

Examining the Role of the School Professional Experience Coordinator in the NSW Department of Education's Professional Experience Hub School Program

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Executive Summary

This document reports the evidence gathered in a research study that critically examined the role of the school Professional Experience Coordinator in supporting the professional experience component of initial teacher education courses.

The focus of the study was the school Professional Experience Coordinators involved in the 2016-2018 and 2019-2021 cohorts of the NSW Department of Education's Professional Experience Hub School program. This study was funded by the NSW Department of Education and undertaken under contract by the NSW Council of Deans of Education. The purpose of the Hub Schools has been summarised by the Department's own Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation (2018, p7) as:

Hub Schools have introduced initiatives that are targeted at both preservice teachers and supervising teachers. For preservice teachers, these most commonly include revised supervising models, increased support structures such as induction and orientation sessions, professional learning, and additional resources. For supervising teachers, initiatives include the provision of professional learning and additional support. Initiatives that benefitted partner schools include the provision of professional learning, funding, resources and increased support. Other initiatives and outcomes include revisions to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course content and modified content delivery.

METHOD

The study was qualitative and used a quasi-narrative approach which collected accounts of the phenomenon in question from the perspective of the participants. The participants were the 24 Professional Experience Coordinators at the hub schools, their Principals (n=20) and the coordinator of professional experience at their respective partner university (n=12). The research method was appropriate for the research questions as it sought to understand and reflect the specific experiences of these three groups within the specific context of the Professional Experience Hub School program. An evaluation of the Hub School program more broadly is beyond the scope of this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The key questions that were addressed through this evaluation are:

1. What is the role of the Professional Experience Coordinator in enhancing professional experience in teacher education?
2. What strategies do Professional Experience Coordinators, Principals and University Coordinators in partner universities see as supporting them to develop and maintain the ongoing quality of the Professional Experience Hub School program?

RESULTS

There is strong evidence from this study that the Professional Experience Coordinator played a significant role in the generation of a professional learning culture that enhanced the status of professional experience in their schools. They achieved this by increasing the number of teachers willing to supervise a Pre-Service Teacher and improving the standard of their supervision thus reducing the historical variance in the quality of supervision on professional experience.

This study also identified the strategies that all stakeholders in professional experience could develop to enhance the quality of this important aspect of Initial Teacher Education in the future. These key strategies are improved clarity in the roles and responsibilities, documentation, processes and accountabilities for all stakeholders in professional experience and for the Professional Experience Coordinator to play a greater role in the program planning and delivery of Initial Teacher Education courses.

The biggest challenge for the future of the Professional Experience Coordinator role is sustainability. Time for the proper execution of the role of the Professional Experience Coordinator (PEXC) is funded within the Hub School program. This means that the recommendations made in this report with regards to that role be contingent on some funding being allocated for all schools involved in professional experience across the state. This could be achieved through the incorporation of the Professional Experience Coordinator role into the executive structure of schools in a broader role that encompasses quality assurance for Pre-Service Teachers across their Hub and Spoke schools. Spoke schools is the name given to the partner schools that Hub schools have chosen to disseminate the professional learning and insights that have developed from their own innovations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Professional Experience Coordinator role needs to be recognised and remunerated as an executive position with oversight of quality assurance for Pre-Service Teachers in their Hub and Spoke schools.
2. The Professional Experience Coordinators have the opportunity to work in university Initial Teacher Education programs as lecturers, tutors and be involved in course development and reviews.
3. Initial Teacher Education Providers and Hub Schools agree on and develop a standardised Professional Experience Handbook with core elements common to all Initial Teacher Education Providers and schools across NSW.
4. The state-wide Professional Experience Coordinator Network meetings continue once per term to further develop consistent practices across the state that align with DoE strategies.

This document sets the background for this study, critically reviews the salient literature, explicates the methodology, presents the evidence, and makes recommendations for an expanded role of the Professional Experience Coordinator to improve the quality of professional experience in Initial Teacher Education.

GLOSSARY

AITSL	<i>Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership</i>
APST	<i>Australian Professional Standards for Teachers</i>
COAG	<i>Council of Australian Governments</i>
DoE	<i>Department of Education</i>
DEST	<i>Department of Education Science and Training</i>
GTS	<i>Graduate Teacher Standards</i>
ITE	<i>Initial Teacher Education</i>
NESA	<i>NSW Education Standards Authority</i>
PEX	<i>Professional Experience</i>
PEXC	<i>Professional Experience Coordinator</i>
PST	<i>Pre-Service Teacher</i>
TEMAG	<i>Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group</i>
UC	<i>University Coordinator(s).</i> <i>In some universities this role is shared among several people</i>
WIL	<i>Work Integrated Learning</i>

1 | Background

The professional experience coordinator is an important position for the quality assurance of professional experience in ITE. The framework for high quality professional experience has a detailed role description for professional experience coordination in nine bullet points (NESA, 2015).

In these nine bullet points the role of the professional experience coordinator can be discerned through the verbs used to explicate their role “providing a liaison point”; “overseeing the supervision”; “being an advocate”; “liaising with the professional experience office of the provider”; “welcoming teacher education students (PSTs) into the school”; “arranging, in consultation with the supervising teacher(s), a teaching timetable during the initial pre-placement visit”; “communicating in a timely manner”; “alerting the professional experience office”; “ensuring that the professional experience report is forwarded” (NESA, 2015, p.15).

This study was also informed by the policy foundation established by Great Teaching, Inspired Learning (Bruniges et al., 2013). The role of the Professional Experience Coordinator role potentially relates to recommendation 4.3 of this report: “Specialist professional experience schools will showcase high quality professional placement practice” (Bruniges et al., 2013, p.10).

Recommendation 4.3 has been translated by the NSW Department of Education into the Professional Experience Hub School program. The first three-year cycle (2016-2018) of the Hub School program resulted in a strengthening of the partnership between ITE providers and schools, the creation of a mentoring web site, and a research study of assessment in professional experience. The second three-year cycle (2019-2021) of the Hub School program sought to apply the resources and knowledge generated from the first hub school cycle to the practice of professional experience across the state. The evolution of the role of the Professional Experience Coordinator was identified as a critically important one in this second hub school cycle.

The purpose of the Hub Schools has been summarised by the Department’s own Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation (2018, p.7) as:

Hub Schools have introduced initiatives that are targeted at both preservice teachers and supervising teachers. For preservice teachers, these most commonly include revised supervising models, increased support structures such as induction and orientation sessions, professional learning, and additional resources. For supervising teachers, initiatives include the provision of professional learning and additional support. Initiatives that benefitted partner schools include the provision of professional learning, funding, resources and increased support. Other initiatives and outcomes include revisions to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course content and modified content delivery.

This study also sought to address the ‘next step’ as identified in the recent Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) Evaluation: School-University Partnerships report, which highlights the need ‘to clarify roles and responsibilities among providers, authorities, education departments and other employers, and schools in advancing and implementing the priority tasks through partnerships’ (Craven et al., 2014, p.4). This study sought to clarify the roles and responsibilities associated with the Professional Experience Coordinator in schools.

1.1 The Socio-Political Context of this Study

This study was conducted in the truly unique socio-political context of the CoVID-19 pandemic outbreak in NSW in March 2020. The pandemic had significant impact on the provision of education at both the schools and universities involved in this study.

The pandemic forced schools to close for face-to-face schooling for the first five weeks of school term two. They had to quickly adapt their programs to a fully online environment. This agile move to fully online teaching and learning was the biggest innovation for 2020 and expended both material and human resources that may have been otherwise deployed to innovation in professional experience for these hub schools.

School closures also meant that professional experience placements were curtailed at the end of term one and were mostly not possible during school term two. There was also continued uncertainty over possible outbreaks throughout 2020 that prevented the forward planning required to organise quality professional experience placements. This uncertainty created backlogs of placements for universities that became difficult to fill as the pandemic adaptations placed enormous pressures on the goodwill and energy of the frontline teachers in schools.

The pandemic also had an impact on the budget bottom line of universities as international students were unable to remain in Australia. The impact on universities varied according to the proportion of overseas students to their overall enrolment (Marshman & Larkins, 2020). The precarious state of universities’ budgets impacted on the professional staff of the universities who sought to reduce their staffing budget as a response to the crisis. There was also a significant impact for the university academic staff who faced a similar challenge to those of their school counterparts in the rapid transition to fully online teaching during March 2020. This may have also had the same impact as teachers on their energy and appetite for innovations in professional experience.

The other important aspect of the socio-political context of the study is that it was situated within the Hub School program. Time for the proper execution of the role of the Professional Experience Coordinator (PEXC) is funded within this program. This means that the transference of the recommendation made in this report with regards to that role be contingent on some funding being allocated for all schools involved in professional experience across the state.

1.2 Problem statement

Professional experience in initial teacher education continues to be a highly challenging area in which to work, given the changing landscapes of schools and universities and increased pressures and accountability measures (Gu & Day, 2007; Le Cornu, 2012). Criticisms regarding professional experience are not new (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Furlong et al., 2008). Concerns have been directed towards the considerable variance in the “hit and miss” nature of practicum experiences, with qualitative research highlighting the problematic aspects of professional experience from the point of view of the preservice teacher, mentor-teacher and university educator (Howley, 2016; Korthagen et al., 2006). Darling-Hammond (2010, p.11) has observed that “Often, the clinical side of teacher education has been fairly haphazard, depending on the idiosyncrasies of loosely selected placements with little guidance about what happens in them and little connection to university work”. Studies have pointed to issues of time pressure, timetabling constraints, the oversupply of ITE students and demands on practicum schools, particular in rural/regional areas, among international students and in secondary subject areas in which there was a shortage of teachers. These demands serve to limit the potential value of professional experience to an emphasis on assessment (Ingvarsson et al., 2014; Korthagen et al., 2006). Surveys of Principals and recent graduates in the Top of the Class: Report on the inquiry into teacher education (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007) consistently pointed to the following as issues of concern:

- » Aspects of the school-based professional experience components of courses
- » The weakness of the link between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’
- » The perceived lack of relevance of some of the theoretical components of courses
- » The capacity of beginning teachers to deal adequately with classroom management issues, to perform assessment and reporting tasks and to communicate with parents.

The value of university-public school partnerships as contexts for mutually beneficial learning and the ultimate improvement in the quality of teaching and learning has been well established (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Green et al., 2020; Ingvarsson, 2014; Zeichner, 2010; Zeichner et al., 2015). The university-led delivery model has come under increasing scrutiny and critique (Jones et al., 2016; McNamara et al., 2013) with calls for more alternative pathways into teaching and for schools to play a greater role in ITE (Le Cornu, 2016; Lynch & Smith, 2012; Zeichner, 2014). Within the “practicum turn” (Heffernan, 2018; Kertesz & Downing, 2016; Sahlberg, 2011) research in Australia and abroad has focused on models of school-university partnership that can generate sustained and productive relationships as well as bridge the perceived theory-practice divide that has been an ongoing focus of criticism (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Yeigh & Lynch, 2018).

Given that ITE students rate their professional experience as the most crucial and formative element of ITE (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006; Townsend & Bates, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2012), it is not surprising that reforms calling for increased teacher quality, flexibility, and leadership have focused on the relationships between universities and schools in effective teacher preparation. The practicum has always been seen as a crucial aspect of a successful teacher education program (Howley et al., 2016; OECD, 2015; Grudnoff et al., 2017; Zeichner, 2010), with ITE students commonly claiming they needed more professional experience in their teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

The role of the PEXC is pivotal to the current reconceptualisation of university-school partnerships as “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998) in occupying a crucial “boundary crossing” role (Akkerman & Bruining, 2016) across multiple levels or “meshworks” (Lemon et al., 2018) of organisations. As Akkerman & Bruining (2016) note of the “broker” role of the PEXC following their five year case study of a partnership in Holland:

Specific attention should be paid to the role of brokers... those people who are positioned at the intersection of different hierarchical levels as well as the different collaborating organizations or organizational units. When these brokers appear to have most responsibility for establishing continuity across different practices, they are likely to have a challenging political position and can probably gain from organizational recognition and support (p.280).

One form of organisational support for the PEXC is the partnership between schools and universities in the provision of professional experience in initial teacher education. These partnerships and the role of the PEXC within them is critically reviewed in the next section of this report.

2 | Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a background from relevant policy documents and the scholarly literature outlining the broader context for the Hub School initiative and this project. It critically reviews the literature pertaining to the policy background and current challenges in school-university partnerships in initial teacher education. It then moves to a narrower focus on the position of professional experience within these partnerships before finishing with a critical examination of the role of the PEXC within professional experience.

THE POLICY BACKGROUND TO SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS IN PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

There has been over a decade of ITE reforms in Australia. An important aspect of these reforms has been the push to regulate, standardise and strengthen the quality of professional experience (Ingvarson et al., 2014; Lemon et al., 2018; Le Cornu, 2016; Rowley et al., 2016; Ure et al., 2017). The development of integrated partnerships between schools and universities has been presented as a critical means of ensuring greater collaboration between these partners in the pursuit of graduate teacher quality.

In 2007, one of the key recommendations of the Top of the Class report from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training was for the Australian Government to encourage a partnership approach to teacher education, induction and professional development. In 2008 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) introduced the Smarter Schools National Partnership on Improving Teacher Quality (TQNP). A priority reform under this initiative was to improve teacher education with the establishment of pilot centres in for university-school partnerships according to evidence-based principles. In recent years, and even before the TQNP funding was made available, several Australian universities developed teacher education programs based on a 'residency' or 'partnership' model that encouraged PSTs to become part of a school community and develop ongoing relationships with their mentor teachers and other teachers at the school (Ingvarson et al., 2014).

In 2011, the federal government through the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) launched the Standards and Procedures for the Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education programs in Australia. The AITSL Program Standards sought to strengthen teacher education programs, with Program Standard 5: 'School partnerships' stipulating the need to establish 'enduring school partnerships'. AITSL principles place an emphasis on supportive relationships that can integrate theory and practice to increase depth of student reflective learning. This means a closer alignment of "knowing and doing" (Loughran, 2010, p. 6) within the professional experience which is central to what Fairbanks et al. (2010, p. 162) have called "thoughtful adaptation" in developing a sense of efficacy in the kinds of decisions they make to facilitate learning.

This included a minimum of 80 days of professional experience in schools, along with the requirement that supervising teachers be suitably qualified, registered and receive appropriate support in coaching, mentoring and making judgements about whether the graduate standards have been achieved (AITSL, 2011, p. 16).

In 2014, the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) advocated urgent changes to the design, delivery and assessment of effective teacher education programs including improved and structured practical experience for ITE students, and the robust assessment of graduates to ensure classroom readiness. The report noted that “close working relationships through effective partnerships between [ITE] providers and schools can produce mutually beneficial outcomes and facilitate a close connection between teaching practice and initial teacher education” (Action Now: Classroom Ready teachers, 2014, p. 25).

In NSW, reforms have been introduced over the last decade to raise the quality of ITE programs and encourage university-school partnerships. In 2012, NSW ITE program requirements were revised to incorporate AITSL Standards and Procedures (AITSL, 2011). Recommendations 4.2 – 4.5 of the GTIL report (Bruniges et al., 2013) included the establishment of a number of schools across NSW as exemplars of effective professional learning, the provision of professional learning programs for supervisors as a component of partnership agreements between schools, school authorities and providers, and the need for Accredited Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers to lead the professional experience activities of schools.

CURRENT ISSUES: CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

There is a wealth of literature internationally that points to a “what works?” in implementing and sustaining effective partnerships across different contexts. Despite the diversity of partnership models and experimentations both in Australia and abroad, a number of key issues and concerns, both practical and ideological, have emerged in the literature that are particularly relevant to the present evaluation:

- » The value of an established, historical relationship. It is clear from a number of reviews in Australia (eg Green et al., 2020; Invarssen, 2014; Le Cornu, 2012) and abroad (eg Greany, 2015) that pre-existing relationships better enabled stakeholders to achieve the necessary levels of trust, mutuality and reciprocity in a non-hierarchical relationship (Cohen et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2016; Kruger et al., 2009; Le Cornu, 2015).
- » Overcoming and resolving the ‘imbalance’ issue, where universities are required to find placements, while for schools accepting ITE students is voluntary. Research has highlighted the increasing problem for universities of the shortage of placement opportunities (Top of the Class report, 2007) which can result in inadequate notice and preparation for ITE students. Similarly, Rowley et al. (2016) have highlighted the ‘disruption’ effect where schools resisted taking more responsibility for pre-service teachers for fear of disturbing the smooth running of their schools.
- » The importance of leadership. Leadership commitment from the principal and at all levels in a distributed leadership have been shown to play a pivotal role in galvanising and sustaining successful partnerships that can overcome cultural and practical barriers faced (Allen & Peach, 2014; Le Cornu, 2012; Greany, 2015).

- » A commitment among stakeholders to a shared vision and understanding of what constitutes a ‘partnership’ in preservice teacher education. Research has also highlighted the need for clarity and agreement regarding the definition of roles, the scope of the roles, and titles (Allen & Wright, 2014; Butcher & Mutton, 2008; Greany, 2015; Trent & Lim, 2010), which is critical to succession planning in countering the vulnerability of a program to staff changes. A shared vision is required to foster collective efficacy around a coherent and feasible plan to achieve shared objectives (Loughland & Nguyen, 2020).
- » The importance of a carefully staged implementation with effective communication, joint decision-making and ongoing evaluation (Le Cornu, 2010, 2016; Rowley et al., 2016) in order to avoid inertia (Akkermann & Bruining, 2016; Greany, 2015). This approach which Harris & Jones (2017, pt.201) have called “disciplined collaboration” emphasises built-in assessment measures in collaborations centred on student learning.
- » An emphasis on professional learning. Research highlights the way that a collaborative focus on professional development and research can help in the shift from ‘closed systems’ towards partnerships as ‘networks of distributed expertise’ as stakeholders work creatively to advance the professional learning of all participants (Akkermann & Bruining, 2016; Edwards & Mutton, 2007; Gu et al., 2014).
- » The need for appropriate incentives such as adequate reward structures (e.g. higher salaries and promotion opportunities for key school personnel) (Kertesz & Downing, 2016; Rowley et al., 2016).
- » The need for adequate time, resources funding and infrastructure (e.g. time allowances for coordinators and mentors and dedicated technology and learning spaces in schools) (Bloomfield, 2009; Greany, 2015; Le Cornu, 2010; Rowley et al., 2016).
- » The need for the Coordinator to have appropriate authority in the school context (Butcher & Mutton, 2008; Greany et al., 2014; Le Cornu, 2015). Research has highlighted the need for the Coordinator to have experience and expertise in curriculum, IT, professional development and networking associated with an appropriate leadership position.
- » Effective support for experienced, trained teacher mentor teachers, both in mentoring pre-service teachers and in their broader capacity to assume a role as co-researcher.
- » The critical role of a ‘boundary crosser’ (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) in each cluster. This role should be carried out by a senior person who would provide educational leadership and take chief responsibility for the coordination and management of the program in each cluster, working across university and school sites (Le Cornu, 2012, 2015).

RECONCEPTUALISING PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE IN PARTNERSHIPS

Initial Teacher Education across NSW has an established repertoire of school-university partnership models which have evolved significantly over recent decades (Grima-Farrell et al., 2019; Miles et al., 2015). There is an expectation that partner schools and universities share some responsibility for the planning and management of ITE professional experience courses but the reality is that there is significant variance in how this is enacted.

