

# Two sides of the same coin: leaders in private providers juggling educational and business imperatives

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EVALUATION PROGRAM

RESEARCH REPORT





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Additional information relating to this research is available in *Two sides of the same coin: leaders in private providers juggling educational and business imperatives: support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2510.html>>.

To find other material of interest, search VOCED (the UNESCO/NCVER international database <<http://www.voced.edu.au>>) using the following keywords: industry; leadership; management; managers; private training provider; registered training organisation; vocational education and training.

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# About the research

## *Two sides of the same coin: leaders in private providers juggling educational and business imperatives*

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Previous work on leadership in vocational education and training (VET) providers has mainly focused on public providers. This report builds on this research by specifically investigating leadership in private providers.

The researchers have used case studies to explore leadership across the different types of providers that make up private registered training organisations: enterprise, industry-sponsored and commercial. Through interviews with senior leaders and managers, as well as trainers, the research examines the overarching question of how leaders in these various private registered training organisations juggle the educational and business imperatives of their organisation.

## Key messages

- Leadership is shaped by the structures and cultures of the host organisation, including the state of the business and its competitive position in relation to other providers.
- In industry and enterprise registered training organisations, leaders are driven primarily by the goal of ensuring that training adds value to the enterprise. On the other hand, leaders in commercial registered training organisations see outcomes for learners as fundamental, recognising that these can be assisted by industry connections in their market niche.
- The business and educational imperatives of the organisation should not be seen as competing with each other. Rather, they should be treated as two integrated aspects of educational leadership.

Tom Karmel  
Managing Director, NCVET



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We also gratefully acknowledge all the staff in the private registered training organisations visited who willingly gave their precious time to be interviewed. We understand that securing time in private business for activity such as research, which is not core business, is extremely difficult, and so we thank you all for your participation and for giving us your reflections on how you saw leadership and how you practised it in your organisations. We hope that the report does justice to what you have told us.

We express our appreciation also to the three anonymous reviewers who provided helpful feedback on the draft report.

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# Executive summary

## Context and purpose

Australia has seen major changes in the leadership and management of vocational education and training (VET) organisations over the last 15 years. Increasingly competitive funding arrangements, the requirement for greater responsiveness and flexibility, the adoption of management models from business and industry, together with a policy emphasis on institutional self-reliance, have meant an escalation in non-educational leadership/management needs in Australian training providers. Yet a common theme through VET literature is that educational leadership is not recognised in research and practice, which means that policy-makers are left without a clear view of what is going on in registered training organisations and what genuine educational leadership looks like.

This project aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge on VET leadership by foregrounding educational leadership in the daily lives of private provider leaders/managers. The study distinguishes itself from previous research by focusing on private registered training organisations. Its purpose was therefore to investigate ways in which leaders/managers in these training organisations understand and enact leadership in their daily work. The overarching research question set for this study was: How do leaders of private registered training organisations understand and juggle the educational and business imperatives in their organisations?

## Research process

Sixteen private registered training organisations formed the cases for this study, across three types of provider: commercial, enterprise-based and industry. The organisations were from the three states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Attempts were made when selecting these organisations to obtain a broad coverage, particularly in terms of geographical location and the types of industry served. The cases, therefore, provide some diversity but take account of the need for compromise because of time, funding and the intensive nature of the research methodology.

The study used three main methods for gathering information: a review of published national and international literature on this subject; content analysis of relevant documentation from the organisations or their websites to understand the nature of the enterprise; and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 34 personnel – leaders/managers (n = 21) and employees/trainers (n = 13). Since the purpose of the study was primarily interpretive, its findings cannot be generalised to all private registered training organisations.

## Key findings

### Importance of context

The notable feature to emerge from this research is the role that context plays in influencing the phenomenon of leadership in training organisations. Leadership is enacted in a variety of ways that are predominantly shaped by the type of business a registered training organisation is involved in and the ways in which the leadership function is understood and structured in and across various job roles.

## Distinctive emphases in understandings of leadership

Leaders across all three types of training organisation were able to articulate their understandings of leadership as taking a number of forms. Most referred to a variety of generic functions performed as part of a leadership role. Most informative, however, were the distinctive emphases that reflected the different aims to which their leadership was directed. For example, leadership in industry and enterprise registered training organisations was not so much focused on outcomes for learners, but on enhancing productivity. In commercial registered training organisations, outcomes for learners were integral to their concerns, although connections with their market niches were also always in sharp focus.

## Leadership as a multi-dimensional phenomenon

Another key theme from this research was that the enactment of leadership in private registered training organisations was a multi-directional phenomenon – it was exercised ‘up’, ‘down’ and ‘across’ organisations. For commercial registered training organisations, leadership was often concentrated in a small team, meaning that ‘upwards’ leadership in the organisation was less evident, while engagement across the organisation and with stakeholders featured highly. In their enterprise counterparts, leaders worked ‘up’ to influence their enterprise senior executives on the value of the training organisation to their business, as well as ‘across’ the organisation to embed training in work structures and to influence other middle managers to engage in and support training. They also worked ‘down’ in the sense that, as part of the workforce, they were fully aware that their role as workers could influence other workers’ perceptions of the value and importance of training and be a significant driver for change. Leaders in industry training organisations operated in a similar fashion, except that their domain was an industry rather than an enterprise. Being ‘one step removed’ and having to operate across the range of businesses that constituted the industry required leaders to adopt both a broader perspective (the best interests of the industry) and a narrow, specialist focus (this particular business at this point in time).

## Challenges faced by leaders

The three main challenges faced by all leaders, regardless of organisation type, were establishing their credibility in the arena in which they operated, managing compliance requirements and managing change. There were also particular challenges specific to the various types of training organisations. In commercial organisations, staffing issues featured as a significant challenge for leaders. Finding the right staff with a passion for their roles was paramount, as was recruiting staff who had the right skills mix. Other challenges were ‘growing’ staff, access to administrative support, and achieving a balance between commercial requirements and the need for quality provision. On the other hand, embedding the functions of a training organisation inside an enterprise presented unique challenges for leaders in enterprise training organisations. One major challenge was communicating the value of the training organisation to senior executives, while another was managing the different cultures within the whole enterprise and the requirements the training organisation demanded. For leaders in industry settings, like their counterparts in commercial training organisations, budgetary constraints and balancing commercial and quality imperatives loomed as significant challenges. A related issue was the necessity for engaging staff with both industry credibility as well as the ‘head set’ for business development. Leaders in industry training organisations, like their enterprise counterparts, also grappled with the challenge of changing cultures in their training organisation.

## Success factors

The key factors that assisted leaders to meet these challenges were connected to their perceptions of their organisation's objectives. For leaders in industry training organisations, their leadership centred on engaging their industry with the VET system in a way that assisted businesses in the industry to thrive and see their productivity enhanced. A second success factor was building the trust of the industry in the training organisation and paving the groundwork to support what could be perceived as 'jumping through hoops', that is, attention to compliance processes. A third success factor was the capacity of industry training organisation leaders to be proactive and, as far as possible, able to anticipate the impact of the dynamic compliance environment in which they operated.

For the leadership in commercial training organisations, success factors were linked to their capacity to maintain reputation, networks and market niche. Sound business models that built sustainable businesses were mentioned by these leaders. Synthesising educational and business leadership was considered essential for survival, as lean structures and smaller numbers of staff meant that it was not possible to operate using more hierarchical or specialised structures of leadership.

Leaders in enterprise training organisations saw that success lay in ensuring that their enterprise perceived value in the training organisation and what it could offer in terms of facilitating growth and developing a competitive advantage for the business. In this context, successful educational leadership was intimately bound up with the productivity of the business. Being able to network and to influence people in positions where they could have a direct bearing on the operation of the training organisation required skills of persuasion and highly developed networks. Another success factor was being able to integrate the learning systems developed by the training organisation into work structures and processes in a way that did not hamper enterprise productivity.

### 'Two sides of the same coin': educational and business leadership

Respondents were clear that exercising leadership directed towards educational outcomes, as distinct from business, financial and human resource outcomes, was an integral part of their role, but one that assumed a greater or lesser importance at particular points in time and in particular contexts. Thus, respondents were arguing for a shift from a 'competing domains' to a more integrated understanding of leadership, one in which exercising leadership across business and educational outcomes is viewed as two sides of the same coin. Educational leadership in private training organisations, then, can be understood as a phenomenon that is distributed over two dimensions – across people (it is not exercised by one person) and across functions (it has both business and pedagogic elements). While some aspects of leadership are undoubtedly based on personal traits and capabilities, this study illustrates that educational leadership in registered training organisations can be viewed as a practice that exists at a range of levels and is supported by a culture focused on high-quality outcomes for defined markets, enterprises, industries and learners.

## Conclusion

This study suggests that it is important to think of educational leadership as not only embedded in personal capabilities but as equally situated in practices in particular organisations. This research directs attention to structures and cultures as the key enabling conditions to support the exercise of effective leadership whose objective is VET. It highlights the need for a revised definition of educational leadership, one that encompasses, as key elements in leadership, the perspective of the organisation, the nature of its work and the actions of the individuals from across the organisation.

