

John Mitchell's 'Inside VET' column, *Campus Review*, 10 November 2009.
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VET leadership alive not static

What capabilities are needed by VET leaders, asks John Mitchell.

There is a myth in the VET sector that most of its current leaders have been there forever and are likely to stay on indefinitely in their current positions. Interestingly, sixty per cent of the more than 200 VET leaders who responded to a recent major survey have been in their current position for three years or less. And they learnt to be leaders elsewhere: nearly seventy per cent of the survey respondents have held a leadership role outside of VET.

Nor do they all expect to stay in their current jobs. Just over half of the sample indicated that they intended to apply for another VET leadership role in the next five years.

These are a few of the many findings from the national survey of VET leadership commissioned by the L H Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Management and administered by the Australian Centre for Educational Research (ACER).

The L H Martin Institute director, Professor Lynn Meek, notes that "there must be a good deal of mobility within leadership ranks in the VET sector". This mobility is likely to increase with imminent retirements, says Meek, with 23% of the respondents 56 years or older. "Replacement of retiring leaders is going to be a high priority over the coming years."

Meek is impressed by the vibrant, not static, picture of VET leaders emerging from the survey. For instance, the survey identified that the influences that shape leaders' roles most are everyday, pressing issues such as developing the capacity of the organisation to change and responding to uncertain conditions.

The results also indicate that pressures associated with competition, compliance and institutional change weigh most heavily on leaders. "Administrative and staffing matters occupy leaders' attention most fully. Managing change and uncertainty is particularly prominent."

Interestingly, survey respondents feel on top of educational and quality issues and are focused more on people issues. "Leaders placed most emphasis on knowledge and skills associated with self organisation and change management. The least emphasis was placed on matters associated more specifically with education and quality assurance."

The leadership role is intellectually demanding, says Meek. Survey respondents rated as necessary for effective VET leadership the following capabilities: critical reflection, priority setting, learning from experience, thinking creatively and laterally, and diagnosing the underlying causes of a problem and taking appropriate action to address it.

VET leadership is an intensely human activity requiring advanced interpersonal skills including being transparent and honest with others, motivating others to achieve positive outcomes, inspiring people to work effectively and listening to different points of view.

Higher education comparisons

This new study builds on the higher education study conducted by Professor Geoff Scott from UWS and colleagues at ACER, which reported in early 2008. “That project provided us with validated research instruments that we could adapt for a similar study in the VET sector. We also now have an extensive database for doing comparative research on the management capacities of the two sectors.”

As we move more towards a truly national tertiary education sector in Australia, says Meek, “it will be important to understand the management capacities and development needs of all who will occupy a tertiary education leadership role”.

“The latest study may open the door for a more direct dialogue between VET leaders and their counterparts in higher education. Sharing of leadership and management experience will be of benefit to both sectors.”

Meek is pleased that the VET survey provides a sound database on which not only to fashion programmes to meet the leadership needs of the sector, but also on which to construct other management tools, such as 360 degree instruments and online, self-initiated learning programs.

He also believes it is important to have a validated, empirical database on which to develop educational and training programmes to enhance leadership and management capacity in the VET sector. “Without such evidence, the objectives of training programs are largely left to anecdotal observations at best, and opinionated hearsay at worst.”

Immediate beneficiaries of the study will be the leaders of VET institutions and their staff and students, says Meek. “Effective leadership and management is not an end in itself, but an activity for achieving the education and training goals of individual institutions and the VET sector as a whole.”

The initial results of the study will be presented at public workshops in four capital cities during November. Meek is confident the study and the workshops will inspire VET leaders and will enhance “the professionalisation of leadership within the sector”.

To attend the workshops see www.mihelm.unimelb.edu.au and contact asteer@unimelb.edu.au

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