



# The Importance of VET Teacher Professionalism: An Australian Case Study

# 88

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## Abstract

The effectiveness of vocational education and training (VET) systems depends upon their teachers. The teachers are regarded as “dual professionals,” requiring expertise in both their background industry areas and in VET pedagogy itself. This chapter uses Australia as a case study of what happens when the accepted regime of qualifications for VET teachers alters. In Australia full-time VET teachers were, until recently, required to undertake degree level qualifications in VET pedagogy, taught at universities, either before or, more usually, after entering the occupation. The required level has now reduced to the regulatory minimum of a Certificate IV level qualification, taught by training providers not

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universities, and often provided to their own teachers. The qualification contains only 300 nominal hours of training. It has been recognized as a particularly poorly taught qualification, requiring the introduction of a high degree of regulation and most recently a special compliance framework for training providers wishing to deliver it.

In this chapter, the historical path of the decline in VET teacher professionalism in Australia is charted, including research evidence from a national project managed by the author, about the effects of higher-level qualifications on VET teacher practices and quality and teachers' propensity to engage in professional development. A conceptual model of the attributes of professional VET teachers with regard to qualifications and professional development is presented. The chapter concludes with some recommendations for change and implications for other countries.

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**Keywords**

Vocational education teacher · Australian system · Teacher professionalism

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**Introduction**

In the introduction, the VET system in Australia is briefly described, together with a discussion of the qualification regime for VET teachers. This chapter confines itself to the formal VET system, i.e., the teaching and assessment of formal qualifications, whether delivered in training institutions or within workplaces. It does not include company trainers working in companies which are not involved with the award of formal qualifications, nor with those working on VET programs within secondary schools even if formal VET qualifications are awarded. The reason for the exclusion of the latter so-called "VET in school" teachers is that they are required to adhere to the qualifications regime for school teachers, which always demands a pedagogy degree or above.

In 2016, the most recent year for which precise figures are available, there were around 1.3 million government-funded learners in the VET system (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2017), with a large number of additional non-funded participants paying full fees. (The system for counting non-funded students is not reliable.) The public VET provider in Australia is known as TAFE (Technical and Further Education). TAFE colleges are managed by the eight States and Territories. Until the end of the last century, most formal qualification-based VET was delivered by TAFE, with private providers only having access to specific government funding programs. Indeed, prior to the 1980s, all private provider courses were fee-paying. Regulation of the VET system at this time was minimal. The system has now moved to a position where private providers of training, through progressive access to all types of government funding and to VET student loans (known initially as VET FEE-HELP), have much greater market share, although this is beginning to reverse due to the deregistration of some large private providers because of

poor business practices (Yu and Oliver 2015). There are over 4500 private providers (PwC's Skills for Australia 2017) and 40 TAFE institutes, each with multiple campuses. In some States, one TAFE institute covers the whole state. The recent de-registration of some for-profit providers, and also cuts to funding rates by states and territories, has led to the current relatively low figure of students which is below the 2003 figure (NCVER 2017) although Australia's population increased considerably, from 20 million to 24 million.

In 2008, it was estimated that there were 57,800 full-time TAFE teachers in Australia, but it is thought up to 300,000 or even 400,00 people were involved in VET teaching or workplace training as part or all of their jobs (Guthrie 2010c). The exact number of VET teachers is unknown as there are many part-time and casual teachers who are not recorded centrally by most training providers. In Australia, it is the norm for VET teachers to enter the occupation after a career in industry, often a lengthy career. For this reason, the majority of VET teachers are middle-aged or older (Smith et al. 2009)

From around 1975, full-time TAFE teachers starting work were required by their employing state or territory to gain, while working, a university diploma in VET teaching (which became a degree around 1990) or a graduate diploma if they already had a degree in another discipline area (Guthrie 2010a). In each State, at least one university provided such qualifications (Harris 2015). In 1998, a Certificate level qualification (now called the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment) was approved, containing only 300 nominal hours of training. The qualification was introduced to provide a mandated "floor" for qualifications for VET teachers; this however rapidly became a "ceiling" (Smith and Keating 2003; Wheelahan and Moodie 2011). Over the first decade of the twenty-first century, progressively in each State-based TAFE system, the requirement for pedagogical qualification for full-time TAFE teachers was reduced to this regulatory minimum. According to the Australian Qualifications Framework (<https://www.aqf.edu.au/aqf-levels>), level 4 qualifications "will have theoretical and practical knowledge and skills for specialised and/or skilled work and/or further learning." To set this in context, a trade apprenticeship is at level 3; the VET sector delivers mainly to level 6, and a degree is at level 7. The minimum qualification for the lower level of nurses (known as "enrolled nurses"), for example, is a diploma, at level 5. In recent years, Australian government-sponsored reports have shown, on many occasions (e.g., Skills Australia 2011), deficiencies which could to some extent be attributed to a low level of qualification among VET teachers. For example, an ongoing concern has been the quality of assessment of learners.

After a background section, this chapter maps changes in qualifications and professional development provision for the VET workforce and suggests contextual reasons why this was allowed to occur. Findings from a national research project concluding in 2017 and led by the author are provided to show the difference that higher-level qualifications make both to teaching and to engagement in professional development. The chapter concludes with a model of VET teacher professionalism and some recommendations for change and implications for other countries.