This in turn would ensure a focus on the VET goals of the organisation. This expansive and enriched understanding of leadership has the potential to be more attuned to the contemporary VET sector, where the emphasis is increasingly on quality as well as on competitiveness.

# Introduction

Australia has seen major changes in the leadership and management of vocational education and training (VET) organisations over the last 15 years. The demand for greater responsiveness and flexibility, the adoption of management models from business and industry and, more recently, the policy emphasis on institutional self-reliance and increasingly competitive funding arrangements have seen a major escalation in attention to the management needs in Australian training providers. Arguably, this rise in interest has not been accompanied by attention to educational leadership focused on the functions of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and student outcomes. Put simply, attention has shifted from educational leadership to the more generic leadership and management associated with functions such as human resource management, financial management, planning, marketing and managing external and stakeholder relations. This shifting focus has not been without its consequences.

Anderson's review (2005) of the effects of the National Competition Policy concluded that, while there had been gains in flexibility and innovation in the VET sector, there were negative consequences, in terms of access, equity and educational quality. In the current VET environment, leaders and managers are being challenged to strike some balance between managing the business and managing the educational imperatives in their organisations, in a context where the operating conditions of registered training organisations are becoming more diverse with the growth of private providers and the increasing influence of the new public sector management in public providers such as TAFE (technical and further education) institutes. The tensions inherent in these dual roles are an increasingly pressing problem that urgently requires a richer understanding of the issues and potential solutions, for the sake of enhancing further both efficiency and quality in the sector.

There is significant evidence that strong educational leadership helps to develop innovation, flexibility and agility in registered training organisations (Palmieri 2004) and this is matched by observations from business literature that 'management and leadership [are] key factors in the differential productivity performance of firms, including their ability to undertake innovation' (Green 2009, p.33). Yet there is anecdotal evidence that leaders/managers are also commonly affected by stress and overwork, and that in such situations, it is often the non-educational work that tends to be prioritised, with consequent impacts on the educational work. From our previous research (Harris, Simons & Clayton 2005; Simons et al. 2009), and supporting observations from research in the TAFE sector (for example, Foley & Conole 2003; Rice 2004; Black 2009), we surmise that these trade-offs take place very visibly in the daily lives of leaders/managers in private registered training organisations.

This research therefore explored the phenomenon of leadership in the working lives of leaders/managers in a variety of types of private registered training organisations located in three Australian states. For the purposes of the research we adopted the assumption that leadership does not solely reside in the actions of an individual nor can it be reduced to a list of disembodied characteristics or competencies (Cranston, Ehrich & Morton 2007). Rather, the project aimed to generate insights into the leadership practices as they were enacted across selected private training organisations in order to offer some directions for future policy on and practices in educational leadership for Australian VET. We elected to focus solely on private registered training organisations in this study for three main reasons. First, there had already been some work undertaken on this topic, which had focused predominantly on leadership in public VET providers (Callan et al. 2007; LH Martin Institute 2009; Daniels 2011). Second, educational leadership within this group has rarely been

studied in isolation (the main exception being Guthrie 2008). Third, previous research (Harris, Simons & McCarthy 2006; Guthrie 2008; Clayton et al. 2008) had shown that the differences between private and public registered training organisations are significant enough to warrant separate treatment.

## Purpose of this research

The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate leadership in private registered training organisations, with a particular focus on the ways in which leaders and managers in these contexts understand and enact leadership in their daily work. Specifically, the study focused on identifying ways by which these leaders and managers attempt to understand and work with the tensions inherent in meeting the educational and business imperatives that are integral to their role as a registered training organisation in the current VET policy environment. This study was not concerned with evaluating the quality of leadership in private registered training organisations. Rather, it started from the assumption that the role of leaders in training organisations is a difficult one and, for private training providers who are operating under different commercial imperatives from their public TAFE counterparts, the effective balancing of the multitude of demands and expectations by governments, the public and other stakeholders presents specific challenges.

Research in this area, and the sharing of it through the wider training system, is of significant value, with leadership and management effectiveness being critical for quality and innovation in tertiary education (Skills Australia 2010). The researchers, then, considered that the findings from this study would be of considerable interest and use to both registered training organisations, especially private providers, in their strategic planning and their daily practices, and policy-makers and researchers, for whom the data would be a valuable addition to the hitherto rather 'thin' body of knowledge on this segment of the overall training system.

## Research questions

In accordance with this purpose, the overarching question for this study was: How do leaders of private registered training organisations understand and juggle the educational and business imperatives in their organisations? The research was informed by the following sub-questions:

- What are the leaders' understandings of educational leadership and business leadership?
- What key challenges do the leaders face and how do they attempt to balance these often competing and conflicting demands and expectations?
- What are the critical success factors in educational and business leadership in private providers?
- In what ways does the nature of the provider affect these understandings and practices of leadership?

## Research methodology

An interpretive approach was used to address these research questions. This approach is based on the view that people socially and symbolically construct their own organisational realities (Berger & Luckman 1967). It sees knowledge as being gained through social constructions such as language, shared meanings and documents. Thus the individual is cast as 'a central actor in a drama of personal meaning making' (Fenwick 2001, p.9). In this way, individuals are understood to construct their own knowledge through interaction with their environments (constructivism).

The project employed a case study approach. A case study strives to obtain and portray a 'rich' descriptive account of meanings and experiences of people in an identified setting. Mark (2004, p.207) claimed that a case methodology is 'the study of a unique event or action shaped by those who are the participants in the situation'. This definition emphasises a focused dimension, which is deemed most appropriate for analysing leadership understandings and practices in private providers. It is also a most fitting approach from the viewpoints of appropriately matching method to research questions, portraying leadership practices in discrete settings and understanding different actors' viewpoints.

## Data sources

Sixteen private registered training organisations spread across three types of provider formed the cases for this study. The three types of provider are:

- commercial training organisations: independent providers of post-compulsory education and training, deriving their education and training income from private enterprise or contract work for government agencies
- enterprise-based organisations: training centres within enterprises whose prime business focus is an industry other than education and training
- industry organisations (includes industry associations, professional associations and group training companies): industry-sponsored training centres that normally provide training to a particular industry sector.

The organisations were from the three states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia – the first two because of their large populations and because they differ considerably in VET context, and the third because it is a less populated jurisdiction with yet again a different VET context from the other two. Attempts were made when selecting registered training organisations to obtain a broad coverage of different types of registered training organisation, particularly in terms of geographical location and types of industry served. This broad spread of cases provided some diversity, while taking account of the need for compromise because of time, funding and the intensive nature of the research methodology.

In total, 34 interviews (table 1) were held with senior leaders/managers (n = 21), as well as with employees/trainers (n = 13), depending on the size and nature of the organisation. In this way, it was intended that the interviews would furnish perspectives from both the leaders and the led. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.



**Table 1 Summary of interviews, by state, registered training organisation type and level of interviewee**

State	Enterprise	Industry	Commercial	Totals
<b>SA</b>	Three registered training organisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 trainers</li> <li>• 2 trainers</li> <li>• 1 leader</li> </ul>	Three registered training organisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 leader</li> <li>• 1 leader</li> <li>• 2 leaders</li> </ul>	Three registered training organisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 leader</li> <li>• 2 leaders</li> <li>• 1 trainer</li> <li>• 1 leader</li> </ul>	Organisations: 9 Interviewees: 14 Leaders: 9 Trainers: 5
<b>Victoria</b>	One registered training organisation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 leader</li> <li>• 3 trainers</li> </ul>	One registered training organisation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 leader</li> </ul>	One registered training organisation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 leaders</li> </ul>	Organisations: 3 Interviewees: 8 Leaders: 5 Trainers: 3
<b>NSW</b>	Two registered training organisations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 leader</li> <li>• 3 trainers</li> <li>• 3 leaders</li> </ul>	One registered training organisation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 leaders</li> <li>• 2 trainers</li> </ul>	One registered training organisation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 leader</li> </ul>	Organisations: 4 Interviewees: 12 Leaders: 7 Trainers: 5
<b>Totals</b>	Organisations: 6 Interviewees: 16 Leaders: 6 Trainers: 10	Organisations: 5 Interviewees: 9 Leaders: 7 Trainers: 2	Organisations: 5 Interviewees: 9 Leaders: 8 Trainer: 1	Organisations: 16 Interviewees: 34 Leaders: 21 Trainers: 13

## Data gathering

The study used three main methods for gathering information:

- a review of published national and international literature on this subject
- content analysis of relevant documentation, either from the organisations or their websites, in order to be able to understand the context of their activities and strategic directions
- in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected personnel (as described above). The interview questions and associated material are provided in the support document.

## Limitations of the study

Since the purpose of the study was primarily interpretive, that is, to examine specific instances of leadership in the sites volunteering to participate in the study, the findings cannot be generalised to all private registered training organisations. The numbers involved are relatively small, 34 individuals from 16 organisations across three states. The data collection was undertaken in purposively selected sites, systematically applied and documented. While every effort was made to ensure that respondents were encouraged to express their own understandings of leadership in an open and frank manner, the absence of any direct observation of leadership practices necessarily places some limitations on the findings.

