

Professional Development: What Casual TAFE Teachers Want

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Abstract

This paper discusses research into what casual teachers working in one large TAFE institute want in relation to professional development. Empirical evidence gathered through sixty three questionnaires and interviews with three casual teachers will be presented. Against a background of ongoing socio-economic change, the Australian TAFE system must continue to provide quality education and training to meet the demands of a globalised economy and a changing workforce. This is taking place in the context of a TAFE teacher workforce made up of a large proportion of casual workers. At the same time as TAFE is being confronted by increased expectations in relation to teaching and learning practice (Guthrie, Perkins, & Nguyen 2006; Darwin 2004) the increasingly casual TAFE teacher workforce are less likely than permanent staff to access professional development related to VET pedagogy (Guthrie, Perkins, & Nguyen 2006). While anecdotal evidence abounds as to why casual TAFE teachers are less likely to undertake professional development in relation to their teaching role, this research seeks to provide an insight into the issue from the perspective of casual teachers.

Introduction

Casual teachers currently make up a large proportion of the TAFE teacher workforce. While the proportion varies across Australia, the percentage of TAFE teachers employed casually is more than fifty percent in all states, and much higher than this in some states (Forward, 2007a; NCVER 2004). This casualisation of the TAFE teacher workforce is occurring against a background of workforce change, demographic change, an increasingly globalised economy, and a consequent increase in expectations in relation to VET provision (Chappell, 2000).

Casualisation of the TAFE teacher workforce has been increasing since the early 1990s (Junor 2005). A number of researchers have shown that this expansion has been a response to reduced government funding, and used as a way to contain costs (Cully and Woods 2006; Junor 2005; Kroneman 2002). Anderson (2005) found that as a result of Federal Government led market reform TAFEs are diverting money from training delivery and focussing on cost cutting rather than improving the quality of teaching and learning. He found that after more than a decade of market reform, the quality of teaching and learning in TAFE had not improved, and has most probably declined. The use of casualisation by TAFEs to increase market flexibility and meet increased obligations during a time of decreased government funding (Anderson 2005) has not been accompanied by a strategic approach in relation to professional development for casual teachers who now comprise the majority of the TAFE teacher workforce.

At the same time as TAFE is being confronted by increased expectations in relation to teaching and learning practice, the increasingly casual TAFE teacher workforce often do not have a practical or theoretical understanding of contemporary VET pedagogy (Guthrie et al, 2006). Casual teachers are also less likely to be involved in PD related to

their teaching work (Guthrie et al, 2006). Researchers have found that most casual teachers have been teaching for less than four years, and that there is a gap between the level of expertise of the minority permanent teacher workforce and the relatively inexperienced casual teacher workforce (Guthrie et al, 2006).

The requirement for TAFE to provide quality education within the context of ongoing socio-economic change, combined with an increasingly sophisticated clientele with clear expectations related to quality and flexibility of VET provision (Guthrie et al, 2006), has implications for the pedagogical skills of VET educators (Darwin 2004). The development and maintenance of contemporary pedagogical skills requires a commitment to professional development by all TAFE teachers, both permanent and casual, as well as the organisations that employ them.

Time and money are important components in the provision for, and uptake of, professional development by casual TAFE teachers. Carmichael, Clayton and Symons (1998) noted that research undertaken in Community Colleges in America by Roueche, Roueche and Milliron (1995) found that managers considered that the provision of professional development for casual teachers was limited because of: willingness of colleges to pay part time staff to attend PD; the possibility that casual staff might leave the organisation; and the limited time that casual staff could make available to attend PD. The issue of not paying casual staff to attend professional development activities was also raised by Kroneman (2002) who found that casual teachers would like to be paid for attending PD activities. She also notes that sessional teachers are not as likely to be involved in formal training provided by their employer. Guthrie et al's finding that

"The high proportion of casual staff in the current workforce generally have less background and expertise in the teaching and learning aspects of the VET practitioner's role, and providers currently make only limited provision for professional development that might change that situation (my emphasis)" (2006: 29)

suggests that in Australia 12 years later the issues raised by Roueche, Roueche and Milliron (1995) remain important in limiting professional development of casual teachers.

Carmichael, Clayton and Symons undertook research at the same TAFE institute in 1998. They found the following barriers to accessing staff development within the institute.

