

PD: a professional deterrence? The financial cost and time commitment of professional development for VET practitioners in Western Australia

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Vocational education practitioners must participate in professional development (PD) activities so they may implement contemporary teaching practices to support their students. Long-term, social types of activity are best because they benefit individuals and groups of practitioners and the training organisations for which they work. However, training provider managers often favour short and individual activities which are cheaper to resource. Not much has been previously known about the financial and time costs incurred by individual practitioners which may act as a deterrent for practitioners to continue in the sector. Our research addressed that gap for Western Australian VET practitioners by examining data collected from an online survey. The survey collected quantitative information from 30 volunteer WA VET practitioners about their activities in a twelve-month period. Using human capital theory underpinning data analysis, we show that at no stage of a VET practitioner's career was

there a positive return on investment for the personally incurred cost of PD. We argue that acts as a deterrent to working as a VET practitioner which has ramifications for training provider operational efficiency, and the wider VET sector. There appears to be a misappropriation of pay scales based on applicable employment conditions which indicates sectoral underpayment.

Keywords: VET practitioners, professional development, VET working conditions and pay

Introduction

The Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector has been responsible for teaching an average of more than four million students per year since 2017 (NCVER, 2021). Those students usually go on to participate in work that requires industry-relevant skills and knowledge or on to further higher education. VET practitioners assist these students to achieve their employment or educational goals through a variety of activities that are not limited to teaching and assessing. To ensure a continued ability to support their students, VET practitioners must keep abreast of contemporary industry standards best practice and teaching methodologies appropriate for a varying student cohort, ensuring their industry knowledge and teaching capabilities continuously improve. The imperative for continuous professional development is supported by legislated regulations that govern Australia's VET sector (Standards for Registered Training Providers (RTOs) 2015, 2019, p. 19).

Maintaining and developing proficiencies comes at a cost, for example, direct expenses for courses and equipment, and indirect costs such as travel costs and time taken away from performing other professional duties. Little is known about the cost of PD activities for VET practitioners in Western Australia (WA), with scant empirical research done on PD and VET sector generally. The bulk of the literature about PD has dealt with perceptions of the most beneficial PD activities. There is a paucity of empirical data to inform decisions about resourcing PD and how to adequately remunerate VET practitioners who incur PD costs. This paper addresses this gap in knowledge about the relative value of PD for VET practitioners. It asked thirty practitioners a series

of questions aimed at identifying their perceptions of the relative value – and accompanying explicit and implicit or unintended costs – of engaging in PD in the VET sector, providing insight into the overarching question emerging from literature as to whether VET practitioners are adequately remunerated by RTOs for the costs associated with necessary PD.

Our research also sought to better understand the types of PD undertaken and valued, extending previous work arguing that social types of PD activity, such as mentoring, validation and moderation, and industry are the most beneficial because practitioners and employers regard knowledge gained through these means as readily compared, shared and enacted in workplaces (Jin, Li, Meirink, Want & Admiraal, 2021; Francisco, 2020). Social PD interactions between VET practitioners facilitate knowledge sharing, contributing to group and individual teaching practice. At the organisational level, RTOs that implement systems to manage PD activity and the collection of knowledge can use what is learnt to improve VET products and procedures to improve operational efficiency. For the wider VET sector, practitioners who participate in professional networks and engage in collective PD and sharing of knowledge can improve the VET sector. However, literature has also shown that when RTOs insist that VET practitioners undertake PD without material employer support, there is an increased likelihood they will leave that employer (Preechawong, Anmanatruakul, Pinit & Kould, 2021; Annelies, Rosenauer, Homan, Horstmeier & Voelpel, 2017). When VET practitioners change RTOs, unless PD has been managed by the RTO, the knowledge gained leaves with the individual. On the other hand, RTOs that do meaningfully support PD are more likely to retain skilled and experienced VET practitioners and the knowledge they bring.

VET practitioners tend to identify the importance of PD as concerned with professional identity and educational value (Tyler & Dymock, 2021b). Given the inherently unequal power dynamic between VET practitioners and RTO managers (Simons & Harris, 2014), actions regarding PD are usually determined by managers who exert authority over those they employ. The national award does nothing to materially recognise the personally incurred costs of PD, and while the WA Technical and Further Education (TAFE) agreement does provision some hours in lieu of PD hours (Department of Training & Workforce

Development, 2020, pp. 38-39), failing to consider the potential financial costs of PD activities that VET practitioners could incur. Substantiating the opportunity and cost of VET practitioner PD assists in forming a common language that can bridge the apparent gap of communication between VET practitioners and RTO managers. In this paper, we argue for improved dialogue about the significance of PD, resolving something inherent in the power imbalance between RTO managers and practitioners. The following section outlines the methodological approach taken in conducting this research, followed by a literature review contextualising this study. A discussion of the findings concludes the paper.

Methodology

The research on which this paper is based involved a structured electronic survey to collect data sent to VET practitioners and RTOs in WA, inviting participation. Requests to individual VET practitioners were distributed via relevant social media channels. Email requests for voluntary survey participants were also distributed to WA RTOs identified using publicly available contact details on the training.gov.au website. Requests for participation in the research emphasised that responding to the survey was voluntary and that respondents would maintain anonymity. Participants were unknown to the researchers, eliciting randomised data from self-selecting volunteers. It can be presumed that relatively few practitioners will respond and therefore that the responses received are indicative and representative of the sector in which they work.

