

Tell me the old, old story or new messages? Five decades of inquiry into VET teacher development

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Abstract

At various points during the last five decades (that is, the 1970s to the present), the attention of policy makers has inevitably turned to the initial preparation and ongoing development of the sector's teachers and trainers. In this the latest decade, these issues have re-surfaced as headline topics capturing the interest of policy-makers, industrial parties and researchers alike. While much research has been dedicated to the topic over the years, concerns about practitioner capability remain constant. Is it a matter of the old, old story being told over and over again or have we missed something in the telling and re-telling?

This paper reports on a qualitative synthesis of some key research on the development of teacher capability produced between the years 1978 and 2011. Fleming (1978), Butterworth and Gonczi (1984), the VEETAC Working Party on TAFE Staffing Issues (1992, 1993), OPCETE (2000), Dickie et al. (2004) and the Productivity Commission (2011), amongst others, have all attempted to provide solutions to the various 'problems' assigned to VET practitioners and their skill development. In this paper, contexts, purposes, methodologies and recommendations have been re-analysed to determine if there might be new and useful messages for the sector today.

Introduction

The VET sector and its teaching staff have multiple roles: to support industry's needs, in social inclusion, and to meet the needs of its diverse body of individual learners. Indeed, the quality of the VET sector's outcomes needs to be closely linked to the quality of those delivering the services (Productivity Commission 2011). Australian Workplace Productivity Agency (AWPA) predicts that VET teachers will be one of the top 10 growth occupations requiring a VET level qualification to 2025 in all but one of their scenarios (AWPA 2012). In its 2011 report, the Productivity Commission described the increasing challenges being faced by the VET workforce, pointing out that:

“Over the medium term, in the context of a tightening labour market, the VET workforce will be expected to deliver a greater volume of training, increase the quality and breadth of its training, cater for a more diverse student population, and operate under a more contingent and contestable funding system.” (Productivity Commission 2011, p LI).

Invariably, the range of missions outlined fall predominantly to VET's teachers and trainers, who make up the bulk of the sector's workforce. VET's workforce is aging so that attracting, retaining and rewarding capable teachers must be a priority to ensure quality provision (AWPA 2012). Despite all this rhetoric, what evidence is there of concerted activities now and in the past to build and maintain a capable VET workforce, and ensure that it has the skills to meet the challenges of educating and training the broader Australian workforce and community? In this paper we look to the past to advise the present and the future of VET workforce and teacher development.

Background

In the period 1974 through to 2011, numerous qualitative and mixed-method studies have focused on the preparation and capability of teachers and trainers and the broader VET workforce. Through the years seemingly significant recommendations have been made, yet there is little evidence of the research having made any real headway in initiating change. In addressing this issue, Selby-Smith, Hawke, McDonald and Selby-Smith (1998) suggest that the impact of research tends to be incremental in nature and that change generally comes about as an outcome of a comprehensive body of work on a topic rather than as an outcome of a single study. Offering a different perspective, Sandelowski, Docherty and Emden (1997 p.366) see part of the problem home to qualitative researchers whom they suggest are 'engaged in a cottage industry: working in isolation from each other, producing "one-shot research" (Estabrooks, Field & Morse, 1994, p. 510) and, therefore, eternally reinventing the wheel'. Moreover, they contend that qualitative research 'appears endangered by the failure to sum it up' (Sandelowski et al., 1997, p. 366).

The small-scale study reported in this paper is a hesitant attempt at 'summing-up'.

The stories and their contexts

It is necessary, while formulating the problems of which in our advance we are to find the solutions, to call into council the views of those of our predecessors who have declared an opinion on the subject, in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their suggestions and avoid their errors.

Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book 1, chapter 2

Whilst it is acknowledged that there are literally hundreds of Australian research studies, government reports, literature reviews, journal articles and conference papers on initial teacher preparation and ongoing development cited on VOCED, only six were included for examination in this study. Those examined in this study were selected on the basis that they were located in the Australian Landmark Reports section on the VOCED database; they reported on studies initiated by government bodies and were specifically directed at informing policy, and all included a review of literature and referenced research relevant to the time. The six reports included were:

1. *The formal preparation of TAFE teachers in Australia* (Fleming, 1978).
2. *Beginning TAFE teachers: profiles, problems, attendance patterns* (Butterworth & Goncz, 1984).
3. *Staffing TAFE in the 21st Century* (VEETAC Working Party, 1992 & 1993).
4. *Trends in the Victorian TAFE institute workforce* (Office of Post Compulsory Education, Training & Employment, 2000).
5. *Enhancing the capability of VET professionals* (Dickie, Eccles, FitzGerald, McDonald, Cully, Blythe, Stanwick & Brooks, 2004).
6. *Vocational education and training workforce* (Productivity Commission, 2011).

