

# **TAFE Managers: Juggling educational leadership and accountability**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the tensions felt by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) managers in trying to adapt to the 'new vocationalism'. The major tension generated centers on the question of educational leadership versus accountability. A number of managers would argue that the two are in competition with the stress on accountability weakening the pedagogical output of TAFE. To many, the tensions created in the juggling of these roles while trying to maintain a healthy balance between the two, with limited support and resources, is not an attractive work option. Accordingly they are making the decision not to move into management positions within TAFE. The question must then be posed (particularly in the current climate of casualisation and the impending retirement of the 'baby boomers'), "Who will step up to leadership in TAFE?"

## **Introduction**

At a recent staff development the role of the Head Teacher in Technical and Further Education was described as being an amalgam of business manager, administrator and educational leader with the emphasis of late being on the former two areas. When asked what they thought took up most of their time, the Head Teachers in the room (by a vote of eleven to one) indicated that administration of the system was their major time consumer. When asked what they would rather be doing the Head Teachers invariably answered, 'Educational leadership'.

The role of the Head Teacher in TAFE has undeniably changed since the implementation of the National Training Framework in 1996 with its focus on competency-based education, national training packages and a national recognition framework. Although described in the above staff development as the most important link in any college, Head Teachers are suffering the angst associated with how to juggle their role so that they fulfill the expectations of others to meet their compliance and accountability requirements while fulfilling their own expectations (and those of their teachers and students) to role model best practice in educational leadership. Busher and Harris (1999) have described this as a complex matrix of leadership and accountability with staff switching roles and lines of accountability. This, according to Busher and Harris, raises issues about how these leaders deal with the tensions between the different functions of their roles.

With TAFE operating in an increasingly competitive vocational education and training (VET) market it is difficult to see how Head Teachers will be able to reconcile their role especially given the current constraints under which they operate. These include constraints on the most valuable resources available to any frontline manager – those of time and support. Basically, Head Teachers have been forced to marginalise educational leadership because the administration has to be done.

The burden on Head Teachers has arguably intensified as a result of:

1. The increased need for administration with the introduction of managerialism into vocational education and training.
2. A lack of clerical support due to the fiscal constraints under which TAFE colleges now operate.
3. The increase in central control as a result of the national training framework and the introduction of training packages.
4. A casualisation of the TAFE workforce which makes it difficult for Head Teachers to delegate administrative duties to an already over-burdened full time staff.
5. A continuing devolution of administrative functions in the form of computerised systems that simply shift work from front-office clerical personnel to teaching sections.

The impact of these factors on TAFE is to increase the out-of-class demands on teachers leaving them less time to teach, assess and develop curriculum to use with their classes. The impact on Head Teachers is to force them into being business managers and administrators at the expense of their educational leadership role.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In the 1980s, when Australia was in the grip of a recession, plans were put into place by the federal government to rationalize the public sector and, on coming to office, the Hawke administration embarked on a program of administrative reform to improve the way in which government was managed (Zifcak, 1994). At the same time Hawke's cry for a 'clever country' "called for an increased emphasis on skills formation for national economic recovery" (Kell, 1992, p.1).

As the major provider of skills to the Australian workforce vocational education and training became an instrument for economic growth with the development of a national, customer-focused training system based on the needs of industry. The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was established to reform the national VET system and TAFE, as the major player in VET, became part of an increasingly competitive, market-based training sector. This competition was seen by the government as "one of several mechanisms to drive improvement in the training system to increase flexibility, efficiency, quality and client choice" (Kemp, 1998, p.4).

The introduction of economic rationalism to the education sector brought with it changes to the way the sector was managed. The logic of managerialism was introduced in the belief that better management would "prove an effective solvent for a wide range of economic and social ills" (Pollitt, 1993, p.1). With managerialism argued Pollitt came "closer personal accountability enforced through systems of measurement and appraisal ... and ... performance indicators" (p.107). Law and Glover (2000, p.6) argued that this reform had "undoubtedly reframed educational management around business-related concepts".

