



# SUPPORTING VET PROVIDERS in building capability for the future

## Careers in VET: What are they like? by Michele Simons, Roger Harris, Berwyn Clayton and Val Pudney

As organisations continually restructure, so the working lives of their staff are reshaped to take account of these new workplace realities. This research examines how staff in the VET sector understand careers, how their careers unfold during their working lives in VET and the implications these views have for the management of the VET workforce.

### Changing career pathways

The nature of work in the VET sector is changing. As the work changes, so people's career options and pathways change, with new opportunities opening up while others disappear. To build an understanding of how careers in VET are developed and understood, we conducted a survey of samples of staff from 44 registered training organisations (23 public and 21 private) in Australia. A total of 1098 teachers, managers and support staff responded.

### Moving into VET

The survey highlighted the casualised nature of entry positions in VET's teaching workforce. On the other hand, general staff or those entering management more frequently begin their VET careers in permanent and full-time roles. For almost one-third of general staff, employment in the sector was preceded by a period of time outside the paid workforce and, for the vast majority, work in the sector was their only form of employment.

Many of the more recently employed beginning teachers and trainers worked both in the VET sector and in other paid work outside the sector. A number of these people considered their work outside the sector to be their primary employment. Also, for most beginning teachers and trainers, the VET sector was usually not their first employment experience, with many having extensive experience before making a career change into the sector. They are therefore older, in general, than those found in general staff roles.

### Moving around in VET and developing their skills

Two-thirds of those responding to the survey had made between one and five moves during their employment

in the sector. The changeable nature of work roles and the generally wide acceptance of this characteristic were features of the VET workforce noted in the survey results. This is not so remarkable for teachers and trainers, given that many had already made a significant career change by entering VET. For general staff this flexible orientation to working life seems to be a product of age, experience in the sector and the timing of their employment.

This mobility of staff can be understood in two ways. First, it may indicate a view of working life not limited by ideas about what the work of a particular role entails, and their mobility can be viewed as an indicator of the flexibility and agility that is now so integral to the way VET organisations have to operate. Second, it may be viewed, especially by teaching staff, as a strategy to cope with working lives that no longer offer traditional career pathways. Rather than progression being measured by promotions, or changing modes of employment from hourly paid to contract to permanent, progression in this sector is achieved in less direct ways—by exploiting a series of opportunities that provides more enriching or varied work or prepares them for a wider range of roles. This makes staff increasingly valuable to their own or other organisations and helps them attain a more permanent and satisfying work life.

Given their mobility within the sector, it is not surprising that respondents reported moderate-to-high levels of engagement with both structured and informal professional development opportunities. Teaching staff undertook formal, as well as engaged in informal professional development, more often than did general staff. What was surprising were the generally low levels of engagement and satisfaction with performance management in the sector, with general staff reporting lower levels of engagement than their teaching colleagues.

## Research activity 2: Understanding career pathways in VET

The research consortium, *Supporting vocational education and training providers in building capability for the future*, comprises researchers from the Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work at the University of South Australia, the Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education at the Canberra Institute of Technology, and the Australian Centre for Organisational, Vocational and Adult Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney. Managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), it aims to investigate how training organisations will respond to future changes in VET provision.

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CONSORTIUM RESEARCH PROGRAM



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## Plans to move out of VET

While those who have been employed the longest are planning to move out of the sector in the next five years, this is also true for significant numbers of more recently employed staff. Of staff employed in the last decade, just over half were either unsure or did not believe they would be in the sector in five years' time. This may be because some VET staff are not always young when they move into the sector. But for other younger staff, including general staff who may be working in roles that enable development of transferable skills, the VET sector may be serving as a stepping stone to their next work role outside the sector.

## Viewing their careers

VET staff understand the concept of career in diverse ways. Some see their careers as pathways which they follow and which lead to progression, promotion and opportunities for movement within the sector. Others view their careers as working lives that provide learning, enjoyment, change and personal development. Yet others describe careers in ways that reflect a blending of these two perspectives.

Significantly, survey respondents reported that decision-making about their careers was more often driven by internal considerations such as job satisfaction, support from colleagues and their own self-esteem and confidence, rather than workload issues and availability of full-time work. For teaching staff, factors such as qualifications, personal ambition and family responsibilities featured highly, while for general staff support from managers, work-life balance, availability of permanent ongoing work and financial responsibilities were rated more highly.

## Implications for policy and practice

The findings highlight the importance of understanding the differences that exist between groups of staff on matters relating to careers in VET, rather than the differences between types of organisations (such as the public/private divide).

Managing transitions of different groups of staff into the VET sector warrants more considered and systematic attention. Industry is by far the largest source of the recruitment of teachers and trainers. However, in reality, the careers of teachers and trainers often straddle both industry and VET. This is particularly so for more recent recruits who often retain their positions in industry alongside their work as teachers and trainers. It is unclear whether the career pathway for teachers and trainers is an extension to their career in their industry or a significant career change from one industry to another. How they view their career has important implications for how career development and support for staff might be provided. For these staff, better understanding and support needs to be offered if numbers are to be sustained or grow. This is more

difficult in a tight labour market where higher salaries act to keep high-performing staff in industry. Given the highly casualised nature of entry-level employment, teachers and trainers also need support and assistance in juggling the demands of several employment roles as well as family and other personal commitments. Perhaps a range of new employment options should be considered by the sector; particularly for those employed as teachers or trainers.

General staff also need support as they seek to establish themselves in the workforce. Meeting the needs of younger staff requires particular attention to ensure that this support matches the career- and professional-development requirements of this group, rather than assuming that what is offered to teachers and trainers (who are often older) will be appropriate for their needs. In addition, as more recent recruits are often less certain about their futures in the VET sector, some systematic attention to better understanding the career aspirations of this group would be a timely intervention.

The necessity for making opportunities available for continuous learning for all VET staff is a clear message from this study and needs to be concerned with equipping staff with the capability to perform their current work role; there also needs to be a way of helping staff to enhance their career(s) and to attain the desired quality of working life. Herein lies a dilemma: assisting staff to take advantage of opportunities for changed work roles also contributes to their potential to leave the organisation. However, not providing learning and development opportunities leads to a perception of a disengaged organisation where professional development (and hence career capability) is the responsibility solely of the individual. In a context where all staff clearly value job satisfaction and the support of colleagues and managers, this narrow approach is not ideal. Thus, VET leaders are being challenged to think about the working environment they provide and how it impacts on the quality of staff relationships.

The findings reinforce the need for training and development of managers and team leaders—particularly in those skills which will enable them to engage staff, structure work and work processes, cultivate working relationships and provide meaningful, relevant learning opportunities and performance management processes. In other words, the capability of managers to forge new psychological contracts with staff will be a key determinant of successful workforce development strategies in VET.

An overview of the consortium's research findings is available at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1827.html>. Information about the consortium's program can be found at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/workinprogress/projects/10345.html>.