# Background to the research

Unlike the schools sector, which has arguably entered a 'golden age' of sustained interest in educational leadership (Leithwood & Day 2007, p.1), research in the VET sector generally has not shared this interest. Instead of an emphasis on the leadership of teaching and learning or on the contribution that effective leadership can play in creating the conditions to enhance outcomes for learners, research on leadership in the VET sector has concentrated more on generic management, leadership skills and capability frameworks (see, for example, Callan 2001; Falk & Smith 2003; Callan et al. 2007). These foci have been used to build understandings of how particular types of leadership may explain the process of leadership and the characteristics of leaders. The resultant descriptions have been labelled as 'adjectival' leadership by Mulford (2008, p.38) because of their tendency to universalise the notion of leadership and to portray these different types as the 'right one' for the current times. This attention to leadership has arisen because, as generally acknowledged, the VET sector has undergone dramatic change in the last 15 years. A raft of reforms over that time has seen a major escalation in 'bottom line' management responsibilities for selected groups of staff in the VET workforce. Responding to these continuous waves of systemic reforms by managing change has arguably been the main 'business'. Leadership has been universally called for, but paradoxically, educational leadership appears to have become almost invisible.

While flexibility and responsiveness to industry have increased in the new competitive environment, many writers contend that there have been negative effects on educational quality (for example, Siggers et al. 2002; Anderson 2004, 2005). Rather surprisingly, attention to questions of the leadership and management of VET organisations has not been substantial over this period. Some research (Mulcahy 2003; Mitchell et al. 2003; Rice 2004; Black 2005) has highlighted the tensions these reforms have created for leaders and managers and the impact on their roles. Research has also examined the roles of various groups of leaders (Mulcahy 2003; Rice 2004), the application of particular theoretical perspectives on leadership to the VET sector (Falk & Smith 2003), the development of lists of leadership and management domains of activity (Shaw & Velde 2000; Falk & Smith 2003; Mulcahy 2003), skill domains (Mitchell & Young 2002; Mitchell et al. 2003), and capability frameworks (Callan 2001; Foley & Conole 2003; Callan et al. 2007; LH Martin Institute 2009; Coates et al. 2010). Attention has also been paid to the development needs of leaders and managers and how they might be met (Victorian Office of Training and Tertiary Education 2002; Callan et al. 2007; Brown 2011; Daniels 2011).

These studies collectively have revealed that people undertaking leadership/management responsibilities suffer from considerable stress and overwork. In their daily working lives, these staff report that they often struggle to balance their roles as educational leaders with their business responsibilities, such as expanding the capacity of their organisations to attract fee-for-service and other income. They also feel unwilling or unable to assume higher levels of leadership in the future, citing the difficulty of their 'dual role' as the principal reason. Research conducted as part of the National VET Research Consortium, Supporting VET Providers in Building Capability for the Future, highlighted the role of middle managers (team leaders, head teachers and others responsible for managing educational delivery) as particularly problematic in the new competitive culture of VET delivery in Australia (Callan et al. 2007; Harris, Clayton & Chappell 2008; Simons et al. 2009).

In scanning and appraising this literature, it becomes apparent that it mostly emphasises a 'generic' perspective on leadership; that is, it is almost devoid of an interest in leadership specifically directed

to the various elements of the endeavours of training organisations – pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and learning. In other words, as Robinson (2006) has observed about research on leadership in the further education sector in the United Kingdom, this research has not been about educational leadership – that form of leadership with learner outcomes at the core of its concern. This is both significant and surprising, given that it has been well documented in other sectors of education that educational leadership is critical to high-quality outcomes for learners. This has been confirmed for the VET sector in only a few specific studies, conducted in the last eight years. These studies have raised issues about middle management in a single TAFE institute (Palmieri 2004; Rice 2004; Black 2005). Palmieri's (2004) examination of the agility of Australian training providers in particular identified that successful organisations had middle managers who displayed an ability to combine both high-level educational leadership skills and administrative management skills. Rice's (2004) study of TAFE managers emphasised the challenges facing these managers as they grappled with the twin issues of exercising educational leadership and the demands of the accountability regimes under which they worked. Research completed by Black (2005) complements this work by examining the role that head teachers in TAFE play in exercising leadership amongst the ranks of teachers, as they also grapple with the demands of the new public managerialism.

Relevant research in the UK has documented the working lives of middle managers in a number of further education colleges, noting a rise in their non-educational workloads as well as their pivotal role in organisational change (Collinson 2007). Other research has pointed to the failure of senior management in further education to recognise that many middle managers do not consider themselves 'leaders', particularly not in the transformative sense, and are rejecting the culture of continual change through transformative leadership in favour of professional development through distributed leadership, which has major implications for the development of senior leaders in the future (Gleeson & Knights 2008). In this context, distributive leadership is associated with efforts to bring about cultural change through the application of 'team-based, people-orientated management' (Gleeson & Knights 2008, p.52), which acknowledges the values and professionalism that individuals bring to their work. Transformative leadership, in contrast, revolves around the enactment of 'participative professional and stakeholder practices' but which still arguably retains an 'heroic' and masculinised notion of leadership, where followers are led by charismatic leaders (Gleeson & Knights 2008, pp.52, 65).

This particularly points to the problem of applying particular 'adjectival' theories of leadership (Mulford 2007, 2008). While these may be viewed as helpful starting points, they are often grounded in domains that do not take into account some of the key characteristics of educational settings; for example, the team-based focus of many teaching faculties in VET, the cultures and structures of VET organisations, which shape particular ways of working, as well as the values, norms, habits and beliefs that influence pedagogy and curriculum in these environments (Clayton et al. 2008; Dickie et al. 2004). Briggs (2005, pp.27–8) has noted, and this is also the case in Australia, that there is little empirically based understanding of the roles of middle managers in English further education colleges, yet these managers occupy a pivotal role in a complex setting, translating the purpose and vision of the college into practical activities and outcomes. Her research has also highlighted the ambiguity and ambivalence that many further education managers feel about their institutional roles and the resistance this creates to implementing institutional change (Briggs 2005, 2006).

Another similarity the Australian VET and the UK further education literature on educational leadership share is that this research has been conducted largely apart from the body of literature on educational leadership in the schools sector, where interest on this topic has been growing. This particular research, like that of its VET and further education counterparts, emphasises the shifting

expectations facing schools, the changing work of teachers and principals, and the centrality of educational leadership to these reforms (Mulford 2007; Duignan 2007). It is from this research that we may gain a sharper sense of the importance of concentrating on the educational aspects of leadership and that such leadership is fundamentally about 'strengthening the conditions that enable effective teaching' (Robinson 2006, p.62). However, it has been acknowledged that the contribution of leadership to effective teaching is not a simple one. It is part of potentially 'a long causal chain', where the leader (perhaps in a designated leadership role) acts and there are effects on student outcomes (Robinson 2006, p.64). In other words, effective educational leadership can have an impact that may vary from minimal to significant, as reported in a number of studies (for example, Hallinger & Heck 1998; Witziers, Bosker & Kruger 2003; Leithwood et al. 2004; Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2005). In the context of the Australian VET sector, what is required in the first instance is a richer understanding of how leadership for both educational and business outcomes is understood and enacted. This study addresses this issue through a particular focus on private registered training organisations.

# Leading in private registered training organisations

The most notable shared feature of leadership in registered training organisations is the role that context plays in influencing its form and characteristics. Leadership is enacted in a variety of ways, which are predominantly shaped by the type of business the registered training organisation is involved in and the ways in which the leadership function is structured within and across various job roles. In other words, the position of the individual labelled as a ‘leader’ in an organisation plays a significant part in shaping their understanding of leadership and the ways they carry out their role. This leadership role can be exercised by people ‘at the front line of training’, or by people who are removed from a direct training role but who nevertheless have a place in the organisational structure that gives them leadership of some aspects related to the provision of training (for example, curriculum development, learner support, compliance, quality assurance and improvement). Here we present a distillation of the main themes from the interviews conducted for this project. In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants and their organisations in the discussion of the findings from the research, interviewees are identified by the type of organisation in which they work and a personal identification number.

## Understandings of leadership

Across the different types of registered training organisation, the rationale for being a part of the VET sector shaped respondents’ understandings of the leadership they exercised. For many of these organisations, the decision to become a registered training organisation was a strategic and deliberate choice because the VET sector offered something that was seen as valuable and important to the overall direction and growth of each organisation:

There is a lot of government funding out there for training, for people finding innovative and different ways of getting people in. (Commercial, #5)

We’ve decided to become a registered training organisation ... to ensure that we provide recognised training ... industry training for our [workers] ... we’re training our existing employees ... there’s a requirement for training, for good quality formal training in the structure, and through the registered training organisation process, that’s what we can deliver because we have to meet a certain standard. (Enterprise, #6)

The VET sector basically gave some comparable competency frameworks ... [it helps us to see] how our training and standards meet industry benchmarks. (Industry, #32)

Leaders across all three types of registered training organisation were able to provide their views on the concept of leadership in a number of ways. Table 2 summarises the main emphases in these views, according to registered training organisation type.

