Head teacher perspectives on their changing role in TAFE NSW

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Abstract

There has been a strong research focus in recent years on the changing role of VET practitioners (e.g. Harris, Simmons & Clayton 2005, Mitchell 2008) and the need for new leadership qualities at various management levels in VET (e.g. Callan, Mitchell, Clayton & Smith 2008, Mulcahy 2004). This paper reports on a research study which focuses on the head teacher role in TAFE NSW. Previous research has suggested that head teachers, known sometimes as 'frontline managers', occupy a key role as 'discourse brokers' at the interface between management and pedagogy (Black 2005) and that their educational leadership role is threatened by the increased volume of routine administration they are required to undertake (Rice 2005). This paper represents the voices of a state-wide cohort of current head teachers in TAFE NSW Institutes on their changing work role. 109 head teachers responded to an email survey questionnaire featuring open and closed questions. Questions focused on how their role has changed in recent years, their levels of job satisfaction, and their comments on a wide range of head teacher issues. These included their: changed responsibilities, use of electronic systems, overall workload, degree of autonomy in their work, professional development needs, levels of support from other TAFE staff, and how they think their work role can be improved. The survey findings have implications for current debates over the most effective role for head teachers in TAFE NSW. In particular, they suggest there is significant tension between the routine administrative workload involved in trying to ensure audit compliance and the current demands for head teachers to be educational leaders, innovative and commercially enterprising.

Introduction

This paper is drawn from a recent research report on the perspectives or 'voices' of head teachers in TAFE NSW (Black 2009) which examines what head teachers think about their work role in light of the current changing VET practitioner climate.

TAFE NSW is the country's largest VET organisation and almost every teaching section in the many TAFE colleges spread across the state has a head teacher. Head teachers 'manage' all aspects of the human, financial and physical resources of their sections, and they also 'teach' in their sections; 9 hours or 13 hours a week, depending on their head teacher status (i.e. band 1 or band 2). While some researchers refer to head teachers as 'frontline managers' (e.g. Mulcahy 2004, NCVER 2004), they are nevertheless classified within TAFE NSW as part of the teaching service with working conditions commensurate with full time teaching. At the outset of this paper it should be stated that the author himself has been a substantive head teacher in TAFE NSW for the past 16 years.

Head teachers are significant largely because they occupy a key role located at the interface of management and teaching. Previous research has referred to them as 'discourse brokers', due to their dual role operating within the discourses of both management and teaching in TAFE (Black 2005). The many full and part time teachers in TAFE NSW are likely to gain knowledge about what's happening in TAFE or be directly influenced in their engagement within TAFE by the head teacher of their section. To some extent, therefore, head teachers are a 'filter' for teachers, informing them of what they essentially need to know about the TAFE 'system'. Senior and middle management in TAFE NSW have little direct communication with teachers, except via the head teacher. As Mulcahy (2004, p.195) points out in a study of managers in VET, whereas senior managers connect policy to strategy, frontline managers (i.e. head teachers) connect strategy to staff.

Head teachers are necessarily expected to be educational leaders in their field and they are selected for the position at least partly based on their educational leadership qualities. The great majority of head teachers are former TAFE teachers, often having taught in the TAFE system for many years.

Mulcahy (2003, p.57) suggests frontline management is "where the rubber hits the road, as far as doing business is concerned". The head teacher role is complex, and the various elements of the role can be seen to follow Mulcahy's (2003, pp.7-8) classification for frontline managers, that is, the six broad leadership and management

roles of: financial management, administration and operational management, strategic management, people-centred management, consulting, and educational leadership.

To date, research on the role of head teachers is quite limited. Black (2005), in one TAFE NSW Institute, indicated that for some head teachers there is a degree of resistance to elements of the new management discourse. Importantly for this paper, Rice (2005), also focusing on one TAFE NSW Institute, indicated that the educational leadership role of head teachers is being restricted because head teachers are preoccupied instead with routine administration. More recent research provides further indications that the educational leadership role of head teachers is reduced in effectiveness due to workload and other issues such as lack of support and training (Adams & Gamage 2008).

