

VET and VET Educators: Understanding teacher dilemmas in providing quality educational experience to international students in Brisbane

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Abstract

In the past fifteen years, increasing attention has been given to the role of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in attracting large numbers of international students and its contribution to the economic development of Australia. This trend has given rise to many challenges in vocational education, especially with regard to providing quality education that ensures international students' stay in Australia is a satisfactory experience. Teachers are key stakeholders in international education and share responsibility for ensuring international students gain quality learning experiences and positive outcomes. However, the challenges and needs of these teachers are generally not well understood. Therefore, this paper draws on the dilemmas faced by teachers of international students associated with professional, personal, ethical and educational aspects.

This paper reports on a Masters Research project that is designed to investigate the dilemmas that teachers of international students face in VET in Australia, particularly in Brisbane. This study uses a qualitative approach within the interpretive constructivist paradigm to gain real-life insights through responsive interviewing and inductive data analysis. While the data collection has been done, the analysis of data is in progress. Responsive interviews with teachers of VET with different academic and national backgrounds, ages, industry experience have identified particular understandings, ideologies and representations of what it means to be a teacher in today's multicultural VET environment; provoking both resistances and new pedagogical understanding of teacher dilemmas and their work environment through the eyes of teachers of international students.

The paper considers the challenges for the VET practitioners within the VET system while reflecting on the theme for the 2011 AVETRA conference, "Research in VET: Janus- Reflecting Back, Projecting Forward" by focusing particularly on "Rethinking pedagogies and pathways in VET work through the voice of VET workers".

Introduction

International education in Australia can be seen as a complex equation, which includes students and lecturers besides many other support structures. While the experiences and needs of international students have been widely researched, as yet,

there is limited research about the experiences and needs of their teachers. Teacher experiences can prove as a most significant missing link in meeting the needs of international students. After all, teachers are often the first point of contact that international students encounter. Therefore, this paper will draw the student and teacher threads together with a coherent strategy, viewing the situation holistically.

This paper is grounded on the stance that learning is more than economic necessity. Rather, it assumes that a quality education and reputation for quality are not possible when the person, that is the teacher; who also has a significant stake in quality education and who has invested a considerable amount of time, money and personal commitment (in terms of professional development, reflection) is not considered as integral to the education delivery standard (Bennett, 2006).

A recent study by Smith (2010) highlights international education as a source of political controversy in Australia. In such an environment, it could be easy to lose sight of the teaching and learning processes that are at the heart of vocational education and training (VET) for international students. The research reported in this paper seeks to identify key dilemmas that teachers of international students experience. It also seeks to identify further possible, but as yet unreported concerns of teachers of international students. It intends to make more explicit the roots of common difficulties experienced by teachers. In doing so, it aims to provide more effective strategies for coping with the problems teachers encounter in VET institutions and promote quality as a cornerstone of Australian education.

Literature Review

Vocational education and training (VET) focuses on the development of workplace skills to enable or improve the employment options for individuals (McLean, 2010, Choy, 2010). VET occupies a specific place in Australian education. Since the early 1970s VET has become specifically linked to economic development and the production of skills for the Australian workforce (Harris and Guthrie, 1995; Marginson 1997). Over the last decade significant reforms have taken place leading to a paradigm shift from qualification to competences and from teaching to learning (Grollmann & Rauner, 2007), the introduction of training packages, traineeships and VET in schools (Purcell, 2010). A number of new national frameworks were also developed for the sector, among them, the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF, 2007), the first mandated national quality system.

Since 1997, the number of international students studying in VET in Australia has soared (Gillard, 2009). In Australia, quality education for international students has become a common goal. Quality of education has been a focus of an extensive array of literature and academic discourse nationally and internationally. In the last decade, in particular, the focus on VET has increased (Baker, 2010).

Vocational Education and Training institutions, to varying degrees, are putting large amounts of effort, money, and staff time into internationalizing their campuses, without solid evidence of the effectiveness of the various aspects of internationalization (Bennett and Kane, 2009). Some of it is taking place but it is taking place at a very slow pace. A gap between theory and practice appears to exist. Teachers are often aware of what is needed but putting this into practice; that is operationalizing these ideals, is much more difficult (Bradley, 2010). To date, research has usually pointed out the difficulties faced by beginning or new teachers, but so far there is little evidence of dilemmas faced by teachers who took their degree decades ago. Examining their dilemmas and strategies they use may provide valuable insight to new teachers for developing or accommodating their strategies.