## Background and Literature

In this section, more detail is provided about the complexity and importance of VET teachers' work in Australia. The qualification regime for teachers is explained further, the nature of professional development is described, and the concept of professionalism is introduced.

### The Nature of Teaching and Assessment in VET

Since the late 1980s, the VET system has moved entirely to a competency-based system. In Australia this means that the competencies to be attained (which contain skills as well as knowledge) are clearly defined on a national basis, but the training delivery method is not so prescriptively laid out. Since around 2000 (beginning in 1997), the competencies have been laid out in national Training Packages (Smith and Keating 2003). A few courses fall outside these, but the vast majority are within this system. Prior to 1997, competency-based training (CBT) was delivered in some industry areas using "national modules" or industry-developed standards (Smith 2010).

A Training Package contains qualification and units of competency, each with an accompanying assessment guideline. The Package provides rules about how the units of competency are combined into qualifications, at different levels. Qualifications have cores and electives. In some qualifications the core forms most of the qualification, while in others, there is a small core and a large range of electives from which a specified number are then chosen by the RTO to deliver. The Certificate IV in Training and Assessment itself is included in the Training and Education Training Package (hence, it is shown as the "Cert IV TAE" rather than Cert IV TAA). Training Packages contain no guidance about delivery, as this has not been permitted by the Training Package Development Handbook (Department of Education & Training 2015) except that proxies for delivery may be found in the assessment guidelines. These may include, for example, the need for assessment to be carried as part of a work placement. Thus, teachers have the task of creating a "curriculum" from the units of competency and assessing the learners, although in practice many training providers have developed prescriptive methods for delivery and also for assessment, for quality assurance purposes, and because they find teachers are not capable of development of curriculum (Smith 2016).

There have been well-documented cases of unethical – indeed sometimes criminal – activity by some private providers, using government funds inappropriately or recruiting students unwittingly to VET sector student loans (e.g., Yu and Oliver 2015). These instances, and reports by the regulatory body, have included widespread evidence of inadequate course length (Australian Skills Quality Authority 2017) and other delivery issues. TAFE institutes and reputable private providers report being forced to "cut corners" in order to compete (Guthrie et al. 2014). As the VET system in Australia, being competency-based, focused on outcomes rather than inputs, with assessment being of overriding concern, it has been difficult for the regulatory system to move against inadequate training provision.

## Expertise Required of VET Teachers Compared with Their Qualification Levels

There have been expressed concerns by most stakeholders in the Australian VET system that quality in the system is declining, evidenced partly through poor business practice as explained above but also because teachers appear to be lacking in the necessary skills and knowledge to work with the national VET curriculum regime and to assess students (National Skills Standards Council 2013). It has been recognized since the early days of competency-based training that teachers needed high-level skills and knowledge to work in a competency-based system (e.g., Smith 2010). In recent years, other matters have necessitated higher-level activities by VET teachers, such as the requirement to liaise closely with industry and the increasing diversity of student groups. In this context, a Certificate IV seems an inadequate level of qualification, as has been shown in several ways. Robertson (2008), for example, mapped the qualification against accepted knowledge bases of teachers, and a comparison was made between the documented requirements of the job against Australian Qualification Framework levels (Australian Council of Deans of Education 2011) in a submission to a Productivity Commission inquiry into the VET workforce (Productivity Commission 2011). The latter report showed clearly the complexity of the tasks involved in VET teaching but did not recommend an increase in qualification levels, primarily because there was a fear that people might not be attracted to the occupation if they had to gain higher-level qualifications. Finally, while teachers cannot be expected to compensate for poor business practices by management in private training providers and indeed TAFE colleges, ethical issues posed by such practices have become a major concern to teachers (e.g., Nakar 2017; Smith 2016). The Certificate IV qualification does not contain any component about such matters, to equip teachers to forestall or address events such as being required to enroll students who are clearly not capable of completing a particular qualification (Nakar 2017).

As well as the inadequate *level* of the qualification, problems with the *delivery* of Certificate IV in Training and Assessment have been well-recognized; such problems in this qualification exceed the sector norm. To some extent, the problems are shared with some other VET sector qualifications where relatively new regulation is involved. The Certificate III qualifications in the security and aged care industries, for example, exhibit similar patterns of poor delivery practices to the Cert IV TAE but are, likewise, popular qualifications for students, as they are necessary to undertake work in the respective industries (Halliday-Wynes and Misko 2013). While these industries are regulated to some extent, there is no industry body providing licensing or regulation of practitioners or qualifications as there is in other industries such as engineering, electrotechnology, or financial services; hence the pressure for learners to gain qualifications has led to demand for courses that provide the qualification quickly and at low cost but are unlikely to develop significant learning. The Certificate IV qualification has always had notoriety as being delivered in an unduly short manner, often partly or even wholly by Recognition of Prior Learning, or in weekend courses (Smith and Keating 2003).