Table A Barriers to Accessing Staff Development

Lack of information about staff development programs	50.5%
No time to access staff development usually because they were too busy with combining casual teaching and other employment	31.3%
Unsuitable times and/or venues of staff development programs	27.5%
Personal reasons usually family related	8.2%
Not paid to attend staff development	7.1%
Could not afford to give up teaching hours	6.0%
Unable to obtain places on the programs because either full or places given to permanent or contract staff	4.9%
Lack of interest in staff development	2.7%

(adapted from Carmichael, Clayton and Symons (1998))

Carmichael, Clayton and Symons (1998) found the following recurring themes identified by respondents: a lack of tenure and uncertainty about contracts which impacted on their desire to undertake professional development; a lack of support and information for casual teachers and a sense of isolation; a need for a wider range of times, locations and information about staff development programs; a preparedness to do training in their own time; and dissatisfaction with not being paid to do professional development.

This research seeks to explore the views of casual teachers within a large TAFE in relation to PD related to their work as a teacher. Broadly, the following areas will be addressed:

- the attitudes of casual teachers toward professional development, including their willingness to undertake PD;
- perceived barriers to PD and ways of overcoming these barriers;
- preferred means of accessing PD.

Research Methods

Two research methods were used: a questionnaire for casual teachers – 63 completed questionnaires were returned (a response rate of approximately 47 %); and interviews with 3 casual teachers.

In distributing the questionnaire the aim was to ensure as broad a distribution as possible across the institute. An email was sent to people in four different teacher networks (comprising teachers and their supervisors) across the institute asking them to pass on the questionnaire to any casual teachers that they know or to fill it out themselves if they are casual and to advise how many questionnaires they had distributed. This strategy was very successful, with approximately 133 questionnaires distributed (based on the numbers advised and making allowances for overlap if two questionnaires were distributed to the same person). This is approximately the number of casual teachers employed by the institute at this time. Sixty three questionnaires were returned - a response rate of approximately 47% percent.

The questionnaire provided both open and closed questions. Closed questions were related to: length of employment; hours of teaching; the TAFE's status as respondents' employer (main, only, secondary); and whether seeking permanent work. Responses to closed questions were collected into tables and percentages were determined. Questions were also asked which included both open and closed sections. For instance whether they had done PD in the last 12 months, and if so what was their motivation for doing it. Open questions were developed with the intention of giving the respondents a voice in identifying the issues that were relevant to them in relation to professional development, and especially professional development related to VET pedagogy, while at the same time ensuring that all of the key issues that the researcher wanted data on were addressed. Responses to open questions were coded, analysed, and collected into tables and percentages were determined.

Interviews were used to allow further exploration of issues raised in the questionnaire. Questions were similar to those in the questionnaire, with the interview allowing follow

up questions to gain more understanding of the issues discussed. The questionnaire sought to identify whether casual teachers fitted into different groups, and whether each group had different attitudes to PD. Initial analysis of the questionnaires, while ambiguous, suggested that casual teachers may fit into 3 categories. The categories identified were: those casual teachers who were seeking permanent work at CIT; those seeking to continue a casual teaching arrangement with a main job (or responsibility) elsewhere; and those seeking to continue casual teaching in the short term because it met their immediate needs, and not intending to continue with the CIT longer term. Using the purposive sampling technique the researcher's informal networks throughout the institute were used to identify people who would be prepared to be interviewed. Three casual teachers, one from each of the categories of casual teacher identified through the questionnaires, were interviewed. During the interviews it became apparent that the interviewees did not fit clearly into each of these categories, and there is therefore some overlap. Two of the interviewees had fulltime employment elsewhere, and the third had a fulltime load as a mother to four young children. One of the interviewees had completed the questionnaire. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and coding was used to analyse the recurrent themes.

Problems/Limitations

Because the research was undertaken in only one institution the results are necessarily limited. The researcher's role as a teacher within the Teacher Education area of the TAFE was known to the people being interviewed, and to many of the respondents to the questionnaire. Even though the anonymity of the questionnaire was stressed – and a number of questionnaires arrived without any indication of who completed them – many people attached their names to the questionnaires or sent it via email which identified them. Some respondents may therefore have responded in a way that they thought the researcher would approve. Teachers who have recently engaged in professional development, or are willing to do so, may be more likely to complete a questionnaire about professional development than those who have not. A small number of people were interviewed, and these people may not have been representative of the total population of casual teachers working at the Institute.

Findings

Guthrie et al (2006) note that most casual VET teachers have been teaching for less than four years. This figure is reflected in this research - 57% of respondents have been teaching for less than four years, and 29% have been teaching for less than one year. The TAFE was the main or only employer for 46% of the respondents to the questionnaire, and a secondary employer for 54% of respondents. Thus slightly more than half of the respondents had obligations to another employer.