As revealed by this literature review, although most VET sector institutions concentrate on increasing student satisfaction with their educational experience, increasing participation in study abroad, enrolling more international students and internationalizing the curriculum, it appears that there has been little research to investigate the experiences of VET teachers at the onset and during their educational endeavor. The present study addresses this literature gap by identifying and discussing the implications of four key dilemmas which teachers of international students experience, namely: Professional Dilemmas, Ethical Dilemmas, Personal Dilemmas, and Educational Dilemmas. While some aspects are more specific to international education, others are common across VET. The interconnectedness of these four dilemmas is represented in the following model (Figure 1).

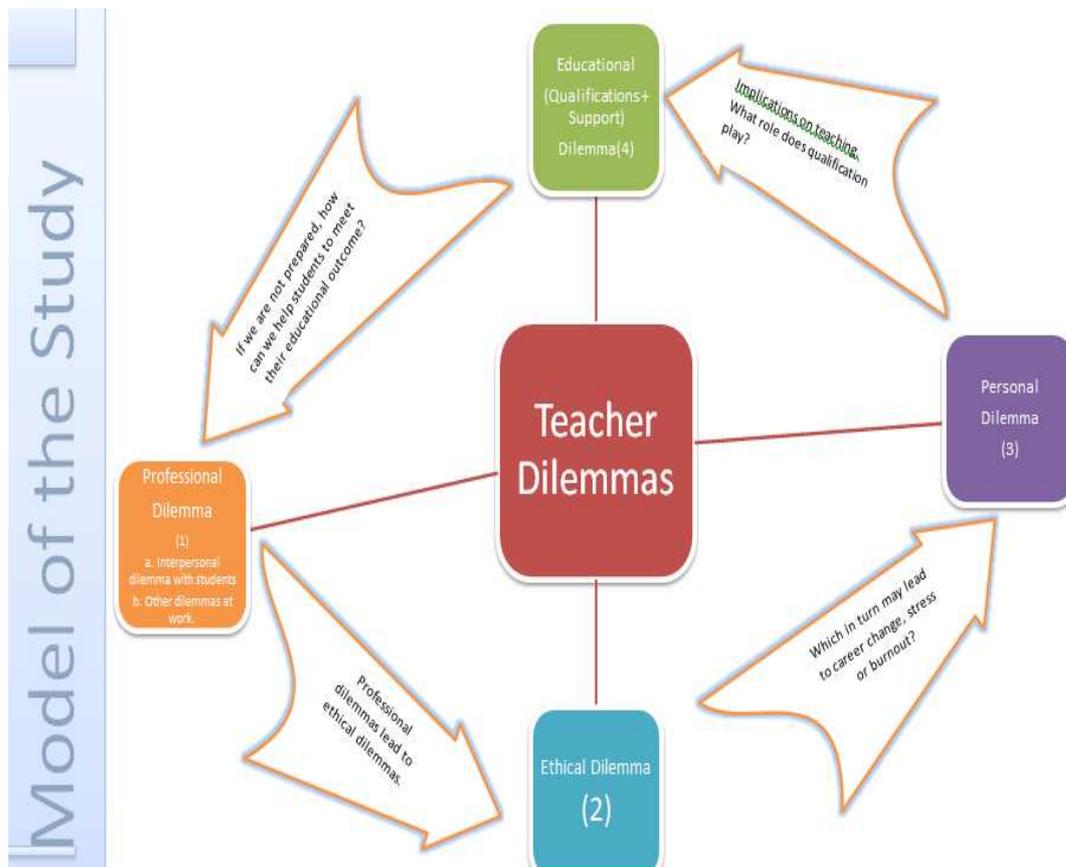


Figure 1: Model of Teacher Dilemmas

Professional dilemmas are associated with the challenges in the classroom and with the management. For example, increasing numbers of international students bring challenges for lecturers and international students alike, associated with addressing the needs of both groups within the context of international education becoming more pressurized and resource constrained. Teaching requires judgment, appropriate action and the capacity to reflect and revise decisions on the basis of observations and insight. 'Learning to teach' means gaining theoretical and practical knowledge along with the development of interpersonal skills. However, theory does not necessarily help in responding to the needs for ideas and activities that works in classroom (Loughran, 2007).

Ethical dilemmas are associated with moral values of teachers. For example, VET teachers are challenged by downsizing of staff, scarce resources, cost containment, changes in law and technology. Issues such as these are complex and they create ethical dilemmas that are difficult to resolve.

Personal dilemmas are associated with analyzing, problem solving, critical thinking, and resolution of conflicts with personal and organizational values.

Educational dilemmas can be classified in two groups as: Qualification of VET teacher and Professional Development.