A quantitative approach allows for a comparison of the variable cost and perception of the relative value of various professional development activities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 30-31), analysing specific and limited parameters through which discussion of data might be viewed (Burton-Jones, 2009, p. 451). For example, this research analyses data collected to determine if there is a social-justice issue between the dependent and independent variables (O'Toole & Beckett, 2013, p. 29), remedying a gap in quantitative data in research about VET professional development, asking respondents a series of questions using a Likert scale to explore perceptions, inviting practitioner reflection of their own positions (Pickard, 2017, pp. 213-214), enabling this quantitative research to be linked with existing qualitative research. We asked

questions to determine the strength of respondents' beliefs about PD activities to compare to quantitative data about actual activities, enriching the quantitative description by applying constructivism to the data, and measuring social beliefs (Suter, 2012, p. 344).

Quantitative data collected via surveys limit participants' responses, restricting respondents from providing additional information to qualify responses (Converse & Presser, 1986; Ercikan & Roth, 2006 p. 17; Ayiro, 2012, pp. 24-25). Discussion can be limited or biased in its representation of respondent data because the applied paradigmatic lens may not reflect fully the respondents' views (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. 303). Hatch (2002, p. 14) and Haig (2012, pp. 8-10) suggest quantitative surveys are suitable for connecting with 'humanistic data' provided questions are suitably and ethically structured. Survey questions were designed to provide a contextual understanding of their purpose without leading respondents to a preordained response (Converse & Presser, 1986).

A survey was appropriate for collecting samples due to the population size and geographical distribution of potential respondents. In sociological education research, it is common for quantitative data to be collected using surveys (Somekh & Lewin, 2011, p. 2), enabling the collection of quantitative data exploring compared variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 57-58). Data are analysed using a quantitative discussion approach underpinned by a critical analysis of responses as illustrative of flaws inherent in human capital theory when applied to contemporary workplace conditions and circumstances. It is important to differentiate between traits and attitudes in human capital theory because traits can be considered fixed aspects of individual humans, while attitudes can shift based on, for example, context, timeliness and social connection with what is being surveyed (Barnes, 2022). Human capital theory postulates that the financial benefits of learning are greater than the input costs (Lopez & Cerpa, 2021). That might be true for organisations benefiting from the mobilisation of employee learning, but a similar benefit might not be realised by individual employees who input costs. Survey data collected as independent variables are compared to employment awards and agreements as the dependent variable (Martin, 2012, p. 63). Ethics approval was obtained from the supporting institution.

Literature review

RTOs must provide VET regulators with evidence that VET practitioners in their employ have participated in adequate PD (Standards for Registered Training Providers (RTOs) 2015, 2019, p. 19). This compliance measure has become an increased priority in the VET sector in the past decade, a response to concerns about quality problems of VET teaching and training. Regulatory control retrospectively applied in the sector are a response to problems plaguing the sector as a result of deregulation and privatisation (Rodd, 2021, p. 62). Tran and Pasura (2021, p. 19) suggest that regulatory scrutiny of PD burdens RTOs with additional costs for the administration of that evidence. However, they fail to mention that most RTOs transfer the burden of administering evidence to individual VET practitioners. Types of professional development, opportunities and standards differ significantly despite guidance in the regulating legislation for example, participation in courses mentoring research moderation industry release schemes (Standards for Registered Training Providers (RTOs) 2015, 2019, p. 11). RTOs often direct VET practitioners to develop and keep up-to-date trainer matrix documents detailing individual PD activities. Developing trainer matrices can take considerable time depending on the extent of individual VET practitioner qualifications, PD activities, and relevant industry experience, creating a situation of gross discrepancy of opportunity and outcome, with practitioners operating as individual contractors while others are allowed time and payment to support their development. While regulations govern the professional standards and skill set to practice as a VET trainer, no comparable standards exist to ensure these regulations are the responsibility of RTO management.

RTOs can provide trainer matrices to VET regulators on request as evidence of ensuring all trainers and assessors have been undertaking professional development (Standards for Registered Training Providers (RTOs) 2015, 2019, p. 19). This implies that it is each RTO that should provide the necessary resources for VET practitioners on their staff to undertake relevant professional development opportunities. However, RTOs apply only limited responsibility, protecting themselves from adverse regulatory action as cheaply as possible, serving legal obligations and reducing operating costs. The risk faced by RTOs that fail to comply with regulations is deregistration (Tyler & Dymock 2017, pp. 40-41). Instead of managing the risk by supplying resources,

RTOs mitigate it by transferring the risk to VET practitioners. Indeed, enquiries into management views of PD found that around 70% of RTO managers believe PD is only necessary to satisfy regulatory compliance, placing less emphasis on the importance of increasing VET practitioner capability (Tuck & Smith, 2017, p. 8).

RTO Managers who opt to provide professional development opportunities tend to select inexpensive options due to their primary interest in the immediate financial position of the RTO. Metrics used to reconcile financial output and value include, for instance, data on student completion and enrolment frequency (Mahon, Kemmis, Francisco & Lloyd, 2017, p. 158). Most managers are concerned with the impacts that regulatory compliance can have on fiscal performance, preferring short and cheap PD activities that do not have ongoing resourcing components (Tran & Pasura, 2021, p. 19). Determining the cost of production is easier than calculating benefits derived from professional development (Billett et al., 2014, p. 28). The cost of ensuring VET practitioners undertake adequate PD to the satisfaction of VET regulators can be measured against the cost of delivering VET products. We argue that this quantification of work value is imperative to understanding the under-valuing of PD in the VET sector. It is easy, for example, to measure if a VET practitioner has all the requisite qualifications according to regulatory requirements by comparing them to a list, while less simple to assess how attitudes and values affect the financial viability of providing VET products despite knowing those aspects have an influence (Relly, 2021, pp. 712-713). Chuan and Ibsen (2021) propose that social skills can be measured by assessing the frequency of activity and attitudes, consistent with employing a Likert scale to measure attitude strengths and comparing those data with measures of frequency.

