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Juggling professional identities: perspectives of a developing researcher in a study on sessional VET practitioners

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JUGGLING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES: PERSPECTIVES OF A DEVELOPING RESEARCHER IN A STUDY ON SESSIONAL VET PRACTIONERS

Abstract

This paper has a dual purpose. First it details key findings of a research study conducted in 2011 for the National Council for Vocational Educational Research (NCVER) Community of Practice Scholarship Program investigating the implications of the increased use of sessional workers in the VET sector. The study used narrative from a purposively selected sample of sessional VET workers in a Western Australian State Provider Registered Training Organisation. Key findings include the characteristics and capabilities of sessional VET practitioners; workforce planning and development strategies to support sessional VET practitioners; and their contributions to an academic culture. Second it discusses the sensitivities required when researchers turn the lens on their own organisations to look within and critically assess practice. This type of research needs to be conducted with a particular focus on ethical data collection as well as careful and sensitive reporting. The paper presents these issues as a first hand reflection by the researcher who conducted the study as a novice. A significant issue included juggling the various professional identities which the researcher currently holds; ie researcher, employee, VET practitioner delivering and assessing in teaching and learning and as a Union representative.

Introduction

The use of a highly casualised workforce is not new in the Australian Vocational Education Training (VET) sector with the sessional practitioner the dominant mode of employment (AEU, 2010). In 2005, Forward (2005) reported that sessional practitioners made up less than ten per cent; however whilst authoritative statistical figures are not forthcoming, Forward (2011, verbal communication) reported that in 2011, 50 - 60% of Australian VET practitioners are employed on a sessional basis. With this ever increasing use of sessional staff the way VET is delivered and received is changing. The employment of sessional rather than contract or permanent VET practitioners allows significant workforce cost reductions for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) hampered by current competitive VET sector funding arrangements (Productivity Commission Report, 2011). This paper presents key findings of a 2011 NCVER funded research project investigating perspectives of a sample of sessional VET practitioners on workforce planning and strategies to support them within the academic culture. In addition the paper discusses these issues as a first hand reflection by the researcher who conducted the study as a novice while working alongside the participants engaged in the study.

What is a sessional VET practitioner?

There is great variance in what may constitute a typical sessional VET practitioner, with a sub category of industry experts who "...are expected to be suitably skilled in the practices of teaching, training and assessment, and also possess sound industry currency" (Productivity Commission, 2011, p.35). Strong links with industry are vital to enable VET organisations to maintain industry currency as required for compliance with Australian Quality Training

Framework (AQTF) standards. Many sessional VET practitioners may have their main employment in their industry, providing their expert skills and experience of current industry practices for one-off, guest lecturer appearances, or as continuing practicum tutors to students. These sessional VET practitioners, who are industry experts, have a more intermittent involvement in VET sector "...and might not be required to be as highly skilled in training and assessment as VET practitioners..." (Productivity Commission, 2011, p.36). Shorne (2008, p.33) examined various aspects of sessional VET practitioners' personal lives through this mode of employment, highlighting they are 'by no means a homogenous group'. Several sub-categories of working as sessional were suggested: women with family responsibilities; after retirement from previous employment; having another/or other employment responsibilities (i.e. own business or employment at other VET organisations); having study responsibilities.

Sessional VET practitioners come at a cost

The increasing presence of sessional practitioners in the VET sector comes at a cost to the quality teaching and learning practices, or pedagogies (Kift, 2003), the academic culture of RTOs and the workers themselves (Shorne, 2008). The overly prevalent employment of sessional VET practitioners also holds implications for quality pedagogies and for the workload of others (Australian Education Union (AEU), Community Colleges Australia (CCA), Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWRA) submissions in Productivity Commission, 2011). Research that specifically relates to the Australian VET sector is limited; however study findings on the casualisation of practitioners within the tertiary education sector indicate the challenges of managing the phenomenon of a casualised academic workforce. "Casual and part-time staff complain of being isolated from the university, being unable to participate in decision making, having no access to support facilities or development opportunities and being subject to arbitrary fluctuations in employment" (Kift, 2003, p.4).