The changing role of the VET practitioner

While on the one hand there is some evidence of head teachers struggling to maintain their educational leadership role due to the pressures of administrative work or other workload issues, on the other hand, there are increased expectations that head teachers, as educational leaders, will take on new identities as the result of new pressures for change. For more than a decade, the whole VET environment has been and remains in the process of unparalleled change as the competitive forces of globalisation take effect. This includes, for example, industry taking a lead role in defining skills standards through training packages, the establishment of quality standards (Australian Quality Training Framework), the introduction of new technologies, and the increase in contestable funding (NCVER 2004, p.2). Overall, there has been a marked shift as public VET providers such as TAFE are being oriented away from 'education and training' towards 'business and service' (ibid). Described another way, VET can be seen to be shifting from being supply-driven to demand-driven (Mitchell 2008, p.3).

How changes to the VET environment have affected teachers' or practitioners' work (and hence head teachers' work) is well documented. Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005) for example, surveyed a range of VET practitioners who in turn identified a number of key changes in their work including: training packages, competition,

funding changes, technology, competency-based training and flexible delivery. These changes have required shifts in practitioners' habits, beliefs, values, skills and knowledge, though interestingly, Chappell and Johnston (2003) in earlier research found that many VET practitioners retained their strong educational identities in the face of these changes.

In the current VET environment there are strong calls for new VET practitioner identities. The challenge, according to the TAFE NSW executive, is to change the services offered by TAFE NSW and develop: different ways of working with industry and communities, a more entrepreneurial culture, and more flexible ways of delivering services (TAFE NSW 2007). According to researchers such as Mitchell (2008, p.4), what is required is a new 'advanced VET practitioner' who will have attributes that represent, "a new hybrid mix of educational and business thinking". This new practitioner, "looks outwards at market needs and seeks to meet those needs" (ibid), and the sorts of attributes required for this work include a new emphasis on creativity, team work, workplace learning including informal learning, and innovation (Mitchell 2007, p.3). In relation to management in VET, some researchers refer to the need for a 'transformational' style of management leadership which they claim has been embraced by VET providers (Callan, Mitchell, Clayton and Smith 2008, Mulcahy 2003). Clearly, these changes have implications for the educational leadership required of head teachers in TAFE NSW.

On the basis of the current literature therefore, the vision for public VET providers is fairly clear and TAFE NSW would claim with their recent Workforce Development Guarantee that they are moving to enact this vision (TAFE NSW 2008). Others would claim that to date recognition and support in TAFE for practitioners and their professional development has been insufficient (Kell 2006, Simon 2007). Certainly, it would appear to be time to re-consider the role of head teachers in TAFE NSW and currently a combined departmental/union review is being undertaken. The research described in this paper aims to present the views of a large number of head teachers in TAFE NSW on their role which may provide some useful perspectives for consideration in the review.

Research method

A survey questionnaire was designed involving both closed and open questions. Closed questions focused mainly on demographic data (e.g. age, subject area, length of service as head teacher) and two Likert items on levels of satisfaction with their work and the extent of change experienced in the job. Most questions were open-ended and they encouraged head teachers to comment on issues such as their use of electronic systems, workload, degree of autonomy, areas of work neglected, support from other staff, professional development and future plans in TAFE. They were also asked to comment on how they thought their job could be made more effective. There were no limits placed on their responses; head teachers could write as little or as much they wished.

The questionnaires were emailed to a very wide range of head teachers in all subject areas in all TAFE NSW Institutes. Head teachers were assured of confidentiality and they could either respond by email or mail their completed questionnaires back to the researcher.

The survey questionnaires were distributed in early September 2008 and responses were collated and analysed from mid October 2008.

Findings and discussion

Head teacher profiles
109 head teachers returned questionnaires from around the state. This is a substantial number of head teachers and the demographic details they provide are to a large extent indicative of the profile of head teachers in TAFE NSW generally. There were respondents from every TAFE Institute in the state, though most were from the larger Institutes such as Sydney and Illawarra. The teaching sections represented by the head teachers covered the full range of vocational areas and subjects in TAFE.

There were slightly more female respondents than male (i.e. 54% compared to 46%) and those in the 50-59 year age group predominated (64%), followed by 40-49 years (25%), 60 years plus (8%) and then 30-39 years (3%). The average period for holding

their head teacher position was eight years (one had been 25 years in the position). In total, they supervised close to 2000 full and part time teachers and hence this cohort of respondents can be considered to represent a significant head teacher 'voice' in TAFE NSW.