According to Chappell et al. (2002) the rise of economic discourses in education have led to a 'new vocationalism' with an emphasis on the contribution of educational institutions to national economic goals. Within this 'new vocationalism' TAFE managers are confronted with the task of integrating their educational leadership role

within a managerial context where their responsibility to TAFE and accountability to the broader VET governing bodies is often perceived to be in conflict with their duty to teachers and students. This conflict manifests itself in a number of tensions which weaken the pedagogical output of TAFE (Rice, 2003).

The intensification of workload for frontline and middle managers in education is part of this broader social movement to managerialism and corporatisation resulting from government disinvestment in public enterprises. It also results from an increase in surveillance and intervention by government bodies (such as ANTA) and an increase in the regulatory powers of these bodies that impose restraints on the operation of government employees (Singh, 2003).

## **Literature review**

### *Role conflict, role ambiguity and stress*

It is widely recognised that the role of the teacher and Head Teacher in TAFE has changed. Gibb (2003), Kronemann (2001) and Mulcahy (2003) accepted that the changes to TAFE as a result of national initiatives had expanded and intensified teachers' work while holding 'individual managers and leaders ... responsible to an unprecedented degree for ... (organisational) performance' (Mulcahy, 2003, p.7). Chappell and Johnston (2003, p.5) argued that the new roles are "additional to the traditional 'teaching' role but are also substantially different in terms of focus, purpose and practice". Chappell and Johnston also contended that the relationships teachers have with their students are of central importance in terms of their identity and their job satisfaction (2003, p.22).

Role conflict has been found to result from a number of factors in the life of middle and frontline managers:

- ?? Briggs (2001, p.230) found that middle managers suffer from role conflict when "their own needs and schedules conflicted with the requirements of senior managers" especially when they received unpredictable, urgent requests from these managers.
- ?? Exworthy and Halford (1999, p.2) contended that the "new managerialism has far-reaching implications for the organisation of professional work in the public sector" with professionals, often promoted because of their technical skills, taking on the role of managers and having to reconcile the conflict that results from this.
- ?? Luthans (1973) described the role conflict that resulted from the differing expectations coming from the management team, workers and colleagues. The ensuing role conflict results from not knowing which set of expectations the manager should follow.

Thompson, McNamara & Hoyle (1997), when synthesising findings on job satisfaction, reported that teachers and administrators had marked decreases in job satisfaction when they experienced role conflict. Adams, Heath-Camp & Camp (1999, p. 140) determined that "role ambiguity was found to induce vocational teacher stress". This role ambiguity resulted when teachers were unable to clarify their work-related obligations, rights and objectives, status and accountability. They also found that stress was produced when vocational teachers undertook numerous tasks

including completing reports and paperwork with decreasing financial support, changing professional standards, and spending time on tasks outside of normal working hours.

### *Accountability*

The discourses of economic rationalism have led to the need for a more market driven and industry responsive further education sector. As one of the major players in this sector TAFE has a critical role to play in implementing education and training initiatives that will meet the market demand for a more customer-focused training system. To ensure this occurs governments demand “increased accountability and a focus on quality” (Chappell & Johnston, 2003, p.17) in the sector.

In 1998 Dr Bruce Haynes identified seven sets of demands for accountability which could be placed on educational administrators. These included legal, professional, bureaucratic, community, corporate, market and network. Whilst accepting that educational administrators should be accountable, Haynes postulated that “where numerous groups make demands for accountability from the various views then educational administrators ... are likely to become confused about their accountability role and frustrated because they cannot meet the seemingly reasonable but collectively impossible demands made upon them”(1998, p.6).

Both Lundberg (1996) and Rumsey (2002) argued that accountability and compliance requirements had added new challenges to the role of the vocational education and training manager and Mulcahy’s respondents listed as one of their major challenges the accountability/compliance issue. They felt that these requirements had “resulted in additional administrative responsibilities for managers and staff (while) one of the most significant effects on staff was the shift of time and attention from core teaching tasks to administration” (2003, p.48).

