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Facing the Dilemma of the Out-of-Field Teaching Phenomenon in Vocational Education and Training (VET)

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Abstract

In a rapidly changing workforce environment with skill shortages and a need for different pathways to training and education, vocational education and training (VET) has a significant influence on building stability in the workforce. The purpose of this paper is to develop an understanding of the causes, implications, and consequences of the out-of-field teaching phenomenon for VET. This phenomenological study examines VET teachers' lived experiences and professional identity as an approach for studying out-of-field teaching in VET. The findings highlight the complex nature of out-of-field teaching in the economic culture of VET, with unique dilemmas. VET teachers experience conflicting and dilemmatic situations regarding occupational professionalism when they are expected to teach outside of their expertise while they are held responsible for students' safe learning environments, outcomes, and satisfaction. The study revealed aspects of harmonious and tensioned relationships between these elements of the work and teachers' identities. In conclusion, evidence-informed strategies are shared to support teachers' capacity building and approaches to address concerns of the out-of-field phenomenon and the influence it has on quality teaching in VET.

Keywords Vocational education and training · Out-of-field teaching · Teacher effectiveness · Pedagogical content knowledge · Teacher identity · Dilemmas

Introduction

The vocational education and training (VET) sector is seen as crucial for the Australian economy, both for the development of the national workforce and as a major export industry (Productivity Commission, 2011). VET is the largest education and

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training sector in Australia (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016). During 2019, 4.2 million students enrolled in VET; this number represents a quarter of the population aged 15 to 64 years in Australia, demonstrating the impact that quality VET and deep knowledge guidance through VET can have on a population (Parliament of Australia: Department of Parliamentary Services, 2021).

Compared to teachers in general education programmes, teachers in VET require dual layers of skills and experience. Assigning VET teachers to out-of-field teaching positions is a current concerning phenomenon, entailing teachers assigned to teach subjects, subject fields, and/or specific year/age levels for which they have inadequate training, qualifications, and/or expertise (Du Plessis, 2015). VET teachers need to have not only theoretical and practical knowledge and relevant experience of the broad package of vocational skills and competencies required for the profession they teach, but also knowledge of pedagogical approaches and experience in effective and innovative teaching for what are increasingly referred to as 21st-century or wider skills (Andersson & Köpsén, 2018; OECD, 2010, 2014).

New forms of formal and informal work and organisational change experienced in different societies globally can be seen to be reshaping workplace requirements and potentially making new demands on VET (Virolainen et al., 2021). Entrepreneurial cultures now permeate Australian vocational education institutions, moving away from the traditional approach of regulated VET provision through public (state) providers, towards more competitive provision through what is termed the neoliberalised and globalised institutions ready to meet student/consumer demands at any cost (Hodge et al., 2018; Nakar et al., 2018; Nakar & Olssen, 2021). Vocational teachers have faced pressures to respond to new needs in society and to cope with constant change in order to maintain economically viable working careers (Nakar, 2019). On the one hand, contemporary VET teachers are increasingly subject to managerial regulation and external accountability, are less autonomous and self-regulating, less involved with educational decision-making, and less well paid and satisfied; on the other hand, the exponents of economic rationalism call for VET teachers to attend to a traditional purpose of vocational preparation, developing new knowledge and skills to address industry skills shortages. The subsequent overcrowded classrooms, higher teacher workloads, isolation, and lack of available funds for teacher development at jurisdictional and provider levels have led to shortage of VET teachers (Guthrie & Jones, 2018; National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER], 2021; OECD, 2021; Smith, 2019). Workforce shortages have continued, made worse by retirements from the ageing VET workforce and by the need to expand training to cater for new and emerging industries (Tyler & Dymock, 2021). This has led to additional organisational pressures on continuing VET teachers to attempt to take on teaching out of field. As a consequence, teachers need to undertake out-of-field teaching tasks and to develop their knowledge on instructional activities—aspects which in themselves could pose a challenge to the teacher's professional identity.

Since 2019, vocational teacher education has undergone several development phases to adapt to changing economic and societal requirements and trends (NCVER, 2021). However, out-of-field teaching practices have implications for teacher job satisfaction, workload, perceptions of self-efficacy, and well-being (Du Plessis & McDonagh, 2021). Teachers who are inexperienced and/or who lack the support of

their leaders and colleagues while assigned to complex out-of-field teaching positions can find themselves in difficult situations requiring ethical decision-making. This paper identifies the dilemmas faced by VET teachers in teaching out-of-field subjects and stimulates awareness of the out-of-field teaching phenomenon on teacher well-being, their identity and teaching quality due to misassignment of teachers and the implications of students' preparedness to enter the workforce.

Out-of-field teaching is a very common phenomenon in education systems around the world, posing a challenge for teachers, teacher educators, and politicians (Hobbs and Quinn, 2020; Özel, 2022). While there is research exploring schoolteachers and leaders' experiences of the implications and challenges of out-of-field teaching inherent in their work (Du Plessis, 2014, 2019a, b), this aspect has been underresearched in the VET sector. The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the dilemmas faced by VET teachers when they are assigned to out-of-field positions and the implications of the phenomenon for effective delivery of content in their diverse classrooms.

The paper is structured to firstly provide background to the out-of-field teaching phenomenon and the implications it has for employability, workforce-prepared students, and the development of a well-skilled workforce. Secondly, a brief VET background is offered. Attention then turns to the context of contemporary VET and out-of-field teaching from recent research. The study's theoretical framework is shared followed by the findings, discussion of the results, and concluding remarks. Finally, we offer suggestions for future research.

