

The changing role of the TAFE Head Teacher

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Abstract

The role of the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Head Teacher has changed since the position was established to provide educational leadership within a particular discipline area in a college. TAFE is now part of a vocational education and training system operating in a competitive market where managers are expected to have business, marketing and performance management skills as well as their traditional educational leadership skills.

This paper draws on the accounts of thirty-three TAFE Head Teachers who were interviewed as part of an ongoing research project into the changing world of work of TAFE managers. It represents the findings of an NVIVO analysis of the interview data as well as a literature review into the role that managers play in the ever-changing context of educational institutions.

The paper raises issues about how the Head Teachers perceive their role and how they deal with the tensions between the different demands of this role. The participants in the study are attempting to balance the requirements of a role that has taken them from being a good teacher and administrator to a leader and change agent and from the professional to the managerial paradigm. The findings of the research, however, indicate that Head Teachers are still preoccupied with routine administration and have little time for either effective business management or the leadership of quality educational delivery.

While future research will attempt to locate this study in the context of the views of significant others (senior managers/teachers/team members) this research stresses the importance of addressing the perceived role overload and role conflict of those in Head Teachers positions with a view to helping the managers balance their current workload.

Introduction

In a paper delivered at the AVETRA conference last year I emphasised the need to rethink the role and duties of Head Teachers in TAFE (Technical and Further Education) to reduce their administrative workload and allow them to have an input into decision-making, leadership and change at both the College and Institute level. While work has been published on the capabilities of VET (vocational education and training) managers (Callan, 2001), career satisfaction in TAFE (Lorrimar, 2002) and other work is in progress on management and leadership in VET (Mulcahy; Harris; Falk – see www.ncver.edu.au for current projects) there is still a dearth of information on the actual role these front-line managers play in their organisations and the ramifications of the multitude of changes in the VET sector on their working lives. This paper draws from a continuing body of work to present an analysis of the role that TAFE Head teachers play and the tensions that have resulted from a movement to the ‘new vocationalism’.

A paradigm shift

The last decade has seen enormous changes in how VET is delivered and to whom. These changes reflect the changes in philosophy that drive the sector and represent the centrality that the government has given to VET in realising Australia's economic prosperity (Senate Committee, 2000). The changes include the implementation of the National Training Framework, the Australian Qualifications Framework and the Australian Quality Training Framework and a focus on the market in determining VET provision. The imposition of economic rationalism with its commensurate withdrawal of governments from public sector activities, new vocationalism with educational institutions playing a key role in economic reform and a new discourse of managerialism where educational managers are being reconstructed from professionals to managers of reform have shifted TAFE from the discourses of liberal education to the discourses of "market driven and commercially focused vocational educational and training activities" (Chappell, 1999, p.9) where the needs of individual clients have been subsumed under the mantle of an industry driven VET system.

In a position paper by the Education for Work Coalition, Robyn Broadbent (2001) has identified the 'conflicted' role of TAFE where, at one end of the spectrum you have those who ascribe to the views of neo-liberal economics and corporatism and, at the other, those who consider TAFE's responsibility is to people in the wider community, with employers being only one of its stakeholders. This position was recently recognised by members of TAFE Directors Australia in their submission to ANTA on the national VET strategy where they have argued strongly for the new strategy to "address the needs of both individual learners and the community as well as industry" to enable VET to "become increasingly responsive and relevant to its diverse clients" (2003, p.2).