A TAFE manager, interviewed by Schmidt (2021, p. 155), remarked on the need to ensure a return on investment using funding. In contrast, research examining the experiences of Victorian TAFE workers found that those who worked in the public TAFE system felt strongly that the institution should not be for profit, instead emphasising quality educational experience (Rodd, 2021, pp. 64-65). Although VET practitioners have argued that TAFEs and private RTOs operate on different financial models, both operate in a contemporary environment where they must all focus on financial performance as a core indicator

of operational success and sustainability. The allocation of resources for professional development is measured by cost-benefit projections (Billett et al., 2014, p. 28) accounting only for finance, revenue and profit (Law & Chuah, 2004, p. 178) failing to encompass more holistic pedagogical concerns. Compounding the issue, VET practitioners have varying years of experience and require different PD experiences to enhance their practice (Villegas-Reimers, 2003, pp. 128-129). RTO managers face pressure to resource different PD activities for individual VET practitioners, which can be viewed as an inefficient use of organisational resources. Without a way to substantially project the benefits of resourcing PD, management is unlikely to do so (Smith, 2004, p. 233). That narrowing view towards financial measures ignores that policy should maintain consistency with its human capital basis to also consider social benefits (Holden & Biddle, 2017, p. 553), RTOs managed from a singular view of cost-benefit fails to meaningfully consider myriad benefits to VET practitioners.

RTOs benefit from VET practitioner PD by capturing what has been learnt and integrating it into organisational systems, policies and procedures for delivering VET products. Knowledge derived from PD becomes a resource leveraged by RTOs (Eraut, 2011, p. 11), improving competitiveness in the marketplace and enabling them to tout innovative teaching practices. VET practitioners' ability to meaningfully introduce new teaching methods that could improve students' educative experiences is limited by what RTO management deems valuable to their business (Caves, Baumann & Renold, 2021, p. 108). The benefits from PD are not necessarily encountered by those participating in the activities but are, instead, received by other stakeholders like RTOs. The intent of such comparison, however, was so that human capital theory could account for external factors contributing to the cost-benefit analysis of education (Holden & Biddle, 2017, pp. 563-564). That aspect appears increasingly ignored by RTO management resourcing decisions, therefore we consider WA VET practitioners could apply a similar view to determine a cost-benefit analysis about resourcing PD.

RTOs implement management systems to capture knowledge as a resource and to ensure VET practitioners are undertaking adequate PD. Points are accumulated for PD activities completed and made measurable by a weighting scale (Dymock & Tyler, 2018, p. 203). RTO managers who implement a point system set a target number of

points that VET practitioners must accumulate during a defined time as a performance condition of remaining employed, not necessarily resourcing PD activities beyond collecting evidence to satisfy VET regulators that the RTO has been compliant with PD regulations (Tyler & Dymock, 2017, p. 31). RTOs that view PD primarily as a regulatory compliance activity perceive little active interest in resourcing PD that has a measurable improvement on VET practitioner teaching aptitude.

For the systematic management of PD in RTOs, a holistic approach to improving the quality of VET is needed (Tran & Pasura, 2021, p. 19). Quality should not be limited to easily measured financial capacity and instead include measures considering teaching and learning, procedures and outcomes. Santa (2015, p. 268) provides a helpful definition that links quality improvement with financial capacity whereby the quality of output increases and the cost of doing so reduces. The problem, however, is that the allocation of resources for professional development is likely to cease when production cost achieves breakeven with the cost of professional development resources. When that happens, RTO management is likely to reduce resourcing PD because there is a financial benefit.

Methods for substantiating costs associated with organisations resourcing PD for VET practitioners have included a cost-benefit analysis using the Kirkpatrick model (Smith, 2004, p. 234). The model aims to make a learning process measurable and realise how learning becomes implemented behaviour. A problem with using it as a decision-making tool for determining PD resources is that it does not account for PD activities that the organisation does not direct. VET practitioners tend to participate in PD activities outside the work environment, particularly when RTOs are reluctant to provide PD activity opportunities. Without measuring VET practitioner personal PDs financial and time costs outside of work, the Kirkpatrick model is a limited measurement tool.

Smith (2004, p. 232) argues that RTOs resourcing PD must manage direct and indirect costs. Direct costs include, for example, formal programs, trainers and subject matter experts, and administration. Indirect costs are those that support the execution of aspects that have direct costs, such as travel and accommodation, and opportunity costs related to doing or not doing PD. Hoekstra and Crocker (2015, p. 357)

suggest four aspects to consider for managing PD a nurturing learning environment, self-evaluation to promote learning, examination of core and implicit values and assumptions underpinning institutional practices, and the availability of knowledge management systems to leverage resources and staff expertise. While the four aspects may help implement an organisational system to manage PD to benefit the organisation, it does not seek to understand the impacts of VET practitioners undertaking PD of their own volition. An earlier idea for determining cost-benefit by Kluge and Schilling (2003, p. 34) has the same problem of not accounting for VET practitioner resourced PD, suggesting the cost-benefit of PD can be measured by calculating the change in cost over time, assuming costs for PD are entirely controlled by the organisation, failing to consider resources provided by VET practitioners which, as our research shows, is common.