The increasing complexity of the roles and responsibilities of all VET practitioners is widely acknowledged (Junor, 2005, Kift, 2003, Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011) and is currently receiving significant national attention (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011; Productivity Commission, 2011; Skills Australia, 2011). Skills Australia (2011) and the Productivity Commission (2011) focused strongly on the need for higher levels of skills and professionalism required in the VET workforce. However, these reports provide limited strategies that develop the capabilities of sessional VET practitioners. Guthrie, Perkins and Nguyen (2006) argue that much of the knowledge and skills unique to VET are vested in the permanent academic workforce with little transfer to the sessional VET practitioner.

Organisational cultures that value the use and development of academic skills and knowledge to enable VET practitioners to provide quality pedagogies should be the guiding vision for strongly influencing the design and implementation of workforce development plans for all RTOs (Clayton, Fisher, Harris, Bateman & Brown, 2008). It is argued that all VET practitioners are required to play an integral role in contributing to a cohesive academic culture. Kift (2003) calls for a paradigm shift towards institutional assimilation and a sense of belonging. She argues if properly developed, an inclusive culture that embraces and values the sessional practitioner will work to the organisations advantage.

Recruitment and retention of sessional VET practitioners

The current VET workforce is highly casualised, underqualified and ageing (Productivity Commission 2011; AEU 2010). Much of the workforce is set to retire (AEU, 2010; Guthrie et al, 2006). It is highly likely that those that do retire will have been employed in permanent positions with higher levels of teaching qualifications (AEU, 2010) and replaced with sessional VET practitioners. However, limited research on the capabilities of sessional VET practitioners has been conducted. There are questions remaining on how staff within RTOs are recruited, supported and evaluated on the quality of teaching and learning, particularly sessional VET practitioners who are often not required to undertake performance appraisal processes from Managers. Retaining a consistent workforce of high quality teaching staff may be an issue for organisations, if there is a regular turnover of sessional VET practitioners (Smith cited in Productivity Commission Report, 2011). The regular turnover of sessional VET practitioners diminishes the development of workforce capability and a cohesive academic culture. Kift (2003) argues that training organisations that fail to develop and maintain sessional VET practitioners with quality pedagogies run the risk of having a depleted, low skilled pool of practitioners to draw on.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used for this research underpinned by a grounded theory approach. The intent of a grounded theory is to generate or discover a theory or abstract the analytical schema of a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation grounded in the experience and perceptions of the participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). The researcher, as the primary instrument, works closely with the real world, assuming an inductive stance to enable the results and findings to be grounded in the empirical world (Patton, 1990). The data collected is conceptualised and reduced, 'elaborating categories in terms of their properties and dimensions, and relating through a series of prepositional statements' (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.12) or coding. This allows for the emergence of sensitising concepts from the data (McConnell, 2002) thus alerting the researcher to possible avenues for future investigation (Clarke, 1997). Theory grows out of this data, but is also grounded in the data (Moustakas, 1994). A grounded theory approach was important to this study as the researcher encouraged participants to identify their personal characteristics and capabilities that may influence their role as an educator and their contributions to the academic culture at their organisation. The interview data collected for the study provided a voice for them to identify the specific support they would like to assist them in developing and implementing quality teaching and learning practices. Qualitative research is a 'fluid' discussion between the interviewer and the participants and, as such, there are opportunities to probe the responses provided and explore them further, as appropriate. Data collected from interviews has been cross analysed through a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) and emergent generalized themes have been developed. Further, the analysis of the study's qualitative data generalises the relations to represent the underlying variations between the participants (Godau, 2002).

The three key research questions underpinning the research study included:

1 What are the characteristics and capabilities of VET practitioner employed on a sessional basis? How capable do they feel in their academic practices?

2 How do they perceive their strengths as educators; their impact on their organisation; and their relationships with others, being their co-workers, their managers and their students?

3   What support would they like to assist them in developing and implementing quality pedagogies, which contribute to an academic culture?