Where, then, does this leave VET management? According to an article in the Campus Review (author unknown) "managers and practitioners now require the ability to juggle the competing and often contradictory demands of the public and private sector values shaping VET" (2003, p.16). These VET practitioners, though, are experiencing a crisis of identity (Chappell, 1999) as they struggle to identify with their new role – a role that challenges their understanding of their educational role. Lorrimar (2002, p.19), similarly, describes these 'seismic shifts' as seriously challenging the professional identity of TAFE teachers and managers and their role in vocational education

The workload of VET managers and teachers has indisputably increased (Lorrimar, 2002; Campus Review, 2003; Kell, 1998; Kronemann, 2001) with administrative functions forming a major portion of this workload. Head Teachers in TAFE are being pressured to increase the efficiency of their sections through increased ASCH (annual student contact hours) and decreased proportional dollar budgets. They are also expected to undertake work with industry that will result in commercial dollars and to run trainee/apprenticeship courses in an effort to gain more funding for their colleges. A Head Teacher survey conducted by the NSW Teachers Federation and TAFE NSW in late 2002 identified that weightings for establishing Head Teacher positions should consider the increased workload of the position as well as the diversity of duties performed by the Head Teacher. The Head Teachers who responded to the survey (21.5%) also felt that their workloads were too high (NSW Teachers Federation, 2003).

As a result of these and other pressures evidence is showing that educational managers are trying to cope with a number of tensions:

- The tension between the core role of teaching while being accountable for balancing the budget (Elliott, 1996; Grace, 1995; Kell, 1993; Randle & Brady, 1997; Causer & Exworthy, 1999))
- The tension that arises from the expectation that educational managers will fulfil low level management tasks while being involved in higher level change (Glover & Miller, 1999; Hannay & Ross, 1999; Paterson, 1999; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989) without the support of administrative staff (Lorrimar, 2002)
- An intensification of workload resulting from both a reallocation of work and additional work relating to the negotiating and monitoring of performance outcomes (Lorrimar, 2002; Paterson, 1999; Causer & Exworthy, 1999)
- The tension between being an 'industry practitioner' and an 'educator' (Chappell, 1999).
- The restraints imposed by a general lack of time in their working days (Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Connors, 1999; Glover & Miller, 1999; Kell, 1998).

The reshaping of the roles of educational managers with the move to managerialism and economic rationalism necessitates that new models of practice be developed with ongoing discussion on job redesign (Kell, 1998, p.5). This research goes some way to explaining how Head Teachers in TAFE perceive their current role and the tensions surrounding this role. Given that roles are determined by the expectations of others (Avery & Baker, 1984, p.369) future research needs to locate this study in the context of the views of significant others (senior managers/teachers/team members). In the future interviews will be conducted with people in these positions within TAFE the build up a more comprehensive view of the role that educational managers play within the system.

Method

During 2001 and 2002 I interviewed forty-two people in management positions in one Institute of TAFE in metropolitan Sydney. These management positions comprised Institute Managers and Head Teachers. The interviews focused on perceptions of their working lives, moving through a chronological series of questions from, 'Why did you want to be an Institute Manager/Head Teacher?' to 'How do you see your future in education?'

This paper presents an NVIVO analysis of the responses of thirty-three of the Head Teachers interviewed. Head Teachers in TAFE are responsible for the operation of a group of full-time and part-time teachers who teach across one or more discipline areas. Head Teachers in the Institute researched report to both a Deputy College Director and a Director, Business Development Group. Their statement of duties describes the role of the Head Teacher as, in part:

- teaching in a most effective manner
- ensuring the provision of a high standard of education in the section
- contributing to the development of curriculum and teaching resources
- providing guidance and assistance to staff
- liaising with other sections of the College to ensure effective educational service to students and the community
- planning and disseminating information and establishing controls on resources
- planning educational programs and organising student enrolments

Being a Head Teacher in TAFE while conducting this research has enabled me to have a practitioner's view of the issues involved in the research. It is important to make my position clear to readers of this research because it underpins and influences all phases of my work. Using qualitative methods that accept the subjective biases of both the researcher and the researched, though, have enabled me to overcome any limitation my background placed on the research findings (Goertz & LeCompte, 1984, p.95). At all times I have used the words of the participants in the interviews when describing their perceptions of the role of the Head Teacher.

A qualitative approach was chosen for the study because it allowed an understanding of what it meant for the participants in a particular setting (Patton, 1985, p.1 cited in Merriam, 1988, pp.16-17) and allowed their perceptions to be expressed. Data collection included:

1. Interviews

Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with participants taking from 35 to 180 minutes (with an average of 70 minutes). All people occupying Head Teacher positions in the Institute (approximately 90) were contacted by email and participation was voluntary.