While innovations have sought to elevate the role of schools in ITE programs (eg Broadbent & Brady, 2013), the sector in Australia remains largely university-driven or complementary, with little indication of the kind of clinically-driven shift witnessed in England (Furlong et al., 2000; Furlong et al., 2008) or the more deregulated partnership context of the US (Darling-Hammond, 2010, 2012; Zeichner, 2010). Evidence of collaborations of the kind sought by TEMAG (2014) is sparse. While a few pilot programs over recent years in the Australian context provide evidence that collaborative efforts can produce mutually reciprocal outcomes (eg Broadbent & Brady, 2013; Clarke & Winslade, 2019; Davis & Reid, 2008; Kertesz & Downing, 2016; Lemon, 2014, 2015; Mathewson Mitchell, 2013), they have tended to be well-funded and well-resourced, without clear evidence as yet of long-term sustainability and ongoing funding.

The final two of four recommendations from a pilot project between the University of Tasmania and a school hub (Kertesz & Downing, 2016, p.23) provide an apt example. They point to the importance of “Resolving the sustainability issue. A partnership such as TAPP-Tas demands investment in staff and time to implement, develop, and sustain the system and associated relationships. Examining how to engage school systems and governments in a new paradigm of teacher education where participation in the practicum is valued and encouraged through organizational and financial support”. The sustainability of partnership projects rests on the need to be realistic, keeping the “contextual realities” in focus (Grima-Farrell et al., 2019).

THE ROLE OF THE PEX COORDINATOR IN ITE

The literature points to the pivotal role of the PEXC as “boundary crossers” or “boundary spanners” (Akkerman & Bruining, 2016; Greany, 2015; Mutton & Butcher, 2007). 20 years ago, Martinez & Coombs depicted Coordinators as “as the unsung heroes of professional experience”:

The school-based professional experience coordinator, usually the principal or deputy principal, has been dismissed as an administrative outsider to the essential triad of supervision. Feedback from the field suggested that the coordinator’s role may in fact be crucial in ensuring that practicum is an occasion for quality learning (2001, p. 275).

Coordinators as “unsung heroes” highlights the often unclear and under-researched nature of the multifaceted role of the PEXC (Jones et al., 2016). A systematic literature review of school-university relationships in Australia (Green et al., 2020) for example, refers to “hybrid teacher educators” as “individuals who are on staff both at the school and at the university” (p. 413). This review does not include any discussion of the role equivalent to that of the hybrid teacher educators referred to in the review. The Professional Experience Framework (NESA, 2015) provides clarity around the Coordinator role and responsibilities in enhancing the quality and consistency of professional experience but this has not been always matched by policy enactment.

THE PEXC ROLE: SKILLS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The PEXC role in schools has the potential to meet the shortcomings that have been identified in professional experience. These shortcomings are the need for more effective liaison with universities and streamlined processes around placements (Le Cornu, 2016), the importance of developing trust and mutuality in school-university partnerships (Greany et al., 2014; Ure et al., 2017), the need for higher quality, greater consistency, and more opportunities for observations and participation beyond the classroom supervision setting and the need to professionalise PEX supervision including use of professional standards (Loughland & Ellis, 2016; Ure et al., 2017). The ACDE submission to TEMAG for example, points to the need to “modernise the notion of Professional Experience, away from an old-style voluntary/goodwill or ‘extra burden’ view to one which values the engagement of pre-service teachers in the active work of teaching to enhance student learning” (ACDE, 2014, p. 16). Further, Greany et al. (2014, p. 7) highlight the importance of material resources, “... the time, energy and resources necessary to keep the partnership alive and well. Therefore funding is a crucial contributor...”.

Research both in Australia (Le Cornu, 2016) and abroad, such as in the UK where the PEXC role has a long history (Butcher & Mutton, 2008; Furlong et al., 2008) has highlighted the wide variance in the Coordinator role in terms of skills, responsibilities and levels of authority. This is apparent in the range of titles associated with the role that imply different degrees of management emphasis. Schools use professional tutor, professional mentor, ITE co-ordinator, ITE manager, and training manager. In primary schools it is not unusual for the PEXC to also be a classroom mentor.

Butcher & Mutton’s (2008) discussion of the traditional PEXC role provides a useful overview of the various areas of responsibility of the PEX Coordinator which are largely echoed in the NESA Professional Experience Framework:

- » Managerial and administrative. These are the traditional responsibilities most commonly associated with the role, including liaison with colleagues within the school and with university-based colleagues, allocation and induction of mentors.
- » Pastoral and professional relationships. These involved dealing with individual personal problems, negotiating relationships between PSTs and their supervising teachers, providing guidance in terms of job applications, interviews, and career decisions.
- » Pedagogical. The PEXC role collaborates closely with mentor teachers in PSTs’ learning, classroom observations and feedback, providing opportunities to reflect on links between theory and practice. They also provide opportunities for wider school involvement, promoting the importance of professional experience for PSTs within the school culture. They organise mentor teacher meeting, formally evaluate PST experiences in school and ensure that the needs of individual PSTs are met.
- » Quality control and assessment. The PEXC is responsible for ensuring the quality of mentoring and appropriate support. They provide support in ITE student assessment beyond the scope of mentor assessment such as affective areas of values, attitudes and issues of emerging professional identity.

Similarly, Le Cornu's (2012) study focussing on the perspectives of six experienced Coordinators in the University of South Australia's Master of Teaching Program regarding their role, identified four key elements necessary for high-quality professional experiences:

- » The quality of mentor teachers, including being prepared to share their classrooms, spend time with the PSTs and provide authentic feedback.
- » Commitment and clear support from the principal/leadership team (the principal, deputy or assistant principal and Key Teachers or Learning Coordinators) to feel the PEXC role is valued.
- » The active support of the role of the university mentor, along with a respectful, trusting relationship.
- » The commitment to, and strategies to support, the development of a learning community. The coordinators valued the program's commitments to reflection, collaboration and reciprocity.

The plethora of definitions of the PEXC position in the literature reveals the complexity of the PEXC role and the inherent challenge of working across different hierarchies, spheres of authority as well being the bridge between academic and practitioner knowledge (Zeichner, 2010). Douglas & Ellis (2011) emphasise the importance of the coordinator being able to bridge these potential divides in creating a hybrid space and motivating stakeholders to spend time away from their "core concerns" to work with "new conceptual tool kits" (p. 475). This highlights the importance of role clarity, where the sustainability of partnerships depends on effective systems with commitment to a strong shared vision rather than on the zeal of a single partner (Douglas & Ellis, 2011; Zeichner, 2010). The success of partnerships in this way rests on fostering a sense of collective efficacy in the culture of professional learning through leadership strategies that enable trust, respect and dialogue (Loughland & Ryan, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This review of the literature has shown that the principles and design of the PEX Hub schools and the PEXC role have a solid basis in research and experience in Australia and internationally. The conception of schools-university partnerships underpins a commitment to improved professional experience outcomes for all stakeholders. The PEXC role is ideally placed in this partnership as they have traction in the learning worlds of both the university and the school. The critical role for the PEXC is in adapting schools historically designed for students' learning into hubs for teacher learning. In this way, the PEXC role will become increasingly important in facilitating, managing and translating knowledge, skills and dispositions between schools and universities in initial teacher education.

3 | Methodology

The aim of this study was to evaluate the role of school-based Professional Experience Coordinators in the professional experience component of initial teacher education courses. The study itself is qualitative and adopts a quasi-narrative approach which collects accounts of the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants.

The participants included 24 Professional Experience Coordinators (n=24) at the hub schools, a total of 20 Principals (n=20) of hub schools, and the coordinators of professional experience at their respective partner universities, (n=12). The research method was appropriate for the research questions as it sought to understand and reflect the specific perceptions of these three groups towards the PEXC role within the context of the Professional Experience Hub School program. An evaluation of the Hub School program more broadly is beyond the scope of this study.

The key questions that were addressed through this evaluation are:

1. What is the role of the Professional Experience Coordinator in enhancing professional experience in teacher education?
2. What strategies do Professional Experience Coordinators, Principals and University Coordinators see as supporting them to develop the quality and integrity of the Professional Experience Hub School program?

3.1 Method

This section describes the methods for generating the sample for the study, for data collection and the analyses of these data.

SAMPLE

The sample for this study were the 24 Professional Experience Coordinators from the 2019-2021 cohort of the NSW Department of Education's Professional Experience Hub School program. In August 2020, the scope of the research was extended to include interviews with the 24 school Principals and 12 University PEX coordinators to provide a broader perspective on the role of the PEXC within each school and university context.

As a result of the COVID-19 virus and restrictions that were in place from the NSW Health Department in 2020, all interviews took place using Microsoft Teams audio-visual meeting software. The software has the functionality of an automatic transcript for each meeting that expedited the data collection and analysis in this study.

THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The questions for the interview with the PEXC were developed from the critical literature review conducted in Term 1 2020 (see Appendix A). The research assistant also asked some follow-up questions in response to interesting responses they heard. The interview questions for the Principals and University Coordinators were developed after the PEXC interviews so they encompassed some of the emerging themes from these interviews as well as the concepts gleaned from the literature review (see Appendices B and C).

INTERVIEWS WITH PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE COORDINATORS

A preliminary briefing session for all PEXC was conducted at the first Hub School network meeting on June 19 2019. This was followed up through a formal information session at the second Hub School network meeting on 13 September, 2019 where both the PEXC and the university professional experience coordinators (UC) were in attendance. The ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent and the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time were explained in detail before the participants were asked to read the consent form and ask any questions they may have about the study. Written consent was then sought from each participant, but they were also given the option of taking the form away to think more about their possible involvement in the project.

The PEXC involved in this study took part in one interview conducted by the research assistant. These 30-minute, semi-structured interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams in Terms 2-3 of 2020.

INTERVIEWS WITH UNIVERSITY COORDINATORS

University Coordinators from the 12 ITE providers in the Hub School Program were emailed in September 2020 regarding the project aims and their willingness to participate in a short semi-structured interview using Microsoft Teams at a time convenient to them in October or November 2020. The opportunity to discuss any aspects of the project in a telephone call prior to the interview was offered. Consent forms were emailed to University Coordinators prior to interviews. Interviews were scheduled with a total of 12 ITE providers and their representative coordinator (s) and these took place on Microsoft Teams in October and November, 2020.

INTERVIEWS WITH PRINCIPALS

School Principals were emailed in September/October 2020 regarding the project aims and their willingness to participate in a 30 minute semi-structured interview using Microsoft Teams at a time convenient to them in early Term 4 2020. The opportunity to discuss any aspects of the project in a telephone call prior to the interview was offered. Consent forms were emailed to Principals prior to interviews. Interviews were scheduled with a total of 20 Principals, and these took place on Microsoft Teams in October and November, 2020.

DATA ANALYSIS

The three data sources provided triangulated evidence for research question one on the work of the PEXC, as well as for question two on effective strategies for developing and maintaining the quality across the Hub School program. Each interview was subject to a thematic analysis employing the key constructs identified in the literature review as well as emergent novel themes. This analysis occurred both in NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software package, as well as from an examination of the primary data and was conducted by all three members of the research team comprised of the chief investigator and the two research assistants. Regular research meetings were held during this process to discuss the emergent themes to ensure they were truly representative of these data. These meetings addressed any potential confirmation bias of the research team. The verification and corroboration of the research findings continued throughout the writing of this report as the chief investigator and the research assistant responsible for the final report were conscious of the risk of data reductionism when working with themes coded in NVIVO. To address this risk the researchers returned to the interview transcripts to verify claims made in this text.

The draft report was also circulated and workshopped with the participants of the study to check the accuracy and representativeness of the primary data excerpts used in the final report. Feedback from these meetings led to a significant refinement of the report section that involved the deletion of what were considered outlier data by the participants.

ETHICS

Ethics for this study was granted through the University of New South Wales (HC190505), and through the NSW Department of Education (SERAP2019413). Amendments were made to these approvals as required throughout the project (e.g. change in personnel, procedures). The electronic transcript of the interviews are stored securely on the chief investigator's password protected UNSW network drive.

DATA CODING

INSTITUTION	
PS01	Primary school 1
HS01	High school 1
UNI01	University 1

ROLES	
PEXC	Professional Experience Coordinator
PEXC01	Professional Experience Coordinator 1 (if more than 1 employed in a school)
PEXC02	Professional Experience Coordinator 2 in a school
UC	University Coordinator(s). A shared role in some ITEP

4 | Results

The results of this study are reported in this section and are grouped under the main themes that were identified in the data analysis conducted by the research team. These themes include the nature of the PEXC role within the hub schools including time allocation and use of funding, the personal and professional qualities of the PEXC, the importance of strong Principal support and an appropriate level of positional authority, and the impact of the PEXC role on the school culture, professional learning and PEX supervision.

4.1 The role of the PEXC in an enhanced PEX

The Australian Government stipulates that graduates be ‘classroom ready’ (TEMAG, 2015) “so that they can be successful from their first day in the classroom” (p. xi). A critical element in becoming classroom ready in initial teacher education programs is access to a high quality practicum, where the quality of teaching, the leadership and mentoring of pre-service teachers is critical to producing student achievement. As the TEMAG report (2014) identified, key issues in professional experience have been:

- » The variance in the quality of the PEX experienced by PSTs: its “hit and miss” nature
- » The low profile of PEX in the school
- » The quality and availability of supervisors

Overall, findings in this study indicate a strong consensus regarding the positive impact of the PEXC role in mitigating these factors in PEX in the hub schools. Evidence suggests that the PEXC role has a strong impact in raising the profile and status of professional experience as a core activity of the school, improving the quality and consistency of the PEX experience within the school and across hub schools, and improving the quality and consistency of supervision and assessment in line with current policies. Findings suggest that the PEXC role can play a critical role in shaping the culture of professional experience within the school in developing a more positive, supportive and seamless transition from the university context to the school experience:

The PEX coordinator can be really critical in taking that either way. So a good PEX coordinator opens up that possibility and invites the new preservice teacher into a real active participation in that, rather than being about ‘You’re about to learn what it’s really like in schools, and you better just toe the line or you’re never going to survive.’ (Principal, HS05)

Responses across the hub schools underlined the importance of understanding professional experience within a broader framework of teacher development encompassing professional, personal and social domains (Cavanagh & King, 2020). Common themes arose about the importance of modelling professionalism, establishing collaborative collegialism, understanding school activities and multiple stakeholders in a holistic sense, and increasing PST's confidence, efficacy and sense of belonging inside and outside the classroom. The crucial role of the PEXC in "bringing it all together" as one PEXC put it was clear, in affording PEX the value it required: "having that one assigned person is really valuable to make sure it doesn't become a secondary thought ... it means that the experience that the students get is a lot higher than what they would if it's not a primary thought" (PEXC02, HS01).

The impact of the PEXC in forging a more coherent, quality and consistent PEX program was seen to be particularly demonstrated by the effectiveness of the way 'at risk' PEX cases were approached and resolved. They underlined the importance above all of building relationships of trust within a community of practice. This is emphasised by a PEXC who had resolved a situation of a PST having difficulty in "making it across the line" through discussions with mentors linked within the hub, "It's not just about all the paperwork and all the pretty stuff that we can create through the hub, which we really can, but it's about building those authentic relationships and really connecting with those people and supporting them in the way they need" (PEXC, PS04). This was similarly observed in another school, "We did have an underperforming teacher and he was just not - there was no way he was going to make it through ... but we had the equipment and we had the whole process around that really structured" (Principal, HS03).

4.1.1 Funding and time allocation: "Time is gold"

Findings across the three stakeholder groups indicated a clear consensus that the quality and sustainability of the PEXC role across hub schools rests on the need for an appropriate time allocation to support PEXC activities, and to enable reflection as well as proactivity. The attribution of time clearly elevated the PEX program in terms of value as a school priority.

"In the schools that I talked to where that role has got that amount of time, it really makes a huge difference so you can really see how the people in the role think about the role differently because it's not something they're trying to wedge into or around something else. So yes, I have seen that with them when we were working with some of our new network schools it was very obvious to see the full teachers that have been told you're a PEXC and you're also a DP and you're also on classes much of the time and they just could not dedicate the time and also things like you can hear in your thinking that you thought about it a lot and that sort of space. Excuse me that space comes from having the time to think about it." (PEXC, PS11)

“It’s more about the significance of the role and if we quarantine funds or if we quarantine time, then we make that program sing a little louder than when we have to cope with it as just part of the everyday work. And the service won’t continue with quality teachers in the future if we don’t start investing correctly.”

(PEXC01, HS04)

Findings indicate that University partners regard the time allowance for PEXCs as critical on the operational side for the smooth and efficient communications around placements. As one University Coordinator noted about schools without a dedicated PEXC with time allowance “... they don’t have the space, they don’t have the time, they don’t have the ‘This is my half day of being a PEX person and I can respond to emails, I can manage, I can do all sorts of things’, so it’s really important” (UC, UNI 12). The flexible use of funding also enabled schools to build a quality PEX program eg in time allocation for supervising teachers for training, planning and liaison with PSTs and PEXCs, enabling attendance at workshops, conferences and PEXC/hub meetings. The allocation of time was viewed as critical in securing teacher ‘buy in’ in becoming supervising teachers within a more highly valued program including time off class as a “sweetener”, and marking the departure from supervision viewed as an ethical responsibility but nonetheless a burden for already overburdened teachers:

“I think well, that’s the way it was up until the hub school program. There was no funding and it was based on the good will of teachers and the obligation of the profession. As I’ve already mentioned, to just support its future. But it was problematic, and I think that’s why we reached the point in the first place that the hub school program was developed. It was because of that exact problem and universities were finding it harder and harder to get placements for students because schools were just going. It’s too hard. You know somebody else’s problem, the money always talks as we know that ‘cause it creates time and that’s the one thing teachers will always say they don’t have. So I think if we lost the funding, I think there’d be a big step backwards in the gains that we’ve had to this point.”

(PEXC03, PS01)

Flexibility in the use of time allowance for the PEXC was regarded as crucial in recognising the complex, multiple and variable nature of PEX activities across the school term, school year, and with the maturity of the PEX program including university and hub relationships. Broadly in terms of the position as ‘project management’, the PEXC role was shown to involve an establishment phase particularly aimed at establishing and building relationships with key stakeholders and collaboratively producing structures, protocols and processes, particularly around PEX placements, followed by a period of consolidation, improvement and growth.

4.1.2 PEXC: Personal and professional qualities

Much of the variance in the nature of the PEXC role between hub schools stemmed from the personal and professional qualities of the person in the role, as one University Coordinator observed:

“It really depends on the school coordinator, so I have some who are absolutely brilliant but who have not organised any professional learning in the role of the school coordinator. So I don’t think it’s dependent on the hub school project itself. I think it really depends on the person who is in the role. If we look at [HS06], [PEXC (HS06)] did do the professional learning ... it went beyond the actual administrative duties that some in-school coordinators perceive themselves to be. So in terms of comparing and contrasting, I don’t know whether the hub school project has really made a difference, only that it really makes a difference about who’s in that role.” (UC, UNI 04)

Findings highlighted the nature of the PEXC role as grounded in transformational, quality teaching and learning, and collaborative professional learning and improvement. This is accompanied by qualities relating to what one Principal referred to as ‘project management’, in being highly organised and proactively building relationships across different teams and collaboratively designing, coordinating and driving quality systems of processes and practices with a number of stakeholders.

