

Executive summary

The effects of teacher/trainer qualifications on the quality of VET teaching/training

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Prior to the mid-1990s most full-time TAFE teachers in Australia undertook ‘in-service’ VET/adult education degrees (i.e. after starting work in TAFE). With the advent of the requirement for a Certificate IV level qualification in 1998, TAFE gradually stopped requiring degrees. Private and community training providers do not have any general requirement for VET teaching qualifications. Now, about 1000 people undertake higher education qualifications in VET pedagogy (teaching and training) voluntarily, at around 10 universities. Some teachers have higher-level qualifications in their industry or discipline area.

Does the relatively low qualification level of the VET workforce affect the quality of VET teaching or of VET more generally¹? Evidence is provided here from a national research project undertaken between 2015 and 2017. The project was funded by the Australian Research Council (LP1401000440), and a number of partnering organisations from the VET sector: ACPET, VET Development Centre, NCVET, TAFE Queensland and Federation Training. The researchers were: Erica Smith and Jackie Tuck (FedUni), Keiko Yasukawa (UTS) and Roger Harris (UniSA)². The research was supported by the peak bodies of all types of Registered Training Organisation (RTO), who encouraged their member RTOs to participate.

The project web site is at <http://federation.edu.au/research-vet-quality>. Its research questions were:

1. What differences do VET teachers’ levels of qualification (both pedagogical and in discipline/ industry areas) make to their teaching concepts, approaches and practice?
2. How do levels of qualification affect VET teachers’ engagement in professional development?
3. In what ways do more highly-qualified VET teachers contribute to improved quality in VET³?

The project involved RTOs and VET teachers from every Australian State and Territory (Table 1). As higher-level qualifications in VET pedagogy are still available, and as there is a legacy population of previously well-qualified teachers/trainers, a comparison between teachers of different qualification levels was possible. Teachers/trainers of all levels of qualification participated in the research.

Table 1: Research method and participants, 2015-17

Phase	Activity	No. of research participants
1.	Stakeholder interviews.	11
2.	11 focus groups of teacher/trainers (29 people) and students (40).	60
3.	Case studies about the effects of teacher qualifications on teaching quality, at four TAFE and four non-TAFE RTOs. Interviews with managers, teachers and students.	128
4.	National Teacher/Trainer Survey administered through eight TAFE and 48 non-TAFE RTOs.	574
5.	Professional Development Survey of teachers, administered through three external professional development providers.	368
6.	Professional development case studies at three TAFE and three non-TAFE RTOs. Interviews with managers and teachers.	50
7.	Expert validation process – three stage on-line ‘Delphi’ survey.	55
Total		1255

¹ Of course, many other factors also affect VET quality, and the research recorded many of these, but they were not specifically investigated.

² Keiko Yasukawa and Roger Harris were investigators in Phases 1-3; and Jackie Tuck in Phases 4 to 7.

Summary of findings

The key findings of the project, from the qualitative and quantitative data alike, were as follows:

1. Higher level qualifications in VET pedagogy improve teaching approaches, confidence and ability to address diversity in contexts, learners and AQF level of teaching.
2. VET teachers often have high level qualifications in their industry area or other disciplines, and these too make a difference. However, higher level qualifications in VET pedagogy make a significant difference to VET teachers' confidence and ability in teaching a diversity of learners.
3. The key qualification level that makes a difference is a degree.
4. Participation in both formal and informal professional development, in industry/discipline areas and in VET teaching, increases with higher qualifications, irrespective of the type of qualification.
5. Teachers with higher level qualifications contribute more to their employing organisations in curriculum and assessment development, leadership and project work.

The findings about the effects of higher level qualifications on teaching approaches, addressing diversity in contexts and learners, and contribution to the employing RTO were very clear. While any type of higher level qualification was helpful, VET pedagogy qualifications had specific utility in pedagogical and assessment matters. The Diploma of VET qualification made a difference here; but the significant difference was at degree level.

Engagement in professional development (PD) was more common among more highly-qualified teachers. This means that PD is unlikely to compensate for the low level of initial qualification. Respondents reported that the PD that was available, both at external providers and in-house, was more likely to be about compliance with the VET audit regime than about pedagogical development.

Validation and potential implementation

In the final three-stage 'Delphi' process of the project (Phase 7), the findings were validated by the respondents who were policy-makers or other influencers in the VET sector (Stream 1) ; and CEOs or senior managers of TAFE colleges or major non-TAFE providers from all categories of RTO (Stream 2).

The Delphi phase respondents reported, with a very few exceptions, that the findings of the project rang true. Over three-quarters advocated the mandating of at least the Diploma of VET as a minimum pedagogical qualification for all full-time VET teachers in all types of RTO. One-third advocated a degree.

Implications: Although all major stakeholder groups were involved either in the conduct of this research project or on the project reference group, it remains to be seen whether there is the will to translate the findings into a new qualification regime for VET teachers. Four specific arguments have been raised for doing nothing about VET teaching qualifications. These are listed below, with counter-arguments:

Reasons to do nothing	Counter-arguments
It would be expensive.	<i>VET teachers could pay for their own qualifications, as do most workers in the economy, including school teachers. Higher qualifications could apply only for new full-time teachers initially, to ease the transition.</i>
You need to prove that student outcomes are improved.	<i>This burden of proof is not placed on school teacher or Early Childhood teacher qualifications. Student outcomes are based on many variables; and in VET, there is rarely any grading to evaluate student outcomes, in any case.</i>
Industry wouldn't like it.	<i>In other research studies, industry has shown its preference for highly qualified and competent VET teachers and trainers. Teaching/training qualifications supplement, and do not replace, industry qualifications and experience for VET teachers.</i>
People would not want to become VET teachers.	<i>Higher level pedagogical qualifications are studied part-time after becoming a VET teacher. When they were required in the past, it was not a barrier to entry. People usually accept that a new occupation entails extra study, and sometimes a drop in pay.</i>