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked whether they are seeking permanent work at TAFE or wish to remain a casual employee. This question was asked in an attempt to determine whether different groups of casual teachers had different requirements for, and attitudes toward PD. Results from this question were not entirely clear, with a number of respondents identifying both options, and a number of respondents identifying neither

option. Overall, 35 % of responses provided indicated a preference for permanent work (some of these also identified the other option) and 45% indicated they want to remain casual. When the interviewees were asked this question responses were mixed. One interviewee said they would not seek permanent work at TAFE:

“I’m not. I have heard too much from other teachers about how hard it is to get, and so I’m not bothering... I don’t see my long term future at the CIT”

Another responded that

“I would really like permanency, but I don’t want it in the role that I’m in”

and the third interviewee responded

“No, not really. I mean you never know.”

These responses indicate a lack of certainty about whether permanent work would be a preferred option, perhaps influenced in part by the lack of availability of permanent employment for teachers as identified by the first respondent. As a result of this ambiguity, no further analysis of responses according to category was undertaken.

While nationally, workers are being encouraged to stay in the workforce longer, and to retrain in new areas, anecdotally the number of retirees seeking casual teaching work in TAFE has been increasing. This research identified 11 % of respondents who have retired from permanent work prior to undertaking casual teaching work at TAFE.

Seventy five per cent of questionnaire respondents (n=63) identified as having a teaching qualification, with 25% indicating no teaching qualification. Fifty five percent of respondents had a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (or its predecessor) and 27% of respondents had either an undergraduate or post graduate teaching qualification. Fourteen percent of respondents (n=63) identified as being a member of a professional network related to teaching and learning and 32% were members of a professional network related to their teaching area.

Forty six percent of respondents (n=63) had undertaken PD in the last twelve months related to their work as a casual teacher. Table 1 identifies the motivation of these respondents for undertaking the PD. Motivation was spread across a number of areas, with the desire to learn more, upgrade skills and ongoing continual improvement as the most important motivation cited, at 25% (n=29) of total responses. This commitment to ongoing learning was reflected in comments made in the questionnaire such as “I believe in continuous improvement and think that it is beneficial in being successful” and in the following comment from an interviewee

“I don’t believe that people should be teachers ...if they’re not developing, if they’re not growing”

and from another interviewee

“I think that PD is ...just absolutely essential.”

Most respondents to the questionnaire identified a range of motivations for undertaking PD, including the following response from one teacher “Intrinsic satisfaction; pride in my profession and professionalism; continuing and deepening interest in specific areas which relate to my profession; meeting and building some relationships with others involved in same or similar work areas (including VET generally).”

Table 1 Motivation for PD in last 12 months

Motivation	%
Continual improvement/ Learn more/ Upgrade skills	25%
Become a better teacher	14%
Interest/enjoyment	11%
Gain a qualification	10%
Enhance employment prospects	5%
Compelled by supervisor	3%
Networking	3%
Other	3%

Number of respondents = 29.

The Certificate IV in Training and Assessment was the major type of professional development undertaken over the last 12 months with 41% of those who did PD in the last 12 (n=29) months undertaking this qualification. Industry specific short courses (31%), development of online learning skills (21%) and post graduate qualifications (19%) were also important avenues for professional development. See Table 2.

Table 2 Type of PD undertaken in last 12 months

PD Undertaken	%
Cert IV TAA new and upgrade	41%
Industry specific short course	31%
Online learning skills	21%
Post graduate teaching qualifications	19%
Working with diverse students	14%
Project for teaching area	7%
Industry specific qualifications	7%
Administrative skills related to teaching	7%
Leadership	7%
First aid	7%

Number of respondents = 29. Some undertook a number of different types of PD

When asked if there were skills or knowledge that they would like to develop further, 92% of respondents to the questionnaire (n=63) said there were. Seventy four percent of respondents want to develop their professional knowledge related to teaching and learning, 64% want to develop their professional knowledge and skills related to the area in which they teach; 31% want to develop administrative skills and 5 % want to develop other skills.

Respondents identified a number of ways in which they would like to develop skills and knowledge related to teaching and learning. Respondents (n=63) were invited to nominate from a range of options, and could nominate more than once. A formal short

course was rated most highly at 64%, with a formal qualification also rating highly at 57%. Mentoring, teaching and learning networks, as well as industry networks were also popular choices at 48%, 47% and 45% respectively.