Following this, Principals identified the need for a strong passion for professional experience, experience of having been a supervising teacher, and having the respect of peers by demonstrating excellence and experience in teaching and leadership along with empathy and strong communication skills as a prerequisite for the PEXC role:

“It’s about the ability to supervise, to understand and empathize with the with the initial teacher education students [PSTs]. Other qualities - firstly they have to be quality practitioners in the classroom so they have to have good teaching skills and capabilities and that comes with some experience behind them as well. They have to have good knowledge of the curriculum and the changes that the curriculum is going through. They have to have good knowledge in preparation of lesson plans and obviously delivery of lesson plans. They have to have good skills in researching and preparing lessons and also in being able to show that they are able to share and support colleagues in practice and across the school K-6 and that they have to be able to manage difficult students in a classroom, so behaviour management is a big part of the experience that I would expect them to have, so if they weren’t a quality teacher and weren’t a teacher that had the competences that I’ve spoken about, I would struggle to offer them that role” (Principal, PSO2)

“I think they need to know about teaching and learning. If you’re a strong teacher and you know what’s important to know and do what’s important to do, and are flexible in what you do, then that gives you the credibility with preservice teachers as well as with the people you work with. And I think [PEXC] gets on with a lot of faculties. [PEXC] is the perfect person for the job. She’s dedicated, she’s enthusiastic, she’s passionate about getting everything right, and so I think it’s worked very well in our school.. she’s passionate about making sure pre-service teachers know everything they have to do. I mean, she’s bought iPads and devices so that she can record their lessons and right into it in a big way” (Principal, HS 07)

“I really think that the PEXC role is best placed with someone who is class free to some extent, passionate and is current.” (PEXC01, HS04)

The importance of the PEXC role in the hub schools in developing and enhancing relationships and effective processes with multiple stakeholders was seen to rest on a need for flexibility, professionalism, strong skills in organisation and relationship building, strong communication skills, and an ability to keep sight of the ‘bigger picture’; the vision and goals of the school and its stakeholders:

“They have to build their own relationships, not so much with the Principals of the schools, but they have to build relationships with the University, with the Department of Education and the other universities... My facilitators also have to be able to converse and be articulate and be able to write well because they’re always writing emails they’re always putting professional learning together they’re always having to share their knowledge with facilitators in the other schools, right? And also they may have to speak to Principals as well, so they have to be very respectful. They have to be able to communicate at a high level and they also have to listen to feedback and act on feedback.” (Principal, PS09)

The qualities that were recognised as important within the PEXC role highlight the crucial nature of the role as “boundary spanning” over multiple domains including within the school, within the hub and with university partners. Based on a foundation of excellence in teaching, knowledge of the curriculum, experience in supervision and a passion for professional learning, the role was seen to encompass many of the qualities required for potential educational leadership including project management, professionalism, communication skills and a clear vision for school improvement.

4.1.3 Importance of principal support

“Unless you got a principal who’s engaged, this isn’t going to work.” (PEXC, HS08)

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRONG PRINCIPAL/EXECUTIVE TEAM SUPPORT

The strong support of the Principal and executive team was seen by all stakeholders across hub schools as essential in providing motivation, trust, authority and the necessary “kudos” to enable a cultural change of the schools in the value and support given to PEX within a broader learning community. Interviews with Principals indicated a they had a clear vision relating to the merits of improved PEX, including benefits for public education more generally in attracting and retaining quality novice teachers within the public education system. This support was seen to permeate the school-based program and beyond, in underpinning collaborations across institutions.

“I don’t think it could actually work unless you had the support of the principal. It does come from the top, so you really do need a very supportive principal who’s supportive of the program and that is instilled in the staff and supports the PEX coordinators at all times.” (UC, UNI 02)

“I think it was valued because I think people see if the principal’s involved then it’s a worthwhile project. If you’re not involved, I think the hidden message is well it can’t be that important, so I was involved and contributed to it when I was needed.” (Principal, HS08)

“Definitely if you don’t have the support of the principal, and they’re not willing to drive the project and build the relationships, and if they don’t value it, then I don’t see why a school would even be a hub school.” (PEXC01, PS01)

“If the principal isn’t the one driving that culture to embrace this sort of thing, it does not happen.” (UC, UNI 07)

The support of the Principal was similarly recognised as important in improving the quality of PEX supervision, both by time allocated and evidence of support:

“[Principal] created the space for [PEXC] as an assistant principal role. Like they put it in there as a valued position, it wasn’t just ‘put your hand up if you want a prac student, please have a prac student’ – it was seen as valued within the school and for people that that have a prac student, they had to go through an expression of interest process... if you haven’t got a principal that values it you’re not going to have that because they’re not going to create time in there.” (UC, UNI 12).

In line with recent research regarding school leadership (Bryant et al., 2020; De Nobile, 2019; Edward-Groves et al., 2019; Gurr, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019) our findings indicate that school leaders recognise their role in building and supporting the infrastructure that promotes the interactions needed for professional learning and effective PEXC leadership. Given the increased demands placed on Principals (Bryant et al., 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2020), the PEXC role was viewed as vital in being able to connect the school’s policy directions and initiatives into improved pedagogical practices. The nature of the Principal’s personal engagement with the PEX program in each school tended to vary however in the majority of schools the Principal liaised on an ongoing basis with higher level leaders such as hub school Principals, University Program Director(s) and the Department of Education to oversee developments and broad directions. At the same time, findings affirmed the importance of the informal mentoring and support from Principals and other school executive to enable PEXCs to step up to leadership roles and monitor longer term succession planning.

4.1.4 The PEXC role: need for appropriate authority


Findings indicated a consensus that the PEXC role needs an appropriate level of authority to communicate the importance of the program and achieve program objectives:

“I made the conscious decision that it needed to have a senior executive push to indicate to the staff the importance of what we were doing.” (Principal, HS10)

The PEXC being part of the leadership team was seen to not only signal the PEX program as a school priority, but also established the program as a school-wide endeavour and intrinsic to the broader school mission and goals:

“[PEXC] sits with the executive team, yeah. It’s absolutely vital, it’s got to be part of the fabric of our school and it is, you know, it’s not an add on, it is part of the work that we do. And there’s a real sense here of, you know, being part of this hub means that you know we have a responsibility to the quality of what and who follows this.” (Principal, HS09)

“The very nature of being on the leadership team, you’re saying through your actions that you demonstrate that you want to build, you’re committed to continuous improvement. You have students you want to develop others so that the students can have the best possible learning experience at school, and you want to connect others to that shared vision and shared purpose.” (Principal, PS03)



Authority was seen as essential in liaising with internal and external stakeholders including the school executive team, and in leading a program of continuous improvement among fellow teachers.

“So the level of authority is around being able to coordinate and support the partnership. Being the spokesperson of the school with the University.”
(Principal, HS03)

PEXC authority is seen as primarily grounded in their recognised expertise in teaching; as Grootenboer et al., (2019) observed, teachers are often promoted to formal leadership positions as a result of their effective teaching practices. As they combine the roles of classroom teachers and leadership, PEXCs were held to be well placed to make direct and positive impacts on teacher and student learning at the primary site of a school, the classroom. This was recognised in most commonly having an AP or DP position in primary schools, and a Head Teacher position in High Schools:

“If it was a normal teacher, there’s no way they could do it and give it the kudos it probably needs, so it needs to be in a non-teaching position. I think you know a head teacher level would be sufficient if that was their prime and only role. I don’t think it needs to be a Deputy Principal or an AP that runs it. And in a primary school it probably would be an AP. If it was someone that was in a primary school coordinating the program, and that’s because they don’t have head teachers, and I think an AP is on an equivalent level of pay to a head teacher, whereas deputy is a sort of the next step up. So money wise, I think you know the AP head teacher would be sufficient.” (Principal, HS06)

“They’ve got a bit more weight of authority behind them like that’s one of the reasons it’s not just a classroom teacher, it’s [PEXC] with the deputy, you know, so that - not that it’s often a problem here, we’ve got a pretty positive culture, but if something needed to be pushed a bit coming from the deputy, people are more likely to go OK. You know, we gotta do that. That’s one thing, having the weight of authority behind you.” (Principal, PS08)

“The PEX coordinator should be an assistant principal level or part AP level, which we fund it at because I think they need to have some sort of authority to be able to say to teachers ‘This person is coming to your room. This is what we’re doing’.” (Principal, PS01)

The need for appropriate authority was seen by University Coordinators as crucial to building an effective relationship of trust and mutual benefit with prompt and timely negotiations and decision-making, where the principal maintained oversight but not direct involvement in operational decisions.

“I think the coordinators that had a higher standing in the school, like the deputy principals, were more able to get things done as they wanted to OK have more sway with the staff.” (UC, UNI 05)

Overall, an appropriate level of authority such as an AP within the primary school context or a Head Teacher within the high school context was commonly seen as vital for communicating the importance of PEXC activities in line with school goals, and in enabling effective decision making and impact both within the school and with university partners and hub schools. Within the school, the level of authority was held as important in being able to galvanise teachers’ support and participation in a professional experience program embedded in a broader culture of professional learning and collaboration. In a context in which time is “gold”, the AP or Head Teacher position was seen to afford the role a time allocation that could enable these objectives to be achieved.

4.1.5 PEXC as a leadership role

A few Principals noted that while the PEXC role enabled PEXCs to gain useful skills and demonstrate leadership more broadly across the school including designing and leading initiatives, the role was constrained by not being a recognised, coded position with a clearly defined position description and associated time allocation. The concern was centred on the importance of sustainability in continuing the momentum of relationships and PEX activities that had been built:

“I think the PEX coordinator role needs to be a recognized role within the Department of Education, so much so that I think it could even be something that Department should consider remunerating or compensating. Either with, you know the Number of University engagement equals number of hours a week compensation you know because after PEX coordinator can be a teaching role.” (PEXC01, HS04)

“We’ve done quite a lot of thinking about the role of the coordinator and the sort of professionalizing of that role a little bit more. For example, in the Department there’s no acknowledgement of it. There’s no code that you’ve done it, it’s just something that that some people who either really believe in, the value of having student teachers and bring them into the schools, they did it for that reason. Or they did it because they were looking for promotion and they wanted something whole school thing. Yes, if it was more of an acknowledged role with time, that’s the other thing that schools have no time. So some sort of a time allocation, some sort of clear expectation of the role too.” (UC, UNI 09)

In summary, findings highlight that the personal and professional skills, abilities and experience of the PEXC within the hub schools are recognised as important leadership attributes, and this is seen in the selection of the PEXC from among aspiring leaders as well as the trajectories of a number of PEXCs into leadership positions in the same or other schools. Responses commonly referred to the “passion”, “enthusiasm”, and “energy” of the PEXCs in initiating and driving ambitious programs of improvement to professional experience programs within schools and hub networks. Findings indicated support for an anchoring of the role within the formal leadership structure of the school. This was seen to offer the potential for a more clearly defined position description and time allocation, along with a level of stability that could translate the zeal of initiatives into longer term goals.

4.1.6 The PEXC in building a culture of learning and improvement

“We approach it as a whole experience, not just a ‘welcome to my classroom’ style” (PEXC, PS04)

As Darling-Hammond has pointed out, “What is important is that the clinical experiences are constructed with careful consideration of what the experience should be like and why, so that the program can optimize the experiences offered” (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 124). Findings indicated that Principals and PEXCs had very clear understandings of policies and systems that needed to be in place within schools to ensure best practice in professional experience. The inter-relationships between instructional/pedagogical leadership and the capacity to build and sustain transformational cultures in which teacher and student learning are prominent have been demonstrated in the context of participating schools.

“PEX gives you the vehicle and that has changed our culture around professional development and it’s not about just you developing the teacher education student in doing our bit. It’s actually you taking on and learning. We intentionally went around increasing the profile of a supervisor and talking about the importance and the value of it, so it was an intentional cultural decision and strategies that are pulling it in play... I feel like it’s increased our profile within the community.”

(PEXC, HS02)

Overall, responses emphasised the importance of PEX being embedded in, and at the same time generating, a broader school culture of collaborative learning and continuous improvement within and beyond the school in which PEX is viewed as a valuable part of the school’s core activities and mission. This has resulted in a broad shift from the role of placement coordinator from a narrow emphasis on administration, to that of a broader instructional leader along with an attention to pastoral care. Further, findings highlight the impact that this has had within the school in generating a broader culture of reflection and continuous improvement.

“It gave us the opportunity because we were in this program to look carefully at what our preservice instruction was within our school. What the pre service teachers were teaching, particularly the supervision and the documentation of that supervision. So that was really that was great to start off with because it basically forced us in a short period of time to have a look at things and that was really beneficial for our school. But once again, that, once you think through the process once and we had funding to pay for that, that in the future is a cost neutral thing as well. Because, it’s just part of our procedures now.”

(Principal, HS10)

“I think the PEXC’s role has been really important for this school in that we have reflected on what we do and how we do it so the school has a very strong orientation towards continuous improvement.” (PEXC, HS08)

Findings indicated that improvements to PEX across hub schools that were initiated and directed by the PEXC had a wider impact on professional learning within and across hub schools. Respondents indicated improvements were called for, however lack of time had not enabled processes to be scrutinised and reviewed, particularly in close liaison with university partners. Improvements instituted within professional experience, particularly induction processes and the nature of supervision and documentation, were shown to foster a broader reflection on, and improvements to, professional learning in schools. This produced a more revitalised culture of professional learning and improvement within the school.

4.1.7 PEXC role: Improving quality and minimising variance

DEVELOPING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

As the findings in 4.1.6 above suggest, given the active support of the Principal and an appropriate level of authority within the PEXC role, PEXCs have the capacity to build and sustain transformational cultures in which teacher and student learning are prominent. Working directly with teachers and Head teachers/Faculty Heads, PEXCs are able to flexibly reframe initiatives and policies and articulate them in relation to local practices in real terms. In this way, they can serve a unique navigational or “boundary crossing” role that bridges (and possibly buffers) between, within and across complex institutional spaces.

Within a broader culture that elevated the importance of PEX within the school, findings indicated the development of consistent, quality programs across hub schools that provided PSTs with a deeper, richer and more supportive professional experience. These included relationship building with PSTs, a more comprehensive and formalised induction program, opportunities to participate in a broad range of school activities including extra-curricular activities, joining school PL workshops, and opportunities to observe a range of classes and specialised curriculum areas, as well as micro-lessons targeting areas of need. As one Principal observed:

“One student we had, on his feedback on his PEX he said it was very clear the intentionality of not just training you to be or in his case for English, but scheduling him all across the school so that he was checking in on lessons with all different teachers to give him a really broad experience to maximize the experience that he had here.” (Principal, HS01)

Our findings respond positively to concerns raised in the NAPDE report (2017) regarding the need to ensure that professional experience is a valuable learning opportunity, where “Research indicates that learning during professional experience is currently often left to chance and many learning opportunities are wasted” (Ure et al., 2017, p. 92). The aim of producing a broader professional experience that emphasised immersion in whole school activities, an authentic experience and self-reflection was commonly noted by respondents:


“The PEX coordinators become a lot more challenging and a lot more demanding in that your pre service teachers aren’t just here to do a placement in a classroom. The expectation is that within that four weeks, nine weeks, whatever the duration of the placement is, that they get a broad picture, a really deeper picture of what it is to be part of a profession rather than ‘Yeah I can plan and I can deliver lessons and I’ve got great resources within a classroom’. It’s extending beyond that... so it’s much bigger than just being in the classroom for four weeks. What happened outside? It’s a holistic development.” (PEXC01, HS12)

“I view placement as a learning opportunity, and the more they see and the more they do, and the more that you’re able to immerse them in, you know, practice, then the more beneficial it is for them.” (PEXC02, HS01)

SYNERGY WITH SUPPORT FOR NOVICE TEACHERS

The benefits of PEXC leadership were commonly seen in terms of “bringing it all together” in coordinating professional learning, and this was particularly apparent in the synergies between PST support and beginning teacher support. The strong emphasis on customised support that is tailored to the particular needs of the PST, the importance of fostering connections across the school as well as intra-group relationships, and the emphasis on a strong induction program clearly meshes well with the support needs of beginning teachers. In all the participating schools in this evaluation, a consistent emphasis was placed on the preparation of quality induction processes and resources:

“You have stronger induction processes. I know that the Department’s now updated the previous PST website to include things around running a quality induction, but unless someone is holding the reins for those – you know we had 13 interns here. You know it is the responsibility of each supervising teacher to do that induction. Or you know someone’s going to bring them all together to say what time it will be, there are developed resources, make it run and that’s the professional experience coordinator.” (Principal, PS06)



“So the instructional leader is able to meet them and not feel ‘I’ve got to be in class in two minutes so I’ll just talk and walk and I’ll drop you off and introduce you to the teacher as I leave’, and I think that there’s been a lot of that happening over my 20 years in Australia and the funding has been able to have much more planned handover of a preservice student into a classroom setting and improve communication generally so that they feel more comfortable as the setting eventuates, and have more of your teaching staff become mentors or completed the mentoring pretraining as part of you know, another use of our funding has been that we’ve given teachers time off to meet with the pre service teacher and teachers appreciate that.” (Principal, PS05)

Findings indicated that schools supported a more effective induction program by allowing time allocation for supervising teachers, class teachers and Head Teachers to confer with PSTs. Funding enabled a broader program including personalising learning, relating with families, and issues around reporting. Every school participating in this research used the funding provided to support the development of effective induction programs and processes within the school and across hub schools, and it was noted by a number of Principals that once established, less funding would be required on an ongoing basis to update and maintain induction programs:

“Once you think through the process once and we had funding to pay for that, that in the future is a cost neutral thing as well because, it’s just part of our procedures now. You know, with all the head teachers in the faculties when they know what pre service teachers are coming, then we’ve got a checklist and to make things easy for future head teachers to provide the support to the teachers coming into our schools.” (Principal, HS10)

Improved processes of induction and supervision within PEX under the leadership of the PEXC were shown to have a positive effect on forging a more coherent approach to inducting new staff more generally into school roles, activities and processes. With those processes in place, induction and supervision extended well into supporting novice teachers.

MINIMISING VARIABILITY OF THE “HIT AND MISS” PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

This broader emphasis on consistent, quality professional experience was seen as a clear departure from PEX previously seen as a “burden” and characterised by inconsistency as “hit and miss” or “sink or swim”:

“In the past, before even the hub school program was in existence, there was always that person in the school, yeah, whose job it was to do that tedious task everywhere trying to convince people to take a prac student, you know which is terrible and it’s something that I think since the hub school program began, there’s been a shift in that thinking.” (Principal, HS05)

“I feel to make sure that you know our teachers aren’t thrown in the deep, that they’re actually given the guidance. You know to get over that sink or swim mentality that was in the schools. Now kids have changed significantly you know, we can’t have that mentality in how we develop our teacher education students any more.” (PEXC, HS02)

The variability characterising previous professional experience programs was seen in terms of the effectiveness of supervision within the school, differences across departments in the case of high schools, and differences between schools, where PST PEX experiences, and professional orientation could rest on the fortune or misfortune of their professional experience.