**Table 2 Understandings of leadership**

Leadership is ...	Commercial	Enterprise	Industry
Developing staff	✓	✓	✓
Providing vision	✓	✓	✓
Bringing staff along	✓	✓	✓
Being a role model	✓	✓	✓
Enhancing the performance of staff	✓	✓	✓
Building connections between external environment, staff and organisation vision	✓		
Building a shared vision	✓		
Directing effort to the provision of high-quality education	✓		
Maintaining the mission of the parent organisation		✓	
Ensuring that the vision of the parent organisation is understood, enacted and reinforced by training staff		✓	
Adding value to the business		✓	
Delivering quality outcomes for industry			✓
Setting directions			✓
Engaging staff			✓
Providing the labour needed by industry			✓
Responding to technological innovations			✓
Shaping the future of the industry			✓
Working for the benefit of businesses in the industry			✓

Most referred to a variety of generic functions performed as part of a leadership role, such as developing staff, providing vision, bringing others along with them, providing a role model and getting the most out of people. Most informative, however, were the more distinctive emphases that reflected the different purposes to which their leadership was directed. These perspectives have their roots in the different purposes and nature of the organisations in which they worked as well as in the individual respondent's location in the organisational structures.

For respondents in commercial training organisations leadership essentially centred on relationships with the external environment on the one hand and bringing along internal staff with the organisation's vision on the other. By virtue of their roles as the owners of the business or as chief executive officers or as a member of the senior leadership in the organisation, these respondents tended to emphasise the provision of a 'vision' ('charting the way forward', 'bringing the consensus of the group with you', 'getting the others to come along with it') directed towards the aim of providing high-quality education:

Leadership primarily ... is about trying to get the best out of others ... you're there to lead a group or a team to achieve the objectives of the organisation ... to develop them in a way that continues to meet the objectives of providing high quality education to our students ... and in that process, improve the skills and capacities of those staff who work for me ... it is really about an investment in quality education.

(Commercial, #30)

Leaders inside enterprise registered training organisations had a decidedly more inward focus to their understanding of leadership compared with that of their counterparts in the other types of training organisations. Their focus centred squarely on maintaining the mission of their parent organisation and ensuring that this was understood, enacted and reinforced by training staff in their interactions with employees. The terms used were therefore noticeably more directive, such as 'ensuring that', 'making sure' and 'it's important for them to follow'. Understandings of growth and the commercial imperative were seen through the lens of the enterprise. For example, they saw their function

differently, in that 'it's not we're chasing after clients, because we're actually training our own existing employees' and 'adding value to the business ... that's the crux of it' (Enterprise, #6). Leaders in a public service enterprise registered training organisation expressed it this way: 'We're not interested in growth, we're neither driven to growth nor driven to get smaller. Our core function is to provide qualified staff for the needs of the organisation' (Enterprise, #28).

Leadership in industry registered training organisations is slightly different again from leadership in the other two types of provider. Their leadership was directed towards their industry. As one leader expressed it:

Because we're not for profit, the dollar isn't really a bottom line. Whilst we do want to grow, it's not a profit-driven growth, it's being able to deliver quality outcomes for our industry ... everything we do in our registered training organisation is related to our industry, it's about bettering the industry and providing more opportunities and those better outcomes and services for our employers. (Industry, #15)

Leadership was understood in terms of setting directions, engaging staff and working for the benefit of the businesses that comprised the industry and which provided the main source of learners for the training organisations. Beyond relationships with staff and the people who made up the industry, leadership was also about 'shaping the future' (Industry, #25). This was a direct reference to the role that the training organisation had to play in ensuring that the industry had a ready supply of labour capable of meeting current and future needs, particularly in response to changes such as those brought about by technological innovation. These somewhat different conceptions of leadership then shaped the work undertaken by leaders in these various contexts.

## The work of leaders

### Commercial registered training organisations

The work undertaken by leaders in commercial training organisations was shaped by the size of the organisation. In the case of the smaller organisations, the work roles of the leaders ranged across most functions, including developing curriculum and learning materials, teaching, managing compliance requirements, the recruitment, retention and development of staff and building the business through the development of business models for the delivery of their products (which could include accredited and non-accredited training). While some leaders were not directly involved in teaching, learners remained at the centre of their work, where their leadership was directed towards 'making people better' and 'giving them what they want'.

Leadership structures were flat or non-existent in cases where the leadership resided in one person, who was the owner of the business. In other cases or in a small team, various leadership functions were devolved across the group, with members fulfilling particular roles; for example, roles focused on academic matters (curriculum, teaching), marketing and external engagement, and compliance. While these roles were clearly demarcated, there was extensive knowledge sharing across the leadership team, with everyone holding an in-depth knowledge of the products (that is, qualifications) offered by the organisation as well as knowledge of the industry. For some roles, particular forms of knowledge were considered more important than others (for example, an academic director needed a strong grounding in compliance, while relying on the teachers for current industry knowledge). In these instances, the leadership team collectively works to plot the strategic directions for the business (for example, considering new qualifications).

The imperative to build a sustainable business had clear implications for leaders of commercial training organisations and this was reflected in a range of skills they believed were important ‘markers’ of effective leadership. These skills included: building effective connections with the skills council relevant to their scope of services, the regulator and the government; establishing and maintaining robust networks with other registered training organisation managers; limiting the training organisation's scope by being able to partner with other high-quality providers; thinking outside the square in terms of commercial opportunities; being able to respond to clients who have ‘a strong, quick need’; communicating, in terms of knowing when to make a point about insisting that something is done, and when to allow other people to sway one’s thinking into a slightly different direction; being a good listener; and being a realist ‘even though I think as a leader you do have to have a sense of a vision, a sense of where you need to head; it doesn’t mean that you’re the only person that has the knowledge or ... it doesn’t mean that you have all the answers’ (Commercial, #20).

## Industry registered training organisations

Leaders in industry-based registered training organisations shared some similarities with their commercial counterparts, in that the functions of leadership were often devolved across a number of work roles. There were a number of ways in which the work attached to leadership roles (delivery, compliance, marketing, business development, staff development and the like) were organised. For example, in one organisation, the person designated as the ‘Head’ of the organisation was not involved in the day-to-day delivery of training. Their role focused on managing strategies to improve the quality of training, changing/setting the training culture within the organisation, overseeing capital investments in equipment, and reviewing curriculum (but not as a writer). This organisation also included the position of training manager. The person in this role is responsible for all functions associated with the management of training: scheduling training for groups of apprentices, organising trainers for these groups and so on. This position is also responsible for managing training data and some compliance work. In this instance, the main work associated with compliance rested with one other person.

‘Growing the business’ was an important role for all personnel engaged in leadership in industry-based training organisations; however, this work took on a different complexion from that of leaders in commercial entities. Here, the market where the growth takes place was quite tightly bounded and intimately linked to the industry. Understanding the nature of the industry – its health, its changes in response to technological advancements, employment trends, and the state of individual businesses – was seen as critical and required ongoing consultation processes to ensure that the training organisations were able to deliver high-quality outcomes to the businesses that comprise the industry. Work functions included working with businesses to enhance their capacity to use the VET sector to meet their skill needs and ensuring that the industry training organisation was the partner of choice. This work was not confined to promoting qualifications and courses; it also entailed assisting businesses to access government support for training. Learners were attracted to the training organisation through informed employers and trainers at the coalface, who shared the work of expanding the business as leading and respected workers in the industry. Trainers also ‘led’ from within the industry by working with employers to construct bespoke qualification solutions and training plans for employees.



## Enterprise registered training organisations

The enterprise registered training organisations in this study were geographically spread within and across states and operated under what appeared to be a devolved leadership structure, whereby leadership functions related to any one training organisation were dispersed amongst a team of people, some of whom often resided in different locations. Under these arrangements, all members of the team, whether they were involved in the direct delivery of training or in functions related to ensuring compliance with Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) requirements, were expected to exercise leadership towards the goal of ensuring that the training organisation added value to and met the expectations of the enterprise:

The ... key part of my role as a leader is to try and instil leadership qualities or impart abilities for my team ... they have also a leadership role in their context, and trying to build their capacity to lead and develop and work with people within their control. That's possibly one of the most integral things in my role. (Enterprise, #26)

In this context their leadership tended to focus more on operational aspects, emphasising that their core function was to lead the training business and ensure that it ran smoothly. This included ensuring that all trainers were aware of the specific and strategic focus being adopted by the training arm of the enterprise, the role that they played in maintaining the quality of training offered to employees, and the standards that trainers themselves were required to meet.