VET practitioners develop experience over time and can increase their value proposition to other training providers. The risk of staff turnover can be reduced by improving staff intention to stay (Annelies et al., 2017, p. 584). When essential human resources leave an organisation, additional costs must be outlaid for rehiring and retraining. That is particularly difficult when VET practitioners who need to be replaced also leave with institutional knowledge and experience. Organisations and managers who provide professional development opportunities and recognise and reward (Annelies et al., 2017, p. 593) VET practitioner improvement is directly correlated to an increased likelihood that staff will remain. Human capital theory postulates that PD directed by managers reduces employee satisfaction, and when staff are self-directive of their development and managers are supportive, there is an increase in job satisfaction (Solomon, Nikolaev & Shepherd, 2022).

Continued benefit from retaining staff is made possible by organisations that lead learning by using structured approaches for managing knowledge and professional development (Farhan, 2018, p. 18). Absent from Farhan's explanation as to why organisations can benefit from implementing systematic professional development is the word 'should', suggesting it is acceptable for management to view resourcing professional development as discretionary. By legislative standards governing the Australian VET industry, it is acceptable for training organisations to adopt the position that the responsibility to develop professionally sits entirely with VET practitioners, the burden

of financial and time costs of PD are mitigated by the organisation, effectively reducing the cost of 'product' delivery, failing to consider the potential costs of staff turnover. Further, the Educational Services (post-secondary education) Award 2020 (ESA) and Western Australian TAFE Lecturers General Agreement (TLGA) used by private RTOs and TAFEs do not require organisations to resource professional development activities. At best, they suggest managers should consider providing resources for VET practitioner professional development, but they are not compelling.

The TLGA (Department of Training Workforce Development, 2020, pp. 38-39) provisions that time may be accrued towards professional development time so long as their employing college approves it. Management can approve or disallow the requested professional development time. VET practitioners who wish to accrue time to undertake professional development must perform additional hours of work or access other leave entitlements while high rates of casualisation in the sector (Tyler & Dymock, 2021a) mean that practitioners are unlikely to be eligible for any paid leave. The employment agreement requires colleges to 'provide opportunities for lecturers to participate in appropriate professional development' (Department of Training Workforce Development, 2020, p. 115) providing no indication of how those opportunities are resourced, specifying only what professional development opportunities are appropriate (2020, pp. 143-144), thus limiting VET practitioner agency. Collectively, that enables employing WA TAFE colleges to compel VET practitioners to undertake professional development benefiting the college at the cost of individual practitioners.

Most private RTOs employ under conditions of the ESA which fails to clarify who is responsible for implementing or resourcing professional development, only noting professional development being an aspect of movement between pay points (Fair Work Commission, 2022, p. 66). The ESA and TLGA provision for incremental increases to pay based upon years served with the employer, qualifications and performance-based measures. Whether or not incremental increases are applied on the anniversary of VET practitioner employment is decided upon by management. Despite provisions for incremental pay increases, Tyler and Dymock (2017, pp. 31-40) suggest that RTOs can use the fact that most VET practitioners are only required to have a certificate four

qualification for vocational teaching as the basis for not incrementing pay. However, RTO managers do not have to agree to increase pay beyond those stipulated at Certificate Four teaching qualifications (Fair Work Commission, 2022, p. 48). Should RTO management determine that qualifications other than the minimum required by legislation governing VET are irrelevant to the function of VET practitioners, they may use that argument to nullify pay increments. In the ESA, employers may consider a VET practitioner in question has not acquired or utilised increased skills and knowledge that could reasonably be expected to be acquired and utilised (Fair Work Commission, 2022, p. 48). Managers may consider skills and knowledge gained in higher level qualifications are not utilised for the employment role and not provide incremental pay increases. Nevertheless, professional development activities must still be undertaken to meet VET compliance requirements. VET practitioners remain vulnerable to management decisions that avoid resourcing professional development. Ethical activity favouring VET practitioner professional development is not mandated by professional membership bodies as, contrasting with compulsory PD for those teaching in the school sector (Tyler & Dymock, 2021b).

Findings and discussion

As with similar survey-based research, the self-selecting nature of those who choose to engage is a significant factor to be considered when interpreting the data. While data are randomised via respondent self-selection, it is acknowledged that self-selection can limit the ability to extrapolate on the significance of the findings. Our findings broadly indicate the disparity of experiences of those working in the VET sector. Pay, conditions (limited in this data set to the relative support workers are given to engage in PD) and qualifications vary widely and appear to be largely haphazard in their application. Our research found that some practitioners are paid below the ESA and TLGA minimum remuneration requirements, responding WA VET practitioners earn, on average, around 17% above the calculated average minimum award. The act of averaging, however, masks the fact that some WA VET practitioners are not being paid at least the minimum legal wage. Indeed, 33% of respondents reported earnings beneath the award when accounting for years of experience and qualifications that identify the entitlement. Of the ten respondents who reported being paid less than the minimum

entitlement, four had less than three years of experience, two had between four and seven years of experience, and four had at least ten years of experience. None of the respondents with less than four years of experience reported being paid at or above minimum entitlements. VET teaching qualification levels did not appear to factor in being paid less than the minimum entitlement.