In response, a degree of regulation and a special compliance framework specifically for this qualification have been implemented via changes to the “provider standards”

(Commonwealth of Australia 2014) used for audits by the regulatory agency for the VET sector (the Australian Skills Quality Authority). Revised regulatory standards for training providers were introduced in 2016 for training providers, requiring inter alia evidence of VET teachers' professional development in VET pedagogy as well as in teachers' industry areas (the latter have always been part of training provider standards), in an attempt to boost teachers' capabilities. Also in this update, higher-level qualifications in what was termed "adult education" were deemed to be equivalent to the until-then mandatory Certificate IV level qualification; and higher-level VET pedagogy qualifications (i.e., diploma or above) were from 2016 required to teach the Certificate IV qualification. In 2016 the large number of training providers allowed to deliver the qualification was reduced through an expedient of making changes to the qualifications that allowed it to be declared "not equivalent," requiring every training provider to re-register for the updated qualification and for the Diploma of VET as well (PwC's Skills for Australia 2017).

Since the advent of the Certificate IV as the mandated qualification, it has been left to individual TAFE institutes or private training providers to encourage teachers to undertake higher-level pedagogical qualifications. The VET sector's Diploma of VET' qualification is popular in some states where there is a TAFE teacher pay rise associated with completion (Guthrie 2010a) and TAFE colleges tend to deliver the diploma to their own teachers during working hours, reducing perceived burden on teachers. There are also a much reduced number of teachers undertaking degree or graduate diploma qualifications in VET teaching while they are working. Numbers are low partly because there is an expectation based on previous practice in the public system that such study would be funded by the employing TAFE institute and time off for study provided; and training providers are not always in a position to provide this level of support, in a reduced funding environment in the public system. The VET teacher trade union has, for this reason, not aided or been involved in any moves for higher qualification requirements, although in public pronouncements the union has provided generalized support for the principle (Australian Education Union 2010).

The universities offering VET teacher training have reduced in number and capacity, and all programs are now offered only by distance (online and/or printed learning materials), sometimes with occasional face-to-face workshops. Nevertheless VET teachers report a high level of satisfaction with their experiences studying such courses (Smith et al. 2015). These universities have formed an official group within the Australian Council of Deans of Education (faculty heads of the Education discipline in universities) known as ACDEVEG, the Australian Council of Deans of Education Vocational Education Group (<https://www.acde.edu.au/networks-and-partnerships/acde-vocational-group/>). This group lobbies for higher qualifications for VET teachers as well as working with VET sector stakeholders to improve the Certificate IV qualification and generally lift the standard of VET teaching.

It should not be forgotten that, in Australia, teachers in the VET system are also required to have industry qualifications, as well as experience in the industry for which they are preparing or upskilling students. Generally, teachers' qualifications in the industry area need only be at the same level as the qualification being taught by that teacher, but some training packages have additional requirements. By contrast,

in the higher-education regulatory framework in Australia, there is a general “one level higher” rule (Commonwealth of Australia 2015). However it should be noted that in some discipline areas, VET teachers routinely have degree level industry qualifications; these are often apparent in, but are not confined to, “professional” areas such as nursing, marketing, and social welfare. All VET teachers (except those in specialist roles such as literacy support) are required to maintain their industry currency and engagement (Smith et al. 2009), and most identify with their previous industry areas as well as with their role as teachers.

## Professional Development for VET Teachers

Professional development (PD) for VET teachers is important and is needed in both “educational and industry-specific expertise” (UK Commission for Employment and Skills 2010). However, with recent funding cuts to the VET sector, fewer resources are available for PD, with teachers increasingly needing to take responsibility for their own PD. It has been established that engagement in PD by VET teachers is affected by many factors, with the nature of “initial teacher qualification” being one among many (Smith 2000; Guthrie 2010b). Professional development is also pointed to as part of a potential solution to the quality of VET teachers especially given the decline in qualification levels (e.g., Wheelahan and Moodie 2011; Smith et al. 2009; Harris et al. 2001).

But teacher engagement in professional development is often patchy and influenced by many factors (Smith 2000). One complication is that many VET teachers and trainers work part time or undertake the role as part of other jobs (Guthrie 2010b), although as Guthrie and Every (2014) argue, there is a substantial core who sees their main role as teaching/training. Substantial barriers to undertaking PD have been identified, including time, access, lack of funding, lack of information, and cost (Harris et al. 2001). In the VET sector, there is a perennial issue of “who pays” for PD and the need for more information “about the relative contributions being made by VET staff and their employers to relevant training” (Guthrie 2010b:19). It has been noted that the approaches of public and private VET providers to PD differ (Harris et al. 2001). Harris et al. (2001) noted that TAFE institutes were more likely to have specialist staff development structures and the internal capacity to deliver a wide range of PD activities, including formal qualifications, than private providers.