### *Workload*

An Australian Education Union (AEU) study conducted in 2001 identified an increase in both the hours worked by TAFE teachers and an increase in the intensity of the workload that teachers were experiencing (Kronemann, 2001). The dominant features of this workload included an increase in administration (including accountability) requirements. Participants in the study reported that this workload led to an erosion of their ability to maintain professional standards and to provide quality education. Gibb (2003, p.44) believed that expecting teachers to be “responsible for duties once the domain of administrators and non-teaching staff” led to insufficient time for preparation of lessons and resulted in conflict with their internal standards or expectations. Sixteen of the twenty eight practitioners interviewed for Chappell & Johnston’s study supported Kronemann’s findings when they “indicated that administrative and management requirements had increased as a result of recent changes to course delivery” (2003, p.25). Paterson’s study of course leaders also revealed a concern surrounding administrative workload with Paterson recommending that, to change the role of the course leader, a review of this administrative workload would be a good starting point (1999).

A “chronic lack of support” in the TAFE system in the form of administrative support, professional development and educational and peer support (Gibb, 2003, p.46) exacerbates the workload of teachers and Head Teachers as does the increasing casualisation of the TAFE workforce.

### *Career succession*

In the AEU study (Kronemann, 2001, p.ix) “nearly one quarter of teachers indicated in various ways that applying for promotion was unattractive to them currently, either because of their concern about the workloads, stress and pay levels involved in current promotion positions, or because they thought it just wasn’t worth it”. The participants in the research felt that the responsibilities and administrative burdens in promotion positions were unattractive and/or were insufficiently rewarded. They also saw a lack of career path for teachers who did not want to move fully into administration.

With existing frontline management under extreme pressure “maintaining valued management and leadership in VET appears problematic at (this) ... level” (Mulcahy, 2003, p.90). “Where” questioned Mulcahy, “is the next generation of first-line managers to come from should ongoing staff choose not to take up management positions and the ‘high casual workforce’ choose not to enter the teaching profession?” (2003, p.90)

The lack of teachers willing to move into promotion positions combined with the fact that TAFE teachers are an aging workforce (with an average age of 47.4 years) with over a third of all teachers likely to consider retiring in the next four years or so (Kronemann, 2001) points to a growing issue with succession planning in TAFE.

### **Research Method**

The purpose of this research was to examine the working lives of managers in TAFE to determine how they were managing in an environment characterised by constant and widespread change. The research was informed by previous studies (Rice, 2000; Dinham, Brennan, Collier, Deece & Mulford, 2000) that recognised the impact of change on the roles of educational leaders while also acknowledging the dearth of research into the role of middle and front-line managers in education.

During 2001 and 2002 volunteers at the Head Teacher level were sought from all of the colleges in one metropolitan institute of TAFE to take part in interviews about the world of work of TAFE managers. Thirty three (or approximately one third) of the Head Teachers from the seven colleges in the institute volunteered to participate in the study after permission to conduct the research was obtained from the institute and college directors.

A qualitative approach was chosen for this research because it is concerned with understanding the situation from the participant’s own frame of reference. Qualitative researchers ensure they capture the perspectives of the participants as accurately as possible in order to understand how they “construct the world around them” (Glesne, 1999, p.5). The research reflects a phenomenological framework “which emphasizes

*verstehen*, the interpretive understanding of human interaction” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p.22).

Semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with the participants so that direction could be given to the interview while being flexible enough to allow participants to make contributions they considered important (Rodham, 2000, p.4). Interview times varied between 35 and 180 minutes with an average of 70 minutes. Notes, including direct quotations, were made during the course of the interviews. Typing of the notes occurred immediately following the interviews. These typed transcripts were returned to participants for verification and to ensure the trustworthiness of the data.

Data was inductively analysed using the NVIVO qualitative research software package.

## **Findings**

### *Why take on the Head Teacher role?*

While some Head Teachers spoke about being ‘pushed’ and ‘blackmailed’ into taking on the position, ten participants specifically discussed moving into the role because of its educational leadership function. Another nine wanted some control or influence in running a teaching section while ten believed it was a natural progression in their career.