The history of VET teacher education and workforce development is wedded strongly to the history of the sector itself. The first report (Fleming, 1978) was produced only four years after the release of the Kangan report (Kangan, 1974). In examining the six key reports reviewed here, it is important to bear in mind the changing context surrounding them. The earliest reports were produced in a time of the sector's early growth, where provision was very largely publically based in a large number of TAFE colleges and its teaching workforce was rapidly growing and largely permanent. At this stage the need to provide initial teaching

skills and qualifications to the teaching workforce was paramount. The role was initially fulfilled by a small number of Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) that first offered Diploma level qualifications and, later, bachelor degrees. With time the CAEs became universities and the VET workforce became increasingly casualised, older and more diverse. The nature of VET teachers' work also changed, as has the vocational areas covered by formal VET programs, the sites of delivery, the technologies used to support learning and the groups of clients accessing the sector's training.

Change has also been driven by the move to a more truly national VET system, changing funding approaches and sources of funding, government policy initiatives and meeting industry's training requirements. Progressively opening the training market to competition led to a growing private provision and more formalised training within enterprises. This created a need for a greater diversity of teaching and training qualifications, including those provided by the sector itself at Certificate level from the early 1990s. Emphasis also switched from a predominant focus on initial teacher qualifications to a greater attention to on-going workforce planning and development, especially professional development for teachers and trainers. The papers considered here also show a switch from a focus solely on teachers to broader VET workforce issues and, in particular, information about its characteristics, its management, capabilities and development.

The research method

The method used to examine the six reports was qualitative synthesis. This process involves systematically bringing together a body of work from a range of sources in order to analyse and draw conclusions from the consolidated research evidence about a particular topic (Ring, Ritchie, Mandava & Jepson, 2010). In undertaking such a task it may be possible to 'provide another reading of the data or an opportunity to reflect on the data in new ways' (McInnes, 2011 p. 14).

The literature notes that there are numerous approaches to undertaking qualitative synthesis. These include amongst others interpretive synthesis (Noblit & Hare, 1988), meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988), framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), meta-synthesis (Sandelowski et al., 1997) and critical interpretive synthesis (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). Interestingly, a good deal of the literature reporting on the use of qualitative synthesis methodologies emanates from the health sector.

The approach used in this study best matches thematic synthesis as described by (Thomas & Harden, 2003). The first step in the process was to frame the examination of the six reports by developing some research questions. These questions were:

1. What major messages are revealed by the synthesis of the selected reports on VET teacher education and ongoing development?
2. What salience do these messages have for the current VET environment?
3. Are new messages revealed by this synthesis?

The next phases in the research involved reading and re-reading the reports; devising an analytical framework and coding guide informed by the research questions and the authors' *a priori* interests; identifying and coding major ideas raised in the findings and recommendations; grouping coded data into descriptive and analytical themes; comparing themes across reports to ascertain how the studies were related and then synthesising themes to explain the comparable and contradictory evidence the process revealed.

The same old story, or new messages?

In analysing the six reports, numerous issues were addressed but three consistent and key themes emerged. These related to the initial teacher education programs, beginning teacher induction and support, and professional development.

Theme 1: Initial teacher education programs

While initial teacher education programs were a consistent focus throughout the majority of the reports, the way the topic played out in each of them was very much dependent upon the prevailing context. In the Fleming report (Fleming, 1978), for example, the major emphasis was placed on the TAFE system supporting its beginning teachers to obtain higher education teaching qualifications, although another undercurrent was a concern about their relevance and content. This same sense of unease was more clearly expressed by Butterworth and Gonczi (1984) not only over the courses offered by Colleges of Advanced Education for NSW TAFE teachers but also about the Diploma of Teaching offered by TAFE itself. By 1992, this issue had become a national concern with the Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Committee's (VEETAC) Working Party suggesting:

The inappropriateness of many of the initial teacher training courses continues to restrict TAFE. The fundamental problem is the lack of recognition that the TAFE employers and employees are the clients. This is also related to the lack of recognition of TAFE as a distinct entity with specific needs (VEETAC, 1992, p. 14).

