

Paper No 15 The “voice” of VET teachers: Teacher dilemmas and their implications for international students, teachers and VET institutions.

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the voices and experiences of teachers, who are key stakeholders in the sustainability and future growth of VET. It presents implications arising from qualitative research about dilemmas teachers face in teaching international students within the VET sector. The potential impacts of this research relate to several themes of the 2012 AVETRA conference, especially with regard to the industry and learners. After briefly introducing this study, this paper will summarize key findings and briefly discuss their implications.

The research participants were 15 teachers from several Australian public and private VET institutions. The method involved responsive interviewing and inductive data analysis to identify and categorize teachers' dilemmas. The research shows that VET teachers experience various inter-related professional, educational and personal dilemmas. These dilemmas result from ethical tensions teachers experience in their interactions with international students, teaching colleagues and their employing institutions. The dilemmas are often influenced by current economic and political conditions of international education. The dilemmas raised in the study by 15 VET teachers might be familiar to other teachers in VET and universities but to date they have received limited attention by researchers. This study's findings indicate significant implications for teachers, students, VET institutions and the government at a time of rapid economic, political, cultural and educational change. They contribute evidence for ongoing review and development of student enrolment and teacher employment in the culturally diverse VET sector, and thus further goals of educational equity and quality learning experiences and outcomes.

1 Introduction

Teachers of international students are essential to ensuring the educational satisfaction of international students in VET. However, their voices, and particularly their dilemmas, are rarely present in the research literature. Knight's (2010) review of the student visa program touches on some of these issues, but without clearly reflecting teachers'

voices. This paper responds by reporting select findings of a qualitative study (Nakar, 2011) which investigated the experiences of 15 VET teachers of international students.

The findings are of potential interest to VET policy makers, managers and teachers. They reveal qualitatively different ways in which the 15 VET educators experienced challenges and associated dilemmas in their culturally diverse teaching context.

1.1 Defining dilemmas

In the context of this study, dilemmas arise from challenges that teachers encounter in carrying out their normal professional duties. They result from ethical tensions in teachers' interactions with international students, teaching colleagues and their employing institutions. The dilemmas are often influenced by current economic and political conditions of international education. On a conceptual level, a dilemma can be perceived as an inner conversation with oneself concerning two or more alternate propositions in which the presence of obstacles on every side makes it difficult to determine which course of action to pursue (Lampert, 1985).

1.2 Research method and participants

This was a qualitative exploratory study, which responded to the research question:

1. What are the principal Dilemmas faced by VET teachers in providing quality education to international students in Brisbane?

The method involved responsive interviewing (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) and inductive data analysis to identify and categorize teachers' dilemmas. The research participants were 15 teachers from several public and private VET institutions in Brisbane. All had worked in either Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes or private Registered Training Organizations (RTOs), while some had worked in both contexts. Most held Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA) as a condition of their employment in VET; a few of them were working towards getting it. The highest qualification gained by participants was Masters (3 participants), with 7 participants holding a Bachelor's degree; only one participant held a Bachelor in Education. Many had experienced a career change, having worked in industry before entering the VET teaching profession.

The majority of the participants tended to view TAFE as educationalist and private organizations as business providers, since they considered that TAFE focused more on apprentices in comparison with the private providers who tended to focus on international students rather than domestic students. However, it is worth noting that the participants perceived no major difference in the nature of the teacher challenges and associated dilemmas in both sectors.

1.3 Overview of findings

The findings show that the teachers experienced a wide range of challenges in teaching international students. However, not all the challenges turned into dilemmas. While some challenges faded away with experience and time, the more significant ones developed into dilemmas. Ethics were found to be the base of all the dilemmas. The following sections of this paper focus in turn on 7 key dilemmas of the teachers. These belong to three categories: Professional Dilemmas (with five sub-types), Personal Dilemma (1 type) and Educational Dilemma (1 type). Each section outlines a particular dilemma and then discusses its impacts and implications.

2. Professional Dilemmas

Professional dilemmas are faced by VET teachers during their teaching experience with international students, colleagues, management and government. They are of five main types, as explained in detail below.

