This is it folks, over the top! How do we lead from the frontline in the changing VET environment? What skills and capabilities do our frontline VET educational leaders require?

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Abstract

Our 2011 research ‘Paths to Promotion’ found that Head Teachers in TAFE NSW valued their positions which mixed teaching and leadership. They said that the most important aspects of their role were educational leadership, section management, increasing quality in teaching, working with industry and other providers, and supporting innovative teaching and learning practices. They valued the tertiary education qualifications they held. However, they also said they needed to further develop their skills and capabilities so that they could be part of the future direction of TAFE. They needed to develop their financial management skills, technological skills, entrepreneurial skills and leadership skills.

Given the current focus on professional development of VET practitioners/professionals and the consideration of a national VET professional association, the time is right to find out what is happening in the rest of the country. This research paper will tap into similar positions in TAFE Institutes in the other states and territories, to find out their views. How do they manage educational, management and leadership roles? What qualifications do they have? What skills and capabilities do they think they need for their roles in a changing VET sector? What qualifications do they believe they need to effectively undertake their jobs in the future, and how can they gain such qualifications? This research has the opportunity to impact on current policy development around capabilities of the VET sector, and to influence funding allocation for professional educational leadership skills development.

Introduction

Comparing TAFE educational positions across Australia is not an easy exercise. Not only are industrial instruments and names different, but TAFE Institutes are structured quite differently meaning that educational leadership and management roles are divided amongst different roles. We focused on Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and the ACT, but were only able to obtain small samples in most of these areas. The sample in Victoria was the largest, and the most useful, even though roles varied from Institute to Institute.

What we did find though was that there appeared to be positions carrying out educational leadership roles in all TAFE Institutes where we made contact, and that these educational leadership roles were closely aligned with teaching sections or teams of TAFE teachers or lecturers. Consequently these were the positions we focused on for our comparisons with Head Teachers in TAFE NSW. On the other hand, educational management and administrative functions were in many cases quite clearly separated from educational delivery, unlike NSW, and these positions were not generally included in our study. At times there appeared to be specialist positions established in some TAFE Institutes to carry out educational administrative work that was part of the Head Teacher role in NSW, such as
work related to enrolment of students, industry liaison and care of specialist groups, such as apprentices or VET in schools students.

Overall the findings were very similar from our study of Head Teachers in NSW, and those involved in our study also indicated the very high workload involved with frontline educational leadership roles in TAFE, and the increasing demands that the ever-changing VET sector placed on them.

Research Method

Our research is based on study of the industrial Awards and/or Enterprise Agreements that apply in the various states and territories, in relation to roles and functions, including qualifications and expected skills and capabilities. We also interviewed union officials, professional development experts, managers and teachers/lecturers holding these educational leadership positions. Whilst the sample was quite small in each of the states and territories, the information provided covered the general requirements relating to these important educational positions, allowing us to draw some critical conclusions around skills and capabilities.

What others have said!

Our original paper referred to the work of Stephen Black and others in looking specifically at TAFE NSW Head Teachers and their roles. It is also apparent that recognition of the important effect that good educational leadership can have in the VET sector, is driving further professional development and networking. We just want to refer to two specific pieces of research here: the NCVER Research Approaches for sustaining and building management and leadership capability in VET providers (Callan, Mitchell, Clayton and Smith 2007) and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) working paper Exploring leadership in vocational education and training (2011).

The CEDEFOP report focused on both qualifications for VET leaders, and the skills and capabilities they needed. Whilst the actual level of management is not always clear, some of the messages relate strongly to our findings in Australia. CEDEFOP found that VET leadership positions in the countries surveyed carry formal qualification requirements, and that such requirements usually include an expectation of completed formal higher education and often work experience. They also found that continuing professional development for VET leaders is compulsory in about half the countries surveyed.

In a further survey they found a set of unique characteristics of VET leadership in the countries surveyed, including the strong connection between VET and the world of work which was a main factor in distinguishing VET leaders. They picked up the changing nature of work and the importance of VET leaders to steer the organisation so that it responds appropriately, as well as having the ability to hire, train and accommodate staff with diverse qualifications and work tasks. The combined role of VET leaders was commented on, indicating they required vocational and pedagogical skills and qualifications. Flexibility and innovation were noted as important requirements, as well as being able to demonstrate clear strategic goals, and manage financial resources, data and people.
The need to be able to work with industry and community partners was noted, as well as being strongly involved in quality assurance. VET leaders needed to stay up-to-date and ensure that their staff did too.