2. Observation

I am part of a metropolitan TAFE college at the Head Teacher level so have knowledge of the working life of TAFE Head Teachers. I also have access to documents, minutes of meetings, conference and other reports as part of my position.

3. Literature Review

The review of literature ranged from readings on managerialism and economic rationalism to studies of academic middle managers, heads of departments in schools and further education. Lately reading has centred on role theory, symbolic interactionism and Erving Goffman's Frame Analysis.

Notes, including direct quotations, were made during the course of the interviews and typing of the notes occurred immediately following the interviews. These typed transcripts were returned to participants for verification and to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

The data from each interview were then entered into the NVIVO qualitative research software package as rich text documents. Coding of the data followed with categories or nodes 'emerging' from the data (Richards 2002, p. 44). At the conclusion of this initial process approximately 70 categories emerged from the data. These categories were examined and refined and reapplied to the interview documents to ensure all incidents of the categories had been found. When each node was established it was given a description and a memo was created as a DataLink and attached to the node to store ideas, insights, interpretations and growing understanding of the data (Richards 2002, p.35).

After data from the interviews were entered into NVIVO, a review of all relevant literature was also entered into the software and coded using the nodes previously built up from the coding of the interview documents. This allowed a ready comparison of the

theory from the literature search with the information gained from the participants in the study.

For the purposes of this paper the NVIVO nodes that have been analysed included:

- ✓ role
- ✓ change
- ✓ stress
- ✓ administration
- ✓ teaching
- ✓ budget

An in-depth analysis of these nodes (which include both interview and literature review data) has enabled a comprehensive picture of the role of the Head Teacher (according to the Head Teachers interviewed) to be constructed.

Findings and Discussion

Of the thirty-three participants in the study, 16 were female and 17 male with an average age of 48 years (ranging from 36 to 57 years). The Head Teachers had an average total of 18.5 years teaching and 8 years at their current college. They had an average of 8 years in Head Teacher positions with 6 years in their current location.

Head Teachers identified the following as being the major changes impacting on their role in TAFE over the past few years:

1. Responsibility for budgets.
2. Introduction of new training packages.
3. The requirement for industry involvement including commercial course negotiation and workplace delivery and assessment.
4. Restructuring of positions within their Institute.
5. An increase in administrative workload.
6. Changes in teaching and assessment methods including flexible delivery and recognition of prior learning.

The changes that have occurred in TAFE have led Head Teachers to perceive their role as multi-dimensional with role expectations coming from a number of sources. The belief that they can fulfil all these role expectations has obviously led to both role conflict and role ambiguity with Head Teachers attempting to balance their educational role with the requirements of a system that is driven more and more by the notions of managerialism and economic rationalism.

The role of the Head Teacher

The Head Teacher's role was initially examined using a model of the role of school department heads developed by Edwards (1985) and enhanced by Earley and Fletcher-Campbell in 1989. The NVIVO analysis of the interviews with the Head Teachers in TAFE suggested three themes (teaching, administration and leadership) infuse all of their activities. Five key areas of responsibility emerged including students, teachers, educational quality, curriculum and budget. These responsibilities must be attended to within six contexts -the section, college, institute, TAFE NSW, the community and industry.

The three themes

1. Teaching

Head Teachers have a teaching load of between 10 and 14 hours per week. Preparation for classes and marking of assessments increases this workload.

2. Administration

A major aspect of the role of the Head Teacher is the completion of paperwork associated with enrolments, mark sheets, purchasing, enrolment adjustments, roll audits, recognition of prior learning, equipment maintenance, course completions, graduations, resource management, missing marks, establishment control, photocopying, ordering of textbooks, room bookings and a plethora of other duties. They must also operate the computer systems that have been introduced to facilitate this administration.