The extent and nature of change

Over 90% of head teachers considered there had been 'considerable change' in their jobs in recent years. In particular, some respondents indicated they are now "to be all things to all". One head teacher described their role as "chief cook and bottle washer", suggesting they were involved not only in higher level decision-making, but also much routine work. In relation to the latter, multiple aspects were mentioned. One head teacher described their work as follows:

> We now spend significantly more time in relation to student admin/enrolment, apprenticeship management with training plans, HR issues like recruitment, discipline, complaints, staff assistance, staff development related to new teacher induction and training and a learning plan for their development, CLAMS, commercial course development, curriculum development, course design, negotiating individual training plans, financial management budgeting, RPL targets, ASH targets, volume of emails, course brochure development, learning resource development, AQTF audits, ITSE audits, ISO audits, internal audits, ICChecklists …

Head teachers commented at length on, "just the sheer amount of administration – often tedious, unrewarding and boring administration", and it was further suggested the head teacher was the "best paid clerk in the section". One head teacher considered that many of their administrative tasks "could be undertaken by a trained junior clerk or clerical support person" because they were repetitive and systems-based.

Many head teachers wrote about the amount of time they now spend on the computer. One head teacher stated, "I spend an ENORMOUS part of my time now in front of the screen, providing reports, rather than working with staff and students". Others claimed to spend 4 to 8 hours a day, "programming classes for students, programming classes for teachers, booking rooms, auditing processes, chasing workplace evidence,

answering emails, developing full training plans for new apprentices, ordering resources …"

Satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the job

Nearly 60% of respondents said they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their head teacher work. This question however was problematic for some head teachers because there were aspects of the job they liked (loved even), but other aspects which caused them problems. For example, one head teacher commented, "I like my job but it is very frustrating not to be on top of all that has to be achieved each week. It is very hard to be pro-active when you are still trying to catch up with last month's work". Similarly, another commented, "I love my job but am frustrated constantly by unrealistic expectations".

Audit compliance

As suggested in some earlier comments, audit requirements were seen to have increased considerably. One head teacher commented, "more and more we operate for auditors not students". Most head teachers had direct experience of having faced a formal audit of various aspects of their work. One commented, "After three audits in about 18 months … I told my auditor that he was a major problem in me getting my work done". Another stated, "I've had two audits this year, one an ISO audit. It was conducted in the last teaching week which added enormous stress to an already stressful time. The other was an NCVER".

Part of the problem for head teachers was the feeling of powerlessness. As one head teacher commented, "There is no way we can question what we are being audited on". Another said, "The 'rules' for auditing keep changing, and we rarely get clear policy advice. It's a reactive approach that puts the onus on the head teacher rather than a management supportive model". But it wasn't just the lack of control over the auditing processes that concerned some head teachers, rather, the 'fear' of audits which resulted in increased stress and "extreme paper chasing". As another head teacher commented, "Audits seem to drive what is expected of me … I dread the day when I face a 'big' audit because no matter how hard I work, I know I am not meeting all the audit requirements".

Staffing issues

Responsibility for their staff is a traditional head teacher role but there have been many changes recently that have added either to their staffing responsibility or their workload. For example, head teachers now play a formal role in undertaking performance reviews of their full time staff, and part time staff without the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment need to be formally supervised. Many head teachers commented on the frustrations and the time spent on Institute-wide recruitment. One stated: "Cannot understand why we need to go through staffing interviews as often as we do. Recruitment is a LONG process and the eligibility list only lasts for 6 months!!! Just stupid".

New student groups – "we are an unpaid arm of Centrelink"

Traditionally, many TAFE head teachers have had responsibilities for working with trainees under various apprenticeship systems and they have liaised with employers and others as part of these systems. In more recent years, however, other specific student groups have been added often necessitating head teachers to liaise and be part of new organisational compliance procedures with government departments and other agencies. Centrelink clients for example, have increased substantially in TAFE courses in the past decade, and especially since recent federal government welfare-to-work policies. Head teachers are placed in a difficult position because they want to look after the interests of their students but in relation to Centrelink, this creates a lot of extra work. One head teacher involved with a Commonwealth language and literacy program (LLNP) stated:

> We are an unpaid arm of Centrelink, forced to cooperate in managing our students'
> documentation and problems with Centrelink/Job network provider so that they are
> not pulled out of class by case managers or pushed from pillar to post. This is a great
> user of time and energy.