Out-of-Field Teaching

Quality teaching influences performance and skill development and the professional status of VET teachers (Misko et al., 2021; Tucker, 2012). Du Plessis (2015) conceptualised out-of-field teaching practices as qualified teachers—indeed, often highly qualified—who are assigned to teach in positions for which they do not have suitable qualifications and/or expertise. These teaching positions might include specific subject areas and/or year levels. Out-of-field teaching practices influence the quality of teaching across all VET subject fields or areas. This paper is concerned with quality workforce preparation and the implications of out-of-field VET teaching for preparing and developing a well-prepared and highly skilled workforce. Darling-Hammond (2010) emphasised teachers' impact on student achievement, underlining their role in specialised skill and capacity development in specific subject areas. Teachers have full educational responsibility for the spectrum of students' learning (Tomlinson, 2017) and are therefore seen as responsible for ensuring their students have the appropriate knowledge and skills for the globalised workforce landscape (Brown et al., 2008). Yet research about the out-of-field teaching phenomenon (Du Plessis, 2014, 2019a) has shown that teachers in out-of-field positions lack in-depth content knowledge, restricting deeper learning discussions with students.

Caldis and Kleeman (2019) noted the additional challenges that out-of-field teachers experience in maintaining sustainable quality when teaching in unfamiliar subject areas. The authors argued that quality teaching in VET forms the foundation for problem-solving and higher order reasoning skills, linking to content and context. Out-of-field teachers admit that they often rely on textbook teaching and shy away

from in-depth subject area discussion of questions from students, hampering deep learning (Du Plessis, 2014). Specialised subjects require development of specific technical skills in a focused area. This requires more than textbook reading or teaching instructional strategies and techniques: it demands an embedded, shared expertise and experience. It is equally clear through research that the effectiveness and quality of teaching are influenced by teachers' attitudes, feelings, and dispositions (Yoo & Carter, 2017).

Teachers are significantly implicated in students' lived experiences during learning because of links drawn between students' lifeworld, beliefs, and self-perception, and the value the content has for them in their context. An investigation by De Boer et al. (2010) highlighted that 63% of sampled teachers did not feel confident teaching and engaging with student cohorts with diverse learning needs. Furthermore, teachers in out-of-field teaching positions feel uncertain about their capacity to guide students to high-impact learning (Du Plessis, 2019a, b). Low-performing students especially fared even worse when educated by out-of-field teachers. Research is showing the need for action to address this issue in countries such as Australia, Ireland, England, Germany, Indonesia, and the United States (Price et al., 2019).

The extended field of influence that VET has across industries is noteworthy. It is concerning, however, that most VET subject areas in Australia are in major need of skilled employees. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) offered information about the two industries with the highest increase in job vacancies from February 2021 to May 2022; namely, (a) food services, with a vacancy growth from 27.6 to 51.9%, and (b) healthcare and social assistance, with a vacancy growth from 39.1 to 68.9%. Results of the Australian Industry Group's (2023) skills survey demonstrated that 36% of businesses are affected by specific skilled staff shortages, and 74% of businesses are affected by low literacy and numeracy skills of their employees. These figures further reinforce that we cannot afford to have unsupported out-of-field teachers in our VET classrooms.

Furthermore, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021) claimed that turnover in the café, restaurant, and catering sector exceeded \$30.5 billion during January 2021, with an annual increase of 10.6%. In addition, the Australian Industry and Skill Committee (2022) noted employment needs in the field of hospitality, where employment levels increased by 38% in 2021 to 795,200 with a projected further increase to 846,400 by 2025. The need for a skilled workforce in VET reaches further: into specialised industries such as the fashion industry that added \$27.2 billion Australian dollars to the economy during 2021 (Sams, 2021), the hospitality and tourism industry with the potential to generate \$94 billion Australian dollars per year, and huge expected dependency on the food industry (Australian Government: National Skills Commission, 2021).

We argue here that specialist subject areas have a close alignment to skilled workforce needs in the industry, and turn attention to students' learning and teachers' influence on the preparation of a skilled workforce, the role of applied knowledge and skills (Van Driel & Berry, 2012), and the impact of out-of-field teaching practices on VET as a specialist area. This alignment of quality preparation towards a skilled workforce to address industry stress turns attention to teachers and relevant content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge as

knowledge sets that support quality teaching and learning (Kleickmann et al., 2013; Porsch & Whannell, 2019; Shulman, 1987). Shulman (1987) and Porsch and Whannell (2019) highlighted how teachers' knowledge influences subject matter and teaching practices. Quality teaching aligns with skill expertise and experience and informs pedagogical reasoning.

The long-term, multilayered implications of the absence of these measures on skill development and the effective preparation of a quality workforce for the future is alarming. Towers et al. (2022) claimed that “whatever subject they [teachers] teach, those who are more experienced tend to be better placed to cope” (p. 8) with change; in this research, the ongoing changes are in the VET space. This study is entrenched in the pressing need to understand the implications of out-of-field teaching practices for VET teachers and students who engage in programs to improve their employability and vocational preparedness. Specialised and well-developed skills influence employability and preparedness for various workplaces, contexts, and settings.

Larter (2023) suggested that 27% of current jobs will cease to exist by 2030, while 49% of jobs will be reformed. Larter further claimed that, by 2030, 22% of the Australian workforce will be assigned to a job that does not currently exist. The quality of adjustment or redevelopment of curricula to address the reskilling of the workforce leans heavily on sound knowledge, experience, and expertise in a specific discipline field. Attention thus turns to highly skilled trainers, developers, and teachers when skill development is involved, especially in the rapidly changing job and technology space to address the gap between skills development and needs within specific industries. We argue that stability within a rapidly changing workforce environment will be directed by the quality and depth of content and pedagogical content offered during training and education.

The VET Context

Education underpins Australia's social, economic, and environmental sustainability. The VET sector is a partnership obligation of the Australian state and territory governments. VET is provided through a network of eight state and territory governments and the federal Australian government, along with industry, technical and further education (TAFE) institutes, and private registered training organisations (RTOs). In addition, some universities and schools provide VET (NCVER, 2018). VET institutions teach a wider range of students than either schools or the higher education sector, and do so in a wider range of contexts, modes (on or off campus, or both), and sites (different types of workplaces, prisons, a range of community settings such as neighbourhood houses and refugee support centres), ensuring the presence of knowledge and skills that can be used in the workplace (Guthrie & Jones, 2018; Wheelahan & Curtin, 2010). The VET workforce also contributes to social inclusion and civic participation (Productivity Commission, 2011).