Comments similar to the following illustrate the desire to be educational leaders:

*It was education and running programs that were valuable and worthwhile.  
I was interested in educational quality and delivery.*

A few of the Head Teachers felt that, in the days they took on the position, ‘it was a different job’, ‘in those days it was a good job’ and:

*They were different days when I made that decision. TAFE was different. It was an educational institution more focused on students and people in general.*

### *How do they feel now?*

According to the participants in the research the Head Teacher role has changed, marginalising educational leadership and replacing it with administrative and managerial work associated with accountability requirements (Rice, 2003). Head Teachers saw the impact of competition and market forces having an adverse effect on educational quality and perceived budgetary considerations as a distraction from educational quality. Head Teachers were concerned that management in TAFE no longer appeared interested in the well-being of individual students but were instead focused entirely on financial aspects:

*The things I want to do educationally are blocked and management doesn’t take an educational stand. Everything is financial.  
They say they’re trying to improve teaching ... but they’re not looking at student needs. Everything is budget driven. It should be student driven.*

This focus conflicts with the Head Teachers' perception of their role which they saw as one that primarily revolved around quality teaching with educational management and leadership responsibilities:

*Your main function is... educational quality and developing teachers and talking to students.*

*I still believe there should be a role for the pastoral care, teaching excellence, content currency, people management aspects that are the real life blood and guts of an organisation like this.*

Instead Head Teachers believed that there had been a decisive shift in their role due mainly to the expectations of management and others in TAFE whose main responsibility was to ensure the organisation moved to become competitive while responding appropriately to the accountability requirements of broader government controls:

*It's a juggling act with the resources against educational outcomes, trying to produce within a bureaucratic framework. We wheedle our way through the rules and regulations and budgets.*

While the Head Teachers appeared happy to take on the management role associated with the leadership of a teaching section in the new TAFE environment it was the administration that was anathema to them. The huge workload resulting from an increase in 'administrivia' was forcing the Head Teachers to lose control over their time and therefore their ability to be educational leaders:

*I'd definitely like to spend more time being involved in the academic side, having an educational input rather than an administrative input.*

*There are priorities you have to deal with. The educational role and administrative, budget role is in conflict.*

Given that the Head Teachers took on the role because they were keen to be educational leaders and/or wished to be able to control and influence their work environment their frustrations with the current administrative and accountability requirements of the role are understandable.

The Head Teachers expressed high degrees of stress and linked this closely with an inability to meet the expectations placed on their role. In trying to process the enormous amount of paperwork crossing their desks each day the Head Teachers were losing contact with the educational leadership aspect of their role. The majority of Head Teachers were actually placing the accountability and administrative function of the role ahead of their educational leadership function and, in doing so, severely compromising their own expectations of the role. The reasons for doing this were many but appeared to be directly related to the expectations of their managers and others in the TAFE system who put unrealistic deadlines on the Head Teachers:

*Decisions are made by people not doing any teaching. They send three to four emails for you to do a job and you might be teaching (but) they expect answers right away. You get Head Teachers shirking their responsibility making cut and dried decisions because of their workload.*

*One of the problems is deadlines. They are unrealistic because of everything else you have to do in the job.*

The role conflict experienced by the Head Teachers as a result of trying to juggle their educational leadership role with the accountability requirements of the system had also intensified with the expectations of their managers in TAFE drifting further and further away from the educational leadership role of the Head Teachers to increased expectations around the business manager/administrative aspect of the role. The ambiguity resulting from this change in expectations had arguably decreased the job satisfaction levels of Head Teachers and caused some of them to question whether, under these conditions, they could perform their role at a satisfactory level:

*I have a terrible fear of being a bitter and burnt out TAFE teacher.*

*You are worried that you're not doing the right thing. You spend your time being anxious about those things.*

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

The combination of unrealistic deadlines, a lack of clerical staff, a reallocation of work to Head Teachers (Rice, 2003) and an increasingly casual workforce place demands on Head Teachers that are fast becoming impossible to meet. A number of the Head Teachers expressed concern, guilt and even fear that these demands were making them feel 'totally submerged and overwhelmed with responsibility' and 'absolutely exhausted' at the end of the day.