By contrast, for respondents who reported being paid at or above minimum entitlements (n=20), the mean average pay was 32.15% above the corresponding minimum entitlement. Individual pay ranged from 13.82% and 55.09% above minimum entitlements. Again, VET teaching qualification did not appear to factor into being paid more than the minimum entitlement. The single highest beneficiary, earning 55.09% above minimum entitlement, had a Certificate IV teaching qualification and between six and seven years of experience. For comparison, the single most underpaid respondent, earning 16.3% less than the minimum entitlement, had a Diploma teaching qualification, though less than two years of experience. VET practitioner PD comes with financial and time costs incurred by individuals when employers do not adequately resource it. The common argument is that individual employees should be responsible for their own PD, despite RTOs being the primary beneficiaries (Avis 2021:167). In effect, WA VET practitioners are offered employment at a particular rate and then directed to pay, by personally incurring costs of PD, to remain employed. Formal qualifications do not represent all PD activity types, but they can be used as an indicator of development and pay (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: VET qualifications held at each reported pay interval

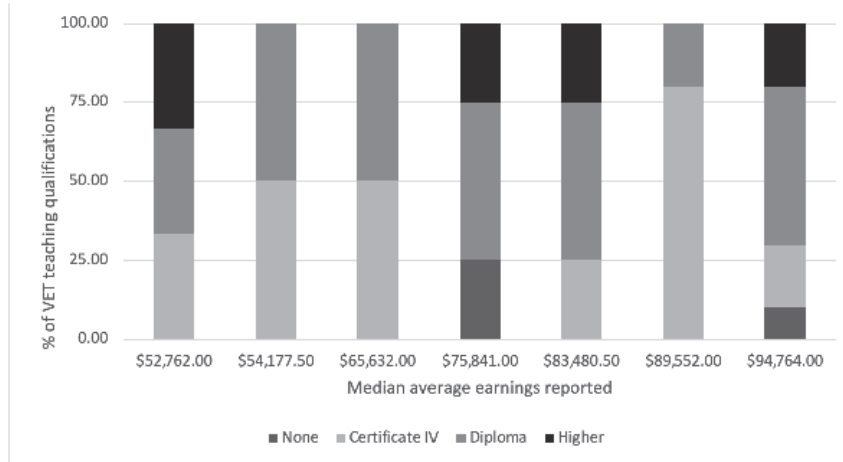
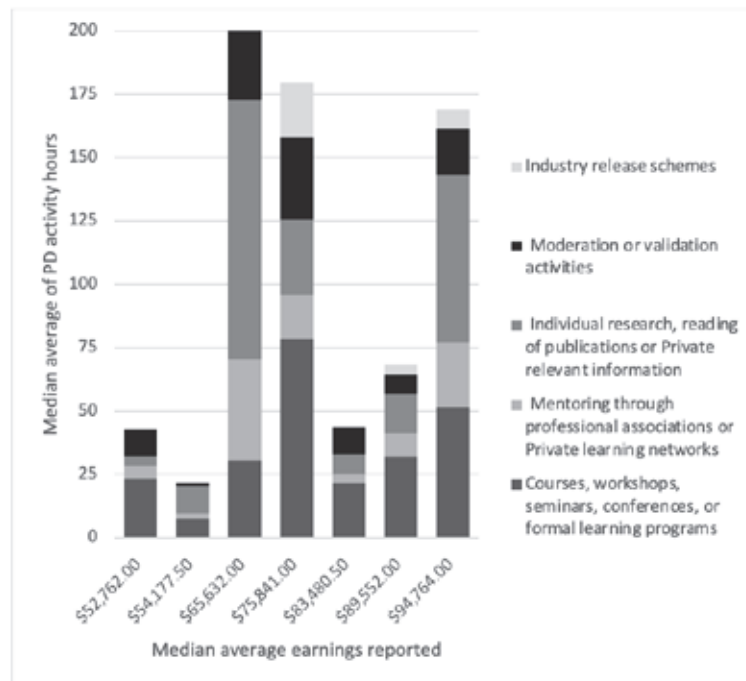


Figure 1 represents the percentage of respondents reporting VET teaching qualification levels at the indicative pay intervals. It might be assumed that as qualification levels increase, so too would pay increments, but that is not the case. Instead, there is a higher concentration of the lowest VET teaching qualification in the second-highest pay interval, and the highest concentration of higher qualifications is in the lowest pay interval. The evidence suggests that there is no clear financial incentive for WA VET practitioners to achieve higher than the minimum Certificate IV teaching qualification. This lack of direct correlation between teaching qualification and pay ultimately degrades the relative standing of the VET profession (Atkins & Tummons, 2017, p. 360). It is important to note that this does not mean that WA VET practitioners are not participating in PD activities that do not result in higher qualifications, only that there is unlikely to be any clear positive financial benefit and that other factors are evidently at play.

An indication of the types of PD activities WA practitioners participate in at different pay increments is formed by graphing data in Figure 2. Each column represents an earning increment, and the total height of each column displays the median average hours of PD undertaken by all survey respondents at the corresponding pay increment. There is some evidence that the amount of PD activity increases as pay increases, however, it is not a linear transition. The lack of linearity is

seen from the middle to high-income increments, where there is a drop in PD activity hours before an increase. Interestingly, participation in individual research activities is much higher at \$65,632 and \$94,764 pay increments. Pay increments are not a predictor of types of PD activity participation since the median average of participating hours does not present an obvious pattern or progression. The only thing it suggests is that higher rates of PD activity do not correspond to higher earnings. WA VET practitioners participate in an unequal number of PD hours at different pay increments, meaning there is no standard amount of PD activity between individual practitioners at the same or different pay increments. The different amounts of time practitioners participate in PD activities can be considered an individual cost to maintain employment. It is therefore important to understand how much time is being spent during work and outside of work time, allowing time to be calculated as a cost-per-hour proposition and consider that resultant figure as part of the individual financial cost of doing PD for WA VET practitioners.