Inevitably, dissatisfaction with higher education sector's delivery of VET teaching qualifications meant that the door was opened for TAFE to become a more significant provider of its own teachers' initial education and training.

Entering the next decades, the Certificate IV became the mandated minimum initial qualification, recognising the broader sites of nationally recognised training and further diversification of the workforce. Little mention was made of formal qualifications in the Victorian report (OPCETE, 2000) which focused on staff development. Likewise Dickie et al. (2004) were concerned with broader issues of professional capability although they re-emphasised the need to review university course content, effectiveness and standing and the potential for consistent offerings nationally for VET practitioners.

In 2011, the Productivity Commission concluded that the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, when well taught, provided the essential foundation skills VET teachers needed. Nevertheless, and because of persistent quality issues, they recommended that it retain its status as a high risk qualification. At the same time they suggested that the TAE10 Package needed to better match the diverse roles of the workforce and encompass the full set of capabilities required by VET teachers and trainers.

Theme 2: Induction and ongoing support

The second theme that emerged with some emphasis related to the induction and support of beginning VET teachers and trainers. In fact, VEETAC (1992, p. 90) went so far as to suggest that 'The issues associated with induction, teacher preparation and staff development should not be separated'. Despite this, these issues receive relatively little attention either singly or together in many of the reports. For example Fleming (1978), acknowledged the

importance of induction for beginning teachers, but focused on introducing new staff to administrative and organisational procedures – a fairly standardised HR view of induction. Dickie et al. (2004) do not address the theme specifically at all. The Productivity Commission (2011) saw a value both in induction programs and mentoring, pointing out that such approaches represented good business practice. They also saw a possibility of both local and more generic solutions at both the state/territory and national levels.

Butterworth and Gonczi (1984), however, expanded Fleming's view of induction to one involving both the development of practical teaching skills and the provision of on-going support utilising the experience and expertise of colleagues and 'master teachers'.

Theme 3: Professional development

In the Staffing TAFE in the 21st Century reports (VEETAC, 1992,1993), the Working Party was concerned that staff development was not integrated into strategic planning, industrial agreements, performance management and career planning processes. Further it was under-resourced, inequitably allocated, reactive and ad hoc when it needed to be proactive, readily available for all and strategic in nature. They highlighted the need for career-long training for practitioners which was not only strategic but also took into account the nature and complexity of TAFE teachers' working lives. The Working Party suggested that staff development should consist of an appropriate mix of non-formal and informal activities together with formal qualifications.

Throughout 1990s, TAFE and a growing number of other providers were facing changes shaped by government and industry-driven initiatives and much of the strategy (and funding) for staff development came from the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). Like other jurisdictions, the Victorian staff development focus was on marketing and entrepreneurial skills, flexible learning and Training Package implementation (OPCETE, 2000). This marked a significant re-definition of what constituted teachers' work and demanded a more comprehensive set of skills and knowledge than previously required. While VEETAC (1993) considered competencies and a competency framework, from 2000 onwards discussions centred on capabilities, capability frameworks, capability levels and skills gaps.

In the ANTA, State and Territory Training Authorities supported project Enhancing the capability (Dickie et al., 2004, p. 3) there was a language shift from staff development to workforce development and specifically to 'professional workforce training, development and management needs ... for VET and the VET professional'. This was in recognition of the role of the broader VET workforce in the delivery of training. It also represented a consensus on the importance of a shared commitment to investment in ongoing development by governments, providers and individual teachers and trainers.

The Productivity Commission (2011) re-affirmed the importance of shared responsibility for maintaining competence and made a particular issue of professional development as a regulatory requirement for providers. The Commission recommended that jurisdictions collaborate to determine how regulatory requirements for continuing professional development might best be met and funded. They also suggested that states/territories jointly explore strategies for the development of practitioner capability, especially where recognised gaps existed.