The NCVER report in 2007 showed that VET providers were aware of the need to develop their leadership. The capabilities of VET leaders varied depending on the level of the leader, but included those related to communicating a vision for the organisation, building successful teams, sound strategic thinking and planning skills, and inspiring staff to make a commitment to change.

The report also commented that existing leadership programs were often fragmentary and short-term, a comment shared by VET educational leaders we spoke to. The need for more support for learning on the job and projects that bring staff together, has also been noted by participants in our research.

Findings and discussion

The findings are organised according to the specific state or territory, with an initial overview of the findings from our previous research in NSW.

**NSW**

In our research in 2010 and 2011, we surveyed TAFE teachers and Head Teachers in NSW to get their opinions about how well they felt they were prepared for the changing world of the VET workplace and what skills and capabilities they needed to keep up.

Our paper in 2010 “Raising the Bar on VET Teacher Education Qualifications”, found that broadly the concerns of teachers fell into two areas – increasing reliance on technology and policy change. The creep of technology into workplaces is ubiquitous and like many other workers, teachers felt they were not keeping pace with new systems and needed training. Many believed that the changes were for change sake and were not making their job easier. This may be proved wrong when the systems are matured and skills increased in teachers.

Head teachers in this survey had a third area of concern – educational leadership. While leadership had always been a part of their role, the changing environment had left them little time to spend in this vital area and many felt swamped by “administrivia” from both new systems and the implementation of new policy decisions. This outcome led us to concentrate on the area of educational leadership in our 2011 research “Paths to Promotion”.

In “Paths to Promotion” we found that Head Teachers in TAFE NSW considered Educational Leadership the most important of their roles followed by Section management, teaching quality, working with industry and supporting innovative teaching. They were concerned though that other areas, like business administration and budgeting, are encroaching on this important role. They understood that the VET environment was changing and most did not feel adequately skilled to meet the new demands. Skills in the area of financial management and new technologies were identified.
There was a strong belief that university level qualifications “give underpinning theory and framework but the Head Teacher role is very specific to TAFE administration. It also requires political judgement and people management skills which are not tight in these courses.” Overall, the view appeared to be that the educational qualifications they had were good for teaching but not for administration, management or leadership.

The Head Teachers surveyed indicated that they needed to undertake a series of courses that included finance and technological skills, entrepreneurial and leadership skills. These are not covered in entry level qualifications like the Certificate IV and Diploma TAA and TAE. There was strong support for many different formats for continuing leadership development including:

- Formal qualifications
- Short courses and skill sets
- Programs and events
- Conferences
- Networks and communities of practice
- Professional associations
- Coaching and mentoring from others, including shadowing, secondments and staff rotations.

There were several courses mentioned that Head Teachers believed could be helpful including Certificate IV Frontline Management, Graduate Diploma of Leadership, Masters in Leadership and Management.

Many respondents felt satisfied with their job as it gave them the mix of leadership and teaching which they desired. However they were frustrated that the job had changed significantly of recent years with no consideration for the added demands.

**South Australia**

Since 1992 there have been separate teaching and management streams in TAFE South Australia, when a Senior Lecturer existed. However, by and large Educational Managers are recruited from the ranks of lecturers, but may come directly from industry or a university. They do not have a teaching role. However, the Principal Lecturer classifications in the current Award/Agreement are intended to be educational only leadership positions.

Principal Lecturers have the main responsibility for leading a team, including the part-time instructors, like their NSW counterparts. The industrial conditions around their leadership roles are not as clearly defined as NSW Head Teachers, with their teaching loads being more flexible. The Award states that Lecturers Level 8 have a 25% reduction of required contact hours per week for educational leadership duties where applicable, and positions are created on the basis of demonstrated need. They are expected to provide a pedagogical role, leading a delivery team in a diverse range of learning environments.

Lecturers at Levels 7 and 8 are filled by merit selection. For both these classifications, the Award states that they “are highly skilled educational leaders who have acknowledged excellence in academic leadership and developing strategic directions”. They are both
expected to hold a Bachelor of Education (Adult, Vocational and Workplace Learning), which is the South Australian qualification, or educational qualifications deemed equivalent by the Classification Committee and qualifications in their field of expertise.