The project investigated the different perceptions of sessional VET practitioners from a State Provider Registered Training Organisation. On-the-ground observations and semi-structured interviews with six sessional VET practitioners, purposively selected, were used to develop an in depth understanding of their characteristics, capabilities and their required support needs and appear as narratives in the research findings. One participant worked predominately in workplace training with trainees, all others worked exclusively with students in classroom teaching environments. The ages of participants varied between 34 and 63 years.

Findings

Characteristics and capabilities

Sessional VET practitioners deliver teaching and assessment in a variety of modes; AQF levels; and across a range of specialised vocational areas. Participants' lengths of employment ranged from six months to three years. Their hours of employment ranged from two hours to eighteen hours per week. Generally, the participants expected to continue their work as a VET practitioner, although they indicated a desire to secure more hours of teaching as well as a secure mode of employment. However, some participants preferred to remain as a sessional to suit their lifestyle; travel; study or other employment opportunities. They enjoyed the flexibility of increasing and decreasing their hours as it suited them. One participant reported being mentored as part of a succession plan to replace a retiring permanent VET practitioner, in order to take on responsibilities for teaching at higher AQF levels of the vocational qualification.

Interestingly, the motivation behind undertaking sessional VET teaching was not tied to financial reward. Without exception, all of the participants expressed how rewarding they found their teaching and assessment roles. They explained that they gained a high level of satisfaction in making a 'difference' to their students' academic lives and the impact that their profession had on their own lives.

Industry vs vocational skills

The study participants commenced teaching and assessment with significant skills, knowledge and current experience in their vocational industry. However, they felt that their managers and colleagues did not necessarily know or value their specific skills. An example of the failure to use specialised skills occurred for one participant who was not teaching his specific area of expertise because someone else was teaching this component of the qualification. Furthermore, when he shared his stories of extensive experience in the industry during teaching sessions, he believed this gave him credibility with his students. When in the presence of his colleagues, however he downplayed these stories as he felt that they would be undervalued.

Even though the participants commenced with extensive industry skills and knowledge, their pedagogical knowledge and skills had mostly been attained informally through experience. One participant was training in the current version of the minimum qualification, the

TAE40110 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, while other participants hold a previous version of the qualification. Even though two other participants appeared to be struggling with the pedagogical skills and knowledge required for their role they were reluctant to undertake the qualification. When questioned about their capabilities, only some participants mentioned sound pedagogical skills as a self-perceived strength, others drew on previous work experience.

> *Classroom management skills and planning skills, thinking quickly on my feet (contingency skills –which include managing administrative tasks such as getting a student to complete a withdrawal form while you are in the middle of teaching a class).*

> *Increasing Modular Load Completion Rate, developing assessments, completing validation and moderations, teaching young cohort of students, teaching strategies such as buddying students.*

> *After completing some teaching PD I am able to confidently stand in front of class of students.*

> *Drawing on your own work experience, life experiences and using that as a teaching tool. Being thrown in the deep end and managing.*

Recruitment practices of sessional VET practitioners

The participants explained that they were either actively recruited as a sessional VET practitioner or had been directly approached by the RTO manager. The active recruitment of some of the participants arose as a result of their reputation within their industry as possessing expert skills and knowledge. Two of the participants were former students, and one participant was enrolling to commence a course at the RTO, when he was recognised by a lecturer through previous studies undertaken at University and was subsequently asked to take on some work. One participant directly approached the manager at the RTO to seek employment and after appearing as a guest speaker demonstrating specialist skills, continuing sessional work has followed.

When participants were prompted to recall if they had been required to apply for their positions through an appointment pool, very few could recall ever undertaking this process. For several of the participants this may have been due to their initial employment commencing several years before rigorous recruitment policies were implemented at their organisation. Their employment as a sessional has spanned over a lengthy period of three years with no requirement for reapplying or selection from a pool registry during this time. Surprisingly, few of the participants recalled ever being interviewed by a manager for their positions.

As an example of the casual recruitment processes at this RTO, one participant suggested an alternative industry expert who could provide a guest appearance to demonstrate new technical equipment. The participant appeared unsurprised at the ease in which the manager accepted his suggestion.