“I don’t think that your success in your career should be dictated by the school that you did your placement at. If they’ve just got somebody that goes, ‘Oh yeah, look rock up on Monday, there’s your supervising teacher, see how you go for the next 10 weeks. I’ll let you know if you’re at risk’. Obviously that’s a very different environment to your placement in their Hi – welcome. Let’s have an induction. Make sure you’ve got everything set up. You know. After the first week check in. What are your professional learning needs? OK, great let’s run a module on that on Friday afternoon. You know, like it’s poles apart really and I would anticipate that the perception of the career, what that’s going to look like and the knowledge of standards and the understanding of us as an organization, you know, it’s gonna be just poles apart for things like doing the graduate interview and being targeted, and so it’s high stakes in a way.” (Principal, PS06)

Principals indicated the problem of lack of time in previous PEX programs, where more effective supervision rested on the good will of supervising teachers. The narrow focus on previous PEX programs that centred on the classroom and supervising teacher was also contrasted with the broader, more holistic nature of current PEX in which PST students were seen as well supported:

“You know I think, like I said, the whole prac experience is very variable and just plonking somebody with the teacher as a teaching prac even if the teacher is really good and really wants to do the right thing. They just really don’t have time for you know that there’s got so many things going on that you know. They aren’t going to be able to give the thought and well, some are, but not many. But the thought and the you know, the sort of holistic approach that we’ve been able to develop here.” (Principal, PS08)

“But you know early career teachers, you know I think it’s less ‘throw them in the deep end’ and it’s more, you know, the supervising teacher and the professional experience coordinator is, you know, throwing them a life jacket and then sitting on the side of the pool and you know, making sure that they’re OK.” (Principal, PS06)

Induction processes were seen as a key focus of improved PEX in the hub schools, and clearly marked the change from being seen previously as highly variable, narrowly focused and lacking effective support for PSTs at a very vulnerable stage of their induction into the profession. The more holistic induction programs initiated by PEXCs shifted the emphasis from an induction to the classroom, students and supervising teacher to an induction into the school with its diverse activities and stakeholders.

4.1.8 The PEXC role in improving quality and consistency of PEX supervision

“It’s so firmly embedded in our culture, we don’t have problems recruiting Supervisors.” (PEXC02, PS09)

INCREASE IN NUMBERS OF TEACHERS WILLING TO BE SUPERVISORS

Findings showed a consensus among the PEXCs and Principals regarding the positive outcome of the PEXC role in increasing the numbers of teachers both willing and suitably qualified to act as PEX Supervisors. This can be attributed in part to the elevation of professional experience in status and importance, in generating a culture in which PEX supervision is regarded as a professional responsibility. This is clearly evident in the comparison made by one PEXC with a former school:

“We are quite blessed with mentors, and the quality of mentors hasn’t been an issue here, whereas it was definitely an issue at my old school because that school didn’t have an ‘out and out’ PEX Coordinator, so the emphasis on placements wasn’t high, so teachers didn’t place value on that, and they saw it as a burden more than an opportunity...in this school we have a high value on being a mentor teacher and I think that’s because of the PEX Coordinator role.” (PEXC02, HS01)

The broadening of PEX to occurring within a wider community of practice involving university partner(s) and hub schools was also seen to add to the value of being a Supervisor while providing an insight into the “bigger picture”:

“If we give teachers more opportunities to see the bigger picture, they’re more likely to contribute.” (PEXC02, PS01)

The benefit of a culture of valuing PEX is further supported by specific benefits that the PEXC and PEX funding has provided for supervising teachers:

- » In some instances, PEX funding has enabled schools to provide a “sweetener” for supervising teachers in terms of time off class to prepare for and confer with PSTs;
- » PEX funding has been used to support teachers to undertake Supervisor training and qualifications, either school or school-university based, or the Supervising Preservice Teachers online AITSL modules;
- » PEXC administrative and instructional support within the hub schools has streamlined organisational and administrative responsibilities associated with the Supervisor role. As one Principal noted, “You’ve got to have a really well- organized program, because the minute there’s not a well-organized program, if you don’t have a staff member who’s overseeing the placements, making sure everyone’s got all the right paperwork, everyone’s linked to the right person and has that sort of they come in and have an understanding of what’s expected of them. You’ve got to have someone who’s able to bring that all together, because if we don’t, I can tell you now, the staff in the school will go ‘No, we don’t want to be part of the program. We don’t want to’ because it becomes too onerous on them” (Principal, HS12).
- » PEXCs are able to provide ongoing support to Supervisors in their roles; as one principal noted, “If there’s any issues between them that they can’t resolve themselves or don’t feel comfortable resolving further, the Professional experience coordinator gets in it, so I suppose that that’s a bit empowering to those that were on the fence or those that may not have seen themselves as supervising teachers. It might be slightly empowering for them to know that they’ve got somebody out there that’s going to support them. If there is a, an issue, if they are at risk. If you know communication breaks down, they’ve got this person that’s there that’s going to help mediate that actively rather than you know you’ve got to book an appointment like that... and I think that’s the idea, they know that there’s support there, so they’re more willing to dip their toe in the water” (Principal, PS06). This is supported by PEXCs; as one commented “I think to motivate more teachers to become Supervisor teachers we need to provide support” (PEXC, PS03).
- » The PEXC role within improved induction programs has alleviated the onus on Supervisor teachers in ensuring PSTs are well-prepared with appropriate expectations and a knowledge of protocols and the school and student background and context;

- » An expanded and quality PEX program has provided leadership opportunities for teachers, particularly early career teachers, in leading workshops in and beyond the school:

“One of the other things that we do also is I utilized the experience of some of my staff also to run them through some workshops sometimes, so it could be on teaching reading, it could be on how to do a running record – those sorts of things and it gives my staff opportunities to step up in more of a leadership role by running some of these workshops. So I give them time off class to actually run these workshops for the teacher education students as well, that’s wonderful.”
(Principal, PS02)

IMPROVED PEX SUPERVISION

Along with an increase in the number of qualified supervisors across schools, findings point to improvements in the quality and consistency of supervision. Training for supervising teachers (eg AITSL modules) was seen to have positive results not just for the PSTs but also for other school staff who benefited from the knowledge of colleagues who had been trained. In addition to the broader culture of collaborative learning and improvement discussed above, a number of key factors were identified as significant to the PEXC role in improving the quality and consistency of supervision.

EMPHASIS ON QUALITY IN SELECTION OF SUPERVISORS

Our findings support recent findings (eg Ellis et al., 2020; Wexler, 2019) that the traditional idea of the older, experienced teacher supervisor providing one-way advice has given way to more collaborative models of supervision involving younger teachers with around 5 years’ experience. Findings indicate a high degree of discernment in appointing supervising teachers; as a PEXC noted, “I do have to say, I do very carefully veto who I have as mentors” (PEXC, PS04), with reference made to attributes which, apart from being an accredited Supervisor, included an enthusiasm for mentoring, a high level of expertise, a willingness to learn, and strong communication skills with a capacity for effective feedback and emotional intelligence. As a PEXC noted, having skilled and accredited mentor teachers has made the hub school “a centre of excellence” with mentor teachers “passing on those high expectations and the standards required to the next generation of teachers” (PEXC02, PS09).

Many PEXCs and principals indicated that early career teachers were effective supervisors in demonstrating these attributes as well as potentially greater empathy in having more recent experience of being a PST: “We chose teachers in the first five years of teaching that could relate and remember with a similar age to the people coming through. So there was less threatening relationship building...” (PEXC02, PS01). The selection of early career teachers is also motivated by a desire to provide leadership opportunities for outstanding teachers: “Giving these younger teachers an opportunity to mentor even though they haven’t been teaching so long gave them a sense of accomplishment, a sense of valid value that led them to believe ‘OK maybe when I’m in leadership, I can do this” (PEXC02, PS01), however while they tended to be keen to volunteer to become supervisors, many did not have their Proficient accreditation which made them ineligible:

“I think now it’s a big challenge that we have so many beginning teachers in our school... and they can’t supervise because they’re like in their first year or two. We can support teachers to supervise after four years maybe if we consider them a strong teacher... and we support that they do a really, really good job. But I don’t think under that they should be supervising ... It’s going to be a big problem for us.” (PEXC01, PS01)

“WE HAVE TO BE THAT ‘IN-BETWEEN’ FOR THEM” (PEXC02, PS01): IMPROVED COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT FOR SUPERVISORS

Responses indicate that PEXCs regard the ongoing and active development and support of supervising teachers as a core responsibility of the role: “I’m trying to be very supportive of my supervising teachers and mentoring teachers to build their confidence and knowing that if they feel supported then they’re going to be more supportive themselves” (PEXC, PS12). As a starting point, PEXCs indicated that Supervisors had access to current documentation and resources:

“We directly communicate with mentors through a Google hub drive we made with all of the pre, during and post practicum requirements. All of the documentation, the books, and mentoring and coaching notes for facilitating the practicum, and then on the other side we communicate with the pre-service teachers.”
(PEXC02, PS09)

PEXCs have been shown to provide an important role in assuring quality PEX and managing risk in entering the triad relationship between PST, supervising teacher and University Supervisor, being able to liaise with all participants, monitor and support the PEX processes. The ongoing support and guidance throughout the PEX is seen as particularly important for ‘at risk’ students in providing another perspective and level of accountability.

“I feel like we’ve got that cultural change, um, happening. I feel like, um, our education students get another opinion. I feel like when things aren’t working well you can come in and quickly align or change strategies so that you know the teacher education student and the supervisor gets benefit from it.” (PEXC, HS02)

“We’re confident that the teachers are very strong teachers, but it’s not just having one person working with the students, but you’ll have [PEXCs] also working with them. So if anything does come up where there’s concerns about the student, you know that it’s gone through numerous people...you know they’ve gone through all the processes. So you’re just very confident of that, and that if it’s a teacher doing it for the first time, you know that they are being supported at their end.”
(UC, UNI 10)

BEGINNING TEACHERS SUPPORT FUNDING POLICY

Some PEX programs have also brought beginning teachers into the triad of supervision to introduce another perspective alongside the PST and experienced teacher:

“So we work with the triangle. We work with an early career, a PEX student and a supervisor in a triangle sort of arrangement so that they can each offer to the others in the early career teacher can say to the supervisor ‘It would have been really good in my PEX if I’d been taught this’, or the experienced teacher can see the needs of the other two and go ‘This is where you go to get solutions for those problems or whatever’. So the PEX funding has enabled that extra time for, it’s been really valuable for all three of those people there. So good for the PEX to see that in two or three years time, I can be an early career teacher. Good for the early career teacher to see where they’ve come from, where they could be aspiring to so it’s a really valuable resource in that way.” (Principal, HS01)

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING WITH PSTS

“They are actually treated with respect as a part of this community” (PEXC, HS08)

Successful changes included building a rapport with PSTs that saw them as colleagues and fellow lifelong learners rather than a pre-teacher with a knowledge deficit. This encouraged greater collegiality and collaboration as an ongoing part of the teacher role rather than a ‘burden’ on an individual teacher. PEXCs regarded relationship building as crucial in building trust and minimising PST anxiety, presenting a professional, well-organised program, and providing an additional forum for communication and consultation beyond the triad. A number of PEXCs referred to the way that the higher value the school placed on PEX resulted in PSTs feeling more valued and supported. In addition to a more comprehensive induction, building relationships with PSTs included having regular meetings, scheduling PST participation in additional classes and school activities, and eliciting and responding to areas of particular need (behaviour management, differentiation) through workshops and observations. Discussions with the PEXC and teachers who were not their supervising teacher were seen to enable greater professional learning in a context that was more casual, less intimidating and allowed for multiple perspectives.

Responses indicated an awareness of the importance of providing PSTs with opportunities prior to and during PEX to develop intra-group collegiality in sharing their experiences and building relationships, as a PEXC observed,

“We don’t just treat them as isolated forces any more. We encourage them to sit together... to share their experiences and knowledge... share what works and what hasn’t.” (PEXC, PS04)

The shift from a predominantly procedural transaction with PSTs is noted by a tertiary supervisor:

“There’s more of a commitment to our students. It’s not just the process or procedural, it’s that pastoral care or relational.” (UC, UNI 10)

USE OF AITSL STANDARDS AS A BENCHMARK AND FRAMEWORK FOR PEX

Findings showed that PEXCs had played a significant role in implementing the expectations of the 2015 Partnership Arrangements in providing training for supervising pre-service teachers regarding the use of AITSL standards in PST supervision. Findings support recent research highlighting the benefits of relating learning to professional standards (Ellis et al., 2020; Loughland & Ellis, 2016), where PEXCs indicated a high level of support for the use of the AITSL Standards in providing greater consistency in PEX as a recognised, explicit framework that can help clarify the difference between performance across different levels.

Responses referred to the increased importance of the teaching standards as a way of providing a continuum throughout the profession focused on setting goals within a shared language, helping as an “evidence guide – it’s breaking it down to ‘This is what you should look for’, and it’s very specific. That’s been very, very helpful. Helpful for reports, helpful for having conversations” (PEXC, HS03). PEXCs had designed workshops focused on using the Standards for consistency of teacher judgment and the consistency of PEX reports. As a PEXC reports, “We deconstructed some PEX reports and went through what a good one looks like, and what the writing should be for one that’s not meeting standard, working at standard, working above standard. We unpacked all of the graduate standards with our supervising teachers just to ensure they were getting the right information” (PEXC, PS04). Standards were also seen as useful in avoiding overly high expectations of PSTs, as one PEXC noted “In my work with Supervisors I showed them the standards and asked ‘What’s the difference here? What are they asking us?’ because sometimes supervising teachers get these prac teachers in and expect them to teach like they have been teaching for 10 years” (PEXC02, PS01). Further, a deep knowledge of the Standards was important in encouraging PSTs to use them to reflect on and evaluate their own teaching.

A small number of PEXCs also observed that the PSTs tended to be very familiar with the Standards, while “more established teachers” might be less familiar and less committed to them. There was evidence some supervising teachers were seen as needing to work more closely with the Standards in mentoring and feedback, and a couple of PEXCs indicated the need for the Standards to be revised and updated.

In summary, the level of funding accompanying the PEXC role within the hub schools has enabled participating schools time to develop effective PEX processes and resources that were universally viewed by Principals, PEXCs and University Coordinators as more professional, collaborative, coherent and supportive to PSTs undertaking PEX. Improved processes of induction and supervision were seen to positively influence not only PSTs experiences and their attitudes towards the school - and public education more generally, but were extended to the improved support offered to novice teachers. Improvements within PEX, such as in supervision, mentoring and a deep understanding of the AITSL Standards, were shown to have the potential to improve professional learning more broadly within the school, and promote a collaborative culture of professional learning. It was evident that the level of time and funding required during the in-school establishment phase shifts to an emphasis on evaluation, maintenance and ongoing development, with implications for the ways funding and resources were utilised. This phase focused on building relationships with current and new hub schools and sharing knowledge and resources. The communication with hub schools during this phase was crucially impacted by schools having to direct their attention to the shift to online learning during COVID-19 in 2020.

The ability of the PEXCs to initiate and implement improvements in PEX programs across the hub schools was held to be positively influenced by the active and visible support of the Principal (and school Executive team) in viewing improved PEX as a school priority. With this, the level of authority accorded to the PEXC was seen as crucial in providing time, authority and a clear mandate for implementing improvements with implications for school-wide change.

4.2 The role of the PEXC in enhancing school-university partnerships

“I think there’s this unspoken sort of tension, which is you know that ‘them versus us’, where you can build a bridge. This is a perfect, a really authentic platform for doing that” (UC, UNI 10)

Our findings reflect the findings of NAPDE report (Ure et al., 2017) that “School-university partnerships can be sites of both struggle and enjoyment” (p.116). As the findings outlined in Section 6.2 indicate, some elements of the gulf between universities and schools that has been so much the focus of the literature around school- university partnerships are clearly evident in this study. Importantly however, our findings demonstrate that the space and mandate of relationship building provided by the PEXC position and funding has had a significantly positive effect in building bridges towards sustainable, productive engagement in providing higher quality preparation of classroom-ready teachers. There is evidence that while there is still much work to be done, hub schools and universities in our study have been able to evaluate and modify their systems and processes towards achieving a closer alignment in their roles, responsibilities and expectations.

Key to this has been building personal relationships and greater trust through which “unspoken tensions” have been voiced with positive attempts at resolution. Through improved communication, schools and universities have shown a greater understanding of the constraints under which their partner institution operates.

Findings present clear evidence that having a PEX Coordinator as a “boundary crosser” was key to developing effective communication and trust, and more consistent, streamlined PEX systems between the school and the university and across hubs, with a significant effect in minimising variance:

“If you’re talking about, like transactional distance I think between the University and the school, having a PEX coordinator in the school first of all, provides for the shortening of that distance. It allows the two to communicate and the role of the University is to work with the PEX coordinator to enhance what goes on so that the link the distance between school and University you would hope it is seamless.” (UC, UNI 07)

“Personally, I think it’s great to have a PEX coordinator in any school because it’s your point of contact rather than sort of be dealing with individual supervising teachers. It’s good to have that focus contact person because they’re the go to person and they know what’s going on in their school and trying to get hold of teachers at the best of times is not easy... There’s sort of like the hub as well. They are the person that you know if you get the message to them that you know you can feel confident, then that if anything else changes in the school (like you know if they need to give the student another supervising teacher or anything like that) it all just flows quite smoothly and that the right sort of communication gets out. You’re not trying to communicate with all these different people.” (UC, UNI 11)

Partnerships that moved beyond formal agreements to more embedded practices were seen as more likely to have sustainable relationships grounded in the provision of PEX that is integrated across the school:

“We’ve seen a greater sense of admin within the school... a greater sense of leadership and documenting the school’s processes... so this has really allowed that process and we’ve seen other [PEXCs] come in and then we’ve seen it be adopted as a link from the classroom to the very top of the school which wasn’t necessarily there before.” (UC, UNI 02)

Overall, the data indicates genuine ‘buy in’ from school and university staff and a shared vision, particularly around developing and managing effective processes around quality PEX programs for PST. Evidence pointed to the importance of relationship building in terms of developing trust, shared goals and expectations, mutual benefit, strong leadership, and the personnel resources or funding arrangements needed to maintain new arrangements. It is important to bear in mind that, as respondents emphasised, relationship building takes time and includes many longer-term goals, so this evaluation in Phase 3 and following a year significantly disrupted by COVID-19 can provide an indication of goals and interim benefits but has not been able to capture the broader extent of collaborative achievements.

4.2.1 Key factors in successful school-university partnerships

4.2.1.1 ENABLING CONTEXTS

School-university partnerships were shown to work best at sites where good relationships already existed between stakeholders.

“We already had a circle of people who knew both of us and I think that that sort of stood me in good stead with [PEXC, HS08]. I had to do a little bit more work, I think to build some fences – I’m still working on that, that’s a work in progress but it’s a lot more well, sort of like this trusting ‘What can we do together?’”
(UC, UNI 09)

“It took a long time, because we didn’t have a relationship prior. You have to have a good relationship with the school first, otherwise you start from scratch and you’ve got to spend a lot of time because every university’s expectation is different.”
(UC, UNI 06)

This was particularly the case in regional areas, where schools had well established partnerships centred on meeting staffing demands. Here, PEX funding strengthened these relationships by providing opportunities and resources for joint planning and monitoring, and in building strong hub relationships:

“I know our project is probably one of the stronger ones, and so I feel like we didn’t have to form a relationship -we were already there, so to us it was a very natural progression to add up plus one year funding provided time for people to stop and think and develop and network relationships in order to be able to work within schools that were, you know were providing the same environment.” (PEXC, HS02)

4.2.1.2 STRONG LEADERSHIP AND PRINCIPAL SUPPORT

As discussed in the previous section, the sustainability of school-university partnerships is heavily dependent on strategic partnerships and strong professional relationships between system leaders. Strong principal support was held to be vital not only in supporting the role of the PEXC in developing a school culture supporting PEX, but in providing a broader structure of support in their ongoing liaison with leaders within schools, universities, hub schools and the NSW Department of Education. This broader network was viewed by university coordinators as critical in creating a wider school culture of support for school-university collaboration:

“What we found is obviously if you’ve got a principal who is on board in regards to teacher education students, you’ll find the staff generally are also on board, so it’s something that the principal promotes.” (UC, UNI 06)

Principal support was seen in the investment of PEXCs with appropriate authority, time allocation and clear goals for developing effective collaborations.