Some of the functions required of a Lecturer Level 8 in their focus on leadership and qualitative improvement in the educational program, are:
* leading a delivery team
* researching, developing and evaluating delivery and assessment procedures
* developing lecturing staff and supporting their ongoing PD
* providing leadership in program planning
* providing educational leadership and vocational leadership in the Institute and across TAFE SA system

In discussions with those who had held such positions, it was acknowledged that pressures on funding, expansion in casualisation and an increased administrative function made the positions difficult and often responsive to crises and demands rather than planned educational leadership. Skills and capabilities needed were once again similar to those required of TAFE NSW Head Teachers, both in the skills needed to keep up with technologies and good people management and consultation skills.

Western Australia

A similar process occurred in TAFE WA in 1996, when teaching and management roles were separated. In the Lecturing stream, release of Principal Lecturers and even Advanced Skills Lecturers from teaching to undertake leadership roles are generally local decisions at a district or college level. The minimum qualifications for these positions, as stated in the industrial agreement, are:
* higher teaching qualification (Bachelor’s Degree, Graduate Dip, Masters)
* vocational qualification
* any required license or registration necessary to perform the position

For each of the Advanced Skills Lecturer positions, there is recognition of a leadership role. The role of the Principal Lecturer states: “The P/L is a teaching position and is expected to provide college or system wide educational leadership in his/her area of expertise. The P/L has industrial leadership responsibilities, which relate directly to the education process, including curriculum, teaching initiatives and industry liaison”. The essential selection criteria also provides further advice on the skills and capabilities of those occupying these roles, when it is stated that Principal Lecturers are expected to:
* demonstrate educational leadership in the development and implementation of curriculum across program areas
* demonstrate significant leadership in professional practice in teaching methodology, student assessment, program evaluation and educational innovation
* maintain close liaison with industry, professional and other appropriate groups
* promulgate advice and information in current trends in the area
* represent the area on college state and interstate committees and working groups

Queensland
In Queensland there is a separation of educational managers and administrative managers. Those who occupy a position of Program Manager or Educational Manager are expected to have a teaching qualification. There is a separate Administrative Officer salary scale. The role of the educational manager can include managing delivery of a team, including staffing and timetables. Whether they also teach can be up for local negotiations, but it was felt that they should be involved in delivery as it made for better management.

There is also an educational position of leading vocational teacher, which is a Step 7 of the certified agreement salary scale. To take on such a position, teachers have to sign to accept one or more additional duties. These duties will be negotiated between teams and managers, and can include such duties as leadership in teaching practice, team leadership, mentoring, performance planning and review, industry liaison work, international projects or business, functional responsibility (financial or staffing), marketing or programming.

A recent piece of research undertaken for NCVER by Jennifer Davids of Southbank Institute of Technology, entitled *Have a heart: challenges for lead vocational teachers in the changing VET landscape* (2011), outlines some of the problems being faced by lead vocational teachers. She makes the point that “... teacher leadership in TAFE Queensland suffers a number of limitations, largely because the leadership roles remain unofficial.” In her study, lead vocational teachers cited a number of areas where they felt they could be particularly effective. These included induction, mentoring and coaching of new staff, business development, course coordination, management and development, acting as a conduit between management and teaching teams, and management of AQTF.

One participant is quoted as saying: “There is erosion of knowledge that would help sell the business. Any lead vocational teacher is a better seller of the course because of their knowledge than a person with a degree in marketing. We were employed with industry knowledge and industry links, but those links have faded because we are not given time to maintain them.” It is interesting that this study finishes by reflecting on the need for career pathways for these lead vocational teachers who want a further career progression, but want to remain teachers with a combined role.