3. Leadership

Head Teachers lead a section of full-time and part-time teaching staff to meet the goals and objectives of the section, college, institute and TAFE NSW. According to the interview data Head Teachers mainly plan at the sectional level. This planning includes timetabling (programming classes, rooms and teachers), budget and ASCH forecasting and planning for new training packages and other course changes. Many Head Teachers are involved in college decision-making and (to a much lesser extent) decision-making within the Institute. They also nominate for committee roles e.g. occupational health and safety, facilities planning, access and equity, assessment validation, finance, computer users group, communications audit and head teacher development. Other leadership roles accepted by the Head Teachers include quality management, animal ethics, union roles and roles with the global business unit. Still others undertake projects (often as the project leader) including Re-framing the Future and Learnscope.

Key areas of responsibility:

1. Students

Many Head Teachers believe their main role is the pastoral care of students and dealing with student enquiries and problems. Head Teachers are also responsible for the recruitment of students, monitoring and assessing their progress and maintaining student records.

2. Teachers

Head Teachers are directly responsible for the recruitment and induction of teachers (full-time and part-time), the performance management of these staff including disciplining, motivating and training and development. Head Teachers are expected to collaborate with staff in problem solving and decision-making and to support their staff with guidance and with adequate resources.

3. Budgets

The responsibility for meeting budget and ASCH targets rests with Head Teachers. They are expected to monitor financial returns and manage any variations to budget. Head Teachers are increasingly responsible for bringing in commercial funds to the college and institute through delivery to industry, and through trainee and apprenticeship training. Head Teachers must allocate resources within their sections to ensure their budgets are met.

4. Curriculum

With the introduction of new Training Packages Head Teachers are responsible for the development and delivery of new curriculum and the valid assessment of this curriculum.

5. Educational

With the current emphasis on contestability of funds within a competitive education marketplace Head Teachers must ensure best practice occurs in terms of teaching strategies, methods of delivery (including flexible, on-line and workplace delivery) and methods of assessment. They must support and encourage teachers in the provision of vocational education and training to an changing client base.

The Six contexts

1. Section

Head Teachers ensure the provision of a high standard of education in a section through their leadership of this section. They also have a teaching program, usually in the discipline area associated with the section.

2. College

Head Teachers participate in whole-college problem solving and decision-making. They attend senior staff and other meetings and act as college representatives at marketing promotions and when negotiating with industry bodies. Head Teachers report to Deputy College Directors on all college matters.

3. Institute

Head Teachers have a functional line of control to their Director in the Business Development area of the Institute office for all matters related to both mainstream and commercial course delivery. They also liaise with colleagues in other colleges across the Institute and participate in institute-wide committees. A number of Head Teachers are also involved in the delivery and assessment of education and training overseas through the Institute International Business Unit.

4. TAFE NSW

Program Managers exist at the state level to coordinate the dissemination of course documentation to all teachers. They also coordinate the setting and marking of statewide examinations in a number of discipline areas. Head Teachers are an important point of communication for the Program Managers. Head Teachers are also involved in working directly with their Program Managers and others in course and resource development.

5. Industry

Increasingly, Head Teachers are negotiating with industry to deliver courses at the workplace, flexibly or on-line according to the specific needs of industry.

6. Community

TAFE still has strong links with the community and provides specific courses to the people of these communities. Head Teachers participate in community committees and associations including the Chamber of Commerce and liaise with local schools and universities.

Tensions within the role

The interviews with the Head Teachers revealed that their role has increased by accretion as a result of the changes being introduced into the TAFE system. From an examination of the interviews of both Institute Managers and Head Teachers (Rice, 2002a; 2002b) and an in-depth review of appropriate literature the conclusion can be drawn that the middle and front-line management positions in educational institutions are bearing the brunt of changes in their systems while also being expected to successfully implement the changes necessary to ensure their institutions remain viable providers of education (Mulcahy, 2002; Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Gleeson & Shain, 1999; Paterson, 1999; Daughtry & Finch, 1997; Lundberg, 1996).

As identified in the literature review, educational leaders are suffering a number of tensions around their changing role. The following discusses the major tensions identified by the Head Teachers in this current research.