“The principals in our hub are very active, very good operators. In my view they have been essential. Whatever success we’re going to achieve, they are key to it. Very positive and supportive. If any outside organization is going to operate within the school, if that is going to be an effective collaboration is going to collegial in nature, the culture of the school has to embrace it.” (UC, UNI 07)

While the degree of direct involvement of principals in PEX, hubs and university relationships varied, most principals maintained executive level communications with universities, hub principals as well as key contacts within the Department of Education both informally and formally eg through participation in meetings and Steering and Advisory committees. Support was also recognised in the way principals embraced a broader vision of school-university collaboration beyond PEX placements and embedded the PEX program within school improvement initiatives. Principals were able to effectively ‘troubleshoot’ if issues arose in partnerships, along with responding to pressures on partnerships associated with changes, external drivers and shifting goals. Principals demonstrated an awareness of the importance of PEXC succession planning in maintaining partnerships over the longer term.

4.2.1.3 WELL-DEFINED ROLES AND PEX TEAM STRUCTURES

Findings highlight the importance of schools and universities having well-defined PEX Coordination roles with clear responsibilities and authority, and clear channels of communication not only between the PEXC and UC but within the school and university teams. Given the high turnover of staff in the Coordinator position in both schools and universities, UCs and PEXCs highlighted the need for clear documentation of systems and effective processes of handover in ensuring continuity, and there was clear support for the role of an Engagement officer who shared the PEXC objective of fostering effective relationships with schools:

“You need to have this engagement style person, and I think that’s really needed because it is going to be really busy and people are going to get stuck in the trenches getting done what needs to get done for that particular term. I think you really do need an overarching person to look after those ongoing relationships.” (UC, UNI 05)

“There’s what happens at the University and what happens at the school. And you’ve got to have a smooth transition, a smooth process by which those two sides can work together to communicate, to provide experience for the students in the schools with what they need. The PEX coordinator serves the school side. We have our engagement person on the other side. And what they have to be able to do is to work together successfully to ensure that that is a smooth process of students coming in, having a positive experience, and then coming back. And the role of the University, on our side, while we have our own specific duties to perform to support the students, we also have to perform a similar role to support that coordinator in the school. If they’ve got a problem, it’s our job to work with them so that they can be effective in their schools, so that they know what they need to know to be able to do what they need to do. Not just for our students but for any initial teacher education students that are there.” (UC, UNI 07)

As this suggests, there was a clear consensus that a close liaison between the PEXC and University Coordinators, each with clearly defined roles along with a consensus on a clear set of procedures and documentation, represented the most efficient approach to collaborations across the institutions:

“That’s why it’s so important with the coordinator she can utilize and find the best way to utilize our time the best so that we’re not wasting time. She’s got everything well planned so we can pick up. We can go in and do this workshop, or we can have that meeting with the pre service teachers. And it’s so well playing that it’s nice and smooth and easy to run me. If something is not organized, it wastes time and then people get frustrated and will lose the value of the program.” (UC, UNI 03)

4.2.1.4 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND BUILDING TRUST

“It’s really important that both sides boundary cross and understand the constraints of the other.” (UC, UNI 02)

“It’s complex, it’s sticky, it’s emotional...” (UC, UNI 03)

Findings highlight the importance of trust in developing successful partnerships between schools and universities, and the key role played by the PEXC in building trust to bridge the divide. Within a highly changeable, highly regulated and increasingly pressured institutional environment for both schools and universities, trust required a great deal of sustained effort for PEXCs and UCs. Responses indicated some key elements to building trust: a shared commitment to common goals, building personal relationships, building knowledge and understanding of the partner institution’s systems and processes, confidence in quality processes, and finally developing and maintaining effective communication processes.

The allocation of time was seen as critical to all these elements:

“Time is critical. It’s incredibly critical to professional experience and the meetings have just allowed us time to sit together and talk and really share what the problems are, where we can intervene, where we can help each other.” (UC, UNI 10)

“It’s actually very clever to empower the schools. Yeah giving them money because money allows you to do things and organize things and maybe it also allows people in the schools to get a bit of time to think. Because that’s a problem in schools that you’re so busy doing it that the thinking time can be very difficult.” (UC, UNI 09)

SHARED COMMITMENT

Overall, partnerships clearly shared the common goal of improved experiences and outcomes for PSTs in preparing classroom-ready teachers, and this served as a basis for effective communication:

“The two things I think that made our success. Number one, we had a clear direction right from the get go... to grow the capacity of all teachers and create environments for preservice teachers to be successful so that was the first one and the second one was that we worked with people who understood us, listened to us, had empathy and fostered dialogue rather than, you know- there was no top down. [UNI 01] have always been really high communicators, have listened, have learned, have shared feedback, have always been supportive.” (Principal, PS09)

BUILDING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Findings highlighted the value of the PEXC role in facilitating interpersonal connections within the “third space”. PEXCs and UCs commonly described just being able to pick up the phone and talk to their counterpart on a first name basis regarding PEX matters. Trust was seen as developing over time and through personal communications without the perceived constraints of their respective institutions:

“It’s easier being on that first name basis with them, and I’ve met them a few times so it makes it easier to explain a situation you’re in, or this is the student we need to sort out. They’re sort of willing to go ‘Yeah we understand that, we can work through that with the student’. It’s just easier to have those sorts of conversations with those schools ... I’ve personally felt more free to talk about that [with PEXC] without constraints.” (UC, UNI 10)

“I think we’re more inclined to listen to the voices of the schools because we’re in close contact with these people and you get to know people because you’re working together, I think too with the schools. I’ll suggest something to one of the schools and they’ll go “Oh we were thinking, we were talking about that at lunch time”. So we are very much on the same page now and I think that’s, I mean that’s it’s taken a little while.” (UC, UNI 09)

This is seen in the way one UC outlines the move from being an institution to a more personalised approach:

“Initially they would refer to us as “the University” like that we were sort of this innocuous thing called “the University” until now where we can have a conversation particularly with [the PEXC] about probably some of the tensions.” (UC, UNI 03)

It was clear that the complex and often unpredictable nature of PST placements exacerbated by time pressures, put a premium on the need for personal relationships of trust, where knowing the person led to trusting their intentions and thus greater willingness to be flexible:

“So even if they say “We can’t take this particular group” it wasn’t just because they didn’t want to, it was because of understanding the development of the students and knowing how to put the importance on one area.” (UC, UNI 11)

“We (UC) had a very particular situation with a student who we needed to fail in his right and so that really cemented the relationship between us because, you know, it was a pretty rough time, and so I think we built that personal relationship that we built and the respect, the collegial respect that we had for each other because she’s always trying to give us as much notice as humanly possible. She’s like, oh, “I don’t want you to think that we’re just dumping things on you or we’re doing this and this” and I think having that empathy, right?” (PEXC, HS03)

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

Overall, there is clear evidence that University Coordinators believed that the PEXC role had allowed them greater trust in the quality, consistency, reliability and integrity of PEX processes for their PSTs in schools. The data shows that having time and a clear PEXC role enabled a greater sharing of knowledge regarding school and university processes, and this was seen as key to developing trust and a more effective alignment of their PEX systems in achieving common goals. While the PEX activities of both schools and universities were seen as highly regulated, this was particularly the case with university processes, where UCs highlighted the importance of the PEXC role as having knowledge across the school as well as the university. This particularly involved knowledge concerning the particular regulatory, logistic and administrative constraints under which universities operate:

“In my view the ideal person is a person who is bridging that gap between ITE and practicing teaching. They’re knowledgeable about pedagogies, knowledgeable about what the University is trying to do in terms of how they train their people, and they are knowledgeable about how that person is coming into school and is transitioning into the profession of being a teacher. That person is the key person for supporting that process. If you don’t have that person in the school when you have ITE people in there, they have no specialist person who can actually support them. In my view it’s essential to their well-being and their professional development that they have someone who is able to provide that service.”
(UC, UNI 07)

“A lot of the problems we have of course is that the PEX coordinators don’t necessarily know what goes on in the University. They don’t know what our students need. They don’t know the rules and regulations all that well about what initial teacher education requires. So the university’s got to provide all that in an easily consumed way and easily understood way.” (UC, UNI 07)

This observation is exemplified in the way one PEXC discusses learning more about the university processes around PST assessment through discussions regarding a PST who was struggling:

“It was so rewarding to be able to see their process and how difficult it is for them to tell the student the things you know, justify it - it was, it was good. It was great to see I think, and it’s also good to disseminate that sort of information to the team in our school. Previously you didn’t know any of what the University had to go through, so you just kind of made it work and you passed them. This time you know what the University has to do, which it seems a lot of work, but you feel more confident.” (PEXC, HS03)

The process of building trust by resolving issues of “disconnect” through open and frank dialogue was commonly outlined by UCs and PEXCs, and is well exemplified by a Coordinator at UNI 02 in the emphasis on the need for openness, frankness and transparency:

“We’re very lucky in our particular hub program that we’ve had quite a transparent open program from the start, and you know that came about from a lot of early ground work. So what we’ve seen from an admin point of view was a pretty open and frank discussion at the beginning where the school and their upper as well as their PEX coordinator kind of unloaded on us pretty early on. That’s how we started. So which was a lot about pinpointing I guess the issues that we had as a University ‘cause there’s been a bit of feeling for a little while between the University campus and the school, about a bit of a disconnect. So we had a pretty strong sense going into this about what the school felt. But what that allowed us to do was it allowed us to sort of sit back and listen to what they were saying, design and evidence so we collected evidence from the very beginning. We went in and we interviewed and surveyed every teacher within the school. That’s how we started. OK, so that allowed us to look at in part of that process that they were confused about. Our administration process and the communication that we had and identifying particular roles and then identifying the connects. So what it meant for the school was to get a greater sense of us and that we needed to get a sense of ourselves. So from an admin side, the school really invested in the uni side of the process to actually do, you know, both sides so let us know what they thought our concerns where, which we then took on board and re-scoped out.”
(UC, UNI 02)

As UC (UNI 02) outlines, developing trust involves an openness about areas of concern, a commitment to improvement on both sides in identifying areas of disconnect and critically evaluating and modifying their (often long-established) processes, and the importance of a holistic approach in involving all concerned stakeholders in the process. Findings indicate that both UCs and PEXCs were able to gain a greater knowledge and understanding of their own roles and the perspectives of the partner institution, leading to greater trust, valuing the benefits of the partnership, and more consistent and higher quality PEX:

“We really need to build a bridge between what we do as Initial Teacher Educators and what the schools do as school-based teacher educators. What I found is ... where they can see you value the work they’re doing, and really value it, not just pay lip service, and you show you value it by returning calls and answering emails.” (UC, UNI 10)

“Basically what we were told was “it’s a courtesy that we get to have praccies” and that we get a say whether they pass or fail. So we should take advantage of that. You know we’re professionals in our field and seeing another professional who is struggling and needs more help, it’s our responsibility to also go in there and say “I don’t think this person is cut out to be a teacher just yet”, so that was really important to see as well that yes we have praccies and we feel like we’re contributing, but we really are. It’s our professional courtesy to universities to let them know if they’re no good.” (PEXC, HS03)

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

As the above responses show, the importance of ongoing, frank communication was seen as essential for building trust through collaboration across different organisational structures, cultures and protocols. For UCs, time allocation was seen as a critical factor in PEXCs being able to do the important groundwork in relationship building, goal setting, and establishing clear processes for effective communication:

“We always know that if there are issues, [PEXC] will contact us.” (UC, UNI 07)

For both university coordinators and PEXCs, having calls returned promptly and being able to quickly and flexibly respond to unforeseen issues around placements and PSTs marked a notable departure from previous relationships with schools, and was seen as central to a successful partnership:

“Most schools try and do their best for our students when they come to them for professional experience, but the relationship that we’ve developed with the hub schools means that our processes are clearer and tighter and our communication is a lot better” (UC, UNI 09)

“It’s definitely easier with our partnerships schools, we tend to find that if they’re not available at the time they’ll give us a call back more readily than other schools will.” (UC, UNI 10)

“We were getting into this habit of trying to dictate to our stakeholders and partners what they should like, instead of just listening to them. And they say “no, we don’t like it like that.” (UC, UNI 08)

The importance of trust was also seen to underpin the ability to modify and improve processes which is key to improving the quality and sustainability of PEX. This was made more complex by collaborations across multiple institutions with different processes and protocols, with both schools and universities wanting to streamline and standardise their processes:

“We altered our evaluation forms a few years ago and there was there was a robust conversation that went on and you know the school wasn’t quite sure about how we were going to do it or why and so we gave them the explanation and then we went through it and we said “You know, just trial it. Let’s see how you go” and now it’s been implemented. We need to learn from them and they need to learn from us. They’re in the schools, we’re in the tertiary sector, so it’s good to have that, you know they’re in there every day so they see the changes, they hear it from their teachers and then they pass it on to us and we’re dealing with different institutions obviously in our guidelines for everything that we need to do, so we need to make changes accordingly. So it’s very open, the fields of communication are very open.” (UC, UNI 06)

As this highlights, communication was critical to understanding and valuing the different perspectives and roles of each institution, and was seen as a process that needed time to develop:

Reference was particularly made to trust in the quality of supervision and mentoring, greater duty of care, and a closer alignment of school reporting measures with university protocols. As discussed in 5.2.8, the impact of the PEXC in monitoring and mentoring PEX supervision led to greater trust and confidence among UCs in the quality and consistency of PEX for their students:

“We’re confident that the teachers are very strong teachers, but also not just having one person working with the students, you’ll have the [PEXCs] also working with them, so if anything does come up where there’s concerns about the student, you know it’s gone through numerous people...” (UC, UNI 10)

Trust was in this way vital for managing risk, with the sense that while PSTs were out in schools, universities had ongoing responsibility for them however little direct control; as the findings of the NAPDE conclude, “Unless school systems and employers address the needs of the partnership activity as a work requirement for teachers, providers have very limited capacity to make changes to school processes to improve placement quality” (Ure et al., 2017, p. 215). Schools on the other hand had broad responsibility for supervision and assessment, however little control over the quality and the nature of academic preparation of PSTs. Ongoing and frank communication in building trust was shown to be vital in aligning processes and expectations in order to bridge these potential areas of risk for each institution.

4.2.1.5 MUTUALITY AND RECIPROCITY

“The ‘you help us and we’ll help you’ thing gets involved.” (UC, UNI 11)

Interviews with PEXCs and university coordinators suggested that despite having different institutional cultures, systems and forms of accountability, sustainable relationships rests on having mutual benefits and reciprocity. For well-established partnerships, mutuality and reciprocity were seen to have been already agreed:

“One of the very first meetings that we went to it was all about reciprocity and that was our underlying value that that was there, so we already had that conversation at our starting point” (PEXC, HS02)

Results across schools and universities showed clear variance in the nature and degree of partnerships, however mutuality was centred on the core business of the provision of quality PEX, with opportunities for cross pollination stemming from this core function. It was evident that both school Principals and University Coordinators did not always regard the relationship as equal in power and benefits gained, there was broad recognition of the importance of their roles, the constraints under which each operated, and the need to acknowledge and support their contributions:

“We’ve tried to develop a strong relationship with the school, not only in terms of managing our students waiting for the prac but also having these schools receiving some sort of award. We give the impression it’s a two-way collaboration on reward. OK, us asking them to do things for us, but it’s also us opening the doors to more rewarding, meaningful collaboration so I remember that we created an award in the faculty for the best school supporting our professional experience students. In a proper ceremony in front of the staff, the principal was so impressed that they are getting something from us, sure.” (UC, UNI 06)

“It’s more, how we develop a program that does allow that cross pollination and that learning on both sides to happen and that benefit to both sides, because it’s really easy to pick out the benefits to the University side. It’s much harder often to see the benefit to the school apart from giving your time and energy to the future of the profession. I think again, we’re probably a little bit early on in our journey to really see the full benefit of that cross pollination, but I can say that we are very open.” (Principal, HS05)

While both universities and schools understood their shared responsibility in preparing future teachers, Universities principally desired flexibility and security of placements in quality, bespoke PEX programs within which they felt they could exercise a degree of control to ensure protocols are followed and to manage risk:

“I’m just thinking “just do the minimum requirements like you know, consistent paperwork, formative assessment processes whether it’s lesson feedback forms and such that makes sense to the report. Making sure you tie the TPA into the curriculum, so it doesn’t be just a separate device.” (UN, UNI 08)

“At least the one good thing I know with them is that they will say to me at the end of every year ‘I’ll take 10 next year’.” (UC, UNI 11)

The key benefits for schools on the other hand included access to graduate teachers for (primarily casual) employment as well as the positive impact on professional learning in the school:

“What we’re gaining now is, you know where I’m putting up jobs right now, I’ve got 7 more positions that I’m advertising today, and I know that some of those are applying for them so that that’s great because that’s exactly how we want the process to run.” (Principal, HS05)

“[The principal] sort of waned a bit because he needed tangible outcomes to report back – you know, the ‘What’s in it for me’ factor, but has really got on board and invested because he’s seen a lot of growth within his staff through this process and has employed quite a number of our graduates over the last four years.” (UC, UNI 02)

The numbers and nature of placements were shown to be an ongoing area of negotiation for mutual benefit:

“The other thing I find with the Hub School is when I say about being demanding we have different programs, different students from second or third or fourth year they will not take any students from any other program except final years because they want to retain them for employment afterwards. And I think as a hub school they shouldn’t be that picky. They should support us with all the programs and that’s really upsetting.” (UC, UNI 03)

4.2.1.6 MOVING FROM ‘CHAMPION’ MODEL TO CAPACITY BUILDING

Successful school-university collaborations were established over time, with embedded practices that enabled relationships to be enduring and sustainable. Continuity was clearly central to effective collaborations:

“There’s been three of us who have been on the project the whole entire time, and I think a lot of the research was talking about people come and go and all that sort of thing, but I think because it was the same 3 all the way through, I feel like that’s given us traction.” (PEXC, HS02)

Due to the PEXC program being relatively new and intentionally allowing flexibility in the kinds of initiatives schools introduced in response to PEXC funding, and due to the PEXC role tending to attract enthusiastic, passionate people, it is not surprising that concerns around sustainability in the “champion” model arose in this evaluation:

“That goes back to the problem with the champion model. What happens when I move out of this job in 6 month’s time or July next year, you need to actually have protocols and processes. I’ve always been a believer in protocol and processes, get them right and get the culture right and not rely on you know the determined efforts of individuals.” (UC, UNI 08)

“It all sits with your champions and your people, and as soon as they move on and get promoted, which they should do because you built these skills, yeah, you get a deficit model and yeah, and that’s what we would need, would need someone who was involved understood both worlds. Yep, and had the time to get their head around both worlds.” (UC, UNI 02)

Both PEXCs and university coordinators highlighted issues around the sustainability of school-university relationships within a context of high staff turnover and significant change in both institutions. University coordinators referred to the importance of the PEXC having a clear, well-defined and well-developed role. Maintaining trust and effective communication rested on the institutions having clearly documented and embedded processes, and clear succession plans and processes. As the next section discusses, continuity in terms of personnel was seen as particularly problematic within the university context. Data indicates that staff changes in university sites had a greater impact on the relationship than those in school sites, particularly within the context of 2020 being a highly turbulent year impacted by COVID-19 restrictions.