What was most interesting and differentiating was that leaders in enterprise training organisations saw their leadership as upwards, outwards and downwards. It was 'up' in the sense of needing to 'sell' the advantages of the training organisation to the enterprise executives, because managing directors were seen as regularly changing, part of:

A global pool ... so every three years, you may be faced with a new MD, potentially a new executive management team who are not au fait with the Australian standards, the Australian registered training organisation concept and that type of thing; it's a continuous process of being in their face, so to speak, to ensure that they do see those benefits and they [the training activities] are not classified as a necessary evil or something. (Enterprise, #6)

Leading 'outwards' was a feature of enterprise training organisations, since groups of trainers were often dispersed geographically, requiring leadership to be directed towards ensuring coordination across groups of trainers and building the capacity of these local leaders:

My team is primarily regional, it's focused right across the state, and so while I have to ensure ... the logistics of providing training across the state works ... the other key part of my role as a leader is to try and instil leadership qualities or impart abilities for my team. (Enterprise, #26)

On the other hand, leading 'down' involved supporting trainers engaged with the employees on the 'shop floor' and with others who could impact on the provision of training, such as the managers of various sections of the enterprise, and supervisory and frontline managers. In these cases, leadership required a capacity to influence the way work was organised so that training could be completed. They needed to be able to work with other parts of the enterprise to 'weave' the training function into the work in ways that did not hamper productivity:

It's got a lot to do with the demands of the business and who's available ... if there is a heavy demand on the business, they'll cut the training down ... and it will trickle along; business drops ... they've got to pay these guys anyway so they might as well have them here ... training. It's heavily based around business demands. (Enterprise, #8)

Another significant facet of the leadership function of the trainers in enterprises involved acting as a good role model and being viewed as credible by those segments of the workforce for whom they were facilitating training. In most cases this was achieved by the way the training function was organised, in that trainers were selected from the workforce, they delivered training for a defined period of time and then returned to their normal duties. However, this leadership required that they not become too enmeshed in the operational/work networks of the enterprises. As leaders they needed to be able to ‘move between’ the training and work functions of the enterprise. This credibility in both arenas was viewed as essential to their role and afforded them the leverage to demand the standards required in the training and to be seen as able to provide direction to staff, and getting the ‘best out of people and pointing them in the right direction’ (Enterprise, #10).

## Challenges facing leaders

Leaders across the three types of training organisations noted a range of challenges they faced in their roles. Their responses reflect the often competing and conflicting demands and expectations they need to juggle in their roles as leaders in these organisations. These challenges are outlined in table 3.

**Table 3 Challenges faced by registered training organisation leaders**

Challenge	Commercial	Enterprise	Industry
Recruiting staff	✓		
Balancing commercial requirements with quality provision	✓		✓
Developing training /delivery staff	✓		
Managing compliance requirements	✓	✓	✓
Sourcing support staff to assist with administration	✓		
Managing change	✓	✓	✓
Balancing the strategic and the immediate	✓		
Communicating with others in the organisation	✓	✓	
Balancing needs of registered training organisation with needs of the organisation		✓	
Establishing credibility	✓	✓	✓
Dealing with budgetary constraints/balancing budgets	✓		✓
Dealing with issues related to apprentices and trainees			✓
Managing staff			✓
Challenging/changing organisational cultures		✓	✓

## Shared challenges

The three challenges confronted by all leaders, regardless of the type of training organisation, related to establishing their credibility in the arena in which they operated, managing compliance requirements, and managing change. The issue of credibility was not just confined to the concerns of senior leaders for their operation as a whole; for leaders ‘at the coalface’ in organisations or engaged with small businesses, credibility with workers and business owners whose staff were being offered training presented a continuous and important challenge. The response to this challenge resided in the quality of the training provided by the registered training organisation – its consistency and its responsiveness to the perceived needs of students, workers and the other people seen as beneficiaries of the training (employers, business owners, the industry). Leaders in this case acted as ‘boundary riders’, working to ensure that their trainers and other staff were fully aware of the parameters in

which they needed to operate, particularly in relation to the quality of their work and reinforcing the need for high-quality training.

It is not surprising that compliance and VET regulation was a topic of often animated discussion during interviews for this study. Various perspectives were offered, with a number of representatives from commercial training organisations offering views which suggested that compliance presented a significant barrier for their operations. One of the interviewees stated that she was 'cynical about the audit process' (Commercial, #21), while another labelled the audit as 'a total farce' (Commercial, #22), principally because they did not believe the auditor possessed the appropriate skills and that their recent experience had been a process focused more on the quantity of compliance information rather than on the quality of their training. While that person's executive leader did not necessarily agree that this description could be applied across the whole system, she concurred that in this instance they had been in a 'powerless position', with the state training authority having 'no mechanism for justly hearing the concerns of an RTO who [is] not being fairly [treated]'. They had found the experience 'emotionally draining' and 'very stressful'. Another leader called it 'the compliance maze of the VET framework' (Commercial, #20), while another highlighted the multiplicity of rules in the regulatory framework:

With VET, it seems you've got more rules, and if you're a provider that operates in more than one state ... even though in theory we have a new national regulator ... there's a fair bit of cynicism around as to what that will do to actually streamline compliance costs because you have different sets of rules required for different governments ... if there are three different sources of funding, often you have three different sets of rules ... more and more of the money is tied up in compliance costs. Good registered training organisations are not looking to access government funding; a lot of them are looking to fee-paying students. (Commercial, #30)

Representatives from some enterprise training organisations in particular did not consider that the rules of the VET regulatory regime suited their situation particularly well:

I think [that an] enterprise registered training organisation in a public service context where we do not offer education to people who are buying education ... I think that represents a unique set of complexities, and I do not think the VET regulatory system understands it ... and I think they try to apply the same rules to this situation and the fit is not good. We should still have the level of quality and we should be held accountable for that, but I think that it's a naive application of a lot of these principles ... I think that needs to be looked at, and I think from a leadership perspective it creates tension that there's no need to. (Enterprise, #28)

Another respondent from an industry training organisation did not see compliance as an issue; rather, the challenge was where to best locate this function within their organisation, as the process of the audit sometimes took them away from other leadership functions such as business development. Another part of meeting this challenge was aligning organisational operations with the AQTF 'language' and ensuring, through training leading up to the audit, that all staff were familiar with audit requirements as part of their continuous improvement processes:

Registered training organisations have their own language, and it's sometimes different to the auditor's language, so it was all about aligning functions ... this function we do aligns for 1.3, so to be sure that when you're aware and when you talk to them [the auditors], if you talk to them, you're aware of ... and so their knowledge got a more condensed focus in the last six months of last year. (Industry, #14)

However, while compliance issues were a challenge they were not always seen in a negative light; indeed for some, they are an integral and necessary part of their operating environment and bring benefits to the organisation. This is best exemplified by the following reflections of a senior leader:

In a small organisation things like that always put a drain, they always put pressure on people like myself in leadership roles and in managerial roles. On the other side of it, though, I always see something like that as being really important to give you a place to reflect on what you're doing, so while you have to make sure you are compliant, because otherwise you won't be in business, on the other side of it, we took it as a time to really reflect and ensure that while we were meeting the compliance, we had the processes in place to say 'OK, look, we could actually do this better'.

(Commercial, #19)

Managing change was a third key theme to emerge in leaders' discussions of their work. This was not surprising, given the dynamic and changing environment in which the VET sector operates. This challenge required leaders to be able to 'manage' change as best as they could, deal with the inevitable resistance that arose from staff and help staff themselves to manage change:

I guess most of my leadership is around change ... you have to bring the people along with you and they have to understand that the change [is] for the good, and that can be challenging because there can be a lot of entrenched ways of working that mitigate against the notions of change, so the biggest challenge I think is usually to get the people to be with you on that journey.

(Commercial, #20)

Leaders of enterprise training organisations grappled with the challenge of handling change in the dynamic economic environment in general and the VET context in particular. This aspect was claimed by this leader to be 'the crux of the leadership challenge':

Look, I think in any educational setting the critical challenge is generally change-related. The systems are constantly reforming, reviewing and changing ... people don't like change, they like the outcomes of change, but they don't like the process of change in general, and so to be able to talk to people to negotiate that change process, and at times it's even as frustrating as 'We just changed that, what do you mean we have to change it again?'. That is, to me, the crux of the leadership challenge, because that is the thing that creates the most angst with your people, and if your people are in angst, then they find it hard to be focused and to do the job that you want them to do. So that's the critical challenge.

(Enterprise, #28)

For another leader, the key issue was also change management, with the challenge in this case being twofold – not only meeting training package requirements, but also addressing the changes needed to accommodate the non-accredited training the organisation might want to offer as part of its services.

Leaders also talked of their work as advocates for change in external environments; for example, with VET regulators in arguing for changes to support their businesses or 'selling' changes to training requirements inside the enterprise or to businesses within the industry. The following quotes from both enterprise and industry trainers illustrate the multiple levels of change and competing interests which need to be juggled in their particular cases:

I think to convince the workforce ... to convince them to change their minds that this is not a joke, this is a serious thing you are about to participate in.

(Enterprise, #8)

We have an ability to talk to our members and employers on a regular basis ... we hold meetings where we ... present what we do ... A lot of employers didn't understand how we deliver versus the way other registered training organisations deliver ... you've got to change the mentality of the employers ... they've got this mindset saying 'That's the way apprentices should be trained'... and they're still getting their heads around that. (Industry, #17)

For the following leader in a commercial registered training organisation, being able to bring about change in the operating environment was critical:

We negotiated getting into the ... Guide ... it was a big move ... we were the first registered training organisation to go in ... We had to do a lot of negotiating and step up to the plate so to speak, in terms of how they perceived us ... I had to train staff to represent us. (Commercial, #19)

While there were shared challenges across all training organisations, there were also particular challenges that were specific to the operations of different types of registered training organisations and these give insight into the demands and expectations their leaders needed to address in their daily activities.