Centrelink students often have additional problems and disadvantages in their lives requiring extra work from head teachers. One head teacher commented, "When they do show up they don't stay in classes because of multiple barriers which are not addressed such as transport, mental and other illness, caring duties etc".

Commercial work

While specific questions did not target commercial activities, several head teachers commented on the increased expectation that they will engage in more commercial activities which takes considerable time, "approximately 4 or 5 hours a week" according to one head teacher. Another head teacher commented on the "paradox" for him in trying to manage commercial work with his regular head teacher duties:

> One major area that was difficult for me to reconcile was the paradox in the need for me to be creative and innovative and the need for compliance. The Institute is extremely happy to support me if I am gaining commercial dollars but does not support me with release time to ensure all administration tasks are met …

Electronic systems

An almost universal grievance from the head teachers was the increased use of electronic systems which involved considerable time and caused immense frustrations. These included some systems which were state-wide such as (using their acronyms): CLAMS (electronic rolls), eECs (the teacher payment system), MEVI (online enrolments), REMS (room bookings), CIDO (curriculum documents) and SIS (student information). There were also many electronic systems in use which differed from Institute to Institute, especially budgeting tools.

Head teachers commented that these systems were dominating their working lives. One head teacher stated, "More than 80% of my time is spent on electronic systems, just to keep my head above water …" Often the electronic systems took much longer to use than the paper-based systems they replaced. For example, a head teacher commented, "it used to take me maybe 2 hours to allocate the paper-based rolls to staff at the beginning of a semester. It now takes me about two days to set up the CLAMS rolls". Many head teachers perceived that the shift to electronic systems meant they were now undertaking routine work that was previously undertaken by the administrative staff in the colleges. One head teacher commented, "I was never trained in records and data retrieval, I was trained as an educator! … If they gave data-type work to people trained in it (that is, the office folk) it may be done right".

Other grievances with the increased use of electronic systems included their lack of integration, their inflexibility, and the sometimes inadequate training and support in their use. According to one head teacher's perspective, "These have become mechanisms of control. We spend all our time putting data information into these programs so we can be banged around the head with the analysis".

Head teacher workload

The overwhelming majority of head teachers indicated their workload had increased substantially in recent years. One typical comment was that, "My workload has increased dramatically. It is impossible to keep up to date". While it may be easy to dismiss as exaggerations some of the hours head teachers said they worked each week, so many of head teachers cited similar figures. Typically, one head teacher stated, "Even though I work a 40 hour week I still do not get it all done. Over the top unrealistic workload". Another head teacher commented, "I work about 60 hours per week minimum. I check emails every night and work on a range of things. I do the same on weekends".

There were examples of head teachers adopting various "survival" measures to try to manage their workload. One head teacher took one day per week extended leave, "so I can reduce my teaching load. I now feel I can get through the mountain of administrative work I need to do". Another head teacher suggested the necessity to "cut corners, stretch the rules, turn a blind eye and have a blind eye turned to them because everyone is just trying to keep the wheels turning".

The overall result of the increased workload appeared to be an increase in stress and work-related health problems. One head teacher said she had been diagnosed with depression last year and had been forced to "develop ways of setting more realistic limits". Some head teachers had become frustrated and cynical ("Systems have made me like this – cynical and only complying when I have to"). One head teacher described their workload being, "like a huge funnel with an increasing inlet. The spout is directed to the head teacher".

Head teacher autonomy

Head teachers were asked about the degree of autonomy they felt they had in their work. Autonomy refers to the independence head teachers feel they have over the work they do. On this issue head teachers were fairly evenly divided with many feeling they had a fair degree of autonomy and many feeling they did not. There were some who felt that their autonomy was "the saving grace" of their role. Certainly head teachers were seen to have some autonomy at a local level, "in terms of the structure of my working day and decisions regarding which courses to offer and which staff to employ". But as another head teacher indicated, "… it is a false autonomy – you think that you have some control over your section but in the big scheme you don't".