The data varies regarding the impact of key staff changes in universities during the COVID year on school-university partnerships. For the majority of universities, embedded processes enabled partnerships to be sustainable despite key staff changes:

“Obviously the PEX Coordinator at the school might change but your particular relationship with the school is so embedded. That’s actually what makes the difference across the board.” (UC, UNI 11)

“Even the schools that we’ve worked with a lot, if the principal or PEXC changes, that can change quite drastically. Whereas at the hub school, even if that changes you’ve got some sort or touch point that you’ve usually met the next person that’s coming into those roles.” (UC, UNI 10)

In a number of contexts however, the relationship was held to be with the person and where feasible the university maintained their relationship with the PEXC in the new school:

“We sort of cultivated out favourites if you like. So even when they move schools the relationship’s with the person and it worked both ways. If you identified a PEX coordinator or DP who took an interest in this area, they knew it was good for their career, especially if they did some work for the University and could see that they’re working in this area with genuine commitment ... in the in the same way they sort of come to like our students so there’s like a brand loyalty... So yeah, we tend to have these partnerships with people rather than institutions.”
(UC, UNI 08)

4.2.1.7 CROSS-POLLINATION AND COLLABORATION

Findings indicate that PEX funding has enabled the generation of a significant degree of collaboration around PST preparation, induction and supervision, as well as broader PL within schools and universities and research initiatives. Responses highlighted the importance of initiatives such as professional learning programs being flexibly designed around the particular context and demographics of the school. While they had similar goals around improved PEX, Principals and PEXCs quite predictably tended to emphasise the importance of collaborations that could introduce PSTs to ‘real’, authentic classroom and school experiences that academic units were perceived not to be able to adequately cover:

“I think University is not giving them the exposure in the experience they need, I think the best learning they do is in schools.” (Principal, PS02)

This was seen in the number of schools that used PEX funding to make video clips of classroom teaching to be unpacked and discussed.

There is evidence in this evaluation that schools and universities did arrange programs of cross-pollination, and that where this occurred it led to closer partnerships and more effective PEX programs. The greatest initial effort within the first phases of the program has been directed towards improving the quality and consistency of PEX through greater cross-pollination between the university and the school. PEXCs have overseen the improvement of induction processes for PSTs through workshops, seminars and the preparation of induction resources:

“I run workshops for the University they called it “Chalk it up workshops”.. So I run workshops here for all the pre service teachers. I don’t care if they’re in the first year or final year they come to school 20 at a time and I run these big sit down workshops with a sample bag. So they get a good insight into the school setting.”
(PEXC, HS06)

“I know that [PEXC] also at times goes up to the University, to speak to preservice teachers and then does that off her back and she takes a team from the school... just to ensure that they’re hearing from the coalface about what, who, where, how, and why.” (Principal, HS09)

PEXCs also developed online resources for PST induction that incorporated broader resources including NSW Department of Education information and information for supervising teachers:

“We’ve been really working hard with these PEX to build a network, but I think the most important thing is that that the website is a one stop shop. Basically, I talk about the PEX program, but I put all the resources there for supervising teachers. I put resources there for the pre service teachers. I’ve got a couple of professional learning activities directed at Preservice teachers and also I’ve got a Gallery where I’ve been starting to put videos of my preservice teachers talking about their experience, so they’ve actually got videos of them there. And the other thing I did was one of term 2, we were remote learning at the time for the COVID and I’m in charge of all the professional learning for the school. So what I did was I made all my stuff, had to do their professional development day via Google Classroom.”
(PEXC, HS06)

In terms of bridging the perceived gap between schools and universities, collaborations mostly involved the opportunity for the PEXC and other school staff to play a greater role in university programs. In addition to induction seminars, teachers have taught in academic programs largely involving professional experience:

“PEX has most definitely improved our relationships with [UNI 12] - we have probably five or six of our teachers who teach at the University now as a result of that that strengthening relationships so that they are getting the best, most current practice around you know what’s happening in schools and. Um, yeah, it’s a really fabulous, dynamic relationship and it it goes in different directions I know that.” (Principal, HS09)

“We’ve had [teachers] do guest lectures in particular units. For example, one of the schools in the hub had accelerated classes, so when we looked at gifted education and some of the strategies we brought them on board, they unpacked the high potential policy, the new one that’s just come out from the Department. We have had them do the literacy block session, so support our preservice teachers in that.”
(UC, UNI 01)

“So what this allowed me to do was to pair up classroom teachers with my academic staff. So students get the theory and the practice in one hit. The way that staffing works, we rely on sessional staff for a number of areas. Professional experience is one of those, so if we model it properly and you know we work on a skeleton number of staff, you know I can have one academic across a range of subjects. Then working in pairs with teachers... we increase that theoretical understanding and the pedagogy you know that’s in the latest research that they didn’t necessarily have, and we could pull that together.” (UC, UNI 02)

As discussed in Section 5.2.8, results indicated a focus on improving the quality and consistency of PEX in aligning expectations and assessments both between schools and universities, and across supervisors within each institution. While the AITSL mentoring modules were used across most schools as a required qualification for supervising teachers, there was criticism of them and two universities had designed their own modules. Collaborations have seen improvements across programs in sharing knowledge and strategies:

“We work together developing professional learning that is unique and contextual and that supports the mentors in the community of schools of the two hub schools that we’ve got (and their community of schools). And it’s mainly the relationship between the University and the school, the academic role and the school is to look at those particular pedagogical implications (like mentoring, supporting students, what it looks like in a classroom) and then reciprocating that. For example, we’ve had the hub schools provide feedback on the Lesson plan template, and so we have made modifications for New South Wales which has been strongly influenced by the hub school. We’ve also had the hub schools in, in terms of teacher education work on accrediting new courses, so being part of the critical friend role and looking at New Course Development. We’ve had them work with tertiary supervisors, so this year when we ran our virtual tertiary supervisor briefing and we had the hub coordinators come on board and provide their insight.” (UC, UNI 01)

“There’s a much closer relationship [with partner schools]. And we’ve actually taken that a little bit further. We’ve actually brought them on board as markers for our TPA, and so we are skilling them up with that. That’s paid huge dividends within their own settings, because they’ve said they’ve been able to go back and help their colleagues with supporting the teacher education students” [PSTs].” (UC, UNI 10)

Mutuality clearly drove effective collaborations, with schools generally eager to see the practical benefit for improved teaching and learning:

“Sometimes the project that comes in is based on a university need rather than an actual collaborative agreed area of possible growth and development – that’s when they tend to be very time consuming because it isn’t actually contextually relevant to us. If it was linked to our priorities or became a joint priority than it would be a very different look and a very different feel as to how we approach it.” (PEXC, PS04)

This sentiment was most evident in research collaborations, where one UC said:

“I’ve maintained my involvement with [UC] in the Professional Experience office because I think that’s where we actually make a difference as opposed to writing stupid journal articles in journals that nobody rates. My view is if an academic’s doing research and they don’t have a school teacher on the team (doing an MEd-Research or PhD or something), it’s an opportunity lost because that’s the way that whatever is being done, it’s upskilling the schools and whatever is being done is at least being fed straight into that school and you might get some sort of impact within the school. But not a lot of academics do it in my experience.” (UC, UNI 07)

In summary, findings support the literature within the area of school-university partnerships that highlights the level of sustained effort required to forge and sustain effective partnerships across institutional boundaries (Grudnoff et al., 2017; Lemen et al., 2018). Overall, the relationships between PEXCs and University Coordinators was very positive and motivated by a common desire to collaborate closely to improve PEX for PSTs, and this was shown to have translated into improved PEX programs and successful collaborative activities. Further, PEXC collaborations with hub schools broadened the network of schools with which universities collaborated, with greater standardisation of PEX processes and documentation across hub schools. As PEXCs lamented, plans for 2020 around the development of resources across hub schools were largely shelved with the impact of COVID-19 on schools.

Effective partnerships were characterised by having previously established partnerships, greater continuity and stability in staffing in each institution, and in maintaining open, frank communication and a transparency that engenders trust. PEXCs and UCs recognised a clear synergy in their roles, and more open communication allowed each to recognise the constraints under which each operated within their institutional and regulatory context. There was strong and universal agreement that the PEXC role had facilitated clearer, more efficient processes and documentation that improved the quality and limited the variability of PEX programs within and across schools. At a minimum, having a designated Coordinator in the school with time to promptly return phone calls or emails and authority to respond promptly to issues arising with PSTs was seen by UCs as crucial to the smooth running of the professional experience program.

Effective partnerships were also characterised by mutuality and reciprocity, with PEXCs, Principals and UCs being mindful of the need to consider their commitment to the broader goals of the partnership in the ‘give and take’ of their regular transactions. Findings indicated that partnerships had seen mutuality in cross-pollination across schools and universities, particularly with collaboration regarding induction, supervision and assessment, with teachers contributing to university programs and in joint research projects. Although constrained by time, it was clear that cross-pollination can hold great value in sharing different forms of knowledge and experience and in strengthening partnerships.

4.2.2 Factors impeding PEXC role in building strong school-university partnerships

Effective school-university partnerships rested on a knowledge and understanding of their different cultures that could work to undermine collaboration and trust. While the theory-practice divide is often held as the key source of tension in school-university partnerships, our findings indicate a high level of successful collaboration around attempts to mesh academic programs with school-based professional experience, driven by a genuine desire for quality, consistent professional experience for PST. Rather, key elements of the university culture that Principals and PEXCs drew attention to as undermining the partnership related to funding, particularly the perceived business focus of universities, and with this, issues around the staffing and academic orientation within university professional experience offices that were perceived to be directed “inwards” to the university rather than oriented towards the capacity to engage effectively with school partners. Further, mismatches in the different pace and scheduling of the working year were a common source of frustration in scheduling PEX and collaborative projects.

4.2.2.1 FUNDING

“...whoever holds the purse strings holds the power.”

(Principal, PS04)

The funding provided to selected schools to improve PEX processes, and the ensuing improvement initiatives driven by PEXCs with the support of Principals, can be seen to have highlighted and accentuated differences in the corporate nature of schools and universities. The perceived business model of universities was seen to be in contrast to schools which prioritise the provision of learning and emphasis on community. The historic trend towards universities incorporating a business model with less reliance on commonwealth funding resulted in universities coming under significant financial pressure in 2020 by COVID-19 and this is reflected in the data in this study:

“I guess the stumbling block always seems to come back to unis need money. And. Unis are a business, you know, whereas we are a service to provide learning and a business on the second side of it, where they’re the reverse, they need the money to provide the service. We need the kids to provide the money. So our slight priorities are slightly different or opposed.” (Principal, PS01)

“There’s been difficulty in trying to get people to stay with us and to come in and not want to sell their product and not, you know, I think I think whoever holds the purse strings holds the power, and it’s not great, but they want us to buy things off them. And we keep saying but we can do this with schools for free.” (Principal, PS04)

“I think a University is a large organisation. There’s a business element to the University, whereas in [Teaching College] they were focused on community and very much on preparing people specifically.” (PEXC, HS08)

As Section 4.1 above highlighted, partnerships need to be mindful about the constraints of the environment in which each operates, including the culture and the relative, perceived affluence of different schools and universities. Successful school-university collaborations suggest that smaller, achievable projects that focus specifically on improved PEX processes can established a positive foundation of collaboration.

4.2.2.2 KEY SCHOOL AND UNI STAFF: SUCCESSION AND SUSTAINABILITY

While both schools and universities were seen to be characterised by a high level of staff changes, schools appeared to be generally more aware of the need for careful succession planning (such as in PEXCs having Associates) and the PEXC role was more closely integrated into the core corporate activities of the school. By contrast, findings highlight issues of staff changes and restructuring in university professional experience offices as a factor impeding the development of effective and sustainable partnerships. This is seen by one UC as endemic to the corporate reward structures in universities:

“There’s the issue of short-termism in universities where it’s grants, and quick wins and boost your CV and move up.” (UC, UNI 08)

The staff changes and restructuring in universities can be seen to be particularly affected by the high numbers of sessional staff employed as Tertiary Supervisors, along with university responses to the financial effects of COVID-19.

“I think because the university has had some significant changes and restructures, it’s created some challenges for having people there. The people that have wanted to be involved have always given it their most, but sometimes they’ve had conflicting timetables. They haven’t been available, they’ve been off, they’ve been moved to another area. Then they’ve come back or they’ve been moved and we’ve never seen them again. So there’s something that is some issues there. You know? It’s always easier for them for us to come to them than them to come to us.” (Principal, PS04)

“... and then it’s paperwork’s confusing or different, or changing, the office person they’re speaking to in our office has changed three times in the one year. We’re just loading up the black marks this year and it’s going to, it’s going to have repercussions... The university is going to a centralised model, so we’ve lost our connectedness with our professional experience team... The team’s been sort of split up a bit now. You’ve got people who are officers, but they don’t understand our everyday business so that has its own set of challenges for sure.” (UC, UNI 08)

4.2.2.3 UNIVERSITY COORDINATORS: THE VALUE OF RECENT TEACHING EXPERIENCE

“You might have trouble finding teacher people in the University because not a lot of us are registered teachers.” (UC, UNI 07)

Findings highlight the importance of University Coordinators and even more importantly Tertiary Supervisors having recent, relevant teaching experience in providing the credibility and authority needed to be able to forge partnerships with schools, and develop effective communication in being ‘on the same page’:

“But the supervisors, when they run pracs, yeah we had a day where they came out and some are saying they haven’t been in school for 15 years and didn’t know schools look like this anymore, you know, it’s not really good when you’re telling the graduates how to be graduates so, I mean, so I think there still got a lot more work done in the future about crossing over...” (Principal, PS01)

This is reflected in recent NESA policy changes in ITE reported by one University Coordinator:

“The accreditation requirements for initial teacher education actually specify that you’ve got a percentage of people on staff who’ve got recent teaching experience. I think it’s only observed in its breach.” (UC, UNI 08)

University Coordinators recognised the importance of recent, relevant teaching experience, with a number suggesting a difference in the culture of the institutions in the way different knowledge, qualifications and experience is recognised and privileged:

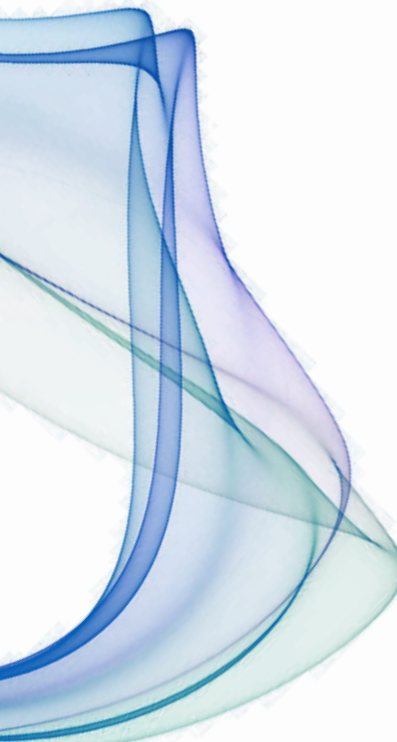
“Now universities privilege certain things and schools privilege certain things and that’s why it’s very hard, you’ve got quite disparate cultures there and that’s our job to pull that gap together. So what we’ve tried to do is my academic staff who work in my team are all teachers, have all done teacher training. All have teacher experience. I privilege that over their academic qualifications and I probably pay them over what they would get if they are employed as a teacher lecturer in somewhere else.” (UC, UNI 02)

“I think I detected an attitudinal change in some of the hub schools. They don’t see us so much as people who are, sort of ivory towers away from the reality of teaching I guess, just because they get to know us better. I was a school teacher for many, many years before I became an academic and I absolutely loved being a school teacher and so I have great respect for the profession and I know I know what it’s like.” (UC, UNI 09)

Findings highlighted the potential conflict between the knowledge, skills and professional output that is recognised and rewarded in the university context, and that recognised and rewarded in a school context. There was a broad consensus among respondents that a teaching background and current knowledge and experience of ‘what goes on’ in schools provided University Coordinators with a level of authority and credibility required in developing strong school-university partnerships.

4.2.2.4 CROSS POLLINATION AND THE THEORY-PRACTICE GAP THE NEED TO REDUCE THE GAP

Findings highlighted that while responses indicated a high level of respect for the expertise of their counterparts, the ongoing issue of the perceived gap between the theory taught in universities and the “real world of teaching” in schools remains a challenge in collaborating to provide more seamless transitions between academic studies and professional experience.



“If you’re a student and you’ve got a really strong network with your uni lecturers, right, you trust them then all the sudden you go to school and you’re told not to trust them and your whole futures in this direction for the next 50 years. Where do you go? You cut your strings and you start to not listen to your lecturers and you go that way” (UC, UNI 02)

“I still don’t believe we’ve done enough work in the area of ‘they only learn when they get here’, you know, like OK, there’s a research base that gives them some confidence in something to fall back on, but no one seems to rely on that.” (Principal, PS09)

Responses from a few Principals indicated an ongoing need for cross-pollination between schools and universities to ensure each understand the teaching approaches and paradigms adopted in the school and university, and thus a more seamless transition for the PST. Two examples arising from the interviews included direct instruction as opposed to forms of social learning, and approaches to behaviour management:

“The other disconnect that we noticed that we wanted to address because our school was going quite heavily down that explicit instruction as a primary school, obviously with a focus on literacy and numeracy. The department’s literacy and numeracy strategy, from 2017 from 2020, you know said that it would have a relentless focus on explicit instruction. And we yeah, we had a lot of students leaving university that had a very strong focus on student centred learning, Discovery Learning, and that was in stark contrast to what their employer was asking for which was evidenced based.” (Principal, PS02)

“I don’t know why there’s that disconnect, but I believe that there’s a bit of a disconnect... I’ve got kindergarten kids here who will say that IGH is a trigraph so the three letters are making one sound. They’re not going to get that through social learning.” (Principal, PS06)

UNIVERSITY STAFF PRESENCE IN SCHOOL PEX

“... If the expertise exists within the University then why not come out and share it with us?” (PEXC, HS08)

The close collaboration of university staff, PEXCs, school supervisors and PST has been shown to be central to consistent, quality PEX and to school-university partnerships. As Ure et al. (2017, p. 104) observe, “The university academic located in the school with the pre-service teachers, where the content (theory) is being learned in real-time and at the point of delivery, enables the pre-service teachers, school and academic to work in partnership during the learning process. This demonstrates that the teacher and academic are both in teacher education and working together with pre-service teachers in that third space of work integrated learning”.