Reporting these concerns of the Head Teachers must be balanced with the positive attitude they expressed in being part of the technical and further education system in New South Wales. It is interesting that, while the Head Teachers were obviously burdened with paperwork, emails and countless calls on their time, most of those interviewed for this study could still express this positive attitude. The majority of the Head Teachers found working with staff and students remained as one of the best components of their role. Many were also excited about the role they could play in delivering training to industry, in planning and organising the operation of their section, in being able to implement innovation around curriculum development, in being part of the bigger picture, being at the 'cutting edge' and 'having control over things like training packages and their implementation' and 'the direction that the changing learning and teaching environment takes'.

### *Head Teachers as role models?*

Overwhelmingly, the major influence on Head Teachers when deciding to take on the position was their Head Teacher at the time or Head Teachers they had worked with in the past. These role models provided support and encouragement to the aspiring Head Teachers and convinced them that the role had 'positive, doable aspects' and led to a career path through TAFE. In the main it was these role models who also influenced the leadership style of the current Head Teachers.

Of concern is the way in which the Head Teacher role is currently being modeled to future Head Teachers. Both full-time and part-time teachers are obviously observing Head Teachers struggling with the demands of their load, working long hours, taking work home (especially lesson preparation), providing little support for the educational quality and development of teachers, attempting to meet unrealistic deadlines, suffering from a lack of acknowledgement, negotiating a cumbersome administrative



system and receiving little support in the form of clerical assistance while being seen as ‘critical management to bring about all the change required’.

In effect, Head Teachers are performing the role of administrative managers and, in doing so, are becoming distanced from the actual teaching that occurs in the sections while having less time to spend with teachers and students. It is doubtful that aspiring Head Teachers are going to be encouraged into a role dominated by these characteristics.

To exacerbate the problem, there are less full-time teachers in the TAFE system who could be groomed for future Head Teacher positions at a time when the average age of teachers in TAFE is approaching 50 years (Kronemann, 2001) and the ‘baby boomers’ are thinking about retirement in the foreseeable future. As one Head Teacher noted:

*With the lack of full-time staff we’re not training people or giving them the skills to be Head Teachers. They’re not miraculously going to appear from nowhere.*

*How can the Head Teacher role be improved?*

It is imperative, given the findings of this research, that consideration is given to the role of the Head Teacher in an effort to reduce the conflict inherent in the role and to ensure it remains a position of educational leadership. Currently it appears that another level of management is being created at the frontline level in TAFE – that of an administrative manager rather than a Head Teacher. If the Head Teacher as a frontline manager, though, is seen as critical to implementing change in TAFE (Mulcahy, 2003) then this anomaly must be addressed and clear purpose given to the Head Teacher position.

This study has identified a number of the tensions inherent in the Head Teacher role and has argued that the major tension surrounding the role is one of educational leadership (and therefore the pedagogical output of teaching sections) verses accountability and administrative requirements. While the purpose of the study is not to generalise to other Head Teachers within the TAFE system due to the limited nature of the sample, the following suggestions for improving the position are put forward in an effort to reduce the conflicts being experienced by Head Teachers and to improve the role in the perception of both the job holder and others who might aspire to the position.

The following strategies for improvement take into consideration the suggestions of the participants in this study as well as suggestions made in the literature:

1. Low-level administration and data-entry should be removed from the Head Teacher position and allocated to clerical assistants located within teaching sections. This should help free up the time of Head Teachers for lesson preparation and for educational leadership. While fiscal constraints necessarily limit the feasibility of this suggestion it is never-the-less appropriate that low level administration be removed from the Head Teacher workload to ensure they do not “become buried in useless information and calls on their time” (Scott, 1999, p 95). According to Scott (1999, p 100) if more responsibility is

given to people 'at the coalface' for particular functions "then parallel attention will have to be given to restructuring their work in order to allow them adequate time to carry out this additional work".