## Challenges for leaders in commercial registered training organisations

Staffing issues featured as a significant challenge for leaders in commercial training organisations. Finding the right staff with the passion for their roles was paramount, as was recruiting staff who had the right mix of skills. In many respects these issues again reflected the contexts in which commercial training organisations operated, where the needed skills mix appeared to be somewhat broader and not as tightly wedded to industry expertise as for the other training organisations:

We went from a situation where trainers were well trained as adult learners ... they could write curriculum, they understood adult learning, and if they had a well-briefed plan, they could get up and train almost anything and do it extremely well. We then moved to a situation where the view was you had to be an expert in the industry to deliver the training stuff ... I don't think that's been particularly successful at all because what you find is a lot of people are experts and can't train ... They might have industry knowledge, but the real skill in adult learning is the capacity of the teacher to impart the knowledge. (Commercial, #30)

Once staff had been recruited, 'growing' staff was an important leadership challenge:

I think it does mean providing a space for people to grow, to reach their capacity in all the ways that [it] can happen. (Commercial, #19)

Another aspect of staffing was access to administrative support, which was considered to be critical so that staff did not become too tied to administrative tasks, especially the work associated with managing quality assurance requirements.

Balancing competing demands was a further theme to emerge from leaders' reflections on their roles. These 'balancing acts' were not viewed as 'either/or' situations but rather the reality – that getting all parts right was integral to their roles and a means of ensuring that they were able to achieve their objectives. For commercial providers, the challenge was to achieve a balance between the commercial requirements and the need for quality provision – juggling the 'big picture with the details':

The balance for us is the commercial imperative, and at the same time looking to deliver a quality product in terms of our training ... and dealing with very complex regulatory arrangements so that is a part of the commercial decision we make. (Commercial, #30)

On the one side you've got to provide a vision of where you're going, you've got to tell the story about that vision, have a narrative and communicate that narrative, so you've got the sort of bigger picture, where you're taking people, where you want to be three years, five years, ten years down the track, bringing people with you and how you do that, and on the other side ... I'm also immersed in the detail, so I think ... you get a tension with that, and how you juggle that can be taxing for someone involved in leadership. (Commercial, #19)

The leaders offered several strategies for managing the challenges they were facing in their organisations. One strategy was making time: 'I make time ... make time out of my own time ... and it's the only way I can achieve it' (Commercial, #22). Another strategy was delegation: 'you know, it's a very fraught area when you're running a registered training organisation. It's a little bit like part of it is like your baby in a way, you want to make sure that it's able to walk and do things, and sometimes you can rush and want to hold its hand when maybe you shouldn't' (Commercial, #19). Other strategies were to access additional staff; for example, by promoting a staff member to a coordinator role, or appointing a graduate from their program to work in a support role. These people had the capacity to 'pick up some of the administration'. Graduates of the training organisation were particularly favoured by one organisation because 'they're intimately connected to us, they know the course really well' (Commercial, #19).

## Challenges for leaders in enterprise registered training organisations

As noted previously, the embedding of training organisation functions inside an enterprise presented some unique challenges for leaders in these contexts. One major challenge was communicating the value of the training organisation to senior executives and 'ensuring that senior management, executive management, recognise that we do provide a service, that we do add value to the company' (Enterprise, #6). This often required the leaders to manage what was labelled a 'two way press', which meant marrying the imperatives of the sector and the imperatives of the organisation:

As an enterprise-based registered training organisation, we're subject to change from two directions, from the VET sector and the regulatory environment and ... from the evidence-based, organisational side of it. The organisation is not focused on ... the VET sector demands in a regulatory environment, they're focused on what they need as an organisation to deliver services and to respond to their situations, so at times we have to manage. (Enterprise, #28)

A second challenge was related to managing the two different cultures in the enterprise: the culture of the enterprise itself and that associated with the requirements of the training organisation. The following quote illustrates how necessary training practices can challenge what is perceived as the 'hands on' culture of the workplace:

The most common is the written part of the training, the written exam. Sometimes they see that as irrelevant, it's what happens out in the crane or what happens in the forklift that's important, but they tend to not think the written side of it is important, so we're always stressing that. (Enterprise, #10)

This challenge not only related to the way things were done in terms of providing training; it also related to issues such as what were 'deemed' as correct work practices and who held the valued knowledge in the enterprise. In the latter, experienced workers could see the presence of the training organisation staff as a challenge to their perceived place in the workforce as an 'expert', which at times led to passive (and sometimes overt) resistance to the work of the trainers. Sometimes training staff had to deal with the strong and confrontational personalities of individuals who had been in the

industry for a long time and who were passionate about their work, but who at times needed 'steering in the right direction':

You tend to get your type 'A' personality, people that have very, very strong views about the way things should be delivered or not delivered, and so you're always juggling with these very strong personalities, and at times they can become quite confrontational. They're all very passionate about what they do, which is great, and you want to encourage that passionate side and make sure that they are aware of what the reasons and the rationale are that things are done a certain way. (Enterprise, #27)

The skills required to meet such challenges included: having 'a passion for learning development and training', being 'an effective communicator', being 'very good at imparting knowledge to other employees', and strategic thinking in the sense of having strategies in place 'that try and cut them off at the pass' (Enterprise, #6). Power to persuade and convince transitory bosses was also seen as a critical skill. A key word in leadership and in the handling of challenges, particularly managing change, was perceived as 'presence':

One of the words that keeps coming into my head ... is presence. That's a key word for me ... You have to be talking, and ... you have to get around to continually tell the story of change, why we're changing, acknowledging the frustrations of change, dealing with the problems that come up, addressing the problems, helping the people to see ways through the problems, and negotiating. Sometimes it's about locating resources; sometimes it's about handling priorities and helping people. (Enterprise, #28)

## Challenges for leaders in industry registered training organisations

Like their counterparts in commercial training organisations, budgetary constraints and balancing commercial and quality imperatives loomed as significant challenges for leaders in industry settings. The pressure to deliver value for money to the (usually small) businesses using their services meant that, in some cases, aspects of their business were not 'reaching their potential' (Industry, #24).

A related issue resided in the challenge of managing people; at the heart of this challenge was the capacity to engage staff for the training organisation who had both industry knowledge and credibility, as well as a mindset to encourage small businesses to take on training. Leaders were required to assist and support trainers who had day-to-day contact with small businesses. This support included assisting trainers to use products such as training packages effectively in order to develop training solutions for employers that would result in business for the training organisation. It also required, for example, delicate management to ensure that apprentices complete on time in order for the training organisation to be able to receive its payments:

We discovered we were training learners that should have completed six months ago ... which from a financial ... view ... poses a problem because we have cut-off points ... so I try going back to the trainer: 'You've got to understand, you're putting at risk the money that's outstanding'... he's like, 'Well, I don't want to deem them competent when they're not' ... and I say ... 'I'm not asking you to do that, I'm asking you to restructure or refocus what you are doing so we can get an outcome sooner'. (Industry, #14)

In the case where the industry training organisation was also operating as a group training organisation, the quality of the apprentices and trainees they could offer their businesses was a

concern. Competition amongst industries for workers required leaders to pay considerable attention to their recruitment strategies:

We're throwing a fair amount of resources and trying to do a few things differently in terms of our marketing, in terms of our approach to educational institutions within South Australia, the secondary school system, doing a lot more hands-on work, and indeed part of the approach has been to put a more highly skilled person in running that side of the business. (Industry, #25)

Leaders in industry training organisations, like their enterprise counterparts, also encountered the challenge of changing cultures in the training organisation, such that they could then meet the changing requirements of the particular industry they served:

[the challenge is] really about having influence, it's being able to act on what's right for the organisation, and ultimately what's right ... for the industry and ultimately the consumer in those industries. (Industry, #9)

The issue of educational leadership also posed interesting challenges for leaders, but was nonetheless seen as integral to their work.

## Educational leadership

This research began with the premise of the importance of educational leadership for the functioning of registered training organisations. Without exception, respondents were clear that educational leadership was a part of their role, but that it presented considerable challenges for them, in that it was often the most difficult to operationalise in work roles because of the competing demands they faced. Most leaders saw a clear difference between externally driven leadership concerns and educational leadership, supporting the conclusion of Coates et al. (2010). From their survey involving 327 leaders in 27 registered training organisations, Coates et al. found that VET leaders view managing change as more important than teaching and learning, which were flagged as the least important facets of their work. Educational leadership in the present study was directed towards a number of objectives. For one leader in a commercial training organisation, educational leadership was articulated as the embodiment of a set of values that acknowledges the business imperative under which the organisation must operate but which also requires more as a leader:

It comes from my values ... I've never been in anything I've done just because there's a commercial [imperative] ... My values are they're not aligned to that notion that you're just running a business and therefore you're just out to make money ... I come much more for what we can do that's meaningful for people ... so for me running a college ... I'm actually holding a container in which people can develop, so that to me is really important because I am passionate about people's development and education ... students, staff, anyone in this environment.

