

1. Key areas or issues for future research in each field or sector

Historical and recent national teacher workforce data consistently identify workload, intensification of work, and work–life imbalance as primary contributors to attrition, early-career burnout, and reduced professional sustainability. While these trends are well documented descriptively, there remains a significant gap in explanatory research.

- Link to current ATWD: <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/australian-teacher-workforce-data/atwd-reports/national-trends-teacher-workforce-jun2025>
- Link to past report (p.107): https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/atwd/national-teacher-workforce-char-report.pdf?sfvrsn=9b7fa03c_4

Future research should therefore move beyond *what* teachers experience to examine *why* and *how* these conditions shape teachers’ professional thinking, decision-making, practices, and identities over time. In particular, there is a need to investigate:

1. The causal influences and structural conditions (e.g. policy demands, accountability regimes, organisational cultures, labour conditions) that shape how teachers interpret their work
2. How teachers’ internal conversations, reflexivity, and sense-making mediate responses to workload pressures and competing professional expectations (what works, what doesn’t work)
3. The interaction between psychological, physiological, and relational dimensions of stress and teachers’ professional agency, commitment, and retention

Research that adopts theoretically informed approaches, such as Margaret Archer’s Theory of Reflexivity, capable of accounting for both structure and agency is essential if workforce challenges are to be addressed in meaningful and sustainable ways.

- Link to one example of Archer’s Theory of Reflexivity in research: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/103589/3/103589.pdf>

Margaret Archer’s Theory of Reflexivity enhances research outcomes by providing a robust framework for explaining how individuals actively interpret, negotiate, and respond to structural and cultural conditions. Rather than treating teacher behaviour as a direct outcome of policy or context, the theory foregrounds teachers’ internal conversations and reflexive processes as key mediators between external demands (such as workload and accountability pressures) and professional action. This enables research to move beyond description to identify underlying causal mechanisms, producing more explanatory, transferable, and policy-relevant findings that can inform sustainable workforce and system-level change.

2. Steps to drive short-term gains and long-term advancement

Short-term gains

In the short term, targeted and well-resourced research initiatives are needed to address urgent workforce concerns. This includes:

- Dedicated funding for empirical and mixed-methods research that explicitly investigates workload, work–life balance, and professional sustainability as causal issues, not merely correlational trends
- Support for theoretically grounded studies that explore how teachers think about, navigate, and respond to the conditions of their work
- Prioritising research partnerships between universities, systems, and schools to ensure findings are contextually grounded and directly translatable to practice

Such investment would generate timely evidence to inform policy, leadership practices, and system-level interventions.

Long-term advancement

Long-term progress requires a preventative and capacity-building approach embedded across the profession. This includes:

- Incorporating self-awareness, reflexivity, and professional identity work as core components of Initial Teacher Education (ITE), rather than optional or peripheral content
- Explicit attention to the physiological and psychological impacts of sustained stress, including how these affect judgement, relationships, and professional agency
- Making these capabilities mandatory, reinforced, and developmentally sequenced across career stages, particularly within leadership preparation and accreditation
- Ensuring such practices are continuously revisited, visibly modelled, and normalised within schools through professional learning, policy messaging, and everyday organisational practices

Over time, this approach supports teachers not only to cope with complexity, but to critically interpret, navigate, and reshape their professional conditions.

3. Mechanisms most effective for addressing the aims of the Decadal Plan

To achieve the aims of the Decadal Plan, mechanisms must prioritise leadership, coherence, and accountability across research, policy, and practice. In particular:

- Appointing and supporting highly qualified, research-literate leaders who can bridge evidence, theory, and system priorities
- Ensuring leaders are not only implementers of policy, but active models of reflexive, sustainable professional practice

- Embedding clear accountability structures that link research findings to policy decisions, leadership expectations, and workforce wellbeing outcomes
- Sustaining long-term investment in people and institutions capable of maintaining momentum beyond short funding cycles

Without strong leadership and accountability, even well-designed research risks remaining disconnected from the everyday realities of schools.