In Australia, VET is governed by a nationally coordinated training system—the Australian National Training Authority—that promotes quality assurance and provides national consistency in terms of qualifications and the delivery of training (NCVER, 2021). Furthermore, stakeholders such as the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development and the Intergovernmental Agreement on Fed-

eral Financial Relations conceptualised the objectives, outcomes and performance measures, and the roles and responsibilities to deliver services to improve skills and workforce development.

Within the profession of trainers/teachers and assessors, there are vocational education and training practitioners, TAFE teaching professionals, enterprise trainers and assessors, industry experts, and other VET professionals (Productivity Commission, 2011). For simplicity, the term “trainer/teacher” is used throughout this paper and is intended to encompass the following: those identified as teachers, trainers, lecturers, tutors, assessors, workplace assessors and/or trainers, VET workplace consultants, and workers who directly engage with students in the development, delivery, and assessment of VET (Billett et al., 2015; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011). As argued by the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (2010) and Andersson and Köpsén (2015), these trainers are dual professionals and diverse, as they are from different backgrounds, possess a variety of skills, and bring prior experiences to the VET sector; furthermore, the career paths they are on are typically much more varied than is the case in the school or university sectors.

The topic of professionalisation in the vocational and further education sector has been much discussed (Clayton & Guthrie, 2013; Smith & Yasukawa, 2017; Smith et al., 2015; Tyler & Dymock, 2017; Wheelahan & Curtin, 2010). It is suggested that the development of formal qualifications can provide the credentials necessary for the professionalisation of teaching (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008) and can improve teaching practice. The qualification requirement for VET teachers, trainers, and assessors is a Certificate IV Training Assessment and Education. However, teacher preparedness with such initial training, and its impact on the quality of teaching and learning in the sector, have been contested amongst vocational educators, government, industry, and other stakeholders for over five decades (Billett et al., 2015; Clayton & Guthrie, 2013; Nakar, 2013; Rasmussen, 2016; Smith, 2019; Smith & Yasukawa, 2017; Tuck & Smith, 2017; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011). Moreover, there is additional accountability on VET teachers as dual professionals needing to keep up with changes in industry, the economy, and society, while developing their teaching skills to deal with increasingly complex learner groups and teaching environments (Andersson & Köpsén, 2015). To be an ideal VET teacher, a teacher will have to demonstrate strong content knowledge based on recent and relevant industry qualifications and experience, pedagogical skills suited to both the content being taught and the secondary-aged cohort to whom it is being delivered, and the capacity to engage and nurture their students (The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2021).

A challenge for VET teachers is ensuring their currency of skills in both educational expertise and industry practices. Literature consistently shows that impactful professional development for VET teachers includes developing dual competencies, incorporating work-based learning, setting requirements for quality assurance, and ensuring teachers’ rights to participate in professional development (Mičiulienė, 2019; Tyler & Dymock, 2017). Billett (2011) and Broad (2016) have argued that workplace knowledge is embedded in routines and artifacts; it is tacit, procedural, technical, context-dependent, situated, and tactile. Impactful professional development builds on teachers’ prior knowledge, providing them with opportunities to prac-

tise and apply new ideas in their own classrooms (OECD, 2021). However, research on the professional development of casual staff (Wheelehan and Curtin, 2010) and on ethical dilemmas faced by VET teachers (Nakar, 2017) has found that casual staff do not get the same access to professional development as permanent staff. This is significant considering that approximately 65% of trainers or teachers and assessors in TAFE were employed on a casual or sessional basis, with the majority working part-time hours (Productivity Commission, 2011). There is resultant high turnover of staff in VET. Significant shortages of VET teachers also relate to the limited attractiveness of the role, poor reputation (Harris, 2015; Smith, 2019), the capability of teachers (Harris, 2015; Smith, 2019), the nature of employment of teachers (full-time or casual), competency-based training (Hodge & Guthrie, 2019), the complex nature of training packages (Joyce, 2019), difficulties attracting industry professionals into teaching roles (Productivity Commission, 2011), and reduced salaries and lack of career support (OECD, 2021).

A study conducted by the NCVER (2021) found that the shortage of VET teachers and trainers extends to virtually every industry. If these shortages are not overcome, the result will be an inadequately trained vocational workforce. This in turn will have an impact on the country's skill levels and productivity (Tyler & Dymock, 2021). Nakar (2019), Nakar and Olssen (2021), and Hellwig (2006) have emphasised the need to address the pending shortage of VET staff and the importance of focusing more on professional development of the VET teaching workforce.

Shifting Context of Contemporary VET and Out-of-Field Teaching

In Australia in recent decades, VET has been subject to a range of major policy reforms in response to globalised pressures to become more effective, efficient, and competitive in responding to consumer demand. For example, in situations when work parameters are decided by factors such as student quotas, criteria for evaluation, discipline procedures, and layoffs, attitudes are shifting away from providing quality education towards pleasing the customer at any cost. Those changes in work culture have been noted as raising significant ethical challenges for teachers in the sector. Nakar et al. (2018), Nakar (2017), Guthrie and Every (2013), and Chappell et al. (2003) have argued that the spectrum of teachers' work in VET continues to increase, and there appears to be a continued need for VET teachers to accommodate change. This paper discusses one such challenge due to rapid changes: the expectation of teachers to teach outside their expertise area, including teaching out-of-field, across borders, and in transnational education (where RTOs from one country educate those of another by setting up off-shore campuses). In agreement with Hobbs's (2020) claim that the out-of-field phenomenon increases because of systemic teacher shortages, unequal distribution of teachers, scheduling issues, and the pressure on teachers to teach subjects outside their trained specialist areas, we turn our focus to the implications of this phenomenon for VET. Within such constraints the question then becomes, what is a person "capable" and "willing" to teach, rather than what is a teacher certified/approved to teach.