**ACT**

Educational Managers (Teacher Band 2) are also part of the system at the Canberra Institute of Technology in the ACT. For people occupying these positions, as well as those at Teacher Band 1.7, 1.8, Advanced Skills Teachers, Senior Teaching Post, Teacher Band 3 and Senior Educational Project Officer, qualification requirements are mandatory. Educational Managers are required to hold an Advanced Diploma in Adult Vocational Education (or equivalent) together with a Training and Assessment Certificate IV level qualification (such as a TAE40110 or equivalent). A bachelor degree in Education, Management or a relevant industry specialisation is desirable. All of these positions are recognised as educational positions and appropriate educational qualifications are necessary. For Teachers Band 2, 3 and Senior Educational Project Officers, a university degree is considered desirable either in education or management or industry specialisation, recognising the management and industry focus of these roles.
Educational Managers manage some program areas, overseeing teaching and technical staff as well as students. Most come up through the teaching ranks and generally have a teaching role which is monitored through the Enterprise Agreement. Like their counterparts in NSW, the issues of workload is critical, with the number of changes occurring in the VET sector and the increasing number of bureaucratic systems around curriculum, Training Packages and programs. CIT used to provide training sessions on being a manager in the VET sector, but not at this time. There is a Band 2 network that has monthly meetings, and this is focussed on the role of these Educational Managers. In relation to skills and capabilities, it was felt that business management skills would be very useful especially given increasing requirements to gain commercial business.

Victoria

In Victoria, the classification structure of the Enterprise Agreement attempts to recognise the varied roles required of the Senior Educator. There are four streams: teaching stream, industry consultancy stream, curriculum and project design stream, and management stream. There are three levels for each of these streams. They may supervise an organisational unit or perform high level specialist educational functions, so the roles vary across the TAFE Institutes and areas.

The industrial agreement states the requirements of people occupying these roles, under:
* typical functions including managing a team of staff, coordinating and supervising resources, managing design and development of training, producing tenders, applying counselling skills, undertaking action based research, developing self-paced learning materials and assessment systems, and providing specialist skills within the Institute and wider community
* judgement, problem solving, accountability and extent of authority
* organisational relationship and impact, including providing professional advice and assistance to teaching staff and Institute clients
* specialist skills and knowledge

In terms of the skills and capabilities expected of Senior Educators, this makes an interesting list:
* knowledge of conflict resolution skills
* knowledge of negotiation strategies
* demonstrated highly developed teaching skills
* extensive knowledge and demonstrated skill of at least one teaching area
* demonstrated understanding of the application of the full range of teaching methodologies, techniques and standards appropriate to subject areas within management/leadership role
* keep abreast of and advise on current and emerging education trends
* develop effective processes for the evaluation and validation of programs, systems and structures within or external to TAFE
* develop and maintain quality control systems
* apply research, analytical and innovative skills
* apply extensive knowledge and experience in specialist expertise area/s
In terms of qualifications, the agreement states that an employee shall not be eligible for promotion or appointment as a Senior Educator unless they are fully qualified which includes a course of teacher training accredited at diploma (AQF level 5) which includes supervised teaching practice and studies in teaching methodology or equivalent.

We interviewed a range of Senior Educators in Victoria and thank the TAFE Development Centre for their assistance. The following represent the views and experience of these Senior Educators and others:

* No 1 SE was in a coordination role in a teaching section, supervising around 30 teachers. He had no teaching role at this time. He had a Diploma and an undergraduate degree and was undertaking a Masters in Education, and agreed that it was important for Senior Educators to continue learning and to be supported by their Institutes to do so. He felt his current studies assisted him in understanding the current changes in VET, especially around Training Packages, and found it was useful to know what was happening across Australia. He believed that if Senior Educators were to help develop their teachers then they needed to be further ahead of the game.

* No 2 SE had been in charge of a college-wide area, and responsible for HR and strategic plans. He had had a teaching role as well. Whilst he had a management qualification on top of his educational qualifications, he felt that as a Senior Educator he needed project management and financial management skills. He acknowledged that many Senior Educators found themselves in roles where they needed further skills and qualifications, such as people management, and that TAFE Institutes should target far more of their PD budgets to supporting those at the frontline.

* No 3 SE managed a number of teaching areas within a department. Her role included responsibility for teachers, students and quality. She believed that all Senior Educators should have educational degrees as she did, as they needed to understand the principles of pedagogy. Other skills were also required in counselling and welfare. However, one of the problems was lack of time to undertake additional qualifications.

* No 4 SE managed a program area and had a small teaching load. She also had the relevant educational and industry qualifications and was undertaking a Masters in Educational Management. Unfortunately this appeared to be more schools focused than VET. She also spoke highly of a program that had been operating in the Institute aimed at developing management skills in the workplace, which allowed for personalised learning and group sessions. Unfortunately as with many such programs, funding had not been ongoing. She believed that the human factor was the most challenging part of the role, trying to bring the teachers along with you, but that she would also benefit from developing her financial management skills.