## Professionalism

While this chapter focuses on VET teacher qualifications and to a lesser extent professional development, as these issues are being discussed in terms of their contribution to the professionalism of the VET teaching workforce, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the concept of professionalism. It is recognized that professionalism is a large topic which is contested in the literature, and all of the debates cannot be covered. Many occupations describe themselves as professions. Long-established occupations such as school teaching, medicine, the law, the church,

and the military have traditionally been seen as professions (Tobias 2003). Tobias claims that new professions or *quasi-professions*, such as accounting, architecture, nursing, engineering, pharmacy, and surveying, display only some of the traditional characteristics of a profession, but by no means all (Tobias 2003). Saks (2012) sees a profession as a body of people engaged in significant and cognitively complex service for society that requires specific education and adherence to ethical regulation (Saks 2012). The Australian Council of Professions defines a profession as:

A disciplined group of individuals who adhere to high ethical standards and uphold themselves to, and are accepted by, the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised, organised body of learning derived from education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others. <http://www.professions.com.au/about-us/what-is-a-professional>

It is clear that the possession of a high level of “education and training” is seen as an integral part of professionalism in these definitions. This is usually understood to be, and operationalized via, requirements for initial qualifications and for ongoing professional development. A profession is seen as policing such a body of knowledge, regulating learning practices, admission, and subsequent practice (Professions Australia 2006). It is recognized that professions and the concept of professions evolve over time and involve matters of power and influence (Crues and Crues 2004; workfare Abbott 1988), but the concepts of expert knowledge and of attention to the public benefit seem to remain constant.

VET teachers in Australia do not tend to regard themselves as professionals; in fact “practitioner” is the term preferred by the sector (e.g., Innovation and Business Skills Australia 2013), with even the word “teacher” being unpopular in some quarters, with some people preferring to use “trainer.” The latter term is used by the national regulatory body, ASQA, for example. Yet there has been discussion in recent years by researchers (e.g., Wheelahan and Moodie 2011; Guthrie and Clayton 2012) and in government reports (e.g., Department of Education & Training 2016) about the possibility of establishing a professional body and/or a registration body. These align with debates over the years in the UK where plans were actually carried to fruition, with a professional membership body, the “Society for Education and Training,” now managed by the Education and Training Foundation (<http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/about-us/>). However currently there is no appropriate body in Australia to manage such functions and a reluctance to establish an additional body.

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## **Developments in VET Teacher Qualifications and Professional Development in the Decade to 2018**

The previous section has established the complexity of VET teachers’ work, the changing and sometimes chaotic environment in which they operate. and, paradoxically, the low level of qualifications existing in the workforce and the barriers that exist for participation in professional development.



A chapter on the Australian VET teaching workforce published in a previous Handbook (Smith 2009) recorded the variety of teaching and training roles, classifying teachers by their site of practice, their role focus, and the formality of training which they delivered. Some challenges to practice were analyzed; and it was noted that the Certificate IV qualification was flawed and that professionalism of the VET workforce was essential in order to ensure continued development of skills and knowledge. This list of challenges seem relatively minor with those faced today.

The 2009 chapter (Smith 2009) provided an account of qualifications and professional development for VET teachers at that time, under a series of headings. Table 1 below uses these headings to provide a comparison of the account presented in that chapter with the situation a decade previously, as set out in Smith and Keating (1997), and a decade later, in 2018.

This table documents a number of events which have occurred. The main features can be summarized as:

- A reduction in the qualification levels required of full-time VET teachers.
- The introduction of a minimum qualification for all VET teachers which has been a consistent failure through various iterations.
- The withdrawal of national and State governments from responsibility for professional development.
- A change to professional development within training providers from being provider-led and even, in some instances, teacher-led to a focus in compliance with an audit regime requiring evidence of PD.
- A consistent failure to conceptualize how workplace trainers delivering non-qualification-based training should be accommodated within the qualification regime for VET teachers.

For example, there have been constant but minor changes to the Certificate IV qualification. These changes have been undertaken to meet perceived inadequacies in the VET system or in the economy. For example, a unit on “Developing assessment tools” was included as core in the qualification in 2016 to meet accusations of poor-quality assessment, and a unit of competency on addressing language, literacy, and numeracy in VET students was the result of peak industry bodies arguing that the general workforce’s skills in these areas were too low (PwC’s Skills for Australia 2017).

But there have been some positive developments, which are indicated by the word *However* in a small number of places in the table. These include, for example, a probable major review of the Training and Education (TAE) Training Package led by the Education Industry Reference Committee which now manages this Training Package, subject to approval from the national government committee which approves development work on Training Packages.

**Table 1** Changes to VET teacher qualifications and the provision of professional development over the two decades 1997–2018 in Australia

	1997 and 2008	2018
“Initial teacher training” via universities – almost always undertaken after commencement as a VET teacher and while working in the role	In 1997, this training was undertaken by all new TAFE teachers	Fewer universities offering VET teacher training, with fewer students. Some universities now combine their degrees with preparation for teaching “VET in schools.” All students are now studying part time and at a distance, and all programs offer credit for the Certificate IV and occasionally Diploma of VET. Two states offer pay incentives on completion of university such as qualifications in VET teaching
	In 2008, “initial teacher training” via universities was beginning to be less common as it was no longer a requirement in any state. Programs generally embedded or offered pathways from the Certificate IV	<i>However</i> , a “higher-level qualification in adult education (either the Diploma of VET or university degree) is now recognized as an alternative to the Certificate IV TAE
Certificate IV qualification in Training and Assessment	In 1997, there was no national qualification. There were “Category 1 and 2” workplace trainer standards. TAFE systems offered introductory courses for part-time teachers	This qualification has had many small changes since 2009, some of which required, variously, either all teachers or only new teachers to gain additional units of competency. It is still the main VET pedagogy qualification. However, there is the “higher-level” proviso. A higher-level qualification is now needed to teach the Certificate IV qualification. There is a Diploma of VET within the TAE Training Package. Because of poor quality, the 2016 update was made “nonequivalent” which meant that all providers had to re-register to deliver either the certificate or diploma qualification. Approval of re-registrations was deliberately slow to try to improve quality