A recent study exploring the moral dilemmas faced by VET teachers in the context of contemporary cultural changes to their work context (Nakar, 2017) highlighted

out-of-field teaching as one of the dilemmas created for VET teachers due to rapid change in the sector's organisational culture. Wagner (1984) defined dilemmas as cognitive knots and conflicts, resulting from the gaps between what had to be done and what was done in reality. In the context of this study, a VET teacher's "dilemma" is understood to be created by the tensions between serving students' needs and outcomes whilst adhering to organisational expectations and acting in their own professional interests and personal well-being. The dilemma faced in teaching subjects outside teachers' expertise was whether to agree to teach those subjects or to refuse and risk losing paid teaching hours. Each participant in this study has been exposed to and experienced the demand for out-of-field teaching and has reacted along a continuum of responses and decision-making based on their personal situation: from outright resistance, to developing radically new ways of viewing their redefined role as a VET practitioner. Such interplay between professional and personal dilemmas faced by teachers in out-of-field teaching, as well as its implications for their personal life, for the students, for VET institutions, and also for industry outcomes, is highlighted in this paper.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This project was drawn from larger studies that aimed to investigate the ethical dilemmas faced by VET teachers in decision-making in their teaching practices. It was directed towards identifying and articulating those dilemmas through the participants' lived experience and understanding of them, what they perceived to be the contextual drivers, and the actions that they were taking in response to their experience of the dilemmas. Data were obtained by in-depth, focused, conversational interviews with 18 VET teacher participants from private RTOs and TAFE institutions. The data were analysed by adopting an inductive approach (J. Smith & Osborn, 2003), seeking to identify key themes in teachers' experience (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The original aim of the study was to understand more about how VET teachers' experience informed their teaching and decision-making. Out-of-field teaching was soon identified as the most significant constraint they faced. The identified dilemma of out-of-field teaching for VET teachers was responding in an accommodating manner to increased expectations of teaching outside their expertise and to the subsequent misassignment in their training practice. This paper will draw attention to such teacher dilemmas linked to decision-making related to out-of-field teaching in a rapidly changing organisational culture and to the implications of such decisions on teaching experiences and teacher professional identity, including the wider implications of out-of-field teaching practices on VET industry and student outcomes.

The theoretical framework for this study is VET teachers' dual professional identity which, according to Dickie et al. (2004), Köpsén (2014), and Choy and Hodge (2017), requires that VET teachers have both pedagogical and industry knowledge to prepare young people and adults for the labour market. VET teachers need dual competences (Bathmaker, 2013; Billett, 2001; Fenwick, 2006); Hiim, (2020) described vocational competence as being part of the symmetric perception of theory and practice which is, moreover, developed as knowing in practice (Billett, 2001). On the

one hand, they need to have theoretical and practical knowledge of the subjects they teach, and to regularly update this expertise in response to changes in technology and working practices. They are often also required to have relevant work experience. On the other hand, they need to have pedagogical skills to effectively share their knowledge and experience with a diverse group of students. This oscillation between theoretical and practical activities is described as crucial for learning vocational competence (OECD, 2021). Thus, the requisite skills and knowledge for a VET practitioner are considered to equate to two careers; they are also considered to be unique to a single occupation (Sarastuen, 2020). For VET teachers who are industry experts and have limited experience of teaching, out-of-field teaching can be a major issue as it can affect their teaching experience and their professional identity as they transition from employment to teaching. Not only can out-of-field teaching affect teacher well-being and lead to attrition, but it can also affect student learning outcomes. For teachers needing to demonstrate vocational competence, teaching out-of-field increases their workload, leading to more teachers leaving the profession. Expectations for out-of-field teachers to perform at the same level as their specialist colleagues, or to achieve the same results for their students, leave out-of-field teachers, often already lacking much-needed support, negatively impacted in their teaching confidence and professional expectations.

Current global concerns about the reputation and quality in VET puts an additional focus on the quality of teaching in VET (Billett et al., 2020), often overlooking expectations and needs of teachers from their workplace. Such out-of-field positions impact teacher preparedness for the workplace, hampering the development of their professional identities and affecting their perceptions about the teaching profession. Ingersoll (1999) captured this misassignment issue succinctly with an analogy, observing that assigning a teacher to teach out-of-field is equivalent to requiring “cardiologists to deliver babies, real estate lawyers to defend criminal cases, chemical engineers to design bridges, or sociology professors to teach English” (p. 34). A doctor licensed in cardiology but practising obstetrics is not an unqualified doctor, but one unqualified to deliver babies. Similarly, a teacher certified to teach in a specialised area but teaching another is not an unqualified teacher, but is unqualified to teach another subject. Teachers asked to teach out-of-field often lack content knowledge and are less effective in that situation, even if they are brilliant communicators and experts in their specialised area.

An additional complexity may arise when a teacher’s successful pedagogical practices enacted in their specialist discipline does not work or proves non-transferable to an out-of-field discipline. The prevalence of the out-of-field phenomenon relates to teacher quality, professional development opportunities, content and pedagogical content knowledge, and the effective imparting of employability skills. It is furthermore important for VET teachers teaching outside their area of expertise to have access to opportunities for professional development to ensure they keep their knowledge and skills up to date. There is an obligation for RTOs to ensure that their VET practitioners meet the requirements for teachers and assessors, as outlined in the Standards for Registered Training Organisations 2015 (Australian Skills Quality Authority [ASQA], 2016). Clause 1.16 of these standards stipulates a requirement that “trainers and assessors undertake professional development in the fields of the

knowledge and practice of vocational training, learning and assessment including competency-based training and assessment”. RTOs must also demonstrate to ASQA that their teachers have “current knowledge and skills in vocational training and learning that informs their training and assessment” (ASQA, 2019, p. 61).

