

TAFE teaching qualifications AT THE CROSSROADS

By Pat Forward

The TAFE and VET systems in Australia have reached a hiatus over their teaching workforce. The CIV Training and Assessment Training Package (CIVTAA) has lost the trust of both the profession and industry. State and Territory governments have managed underfunding of the TAFE system by casualising the workforce and by failing to provide adequate support for the acquisition of appropriate VET teaching qualifications and professional development. As the TAFE teachers who are the centrepiece of an internationally renowned public TAFE system move to retirement, the sector faces a crisis in which there is no widely accepted or supported educational qualification for TAFE teachers. If Australia is to maintain the trust of the community in the VET system it must move quickly to engage in a fulsome debate with the profession, and with other stakeholders about the future of the TAFE teaching workforce.

In an irony which does not escape most TAFE teachers, the VET sector delivers national industry qualifications to a large section of the workforce, and yet the VET teaching

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workforce has no professionally accepted teaching qualification for its own workforce. Indeed, the teaching workforce in the sector is one of the least qualified and most casualised in the country. The CIVTAA has become the de facto minimum qualification for a range of people teaching, training and assessing in RTOs, including all TAFE institutes. This is in part because all organisations who “deliver” accredited training need to be registered and the Essential Standards for Registration require teachers and trainers to hold the CIVTAA, or demonstrate equivalent competencies, or work

under the direct supervision of a person who holds these competencies. When this combines with casualisation, an aging workforce, and more than ten years of underfunding, it is a potent mix. Governments, state and federal have turned their backs, ignoring the critical work of TAFE teachers, neglecting the workforce, denying them access to and funding of either qualifications or professional development and ignoring concerns about the quality of the CIVTAA.

Competency based training (CBT) and Training Packages, and the increased focus on workplace delivery, have led to a fragmentation of the work of teachers. “Training” and “assessment” are seen as separate from, lesser and easier than teaching. Where *teaching* is seen to involve professional judgement in inducting students into evolving complex bodies of knowledge and practice, training is seen to be merely ‘delivering’ pre-packaged industry ‘skills’ to student consumers. *Training* is seen to be the educational equivalent of supplying a McDonalds at a drive-through. This denigrating view of what a TAFE teacher *is and does* at

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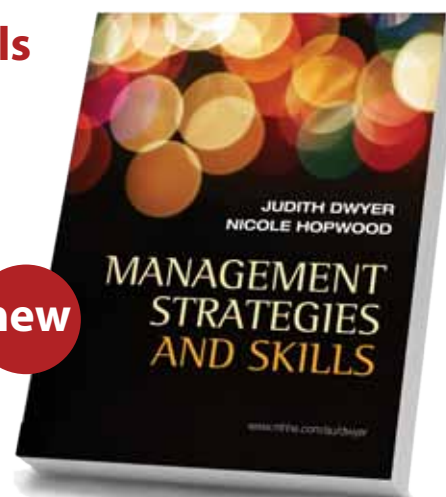
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the policy making level is a key obstacle to the development of professional qualifications for TAFE and VET teachers generally.

Every State and Territory now has high levels of hourly-paid or casual employment of TAFE teachers. This is justified under the rubric of the need for teachers teaching in the sector to have a close connection with contemporary workplaces. There may be good reason, at times, to bring in “industry specialists”, though this needs to be undertaken by teachers. The single most compelling reason for employers to use casuals is their cost. State and territory governments have used insecure employment to deal with underfunding of the system, which effectively means that teachers (both permanent and casual) have borne the brunt of underfunding. In some states and territories, a teacher can be employed casually, with a full teaching load, yet have no teaching qualification or access to professional development or any other support from the system to gain teaching qualifications or skills.

Governments have failed to keep track of the TAFE and VET workforce. Despite repeated acknowledgement that the workforce is overly-casualised, has insufficient professional development and is an “aging” workforce with many close to retirement, little else is known. There is no publicly available or accurate information about the size or composition of the workforce, the proportion of casual teachers, or the number of teachers with teaching or other qualifications.