Method

The intent of this research is to reveal the ways the participants conceptualize their experience of workplace dilemmas, to describe, “How things look from the point of view of the respondents” (Pratt, 1992, p. 204). Consequently, this study uses a qualitative approach within the interpretive constructivist paradigm to gain real-life insights through responsive interviewing and inductive data analysis. Data collection involved interviews with 14 VET teachers with different academic and national backgrounds, ages, industry experience. The participants are a mix of experienced and new teachers. This purposeful sampling ensures a differentiated community of participants and opens an opportunity to elicit the broadest range of perspectives from participants.

Preliminary findings about VET teacher’s dilemmas

The preliminary findings cover a range of issues associated with VET education in Brisbane, with the focus on the teacher dilemmas. A number of these findings are applicable across all educational sectors. According to the participants, they may be said to represent a strong and divergent base of VET Trainers wants and expectations. The responses revealed the depth of the teachers’ commitment to their students and their love of teaching that remains undiminished as they faced several dilemmas in the changing nature of teaching. The following categories have emerged, so far, in the course of analysis.

Colleges as PR hunters: Resources for students; Chase for student numbers

If international students are wrongly labeled as “PR Chasers¹” due to “dodgy colleges” as pointed out by Tran (2010); would it be inappropriate to label those colleges who give the shorter Certificate courses with lower or discounted fees and easy attendance options as “PR Hunters²”? These major issues created dilemmas for casual teachers working in two VET organizations (Public and Private) at the same time. As it came out during the first set of analyses, different VET organizations offer courses for different timeline, fees, as well as examination styles; one of them being open-book or sending papers to students via email. Also the lack of resources for students like textbooks was being justified against low fees.

National consistency has been an important organizing principle in the successive waves of VET reform in Australia for close to three decades (Parry and Robinson, 2010). Achieving national consistency was a cornerstone objective in the development and implementation of national industry Training Packages (Schofield and McDonald, 2004). The above-mentioned findings suggest a re-think of the concept of the same qualification for courses with varying duration of teaching and also suggest more consistency in course materials is needed.

¹ PR Chasers: Students enrolling in course and using Education as a tool to get PR

² PR Hunters: Colleges hunting for those students to enroll them and earn revenue

IELTS test and Criteria for Enrolment of students

All the participants had a common say that they had no trouble in communicating with students in English. According to them, the students somehow understood the teachers' English. However, teachers needed to be careful to use only the level of complexity of language necessary to teach and assess the relevant skills. This created the doubt in the mind of teachers regarding the IELTS test requirements. Teachers were very skeptical of the IELTS testing system. One of the participant recommended that when such prerequisite skill tests are undertaken in the future, they need to be handled more carefully. Also they expressed the desire to understand the admission process of students. Some of the participants had students with Master's degrees in their classes doing Diploma courses.

Qualification/RPL

Lack of teaching qualifications and a tendency towards RPL contributed to teachers' dilemmas. To reduce the cost of training, and cater for the fast-growing demand of VET trainers, elaborate skills recognition process such as RPL was deployed. However, a common dilemma that came out of teacher participants was that those experienced professionals lacked "people skills" for dealing with students. They see Certificate IV in Training and Assessment as just an essential paper with a "tick in a box" that authorizes someone to go and teach without even basic teaching skills. Skills recognition processes exist for experienced professionals who wish to gain formal credit for their accumulated experience, but evidence of the overall effectiveness of these strategies was not available as they lacked the basic teaching qualities which can be gained only through practical experience in classrooms with international students.

Participants suggest that a unit of competency on generic teaching skills could be included in the compulsory VET teacher qualification, the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. The participants feel that the coaching and mentoring programs should be used widely in each of the VET organizations to bridge gaps between theory and practice so that the qualified teachers with Bachelors or Masters in Education can learn from the hands-on experience of those working in the field for a long time; and the later can benefit from the trained teachers' skills in handling students in classroom environment and dealing with their complaints. As expressed by the participants, "If we see VET as an export sector than we must see our students as our customers and good business can thrive only with good customer service/relation skills. More management training or development is needed to take account of the Australian VET context".

Social Inclusion of Teachers

Lack of orientation for VET teachers is another aspect of teacher dilemma. Meaningful alignment occurs when people value their work environment and feel “in place” with their workplace. The use of orientation programs and briefing mechanisms are meant for smoother transition of new teachers into the system but participants’ complain of not having any orientation or being left to discover things on their own. Also the attitude of management towards teachers is one of the reasons for the high teacher turnover. The Management seldom took feedback from teacher of the class or teachers’ need for extra support if any. One teacher was enraged by a lack of management support for acquiring and maintaining computers and facilities for the new technologies; lack of resources for students like books, technology, computer labs, and printer.