*(continued)*

**Table 1** (continued)

	1997 and 2008	2018
	By 2008, there had been two iterations of a Certificate IV qualification which was the only VET pedagogy qualification recognized by the regulatory system in VET. It was not well respected	<i>However</i> , the qualification will be reviewed comprehensively during 2018–2019
National-level and state-level professional development	In 1997, a National Staff Development Committee, which had provided national leadership for some years, had just been disbanded. Among other programs, it had run a “CBT in Action” program and programs on disadvantaged groups	The national government ceased to have direct role in staff development in 2011; the “Reframing the future” web site with details of previous programs was decommissioned. State governments do not provide professional development, except that the Victorian government alone provides substantial funding to a semiprivate entity known as the VET Development Centre. (However as some States have state-wide TAFE systems, it may be argued that their PD systems are State-funded and supported). The national regulatory body (ASQA), which replaced State regulatory bodies in 2011, does not have the remit of offering professional development and will not offer advice
	In 2008 the national government still encouraged professional development, but not directly, via a program known first as “Framing the future” and then as “Reframing the future.” It provided funding which was provided to ideas put forward by training providers or groups of providers. State governments provided programs in-house sometimes offered via the regulatory authorities which were State-based	<i>However</i> , changes to the Provider Standards (against which audits take place) since 2016 require training providers to show that their staff regularly update their knowledge and skills in both their discipline areas <i>and</i> in VET pedagogy. <i>But</i> large private PD providers have grown rapidly as a result in order that providers can show compliance with this standard A national body of state managers of VET workforce development, which also incorporated a representative

(continued)

**Table 1** (continued)

	1997 and 2008	2018
		of university providers of VET teacher education, ceased to meet in 2015 as state bodies were gradually closed down
Provider-level staff development	In 1997, professional development was carried out in different ways by different training providers, although there were commonalities in topics such as a focus on working with CBT and recognition of prior learning	With the frequent changes to the Certificate IV, a large part of in-house effort has gone into updating teachers so that they are compliant with the requirements. A requirement for 2018 is for all teachers to gain units of competency on developing assessment tasks and on incorporating language, literacy, and numeracy into their teaching. This is reported to be taking all available PD effort in some TAFE institutes. In-house units in larger providers deliver the Cert IV and sometimes Diploma to their own staff, often separately from the departments that deliver these qualifications to other students. Otherwise PD units spend most of their time ensuring that teachers meet the requirements in the 2016 Provider Standards to undertake regular PD in both industry and pedagogy
	In 2008, providers were required to document how they developed their staff. Some providers, public and private, had staff development units. Industry currency was seen as being the most important type of teacher development	<i>However</i> , some larger TAFE institutes or statewide TAFE systems (e.g., TAFE Queensland) have developed capability frameworks for their teaching workforces
Industry trainers	In 1997, workplace trainers were very much part of the national training picture. The “Category 1 and 2” standards were ostensibly for workplace trainers	Dissatisfaction remains with the relevance of the Certificate IV for industry trainers. The Enterprise RTO Association (companies who are registered as training providers – registered training organizations – for their own

(continued)

**Table 1** (continued)

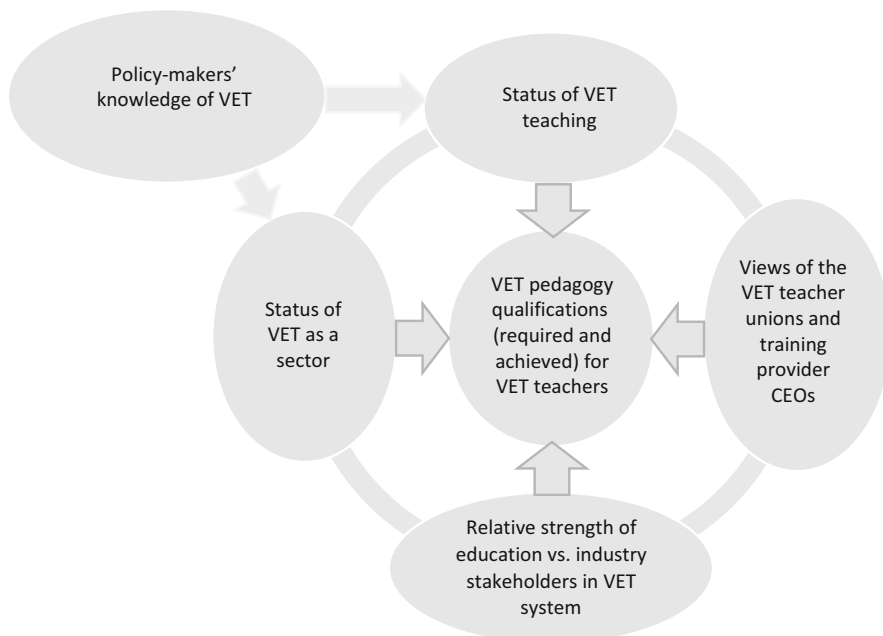
	1997 and 2008	2018
		workers) is vociferous in its opposition to the Certificate IV even for trainers who deliver and assess VET qualifications as opposed to other training for workers. There is no other qualification suitable for industry trainers outside the VET system
	In 2008, it was recognized that the Certificate IV qualification had never applied well to trainers in industry. But where (occasionally) a company awarded VET qualifications, trainers were required to hold the qualification	<i>However</i> , the planned 2018–2019 review of the TAE Training Package proposes to address this matter