Pedagogical competences of VET teachers and their development increasingly attract the attention of researchers and policymakers as highly important factors in the quality and accessibility of VET and its acceptance in society (Bagnall & Hodge, 2017; Billett, 2016; Cedefop, 2017; Day, 2017, Sartori et al., 2015). In light of the importance of occupation-specific skills for their students’ working lives, VET teachers need to be able to apply their professional competences and personal capabilities and values in the training process, and this is what makes a real difference to students (Tacconi & Gomez, 2013). Furthermore, Fejes and Köpsén (2014) suggested that identity negotiation occurs for vocational teachers as they develop their identity as a teacher by crossing the boundaries between prior occupations, teacher training, and their current occupation as a teacher. Assigning VET teachers to out-of-field teaching positions is dependent on re-training, peer coaching support, and up-skilling, as expected by RTOs and ASQA. In addition, researchers have emphasised the situational character of identity and that identity cannot be treated like a static entity without considering physical, social, institutional, and affective contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Bosse & Törner, 2015). This paper highlights that teaching out of field in VET is a different context from teaching in field, and that transferability of skills from one context to the other might have implications on many different levels. Such causes and implications are brought together in this paper to gain a holistic view of out-of-field teaching in VET.

Out-of-field teaching in VET is a relatively unexplored research field. There has been only limited empirical research on the relationships between vocational teachers’ work and dual professional identity, hence this theoretical framework was considered most suited to this study. The requirements derived from the changes in the contemporary cultural context in VET, consequently, had an impact on the participants, who had to find the means to respond to the changes and new challenges of the teaching profession. The notion of response here was thus taken as the way in which the participants came to think and how they responded in practice, increasingly associated with how they made sense of, or decided to act in, those circumstances which were often shaped by their experiences.

Findings

The 19 teacher participants reported that it had become a common expectation in both private and TAFE RTOs that they teach subjects outside their area of expertise. They reported finding themselves in conflicted situations: whether to agree to teach those subjects or to refuse to do so, risking loss of paid teaching hours; whether, against their professional judgement, to pass students whom they felt were not competent due to lack of knowledge. The findings are presented in two sections based on participants’ comments about out-of-field teaching in VET: the first focuses on reasons highlighted by participants for teaching out-of-field in VET; the second focuses

on the concerns of the teacher participants about the consequences of out-of-field teaching on various stakeholders.

Teachers' Reported Reasons for Out-of-Field Teaching

The teachers identified two key reasons for out-of-field teaching in VET: VET teacher turnover and shortages, and budget constraints and employment of casual staff. Each will be considered in turn.

VET Teacher Turnover and Shortages. According to some participants (all are given pseudonyms in reporting), high staff turnover and the shortage of teachers in VET led to a demand on existing teachers to take subjects outside their area of expertise until replacements could be found. Renee, for example, pointed out that although it might seem obvious that teachers should be asked to teach only what they know, large numbers of teachers were routinely assigned to teach outside their area of expertise and *field of license*. She narrated an incident where a colleague in such a situation was unprepared to teach the subject, and was then reported to have given false information to the students:

She [colleague] is a qualified teacher but has not taught for years. And really, she is floundering a lot and she brings in guest speakers a lot to cover the knowledge she doesn't have. (Renee)

Responses from Natalie, Ruby, and Daniel emphasised that certain courses were removed from the demand list by the immigration department, which resulted in a cessation of enrolments and hence closure of such courses. Often in such cases, staff members were reallocated to other courses beyond the scope of their expertise. As expressed by one participant:

A TAFE English teacher was asked to do a Psychology course and she was stuck as she had no idea of the content and the ability to deliver that course. She obviously could not teach so the entire batch [of students] suffered. (Shelley)

Some participants commented that it is not always possible to have the right mix of teachers to cover the full spectrum of classes needed, especially during holidays. It was thus tolerated by some as part of the professional lives of teachers. One participant explained her situation of being required to take three classes at one time, as the other two teachers had gone on holidays:

Management have to fill it [the class] with bodies and they are ready to give them [students] any- body [pointing to body] to teach. (Scott)

Budget Constraints and Employment of Casual Staff. The participants reported their RTOs as further constraining their responsiveness by replacing permanent teachers with casuals. They suggested that the structural adjustments undertaken by their RTOs assumed that educational reforms served to save funds by reducing their salary costs; as Scott pointed out, this resulted in *replacing continuing, full-time, more expensive teachers with part-time, casual teachers at a cheaper rate*. This view was reiterated by others:

A lot of the RTOs are marginal operations. So, they get rid of the teachers with more experience. So, they can pay other teachers less. (James)

Moreover, participants pointed out that casual staff may not have the necessary experience to teach and may not be informed of what is expected by industry, particularly if they had done a Certificate IV in Training to enter the VET workforce and had never worked long enough in industry. They expressed their concern as follows:

The other thing is loss of the experience and knowledge. So, you get all these new teachers coming along and trying to find their footing in the place. And it can be difficult. (Sandra)

We expect when people train others is they have that Cert. IV Training and Assessment, and content knowledge, of course, so that's interesting. (Karen)

So that is another ethical conflict that I have, that the people that are teaching the teacher aides, have not ever worked with teacher aides, haven't got the understanding coming from a teacher aide's point of view. (Renee)

While some teachers liked the approach of no interference, it was strongly opposed by most participants who believed in professional development and support. Teachers pointed out that management seldom took feedback from a class teacher or responded to teachers' needs for extra support if requested.

Management was not Worried About Staff: Teachers were Given the Responsibility of Handling Everything. (Danielle)

John reported that although the quality of teaching differed from class to class, it would never be questioned for out-of-field teachers as long as paperwork of lesson planning was submitted:

There is no quality control in terms of what actually happens. There is quality control in terms of the pieces of paper. So if you sit here and write out a beautiful lesson plan for me and tell me that you are going to do lot of beautiful things and I go and file that in an appropriate folder and never look at it and I never acknowledge that it's been written and then go the classroom and talk about a totally different subjects, and abuse the students and talk about all sorts of different things, the behaviour is almost irrelevant. (John)

Quality would Never be Questioned. (Danielle)

It's kind of like the quality depended totally on the teacher and it was kind of never looked at. (Claire)

Mark further reported that, in terminating tenure-based teachers, RTOs hired an increasing proportion of teaching staff at generally lower salaries than permanent staff, with the intention of indirectly reducing or eliminating programs such as teacher education and professional development:

If you employ a casual teacher, you are only gonna [going to] pay them the hours that they directly stand in front of the classroom. If you employ a casual teacher, there's no allowance for professional development or mentoring or anything like that. (Mark)

The participants further provided an example of how teachers are expected to fill the classroom, while the management of some VET institutes resorted to relaxed and flexible rules to retain students with teachers teaching outside of their expertise. The management would tell students that *it is a self-paced program*, which resulted in undermining student attitudes toward teachers. Jim reported his concerns about the use of assessment within systems of accountability as part of a global marketisation of education policy where *overall academic results of their RTO and their place in the competition played an important role in attracting students*.