Figure 2: Hours of PD activity type by pay interval



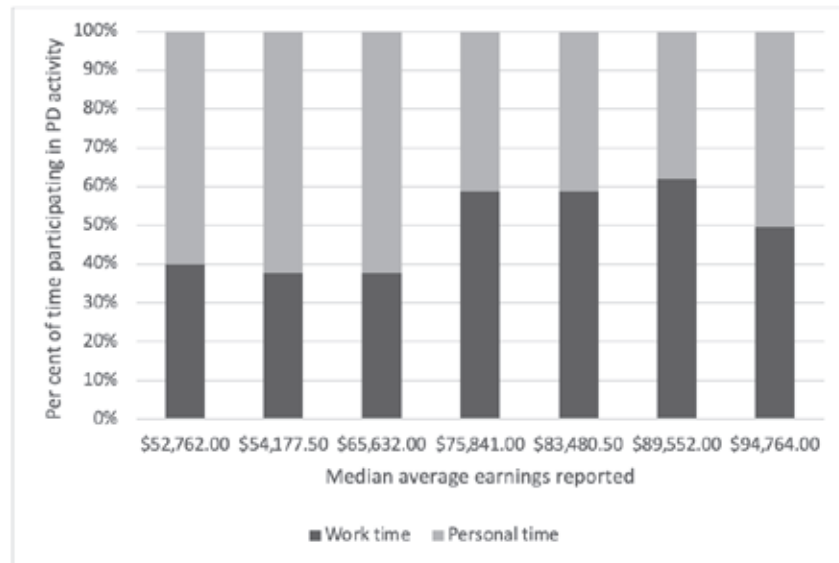
The survey asked respondents what proportion of PD hours they apply outside of working hours. Responses were converted to an estimated percentage to determine how much time was used for PD during work and personal time. For example, respondents who indicated they participate in PD activity in their personal time about half the time were assigned a 50% portion of total PD hours as being undertaken during personal time. Proportions of time spent doing PD during those times are graphed in Figure 3 for each indicative pay interval. WA VET practitioners who receive lower pay participate in PD activities more often in their personal time than during paid work time. Higher paid WA VET practitioners have a more balanced portion of time expended for PD during work and personal time. That time balance does not mean higher paid practitioners are less disadvantaged than lower-paid practitioners as higher paid practitioners are represented by a higher total number of PD hours. Practitioners receiving middling pay undertake similarly high PD hours. Data suggest there is no reliable correlation between hours of PD undertaken during work and personal hours with pay increments.

Our data show that WA VET practitioners participate in more PD activity hours in personal time than the TLGA provides. The TLGA provisions 37.5 hours of entitlement (Department of Training Workforce Development, 2020, p. 38) compared to the median average of 69.2 hours of participation in PD. Illustrating how that disadvantages WA VET practitioners, those hours are multiplied by the median average pay rate finding disposable income is reduced by \$2,464.61. Put another way, the price incurred by WA VET practitioners to remain employed is around \$2,464.61, in addition to the opportunity cost of the time that financial cost represents. Opportunity costs can be intangible, such as spending time with family and friends and participating in social activities. Requiring VET practitioners to give more of their time to meet employers' regulatory obligations in addition to the time and skill they have already traded for agreed pay contravenes the spirit if not the letter of the legislated award.

Invoking human capital theory, a workers' value to an employing organisation relates to their skill and time given as a service for an agreed price (Lopez & Cerpa, 2021, p. 140). WA VET practitioners are being taken advantage of to provide their skill and time for free to enable employing RTOs to meet their regulatory obligations. The RTO ensures

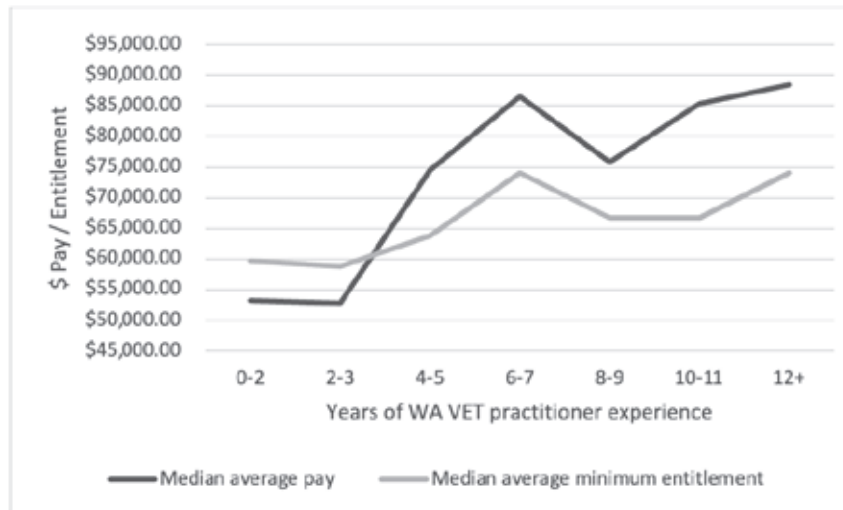
that all trainers and assessors undertake professional development (Standards for Registered Training Providers (RTOs) 2015, 2019, p. 19). The regulation ensures PD remains the responsibility of RTOs. However, RTO management can use the clause to transfer responsibility to VET practitioners as a condition of employment. Doing so, RTOs transfer the financial and time PD burden to individual practitioners, creating a coercive culture whereby VET practitioners accept the burden of unpaid time and incurred costs, the implied threat of termination of employment looming.