These developments highlight the many contradictions and dichotomies in the contemporary TAFE and VET system. TAFE teachers must have up to date industry knowledge, skills and experience, and TAFE needs to recruit directly from industry for these. In the current environment, however, individuals recruited in this way are actively discouraged from gaining education qualifications because it costs money and allegedly reduces productivity. Many new employees are required to pay for the TAA, and the costs can be quite high. Many employers do not support teachers studying for additional education qualifications, arguing that they are not necessary for the “delivery” of training package qualifications. Teachers employed directly from industry to teach in their specialised industry areas are hungry for the training and professional development which will allow them to work effectively in a challenging new occupation. The system neglects these people, employing them insecurely and leaving them to operate in isolation.

These problems will only intensify as the



current, relatively well-qualified workforce moves to retirement.

The skills and knowledge that TAFE and VET teachers require are greater than they ever were. TAFE and VET students range in age from their early teens into their late sixties, are in work, looking for work or attempting to move out of their current job, and are often accessing education for the first time. Many require literacy and numeracy and other support to underpin the courses they enrol in.

TAFE and VET students must have access to improved pathways between schools and TAFE and tertiary education, which emphasises the need for teachers in the sector to have a deep knowledge of the educational and learning needs of all students. They also require access to, and knowledge about, the range of vocational and educational pathways available to them.

John Spierings describes the complexity of learning and the changed expectations of students in the sector. He argues that they expect to learn “not so much by being attentive consumers of knowledge as by actively helping to shape and expand the frontiers of their knowledge” and that vocational education is crucial to the process:

If students are truly to be at the centre of learning, then linking, brokerage, guidance, advice and intermediary roles will no longer be discretionary, instead they will be vital in turning large and impersonal systems into accessible networks.

Done well, these roles represent a powerful way of enabling students to build the self-reliance and informed decision-making necessary to ensure that learning is better accessed and work is well negotiated.¹

Students and their expectations are not the only things which have changed. The importance of workplace assessment and delivery has increased the need for of high level knowledge and skills amongst teachers. An effective teaching qualification gives teachers the capacity to operate in a range of different learning environments and contexts. A teaching qualification provides access to knowledge and theories of learning, and techniques of teaching. Qualified teachers are able to adapt their skills when they encounter new, different and challenging students and environments. A VET

teaching qualification provides teachers with the opportunity to incorporate the disciplinary knowledge of their industry occupation into the teaching and learning which occurs in the VET environment.

A significant feature of contemporary times has been the silencing of the voices of TAFE teachers and the TAFE teaching profession. TAFE teachers are “acted upon”, rather than acting. Studies of the profession highlight the pace of change within, and there is widespread acknowledgment of the changed nature of TAFE teachers’ work. But the fragmentation of TAFE teachers’ professional lives has worked against the capacity to eke out time for the types of collegial work and discussion which are necessary for a profession to develop and maintain a self conscious identity.

In summary, the issues which confront us at the present time are complex, interrelated and urgent.

The profession needs to be engaged now, to avoid losing the knowledge, “know how” and experience of this generation of TAFE teachers. It is this group of teachers who have mediated the changes which have occurred, and who understand the critical nature of the collective knowledge of vocational teaching and learning which they have. At the core of all this is the need to capture TAFE teachers’ own knowledge of their education and training needs, and the way in which these are symbolised and captured by teaching qualifications.

A highly regarded, professionally supported TAFE teaching qualification (or suite of qualifications) is fundamental to the future of a high quality TAFE and VET system. The sector is as critical to the future of Australian society, and the qualifications and professional development of those who work in TAFE and VET are essential components of how it plays its role in the future.

Recent events in the private international VET “market” highlight this. As the regulatory system collapses, and as governments scramble to protect the market they have created, one thing remains clear – the community trusts qualified teachers to educate their young people, and to guarantee quality. TAFE’s enviable reputation as a high quality public provider is due in no small part to the community’s trust in the qualifications of its teachers. ❖

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¹ John Spierings — *The Australian TAFE Teacher*, Spring 2007