Discussion

Whilst the three themes considered already are the most consistent and easily recognised in the reports reviewed, a number of other issues emerged. These can best be seen as

undercurrents or unresolved subplots within the three broader themes of these reports. A number of these have not been covered in this paper because of their complexity or political sensitivity. Included in this category are issues such as industrial relations, human resource management practices and funding. This has led us to recognise that there are several clear issues, “subplots” and related messages arising from our meta-analysis of the chosen reports, each of which is discussed briefly below.

There has been too great a focus on the form and content of formal initial teacher education programs.

Of the six reports, four reveal a constant concern about the content, utility and relevance of initial teacher education programs for VET practitioners. The outcome of these never-ending concerns has been an over-emphasis on the tangible initial qualifications at the expense of the often less tangible but equally if not more important developmental activities that must occur beyond initial entry to the sector. Moreover, unrealistic expectations have been placed on what the foundational qualification might achieve, particularly given the diversity of the VET practitioner cohort undertaking it. In essence, too great an emphasis has been placed on what could most readily be enacted in national policy, that is, the first few steps of what should be a more substantial and continuing developmental journey. In short, the upfront focus has wasted time, resources, dollars and intellectual energy that should have been part of a much broader vision. By and large it seems that the sector and its policy makers have given most attention to apparently easy but unsuitable solutions to what is, in reality, a far more complex developmental problem. Requiring Certificate IV holders to refresh this basic qualification is one example of poor policy which has fed a market for ‘quickie’ qualifications of limited value to the individuals undertaking them or, arguably, the sector more generally. More might have been achieved by demanding more and better ongoing professional development which built strategically on an individual’s existing foundational qualification and developed needed skills. This leads to the second and third messages.

Too little attention has been given to providing comprehensive support to beginning teachers and trainers.

Butterworth and Gonczi (1984) suggested the need to profile beginning teachers to advise and support their initial preparation. They also had a broad view of what initial support involved, yet this is one of the few major reports over the last 30 or more years that has addressed this important issue with any sort of comprehensive vision. Giving full rein to this vision requires a process of induction and support which involves an orientation to the sector, the organisation and the teaching team as well as a program of structured training, observation and supervision, collegial support, mentoring and professional networking. While other reports might mention a few of the elements, it is only when they are brought together into a more comprehensive program at provider level and, where appropriate, as part of wider professional networks that new staff take the next steps and really begin to embark on the journey which will lead them to becoming skilled and effective practitioners. Yet enacting these good practices is difficult, and has received little attention in key reports and in the broader VET research literature. It is also likely that the quality of existing practice is variable. Good practice is dependent on sound planning and human resource management approaches, a willingness to participate, the right organisational culture as well as access to the time, funding and the well trained, more senior and experienced colleagues willing to provide this support. Again, the debate centres on responsibility and access to initial support and on-going development, especially for the sector’s many casual staff. The conception is clear, solutions are possible and there are undoubtedly pockets of good practice that can be

drawn upon and shared more widely. The issue is that sound conceptual ‘will’ all too readily meets the implementation ‘won’t’ or ‘can’t’. It just becomes too hard.

The sector’s continuing professional and workforce development has been largely focused on immediate imperatives rather than others which might have provided better pathways to improved practices and lasting change.

Human resource practices of public providers have remained a state/territory responsibility. One of the few areas in which there was a more national response was in the provision of professional or workforce development, leading to initiatives under ‘*Reframing the future*’ and its predecessor schemes and through the Australian Flexible Learning Framework. In addition other initiatives have bought with them resource kits or programs of professional development to assist in their implementation. Many of these have failed to have the impact they should have had – or deserved as they almost invariably were never extensive enough or sustained for long enough to make a real difference to practice. In fact, often well before they had any real impact the focus of attention was changed to another new key initiative, and so these earlier policies and practices remained only partially implemented at best.

National funding has now largely dried up for professional or workforce development. This means responsibility for teacher and trainer development rests largely with state and territory systems, individual providers and individual teachers and trainers themselves, although representative bodies such as the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) and some entrepreneurs have started to offer a range of professional development (PD) programs as a service. However, as the Productivity Commission (2011, p. 303) noted, building capability requires ‘...better coordinated, targeted and supported PD.’

