

# *Options for the future of VET teaching* **QUALIFICATIONS** and *continuing professional development*

*Leesa Wheelahan is leading a project on the quality of VET teaching, teacher qualifications and continuing professional development and is seeking teacher input on these matters.*

**Dr Leesa Wheelahan**

**U**NPRECEDENTED attention is being paid to VET teachers and the teaching qualifications and continuing professional development (CPD) that they need. There are numerous projects on VET teaching at the moment. This includes the Productivity Commission inquiry into the VET workforce, several projects by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), and the project that I am leading on the quality of VET teaching, qualifications and CPD.

This is a welcome change to the last twenty years in which VET teachers have been largely invisible, reflected in policy by a lack of appreciation and understanding of the complexity of VET teaching and the role of VET teachers. Many teachers have felt disempowered and deskilled through the policy changes of the last twenty years, and that they are not valued. The fact that there are national teaching awards for school teachers and higher education teachers but not VET teachers reinforces this perception.

However, VET teachers and VET teaching are now central to the achievement of government policy objectives. We need to increase productivity, workforce participation and social inclusion to remain internationally



competitive and build a prosperous, tolerant, inclusive and resilient Australia.

The Council of Australian Governments has set ambitious targets for participation in education and training and attainment of qualifications to meet these challenges.

Tertiary education will have to expand,

and VET will need to grow significantly if these targets are to be met. VET must support existing teachers to maintain and build on their expert industry knowledge and deepen their knowledge and skills in teaching. It also needs to support the many new teachers, who will have to be recruited very soon to

replace an age-skewed workforce, to develop their professional expertise as teachers.

Our project has produced a paper that presents a range of options for public consultation on the way we can support quality teaching in VET and quality student outcomes. It presents options on:

- the structure of the VET teaching workforce
- recruiting and retaining teachers
- preparing new teachers and supporting the continuing development of existing teachers. This includes options on VET teacher qualifications, mentoring new teachers, CPD, and maintaining industry currency
- research on VET pedagogy and models of teaching
- registration and accreditation, and
- ensuring the quality of VET teaching and evaluating its outcomes.

We welcome teachers' views about these options. Indeed, teachers' input has been critical thus far in shaping the project and the options paper. We interviewed a range of stakeholders for the project, and this included managers and teachers in nine different types of registered training organisations. The project also included a web survey that attracted responses from almost 1,400

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participants, including hundreds of teachers. Information on how to respond to the options paper is provided at the end of this article.

Our project was shaped by the understanding that VET teaching is more complex and diverse than in either schools or higher education. Demands on VET teachers are increasing as work changes, skill requirements increase, new industries emerge, society becomes more complex, and VET is called upon to deliver more ambitious government objectives, which includes increasing the level of participation by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

VET qualifications will need to ensure that students have language, literacy and numeracy skills, 'green skills', and the knowledge and skills they need for lifelong learning and for their working lives and to

participate in their communities.

These imperatives, and the fact that VET teachers now teach a range of qualifications that include higher education qualifications and VET in schools, means that being an industry expert is a necessary but not a sufficient requirement for being a VET teacher.

VET needs to support teachers to develop the knowledge and skills that will help them become expert teachers as well as industry experts. The need to be both an industry and teaching expert is reflected in the trend internationally towards further professionalising the VET teaching workforce as many countries try to increase the qualifications of their VET workforce and improve CPD for teachers.

One of Australia's achievements over the last thirty years has been the creation of a national VET system, but this may have been at the cost of homogenising VET which no longer takes account of the increasing diversity of its students, programs and teaching contexts. VET teaching has been defined primarily as training for the workplace, with less emphasis on the educational purposes of VET. However, the multiple purposes and contexts of VET

continued on page 10 »

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teaching as well as the needs of diverse student populations now mean that we need to rethink the nature of VET teacher qualifications and CPD.

For example, teaching VET in schools is quite different to teaching degrees, and this is different to teaching in prisons or refugee support centres or on the job. VET in schools teachers may require knowledge about adolescents and pedagogic strategies that are similar to school teachers. Teachers teaching disengaged young people with low level literacy and numeracy skills must be highly skilled, and similar challenges arise for other teachers teaching the most disadvantaged students. Those teaching degrees in TAFE may require more opportunities to develop scholarship in their discipline and have developmental needs similar to higher education teachers in universities. Teaching high level VET qualifications has similarities to teaching the early years of higher education. Teaching plumbing is different to teaching community development or business studies, and teaching hairdressing is different to teaching electricians.

While there are shared knowledge bases across all forms of teaching, it is no longer possible to define a single type of VET teacher given the diversity of purposes, contexts, outcomes, occupational fields and students. This requires teachers to draw on diverging knowledge bases and skills. All teachers need general pedagogic knowledge, knowledge about constructing curriculum, knowledge of their specialist area (content knowledge), knowledge of students and their characteristics, and of educational contexts and the broader social purposes of learning. This is necessary if they are to understand who their students are and how this relates to their future work roles and participation in society. However, they also need specialist pedagogic content knowledge, which is knowledge about how to teach in their content area, and support to deepen the underpinning

knowledge of their content area.

This requires a greater emphasis on teachers' specialist areas than has been the case hitherto in Australia, in contrast to

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VET teacher training in England and Europe. Instead, we have had a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to VET teacher training, and this has not included study in specialist areas.

One of the models we are suggesting is that all teachers undertake the same preparatory qualification, while their higher level studies include study in their specialist area.

Moreover, we are also suggesting that the model of CPD in Australia must change to focus on teachers' specialist areas. Most CPD in Australia is generic and very little is focused on extending teachers' knowledge of their industrial field of practice or how to teach the specific knowledge and skills in their industry. Researchers in schools have found that the best CPD is that which focuses on what teachers have to teach and how to teach it. If VET were to adopt this approach to CPD it would require new partnerships between government, RTOs, skills councils, professional bodies and universities.

Supporting teachers to maintain and extend their industry currency is intrinsic to the integrity of the VET system. There are

many financial and logistical difficulties in organising industry placements, but there is also not much focus on what teachers should actually *do* while on industry placement. It may be more productive if industry placements were used for teachers to undertake a project about teaching in their vocational discipline, so they use the industry placement to develop new teaching and learning strategies or resources to reflect innovations in the workplace, or to contribute to change in the workplace.

Rather than undermining learning for work, a broader understanding of the role of teachers will enrich learning for work, whether this learning takes place on campus, in the workplace or in some other context. ❖

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*She is leading a project on the quality of VET teaching, teacher qualifications and continuing professional development. This project has been funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and managed by the Australian College of Educators.*

The *Quality of teaching in VET: options paper* and all other project reports are available from the Australian College of Teachers website: <https://austcolled.com.au/announcement/study-quality-teaching-vet>.

Submissions to the *Options paper* close on 4 October, but we would be pleased to hear from teachers after that date, even if it is just a few paragraphs.

More information on all the other projects on VET teaching can be found in the recent NCVET report by Hugh Guthrie (2010), *Professional development in the VET workforce*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide, <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2279.html>. The web address for the Productivity Commission's project on the VET workforce is: <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/study/education-workforce/vocational>. It includes the 58 submissions that were made to the review.