown in Graham (2025, Appendix J, pp. 186-190). These criteria reflect the 37 standard descriptors of the APST at Highly Accomplished and Lead levels. This process allows the researchers to evaluate the professional development program at three most complex levels of the Guskey (2000) model through a portfolio-style articulation of participant impact in their own context. Evaluating professional development at these three levels is inherently problematic when the link between professional development and student outcomes is, at best, indirect (King, 2014) but the submission of authentic evidence and annotations, provides a more rigorous, if still imperfect, method of evaluation (Attinello et al., 2006).

Conclusion

The stakeholder views and policies examined in this study reaffirm the view that there is significant alignment between the role of HALTs and that of middle leaders in Australian schools. This alignment may give the findings of this research broader applicability and support future research into effective professional development for current and aspiring middle leaders. It also presents a potential problem for governments and education systems to consider. Despite more than a decade of presenting HALT certification as a career option that allows teachers to 'remain in the classroom but increase their sphere of influence' (AITSL, 2019, p. 10), the majority of stakeholders in this study, many of whom have significant interest in the process, continue to see it as a less attractive option than other middle leadership pathways. One participant noted:

> I don't see the value in Highly Accomplished or Lead Teacher. If you were going to do it for [the learning], you would go and do a masters degree … and if you were going to do it because you wanted the financial benefit, then you would just become a Head Teacher. … You'd also get the release time so that you could do your job well.

Formal middle leadership roles for HALTs, that reflect the title and remuneration of other middle leaders, would likely provide additional incentive for some teachers to undertake the certification process. For many teachers, instructional leadership practices such as

coaching and mentoring without the added burden of formal line-management responsibilities was one of the more appealing incentives of HALT certification. Governments and education systems may wish to consider this in the design and development of future policy in this area.

The professional development program presented in this paper reflects the implementation of the Graham (2025) Revised Design Principles for effective professional development synthesised with the views of key stakeholders in the HALT certification process. The professional development program will be implemented and tested in a future phase of the broader Graham et al. (2023) study. It also remains an artefact that could be utilised by professional developers to assist in achieving current government targets around Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers in Australia. The findings of this study also suggest that it could be adapted to support middle and emerging leaders, or to support other mechanisms to recognise and celebrate high-performing teachers.

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Related publications
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Appendix A: Stakeholder analysis participant questionnaire

[Spaces for respondents' entries have been omitted]

1. What is your current job role?
2. What is your current level of accreditation?
3. If accredited, are you interested in gaining higher accreditation? Why/why not?
4. What do you understand to be the main policy goals of higher accreditation for teachers in Australia?
5. What do you understand to be the main roles of Highly Accomplished and Lead teachers in school improvement?
6. Why do you think that so few teachers engage in the higher accreditation process?
7. Do you see any elements of the higher accreditation process as advantageous/disadvantageous to certain groups of teachers?
8. What are the indicators of effective professional development?
9. How important do you believe the following statements to be in contributing to effective professional development?

Effective professional development should:	*Irrelevant*	*Desirable*	*Essential*
• be collaborative and involve participation from school/system leaders			
• be tailored to the needs of participants			
• be authentic and align with current school/system priorities			
• be sustained and provide teachers with adequate time/resources for change			
• focus on enhancing teacher skills/knowledge			
• challenge participants and encourage self-reflection			
• include rigorous evaluation of and by participants			
• be evidence-based and of high quality			

• clearly articulate the goals/learning intentions of the professional development • encourage active participation of participants		

10. What are some other important characteristics of effective professional development?
11. What would an effective professional development program to support the higher accreditation process look like?
12. In an effective professional development program to support the higher accreditation process, what would be an appropriate:
    a. number of participants in the program?
    b. overall length of the program?
    c. number of sessions?
    d. length for each session?
13. How would you measure the effectiveness of such a program?
14. Do you have anything else to add?

Appendix B: Evaluation questionnaire

How would you rate your knowledge of the APST:
- before the program?
- after the program?

How would you rate your motivation to complete your accreditation:
- before the program?
- after the program?

How would you rate your influence within your school:
- before the program?
- after the program?

Has your practice changed as a result of this program? Give examples.

Did/was this program:
- collaborative and promote active participation of participants?
- tailored to the needs/context of participants?
- evidence-based and align with current school/system priorities?
- sustained and provide teachers with adequate time/resources for change?
- provide opportunities for participants to enhance skills/knowledge?
- challenge participants and encourage reflective practice?
- determine its impact through rigorous evaluation *of* and *by* participants?
- clearly articulate its goals/learning intentions?
- aligned to relevant professional standards and seek to improve student outcomes?

Would you recommend this program to a colleague interested in gaining higher accreditation?

Do you feel confident to submit the evidence set that you worked on during this program? Why/why not?

Do you have any suggestions as to how this program could be improved?

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Dr Wayne Cotton was an Associate Professor in Education at The University of Sydney, Australia. Wayne held Masters degrees in both Education and Computer Studies and a PhD in Educational Technology. IIER records with sadness that Wayne died before publication of this article. We acknowledge with great appreciation Wayne's contribution as a co-author for five IIER articles, appearing in:
33(4) [http://www.iier.org.au/iier33/graham.pdf]
34(4) [http://www.iier.org.au/iier34/graham.pdf]
35(2) [http://www.iier.org.au/iier35/karimullah.pdf]
35(3) [http://www.iier.org.au/iier35/cotton.pdf]
36(3) [http://www.iier.org.au/iier36/graham-m.pdf]
Vale, Wayne Cotton 31 March 1971 - 28 October 2025.

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http://www.iier.org.au/iier36/graham-m.pdf