Pedagogy v. managerialism

Exworthy and Halford (1999, p.2) argued that there has been a “widespread and forceful emergence of new forms of managerialism” in public sector organisations over the past decade. A key aspect of this new managerialism is the devolution of management responsibilities down the hierarchy often converting professionals into managers. According to Randle and Brady (1997, p.232) the professional paradigm has as its goals and values a primacy of student learning and the teaching process; loyalty to students and colleagues and a concern for academic standards whereas the managerial paradigm’s goals and values relate to student through-put and income generation; loyalty to the organisation and concern for a balance between efficiency and effectiveness.

Head Teachers in TAFE are feeling the effects of this movement to managerialism and the “injection of an ideological foreign body” Pollitt (1993, p.11) into the sector. The following statements are illustrative of the frustration and confusion felt by some of the Head Teachers in the study:

There is a frustration that the things I want to do educationally are blocked and management doesn't take an educational stand. Everything is financial. The bottom line is that, if it costs money, it doesn't matter even if it benefits students.

I don't remember the last time in a senior staff meeting where we've dealt with teaching excellence or improvements for students. We spend a lot of time talking about ASCH, photocopiers, commercial delivery.

The name of the game now is ASCH. I'm confused because my involvement with welfare reform tells me that the government is going down another road. Education is about taking the third leg of capacity building - working with the local community and identifying the needs of industry and the local community. We are driven by higher level funding and are not engaging with the local community - high schools, preschools and other associations (not just the chamber of commerce) and addressing their needs.

It must be noted that, while Head Teachers questioned decisions that had been made for budgetary reasons alone, they were not resistant to managing their sections more

efficiently and were, in fact, excited about offering commercial delivery and having more control over the operation of their sections. In fact it was not the movement to 'managing' their sections that caused tension for the Head Teachers so much as the influx of 'administrivia' into their jobs.

'Administrivia'

The increase in administration has been cited as a major contributory factor in causing stress for educational managers (Paterson, 1999, p.106). All of the Head Teachers in this current study perceived that their administrative tasks were assuming dominance over their other roles and discussed having to juggle their workload to get the administration completed:

I do absolutely no lesson preparation at work – it is all done at home. The whole time I am not on class I am doing administration.

The worst thing that I find now with all the paperwork is that you don't do your main function – that is educational quality and developing teachers and talking to students. That gets sidelined to an extent.

There are ten things happening at once and you have to juggle them. I like to finish things but you can't.

The frustration as a Head Teacher is the lack of ability to see something through with any degree of thoroughness because we are always doing the day-to-day stuff

The Head Teachers are preoccupied with routine administration (Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989) undertaking low level, repetitive jobs that are better suited to clerical staff. Two Head Teachers actually said that they were "too highly paid to be a data entry clerk". The lack of clerical staff and increasing casualisation of the workforce, though, make it difficult for Head Teachers to delegate these tasks to other staff.

Workload intensification

The majority of Head Teachers interviewed expressed a concern with the continual reallocation of workload from other positions in TAFE to the position of Head Teacher. Interestingly it is the introduction of systems designed to help teachers and Head Teachers that has impacted heavily on their increased workloads. These computerised systems have shifted clerical and data processing work from college administration staff to teaching staff. For example, the new Classroom Management System (CLAMS) has reallocated the input of enrolment, enrolment adjustment and marks entry, to a large extent, from office personnel to teaching staff without a commensurate increase in clerical assistance at the section level.

This movement of workload is recognised in the following observations made by three Head Teachers:

We've got a shift of responsibility from the customer services section to the Head Teacher. A major amount of work has shifted with CLAMS.

The workload has grown considerably since I've been in TAFE. A lot of the extra work is unnecessary. Different tasks have been added to previous tasks without seeing if anything can be replaced. The pot keeps on getting filled up without anything being drained out.

Look at the jobs that have been added to the Head Teacher – things the clerical did, the deputy did e.g. budgets. Now we have to do all of it – marketing, trying to get extra money, designing extra courses.

