

VET practitioner's perceptions of VET higher education qualifications

Abstract:

The quality of VET teaching in Australia has long been contested. Six Australian universities jointly conducted an online survey exploring the experiences of practitioners who were undertaking undergraduate studies in Vocation Education and Training (VET). This paper explores the experiences of VET practitioners as students in one regional university who were enrolled in a Bachelor of Vocational Educational and Training and compared them to the larger national cohort. While the background and capabilities of these practitioners differed in numerous ways there were similarities in their perceptions of what constitutes quality VET teacher education and the knowledge and skills they gained from studying a Bachelor level qualification when compared to the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.

Keywords: VET practitioner perceptions, quality VET teaching, VET practitioner, vocational education, Regional University, higher education

Introduction

The role of Vocational Education and Training (VET) is to provide learners with job-ready knowledge and skills. In addition, it is concerned with equity and improving social inclusion and addressing disadvantage of marginalized learners and workers. VET qualifications afford enhanced employment opportunities and increased economic wealth for the nation (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014).

The Productivity Commission (2011) have predicted that a 'confluence of demographic, economic and regulatory factors will introduce greater challenges for the VET sector in the coming years' (p. XXVIII). A changing VET landscape includes increased competition, increased diversity of the student body, technology enhanced work and learning environments, user choice, and changes to training packages. All of these items, and others, have increased the complexity of the sector and impact on the work of VET practitioners.

It is difficult to define a VET practitioner given they are employed and undertake teaching and assessment under a range of contexts. Within this paper the concept of a VET practitioner refers to those educators who have qualifications and high levels of expertise in a vocational or professional discipline and they also have at least an entry level teaching qualification (Certificate IV Training and Assessment) and work as a practitioner in a VET teaching and learning context. They may work part time, full time, or temporarily, predominantly within large Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, or small private Registered Training Organisations (RTO), enterprise based RTOs or community education providers. The teaching may occur in a classroom, a workplace, online, or in a blend of those situations. The learner or student could be a school student, a novice in an industry (of any age), a person who is up-skilling or broadening their skills, a business owner, or someone who is unemployed or underemployed.

The changing VET environment in Australia requires effective vocational practitioners to make sophisticated pedagogical choices and professional judgments within an increasingly more complex and

diverse student group (Robertson, 2008). There is no national or state requirement for qualifications beyond the Certificate IV Training and Assessment entry qualification. The Certificate IV (and its predecessor qualifications) was specifically developed as an entry level or benchmark qualification (Clayton, Meyers, Bateman, & Bluer, 2010) to provide essential foundations for those teaching within the VET environment.

Beyond the Certificate IV there are a number of qualifications specifically for the development of pedagogical knowledge and skills for VET practitioners. These qualifications under the Australian Quality Framework (AQF) range from a Diploma, Associate Degree, Bachelor Degree, Graduate Diploma and Masters. There are similar qualifications available overseas. However, there is a variety in the level of qualification requirement to be a VET practitioner. Currently Australia has lower initial qualification expectations for VET teaching than in many other countries (Smith, 2010a). For example, in Finland, VET practitioners are required to complete a Masters level qualification. In Australia ‘[a]bout 20 per cent of VET trainers and assessors hold post graduate qualifications and about 40 per cent have undergraduate or Diploma qualifications’ (Productivity Commission, 2011, p. XLI).

Significant relevant industry experience is required prior to becoming a VET based practitioner. From this it ‘is assumed that they will have a strong knowledge based in their primary vocational discipline’ (Robertson, 2008, p. 11) and an expectation that they will keep this knowledge updated through periodic work or return to industry to ensure they continue to have vocational currency (Guthrie, McNaughton, & Gamlin, 2011). Other means maintaining currency include the maintenance of vocational networks, attending conferences, seminars or workshops, continuing industry registration, and subscriptions to industry journals (Clayton, Jonas, Harding, Harris, & Toze, 2013; Corben & Thomson, 2001).

VET practitioners are dual qualified which has resulted in a *dual identity* firstly as ‘a vocational discipline expert (e.g. plumbing, business or design) and secondly as a VET teacher’ (Robertson, 2008, p. 11). The educator may see themselves more aligned with their vocational discipline or have a closer identity as a teacher i.e. ‘a plumber who teaches’ or a ‘teacher of plumbing’ (Guthrie et al., 2011, p. 17). This interplay between pedagogical identity and occupational identity (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Lassnigg, 2003; Palmieri, 2004; Smith, 2016) impacts their professional identity which in turn influences where they will make the time to support their ongoing professional learning – either in the pedagogical identity or their discipline/vocational identity. Smith (2010b) suggested that because they required contemporary knowledge and skills in both areas they often find themselves trying to ‘maintain two identities’ (p. 10).