Teachers' Concerns About the Consequences of Out-of-Field Teaching

The teachers identified two key consequences of out-of-field teaching in VET: student outcomes and impact on their prospects and industry; and teacher ethics and impact on teacher identity.

Student Outcomes and Impact on Their Prospects and Industry. All of the participants indicated that out-of-field placements presented obvious difficulties for both students and teachers when teachers are not suitably qualified to teach the subject. Natalie reported, *being a good teacher in one subject area did not necessarily mean that they can teach another subject outside their expertise equally well*, noting that they might not deliver their best in the absence of a thorough understanding of the subject.

Most of the participants reported their concern that the *purpose of education should be to allow students to be better informed about the content and be knowledgeable* when the students enter the workforce. However, by pushing teachers to take subjects beyond their expertise, students did not gain knowledge. The participants reported that attending the class of a teacher who is not competent in a subject inevitably limited what students learnt:

It is very much around producing pieces of paper; it is not about in any way encouraging students to be informed to question society or to generally learn. (John)

Generally, a teacher is given a class to teach a subject area, and no one concerns themselves about the appropriate delivery or content of the subject. Management is just concerned with student enrolments and student are impacted in the process. (Claire)

Moreover, in the absence of teacher capabilities in out-of-field subject areas to make judgements about whether students had met the competency standards as specified in the relevant training package, the participants reported the risk that qualifications were being awarded to learners who, strictly speaking, had not met all the required

standards. In the absence of proper understanding of the content by students, three participants were concerned that the students could not transfer core ideas, knowledge, and skills to challenging tasks in a variety of contexts. They pointed out that, without such knowledge and skills, the students were more likely to suffer in their employment. Gina, for example, reported her concern that *inability to perform can be a major disadvantage for students and that can have a big impact on the longer term of employment prospects.*

Sandra further described her concerns that an incompetent graduate who has been deemed competent could have a negative impact on employers and the workplace, or could seriously affect public safety, including through endangering individuals or the community. She expressed her concern that *[if] I am sick, I want to be treated by a nurse who is well-trained not by one of my students.*

Seven participants raised their concerns that students were investing both time and money into courses with the expectation of a particular financial and perhaps professional return, which in reality they were unlikely to achieve. Such a practice was seen as leading not only to disappointment for the students but also to financial hardship, both because of the debt they incurred and because they may require more training to meet their professional goals:

I think, if someone has not been in study for years and years, and they are coming back, you want to set them [up] for success, not for failure. Whatever our reason, we are setting these students up to fail. (Danielle)

Impact on Teacher Identity. Since casualisation of the workforce, VET teachers have become more vulnerable to market instability and have been forced to become more responsive and entrepreneurial in their practice, marketing themselves and their capability to be flexible in teaching out of field. For example, Ruby said, *there's very little room to make professional choices*; additionally, it was seen as paramount to *be a loyal member of the team* (Karen). The teacher participants expressed that teaching out of field presents a challenge for them because of the need for them to learn new content, which requires not only time and effort during their teaching requirements but also a profound knowledge of learning strategies.

All the participants reported that anxieties over job security created confrontations that reduced the pleasantness of the teaching experience. In these situations, the conflict faced by participants was how to maintain their integrity in such a volatile and insecure job market.

You don't want to rock the boat too much. It's just a sad indictment of the times, ultimately. (Daniel)

Teachers expressed that the situation impacted their professional identities, beliefs, and ultimately their knowledge of what and how to teach. Teachers felt overwhelmed as they must not only keep themselves abreast of the changes in industry in their specialised field to ensure that what they are passing on to their students is up to date and relevant, but when they teach out of field they also have to learn new content to be able to effectively pass on their theoretical and practical knowledge to their students.

Most of the participants discussed the fact that students can clearly find out that a teacher is not knowledgeable in the field, and that can be very difficult for teachers in class:

Because for students they have expectations. If you're not well equipped [knowledgeable], they could cut you to pieces, and that's, I mean they pay for it, they have all rights to do so. (Sandra)

The participants pointed out that sometimes out-of-field teaching also involved sending teachers overseas, with the assumption that teachers will be able to teach international students in their home countries as they have experience teaching in Australia. However, these participants pointed out that working in a different environment with different values gave them a cultural shock. They found their values in conflict with a cross-cultural context of academic standards, student services, professional relationships, and assessment irregularities:

Because there is virtually no ethics up there, I struggled in xxx [another country]. They [the students] don't turn up at all and they get 20%? So, I wasn't allowed to give them nil. But anyway, I think that really brought it to my attention, the other side of the coin as well, that [it] was a culture where that it was very acceptable. (Natalie)

I went to PNG a few weeks ago, just before Christmas, I was training their emergency team, and there were locals and Aussies there. And the locals [had] very poor levels of English again. They talk Pidgin. Different to when I've trained Diploma Level Business Management. Much different. That's sometimes what we have got to do. (Drake)

The teachers in this study expressed that whilst adhering to the demands of the institutions to teach out of field was seen as paramount to “be a loyal member of the team”, working in such an environment made it difficult for teachers to develop or maintain a positive sense of professionalism.

You Really felt de-professionalised. (Ruby)

Teacher participants expressed concern about having no spare moment to become enthusiastic about their subject area; their disappointment with the government's failure to check the quality in the form of audits; management's unethical practices; and having no way to avoid complying with unwelcome changes and the pressure to meet the demands placed upon them. In such situations, they made decisions based on their personal circumstances. A few admitted to studying the previous night to prepare for the next day's class, as they were requested to deliver subjects they were not trained to teach.