Figure 3: Per cent of time spent participating in PD activities during work and personal time by pay interval



Graphing time in years of experience and pay intervals reported by respondents gives a clearer picture of how years of VET practitioner experience is a better predictor of pay increments (see Figure 4). Three distinct VET practitioner groups become visually represented: Early career practitioners with less than three years of experience, mid-career practitioners with three to eight years of experience, and late-career practitioners with more than eight years of experience.

Figure 4: Median average pay reported by experience versus median average minimum entitlement



It might have been expected that a linear increase to pay would accompany WA VET practitioner experience increases, but that is not the case. Responding early-career VET practitioners reported being paid below minimum ESA rates. Failure to pay staff adequately negatively affects VET practitioners' intention to stay (Annelies et al., 2018, p. 584). Human capital theory suggests that low pay can cause poor performance, increasing the likelihood for worker attrition (Hartog & Brink, 2007, p. 199). Mid-career WA VET practitioners appear to receive better pay than their minimum entitlement. However, those data are skewed by outlier responses that earn significantly above minimum entitlements. Two respondents in the mid-career group reported earning less than their minimum entitlements, while the remainder earned from 13.67% to 55.01% more than their minimum entitlement.

This sample data indicates a concerning trend in sector underpayment. Highlighting that problem, our evidence suggests great disparities and irregularities in pay based when factoring in other relevant employment variables. One respondent, who was a mid-career practitioner with four to five years of experience, with only a Certificate IV VET teaching qualification reported earning 155.09% of the award. Conversely, the two mid-career respondents who reported earning less than their

minimum entitlement had diploma-level VET teaching qualifications. As noted, participants self-selected to engage with the research. The survey was sent to those in management positions, with the intention that they might distribute it to their workers. Based on the responses, it may be hypothesised that these practitioners themselves chose to complete the survey. This would account for the relatively high income levels recorded.

Late-career practitioners are those with eight or more years of VET practitioner experience paid more on average \$71,497, compared to \$53,115.88 and \$70,110 for early and mid-career groups respectively. It appears that more years of experience beyond eight years does not include a relative pay increase similar to fewer years of experience. That is not particularly compelling because the financial value of work undertaken by VET practitioners needs to be limited so public and private RTOs can provide training and education services at accessible prices. What is telling, however, is the ongoing cost to individual VET practitioners to maintain their employment.

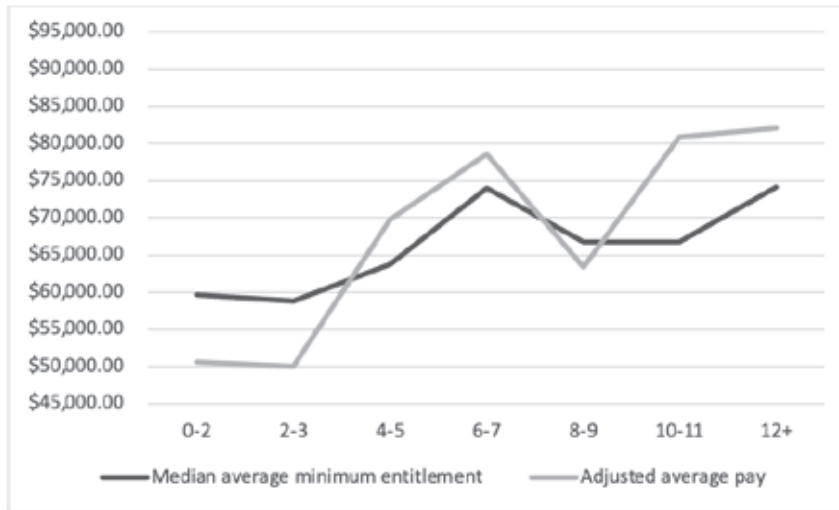
Survey data collected about the time and financial cost of PD incurred by WA VET practitioners provide insight into how those costs impact income from employment, providing more accurate insight into the disposable income of WA VET practitioners. Reported annual income for VET practitioner work is divided by 1950 hours, representing the most common hours per year for full-time work in Australia, multiplied by the number of PD hours participated in external to employment hours. For example, a respondent reported earning \$83,480.50 annually, a financial cost of \$4,538.50 for PD, and 91.8 hours of PD external to employed hours:

- $83,480.50 \text{ annual pay} / 1950 \text{ working hours} = \$42.81 \text{ per hour for work}$
- $\$42.81 \text{ per hour} \times 91.8 \text{ PD hours} = \3929.96
- $\$3,929.96 \text{ cost of PD time} + \$4,538.50 \text{ financial cost of PD} = \$8,468.46 \text{ total individual cost of PD}$
- $\$83,480.50 \text{ annual pay} - \$8,468.46 \text{ incurred individual cost} = \$75,012.04 \text{ disposable income}$

Figure 5 shows what happens to WA VET practitioner earnings when the total individual cost of PD is subtracted from annual reported pay

and compared to minimum pay entitlements. It reveals that WA VET practitioners can receive inadequate pay to support the personally incurred cost of remaining employed. Effectively, the number of WA VET practitioners receiving pay below the award increases from 33.33% to 36.67% when adjusting for the incurred cost of PD. The respondent who reported the lowest adjusted pay compared to their minimum entitlement was 27.13% below the entitlement. The respondent who reported the highest adjusted pay compared to their minimum entitlement was 43.91% above the entitlement. That comparison is necessary to view how wide a gap exists between disposable pay received for work by WA VET practitioners, our sample data indicating that more than one-third of WA VET practitioners are not paid adequately. Further research is needed to test the accuracy of that assumption since this research did not differentiate between VET practitioners who had additional managerial duties.