The current era of decentralised management, nationally-based training products, employment contracts, performance reviews and performance-related pay have all impacted on teachers working conditions and the public perception of VET practitioners. It has been suggested that these elements impact on the VET practitioners likelihood of engaging in professional renewal (Brown, Seddon, Angus, & Rushbrook, 1996; Dempsey, 2013; Seddon, 1997, 2009). Other impacts include the intensification of VET practitioners’ work, practitioners feeling less valued, practitioner work subject to accountability, change in qualification requirements, innovation fatigue, rapid change in educational practices, and poorly resourced classrooms. However, contemporary quality education requires new skills and new knowledge in order to ensure quality teaching and learning and today’s digital world where practitioners

work with a much more diverse group of learners. There is a need to improve VET teaching and learning outcomes, while also attracting and retaining quality VET practitioners (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011).

Identifying quality VET teaching

The professional standing and quality of VET teaching has been impacted by: increased casualisation of the teaching force; use of pre-packaged training programs; increased workplace learning and assessment; and the introduction of the Certificate IV Training and Assessment as an entry level qualification (Corben & Thomson, 2001; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011). They go on to suggest that there is little recognition that quality practitioners have a high levels of expertise in curriculum planning, implementation, and assessment along with a large range of associated strategies or resources to draw from depending on the learner and teaching context. High levels of knowledge and skills are required for quality VET practitioners to effectively fulfill the ‘pedagogically and technically challenging roles performed by VET trainers’ (Clayton et al., 2010, p. 12).

Currently a Certificate IV is the base level qualification for those who have industry experience and wish to become a VET practitioner (Clayton et al., 2010; Guthrie et al., 2011; Smith, 2010b). The qualification however, is contested in terms of the quality of the delivery of the qualification and its ability to provide the level of skills and knowledge required to achieve effective vocational education and training (Clayton et al., 2010; Corben & Thomson, 2001; Smith & Grace, 2011). This in turn impacts on the teaching quality of those who have the qualification. The ‘Certificate IV in Training and Assessment - if well taught – is a useful entry level qualification (Hughes, 2012; emphasis in original). It has been suggested that ‘[t]hose delivering the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment must be appropriately experienced and qualified and capable of modelling good practice’ (Clayton et al., 2010, p. 3), however, that ‘inexperience was breeding further inexperience’ (p. 8). In the same vein, Precision Consulting (2008) commented that if ‘there is no rigour involved in the qualification for their own job, it is unlikely that they will in turn model rigour in the assessments they conduct’ (p.18) impacting on the quality of teaching. The Certificate IV provides only foundational skills and ongoing and more advanced professional learning is required for quality VET teaching.

Smith (2010b) purported that ‘while the Certificate IV provided a floor, it has also provided what might be described as a false ceiling’ (p. 11). Setting a very low bar for the expectations of practitioners in the VET sector is not helpful. In particular, participants in the Clayton et al. (2010) study felt they were less prepared ‘to manage the needs of diverse learning, to undertake assessment, to use training packages and to manage classroom issues’ (p. 3). Because the entry level qualification is not sufficient to support quality teaching VET educators need ongoing professional development to improve pedagogical practices and learning outcomes. However, Rasmussen (2016) reported that having practitioners participate in continuing professional development is a global challenge which impacts on the quality and capacity of the VET teacher workforce.

Effective or quality teaching is ‘that which leads to improved student achievement using outcomes that matter to their future success’ (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Major, 2014, p. 2). In an endeavor to improve teaching quality a number of stakeholders have created frameworks that can be used within VET practitioner training and ongoing professional development. For example, the Queensland College of

Teachers (QCT) (2015) developed the Professional Standards for Vocational Education and Training Practitioners; and Innovation and Business Skills Australia (IBSA) (2013) have developed the VET practitioner Capability Framework; whereas, Corben and Thomson (2001) present Attributes of excellence in VET. Interestingly the key constructs from these frameworks have significant overlap as discussed below. Further, table 1 provides a comparison of the framework along with the results of this study.