Professional Development/Industry Experience:

Having to pay for their professional development was one of the main issues teachers had especially casual teachers who have to bear the cost of industry experience every year to prove them being up-to-date for holding onto a job. Although all of the teachers enthusiastically expressed the need for ongoing professional development activities, it emerged that they were also aligned in their shared dislike of being directed to attend professional development events at their own expense. The participants subscribed to a view of lifelong learning. However, they did concede that if they needed to work in a new area that demanded additional skills, these should be acquired through training funded by the organization and in work hours.

One of the participants explained that he shows a level of agency in responding to the need to undertake training, describing the experience as ‘challenging’ with full-time work. He also associates with colleagues in the organization but, at the same time, he contrasts himself with others who enrolled at the same time as he did, but fast-tracked their course and or copied the weekly assignment for PD from the senior staff.

Audits

Based on the open-ended comments, participants mentioned experiences around the audit process. Some saw it as responsible for excessive documentation. At the other end of the scale, three respondents expressed varying degrees of ignorance of the AQTF 2007 (Audits requirements).

One of the respondents commented that the auditors just came and compared the question paper with the performance criteria in order to see if all performance criteria’s were covered but the auditors had no real idea of the subject area, in order to assess if that piece of assessment was fair, good or poor quality. One of the participants strongly felt and questioned if somebody has audited whether the auditors have background knowledge of the subject.

Discussion

Despite of all these challenges, the teachers seem to be more committed and were not thinking about transitioning to another occupation. For them, their passion for teaching makes them care for international students and want to deliver education to the best of their abilities in spite of all these challenges.

The teachers' motivations and concerns are evident in the study's findings. For example, one of the participants commented: "Good teachers made good teachers of overseas students" and ignore their personal dilemmas to give justice to students who come to the country from overseas. The major motivating factor for teachers is the opportunity to teach students from diverse backgrounds and the potential to pass on the knowledge and skills students' need to learn, to see them work towards achieving their dreams.

The analysis of data so far clearly indicates that the VET teachers see themselves as integral to learning, not just in the sense of the training on basis of teachers' qualification and industry experience, but also in the sense of moral commitment to contributing to the students' learning experience. VET trainers are learning providers; a role that clearly exceeds merely teaching role. From a practical or procedural standpoint, VET teachers' dilemmas bring ideologies and reality together as their first-hand experience of contributing to educational productivity. Their dilemmas are made explicit through the contradictions of roles and expectations as quality education providers who must ensure students are gainfully supported as learners. Conceptually, there is a complex and dynamic interdependency of providing quality VET education with teacher contribution. The teachers realized how crucial their participation was, not just for the project but for themselves as well; it enhanced their commitment to continue improving VET pedagogy. For example one participant clearly expressed how important this research is for the welfare of teachers. It seems that everybody wanted to do something but was waiting for someone to do it so that the voice of the teacher is heard.

The research findings confirm that in order to facilitate quality education, a detailed investigation of the above-mentioned dilemmas is required that acts as a map to guide both teachers and educational departments in their quest for quality teaching and learning. It should be recognized that the learning and development should not be an 'add on' but rather should be an integrated activity within an educational setting.

As pointed by one of the participant, "Business success largely depends on the quality of the customer service that employees provide with their specialist skills and knowledge". Hence the quality of service provided to international students at all levels, educational, administrative, etc. is of great importance. The study is significant for student satisfaction and continuous improvement perspectives, particularly as the VET, it appears, is now the solution for all (economic) problems; it is intrinsically

linked to and interwoven with legislation, policies and practices associated with trade and export income; also with welfare, with migration and citizenship (completed full fee training for visas); and with industrial relations, labour force requirements, skills forecasts and future planning of productivity and population (Butler and Shore, 2010). If VET is to meet such diverse expectations, substantial changes are required, and education and training systems should be re-oriented in such a way as to impart a broad range of life skills.

Conclusion:

This paper has presented preliminary findings of a study which reveals dilemmas that VET teachers experience in teaching international students. When completed, this study will support VET teachers in their practice whilst enabling them to engage in the debate about the dilemmas they experience while striving for high quality teaching. In this way, the research will also benefit international students in their quest for quality learning opportunities at Australian VET institutions. .

Acknowledgment

In the development of this project I would like to acknowledge the crucial role of a number of people: I wish to acknowledge the support of the VET Teachers in participating in the research on which this paper is based. I would also like to acknowledge Dr Hilary Hughes, my Principal supervisor in the MEd programme, for inspiring and uplifting my spirits; for encouraging me to be more proactive, generating extraordinary confidence within me; my Associate Supervisor, Dr Roderick Neilsen for guiding and leading me the right ways; Dr Sarojini Choy and Dr Allan Luke for their vision, knowledge and experience.

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