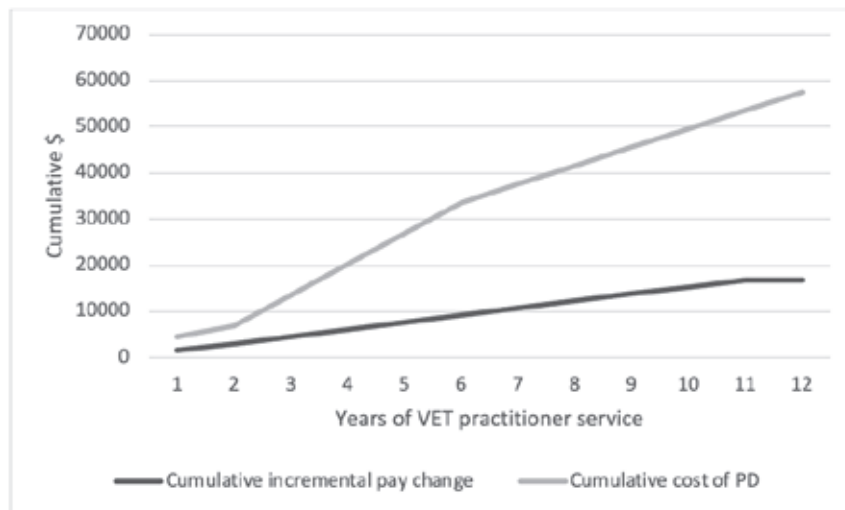
Figure 5: Median adjusted pay reported by experience vs median average pay entitlement



Data indicate that the cumulative individual cost of PD over time does not offer a positive financial return when WA VET practitioners progress from early to late careers. Assuming the reported median average individual cost of PD for each career stage is representative of each year over twelve years, an estimate of the financial value of

WA VET practitioner work is calculable. The cumulative individual cost of PD compared with the cumulative pay increment changes over twelve years as illustrated in Figure 6, charting the accumulative individually incurred cost of PD outpaces the accumulative incremental pay benefits at all stages of career progression. WA VET practitioners are increasingly disadvantaged as they participate in longer periods of service as VET practitioners. Beyond twelve years, incremental pay increases reduce, but the costs incurred by individual practitioners are unlikely to decrease because of the continued need to undertake PD as a condition of continuing to be employed.

Figure 6: Comparison of cumulative individual cost of PD to cumulative incremental pay increases over 12 years



There appears to be no financial benefit for WA VET practitioners compared to the time and financial cost of doing PD other than for maintaining employment. While not an insubstantial benefit, employers receive a greater advantage viewed through a human capital theory lens. Human capital theory concerns human productive output, a result of efficiencies derived from education and training. It suggests that an employee provides increased productive benefits to organisations when their human capabilities are increased (Lopez & Cerpa 2021, p. 136). The theory also suggests that any activity undertaken by individuals for gainful employment can expect to receive an increasing benefit

as their productive skills increase (Lopez & Cerpa, 2021, p. 135). On the other hand, employers may assume an up-or-out perspective that PD is only beneficial for employees' external opportunities in the job market and that rewarding PD will ultimately cost the organisation (Hartog & Brink, 2007, pp. 124-125). Our findings suggest that this transactional, supposedly free-market theory is not only inadequate but deeply flawed. Simply, the VET sector benefits unevenly from practitioners undertaking PD at their own expense, while failing to pass on the rewards of the development of professional skills and knowledge. The assertion that VET practitioners are the only beneficiaries of PD is invalidated by legislative regulation that RTOs must ensure VET practitioners undertake PD (Standards for Registered Training Providers (RTOs) 2015, 2019, p. 19). Resourcing adequate PD protects RTOs from negatively impacting regulatory action. That means that as RTOs encounter VET practitioners with higher level qualifications and who have participated in regular PD, the RTO stands to gain increased productivity or reduced cost due to potential regulatory sanctions. Other productivity benefits that are more difficult to measure are the potential for increased student numbers and improved student assessment success. None of those benefits are likely to be attributed to individual employee skill and productive input while division of labour approaches are used to measure the financial performance of discrete actions, similar to machines on a production line (Livock, 2016).

Conclusion

The findings are consistent with qualitative literature that broadly suggests that VET practitioners continue to teach because of personal beliefs concerning the value they place on their assumed professional identities and love of their discipline. The collective evidence suggests that the motivating factor for most VET practitioners is not a financial reward but rather a deep engagement with their industry knowledge and a desire to communicate that to others. Incremental pay for work does not adequately compensate for the personally incurred costs of PD required for continued employment or as justification for incremental pay increases. This research finds evidence to indicate that the incremental pay scale increases according to the relevant award are not in practice being implemented consistently, indeed providing evidence that at each identified career stage, there is a detrimental financial

impact on WA VET practitioners to undertake PD.

The Australian Productivity Commission, which rejected recommendations for establishing a national VET practitioner scheme that would ensure adequate quality PD undertakings, was concerned that a national scheme would be too expensive and would act as a deterrent for people to become VET practitioners (Dymock & Tyler, 2018, pp. 205-206). Perhaps because there is a negative effect on VET practitioner pay due to personally incurred costs of PD, there is already a deterrent to new practitioners entering the sector and for experienced practitioners to continue practising. This has real potential implications for the ongoing quality and sustainability of the VET sector. The research on which this paper is based indicates that WA VET practitioners are not only inadequately remunerated, in terms of pay for employment, to sufficiently balance the individually incurred cost of PD, but that there appears to be sectoral underpayment based solely on the award.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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