As part of the Queensland Government's reform action plan for further education and training, 'Real skills. Great opportunities' and in the absence of a national VET teaching standards, the Queensland College of Teachers (2015) developed the Professional Standards for Vocational Education and Training Practitioners in Queensland. These standards were developed through consultation with a range of national stakeholders including Registered Training Organisations (RTO's); industry associations; unions, government representatives; and VET practitioners, trainers and assessors. The standards package includes evidence guides, work samples, and a self-evaluation tool. These professional standards have been established specifically for VET practitioners and they consist of 7 standards each with a number of sub-standards. Interestingly these seven standards closely align with both the Australian Professional Standards for School Teachers and also IBSA's VET Practitioner Capability Framework (2013).

Standard 1: Know learners, their context and how they learn;

Standard 2: Know the content and how it can be taught;

Standard 3: Plan, design and deliver effective teaching/training experiences;

Standard 4: Create and maintain a supporting and safe environment;

Standard 5: Assess, provide feedback and report on learning;

Standard 6: Engage in professional learning in your vocational area and in adult education theories and practices; and

Standard 7: Engage with industry, colleagues, community, regulatory and professional bodies.

Professional standards normally are a public statement of the nature and role of the work undertaken by the people working in that field. It has been suggested that by providing professional standards to guide the training and development of vocational teachers, trainers and assessors it can assist in enhancing the quality of VET teaching. However, they might be seen by some as a top down accountability framework rather than a framework for vocational practitioners to reflect on their work and ongoing professional growth. Interestingly, a recent Australian report on Improving the quality, capability and status of the VET practitioner workforce (Rasmussen, 2016) has recommended the development of a national recognised VET learning and teaching standards. The UK has also developed professional standards for teachers, tutors and trainers in the lifelong learning sector (Lifelong Learning UK, 2007).

The VET Practitioner Capability Framework was developed to support and improve recruitment of VET practitioners and to assist with performance and professional development to develop highly skilled VET practitioners. The framework provides common knowledge, skills, behaviors and attitudes that can be demonstrated by high performing educators. The framework describes three levels of expertise and responsibility as practitioners develop their knowledge and skills in facilitation. Figure 1 illustrates the domains and skill areas of the framework.

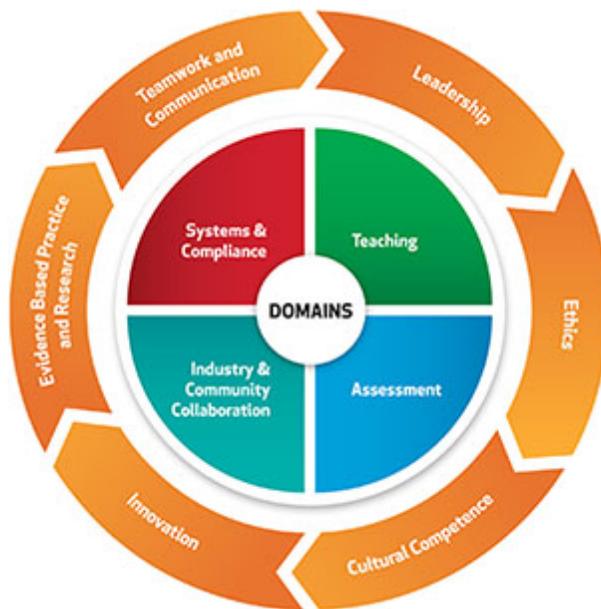


Figure 1: The VET practitioner capability framework by domains and skill areas (Innovation and Business Skills Australia, 2013)

The framework includes four key domains of teaching, assessment, industry collaboration and systems and compliance. Each domain has four areas of capability, for example the areas of capability for the domain of teaching area: theory, design, facilitation and evaluation. In addition there are six skills areas such as leadership, ethics etc. For each domain, each capability and each skill there are descriptors for first level, second level and third level practitioners (for more information see <https://www.ibsa.org.au/vet-practitioner-capability-framework>). Although there is a breadth of generic skills described which are useful for those educators looking towards leadership roles, the teaching domain has little detail on what might be expected from a quality vocational practitioner.

Corben and Thomson (2001) have suggested that excellent VET practitioners require a number of attributes, most of which are not included as part of the minimum qualification nor their industry qualification, and are discussed below. Through a convergent interviewing methodology their research aimed to ‘make explicit the tacit knowledge and skills of these experts’ (p. 11) along with an understanding of how they developed their capability in their journey from novice to expert.