Educator or industry practitioner?

Chappell (1999, p.8) has argued that the new vocationalism has increased the intrarole tension of TAFE teachers “by privileging industry relevance and workplace learning over other goals, previously ascribed to the institutional world of TAFE”. He also accepted that TAFE teachers did identify with this new world of work but also still identified with the “discourses of liberal education” (p.11). This current study has found that Head Teachers are accepting of the movement to commercial delivery and workplace assessment with many actually citing this as one of the most enjoyable aspects of their role. The Head Teachers did not differentiate ‘commercial’ delivery and ‘mainstream’ delivery; rather they felt that all teaching was part of their ‘core’ activity. The tension appears to arise when Head Teachers find themselves marginalising ‘mainstream’ education so that the needs of industry can be served or when funding is taken away from existing courses (especially those providing access and equity to students seeking ‘second chance’ education).

The indirect influence has been an undervaluing of the sort of stuff I've been involved in doing. Once upon a time the work we did was held up as a terrific example of what TAFE could do but not these days (Head Teacher of Access and Equity).

Budget/ASCH has marginalised general education. You are only good if you bring funds into the college but we don't have industry links.

These tensions are exacerbated when Head Teachers perceive that, due to their lack of time, they cannot chase the commercial dollars:

We're supposed to be business managers but we have all this clerical stuff. They ask, “Why aren't you generating commercial funds?”

I find it difficult with the Business Development Group following leads they generate as well as running mainstream.

Time

Head Teachers reflected that the most enjoyable aspect of their job was actually interacting with students, particularly in the classroom. Head Teachers came into TAFE

as teachers and still cherished this role while believing it to be central to the organisation's business. With the shift in their role away from teaching to an increasing focus on management and administration the Head Teachers felt cheated and guilty about the decreasing time they could give to their teaching and the preparation for this teaching. The following statements reveal the tension the Head Teachers felt around this role conflict:

When I first took the job there was something you could achieve. Now it is less so because we are dealing with the nonsense paperwork and have less time to do the important stuff with the students and staff.

It's becoming a job where you can't do what you want to do – interact with students. It's becoming a pain to teach – not the lack of enjoyment of teaching but there's too many other things to do.

There's a bit of a clash – the break down of teaching and administration. What does suffer is your teaching. It's the pressure of having to do all the other things. That's the hardest thing. If you could spend more time in your preparation ...

Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989), Kell (1998), Glover and Miller (1999) and Connors (1999) have all identified that time is a major constraint on educational managers. The subject leaders in Glover and Miller's study (1999, p.61) actually specified a "lack of time as the factor which most inhibited their effectiveness". Similarly, in this current study, the Head Teachers bemoaned the lack of time they had to undertake all of the tasks they were expected to complete in fulfilling their role:

The responsibility of the role has shifted considerably. We are supposed to be change agents as such and that is a mammoth task. We still have to do admin tasks. It takes too much time.

One of the frustrations is that we constantly think we could do things better if there was the time to do it. Everything is done in a hurry or on the run because of time.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the Head Teacher's role according to the perceptions of the people in this role. It has also highlighted the tensions felt by Head Teachers around this role. As their role grows and changes the tensions felt by the Head Teachers mount and lead to a stress induced by role overload and role conflict.

It is clear that consideration must be given to addressing the current role of the Head Teacher to account for the increasing number of tasks they have to perform. Recognition must be given to rationalising the workload of the position while making the role more realistic and achievable. As Paterson (1999, p.114) states, educational practitioners "are more likely to make the role work even if it turns out to be less than ideal from a purely andragogical point of view" if management gains their total commitment and wholehearted cooperation. This will only be gained through open and honest debate with the practitioners and the establishment of realistic predictions and targets.

While the role of the Head Teacher is a complex one all of the Head Teachers in this study expressed an enthusiasm for what they perceived as their core business – the education and training of students. This research, however, stresses the importance of addressing the tensions being felt by the Head Teachers with a view to helping them balance their current workload.

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