To a large extent autonomy depended on the relationship the head teacher had with their line managers and this varied. In some cases the relationship was strained. One head teacher commented, "The reality is we are so heavily regulated and monitored there is little real autonomy". Another stated, "… Basically, we are managed to death".

Important areas of head teacher work that are now neglected

In light of the many recent changes to the work of head teachers, it was relevant to ask if there were important areas of head teacher work that were now neglected. In their responses, one word featured prominently: *teaching*. Time and time again head teachers expressed the view that their administrative role and their many hours in front of a computer were undertaken at the expense of their personal teaching role and aspects of their educational leadership. One head teacher commented, "I feel I am letting down the students in my classes through lack of preparation. If any teacher working in the section did that (lack of preparation) I would have to have a talk to them to rectify the problem, but every head teacher this it is the norm".

The teaching issues, however, extend beyond individual head teachers lamenting over their lack of time to prepare properly for their classes. Head teachers stated they no longer have the time to work with their staff as educational leaders. For example, one head teacher commented, "Another big factor here is that every time I start a new part time teacher I do not have the time to mentor/monitor them as they get settled in the section". There was also little time for head teachers to interact with their own

teachers in a meaningful and productive way. One head teacher said what was now neglected was, "Meeting with staff … really sitting down and having the time to think things through and come up with a consolidated approach". The loss of this vitally important relationship work (i.e. 'social capital') was not confined to relations with teachers in their own section. Head teachers mentioned not having enough time to liaise with their colleagues and "networking with agencies" in the local community and in industry. The overall result was the loss of creativity and ideas that can be generated.

Support by other TAFE staff

Head teachers were asked if they felt supported by other staff. By and large most thought they were well supported by their own teaching staff and by administrative staff, especially as the latter had often suffered quite severe cuts to staff numbers. Support from line management varied. From an interpersonal level there were many head teachers happy with the support provided, but there were also many who were quite unhappy. Generally, a distinction was made between those line managers on campus with whom head teachers worked with closely and often harmoniously, and those who managed at a distance (for example, Institute level managers referred to in some Institutes as Business Line Managers [BLM]). For the latter group there was often some harsh criticism. One head teacher commented simply, "MTL (local Manager Teaching & Learning) good, BLM – Oh dear". Similarly, another head teacher commented, "Local MTLs, yes, Business line, no. Business line has interest only in the budget bottom line, nothing else. An absolute pre-occupation with ASH". Some comments on support from management were quite scathing. One head teacher stated, "The Faculty Executive are demanding, removed, and focused only on their careers. Bullying and intimidation are on the increase".

Professional development programs

Responses to professional development (PD) varied a great deal also. Not surprisingly over the years head teachers had attended PD courses on a wide range of activities. While many courses on technical aspects of using electronic systems were considered useful, one area universally acknowledged as falling short was induction courses for head teachers. Most head teachers experienced no induction to the job and simply learnt 'on-the-job'. Others benefited most from mentoring from other head teachers,

which was usually informal, though not always. One head teacher explained the mentoring she received: "It was set up between another long standing Business Services head teacher on campus who mentored me 'officially' for 1 hour per week". Professional development also varied between Institutes. One head teacher commented, "I had NO professional development as head teacher in 3 years at the now defunct Southern Sydney Institute. In my first year or more in SWSI I had about 10 or more head teacher staff developments". Head teacher forums in several Institutes were mentioned by respondents as being a useful way of expressing and addressing head teacher professional development needs. Lack of time to attend PD due to workload pressures were cited by many head teachers.

How can the head teacher job be made more effective?
Head teachers were asked if they could suggest ways in which the head teacher job could be made more effective. With this question there was considerable consensus with many (approximately eight in every ten) stating the need for what they termed either clerical or administrative support. Even allowing for the current situation where some sections received clerical support and others did not, nevertheless, all wanted more. One head teacher described the value of their existing clerical support, stating, "If I didn't have a fantastic clerical officer I would be 6 feet under by now". Several head teachers said they needed a "dedicated support person" or "direct" and "reliable" clerical support by which they meant that they wanted their own clerical support and not someone shared by many other sections. As one head teacher expressed it, clerical support could do much of the routine administration, "Basically, anything that will let the head teacher and teachers do the job of managing the section and teaching in a professional manner".