Firstly, excellent VET practitioners take a *Learner focus*, recognising that there is a need to respond to the diversity of students as individuals. Also included within this attribute is an acknowledgement that learning is a social activity, which may occur within face-to-face classrooms, workplaces or even technology enhanced environments. Irrespective of where the learning and teaching occurs effective practitioners must establish and maintain a positive learning environment. This aligns with other research which indicates identifying learner needs, classroom climate, relationships and classroom management have a moderate impact on student outcomes (Coe et al., 2014; Pichler & Moser, 2013). It also aligns with QCT’s (2015) standard 1 for VET practitioners: Know learners, their context and how they learn.

The second attribute, is associated with the practitioners' *technical knowledge and currency*. Deep knowledge of the relevant and contemporary content is also linked to the practitioners' confidence and credibility (Corben & Thomson, 2001). This is one part of the VET practitioners' dual identity and is essential knowledge in their role as an educator. QCT's (2015) standard 2, Know the context and how it can be taught, along with Coe et al's., (2014) pedagogical content knowledge attribute support this concept as being key to quality teaching within a VET environment. Building on the work of Rumsey (2002) and Dickie, Eccles, FitzGerald and McDonald (2004), Guthrie, Perkins and Nguyen (2006) also noted that industry currency is an important element in VET teaching.

Thirdly, excellence in VET teaching requires expertise in *teaching and learning methodologies*. As VET teaching is not their first career the move into teaching or training requires them gain an expertise in teaching and learning methodologies. This is the second element of their dual identity. Excellent practitioners have a depth and breadth of knowledge and skills to draw from to enable them to select the most effective strategies and resources dependent on the learner needs, curriculum and context; this includes effective knowledge of assessment and feedback as part of the learning process. This attribute aligns with Coe, et al's (2014) research report where they found that pedagogical content knowledge and the quality of instruction (including questions, scaffolding and assessment). It also is supported by QCT's (2015) standard 3, Plan, design and deliver effective training experiences and Corben and Thomson's (2001) teaching and learning methodologies construct. Quality VET practitioners are able to contextualise theories of learning and applying them when structuring and delivery learning. VET practitioners must maintain currency in both their vocational discipline and also in their pedagogical practices as a professional educator.

The fourth attribute is related to *personal attributes and values*. Corben and Thomson's (2001) research indicated that quality VET practitioners believe 'in the transformative nature of education' (p. 2) and have 'high level communication skills and a commitment to one's own professional renewal' (p. 3). Teacher beliefs are referred to by Coe et al., (2014) as having impact on student outcomes and hence being important to quality teaching. They refer to teachers' self-knowledge of why they adopt specific pedagogical practices, their models of the role of teaching and their theories about learning. The other frameworks discussed do not make explicit reference to concepts related to values and beliefs although QCT's (2015) standard 6 discussed educational theories and practices.

The final attribute concerns *influences of teacher development*. This includes initial teacher training, such as the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, ongoing professional development and critical reflection on personal practice. QCT (2015) relate this to Standard 7, Engage with industry, colleagues, community, regulatory and professional bodies; and IBSA (2013) discussed Industry collaboration, systems and compliance. A number of elements impact an practitioners' ability to effectively move from a novice to an expert, including further formal and informal learning as an individual and as part of a network of practitioners and ongoing professional support. This ongoing learning is driven from within the practitioner themselves rather than imposed on them from above. Interestingly, the last two attributes align with other research of quality teaching, where practitioner beliefs and professional behaviors have an impact on student outcomes (Coe et al., 2014).

Clayton et al's (2010) research indicated that 'it was unreasonable to expect the one qualification to fit the needs of all practitioners in every training situation. Great depth and breadth could be achieved

through higher-level qualifications and skills' (p. 31). In an environment where employers are seeking enhanced teaching and learning outcomes, (in addition to contemporary industry knowledge and skills), and in an endeavor to improve the quality of their teaching some vocational practitioners actively seek additional pedagogical qualifications beyond the entry requirements such as a Diploma of Teaching and Assessment or Bachelor Degree in Vocational Education and Training. At the time of this research the numbers of educators engaged in Diploma programs was modest and the numbers enrolled in higher education degrees was diminishing (Guthrie et al., 2011).