2.1 How to overcome lack of resources and support systems to help international students

One of the major professional dilemmas identified in the study is how to overcome the insufficient support provided to teachers to help international students to achieve a good educational outcome. Some of the teacher participants voiced the concern that they were not given any resources or textbooks. It was even left up to teachers to determine their own subject outlines. Thus, teachers had to spend hours writing lesson plans and resources in their own time, without being paid, yet the college expected the teachers to hand over the plans when the subject was completed. This created a dilemma for teachers about whether they should submit their personal resources to the college or retain their own unpaid work.

According to some participants, the students deserve to be helped after paying such high fees. However, they were concerned about the quality of learning experiences for students in the absence of suitable resources, especially where English language proficiency varied greatly among the students in a class. As per the findings, the ability to speak English “well” was not always congruent with students’ IELTS grades.

Implications for teachers: If the teachers give students extra support in terms of extra resources, teachers are still taking the risk of displeasing a management which is unwilling to pay teachers extra to support students in need. So some teachers offer support in their unpaid hours. If the teacher decides not to offer help, it could mean more incompetent assessments and more paper work for teachers. Consequently, some teachers might resort to unethical professional standards, such as giving exam questions as revision to help students and make their work easier.

Implications for students: Many international students struggle with the unfamiliar demands of academic, scholarly English. Although all international students are required to attain minimum scores in English, there is still a world of difference between performing in a short English test and suddenly finding oneself in an Australian classroom. If extra help is not offered, it means students might struggle to understand the concepts and might not get the best out of the course. Students might struggle to pass the examination and lose their self-confidence in their ability.

2.2 How to manage perceived unethical expectation/acceptance of gifts

Some participants highlighted dilemmas associated with perceived unethical standards of colleagues associated with expecting and accepting favors. Thus, some teachers, with an established ethical framework, found themselves and their values challenged by other teachers whose unethical practices makes teachers lose face in front of international students. As stated by one participant, *“Gift giving and also the expectations that bribing or ‘corruption’ in any form, is normal and easy”*. Some of the participants expressed particular concerns about gift giving by students at the time of assessment. While they considered that acceptance of a small gift as a token of appreciation or respect towards teacher is acceptable, acceptance of an expensive gift before an examination was unethical.

Implications for teachers: The implication is that the colleagues who accept gifts put others in an awkward spot when the genuine students complain about such colleagues to them. If the teacher speaks out they risk damaging their relationship with colleagues and students. Teachers are sometimes unsure whether the gift is a genuine token of respect or a potential bribe and they might offend genuine students when they refuse to accept gifts. .

Implication for students: Students who benefit from favors as a result of giving gifts might generalize that it is the normal approach to give gifts before assessment. Thus they might lose faith in the education system and start generalizing that corruption or gift giving is the way to get things in Australia. The genuine students might lose their enthusiasm for studies under the notion that they might not get good results as they have not offered gifts.

2.3 How to reconcile inconsistencies amongst various VET institutes regarding curriculum, assessment standards and extent of the course

According to some of the participants, assessment standards, processes and the duration of the courses appear to exhibit marked inconsistencies across providers for students undertaking the same programs of study or for students seeking recognition of their prior learning. A great majority of the teacher participants expressed that they were aware of the massive variations in the content knowledge passed on to the students across organizations due to inconsistencies in curriculum resources and assessment standards. For teachers working in two organizations at the same time, inconsistencies across curriculum and assessment led to the dilemma of how to teach the same curriculum across different organizations: for example, teaching the same course for 33 weeks in one organization and 16 in another; or having an open book examination in one college and a difficult closed book examination in another.

Implication for Teachers: Teachers might have to resort to practices such as overtly liberal marking of the assessment or overlooking the plagiarism of the contents. Like Ehrich, Kimber, Cranston & Starr (2011), the findings of the study clarify that the pressures and complexities inherent in today's VET organizations are creating the conditions for ethical dilemmas to flourish.

Implication for students: Students studying a course in 16 weeks might gain less knowledge than students studying from an organization offering the same course in 33 weeks. These inconsistencies might bring unrest in the minds of international students who, after paying fees are not satisfied with the different educational outcome obtained by other students in the different college. These students, when they go for work, might get rejections due to their lack of knowledge. One participant even expressed the disappointment of seeing former successful students doing odd jobs like driving taxis or cleaning offices after gaining such qualifications.