2. The role of the Head Teacher should be acknowledged and valued. Managers need to value and recognise teachers' work; they need to return their focus to education and build an effective, open and competent management structure (Kronemann, 2001, p.x).
3. Networking opportunities need to be provided for the Head Teachers so they can share strategies for, and brainstorm solutions to, educational issues (Gibb, 2003, p.43). This would also relieve some of the isolation that the participants in the study reported. Other positions within TAFE should be given the opportunity to network with Head Teachers so that all positions obtain an understanding of the role. Multidiscipline teams working on solutions to various issues would facilitate this networking.
4. Formation of a consultative committee of Head Teachers to take advantage of their expertise should occur.

*Head Teachers are such a different group from management. I think they need their own mechanism for influencing how things work. They need their own group for directly influencing especially on educational matters and they need the power.*

5. Head Teachers need more autonomy in managing their budgets while the budgeting procedures themselves need to be more transparent and genuine. Head Teachers in the study were concerned that:

*Trying to get sensible, up-to-date budget reports is difficult.*

*The budget doesn't seem to reflect what we actually do.*

*The goalposts are continually changing especially in a financial sense.*

With improved budgetary processes Head Teachers would spend less time trying to manage conflicting information and have more time available for their educational leadership role.

6. An in-depth analysis of the changes made to the Head Teacher's position should be conducted to determine exactly what has been added to it over the years. Deliberate consideration must be given to the impact of future changes before they are automatically passed on to the frontline management level.
7. The Head Teachers' teaching load should be reconsidered. Unfortunately this is a two-edged sword as, while Head Teachers profess their love of teaching, it appears impossible to perform satisfactorily as a teacher with the limited time available. Consideration could be given to the creation of educational and administrative Head Teachers with people moving into their areas of interest.
8. The next generation of Head Teachers must be identified and developed. "In an economic climate characterised by downsizing, budget cuts, outsourcing and financial self-sufficiency, perhaps it is even more critical to anticipate and prepare for the different expectations and demands on future TAFE leaders". (Riches, 2002, p.1). These aspiring Head Teachers would provide much-needed assistance to Head Teachers currently in the job.
9. Head Teachers must learn how to prioritise and time-manage especially in relation to accountability requirements. These accountabilities must be defined and the importance of each one determined so that the Head Teachers' time is spent on the most important issues. To this end, longer term planning on the part of others in TAFE who place expectations on Head Teachers will

alleviate unrealistic deadlines and the stress being experienced by a number of the Head Teachers.

10. Management must reconsider their thinking in regard to the expectations they have of Head Teachers in an effort to encourage the educational leadership role of the Head Teachers. By removing the full-time concentration on budgeting and accountability requirements Head Teachers will be given permission to think more about the educational leadership aspect of their role.
11. Professional development should continue to concentrate on leadership and change management (which the participants in the study commented favourably upon) while also taking into consideration the capabilities required of management positions in TAFE (Callan 2001).

## **Conclusion**

The demands of the 'new vocationalism' are distracting Head Teachers from focusing on teaching and learning and steering them towards a focus on accountability and its associated administrative work. These new demands compete with and distance Head Teachers from their traditional role of educational leadership forcing them into a juggling act that weakens the pedagogical output of TAFE. Head Teachers no longer have the time to meet all of the demands of their position. They must make choices between processing the administrative paperwork and providing educational leadership. According to the participants in this study the administration is often the winner with Head Teachers coping with short deadlines and an increase in processing work that would normally be the province of clerical assistants.

A number of suggestions for improving the Head Teacher position have been made in this paper. Head Teachers should be change agents and role models. Without the time to spend on educational leadership they are fast becoming administration managers – a role that has little relevance to teachers who would otherwise be expected to move into Head Teacher positions. It is vital that the role of the Head Teacher is reassessed to make it an attractive option, once again, for teachers who aspire to educational leadership positions.

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