Method

This paper takes data from a larger research study where six universities across Australia invited their VET students engaged in further higher education study to explore their views of their study. This paper describes the experiences of students within a Bachelor of Vocational Education and Training (BVET) in one regional university and the student perceptions of their higher education study.

Data were collected through an online survey. The survey was based on a VET *learner satisfaction* survey developed to gather student feedback and is commonly used in the VET sector in Australia. This paper will describe the data from one university (regional cohort) and compare it to the other universities (national cohort) in the study. A total of 147 students across six universities completed the survey with some survey's incomplete. After ethical approval was gained VET students were emailed asking them to volunteer to complete the online survey. The initial contact was made at the end of October and the survey closed at the beginning of February. Because the data collection time period was outside the normal study periods of semester 1 and 2 several follow-up reminder emails were sent to the cohort in an attempt to increase the response rate.

The survey included questions to gain demographic information; a series of questions interrogating the student experiences within their degree, written in positive language, using a forced 4 point Likert scale (Strongly disagree – Strongly agree); open ended questions about the knowledge and skills developed during the program; and a comparison of the degree program with the Certificate IV qualification. The goal of the survey was to gain students perspectives, and a 4 point scale forces the respondents to provide an opinions rather than provide a neutral response. The author acknowledges that the 4 point scale has a limitation because it does not provide a middle response and forces respondents who are truly neutral or undecided to agree or disagree with the positive statement. Due to the small sample in this regional cohort (n = 12 or 8%) care must be taken in interpreting the results and no statistical analysis of significance has been undertaken. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data was undertaken however the data will be reported descriptively rather than statistically.

The research questions for this study were:

- Why do VET practitioners engage in higher education study?
- What are the educational experiences of VET practitioners who are currently engaged in higher education study?

Results and discussion

All of the students within the regional cohort were studying part time and online while also working. Within the national cohort 87% of the students studied part-time and the majority of them (99.3%) studied online. This is because the majority of the students within the study were already employed within the VET sector as teachers or trainers. It is worth noting that no student had completed an undergraduate or higher qualification prior to commencing the BVET program. Most of the participants were towards the end of their study; this is largely because they gained significant exemptions from previous qualifications (such as a Certificate IV or Diploma in Training and Assessment and industry qualifications at Certificate III or above) along with industry experience and teaching/training experience.

Most of the regional cohort participants (9/12 or 75%) were aged between 40 and 59 years of age and were female. This is not surprising given the ageing population of teaching in general and given these practitioners all had to have previous years of experience in industry prior to coming to VET teaching. It is also comparable to the study by Guthrie et al., (2011) who found that the characteristics of VET learners completing higher education included 52% females, 74% were within the age group 30 – 49 years, and 66% were studying part time.

The regional cohort participants came from a broad range of vocational areas including frontline management, hospitality, retail, engineering, and business administration. The years of experience in industry pattern for the regional cohort generally following the national cohort with a slightly less experienced cohort (45.5%) in the 1-10 years of experience bracket compared to the national cohort of (31.5%). 18% of the regional cohort had less than 5 years industry experience, compared to 11% of the national cohort.

The VET teaching/training experience pattern for the regional cohort also followed the national cohort with the majority of the respondents having 1 – 10 years VET teaching experience, although no regional cohort respondents had more than 20 years' teaching experience. It appears that VET practitioners with 10 years or less teaching experience are more likely to enroll in higher education studies. Interestingly the largest group in the regional cohort had both 6 – 10 years industry experience and 6 – 10 years teaching experience.

When asked why they enrolled in a Bachelor program, the most frequent response from the regional cohort participants was *I wanted extra skills for my job* (6, 50%) followed by *To improve my general educational skills*. The first item was also the highest response for the national cohort (32%) followed by *To get a better job or promotion* (25%) and *To improve my general educational skills* (21.1%). In an era when regulation does not require higher level qualifications the study by Guthrie et al., (2011) found that the students engage in further higher education study due to employer needs or personal interests and aspirations. It appears that for most students they engage in further study for intrinsic reasons or 'because they are committed and motivated to improve what they do' (p. 28).