I need this job and I am happy to cut some corners and teach out of field. (Bianca)

My Ethics have Dropped Considerably. I had very high Standards. (Natalie)
I cope it with try to do it best I can from There. (John)

Some commented that a generally poor attitude of management towards teachers resulted in high teacher turnover.

I've seen People come and lost Their way, Saying this is not Worth it. (Sandra)

Discussion

In this study, the inclusion of teachers from both private RTOs and TAFE institutions has offered a picture of common causes of challenges, associated dilemmas, and implications experienced by teachers teaching out of field across the public and private VET sectors. The findings reveal two reasons pointed out by teachers for teaching out of field: VET teacher turnover and shortages, and budget constraints and employment of casual staff.

The findings point to the reported downsizing of the permanent workforce in some RTOs and the replacement of permanent workers by casual teachers which has resulted from cost-saving measures. The data unveil the concerns with quality and stability in the workforce, and the impact of out-of-field teaching assignments on the VET workforce because *people come and lost their way* and decide as a career it “is not worth” the emotional stress and additional workload. Such characteristics were presented as significant trends transforming existing conceptions and practices of paid work that participants encountered in their working life (Chappell et al., 2003; Clayton & Guthrie, 2013; Guthrie & Every, 2013; Nakar & Olssen, 2021). The participants reported that the key drivers underpinning this scenario were a combination of funding cuts necessitating cost savings and the fact that casualisation of staff was now a common phenomenon in the VET sector. Thus, the findings conform with those of Choy and Hodge (2017): VET teaching is directly shaped by policies and by industry and organisational response to such policies; with reduced public expenditure on training, VET teaching practices are institutionalised to suit client needs.

The findings revealed that although it might seem obvious that teachers should be asked to teach only what they know, large numbers of participants were routinely assigned to teach outside their area of expertise. The assumption was that teachers with experience would be able to teach any subject if they needed a job. The results of this study have revealed how VET teachers’ enacted curriculum, embedded in conceptualisations of knowledge as content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge expounded by Shulman (1987), Andersson and Köpsén (2018), OECD (2014), Tomlinson (2017), and Yoo and Carter (2017), influences quality VET education. The research results highlighted that VET teachers will agree to teach outside their field of training, qualification, or expertise but will *cut corners* when assigned to out-of-field positions. The researchers agree with Yoo and Carter (2017), arguing that teachers’ interest, passion, and instructional attitude are measures of quality teaching.

Achieving outcomes and sustainability are often challenges for out-of-field teachers because of restrictive content and pedagogical knowledge. Effective development of student expertise and capacity in specific fields is greatly dependent on the depth of their teachers' expertise, the level of their knowledge and understanding, and their skill capacity to enact knowledge and curriculum in an effective manner. As Vis-kovic and Robson (2001, p. 222) report, "if you know your subject, you can teach it". However, the current findings indicate that vocational educators are expected to apply and transfer their pedagogical knowledge, skills, and experience to offset lack of content knowledge. The research findings stimulate a deeper understanding of the emotional and cognitive load VET teachers in out-of-field teaching positions experience; for example, teachers who previously had *very high standards* feeling guilty and perceiving their teaching *ethics have dropped considerably* while they *cope and try to do it best*.

According to the teachers' narratives, good vocational teachers play a distinct dual role which is consistent with Dickie et al. (2004), Köpsén (2014), and Choy and Hodge (2017). As Andersson and Köpsén (2018) report, they have to be professional experts in their subject and industry with a comprehensive understanding of its pedagogy; they also need to be specialists who possess practical, technical, and up-to-date vocational expertise and occupational skills relevant to the broader workplace.

The data demonstrate that VET teachers in out-of-field teaching are *floundering a lot* and need to make use of *guest speakers* to ensure they *cover the knowledge* needs. A few participants highlighted how some casual teachers had good academic qualifications; however, they did not have substantial work experience in the industry and, thus, they might not be able to transmit vocational expertise and technical skills effectively. They emphasised that teachers should have a greater depth and breadth of knowledge and be aware of the skills required in the workplace (Larter, 2023; Towers et al., 2022; Van Driel & berry, 2012). The findings also corroborate the ideas of Chan (2021), Hobbs and Porsch (2021), and Porsch and Whannell (2019), who suggested that good vocational teachers are expected to possess a solid background in their field of industry and to keep their knowledge and skills of the profession up to date.

It was clear from the findings that VET teachers were being put into dilemmatic situations where they had to choose between teaching out-of-field subjects or losing their job. Teaching in challenging out-of-field subject areas and positions resulted in feeling *de-professionalised*. This required difficult career decision-making due to the challenges for VET teachers in integrating knowledge on subjects, occupational practices, and the needs of the learners. The participants may consider themselves experts in their field, but transferring their pedagogical skills and adjusting to completely new subjects beyond their areas of expertise impacted individual teacher participants in terms of the nature of the relationship between their identity and their work.

The findings show that the dilemmas had varied impacts on teachers and potential implications on various stakeholders. Teaching in out-of-field subjects means many unaccounted hours of work, which can have a significant impact on teachers' normal routines and practices. Sending teacher overseas was also done on the premise that experienced teachers would fare reasonably amongst non-native English speakers, even though they may not be trained for teaching overseas. The participants reported their conflict over accepting or rejecting the only job available at the time. It was

a matter of considerable concern for them to teach students without having sufficient knowledge; participants who were assigned out of their field considered such teaching experience as stressful. Out-of-field VET teachers who urgently need the employment opportunities and do not *want to rock the boat* find themselves in a *sad indictment of the times* pointing to workforce needs such as targeted support and re-training opportunities. As a consequence of support and re-training constraints, some teachers resorted to practices such as studying the night before and delivering the content even at the expense of giving false information or calling guest lecturers.