Implication for VET industry and the Government: According to a great majority of the participants, the unhappy students spread the word about their dissatisfaction with the outcomes and might start questioning the government about the promises of quality education. This in turn might result in loss of future international student enrolments.

2.4 How to teach subjects without expertise

Another major dilemma faced by some teachers is being required to teach subjects outside their expertise to international students. This is consistent with Moddie, Wheelahan, Curtin, Arkoudis and Bexley's (2011) finding that VET teachers and trainers are not necessarily industry experts and that many are teaching outside their area of specialization. One VET teacher explained that as a contract teacher she can be asked to teach subjects ranging from VET certificates in Business and Retail (her specialist areas) to areas outside her scope like Hospitality. One participant expressed his concern that being a good teacher in one subject area does not necessarily mean that they can teach another subject outside their expertise equally well.

Implication for teachers: Teachers might accept the offer to teach subjects outside their expertise. One participant suggested that she was compelled to take the offer to teach the subject out of concern for students' welfare as otherwise students would have been without a teacher for a couple of weeks. Another participant said that it was the only course that was offered to her by the management that semester and she could not afford to be without work for 6 weeks; so she took it, studied the previous night of the class, prepared resources and did her best. The findings coincide with Kelly, Wheelahan & Billett's (2009) views that while teaching at different levels using different models of curriculum is challenging, it is even more challenging to teach and train in completely different fields in which teachers and trainers have no expertise.

Implication for students: Students might suffer by not getting the best education and a high quality qualification with value in the marketplace. The implication is that by the time a student stands up to complain about a teacher and some action is taken the course might be nearly finished. Students might also suffer as a teacher might sometime leave mid-term due to the stress of teaching outside their comfort zone.

2.5 How to manage constant changes in rules and policies regarding the courses in the MODL list and the financial requirements

The findings show that teachers are sometimes disturbed by a VET institution's response to the constant changes in the Migration Occupations in Demand List (MODL) list and financial requirements policies. Most of the participants complained about the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) removing additional points from the MODL list in July, 2010 for occupations like Cookery and Hospitality, although they were considered to be in demand by some participants. Increased financial pressures also caused concerns related to changes in course duration. These changes, along with the rising Australian dollar and migration cuts (ACPET, 2010) backfired on the Government resulting in a sharp downturn in student numbers. The participants expressed that RTOs needed to adjust business strategies and delivery practices to meet these challenges.

Moreover, the participants suggested that, in their zest to achieve their well-documented strategic plans and focusing on long term organizational efforts, institutions did not always meet ethical standards. According to some participants, many private providers respond in an agile manner to market change by offering discounts in the course fees and option of flexible duration, whereby educational courses are marketed like a product. However, the findings also suggest that RTOs' strategies like reducing the duration of a course and slashing fees to combat the negative effects of the removal of a course from MODL list, serve a dual purpose. They give opportunities to those students looking out for a cheaper course as a means to stay

in Australia and to the colleges seeking sufficient student numbers. According to a majority of the participants of the study, with the immigration visa requirements constantly changing, students have been encouraged to see studies more as a form of visa generation and less as a career option. More students seem to be blindly chasing the courses listed in the Immigration Department demand list. The participant teachers tended to see it as a learned behavior of students to enroll in high priority courses, caused by the VET system.

Implications for teachers: The biggest dilemma the teachers face is in developing a motivating platform in class due to alterations in the MODL list and removal of courses which students are nearly due to complete. Teachers are aware that continuing altered course is not going to help students get their visa for work or permanent residency (PR) but telling students to discontinue means losing them and a resultant decrease in their teaching hours. In addition, some participants apparently felt compelled to bend the rules for students. For example, some occasionally turned a blind eye to students who were working longer hours than are legally allowed by their visa. They did so because they recognized the pressures students were under to achieve, having heard that some international students in their class had worked hard to save money, or had exchanged sex for the required IELTS exam results (Participant 13) or had crossed borders on donkeys (Participant 1). Consequently, some Hospitality teachers asked students to go home to sleep and study, if they knew that students were working in a good hotel and gaining good industry experience. On the other hand, it was difficult for teachers to ignore students breaking of working hours restrictions, as they were concerned this it could backfire on them legally. The participants also found themselves in another dilemma: of being challenged by the conscientious students who diligently attended class and followed the college rules yet were treated in the same way as their apparently less conscientious classmates.