In our evaluation, while findings indicate a closer collaboration between schools and universities around PST placements, most schools still followed the old model in terms of occasional and random visits by university staff. PEXCs and principals expressed concern about the lack of regular participation of university staff in PEX within school sites, along with the need for a clearer consensus between PEXCs and UCs regarding their on-site role:

“It’s sounding like more and more that what universities aren’t doing any more, and that’s tertiary supervisors. So we have that liaison between someone who can watch the students teach & liaise with the PEXC, but definitely with the supervising teachers – it’s that consistency again.” (UC, UNI 11)

“Unis need a presence in schools to raise their profile. They need to be part of the school community. If the expertise exists within the University then why not come out and share it with us? I think instead of it being an us and them kind of thing, we actually have to engage more, and not just with hubs. So not just with a school, but that is the centre of a hub so they actually need to engage with everybody.”
(PEXC, HS08)

Greater support from university staff was particularly important in the case of PSTs who were struggling in PEX:

“I always find that we are the ones that take the dominant role in a lot of partnerships with universities and a lot is expected of us. I think sometimes they need to step up a little bit more with what they’re doing as well. I’ll give you an example. There are times where we may have had students that were sent to us and clearly their students that may be struggling, and we need to get a heads up from the University. If it’s a student of concern I think there needs to be more support from the University about supporting these students as well. So good communications, honest communication is really important, but we also need them coming sometimes to the school to support those students not expecting it all coming from us as well.” (Principal, PS02)

“I think that the pre service teachers, I think it’s important still to have University liaison while they’re here, because as I said, the one that was difficult, [PEXC] needed backup. She felt that you know someone had to come out and observe us again to support her view that this person wasn’t really functioning as they should.” (Principal, HS07)

The issue of a perceived lack of representation of university staff within the school site is addressed in findings detailed in the NAPDE report (Ure et al., 2017) which highlight the urgent need for a re-evaluation of the financial modelling around Professional Experience activities with schools to more accurately reflect the new roles and responsibilities, particularly associated with building partnerships with schools, “The relational work of Professional Experience is not recognised within workload models of financial modelling. The capacity to work with early learning centres/schools/colleges relies on a presence within and relationship with site staffs and this is not the work that is recognised within the performativity of the current context” (Ure et al., 2017, p. 208). The study found that visits to schools were under-costed and relied on the goodwill of university staff. Being time-consuming, they also take time away from other activities that might be more highly valued and rewarded by the university such as writing research papers, and recommended that “Academics should be provided with time release to adequately support schools” (p. 239).

The report’s recommendation that UC activities including school visits be re-evaluated is echoed by UC (UNI 08):

“People defend our school visits as being PR, but I don’t know - schools are pretty busy places, they don’t really care too much if the University person visits or not. They’re the main assessors. So I’m just asking myself questions and our team questions about the utility and about the purpose and function of a lot of things that we’ve done that are just taken for granted. There’s a lot of taken for granted things in professional experience because it goes back to practice and practicum. They’re practice architectures that haven’t been disturbed for a long time. And I think they need disturbing.” (UC, UNI 08)

This also extended to the role of academic staff in schools including the 'random visit', demonstration lessons and opportunities to build closer connections with PSTs:

"... processes around proper liaison from the university, not one random visit and a demonstration lesson – I've been on a war against that demonstration lesson thing ... because I realised it's just a demonstration, not the reality of teaching which is planning, assessing, doing the cycle and working closely with students and their development rather than pulling a few tricks out of your magic bag." (UC, UNI 08)

Findings in this study reiterate finding in the study by Ure et al. (2017) that suggest the need to review the role of the university in professional experience within the school, in the efficacy and purpose of school visits, and particularly around the needs of PST who are encountering difficulties in their professional experience.

MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHERS TO CONTRIBUTE TO UNIVERSITY PREPARATION PROGRAMS

While there was evidence that the PEXC role and PEX funding had resulted in higher levels of participation of the PEXC and school teachers in university programs, particularly professional experience programs and induction programs, respondents within schools indicated this could be extended, with the need for PSTs to gain "real world experience" and a better understanding of the particular, unique context of each school. For most respondents, the most effective ways to bridge the gap was in ensuring that a higher number of university staff have recent teaching experience, in effective communication between PEXCs and UCs, and creating more opportunities for teachers to contribute to university programs both online and on-site.

"I think in an ideal world PEXCs should be involved somehow in some of that course work, maybe to be guest speakers or to do things like that because it's real world experience. I mean, you've got the issue of contextualising what you need to say to your particular school environment, because all schools are different. But I can see the benefit that I think in an ideal world we would have more schools, not just hub schools, but general schools going in universities and I think more of an authentic partnership is what I'm trying to say." (PEXC02, PS01)

"So why aren't the unis seconding teachers to come across and teach for a period versus bringing someone who doesn't know anything about the system anymore? You know, I mean, so. I think there's maybe avenues there where we can get a bit more crossover, cross-pollination of intellectual property too... Maybe lectures can be provided more from teachers you know. And maybe there's got to be a component to the Education students where these PEX hubs can be providing crossover more between the two facilities in more shared use of facilities. I think there's still ground to be made there." (Principal, PS01)

"Ideally, I would like to see something that happens in other areas, like having someone becoming tutors or instructors for a certain period of time. So, they gain some experience, teaching experience at the university, sharing their professional practice with students. It is complex to implement but it involves having school teachers teach for a number of weeks at the campus. So, they gain some experience and they find these also rewarding in terms of their curriculums and their career progression." (UC, UNI 06)

Findings indicate a consensus among respondents that cross-pollination in terms of having school teachers participate more in university Education programs holds value for the teachers, their schools and the university and PSTs. Within the university contexts where the PEXC or other teachers regularly participated in induction lectures or lectured in the areas of behaviour management, special needs education etc, these were seen to scaffold students effectively into their professional experience in the school. Nevertheless, the time constraints and logistics associated with regular programs involving this were also acknowledged by PEXCs and UCs.

4.2.2.5 VOLUME OF PLACEMENTS

The ongoing issue of the inconsistency and unpredictability of student placements was seen to impede the quality and sustainability of the systems that had been developed across schools and universities. The impact of COVID-19 had clearly exacerbated existing difficulties universities and schools experienced in their negotiations regarding placements. Here, the PEXC played a crucial role in “boundary spanning” through improved personal communication and processes, where it was evident that relationship building resulted in a greater understanding of the constraints within which universities operated in managing placements.

While some schools in regional areas reported the issue of having too few placements, which made it more difficult for the PEXC to build robust PEX programs and resources, a number of universities within the metropolitan area reported an ongoing issue of trying to meet demand in regularly experiencing an oversupply of PSTs to place. While universities had partnership contracts and partnerships with key schools, they also had more informal arrangements with a large number of schools, and struggled to place within the “frontier land” and “open slather” (UC, UNI 08) of finding placements. This is seen to threaten quality assurance:

“Sometimes and this is this is one of the big challenges that we get down to “just need to place” and sort of when we get to just need to fill placements, I always think the quality assurance process goes out the window because you become desperate for a placement. And you’ll take, at the minimum requirement someone [a teacher mentor] who’s proficient by our standards, and that’s done two modules of AITSL training. I mean, that’s a tick box requirement, I mean it’s much better to have PEX coordinator says ‘ah this person is actually, you know he’s a nurturing person or they’re very good mentor’.” (UC, UNI 08)

DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS IN PST SUPERVISION AND ASSESSMENT

While there was a clear consensus that the use of the AITSL Standards had resulted in more consistent and structured supervision, guidance and assessment, findings indicated the need for ongoing frank and open communication in school-university partnerships in working to align areas of emphasis and expectations in PEX, with PEXCs playing a crucial role in this:

“It’s often been two different discourses: what the school thinks is needed for professional experience and what the University has to do in terms of accreditation.” (UC, UNI 08)

Overall, schools tended to place less emphasis on academic qualifications and ‘ticking the boxes’, and a greater emphasis on the demonstration of flexibility, diligence, and interpersonal skills:

“It’s been super interesting to see the people who aren’t necessarily getting high distinctions and everything, are actually very wonderful teachers and adaptable and flexible.” (PEXC, HS03)

“I’m such a believer that I think interpersonal skills and relationships is a stronger indicator of a good teacher than having three band 5s. Yes, strong believer in that. I feel that universities should be focusing on a resume rather than just looking at the ATAR because now I can see you have a lot of amazing teachers without it.”

(PEXC, HS02)

Responses highlight that ongoing dialogue between PEXCs and UCs is needed in the area of assessment, with the notion that school supervisors may be more focused on potential and cultural fit, which can potentially lead to the issue of overly subjective assessment:

“A lot of schools don’t necessary want someone who’s the best and brightest... They want someone who can work, you know, and can really put in. And some schools tell me they would just want to like make the person fit their culture. You know, like that ethos thing so they’d much rather get someone who’s a bit rough around the edges, maybe is not that brilliant in the curriculum but actually understands the ethos, won’t scare the parents.” (UC, UNI 08)

“They want someone who can learn, who’s got capacity to learn. Not so much the finished product, but the capacity to learn, who’s engaging in critical reflection. Is willing to engage in in the learning process and they see that propensity in someone. They’d much rather someone who can sort of roll the sleeves up.”

(UC, UNI 08)

Findings also highlighted the perception that schools and universities had different expectations regarding levels of teaching proficiency to meet the standards, with the perception by universities that schools’ expectations are too high, overly harsh in acting as ‘gatekeepers’ or that teachers were influenced by the “mini me” effect:

“Their expectation of our students is very very high and we have to remind them that their students are still developing and there’s some room for growth...I think what I’ve noticed in the last little while is this gatekeeping mentality to the profession. It’s almost like the schools are now thinking. “Well, if you can’t hack it now, you won’t hack it in the future ... a sink or swim mentality, and I find that interesting because if you’re working with learners of any age, you want to scaffold them to success, whatever that may look like.” (UC, UNI 03)

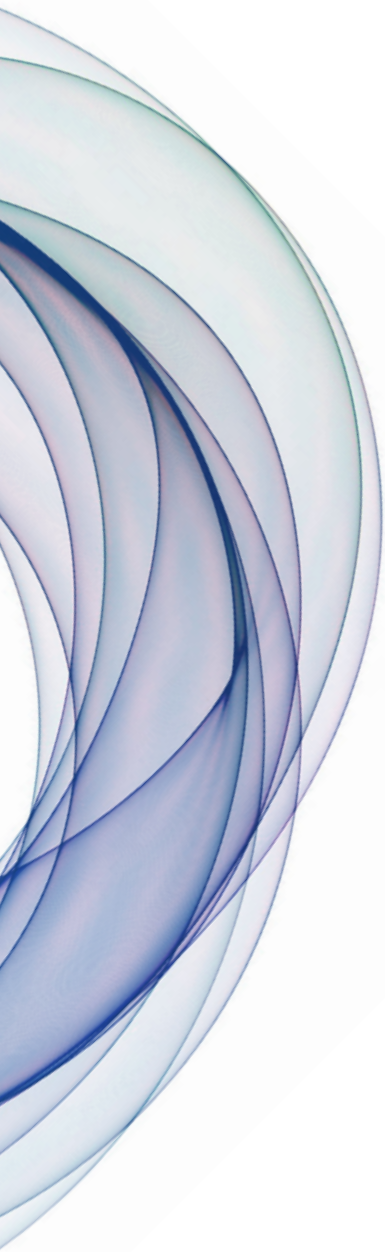
“I mean, you know it’s that whole stuff about mentoring about the “mini me”. And I think that some schools default to that mini me”, and if that person doesn’t fit the “mini me”, then they’re going to have a tough time.” (UC, UNI 03)

INEFFICIENCY AND INCONSISTENCY IN PEX DOCUMENTATION

An outstanding theme in discussions around partnerships in PEX centred around the importance of streamlining procedures for greater quality and consistency, with issues concerning the high level of administrative work associated with PEX, along with issues of unnecessary inconsistency in documents between schools and between universities. With both PEXCs and UCs being under significant time pressure, this was seen to be inefficient and served as an obstacle to effective partnerships.

“One of the struggles that I’ve had in my time as a Principal working with different universities is they send you out all these manuals and some of them - there’s no way I’m going to read all of that information because I just don’t have the time to do it, and particularly taking from 6 universities and they have different practices, different standards, different you know rules and regulations about supervision. I think there needs to be consistency across the board quite honestly, and I suppose the universities need to get together and manage that better.”

(Principal, PS02)



“I think a road block for a lot of people is the paperwork though, because so much of it is required and I think what didn’t help with that is sometimes resistance to change the way the paperwork was set up. So explore other options. Whether there’s a fear of technology or a fear of doing something wrong, or fear of do I have the authority to sign off on this kind of change? Yeah, so I think that’s a big difficulty of ‘I’m too busy to look at this. I’m too busy to look at this.’” (UC, UNI 05)

“We’re constantly being kept on top of our toes, because the Department will keep releasing changes and updates and reviews, and now there’s a new one coming. So by the time you’ve done all your planning work and your prep work, and then you’ve managed all of the paperwork side on the admin side which is just growing exponentially in all the those sorts of fun stuff that we have to do, there’s not a lot of time left.” (PEXC, PS04)

A common theme that arose among schools concerned the need to receive placement information from universities on time, as well as the level of detail in the information (eg where some partnerships had decided to include biographical details regarding PSTs to assist matching with suitable supervising teachers):

“The uni has their own timelines, but just getting, yeah, getting information earlier so that I can prepare my staff and it’s like one of the examples is when the students start on the first day of term and we don’t have a staff development day and it’s sort of I need to have everything ready the term before the last week.” (PEXC, PS12)

By contrast, one of the PEXCs outlined collaborative attempts to improve communications regarding PEX which can be considered an example of best practice in this area:

“I put a lot of their handbooks on my website, and I put the GTP, another teacher assessment tool there. I’ve got everything on there. The portal for access to all their resources are on my website, and everything is so welcome, coordinated by [UNI] and that has improved out of sight in the last five years. It’s all beautifully coordinated and I love that you know the students contact the school prior you know. Now I know more personally the 10 that I’ve got starting on Monday and I’ve spoken to every one of them.” (PEXC, HS06)

“We had three projects that we were looking at as part of the PEX Hub program project and one of them was assisting in the development of an online report to minimize the administration that was required to make that efficient and to make sure that if there are issues, that the University could be digitally informed quickly, so that the best possible outcome could occur for everybody.” (PEXC, HS10)

Overall, findings discussed in Section 4.2 show that the PEXC role can have a significant impact on forging more productive partnerships with universities and with this, higher quality and more consistent PEX programs. In some schools, the PEXC role and associated funding were able to build on existing partnerships, while in others new partnerships were forged between schools and universities, and universities and hub schools. Clear synergies were recognised between the PEXC role and the University Coordinator role, and having a clear point of contact in the school and uni with time and commitment to a quality PEX program was seen as crucial to developing efficient, collaborative PEX processes.

Effective partnerships involved open and frank communication, mutuality and reciprocity, and a commitment to common goals and vision, and this broader commitment was important in overcoming areas of disjoint between the different cultures and practices of the institutions. Enabling factors in effective partnerships also included clear, ongoing communication in arranging placements, consensus around PEX supervision, assessment and documentation, and PEXCs having the time and level of authority to respond promptly to issues that arise. The importance of having the PEX processes and systems well documented to mitigate the effects of staff turnover was highlighted.

Results also recognised issues seen to impede effective collaboration. Some of these are grounded in the different institutional cultures, means of accessing funding, and the different kinds of knowledge, skills and experience recognised in the reward structures of schools and universities. Other obstacles related to the variability in the volume of placements, and the need to keep up with changes in regulations regarding reporting. The role and purpose of school visits by University Coordinators was also seen to warrant discussion and clarification. Collaboration was strengthened by University Supervisors having recent, relevant teaching experience and PEXCs and other staff participating in the teaching of relevant university programs such as inductions, behaviour management, or areas of special needs education. There was a strong support for cross-pollination through collaborative projects including research between universities and hub schools, with nascent signs of successful research work, although a number of initiatives in this area were disrupted in 2020 by COVID-19.

4.3 The role of the PEXC in building effective hub networks

“To coordinate a PEX hub you sit in a community of practice which is something that is improving the next generation of teachers.” (PEXC02, PS09)

4.3.1 The impact of COVID-19

Hub networks were seen by PEXCs as central to developing communities of practice as “coalition of success” (Hattie, Masters & Birch, 2015, p.2), where sharing expertise with hub schools was viewed as a very natural extension of in-school improvements in PEX. Building a closer relationship between the university and the school hub network was also seen to have broader effects such as the opportunity to bring the university into the realm of school students’ imagination:

“[UNI] has a sign outside one of their hub schools saying that it’s a hub school and linking it to the University and the person I interviewed there said the students come in and they ask about the University. He said they’ve never asked about University and suddenly this thing that they want to know what the University is. So I think that sense of the visual connection to the community is really significant.” (PEXC, HS08)

Overall, findings indicate that PEXC with the support of principals were able to use the time and PEX funding allocation to make substantial progress in developing, demonstrating, trialing and sharing quality professional experience across hub schools. While outcomes of PEXC efforts within schools were clearly evident in this evaluation, progress in developing the hub and spoke arrangement has been shown to be inconsistent, with some examples of best practice in approximating the ideals of the Hub initiative, while other hub schools have struggled to achieve the size or strength of hub network they sought to build. Of all the relationship spheres within the PEX program, it is clear that hub relationships have been the most affected over the last year by COVID-19, where many communications stalled and plans for shared provision and professional learning were put on hold or only partly realised. As an outcome of COVID-19 and due to its clear efficiencies in time and budget and potential for wider reach, most PEXCs have focused more recently on developing online resources and sites as a medium for hub collaborations:

“COVID is adding a whole level of dimension and challenge. We started implementing a Google classroom last year so that, you know, resources would be available.” (PEXC, PS04)

“So we’re currently in the process of another sort of facet is to develop our website so we’re halfway through getting that done and basically sort of taking that, not leaving the whole connection we have with our close local schools, but giving that chance for the program to grow even further by putting our model out there. And I think that it’s important that we share that you know, having that hub funding.... We advocate for the range of schools that we go to, that we have close contact with to share our model.” (Principal, PS11)

Findings clearly demonstrate the efficacy of, and widespread support for the hub and spoke model driven by PEXCs in providing a network for shared provision of quality practices around PEX and increased consistency and sustainability. PEXCs, Principals and UCs saw clear merit in sharing expertise and innovations in professional experience across hub schools, and substantial efforts were made by PEXCs to foster and maintain supportive hub relationships alongside the university partnership as a community of practice:

“It’s the incredible relationships that you build, the learning, this learning culture. It’s become yeah a really great learning culture between the universities with schools, other schools that you’re partnered with and what can I say? We grow. We grow.” (PEXC01, HS12)

“One of the big things has been, you know, that vision of trying to build up a community of primary schools in our local area. Have a network and share practice and that sort of thing.” (PEXC, PS12)

“I took on the PEX coordinator three or four years ago when we became a Hub school, it sort of became a much bigger role within the school than it had been in the past. When we became the Hub school, it really gave it its own light to shine on.” (PEXC, PS04)

4.3.2 PEXC role in hub and spoke relationships

Established relationships were an enabling factor in hub development, with most hubs being based on existing networks from which new hub relationships were forged:

“We’ve got a quite a large hub and at this point we’ve got 17 schools now that is quite large at the moment. 15 active schools. We started off with eight. The structure was our Community of practice for our region so that PEX hub was set up at the same time so we have our core hub of schools that were part of a community of practice and they were the first set that were trained by [UNI] to be mentors and then building on those relationships and our principals networking expanded that each year up to the current 17 schools... so any one school might have one or two, or up to five or six PSTs, depending on the size of the school... So there’s like a mini PEX coordinators.” (PEXC02, PS09)

“I feel like we didn’t have to form a relationship. We were already there, so to us it was a very natural progression to add up so called plus one year funding provided time for people to stop and think and develop and network and build relationships in order to be able to work within schools that were, you know, were providing the same environment.” (PEXC, HS02)

Despite the constraints of COVID-19 throughout 2020, PEXCs made ongoing efforts to broaden and strengthen hub-spoke interaction, particularly using existing networks including principals’ networks:

“Over the years, we’ve branched out, incorporated more schools, and had other schools running it so that. Interns actually get an option in a choice as to what they’re going to actually attend, so they’ve got some compulsory ones they attend with us and then other ones where they get to choose to go to one of the other. Depending on what’s on, and we use the seeding money to give those schools some release time for their teachers to be able to plan and organize.” (PEXC, PS04)

“Right now another school is, you know, joining our network. But it’s our goal for next year, we want more schools joining us, but right now we got one school, another primary school, a local school. Yeah, and so far we share lots of resources with them and we have one PL they join us in yeah, it’s only a beginning to work together more often.” (PEXC, PS03)