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked if there were barriers to them being able to undertake PD in relation to their work as a casual teacher. See Table 3. Seventy six percent of respondents (n=63) saw barriers to undertaking PD. At 54%, the highest ranking barrier was time, followed by other work commitments at 42%. As one interviewee noted

“a lot of teachers take on these roles in addition to a full time job and we have the after hours stuff, and personal lives can be an issue”

and one respondent to the questionnaire wrote

“I have a primary employer, to whom I owe commitment and with whom I must spend a defined number of hours per day/week. Hours outside of this are usually spent as a casual TAFE teacher. This does not leave much personal time for home/family”.

While childcare was not identified by a large number of respondents, it was an important factor for those who raised it. One of the interviewees said

“my major issue with going to these sort of things is the fact that I may not be being paid for the time that I go but I’d be forking out a lot of money for childcare”

Table 3 Barriers to Undertaking PD

Reason given	Percentage
Time Available	54%
Commitments of other work	42%
Money/costs	21%
Family and other personal commitments	19%
Childcare	8%
Timetabling of PD	8%
Not paid to attend	8%
Taking time off teaching to attend	6%
Marking and class preparation time	4%
Other - one response each	8%

Number of respondents = 48

Respondents were asked to identify possible strategies for overcoming barriers to PD. Flexible timetabling was the highest ranked strategy. TAFE paying for casual teachers to attend PD and providing funds to pay for PD were noted by 19% and 17% respectively. This is consistent with the comments by Kroneman (2002) that “the desire of casual teachers to be able to undertake professional/staff development during paid hours is a recurring theme.” The provision of distance, flexible or online PD was identified by 15% of respondents. See Table 4.

Table 4 Overcoming Barriers to Undertaking PD

Reason given	Percentage
Flexible timetabling - including multiple offerings at different times	23%

Paid time off teaching to attend	19%
TAFE to pay for PD/provide PD funds for casual teachers	17%
Distance/flexible/self paced learning options/online (only one respondent explicitly identified online)	15%
Better working conditions for casual teachers/make casuals permanent	8%
Teacher reorganising other commitments	6%
Advice of available PD well ahead to allow arrangements to be made	4%
Childcare provided/CIT Childcare centres offering occasional care	4%
Responses not addressing overcoming barriers	10%
Other - one respondent each	6%

Number of respondents = 48

Ninety four percent (n=63) of people perceived personal benefits of undertaking PD related to their work as a teacher. Table 5 shows a broad range of personal benefits, with remaining current in their field of teaching, and increased confidence at 24% and 20% respectively ranking the highest. As one of the interviewees said when asked what the personal benefits might be

“I think, advancing yourself. If you learn new stuff it assists right through. It’s more than just about the classroom. It’s about yourself”

and another said

“well, if it’s inspiring then it’s exciting and it’s wonderful and it motivates me. It motivates me to work harder as a teacher, it motivates me to keep doing things well, to keep being thorough, and it keeps me up to date with learning and how people learn, and good ways of teaching.”

Table 5 Personal Benefits of PD

Personal Benefits of undertaking PD	%
Remaining current in field of teaching/at forefront	24%
Confidence	20%
Continual improvement/enhanced knowledge	15%
Being a better teacher	15%
Benefit to students	14%
Job satisfaction/ Motivation	10%
networking	7%
Increased career options	7%
Personal benefits not specified	7%
People skills	5%
No comment	14%
Other (a number of benefits each identified by only one respondent)	11%

Number of respondents = 63

The same 94% of respondents who saw personal benefits of doing PD also saw benefits to students of teachers undertaking PD. The highest ranking reason for student benefit identified was more effective teaching at 42%, although a range of reasons were given. See table 6. Unsurprisingly, of the 4 respondents who saw no benefit for themselves or for their students of PD for teachers, none had undertaken PD in the last 12 months.

Table 6 Benefits for students of teacher PD

Personal Benefits of undertaking PD	%
More effective teaching	42%
No comment	17%
More interesting classes/more fun/more stimulating	12.5%
Improved student outcomes/ Students more workplace ready	12.5%
Currency of teacher = currency of students	12%
Increased skill/knowledge base on which to draw	12%
Increased skills with technology	8%
Improved confidence of teacher	7%
Benefits to the TAFE institute	3%
Other	10%

Number of respondents = 63

The questionnaire asked if respondents thought there were possible negative outcomes of undertaking PD. Of the 13 respondents who identified possible negative outcomes, 5 people (38%) identified courses that don't meet expectations or needs as a possible negative outcome. All other responses were the same as those identified in Barriers to PD.

Three recurring themes were identified in the interviews in relation to PD: time – availability of, and the use of; other commitments; and a willingness to undertake PD. Three other recurrent themes that all interviewees discussed were: the lack of access to resources to do their teaching job (computer, phone, desk, photocopying); a desire to help students learn; and their enjoyment of teaching.