Implications for students: The research suggests that some of international students whose courses were removed from MODL and others who could not cope with increased financial requirements resigned from their courses and joined another VET institute which negotiated course fees with students and gave a huge discount to attract higher numbers. The findings also suggested that students who worked longer hours due to inflation or to meet their financial requirements were unable to gain full benefit from their course. They were sometimes sleep deprived and came late or fell asleep in class, or were sent home. But this seemed to send a discouraging message to genuine students who work within their 20 hours visa limit.

Overall Implication of such changes on the VET industry: The impact of these changes has yet to be fully felt. However, modeling of the Australian economy over the next five years indicates a loss of total expenditure from international students of just over \$5.88 billion and the loss of 45,583 full time equivalent positions across the whole Australian workforce (Phillimore, J. and Koshy, 2010). This relates to a crisis in the international education market in Australia which grew throughout 2009 due to rising Australian dollar, changes in rules, attacks on students and shutting down of some colleges. As per

the Australian Education Union (AEU, 2010), by January 2010, more than 14 colleges in the international VET sector had been shut down, with 7,000 international students affected. More than ten colleges have closed in Victoria since July 2009, with 3,000 students affected.

3. Personal Dilemmas

3.1 How to manage conflict within themselves, care for students and lack of sense of belonging

Personal dilemmas affect the teachers personally, and impact on their well-being and their decisions to act in a multicultural VET environment. In addition to the usual adjustment process of having international students in a class, the teachers have a number of other stressors, which include: the added strain of having to learn to sell different educational products to graduating students so that they continue studying in the same college; and constantly changing rules in the VET system. At a personal level, these dilemmas are compounded by organizational politics, personal career plans and managing a work-life balance.

Implications for teachers: The ways in which these stressors are perceived and dealt with are likely to influence the quality of the teaching experience for international students. Some of the participants seem to have adopted a deaf ears and blind eyes approach to dilemmas and have explored new ways of working with students whereas some of the teachers experience feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty about how to proceed in their role (of teaching). These concerns become personal dilemmas when they impact teachers' self-esteem and morale and lead teachers to certain disengagement. Teachers might be afraid to go and seek help from management as this is often perceived as a sign of weakness. This isolation may prevent them from accurately identifying the cause of the dilemma and taking appropriate action. Some teachers feel overwhelmed by the dilemmas and lose motivation, as expressed by one participant, "I go and do my work and come back". Such perceptions have an impact on professional engagement, development and quality of work as their teaching career unfolds.

Implication for students: Students feel the impact as a stressed teacher may not be able to provide best quality education to students. Teacher turnover from stress causes lack of consistency in teaching methods, making it harder for international students to adapt to constant change in teachers and their teaching styles

Implications for RTOs and VET community: Such stressors may cause frequent staff turnover in some RTOs. Teachers' low morale and dissatisfaction may result in their leaving the industry causing loss of a good teacher to the industry.

4. Educational Dilemma:

4.1 How to overcome apparent lack of teaching know-how and opportunities to develop professionally along with pressure to maintain industry currency

The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) requires all categories of VET teachers to have the qualification mandated by the National Quality Council, which is the Certificate IV Training and Education (TAA). The participants not only complained about marketization of courses for students but also of educational courses for teachers such as Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA) being promoted at discounted rates and specials. Some participants told of obtaining the TAA in 2 days over weekend and some over 2 coffee chats and believed that providing this qualification in such a way is inappropriate and did not give them the foundational skills they needed to be effective teachers. A majority of those only having the TAA expressed their dilemma of how best to support international students in a class as TAA does not include practical training. Regrettably, from the findings it is evident that most teachers consider TAA as just a necessary document to teach. It was an ethical dilemma for some of participants when the TAA was available through the provider they worked for. In fact, they confessed to copying required assessment for TAA from senior staff in order to gain the qualification quickly and easily.