Sources: Smith and Keating (1997: 194–203) and Smith (2009)

## Reasons for the Low Levels of Qualification and of Professional Development in VET

In this section an attempt is made to explain how this deteriorating situation has occurred. At first glance, it seems surprising that a country should deliberately reduce the qualifications required for its VET teachers and that the national government should remove itself from responsibility for professional development. Over the same period of time, and particularly in the last decade, there has been considerable focus on school-teacher qualifications (which have been at degree level and above for decades), with considerable intervention by governments at both national and state level in the content of university school teaching-training programs and in the entry levels for these programs (e.g., Department of Education 2015). Also, in early childhood teaching and care, while the basic qualification for childcare workers is only at Certificate III level, there is now a requirement for a proportion of workers to be diploma-qualified and degree-qualified (Margetts 2014). University teachers are not required to hold a university teaching qualification, but most universities in Australia mount a graduate certificate program which they either require or encourage their own academics to undertake (Hardy and Smith 2006)

A tentative model is presented in Fig. 1, which may explain the low levels of qualification required of, and also undertaken by, the VET teaching workforce. In this Figure, which may also be applicable in other countries, the qualification regime is seen to be affected by the low status of VET in Australia and hence the low status

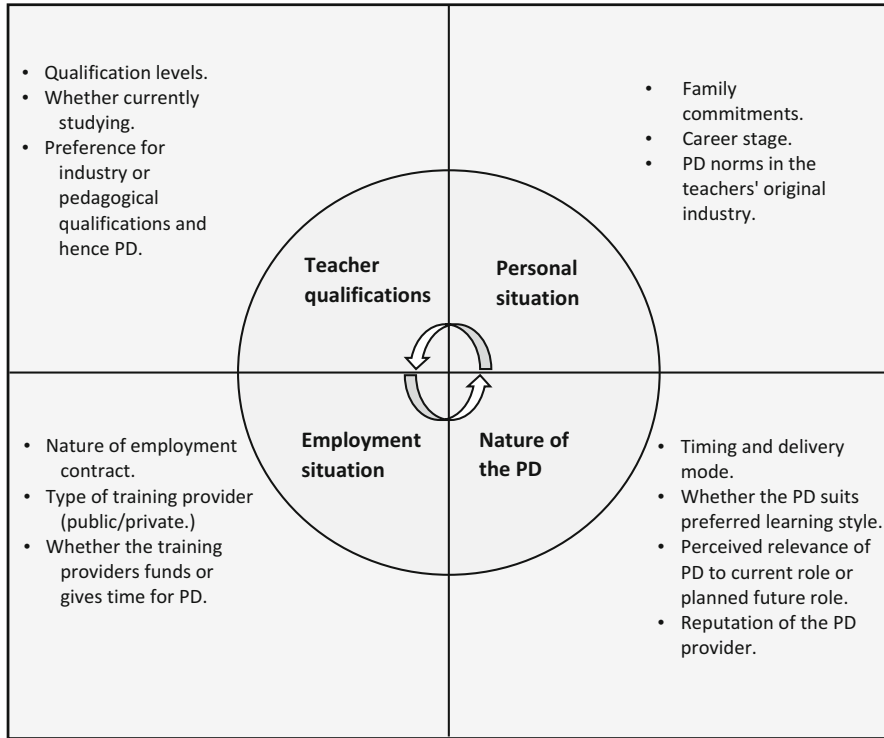


**Fig. 1** Contextual factors affecting the VET pedagogy qualifications required of VET teachers, and undertaken by the teachers

of VET teaching. One effect of this is that it is reportedly difficult to attract good applicants for VET teaching positions (Productivity Commission 2011). But another is that it makes it difficult to argue that VET teachers should be well qualified. The low status of VET and of VET teaching is compounded by the fact that those who make decisions in this area are unlikely to have had any direct experience of the VET system, as government officials are university-educated. It is therefore easy for them to underestimate both the importance of VET and the expertise required to teach in VET, as they know little about it. In the Australian system, the voices of industry dominate over those of educationalists (Smith 2010). Little attention is therefore paid to pedagogical issues; an assumption is that a good industry practitioner will be able to “transmit” knowledge and skills to learners without any teaching expertise.