> *I just wanted to clear it with them. And [the manager said] "oh well, as long as they're competent". [The manager was happy with my suggestion] especially because they don't want to be bothered by it.*

Contributions to an academic culture

Participants, particularly new staff members, reported feelings of not being accepted; disconnected; isolated and marginalised and working as silos within their organisations. The participants felt that they were contributing to the academic culture through sharing their current industry expertise, knowledge and resources and were able to give recent examples of this occurring. The participants also felt they made a significant contribution of hours exceeding more than those paid for, including preparation of learning materials and resources, development and marking of assessments and other administrative tasks.

> *I don't have another job. No, this is the biggest and longest twelve hours ever. My daughter said to me – "I am sure you work more than twelve hours". I said, "I don't care".*

However as time passed, participants developed a greater sense of belonging or affiliation as well as a connection with other sessional VET practitioners.

> *Now I think, I feel part of it, and teachers are more likely to say what they want to say in front of me, whereas before they talked among themselves and if you were passing by they'd sort of "who's that?" The difference is, I suppose, when you start a new job as the person who is going to be there regularly, you probably are brought into the team pretty quickly. But I didn't realise how many casuals there actually are here. I just supposed me and maybe one or two others, when we get talking, they say "no, I've been casual here for five years".*

One participant reported a greater sense of closeness and belonging when teaching night and weekend classes.

> *It's a nice warm feeling, evenings and Saturdays, because we're a small group and we sort of know each other. It's a little bit more, I suppose, distant during the day because a lot of the people don't know you, but they'll come up to you and say "oh who are you"..*

Participants suggested beneficial support strategies such as mentoring programs or Community of Practice groups that could occur as a regular quarterly event. The sessional VET practitioners who had been employed at the RTO for several years felt this would be an opportunity to assist other sessional VET practitioners, and transfer their growing wealth of skills and knowledge . One participant suggested the mentoring process should include;

> *More individual time with someone who was more up to speed with all that you have to do for paperwork/assessments*

Discussion

The participants interviewed indicated that they are indeed not a homogenous group (Shorne 2008), having diverse characteristics; motivations; capabilities and self-perceived strengths. The participants commonly perceived sessional teaching as a career pathway into a more secure mode of employment. In short, sessional VET practitioners enjoy the work they do situated in this casual employment mode.

The recruitment of the participants by their RTO was mostly based on their level of industry expertise or qualification. Most participants had not been selected through the appointment pool or recall being interviewed. This indicates that the recruitment process of sourcing and selecting the appropriate person for the job with the right mix of skills is occurring at times in an ad hoc manner rather than through consistent implementation of recruitment policies. Whilst addressing the recruitment and support strategies for sessional VET practitioners would be a positive development, the barriers created by VET funding mechanisms are at the root of the problem.

A need for continuous professional development to be undertaken by all sessional VET practitioners including the requirement to obtain the minimum requirements of TAE Certificate IV in Training and Assessment emerged from the data. However, the research indicated that there is a lack of incentive to undertake TAE Certificate IV. Several reasons for this emerged including: Sessional staff have to pay for own training, undertaking TAE Certificate IV does not guarantee that they would be retained in their jobs and it is not a mandatory requirement of the RTO to teach as a sessional practitioner. Continuous professional development needs to be customised and targeted for sessional VET practitioners in specific vocational areas so that discussions on quality pedagogies are placed in a context that is directly relevant to them. This notion is supported by the AEU who stated that:

> "Linking professional development to the acquisition of a qualification makes the activity purposeful, and captures the notion of continuing professional development" (AEU, 2010 p.43).

Although there was reluctance to undertake formal training to develop better quality teaching techniques, participants did indicate their support in having access to an assigned mentor who could supervise and assure quality teaching pedagogies.

The participants reported feelings of not being accepted; disconnected; isolated and marginalised and working as silos within their organisations. One strategy to address this is to acculturate sessional VET practitioners' professional identity with a cohesive academic culture by using formal and informal networking opportunities. An example of this may include scaffolding a united and committed community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 2008) to harness a culture of critical reflection as opposed to merely an industry expert who teaches in VET.