* No 5 SE also managed a teaching section, where the two Senior Educators had separate roles in teaching and learning, and in operations. He felt he had most of the skills and capabilities he needed in his current role, with his educational and vocational qualifications, but acknowledged that additional skills in leadership and technology would
be good. He thought that it could be quite challenging for a teacher to move from being a ‘tradie’ to being a manager in what was becoming a corporate world.

* No 6 SE managed a number of areas within a Department, which involved a lot of delivery in the workplace and RPL. There was also a strong commercial bent to the role. He had both educational and vocational qualifications, and because he had worked in his own business felt he had many of the management skills he needed for this role, but felt this might not be the case for all Senior Educators. One of the biggest challenges for him was going to be in the international area, and a tertiary course in this area could be beneficial.

* No 7 SE had a wide scope of responsibilities in managing a section and VET in Schools programs. She had educational and vocational qualifications, and had undertaken further study in the management areas. She felt the challenge for many Senior Educators was in managing the TAFE people, and that leadership attributes were critical. She felt it would be great to be given time on the job to update both her leadership and vocational skills as it would enrich her role. She found networking with other Senior Educators most useful.

* No 8 SE co-ordinated a teaching area. She had educational and vocational qualifications and was undertaking a degree in management. Through this she was able to gain insights into current philosophies driving educational change. She also had a teaching role, and felt that there were challenges in the Senior Educator role in dealing with people. Skills to deal with change management would be useful, as well as further expertise in online learning. She felt that one of the challenges for TAFE teachers was whether to focus on their educational or industry qualifications, and which it was most critical to update.

* No 9 SE managed a centre and teaching programs across a number of campuses. She co-ordinated the work of many sessional teachers and felt that could be one of the main challenges for a Senior Educator in communicating with and updating and upskilling sessional staff. She felt Senior Educators needed to be expert communicators. She had a number of educational qualifications and university qualifications, and felt that specific training in management and budgeting would now be useful. She felt the employer had to also show commitment to support and upgrade the qualifications of staff.

* No 10 SE said that most Senior Educators were asked to have multiple roles and whilst many had strong educational qualifications, not many had leadership or management qualifications. A business leadership focus was now needed in this job.

Conclusions and options

Despite the different titles and responsibilities, our research so far indicates that TAFE frontline educational leaders across the country share the same concerns about their roles, and similar views on the skills and capabilities they need. There was overall strong support for a continued teaching or close educational part of the role from all of those interviewed, and some exasperation where there had been attempts to impose generic management and/or leadership.
TAFE Senior Educators/Educational Managers/Principal Lecturers and so on, recognised the value of their educational qualifications and the majority supported the need for university level qualifications. They also indicated the additional skills they needed for their current jobs, and like TAFE NSW Head Teachers gave a range of answers but those that focused on management aspects of their role, and also those that would meet the needs of the changing VET sector. There was support for the ability and time to gain post graduate qualifications, and also to be able to participate in programs in the workplace focused on their particular roles and enabling them to mix with their peers.

There was strong support for networking opportunities for educational staff in these frontline leadership roles in TAFE. One of the models suggested could follow the Emerging Leaders programs set up by TAFE Directors Australia at their conference in 2010. This was extended in 2011 to include ongoing networking opportunities and a structured professional learning program. The skill and knowledge challenges identified for Emerging Leaders included commercial acumen and an outcomes-focused orientation, driving and managing change, educational management, ensuring quality business processes, and strategic thinking and risk management.

The proposed professional development program would include: market engagement, sustainable industry partnerships, entrepreneurial cultures, innovation, influencing change, building a capable workforce, building resilience, strategy, systems thinking, LEAN systems, leading educational excellence for better learner outcomes, educational pathways, and social inclusion. Whilst TDA may have seen such a program focused on senior and middle managers, such a program, with a few changes, would be most appropriate for TAFE Head Teachers/Educational Managers/Senior Educators and so on. It would be good to see this investment in supporting our frontline educational leaders to further develop their skills and capabilities for their current challenging roles and for future careers in TAFE.
References