In reviewing the shifts in VET education, the participants recognized the importance of industry experience for professional development. There is huge pressure on teachers to also work in the industry. But according to some participant teachers, it was not easy to maintain industry currency in ways that were accepted by the auditors. For a full time working teacher, it was generally not feasible. Moddie, Wheelahan, Curtin, Arkoudis and Bexley (2011) advised that vocational teachers in universities reported adequate staff support and development opportunities, but did not always have the time or inclination to take much advantage of these. However, the findings of this study suggest that in private VET institutions and TAFE, there is lack of adequate support and development systems for the staff. The development opportunities, according to some participants, are only for Lead Vocational Teachers (LVT) and there is undue pressure on other teachers to adhere to standards set for them by LVT. The major issue identified by the study is that VET bodies like Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) and The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) membership are not widely known and consequently underutilized in Brisbane.

Implications for teachers: Many VET teachers are successful former professionals who have transformed almost overnight into their new situations. It appears that the nature of transitions is largely under-researched. As a consequence, many new teachers may struggle to know what or how to teach their international students in ways that will effectively support their learning. Apparently in some cases, institutions saw appointing industry experts as sessional teachers as an opportunity to ensure better links to industry. However, as discovered by the study, it might be a risk in itself because an

industry expert may not be trained to teach in classrooms full of international students with varying English language competencies. The realization of such challenges created a sense of dissonance in the participants.

The findings also show that sessional teachers generally have less access to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and thus do not have the same opportunity (and generally are not given the support) to develop their repertoire of teaching and assessing strategies, or their knowledge of teaching, learning and students. But the pressure to maintain currency is so high that some of the participants confessed to falsifying or manipulating it. If support is not provided to teachers, it might discourage them from updating and may eventually lead to professional obsolescence due to disjuncture between a teacher and an organization.

Implication for students: Unfortunately, it is not until their students have graduated that many teachers become aware of their potential to apply life skills and experiences they have developed over time to aspects of their working lives. Students might suffer as teachers, who are not supported professionally, sometimes start speaking or acting inappropriately in class. It seems that the students do not complain either because teacher is considered GOD in some cultures or sometimes in order to progress and achieve a good outcome they prefer to keep quiet, but they certainly lose respect for teachers on a personal level.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

As evident from the findings presented in this paper, the teachers' dilemmas are varied and complex and need detailed understanding by education providers at different levels. However, the majority of the teachers' responses reveal a depth of commitment and love of teaching, which remain undiminished as they face multiple dilemmas created by the changing nature of their profession. The findings also suggest that in spite of this commitment, the teachers are often unable to fulfill themselves as professionals due to the intense nature of the dilemmas. According to a majority of the participants, a few teachers try to voice their challenges to colleagues and management whereas other teachers prefer to remain silent. Those teachers, who have tried, expressed that their efforts to address problems of practice rarely result in tidy answers when the teachers are without any other professional guidance.

It is worth noting that the issues raised by the interviewees tended to be less about engaging with international students and more about poor operational management by the educational providers. Thus, the dilemmas are not 'caused' by the international student factor but rather by the lack of an accessible policy framework and organizational and financial constraints of institutions where they teach international students.

The insights provided by this study's 15 teachers in discussing their dilemmas support the following recommendations to policy makers and managers in the VET sector:

1. Address the prevailing organizational culture within the VET institution to balance profit with educational outcomes for the students.
2. Enhance opportunities for teacher qualification and practical training, in particular- CPD about teaching international students.
3. Develop a stronger and more consistent national regulatory framework to deliver the highest quality teaching and learning outcomes.
4. Revive the partnership between governments and educators in policy making, with a view to developing a shared policy that: supports international students' learning; enables teachers to maximize international students' educational outcomes; encourages teachers to capitalize on the knowledge they gain from their experiences with international students and colleagues; requires VET institutions to link investment in skills to market needs, sustainability of VET institutions and reputation of Australian VET education.

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