



# The role of frontline managers in TAFE

## *A reality check*

By Dr Stephen Black

Head teachers occupy a key role at the management/teaching interface in TAFE NSW. They are employed as specialist educational leaders with responsibilities for managing the physical, financial and human resources of their teaching sections, and they also have a teaching program in their sections of up to fourteen hours per week. According to one researcher, their role is "where the rubber hits the road as far as business is concerned" (Mulcahy 2003:57). They are the linchpin connecting TAFE policy and strategy to the frontline services involving teachers and their students.

### The rhetoric of change

Head teachers in their leadership roles are expected to assume new identities in this current era of unparalleled change in vocational education and training. In the research literature, for example, there are calls for "transformational" management leadership (Callan et al 2008) and the need for "new", and more recently, "advanced" VET practitioners (Mitchell 2009). These practitioners are expected to be creative, innovative and completely in tune with the needs of their customers in a demand-driven VET sector. TAFE NSW corporate policy

How has the role of head teachers in TAFE NSW changed in recent years?

This article is based on a recent report, *Head Teacher Voices: Insights into the changing role of head teachers in TAFE NSW* (Black 2009), published by the TAFE Teachers Association of the NSW Teachers Federation.

reinforces the idea that *Doing Business in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (TAFE NSW 2007) requires an entrepreneurial culture and working differently and more flexibly with industry and communities. Clearly, head teachers as educational leaders are expected to embrace and promote these changes.

### The reality of change: A research study

During 2008 a questionnaire was emailed to head teachers in TAFE NSW Institutes seeking

information on how they perceived their role had changed in recent years. One hundred and nine head teachers responded with their personal accounts explaining their reality. Over 90% of respondents said there had been "considerable change" in their role and nearly 60% expressed dissatisfaction to some degree with their job. Interestingly, many head teachers said they loved their work as it related to teaching and educational leadership in their own disciplinary areas, but it was other aspects of their role that negated much of their enthusiasm for their work.

### The administrative burden

Overwhelmingly, the head teachers in this survey felt the major change was the burden of routine administration that had the effect of occupying the major part of their time. Comments from different head teachers included:

*"I spend an ENORMOUS amount of time now in front of a computer screen, providing reports rather than working with staff and students."*

*"Most days I sit in front of a computer 4 to 8 hours a day programming classes for students, booking rooms, auditing processes, chasing workplace evidence ..."*

*"Just the sheer amount of administration, often tedious, unrewarding and boring ..."*

These comments should hardly seem surprising in light of Rice's (2005) earlier research which indicated that excessive "administrivia" was compromising the educational leadership role of head teachers. Her research, however, related to the period 2003-4, and the situation is likely to have been further exacerbated since then.

### Audit compliance

One major element of excessive routine administration cited by the head teachers was the increase in audit compliance. A decade ago there were relatively few such audits. Now, every head teacher has experienced audits. Typically, as one head teacher commented, "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." Another head teacher commented, "After three audits in 18 months ... I told my auditor he was a major problem in me getting my work done."

Head teachers spoke of the "never-ending" audits, of the fact that they felt powerless in dealing with them and that they complied largely out of fear of the consequences of failing to do so. As one head teacher commented, "I dread the day I face a 'big' audit because no matter how hard I work, I know I am not meeting all the audit requirements."

### Extra responsibilities and electronic systems

Head teachers explained that their administrative duties were ever expanding as support staff were reduced or redirected. There was the perception, for example, that they were doing many tasks that were more befitting Human Resources clerical staff, such as recruitment procedures or chasing up qualifications. Electronic roll books, known as CLAMS, and the expansion of other electronic systems, such as online enrolments called MEVI, meant head teachers were doing tasks previously undertaken by administrative clerks. Further, new students groups such as Centrelink students often required additional time and administrative effort. One head teacher said he resented being "a compliance officer for Centrelink". Often these students had additional social and health needs. International students were another relatively new student group that required additional time spent on administration and compliance.

### The results of the pressure – what gives?

With most head teachers bound up with so much routine administration and compliance,

**'We are so focused on getting the paperwork correct we are losing the ability to be creative.'**

other aspects of their role were inevitably neglected. According to the head teachers, what is neglected is their own teaching and important aspects of their educational leadership. One head teacher commented, in relation to his own teaching, "If any teacher working in the section did that (lack of preparation) I would have to have a talk with them to rectify the problem." In relation to their broader educational leadership role, head teachers said they no longer had the time to mentor new teachers properly or monitor teaching in their sections. Time to meet with other teachers and discuss pedagogy, that is, "really sitting down and having the time to think things through in a consolidated approach", were limited. This lack of "networking" time extended beyond the sections to working in the community and with industry and this clearly has implications for the ability of practitioners to be creative and innovative.

### How much support is provided to head teachers?

Head teachers were concerned that support from other TAFE staff was often insufficient. Fellow teachers provided much support, as did most administrative staff, though their numbers were often being cut back or redirected to other duties. Some line managers were also very supportive, especially those on campus. However, other managers, often geographically remote in their Institute offices, were often seen to be more concerned with bottom-line budgets and their own career paths than providing support to head teachers. Views on professional development varied with positive and negative comments, but in one area, induction to the head teacher position, support was considered lacking and most head teachers learnt on-the-job with informal help from other head teachers.

### Tensions between rhetoric and reality

In conclusion, while head teachers play a pivotal role in TAFE NSW, this survey indicated they clearly have concerns relating to their role in the current climate. Leading VET researchers and TAFE corporate vision statements have outlined the new identities expected of their

frontline managers, but being creative, innovative and entrepreneurial in dealing differently with communities and industry has to be seen alongside the realities of the head teacher role as seen by the head teachers. This is where we find the tensions. These new identities may be problematic for head teachers to assume if they spend ever more of their time in front of computer screens dealing with routine administration and compliance matters and receiving inconsistent support from other sections of TAFE. Significantly, one head teacher stated, "We are so focused on getting the paperwork correct we are losing the ability to be creative." The findings of this survey would suggest the need to address the working conditions and concerns of head teachers in order to maximise the take-up of new VET practitioner identities. ♦

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*Dr Stephen Black is a Research Associate at the University of Technology, Sydney. He has taught in TAFE NSW for more than 20 years, including 16 years as a Head Teacher.*

