

HIGHER LEVELS ACCREDITATION... SO MUCH MORE THAN A FANCY BIT OF PAPER

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Abby Saleh explains why accreditation at Highly Accomplished of Lead Teacher (HALT) level is something that expert teachers consider and gives some practical advice to those teachers who are seeking such accreditation.

'I do not need a fancy bit of paper to tell me that I'm a great teacher', is the rhetoric used by those who are disgruntled by the rigour and complexity of the higher levels accreditation process in NSW. The fact is, in essence, that's completely true.

Great teachers are very easily identifiable: for their passion and skill exudes. Indeed, there are vast numbers of highly expert practitioners throughout the NSW education system who do not need, nor require, the official recognition of achieving the Highly Accomplished or Lead Teacher (HALT) accreditation status to maximise their impact. Their reputations precede them. Based on my personal experience, however, the recognition of the HALT accreditation status does further empower some to reap greater benefits for their students and colleagues. It has been my experience that the process of achieving HALT accreditation, and the benefits associated with it, far outweigh the perceived burdens of the process, and overwhelmingly helps schools, teachers and students. The process and benefits further empower teachers to continue to lead and build the capacity and efficacy of colleagues within their schools, networks, and the system in general. After all, is it not the moral purpose of teachers to impact positively on the lives of as many students as possible?

HALT accreditation is all about recognising and esteeming exceptional teachers. It is a cross-sectoral, consistent, valid and reliable appraisal of teacher expertise which is strengthened by the use of external assessors and moderation by NESAs. HALT accreditation is to ensure that there are structures in place for teachers who excel, to be identified, without needing to leave the classroom, and be remunerated for their expertise. It creates a career pathway in which teachers can reach the heights of the profession without

necessarily seeking promotion. It validates teacher practice, consequently increasing self-efficacy and confidence. It raises the status of teachers. It positions teachers as lead learners - those who demonstrate that learning is never finished and is an ongoing process of discovery, evaluation and reflection and those who produce the right environment for others to grow and learn. This is evidenced by the Gonski report *Through Growth to Achievement* (2018) which found that "Certification of Highly Accomplished and Lead levels of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers recognises and promotes the development of collaborative learning professionals who strive to continually reflect upon and improve their practice and that of their colleagues. Such acknowledgement can play a key role in keeping excellent teachers working with students and helping to improve colleagues' pedagogical practices".

As an accredited HALT, I have observed and experienced firsthand how the process (and subsequent certification) empowers teachers to maximise learning outcomes for students in their immediate classroom. This is because it facilitates engagement in a personalised, self-paced and authentic process to deeply reflect on, and refine, practice. It also expands a teacher's sphere of influence, so that the beneficiaries of their expertise extend across grades, schools and even into the wider education community. As teachers, there is no greater feeling than knowing that one's hard work is having a positive impact on students' learning and wellbeing outcomes beyond their immediate classroom.

The HALT accreditation process is often regarded as a powerful means of professional development (few accredited HALTs would disagree). Engaging in the process plunges one into a deep cycle of authentic self-reflection upon one's practice against the Australian

Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) in an effort to evidence and align one's practice to either the Highly Accomplished or Lead Teacher stage of the APST. In doing so, candidates are also well positioned to identify areas to refine, which is why the APST make an excellent reflection tool. For instance, when collecting evidence for accreditation, a candidate may notice that they are unable to illustrate a particular standard descriptor. Accordingly, the candidate may take deliberate actions to ensure that that missing aspect is evident in their practice.

HALT accreditation is all about practice and impact. Engaging in the process refines teachers' capacity to measure their impact. John Hattie's *Visible Learning Mindframes* (2014) posits that effective teachers regularly evaluate their impact on student learning and view the extent of that impact as reflective of the power of their teaching. They see assessment as informing impact and next steps.

Once a teacher's practice has been recognised (a recognition which is portable across sectors and states) their confidence and credibility is raised. They become sort after by their colleagues, and the wider education community, because there is little doubt about their professionalism and expertise. They are afforded opportunities to represent the profession on a multitude of platforms (as I have been fortunate to have experienced). Accreditation is not about the accolades; it is about the satisfaction that one feels when one's work and expertise are validated and acknowledged. Accreditation expands teachers' spheres of influence.

Thus, in order to maintain a high standard of candidature it stands to reason that the process must be rigorous, multifaceted and complex.

So how does one know if one is HALT material? The answer lies in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST or the Standards). If 'language' is a system of communication used by a particular country or community, then the APST is the language of teachers, for they articulate the behaviours and practice that teachers need to demonstrate across the four distinct teaching career stages (Graduate, Proficient,

Highly Accomplished and Lead). They act as a guide to illustrate how teacher expertise is developed. They provide a common vernacular to better understand, and share, what makes an excellent teacher and leader. The Standards are the vehicle which ensures consistent, fair and accountable performance and accreditation processes for all teachers, no matter which stage of their career they are in. But, most importantly, the APST direct and steer the direction of teacher and educational leader professional growth and development.