The regional cohort respondents' indicated they had highest levels of agreement to the statements *The course of study was flexible enough to meet my needs* (3.70 from a 4 point scale), *I set high standards for myself in learning* (3.64) and *The University had a range of services to support learners* (3.45). In all cases these responses were higher than the national cohort whose level of agreement was at 3.29, 3.48 and 3.22 for the same statements. The areas where the regional cohort had high levels of agreement with the

national cohort were the statements *I set high standards for myself in learning* (3.48), *I identified ways to build on my current knowledge and skills* (3.45), and *Lecturers had an excellent knowledge of the subject content* (3.38).

The regional cohort students agreed with the national cohort that the BVET courses built on their current knowledge and skills; that the lecturers had excellent knowledge of their subject content; and that the respondents were able to push themselves to understand things when they found the material challenging. Additionally, the students appreciated the flexibility of the BVET course enabling them to meet their needs; the support services offered by the university; the inquiry approach adopted by the lecturers, and indicated a capacity to meet their own learning needs.

Areas of concern indicated by the regional cohort respondents were similar to those from the national cohort. The top three areas of disagreement were *The qualification had a good mix of theory and practice* (2.91 regional cohort, 2.90 national cohort within a 4 point scale); *Studying with people from different contexts extended my learning* (2.82; 2.89); and *It was always easy to know the standards expected* (2.82; 2.88). Although these were areas of concern they still had above 70% satisfaction. Both cohorts agreed that the weaknesses of their higher education courses were their understanding of the standards expected; level of learning enhancement offered by studying with people from different backgrounds; and the mixture of theory and practice in the course offerings. Perhaps this is an outcome of different expectations within vocational education and academic work in higher education.

The regional cohort respondents gave more favourable feedback on the following statements compared to the total cohort:

- The course of study was flexible enough to meet my needs (+0.41);
- The university had a range of services to support learners (+0.23); and
- Assessments were based on realistic activities (+0.22).

This indicated that the regional cohort respondents perceived their experience more positively in terms of course flexibility, university support services, assignment activities, course expectations and learning resources. In general terms, these all appear to be aspects of sound course delivery.

However the regional cohort respondents perceived their experience less favourably in the areas of skill development and assignment feedback. The following areas indicate where the regional cohort respondents gave less favourable feedback on the following statements compared to the national cohort:

- The qualification prepared me well, or extended my skills well, for work as a VET/adult education practitioner (-0.26);
- I developed the skills expected from this qualification (-0.24); and
- I received useful feedback on my assessments (-0.22).

The regional cohort participants indicated the following *skills* were developed during their study: Academic writing, referencing, research; IT skills and Course facilitation. They indicated that their gained *knowledge* in areas:

- Greater self-awareness/self-efficacy (e.g. ability to participate in collaborate tasks);
- Understanding of learning theories (e.g. diagnose learning gaps, validation of current approaches, apply learning theories in an organisational context, pedagogical toolkit); and

- Teaching skills (e.g. differentiation, behaviour management techniques, and training delivery requirements).

Within the mandatory Certificate IV students ‘develop knowledge of learners that is largely limited to superficial, description and applied concerns’ (Robertson, 2008, p. 15). When comparing the Certificate IV, entry qualification with their BVET qualification the students gained higher level theoretical and practical knowledge and skills to assist them to design learning experiences for high level cognitive learning and to assist them in applying their knowledge in a range of contexts and in non-routine conditions.

The students also indicated that there were a number of content areas where the BVET enabled them to develop knowledge that was not part of their previous qualification. These areas included knowledge of philosophy of learning and learning theories, human development and behaviors, diversity in classrooms and creating inclusive engaging safe and supportive learning environments, workplace literacies, IT skills, and application of theories into practice. And finally, they commented that their additional study promoted the importance of self-reflection, collegial support and professional discourse as a means to improve teaching and learning. Corben and Thomson (2001) affirm these outcomes as being pertinent to quality teaching because ‘practical skills need to be informed by theoretical understandings’ (p. 9). Interestingly one participant stated that their higher education study ‘*allowed me to become a better teacher and more relaxed teacher; not just 'the business' of delivering content and assessing, humanising and enjoying the exercise and the people in it*’. The regional cohort student experiences’ mirrored the expectations that Guthrie et al., (2011) had of higher education qualification is that the program ‘should allow a critical reflection on competing or prevailing philosophies’ (p. 39).