(Commercial, #18)

For others, educational leadership was directed towards the goal of providing high-quality training for the industry they served, which implied being more responsive and effective than their competitors:

I suppose when we talk about educational leadership, I want us to be the best at what we do. I already think we're pretty good but I want to be the best. Our major competitor out there is TAFE ... We should be faster, quicker, and move to market because of our links with industry ... to me, it's about continuing to develop our training so we're producing the best possible people for our industry. (Industry, #25)



Expressed another way, educational leadership was seen as:

strategy and direction. It's about ensuring that we're headed in the right direction, and it's about ensuring that we have the right focus within our educational institution. (Enterprise, #26)

For another leader in an enterprise training organisation, educational leadership was the site where the innovative aspects of education were realised by the staff and which, in turn, drove innovation for the enterprise:

In the bigger picture, it's about being responsive to the directions that the [enterprise] sets, but there's another side to it, of being innovative in pushing the directions that the [enterprise] should go. Educators by nature are innovators ... so it's through that mechanism that you start to influence the service delivery of the organisation itself. (Enterprise, #28)

For a leader in a commercial training organisation, educational leadership clearly was embodied in the way the training organisations treated their learners. As one leader eloquently expressed it:

We take a lot of time caring about that, and we have a very open-door policy, our students ... we encourage them to tell us how they're going and how they feel, and what their experiences are like ... and that's good because then we can sort of have an interactive process there, but some people have ... very traditional kinds of teaching paradigms, you know, like still the 'I stand and deliver', for example. I mean, that's a big one to break down when people have had years of sort of believing that's how you do it. (Commercial, #18)

For enterprise training organisation leaders, educational leadership involved such activities as: contextualising curriculum and resources to align with job functions in the organisation; initiating communication strategies for 'the troops' (Enterprise, #6) across the country by such means as three-weekly teleconferences; starting professional development workshops for the trainers and assessors; and mentoring trainers in training skills by sitting in on their sessions, providing feedback, offering their own knowledge and passing on their own experiences and providing examples of how they could overcome certain difficulties. For another, educational leadership was far more operational: 'organising when the courses are on and who's going to be in them, who's going to be training them, and getting allocations to provide the labour for that to happen' (Enterprise, #10).

For a leader in an industry training organisation, educational leadership was a far-reaching, forward-looking activity. When it is enacted, the organisation is very proactively researching, developing trends, and looking at what might be on the horizon in terms of new technologies and changing training requirements for the industry. These activities stand in contrast to the day-to-day management, which is about ensuring that the organisation is run efficiently (Industry, #25).

## Juggling competing challenges

Having named and explained their understandings of educational leadership, leaders from all registered training organisations were then quick to expand on the challenge of realising educational leadership in their work and how they worked to juggle it alongside other imperatives – particularly business, financial and compliance imperatives. For some leaders, these imperatives were viewed as separate entities and juggling these multiple imperatives 'happens every day ... that's what you do, that's part of the role (Industry, #25). By their own admission there are times when the 'educational side' will take a step back to enable more pressing imperatives to be dealt with.

Compliance also sometimes jostled for attention with business development:

The compliance is the absolute must, we have to have it right otherwise we don't run, so obviously there're tasks around compliance that have to take priority, but obviously at the same time you want your business to grow, you don't want to see it stagnate or miss opportunities, so it's definitely a juggling act between the two in ensuring that both are covered. (Industry, #15)

For some leaders the distinction between educational and other forms of leadership was a positive one to make, because, for them, the notions of compliance and quality education outcomes were not necessarily one and the same thing:

I'm still not convinced, and again, given my limited exposure to nationally accredited training, I'm not convinced that the structures that are in place are necessarily a commitment to stronger educational outcomes. (Commercial, #24)

Others viewed compliance as 'a struggle between the idealistic principles of educational quality and what you can hope to achieve, and then the practicalities and the realism of what you have, and the number of staff, the resources, because that's something that always comes up, the number of students to staff ratio' (Industry, #27).

For the training leaders in the enterprise organisations in this study, compliance imperatives often overshadowed their desire to devote more time to educational leadership, with some suggesting that up to two-thirds of their time could be devoted to compliance-related activities. However, like some commercial training organisation leaders, these enterprise leaders saw benefits in the compliance system, in that it did ensure 'vigour [and] robustness to assessment' (Enterprise, #6). In this way, compliance had an impact on the training outcomes in the organisation and fed the overarching rationale for the existence of the registered training organisation; that is, assuring a qualified and competent workforce for the enterprise.

However, a few other leaders did not see the domains of business and educational imperatives as discrete entities. Particularly in the smaller commercial training organisations, some of the leaders considered that they were able to meld the two more effectively than they believed their counterparts in larger organisations might do. For example, one considered that: 'I'd probably challenge the view that ... the commercial imperative ... drives a wedge between the educational one. Now, I understand that in other organisations that might be the case, but I really don't agree with that view in the way I run [my registered training organisation]' (Commercial, #18). When probed to explain how this leader was able to avoid the 'struggling', the response, while difficult to articulate, was intricately related to an understanding that, without a strong business and a vision for that business, the educational leadership can be directed towards nothing:

I mean honestly if you are bad you can't survive ... I mean, that's the reality in my view anyway ... for us the notion of quality is just so incredibly embedded ... there might be a commercial imperative in that, yes, there might be a business imperative in that, but on the other side of it, if we don't offer a really strong, quality, educational offering and it leads to really good outcomes, people ... just don't come here. (Commercial, #18)

Another leader also expressed the view that leading for compliance and leading for educational outcomes are closely intertwined and complementary activities:

I don't think you can have one without the other, to a certain extent ... So I'm really interested in the environment that we provide as a space for students to experience their education ... but I'm also intimately connected with being compliant and making sure that we are on track as far as that side of it goes, so I don't see there's a huge [gap]. (Commercial, #19)

Nevertheless, tension was acknowledged to be ever present:

I think you're always going to have a tension with it. I don't think it can ever be totally resolved. I think that's part of running an organisation actually. I don't think you can ever let go of it totally because you're going to be too far removed, and you're not going to have a sense of it. Sometimes though, when you're in that, when you're really in the housework, it can feel like you don't have the space. (Commercial, #19)

The work of leading in a private training organisation, then, is a complex undertaking, which both stretched and invigorated these incumbents. Many of the respondents in this study were enthusiastic about their leadership roles and spoke of their desire to continue to develop their capacities as leaders and to build the quality of the services and products that their training organisation delivered to their clients.

## Success factors

The key factors that assisted leaders to meet the challenges they faced were clearly connected to what they perceived as the objectives to which their leadership should be directed.

For leaders in industry training organisations, their primary leadership centred on engaging their industry with the VET system in a way that assisted the businesses in the industry to thrive and to see their productivity enhanced. This was expressed by one leader as 'talking on a regular basis', noting when 'their ears prick up' and explaining how 'they're retaining productivity while we're training them' (Industry, #17). Critical success factors lay in their capability to get 'the right information to the right people' to facilitate engagement with the VET system (Industry, #14).

The currency and effectiveness of staff was singled out by all leaders in industry training organisations as the key to success in this area. This work included 'breaking down' any perceived barriers; building knowledge of the products that VET had to offer businesses; and, most importantly, building the capacity of the training organisation staff to perform these activities effectively. Ensuring that staff were well supported to grow and develop through the provision of timely and effective professional development was important, alongside the provision of adequate resources to support learning for both staff and for the delivery of training (Industry, #25). Proper management systems also played a key role in supporting the innovation needed to bring together the compliance requirements of the VET system and the training needs of organisations in ways that best met the needs of the industry (Industry, #33).

A second success factor, linked to the first, related to building the trust of the industry in the activities of the training organisation. This meant ensuring that information about training requirements (particularly when these changes, for example, related to a new version of a training package) was conveyed as accurately as possible across the organisation and out to industry. This was likened to 'preventing Chinese whispers' (Industry, #33) and paving the groundwork to support

compliance requirements. The emphasis here was on high-quality information, circulated often and well (Industry, #32).

A third success factor was the capacity of industry training organisation leaders to be proactive as far as possible. While this was acknowledged to be a hard goal to accomplish, being able to anticipate the impact of the changing and dynamic compliance environment in which they operated was linked to ensuring their credibility and effectiveness in the industry.

For leaders in commercial registered training organisations, success factors were linked to business concerns – particularly those related to their capacity to maintain their reputation, networks and hence their market niche. Sound business models, which built sustainable businesses, were mentioned by almost all leaders in these sites as making an important contribution to their effectiveness as registered training organisations. Success was also intimately linked to attracting and retaining high-quality staff with whom they could share their vision for their business and who also had the capacity to help realise the outcomes needed for the organisation (Commercial, #23). Staff who brought the capacity to innovate and to help expand the business were particularly valued (Commercial, #34).