None of these factors, of course, prevent individual teachers from gaining higher-level qualifications, nor do they prevent training providers from demanding that their teachers undertake higher-level qualifications. With encouragement from their employer and a supportive stance from their trade union, teachers can choose to study further. Hence the box on the right-hand side of Fig. 1 assumes extra importance when examining the *actual* take-up of higher-level qualifications.

Engagement with professional development is affected by the same issues as contextual factors, and there are also other, more direct influences on engagement. Figure 2, adapted from a model by Smith (2000), indicates a range of factors – some personal and some related to the teaching context – and is updated to the current



**Fig. 2** Contextual factors affecting engagement in professional development by VET teachers. (Adapted from Smith (2000))

VET professional development context in Australia. In this Figure, the level and nature of teachers’ prior qualifications is one factor that affects engagement in professional development.

### **Research Evidence on Whether Teacher Qualifications Affect the Quality of VET Teaching and VET Teachers’ Engagement with Professional Development**

Evidence is now presented from a national research project undertaken between 2015 and 2017, led by the author. The project was funded by the Australian Research Council (LP1401000440) and a number of partnering organizations from the VET sector. It was entitled “Would more highly-qualified teachers and trainers help to address quality problems in the Australian vocational education and training system?” and set out to answer the following questions.

1. What differences do VET teachers’ levels of qualification (both pedagogical and discipline-based) make to their teaching concepts, approaches, and practice?

2. How do levels of qualification affect VET teachers' engagement in further professional development activities?
3. In what ways do more highly qualified VET teachers contribute to improved quality in VET?

The project involved participating training providers and individual VET teachers from every State and Territory in Australia. The method involved initial interviews and focus groups of stakeholders, teachers, and students, two major teacher surveys, and two sets of case studies in public and private training providers, as well as a three-stage validation process with two sets of respondents. The phases and the numbers of participants are shown in Table 2.

As higher-level qualifications in VET pedagogy are still available, and as there is a legacy population of previously well-qualified teachers, a comparison between teachers of different qualification levels was possible. The key findings of the project were based on the qualitative and quantitative data and 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 improve teaching approaches, confidence, and ability to address diversity in contexts, learners, and qualification level of teaching.
3. Higher-level qualifications in VET pedagogy make a significant difference to VET teachers' confidence in teaching a diversity of learners.
4. The key qualification level that makes a difference is a degree.

**Table 2** Research method for national project on VET teacher qualifications and quality 2015–2017

Phase	Activity	Number of research participants
1.	Stakeholder interviews	11
2.	11 focus groups of teacher/trainers and students	Teachers: 29 Students: 40
3.	National Teacher/Trainer Survey administered through 8 TAFE and 48 non-TAFE RTOs	574
4.	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
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.	Delphi process – three stage on-line survey	55
Total		1255

*RTO* registered training organization (public or private training provider)



5. Participation in both formal and informal PD, in both industry/discipline and VET teaching/training, increases with higher qualifications, irrespective of the type of qualification.
6. VET teaching/training PD needs to be tailored for teachers with higher levels of VET pedagogy qualifications.

In the final three-stage Delphi process (Phase 7), the findings were validated by the respondents who were (in Stream 1) policy-makers or other influencers in the VET sector or (Stream 2) chief executive officers or senior managers of TAFE colleges or major non-TAFE providers representing all categories of private providers.

The findings about the effects of higher-level qualifications on teaching approaches, addressing student diversity, and overall contribution to the employing training provider were very clear in qualitative and quantitative phases alike. While any type of higher-level qualification was helpful, VET pedagogy qualifications had specific utility in matters such as dealing with diverse teaching contexts and student groups. The Diploma of VET qualification made a difference; but the significant difference was at degree level.

Husband (Husband 2015), in the UK, found that teachers with shorter pedagogical qualifications report more need for professional development. Yet the Australian project showed that engagement in professional development was more common among more highly qualified teachers. They reported some dissatisfaction with the type of PD available from specialist commercial VET PD providers. It was disappointing to see all respondents report that the PD they undertook at external providers was most likely to be based around compliance with the VET sector audit regime rather than on pedagogical development. Teachers reported that in-house PD was also focused on compliance with the audit regime; and staff development personnel within training providers reported that the addition of PD requirements to the provider standards merely added another layer of compliance focus to the PD they could provide.

The Delphi phase respondents reported, with a very few exceptions, that the findings of the project rang true and advocated the mandating of the Diploma of VET as a minimum pedagogical qualification for all full-time VET teachers. 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 or into more strategic and rigorous professional development provision.

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## Implications for the Nature of VET Professionalism

A model of professionalism in VET teachers in Australia is now proposed (Table 3). It is based on consideration of the changes in the qualification regime and professional development provision since the turn of the twenty-first century and on the findings of the research project reported in the previous section.