Overall, these comments suggest that the BVET provided a more theoretical underpinning to vocational education and the opportunity to develop reflective practice. This result aligns with the work of Clayton et al., (2010) who found that after the completion of a Certificate IV there was a ‘desire for more opportunities to develop: specific teaching strategies, including assessment, a greater understanding of how students learn and the psychology associated with learning; and skills in learner feedback learner engagement and class-management skills’ (p. 8). Unsurprisingly, the participants perceived that the higher education qualifications did provide them with the opportunities to gain those knowledge and skills that were not present in the entry level qualification. Corben and Thomson (2001) also suggested that networking, having a mentor, and reflection on practice was key to improving the quality of teaching and for practitioners to ‘adopt a critical, questions attitude to their work’ (p. 3).

The participants indicated that some additional benefits of completing higher education study including: ‘*validation of my own thoughts and skills about teaching*’; ‘*opportunity to apply my study in my current place of employment*’; ‘*will help me get another job*’; ‘*qualification provides credibility in the workplace*’; and ‘*I now apply deeper critical thinking and research about topics and issues before making a decision*’. Robertson (2008) suggested that without access to higher qualifications VET practitioners approach teaching and learning in an ‘uncritical manner ... [with] limited opportunities to develop knowledge of learners and general pedagogical knowledge ... and no explicit opportunity to develop other knowledge bases which require a high level of reflection and self-evaluation’ (p. 19).

The participants were provided the opportunity to critique their higher education programs and the regional cohort offered the following recommendations. Firstly, they suggested a greater focus on adult education – there was a clear perception that some of the courses were too broad in catering for early

childhood, primary and secondary teacher education which effectively diluted the focus on VET in the adult education sector. In other words, there was a perception that the BVET could be strengthened by better targeting of the needs of clients from a TAFE/adult education background. This is because a number of the courses within the BVET are shared with school teacher education programs. Secondly, Indigenous studies should be optional not mandatory. Thirdly, increase the number of recorded lectures to support learning and provide a greater consistency in use of the technology. Contemporary online learning goes beyond the traditional distance education model in which learning packages were posted out in the mail and the students posted in their assignments. It now includes a range of media and other resources to gain access to content materials and also provides access to synchronous and asynchronous discussions where students can unpack the content and make links to their previous knowledge and currently workplace in an attempt to make individual and group meaning of the concepts.

Table 1 provides a summary of contemporary frameworks and research, including this study, which identified the ‘complex knowledge base’ (Corben & Thomson, 2001, p. 1) that is required for excellence in VET teaching. Although coming from a range of sources the key concepts are closely aligned and form a backdrop for the concept of quality VET teaching.

Table 1: Comparison of contemporary research and frameworks for quality VET teaching

Professional Standards for Vocational Education and Training Practitioners (Queensland College of Teachers, 2015)	VET Practitioner Capability Framework (Innovation and Business Skills Australia, 2013)	Corben and Thomson (2001)	Clayton et al., (2010)	Coe et al., (2014)	Regional cohort student experiences from this study
Know learners, their context and how they learn	Teaching	Learner focus	Learner diversity		How students learn, psychology of learning, lifespan development, differentiation
Know the content and how it can be taught	Teaching	Technical knowledge and currency; Teaching and learning methodologies	Using training packages	Pedagogical content knowledge	Teaching approaches, teaching skills, workplace literacies, teaching strategies
Plan, design and deliver effective teaching/training experiences	Teaching	Teaching and learning methodologies	Teaching repertoire	Pedagogical content knowledge, quality of instruction	Instructional design, pedagogical toolkit, training packages, learner engagement

Create and maintain a supporting and safe environment	Teaching	Teaching and learning methodologies	Classroom management	Classroom climate	Behaviour management, supportive environments, enhancing learner engagement
Assess, provide feedback and report on learning	Assessment	Teaching and learning methodologies	Assessment		Assessment, performance criteria, moderation, feedback
Engage in professional learning in your vocational area and in adult education theories and practices		Technical knowledge and currency; Teaching and learning methodologies: learner focus	Professional development	Professional behaviours	Learning theories, opportunity to value add in vocational area
Engage with industry, colleagues, community, regulatory and professional bodies	Industry collaboration, systems and compliance	Influences of teacher development	Professional development	Professional behaviours	Professional discourse, collegial support
		Personal attributes and values		Teacher beliefs	Self-awareness, self-reflection, informed decision making

Implications

When comparing the Cert IV, entry qualification with their BVET qualification the students indicated that there were a number of areas where the BVET enabled them to develop deep knowledge that was not part of their previous qualification. Three clear impressions emerged from the data overall. Firstly, the student experience with their higher education qualification is positive overall compared to that in the other institutions surveyed, particularly in the areas of course delivery, course flexibility and course relevance.