As noted in the introduction, it has been claimed that casual teachers often have limited expertise in teaching and learning (Guthrie et al, 2006; Kell 2006). In an attempt to identify interviewees' understanding and use of contemporary VET pedagogy – and therefore to some extent their need for professional development in relation to VET pedagogy - interviewees were asked to describe what one of their typical teaching sessions might look like. All interviewees described using elements of student centred teaching and learning strategies.

Discussion/conclusion

Forty six percent of all respondents had participated in professional development related to their role as a teacher in the last 12 months. To gain some perspective on this, it is useful to consider that in 2005 (the latest year for which information is available) in the same State/Territory, 50 % of people aged 15-69 years of age had completed work related training (ABS, 2006). Thus, while a high proportion of respondents value PD, and a high proportion also want to develop skills and knowledge related to their teaching, the proportion who have been able to engage in professional development in the previous 12 months falls below the level of the broader population. Further support needs to be provided to ensure that casual TAFE teachers are able to access PD.

Time limitations and other commitments are important barriers to PD for casual teachers. Flexibility in the provision of PD was raised by many of the respondents as a strategy for overcoming barriers to PD. In addition to flexible timetabling of courses, and offering

online and distance options, the provision of a drop in centre for casual teachers to support them in further developing their practical teaching skills on a just in time basis would be worth trialling.

Almost half of the respondents identified teaching and learning networks as one of their preferred ways of developing skills and knowledge related to teaching and learning. Kell (2006) also found that teachers value networks for providing teachers with opportunities to reflect and share ideas. Networks could be established on an institute basis, or focussing on individual industries and operating across institutes.

The cost to teachers rated highly as a barrier to undertaking PD, and in terms of suggestions for overcoming barriers reducing the cost burden ranked highly. It is not unreasonable that casual teachers seek to have the personal financial cost of PD reduced. National research by the ABS found that 94% of work related training courses completed by employees resulted in no personal financial cost to the employee (ABS, 2006).

Carmichael, et al (1998) undertook research into professional development for casual teachers in the same TAFE institute where this research was done. While the data have been coded differently, and care needs to be taken in comparing percentages, it is still possible to make some broad comparisons. It is interesting to note that in 1998 the key barrier to staff development was a lack of information about what was available, whereas in 2007 this was identified by only one respondent. Time available, and commitment of other work were rated highly in 1998 and remain key issues in 2007. Family commitments were not rated highly in 1998 and were identified by 19% of respondents in 2007. Timetabling issues (unsuitable times or venues were identified by more than a quarter of respondents in 1998, and only 8% in 2007. (See Table A on page 2).

Only two of the recurring themes identified by Carmichael, Clayton and Symons (1998) were identified in the research undertaken in 2007. These were: a preparedness to do training in their own time; and dissatisfaction with not being paid to do professional development - although in 2007 this was expressed as a desire to be paid for doing professional development rather than dissatisfaction with not being paid. The other recurring themes identified by Carmichael, Clayton and Symons:

- a lack of tenure and uncertainty about contracts which impacted on their desire to undertake professional development;
- a lack of support and information for casual teachers and a sense of isolation;
- a need for a wider range of times, locations and information about staff development programs

were not raised by those completing the questionnaires, although “ a lack of support and information for casual teachers and a sense of isolation” was raised in the interviews. Care needs to be taken in assuming that these issues are no longer important for casual teachers, as questions were asked differently in each questionnaire.

Casual teachers are now a majority of the TAFE teacher workforce, and it is important that they have access to professional development to ensure quality teaching and learning in VET. As Junor (2005) notes “professional development is a primary value-adding

activity rather than a discretionary cost” (p, 272). A strategic approach needs to be developed to ensure that the TAFE teacher workforce who are educating Australia’s future workforce are themselves provided with education and training to allow them to do their jobs well.

Based on the results of this research a plan of action for TAFE institutes to support casual teachers in accessing professional development could include:

- Provision of free PD for casual teachers;
- The development of a PD fund specifically for the purpose of paying casual teachers to attend PD;
- Provision of a variety of times for each PD activity. This would involve offering each PD activity more than once, with day time and evening options;
- Provision of flexible learning options, including self paced learning and online learning;
- Provision of a drop in centre for casual teachers to receive teaching and learning support as required, with both evening and day time options provided;
- Ensuring the identification of PD options well ahead of time to allow for child care and other arrangements to be made;
- The provision of a teacher network (including meetings and access to relevant information about quality teaching and learning) to support teachers in discussing and reflecting on issues related to teaching and learning.

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