**Table 3** Characteristics of different levels of professionalism in full-time VET teachers, based on research evidence

	Qualifications in VET teaching	Qualifications in discipline area	Professional development
Highly professional	The highest available VET teacher-training qualification (Degree or Graduate Diploma)	The highest available qualification of relevance to the discipline area	Engages in frequent professional development (PD), whether funded or not, and often in own time. Identifies and seeks out PD. Provides PD to others
Moderately professional	Diploma of VET	One level higher qualification than that taught to students	Engages in PD as often as possible when brought to attention; makes occasional own-expense and own-time contributions
Not professional	Certificate IV in Training and Assessment	The qualification level that is taught to students	Only attends PD where it is funded and in working time; may even avoid PD unless necessary

(i) The Australian context is used for this table, with regard to qualification level

(ii) Research evidence is taken from the research project discussed above, which is available at <http://federation.edu.au/research-vet-quality>

The research evidence is crucial in the development of this model. In the research, groups of teachers were interviewed who displayed markedly different approaches to qualifications and to professional development. This enabled clear distinctions to be made among different groups of teachers which in some instances were related to differing discipline areas and in some instances were not. The role of managers in colleges, and also of department heads in larger providers, was also very important, but in the end, the key differentiator appeared to be the attitude of the individual teacher. For instance, some undertook a Diploma of VET only because it entailed a rise (and were “surprised that [they] actually learned something,” in the words of one carpentry teacher). Some attended professional development only because of the new regulatory requirements in VET or because of the regulatory requirements of their industry area; some reported learning from professional development, and others were negative in their evaluation of events. Some sought out professional development; others only attended when they were urged to do so. Yet as Husband (2014) points out, more professional development is actually needed for teachers with less rigorous pedagogical qualifications.

## Conclusion and Implications

The discussion in this chapter leads to a conclusion that the VET teaching workforce in Australia has become increasingly de-professionalized. In terms of the literature on professionalism, the occupation lacks a “high level” of education and training; there is no acknowledged body of knowledge (Professions Australia 2006) for the

occupation; and, except for content in some university-level VET teaching qualifications, there is no discussion of ethical practice or the interests of others in the occupational qualifications. Professional development is mandated, but not by a professional body; it is now primarily a compliance requirement. In this context, while individual professionalism is possible, it is unlikely; Table 3 might be expected to show a heavy weighting toward the bottom right-hand corner.

It seems likely that the documented deterioration of quality in the VET system is at least partly due to the decline in the proportion of degree-qualified staff. In interviews undertaken in the case studies in TAFE institutes in the 2015–2017 research project, some managers reported that, on average, teachers were becoming less and less capable of developing assessment tasks for their students or of developing teaching programs. The managers needed to hire consultants to perform these tasks. Some also said that teachers could not understand basic principles of quality teaching; they saw quality as merely a compliance issue. Some private providers felt the need to provide all teaching and assessment materials to their teachers, even prescribing particular PowerPoint presentations which could not be changed. Managers were also finding it increasingly difficult to find candidates for promotion positions. In TAFE institutes, some managers said that many teachers were unable to contribute to working parties or to debates about appropriate teaching and assessment practices. While the project did not investigate how teachers approached the ethical dilemmas of, for example, inappropriate enrollment of students into qualifications, it is not unreasonable to imagine that without a high level of education, teachers would not be equipped to recognize or address such matters either.

The logical recommendation that can be drawn from the arguments in this chapter is that in Australia the teaching qualification, at least for full-time VET teachers, should be raised from a Certificate IV level to a VET Diploma level or preferably returned to the pre-1998 level of a university degree or graduate diploma. However, when this possibility is mooted, arguments about the cost to training providers (since it is assumed that teachers would refuse to pay for their own studies) or a perceived barrier to entry to the occupation (Productivity Commission 2011) are raised, regardless of the fact that these barriers did not seem insuperable before 1998. However, the cost of *not* qualifying the VET workforce, both to training providers and to the system as a whole, has been shown in this chapter to be great. In early childhood education, it was argued that the need for higher qualifications for teachers would make childcare unaffordable (Margetts 2014), yet the government proceeded to mandate them. Similarly, qualifications for school teachers have become longer and more rigorous; there would be no thought of reducing them below degree level. It would perhaps not be unreasonable to think that national and state governments think that VET does not matter very much compared with other sectors of education.

The matrix of professionalism in the VET workforce developed in this chapter may help VET teachers to locate their attitude toward their expertise as teachers, compared with others. It may also assist training providers in encouraging reluctant members of their workforce to take more responsibility for professional development. However, in the absence of a professional body, leadership is required at national and State levels.

Concern with the quality and qualifications of VET teachers is by no means confined to Australia; for example, recent initiatives have taken place in countries and regions as diverse as the UK (UK Commission for Employment and Skills 2010), Finland (Volmari Helakorpi and Frimodt 2009), and Southeast Asia (Paryono 2015). In England, for example, there are VET teacher training programs offered at different levels by the VET sector and by universities (Simmons and Walker 2013), as in Australia. For other countries there are clear lessons to be learned. If VET teachers are already qualified to a high level, there should be no countenancing any attempt to reduce the levels of qualification, no matter how powerful the lobbies that argue for such a reduction. If VET teachers are not already well qualified, the findings from the research project provided here make a powerful argument for considering increases to qualification levels. Since vocational education and training underpins nations' economies and provides the only available means of education for many people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, it needs to be delivered by highly expert teachers.

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