In addition, the very diversity of the skills potentially required by teachers and trainers, means that professional development has to be targeted, strategic and readily available when needed. A range of capability frameworks has been developed and used to advise professional and workforce development through gap analysis and targeted professional development. Much of this development is, and has to be, locally driven at organisational or teaching team levels. However, resourcing this is difficult when public funding for VET’s providers is tight and oriented towards minimising the cost of delivery, rather than a costing regime which might allow some greater capacity to improve quality. How professional development is resourced is overlooked in much of the policy debate, apart from the suggestion that governments, provider organisations and individuals need to ‘work it out’. In addition, too much tends to be made of formal and structured professional development activities in many of the reports reviewed and too little of the underutilised capacity of informal workplace learning to develop staff. Key to this is not to have professional and workforce development which is just events based. Rather, the most effective is that which is driven from within individual organisations or through wider networks and communities of practice. Yet the competitive pressures driven through policy imperatives mean that many organisations and their staff are unwilling to share good practice despite the obvious values of doing so as they are fearful of losing their competitive edge, or concerned that their practices are not good enough and they will be ‘exposed’.

And finally:

The sector lacks an understanding about the nature of its teachers and trainers and range of the work they do. The lack of this fundamental knowledge affects the extent to which those with influence in and over the sector can think, plan and act strategically.

One of the recurring themes in a range of the reports has been the available data and about VET's teachers and trainers. While the quality of it has been questioned in earlier work, for example by Butterworth and Gonczi (1984, p.37) who commented '...much of what is known about the characteristics of Beginning TAFE Teachers has been based upon impressions, anecdotes and "educated guesses"' and OPCETE (2000), its lack came into sharper focus in the last two reports reviewed (Dickie et al., 2004; Productivity Commission, 2011). Indeed, OPCETE (2000) raised the issue of the extent to which TAFE providers themselves had good information about their staff's characteristics and capabilities.

The nub of the argument for why data and other workforce information are so important is that their lack compromises effective workforce planning both at the local level and more globally. Good and consistent baseline data are also needed about the current capabilities and development needs of teachers and trainers and the organisations for which they work, and so it is difficult to quantify skills and capability gaps and allocate the resources necessary to address them effectively. It also limits the capacity of the sector and its providers to benchmark. Finally, there is almost no information about the 'psychological contract' that VET staff have with their employer, that is: job satisfaction, organisational commitment and wellness and career goals (Dickie et al., 2004). These data are also needed more broadly so that the VET industry and its workforce can best serve the needs of other industries.

Conclusions

To draw this paper to a fitting conclusion, let us return to the three questions we posed earlier:

1. What major messages are revealed by the synthesis of the selected reports on VET teacher education and ongoing development?
2. What salience do these messages have for the current VET environment?
3. Are new messages revealed by this synthesis?

The key themes are the nature and quality of VET initial teacher qualifications, the nature of induction and support beginning teacher receive and then their on-going professional development. These themes represent a functional and ordered view of the VET teacher education and development.

In answer to the first question, an examination of the selected reports has revealed four clear messages, highlighted in italics above. However, one striking feature of the reports, and perhaps a fifth message, is the extent to which the same issues emerged time and time again with no apparent progress. In short the issues, whilst recognised, never seem to be really resolved. One of the reasons for this is that no one body or group has the power to make things happen, or to enact comprehensive solutions. Rather, any attempted solutions have been piecemeal, or have turned into battles between jurisdictions or a variety of interest groups over whom, precisely, has responsibility for carriage of the issue. One of the truisms of implementing change comes from a quote in the Yes minister episode 'A real partnership', where Hacker remarks that:

In government, many people have the power to stop things happening but almost nobody has the power to make things happen. The system has the engine of a lawn mower and the brakes of a Rolls Royce.

The sad fact is that this is true of teacher development in Australian VET.

In answer to the second question, there is sound advice in all the reports reviewed, and much of what has been recommended in them remains as valid today as it was originally despite all the changes that have occurred within and outside the sector. In sum, the old, old story does

have real value. Sadly, and in answer to the third question, there seem to be no new messages. Even more sad is the extent to which important and consistent messages from the past continue to be ignored or not actioned. To return to Aristotle, on the whole the sector has not profited from the sound suggestions made, nor do the errors of the past seem to have been heeded.

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