However, while some leaders in commercial organisations expressed the view that balancing the multiple demands of education and business was best done by leading the business first, others expressed the idea that success lay in the integration of both imperatives, which was reflected in the ‘way’ leadership was understood, integrated and dispersed across the leadership team in the organisation (Commercial, #18). This synthesis of educational and business leadership was considered essential for survival, as the lean structures and smaller number of staff meant that it was not possible to operate using more hierarchical or specialised structures of leadership. Put another way, success depended on the development of a model of leadership where educational and business leadership were ‘two sides of the same coin’ and in which leadership was dispersed across the organisation (Commercial, #18).

Like their counterparts in industry training organisations, leaders in enterprise organisations recognised that their success lay squarely in ensuring that the enterprise saw value in the registered training organisation and what it could offer in terms of facilitating growth and developing a competitive advantage for the business (Enterprise, #1). As Smith and Smith (2009) have observed, with enterprise training organisations the reputation of the enterprise depends on other matters, as training is not the core business. In this context, successful educational leadership was intimately bound up with the productivity of the business, and success lay in leaders’ capacities to combine learning for employees with the imperatives of productivity, therefore creating an effective and profitable workplace for the owners of the parent business. Effective communication both ‘up and down’ the organisation about the training organisation was critical to success (Enterprise, #5). Being able to network and influence people in positions where they could have a direct bearing on the operation of the training organisation required skills of persuasion and highly developed networks across the organisation (Enterprise, #4). Training organisation leaders also needed to know how to talk about the VET sector and the operation of the training organisation in ways that connected its operations with that of its parent enterprise.

Another critical success factor lay in being able to integrate the learning systems developed by the training organisation into the work structures and processes in a way that did not hamper productivity (Enterprise, #5). This required the capacity to be able to identify key people working in a variety of roles where training was required and then to organise them to provide training to other workers. The selection of these people was critical, as they needed both credibility with the workers they were

training, as well as the capacity to be ‘slightly removed’ from the ‘shop floor’, in order to be able to ensure that the standard of the training was commensurate with the requirements of the relevant training package and the AQTF (Enterprise, #1). It was also critical that leaders were flexible in their approaches to the ways in which they understood how training might be constituted from within and alongside the work of the enterprise. This required a continual connection with the work of the enterprise and a level of ‘current competence’ in training leaders that went beyond that expressed in units of competency, to encompass an understanding of the culture, values and norms of the enterprise vis-à-vis effective vocational practice in these sites. Educational leadership was intimately connected to the work of the enterprise, and leading in training also meant leading in working (Enterprise, #11).

# Conclusions

The provision of leadership in private training organisations is complex and multi-faceted. Increased contestability in the VET sector, coupled with reforms designed to achieve a more interconnected tertiary sector (Bradley 2008), has provided both opportunities and challenges for leaders as they work to juggle a number of educational and business imperatives. Previous research relating to staff in leadership roles has highlighted these 'dual roles', whereby they are expected to be both change managers (that is, at the interface between higher-level management initiatives and daily practice) and inspirational on-the-ground leaders of training staff (Falk & Smith 2003; Foley & Conole 2003; Mulcahy 2003; Dickie et al. 2004; Rice 2004; Callan et al. 2007; Black 2005, 2009). There is also evidence that suggests that strong educational leadership helps to develop innovation, flexibility and agility in training organisations (Palmieri 2004) and this is mirrored in observations from the business literature: that 'management and leadership [are] key factors in the differential productivity performance of firms, including their ability to undertake innovation' (Green 2009, p.33). The aim of this research, which began with the assumption that, despite the difficulties, effective business and educational leadership are both essential to the VET sector, was to analyse the ways in which leaders in a variety of private registered training organisations understand their roles as leaders and, consequently, how they enact their leadership in their organisations.

The leaders in the private training organisations in this study exemplified the complex and contextual nature of the work that leading in VET entails. Their leadership was in all cases shaped by the operating conditions in their organisation, including the state of the business and its position vis-à-vis the competition with other providers. The decisions they made and the way their work unfolded could only be understood from within their particular context.

The participants in the study understood that leadership was an action or process (cf. Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky 2009) that can be exercised by an individual across functions such as delivery, assessment, meeting compliance and other regulatory requirements. However, they were also clear that leadership can, in addition, be understood as an activity that can be directed by groups of individuals and teams in various work roles associated with the delivery of nationally accredited VET (perhaps from a range of other learning and development activities) across organisations. Sometimes these groups are geographically dispersed; in other cases, they are contained within a small leadership team. Leadership functions could be traced across different job roles in an organisation – at the coalface, at middle and senior levels in the organisation.

This form of leadership reflects some of the notions of distributed leadership encapsulated by authors such as MacBeath (2005), Harris (2006, 2009) and Spillane (2006). However, unlike the notion of distributed pedagogic leadership (Hargreaves 2003; Hargreaves & Fink 2006), which emphasises collaborative and shared actions to realise productive learning environments, the leadership described in this research extended beyond a sole concern with the pedagogic. Leadership in the private training organisations extended to a range of other functions that worked together to provide the impetus for the training organisation to move in a particular direction and focus on a particular outcome consistent with the mission of the training organisation in its broader context. In the case of industry and enterprise training organisations, leadership was not directly driven by outcomes for individual learners – these were a by-product of a focus on enhancing the productivity of enterprises and industries. In the case of commercial training organisations, outcomes for learners were more integral to their concerns, although connections with their market niches and their demands and prospects were also always a

priority for the leaders of these organisations. Across all sites in the study, leaders were acutely aware of the ways in which their work resided at the interface between the VET sector and their particular context, and the roles they played in making VET ‘work’ for them contributed to the effective running of the VET sector and the provision of nationally accredited training.

The enactment of leadership within the various types of private training organisations in this study was a multi-directional construct: it was exercised ‘up’, ‘down’ and ‘across’ organisations, with the nature and extent of these actions being clearly shaped by the structures and cultures of the specific organisation. In commercial training organisations, leadership was often concentrated in a small team. This often meant that ‘upwards’ leadership was less evident, whereas leadership enacted to enhance the ‘outward’ engagement with stakeholders (students and key niche markets) featured more highly in leadership descriptions in these contexts.

Leaders in enterprise registered training organisations worked ‘up’ within the structures of the enterprise to influence and remind senior executives about the value of the training organisation to their business. These actions served to ensure that it was viewed as an integral part of the enterprise’s operation and was key to establishing the notion of the training organisation as an asset rather than a liability unrelated to the core functions of the enterprise. They worked ‘across’ the organisation to embed training in the work structures of the organisation and to influence other middle managers to engage and support the training function. They also worked ‘down’ in the sense that, as part of the workforce, they were fully aware that their role as workers could influence other workers’ perceptions of the value and importance of training and be a significant driver for change.

Leaders in industry training organisations operated in a similar fashion, except that their domain was an industry rather than an enterprise. Being ‘one step removed’, and having to operate across the range of businesses that constituted the industry, required leaders to adopt both a broader perspective (that is, what might be in the best interests of the industry?) and a narrow, specialist focus (that is, what will work for this particular business at this point in time?). Like their counterparts in enterprises, they worked to ‘shape’ their training functions to the presenting needs, while simultaneously working to shape their business to embrace what the VET sector might offer in terms of services and products to enhance their productivity. Industry training organisations were also not immune from needing to exercise influence in their own organisation in order to ensure they were able to bring the necessary resources, processes and personnel to the task of providing accredited training.

Respondents in the study were clear that leadership which focused on educational outcomes – as distinct from business, financial and human resource outcomes – was an integral part of their role but one that assumed a greater or lesser importance at particular points in time and in particular contexts. It is clear that the ‘business’ of running a registered training organisation often needs to take precedence; however, just as learning can be coterminous with work, so educational leadership can be considered as integral to the activity of running a training organisation – while also ensuring that action is directed to achieving the desired vision and goals for the registered training organisation. Put another way, respondents in this study were arguing for a shift from a ‘competing domains’ understanding of educational and business leadership to a more integrated understanding of leadership, where exercising leadership across business and educational outcomes are two sides of the same coin. This understanding of leadership acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between leadership directed towards educational outcomes and leadership directed towards financial and business outcomes. Educational leadership in private training organisations, then, can be understood as being distributed across people (it is not exercised by one person alone) and across functions (it has both business and pedagogic dimensions). While some aspects of leadership are undoubtedly based on

personal traits and capabilities, this study illustrates that educational leadership in organisations can be viewed as a practice that exists at a range of levels, supported by a culture focused on high-quality outcomes for defined markets, enterprises, industries and learners.

The implication of such an understanding of educational leadership, from one embedded in personal capabilities, to one that is situated in practices in organisations, is significant. While not negating the importance of the individual capacities of those who occupy leadership positions in private training organisations, this research directs attention to structures and cultures as key enabling conditions to support the exercising of effective leadership where VET is the objective. This study highlights the need for a revised definition of educational leadership, one that adopts the perspective of the organisation, its work and the actions of individuals from across the organisation as key elements in leadership aimed at achieving VET goals for the organisation. This expansive and enriched understanding of leadership has the potential to be more attuned to the contemporary VET sector as it positions itself in the more interconnected tertiary education system in Australia.



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# Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in Leadership in private providers: *Juggling educational and business imperatives: support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2510.html>>.

- Information sheet
- Consent form
- Interview schedules
- Brief profiles of the case study organisations

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