Participants found that they had limited choice in facing this dilemma, as responding to students' needs may lead to creating resentment with management and losing their job. Such practices affected some participants' morale deeply. With job uncertainty woven into the realities of financial constraints of RTOs, accompanied by disconnection with the management, many participants experienced serious isolation and distress and showed a desire to resign or retire. The teachers' transition to accepting to teach misassigned subjects out of their area expertise involved reinterpretation or reorientation of the self-understandings they had developed in their teaching practice. The teachers' descriptions of adjusting to teaching out of field revealed frustration and indicated a feeling of loss of competence. The participants also spoke of their disappointment at the economic focus of their employing RTOs: treating students as customers and not providing any support or professional development to teachers. The absence of professional guidance might leave teachers confused and isolated, possibly resulting in teacher turnover which in turn creates more expectations on remaining staff to teach out of field.

Besides affecting teachers personally, the phenomenon also affected their teaching and student learning. VET teachers assigned to out-of-field positions are deeply aware of their task to prepare a quality workforce and to offer some students second career opportunities. They had an awareness of students' commitment to be well qualified *coming back* to study *with high expectation*; as teachers, they *want to set them [up] for success, not for failure*. It is however concerning the teachers in out-of-field teaching positions perceive the out-of-field teaching as a phenomenon which is *setting these students [in out-of-field classes] up to fail*. Teachers realised that teaching after studying only the previous night meant that students' learning would only be surface learning, with the implication that students might struggle to understand the concepts, not get the best out of the course, fail the examinations, and lose self-confidence. Students thus may neither get value for money spent nor be job ready. Such students working in industry can prove harmful for them as well as for their clients. The implication for VET institutions can be dissatisfied students spreading their displeasure and questioning the quality of the courses, thereby harming the institution's reputation. Subsequent reduced student numbers might result in more teacher redundancies and RTOs being shut down. The implication for the VET industry can be employing students who are not prepared well and who may not be job ready.

However, the analysis also suggested that some teachers studied the night earlier and their efforts should still be appreciated instead of highlighting the deficits. The majority of the teachers already worked hard to compensate for lack of content knowledge by applying their own methods and coping strategies. The dual professional identity framework makes these approaches visible and considers both short-

comings and the individual ways to cope with them (Choy & Hodge, 2017; Köpsén, 2014). The findings agree with Smith's (2019) suggestion that teaching is a continuous learning journey, beginning from the time a VET teacher enters a profession. It requires continuous effort to maintain their industry currency and skills and to maintain their dual professional identity, a factor which sets a VET teacher's role apart from other teaching professionals while enabling them to respond to the changing needs of a global economy (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Hodge & Guthrie, 2019). The motivation required to continue updating the expertise required of a dual professional therefore needs to be understood so that it can be supported and enhanced. Having in mind that out-of-field teaching has a negative influence on student achievement, it seems reasonable to provide affordances to cope with the phenomenon. These negative influences imply that we need an elaborated understanding of how to support vocational teachers and their professional development. A professional development program for out-of-field teaching teachers should spend time not only on fostering subject-related competencies but also on ways to protect and nurture their professional identity.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the lived experience of teachers in teaching out-of-field subjects due to the hard-pressed demands of the VET sector. The teachers were confronted with an array of challenges but felt powerless to do anything about them, making them frustrated and stressed, hence impacting their personal well-being. Despite the benefits of expertise in their own field, teachers teaching out-of-field subjects lacked pedagogical knowledge and skills and felt unprepared for teaching, and therefore could have benefited from the training opportunities to develop those skills.

While previous research has explored schoolteachers and university academics' experiences of challenges and dilemmas inherent in out-of-field teaching, this aspect has been underresearched in the VET sector. This paper makes an important contribution to the knowledge in this field by assembling descriptive accounts of how participants come to know the causes, dilemmas, and implications of out-of-field teaching and how they make sense of and reconfigure their teaching practices. This research offers insights into how teachers who have not had authentic practical experiences and skills in units outside their expertise can provide these learning opportunities for their students. It further gives a valuable opportunity to make the voices of out-of-field teachers be heard. However, the limitation of the study is the relatively small number of teacher participants. Out-of-field teaching in VET is a significant problem which merits further investigation with a larger cohort of teachers. The risk to industry and the reputation of VET is not only that a heavy out-of-field workload may result in teachers giving up teaching altogether, but that it also affects subject integrity and impacts student learning outcomes which can in turn impact their future prospects.

While the research was conducted in Australia, the findings are relevant to VET systems elsewhere. Transnational research is required to better understand the demand for teachers across different subjects and the nature of the pressures on organisations

that cause out-of-field teaching. This would allow us to learn from successful solutions and provide indicators of best practice that could reduce the incidence of out-of-field teaching and may also improve the retention of VET teachers.

The impact of the out-of-field phenomenon on the need to improve skills and capacity building, often in a rapidly changing workforce, needs to be reflected on critically. Expectations for rapid upskilling and training linked to skills shortages in the workforce put pressure on VET teachers assigned to teach outside their field of qualification, training, or expertise. Out-of-field teaching practices in VET have significant implications for equitable, sustainable, and transformative vocational education and training. The danger of an out-of-field teaching regime is that if training providers and delivery of content by VET teachers are not adequately quality assured, meaningless training can lead to loss of public trust in the outcomes of the training system. The data further highlight the significant role of teacher confidence and dual professional identity in subject areas and fields of learning to develop student skills and capabilities through high-impact teaching. This situation means that there is a critical need for continuing professional development for VET teachers so that they have the content knowledge, pedagogical and professional skills and values, as well as sufficient work industry currency to teach effectively and productively in VET institutes. High-quality initial teacher development is also essential to equip new VET teachers with the necessary skills so that, in the future, continuing professional development has a solid foundation on which to build. This means a deep understanding of applied knowledge that can be adjusted through problem-solving strategies to succeed in various contexts.

Awareness of the impact that the out-of-field teaching phenomenon has on VET will support evidence-informed decisions, strategies, and re-assessing policy decisions linked to improved and sustainable VET teaching practices despite workforce challenges. An evidence-informed way forward, with an improved and sustainable VET environment as the objective, needs to focus on the targeted and effective management of specific implications of the ethical dilemmas posed by the out-of-field teaching phenomenon to teachers, students, industry, and communities.

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