It is very important to distinguish between an expert teacher (one whose practice aligns with the higher levels of the APST - HALTs) and an experienced teacher. The most important difference is impact! Expert teachers impact student learning and well-being outcomes, this is not always the case for experienced teachers. Expert teachers present content in more engaging ways applying evidence-based strategies and sharing these with colleagues. They maintain high expectations of themselves and of their students. They view student growth as a reflection of their teaching. Expert teachers are lifelong learners. They recognise that teaching is not a constrained skill. They not only model and lead best practice, but also regularly refine their own practice. They create engaging and inspiring learning environments for their students and colleagues. Overall, it is important to note that teachers may be 'expert' without being highly experienced, but experience does not always equate to expertise.

So, what exactly is required to become a certified Highly Accomplished or Lead Teacher? Firstly, it is important to note that HALT accreditation is a voluntary process and that it is not a promotion. It is a recognition of expertise for those who seek it. In NSW, the process requires candidates to submit a series of current documentary evidence which demonstrates their practice and impact in each of the thirty-seven standard descriptors at the chosen career stage of the APST. Candidates must also identify referees to attest to their claims and be observed by colleagues and school leaders, as well as an external assessor assigned by NESA. Those seeking Lead level accreditation must also design and deliver a six month 'Lead Project' which is aligned to school priorities. It should also be noted that there is no

hierarchy in the Higher levels of Accreditation. Both the Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher levels are considered 'Higher Levels'. The difference lies in the sphere of influence that a teacher's practice exhibits.

Clearly, the accreditation process is thorough and multifaceted. Aspiring HALTs will encounter enablers and barriers in pursuing higher levels accreditation. The first, and most important, enabler is commitment to the process. Once a candidate starts to truly understand the benefits of accreditation and decides to pursue it, they need to commit whole heartedly to it. Setting time bound goals and milestones and celebrating small steps and achievements is an effective strategy.

Another enabler is the principal/director and/or leadership team. It would be ideal to have the support of school leaders, at least their emotional support. They can play a pivotal role in 'clearing the path' and reducing the impact of potential barriers. Having an accreditation mentor, or critical friend, would greatly boost chances of success. Buddying up with another person pursuing accreditation would be of immense benefit. It would be highly beneficial for candidates to attach themselves to an accreditation network (there are many around now) and to reach out to personnel (such as Department of Education [DoE] Teacher Quality Advisors or NESAs teacher accreditation officers) to answer questions (and there will be many) or provide feedback/ feedforward.

One must maintain a positive mindset and remember that the submission is a persuasive piece which leaves no doubt about one's practice at one's chosen career stage. Candidates must regularly seek opportunities to demonstrate their skills, not just because they are pursuing accreditation, but because that is what leaders do.

Naturally, just as there are enablers to pursuing and achieving HALT accreditation, there are also potential barriers or challenges.

The most pertinent is time! Teaching is already a time-consuming career which absorbs unnatural percentages of the day. HALT accreditation requires candidates to gather, collate and annotate evidence of practice as part of a submission. This is obviously added work that teachers must complete and, in a time-poor profession

such as teaching, this is indeed a barrier. In saying that, teachers working at the HALT level should find it relatively easy to gather evidence, as the standards and their descriptors should be reflected in their day-to-day practice. It then becomes just a matter of organising and annotating the evidence and complying with other aspects of the accreditation process (such as observations and referees).

Just as principals/ school leaders can be enablers, they may also be blockers, potentially unsupportive of a candidate's aspirations due to their limited knowledge of the process or professional conflict.

Another barrier is poor knowledge of the process and what constitutes expertise. Aspiring HALTs may find it difficult to gather evidence which is linked to specific subject areas (such as the various literacy/numeracy standard descriptors). And the barrier which can be the most crippling – self-doubt!

MY TOP 10 ENABLING TIPS INCLUDE

1. Be immersed in the Standards. Candidates need to be very intimately familiar with each of the standard descriptors. Unpack the verbs and enact them. Use their language.
2. Become familiar with the accreditation policies and procedures (NESAs and DoE).
3. Seek a buddy or support person. They will act as a critical friend, giving advice and feedback (especially if they have been accredited at the higher levels themselves). They may also support in reading and editing annotations.
4. Talk to colleagues about the accreditation journey, it need not, and should not, be a secret, as they will be attesting to your expertise.
5. Set time limits, goals and milestones.
6. Don't be shy to ask questions.
7. Back up work. Use a cloud-based storage to ensure work is not lost and kept safe.
8. Use tracking and monitoring tools and documents to ensure all standard descriptors are covered and the various requirements have been met.
9. Regularly refer to the Evidence Guides and other support materials. And finally...
10. Reflect, reflect, and reflect even more!

Clearly, HALT accreditation has great benefits for teachers and the whole school community. Only time will reveal the reasons (if any) why passionate, inspired, expert teachers should not seek higher levels accreditation.

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ABOUT ABBEY SALEH

Abby Saleh is an Accredited Highly Accomplished Teacher, currently working as a Curriculum and Instruction Leader at Chester Hill North PS. Over the past 25 years, Abby has worked in both the independent and public education sectors in Sydney's South Western Suburbs. Abby's pedagogical interests are in EAL/D education and building teacher capacity. She has held positions in the corporate arm of the Department of Education as well as various network-based consultancy roles in Refugee and EAL/D education – drawing on her personal experiences as a former refugee. Abby has had work published by AITSL and the DoE SCAN Journal. She advocates for the profession widely through conference presentations and workshops including with the Gonski Institute and NSWTF Centre for Professional Learning. Her mantra reflects John Dana's notion of 'Who dares to teach must never cease to learn'.