Results highlighted the importance of strategic fit in creating sustainable hub relationships, where key synergies included both being primary or high schools, geographical proximity, school size, socio-economic demographics, and orientation towards PEX and professional development:

“I think it’s a little bit hard in some ways because they’re a high school and they’re a very very different setting to us. You know certain things they were doing didn’t always um feel relevant or transferable.” (PEXC, PS12)

In perceptions of synergy, primary schools were seen as being inherently more predisposed to hub style networking than high schools due to the more collaborative nature of the school:

“One thing that’s I think is the fact that primary schools have natural networks and natural communities. Secondary schools don’t seem to, and so where the networks have really flourished has been all the primary schools that I can tell you about four primary schools which have a really easy network, things work well there.” (PEXC, PS03)

“I think secondary schools are more complicated places than primary schools. I think secondary schools in my experience have trouble getting their whole staff together because they are in different faculties... very compartmentalised, whereas primary schools are, you know, you’re teaching K-6 basically and everyone’s on the same page. My belief is that primary school teachers and primary schools are naturally more collaborative than secondary schools - they network within their own communities so it’s easier to network beyond those communities.” (UC, UNI 04)

The development of the hub was shown to be more problematic for SSP schools and schools outside the metropolitan area, where PEXCs found geographical distance and the size of schools impeded their ability to engage schools. Hub activities were also affected by the limited number of PSTs that all the schools were able to attract:

“We just identified the schools which were a close to the University with large student population. We also did open up to some smaller schools out in the valley, but we didn’t get much takeout from them. I’m not sure why, we did offer them funding as part of the deal, but I think it’s again probably everyone is busy and I think even even with more money, it’s still if I get a day in a small school. If I get a day off class to go and do that, that’s the day I’m not in class, so that the bigger schools seem to be more a little bit more receptive.” (Principal, PS07)

“So there’s no other SSPs involved with the PEX hub, so the other schools are more mainstream, so they’re primary and secondary... we like to see how a mainstream navigates that so we can then learn from it so that’s been really useful. I think they’re just a bit confronted when they hear of our setting... But it just feels like you know it would be great to share some of this expertise with people who are committing within special Ed.” (Principal, PS05)

In regional areas, there was also an emphasis on the importance of PST students having opportunities to socialise:

“There’s been a few things that have happened in terms of being able to organize an event where all of the PEX students got together. They’re often distant students and so they don’t come in contact with other teaching students. And they were able to visit a couple of schools as a group, and so those kinds of things have happened as a result of the PEX hub. It was interesting feedback from that in terms of that, the main thing that they valued was some time together.” (PEXC, HS10)

4.3.3 Hub initiatives in improving PEX quality, consistency and sustainability

“It’s about recognizing our colleagues are a system, it’s not about me building up a great school at the cost of the school down the road.” (Principal, PS04)

There is clear evidence that effective hub relationships coordinated by PEXCs within the hub school has enabled higher quality, more streamlined, efficient PEX processes between schools and the university. Here, best practice has seen spoke schools having a nominated Coordinator to act as a central liaison between the school and hub who coordinate with the university, thereby producing greater efficiency and consistency in placement processes:



“They devised a program that would be a true Hub project with the spokes in the outlying centres and we connected with a number of our local schools and made them many Hubs with the University. They came up with the mentor program which was the Met Program which was to be implemented by the University. And the University came in and we ran sessions and provided seeding money for our Hub partnership schools to release their people. They would come in and do professional learning with us, with the university’s guidance on the Met program. So we also ran what we call the step program, which is where we have the University students come to our school and we actually ran targeted professional learning at the point of need of what it was they were doing.” (PEXC, PS04)

“I reached out to some of our spoke schools and we ended up some of them ran also gave them the kind of overview of the professional development and they ran it at their own school. And other smaller schools ended up sending their students to our school to participate in those meetings. And so the feedback was really positive from that.” (Principal, PS06)

Closer school-school and school-university collaborations through the hub have used websites and a train the trainer approach to roll out quality processes and standards focusing primarily on administration processes, induction, supervision and quality feedback using the Standards:

“The PEXCs all did a mentoring course with [UNI], and they’ve also used those skills to workshop people within our school. And we’ve done those on school development days or Twilight sessions with people who were going to take pre service teachers. So they’ve used their skills to mentor other teachers and that’s been very successful. And having the funding as part of PEX hub has allowed for that to happen. We can train others in our school and also train others in our network schools. Training others in the network schools didn’t work so well. It had to be done over zoom, and I’m not sure that that’s as successful as what happened here, yeah, so the I think she called it, you know, train the trainers or whatever, yeah I think it worked extremely well here.” (Principal, HS07)

“I’ve already got a network of schools ready with workshops here for the two local primary schools in [Regional centre]. Uhm and they sent two staff, each an executive staff and they helped me put my website together. They gave me tips and tricks for pre service teachers. I’ve given them two days each to do inductions with their pre service teachers. That was for the primary schools. I’ve got another one planned for the local high schools, so I’m building up a network of people that are getting involved in the PEX group. In addition to that like we’ve got the SCIL program, it’s School Community Integrated Learning and so all our pre service teachers that are coming to a [Regional centre] High School start day one of the year.” (PEXC, HS06)

As the following principal highlights, hub collaborations were mindful of the uniqueness of each school context and the particular expertise and experience they could offer the hub, while using the Standards for consistency:

“We try to involve schools - we’ve had up to 16 schools involved in any time, at different times we’ve had different schools. We’ve run different programs and support structures, we’ve given out money to support the induction programs in each of their local schools coming together to share that, we’ve capitalized on the local schools’ demography and context to share expertise, so we’ve run things like, you know, dealing with students from disadvantaged backgrounds and trauma, Aboriginal students, what does a high aspirational students and high aspirational community require? So it’s capturing the good practice ... not from a point of view of we’re a school of excellence; it’s more a point of view of – ‘We have some expertise and this has been our story’, and that’s where it’s worked really well constantly bringing it back to the standards.” (Principal, PS04)

4.3.4 PEXC networking

PEXC Network meetings were organised every school term to enable PEXCs to meet in person (online during 2020 under COVID-19) and share information, ideas and updates with PEX stakeholders including University partners, hub school partners, and DoE personnel including the project leaders.

Key focus areas of the meetings included:

- » Updates, findings and sharing ideas relating to initiatives in improvements in professional experience across HUB schools
- » Initiatives other schools employed to support preservice teachers during the pandemic.
- » Collaborative projects among PEXCs
- » Discussion regarding programs from other PEX schools, input with the development of DoE preservice teacher resources, contacts with other Hub schools and DoE personnel
- » Discussions around the development of systems related work in formulating common goals and resources
- » Collaboration of all stakeholders regarding research findings and understanding of other successful Hub models.
- » Implementation of Logic Models to deliver outcomes
- » Discussions around best practice in collaboration with universities, and opportunities for PEXCs to begin conversations with prospective tertiary partners

KEY BENEFITS OF NETWORK MEETINGS

Overall, meetings across key stakeholders: PEXC, UC as well as DoE leaders were seen as vital in building relationships in communities of practice, developing, aligning and affirming collaborative goals and processes, and energising PEXCs towards broader program aims:

“The meetings repositioned the project to a broader goal/purpose. Sometimes you can get ‘lost’ in internal school politics... Hearing the wonderful ideas and work of other projects is inspiring and makes you committed to the ‘continuous improvement’ journey.” (PEXC HS02)

Networking was seen as vital to building systems relationships in maintaining the momentum of relationship building and in building trust, commitment and reflexive practice. This provided a solid foundation for sharing ideas, initiatives and resources across schools, hubs and universities, supported by leaders from DoE.

In summary, there was universal support for the use of funding to develop hub networks and clear evidence of the benefits of collaboration across schools within broader communities of practice, and PEXCs who had the active support of Principals had made substantial progress in developing, demonstrating, trialing and sharing quality professional experience across hub schools. The development of the hubs over the year prior to this study was unfortunately highly impacted by COVID-19, with many Principals and PEXCs reporting that they had to put plans they had made either to expand their hub network or in collaborations with current hub schools on hold.

Results highlighted the importance of strategic fit in creating sustainable hub relationships, where key synergies included both being primary or high schools, geographical proximity, school size, socio-economic demographics, and orientation towards PEX and professional development. Strong hub networks built on existing networks as well as Principal networks in developing spoke schools, as well as strong school-university collaborations. Primary schools were seen by some PEXCs as being more predisposed to hub style collaborations in not having the departmental divisions of a high school. Further, development of the hub was shown to be more problematic for SSP schools and schools outside the metropolitan area, where PEXCs found geographical distance and the size of schools (including number of placements) impeded their ability to engage schools.

The role of the PEXC was crucial in the development of the hub and spoke model of collaboration, and time allocation was clearly a crucial enabling factor. PEXCs led the development of websites, resources and train the trainer approaches focusing primarily on administration processes, induction, supervision and quality feedback using the Standards in collaboration with partner universities. Having a forum for hub networking was regarded as highly important. Meetings among key stakeholders: PEXC, University partners as well as DoE leaders were seen as vital in sharing ideas and building relationships in communities of practice, developing, aligning and affirming collaborative goals and processes, and energising PEXCs towards broader program aims. While some PEXCs preferred the greater time efficiency of zoom meetings, others preferred the level of interpersonal contact and collegiality developed during on-site meetings.

While building hub relationships was seen to demand a sizeable degree of time and effort for PEXCs, the dividends were clear in terms of developing quality PEX programs that were more consistent across hub schools. PEXCs worked to put systems in place with online access to information, resources and documentation which assured continuity, particularly given staff changes in the PEXC role.

5 | Discussion

This section of the report is a synthesis of the data to answer the research questions of this evaluations. The questions posed were:

1. What is the role of Professional Experience Coordinators in the Professional Experience Hub School program in enhancing professional experience in teacher education?
2. What strategies do Professional Experience Coordinators see as supporting them to develop and maintain the ongoing quality of the Professional Experience Hub School program?

The first research question will be addressed before the second.

THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE COORDINATORS IN THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE HUB SCHOOL PROGRAM IN ENHANCING PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE IN TEACHER EDUCATION

There is strong evidence from this study that the PEXC played an integral role in generating a professional learning culture that enhanced the status of PEX in their schools. They did this through increasing the number of teachers willing to supervise a PEX student, improving the standard of their supervision thus reducing the historical variance in the quality of supervision on professional experience. It was acknowledged that the hub school funding created the time needed for the PEXC to develop an effective professional learning culture around PEX in schools.

There was a strong consensus evident from the stakeholders interviewed for this study that the person in the PEXC role needs to have the skillset to build and maintain an effective professional learning culture. This suggests that the PEXC should be selected on merit rather than be assigned to a staff member based on their years of experience. There was also a call for the role to have executive status. This would give the PEXC position the requisite authority in what is still a very hierarchical civil service.

The skillset for the PEXC role includes the need to enlist the support of the senior executive in PEX execution and innovation, the selection, training and ongoing support of supervising teachers and a strong working knowledge of the graduate standard descriptors as high stakes assessment criteria in PEX.

An important inclusion in the PEXC skillset is the ability to enlist the support of the senior executive in PEX execution and innovations. The execution skill was more important in the first round of PEX school funding in 2016-2019 as the hub schools sought to establish a consistent standard of PEX supervision in their school and, in a few cases, within their alliance of spoke schools. It was expected that the innovative skills of the PEXCs would be more prominent in the second round of hub school funding but the innovation was mainly focused on executing some level of PEX in the challenging COVID environment. The challenges of 2020 brought to the fore the skills of agile and adaptive leadership in PEXCs which are both excellent additions to the PEXC skillset.

Another key skill for the PEXC is the selection, training and ongoing support of supervisors. There was evidence from this study of greater discernment exercised by PEXCs in the selection of suitable supervisors. This discernment was matched by the diligence with which PEXCs ensured that their supervisors had the requisite training for their role. Finally, there was ample evidence that PEXCs provided ongoing support to their supervisors. This support was timely in the case of At-Risk PSTs and moderation of assessment for reports.

PEXC proficiency in the use of the AITSL Standards in the formative and summative assessment of PSTs was also identified as an important skill for them to have. It was recognised in the report that familiarity with the graduate standards varies among supervising teachers and the PEXC played a key role in ensuring that their supervision teams understood the appropriate standard to apply to the graduate descriptors in PEX reports.

THE STRATEGIES THAT PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE COORDINATORS SEE AS SUPPORTING THEM TO DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN THE ONGOING QUALITY OF THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE HUB SCHOOL PROGRAM

The evidence from this study indicates that there are several strategies that PEXCs see as supportive of the PEX Hub School program. These strategies are:

- » improved clarity in the roles and responsibilities, documentation, processes (placement numbers) and accountabilities for all stakeholders in PEX and;
- » for the PEXC to play a greater role in the program planning and delivery of ITE courses.

The professional experience framework created in 2015 by the government agency responsible for initial teacher accreditation in NSW provided a comprehensive list of responsibilities for the role of the Professional Experience Coordinator in professional experience (NESA, 2015, p.15). This framework has provided the operational guidelines for the conduct of professional experience in NSW since 2015. The evidence from this study that stakeholders in hub schools would require more clarity in the roles and responsibilities is an interesting finding that is worthy of discussion here. The following paragraphs offer possible explanations for this finding.

The most likely explanation for this finding is that the request for clarity relates more to the processes that enact the policy within the framework. This lack of clarity in process is apparent in the assessment process in professional experience. The professional experience framework (NESA, 2015) clearly states that assessment of PEX students in their final experience must occur using a standardised final report:

The development of the report template was designed to create efficiency in the development of professional experience documentation across NSW institutions, establish greater commonality in the professional experience reports being used and assist in achieving greater consistency in the assessment of teacher education students by supervising teachers in NSW schools (p.18).

A common reporting template for the final professional experience was a significant policy achievement for those troubled times but there remain other areas of the assessment process that require similar reform. The standards that are applied to the assessment criteria, their moderation within and between schools, the formative assessment strategies employed, and the At-Risk process all require further scrutiny. The PEXC in schools would derive great benefit from enhanced clarity across the entire assessment process from the first professional experience to the last.

The next explanation offered here for the request for greater clarity is the variance evident in PEX documentation across ITE providers. The Hub and Spoke schools involved in this program routinely accept PEX students from more than one provider so the different communication protocols, lesson feedback forms and other resources can create extra work for the PEXC as they interpret these for their busy supervising teachers. It is not beyond the scope of NESA and the relevant stakeholders to create a standardised PEX handbook in pdf format that could be used across the state of NSW.

The next possible explanation for the request for improved clarity in PEX roles and responsibilities statements could be a sign that some PEXCs may well be overwhelmed by the many responsibilities they have as well as the extra ones they take on for innovations such as the hub school program. This explanation relates to the finding from this study that the PEXC role should not be confused with that of the heroic champion or advocate for PEX in a school. Instead, the PEXC should be the person in the school responsible for creating the culture where each team member understands their roles and responsibilities and the proper processes to enact these in professional experience. The litmus test for this enactment of processes should be the management of At-Risk students where a dysfunctional PEX culture is quickly exposed.

ENHANCED ROLE FOR PEXC IN ITE PROGRAM PLANNING AND DELIVERY

The other main strategy put forward by stakeholders in this study was the call for an enhanced role for PEXC in ITE program planning and delivery. This is an innovation tried many times in the history of university-based teacher education in many guises ranging from conjoint appointments to one-off demonstration lessons. This does not mean that it is not worth another attempt especially in the area of course planning in method and pedagogy units where the classroom expertise of the PEXC would be very worthwhile. It would be also very advantageous for the universities to have the PEXC involved in all aspect of the planning for PEX units in teacher education.

6 | Recommendations

1. The Professional Experience Coordinator role needs to be recognised and remunerated as an executive position with oversight of quality assurance for professional experience students in their Hub and Spoke schools.
2. The Professional Experience Coordinators have the opportunity to work in university Initial Teacher Education programs as lecturers, tutors and be involved in course development and reviews.
3. Initial Teacher Education Providers and Hub Schools agree on and develop a standardised Professional Experience Handbook with core elements common to all Initial Teacher Education Providers and schools across NSW.
4. The state-wide Professional Experience Coordinator Network meetings continue once per term to further develop consistent practices across the state that align with DoE strategies.

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8 Appendices

Appendix A

PEXC Evaluation: PEX Coordinator questions

- » How long have you been teaching for, and what types of schools have you worked in?
- » How long you have been in the PEXC role?
- » Before you were a PEXC, were you involved in practicum mentoring or supervision? Do you draw on these experiences in your current role?
- » Did your own experience of being a practicum student influence how you approach the PEXC role?
- » What are the positive elements of the PEXC role?
- » Which elements of the role do you find challenging in terms of the in-school dimension?
- » Which elements of the role work well in terms of the university partnerships and which areas might benefit from some consideration?
- » Have you seen any significant changes over the last 5 years regarding prac students, their expectations, or the university's expectations of prac students, or technology?
- » Have you studied further beyond your teacher-training period, this could be any form of training or postgrad study?
- » Do you feel the use of the AITSL teaching standards is beneficial for your role?

Appendix B

PEXC Evaluation: interview questions for university coordinators

- » What are the positive elements of the PEXC role for the school, the prac' students or yourself?
- » Which elements of the role work well in terms of the university partnerships and which areas might benefit from some consideration?
- » Which elements of the role do you find challenging in terms of the school-facing dimension?
- » Would you say the role has changed much in the time you've been involved? Those changes can be within the school in terms of technology, in terms of practicum student expectation or the school-university partnership?
- » Do you feel the use of teaching standards is beneficial for your role? Would you say it gives you a helpful "language" to communicate with school mentors, prac' students and university PEX directors?
- » Do you have a sense that schooling is changing to accommodate a better connection to university and do you feel you have a role to play in that?
- » How do you understand your role as a Professional Experience Director &/ or WIL PEX Professional Staff?

- » What are the main challenges and issues you are dealing with right now in your role as a Professional Experience Director &/or WIL PEX Professional Staff?
- » What tells you that these are important challenges and issues?
- » What have you prioritised in sorting through these challenges and issues?
- » What evidence have you used to weigh up this issue?
- » What is the first action you took or want to take?
- » What will be the result of this course of action?

Appendix C

PEXC Evaluation: principal interview questions

- » What are the current arrangements for the PEX Coordinator role in your school?
- » Why have you set up the role as you have (time allocation, split role etc).
- » What have been the benefits of setting up the role as you have?
- » What did you initially anticipate the role of the PEX Coordinator would be?
- » To what extent have those early ideas come to fruition?
- » Has this modified over time?
- » In which ways have these changes been incorporated into the role as a result?
- » What decision-making was behind the choice of the person for the PEXC role?
- » What types of qualities and capabilities do they need to be successful in the role?
- » Could the PEX Hub initiative be run as efficiently, effectively, or as meaningfully without a dedicated PEXC?
- » Without the funded role, to what extent could the same initiatives be run?
- » How would principals manage and develop the quality of professional experience in an ongoing way without the role?
- » Can you describe if there a difference when the role is undertaken as part of an A/P or Deputy's role?
- » Do you see the benefit of connecting the skills and attributes of the PEXC role to the Highly accomplished and Lead Teacher credentials? In which ways could the opportunities in both areas be integrated?
- » To what extent has the PEXC role offered the chance to form stronger and more meaningful relationships between your school and the university partner?
- » Has there been benefit (in terms of this relationship) that would be difficult to replicate without the PEXC role?