Secondly, when the BVET program is redeveloped a stronger focus needs to be on the needs of learners coming from a TAFE/adult education background and the Professional Standards for Vocational Education and Training Practitioners. This research and the information provided in table 1 should be used to drive new program and course development. The redesign of the program should ensure that the common content elements are explicitly included in the new program so that graduates have a deep

understanding of these elements which participants in this study felt were not developed within previous qualifications.

Thirdly, the BVET experience, when compared to lower level qualifications, has greater depth and complexity and, while it comes with some challenges, provided VET practitioners with knowledge and skills to improve their teaching quality. Harris (2015) suggested there is a link ‘between quality of education and quality of teachers’ (p. 30) one way to enhance the quality of the VET system and in turn the quality of VET teaching is to mandate higher qualifications as is demanded of school teachers and VET practitioners internationally.

With a small sample size, (admittedly within a small cohort) care must be taken in making broad generalisations. The data were sourced from only one regional university which may not be typical VET practitioners undertaking further study. However comparing this data to the national data and previous research enhance the generalisability of the findings. Another limitation, is that the data came from cohorts who had already made a decision to undertake a higher level qualification which probably lead to the high number of positive responses on the survey.

In the current climate, where high level qualifications are not required by those teaching in the VET environment, some VET practitioners engage in higher education study to gain or improve their education knowledge and skills. In answering the first research question it would appear that students see a Bachelor of Vocational Education and Training qualification as a natural progression in their professional training and development for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. The second research question asks, what are the educational experiences of VET practitioners who are currently engaged in higher education study? The participants in this study found that their study provided the support and flexibility required to study and work at simultaneously while providing high quality teaching enabling them to align and refine the theoretical knowledge with their everyday practice.

It is not realistic to expect that a Certificate IV level entry qualification will fulfill the needs to all VET practitioners in all situations; and Rasmussen (2016) has recommended raising the minimum level qualification beyond the certificate IV. Higher level qualifications such as the BVET can provide the opportunity for VET practitioners gain more sophisticated depth and breadth of relevant knowledge and skills which will improve quality teaching and provide other advantages, such as:

- ‘Recharging the batteries of motivation and enthusiasm
- Proving opportunities for networking, and
- Reducing feelings of isolation’ (Corben & Thomson, 2001, p. 4).

Beyond further study, there are other strategies for ongoing quality pedagogical development including comprehensive induction and supervision, observation of quality teachers, networking, mentoring or support from experienced colleagues, and access to high quality professional development (Clayton et al., 2010; Coe et al., 2014; Corben & Thomson, 2001; Guthrie et al., 2011). When reviewing the research on great teaching Coe et al., (2014) also found that classroom observations was a key element in assessing teaching quality; and suggested that it should be structured as part of continuous professional learning.

Perhaps a way forward, given the low enrolments in vocational education in higher education, is for higher education providers to work with the VET sector at the national level to ensure that qualifications higher than the entry level certificate IV are fit for purpose. Further research could explore the volume and breadth of ways VET practitioners take up alternative opportunities beyond formal study to enhance their teaching knowledge and skills and also to discover why formal study is not the preferred form of professional development post their initial qualification. Additional research could also investigate the volume of development in pedagogical practice and compare it to how VET practitioners continue to remain current within their discipline. This could then be linked to the research on dual identity.

Conclusion

It is important for VET practitioners to continue to build knowledge, skills and pedagogical practices relevant to the sector. Enrolling in higher education degree programs can assist within their ongoing development and also provide further pathways for both employment and professional development as they move from novice educators to expert VET practitioners. Previous research has identified gaps in the Certificate IV entry qualification and this study indicates that VET practitioners' knowledge and skills related to quality teaching can be enhanced through further study.

It is hoped that this study along with others will move the dialogue and debate about VET teaching qualifications and quality VET teaching in a positive, productive and constructive manner. Currently, the number of VET students in higher education is declining, as is the number of institutions offering graduate or post graduate degrees in the VET sector. Raising the entry qualification from a Certificate IV to a higher level qualification could go a long way towards improving VET teacher education and also to enhance the quality of VET teaching within the sector.

Acknowledgements

To be added after review process.

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