Some head teachers suggested reducing the teaching component of their work to enable the administrative and compliance aspects to be undertaken. However, very few head teachers wanted their teaching removed altogether; they saw their teaching to be integral to the professional connection they had with their staff and students.

There were some bitter comments over the 'banding' system, the annual review of head teachers based on section hours, and the number of teachers, courses and locations supervised which determines whether head teachers remain classified either

a Band 1 or a Band 2. There was the observation that through being allocated a reduced budget in the first place some head teachers were destined to be downgraded. As one head teacher commented:

> Head teachers should not be in a position where they can lose their head teacher banding based on things out of their control i.e. the budget they are allocated. Why are head teachers reviewed annually and at risk of losing their job? Which other permanent positions in TAFE provide for a demotion based on criteria out of the control of the person in question?

Where to next for head teachers?

Head teachers were asked about their future career plans. Bearing in mind the ages of the head teachers (64% in the 50-59 year category), many teachers said they planned staying in their current position, mainly because they enjoyed their subject area and the people they worked with. One said, "The position is not just a job to me, it is 'MY CAREER' and I LOVE my area of work, but mostly the students …" Many other head teachers, however, said they were staying on reluctantly and primarily because they had few other options prior to retirement. Typically, one head teacher said, "I am planning on retirement at the end of 2009. If this wasn't the case then I would seriously need to reconsider the future of my role as head teacher. If I had the resources to do so then I would retire today". Others planned to retire early, using up extended leave and leave without pay. A few head teachers were looking for advancement to the ranks of middle management, while others couldn't wait to get out. One stated, "I'll get out as soon as I can, hopefully to private enterprise or another government department. I feel this job has deskilled me".

Conclusions

The results of this survey on the views of head teachers are disconcerting. Head teachers are the frontline staff responsible for teaching in TAFE. They are the key TAFE staff members who are expected to assume new professional identities, to become more entrepreneurial and creative in working differently with industry and communities as expressed in recent VET research (e.g. Mitchell 2007, 2008) and TAFE NSW executive documents (TAFE NSW 2007, 2008). Their role is pivotal to

the success of TAFE NSW. One respondent described head teachers as "the glue between our customers and the TAFE organisation". But what makes this study disconcerting is the obvious discontent and poor morale that many head teachers experience. Of course, this does not apply to all head teachers, but the overall picture resulting from this survey is one of strong discontent at various aspects of their role.

Chief amongst their grievances is the administrative overload and audit compliance demands. Much of the role of the head teacher is taken with routine, systems-based computer work undertaken partly out of the fear of being audited. To some extent head teachers consider this work de-skills them, and at the very least, takes an enormous amount of time and prevents them from focusing on aspects of educational leadership that are integral to the role. Currently, educational leadership, at least in relation to working with other teachers and providing mentoring arrangements and professional guidance, is limited due to the administrative overload. These factors were identified in research by Rice (2005) several years ago and they have been exacerbated since then. Not only do head teachers feel an administrative burden and the frustration of not being able to do the professional work they feel they should be doing, this survey has indicated they are concerned at: taking on new roles that could be undertaken by others in TAFE (e.g. staffing issues), working with problematic student groups (e.g. Centrelink), being pressured to take on additional commercial work, working with unwieldy electronic systems that are introduced often without sufficient training and are largely not integrated, and experiencing lack of support from other staff in TAFE and especially some line managers. They are also unhappy at a banding system that can see them demoted (via budget cuts) irrespective of their personal efforts in their own sections.

There has been relatively little research to date on the role of head teachers in TAFE NSW and this study has begun the process by identifying a number of key areas of concern for head teachers which require further exploration. This could include quantitative research to substantiate numerically some of the main trends indicated in this study, and more in-depth, qualitative research to probe beyond the more limited survey responses afforded by this study.

This study has indicated the realities of the head teacher role as seen by the head teachers themselves and they represent a major tension when considered alongside the rhetoric of change expressed in both the research literature and corporate VET vision statements. Current departmental reviews of the role of head teachers need to take into account and address these factors in working towards a more professionally rewarding and effective head teacher role that meets the expectations of 'new VET practitioners'.

Acknowledgements

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