CoPs promote and facilitate collaboration between tenured and sessional VET practitioners. They encourage a collaborative approach to professional development (Wenger, 2008) focussed on achieving quality teaching and learning practices. Through regular community activity, expertise is naturally passed on from established to novice VET practitioners. The value of networking opportunities for sessional VET practitioners has been acknowledged in providing opportunities to address concerns; facilitate critical reflections on quality pedagogies; and develop a cohesive academic culture (Francisco, 2008; Kell, 2006; Kift, 2003).

Supporting sessional VET practitioners to enable them to provide quality pedagogies is vital for student outcomes and impacts on the training organisation. The delivery of quality teaching ultimately shapes students experiences and influences the reputation and ability to

attract future funding for training organisations. Our guiding principles as RTOs should be to ensure the best outcomes for students and the industries which they will become employed in. The support strategies required for sessional VET practitioners to guarantee a successful and high quality educational experience for students is reliant on the provision of quality pedagogies.

Personal reflection as a VET practitioner conducting research
Undertaking research on sessional VET practitioners in the researcher's own workplace provided an exciting yet challenging opportunity whilst juggling various professional identities. The successful selection to participate in the 2011 NCVER Community of Practice Scholarship Program has enabled the development of research skills as a novice researcher. While able to strongly draw on the support and guidance of my mentor, and co author, the researcher was also able to access invaluable knowledge from a core group of AVETRA members who generously contributed their time and wealth of experience during two Community of Practice workshops held at Victoria University, Melbourne.

Undertaking the research, partly funded by the researcher's employer allowed open access to interview sessional VET practitioners within the organisation, yet sensitivities were required for reporting a critical assessment of practices. Whilst not wishing to diminish the researcher's career prospects within the organisation, writing a sanitised account of the issues arising from the research findings was equally unpalatable.

Other conflicting identities held by the researcher while undertaking the study required critical self reflection. As a Union representative for VET practitioners, the researcher holds strong views and opinions on the impacts of the over-reliance of sessional VET practitioners in the VET sector. Whist wishing to advocate for both tenured and sessional VET practitioners, the researcher was mindful of not damaging a collaborative and respectful relationship with managers of the organisation. The participants of the study often spent time after the interviews discussing their particular issues, where the researcher was able to clarify their entitlements and advocate for the rectification of issues where necessary. One participant in the study lacked access to a desk, computer and phone, not even having a swipe card to enter or exit the building.

Invariably further time was spent with participants providing individualised coaching on skills required to complete their new teaching and assessment role. As the researcher's substantial role at the organisation involved training and assessment in the minimum qualification requirement for VET practitioners, she was able to provide valuable 'just-in-time' training.

Conclusion
This paper has presented some of the key findings that research into sessional VET practitioner's capabilities and skills, recruitment processes and their contribution to an academic culture. It also provides some reflection on the research process as an employee placing a critical lens on the organisation in which they work to conduct the study. The key findings included that sessional VET practitioners are not a homogeneous group with varying skill levels in industry experience and teaching and assessment. They are recruited by RTOs in a generally ad hoc manner based on industry expertise, past relationships as a student and through direct approaches to managers in the RTOs. Standardising the recruitment practices in RTOs would be beneficial and produce a level playing field for applicants to ensure the best candidate is appointed. Many sessional VET practitioners lack professional development

and training in the TAE Certificate IV in Training and Assessment qualification which we argue should be a minimum requirement for these professionals. Barriers to completing the training include the cost of the training to the individual, no guarantee of continued work once the training is completed and the undervaluing of the qualification by the RTO. The participants reported that although they feel they contribute significantly to the academic culture of the RTO they are not accepted; disconnected; isolated and marginalised and working as silos within their organisations. The development of communities of practice that encourage sharing of knowledge and skills is one strategy to address this issue.

Finally, as a researcher conducting a study within the workplace in which they are currently employed we offer these reflections: Juggling various identities when undertaking research within my own workplace has provided an invaluable professional opportunity. Writing a critical evaluation of organisational practices requires a particular focus on ethical data collection as well as careful and sensitive reporting. Ongoing communication and transparent reporting with the organisation's managers is recommended to provide optimum chances of final publication. Ensuring final recommendations of the report align with the organisation's guiding visions, provides possible opportunities for future research and career opportunities.

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