VET Leadership for the Future

Contexts, characteristics and capabilities

Research Briefing

Hamish Coates, Lynn Meek, Justin Brown,
Tim Friedman, Peter Noonan & John Mitchell

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Key insights

Leadership is about managing change and guiding growth in fluid environments

Leadership requires a 'change capable culture' that gives space to lead

VET needs strategies for managing the looming succession crisis

Too little is known about leaders and their work

Leaders' roles and work focus are not clearly defined

Markers of effective performance are not clearly defined and deployed

Produce a framework of key capabilities and competencies

Effective leadership education must be current and shaped by understanding of effective practice

New perspectives on VET leadership

This research briefing distils insights from a national study that examines leadership in Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector. VET leaders make a vital and growing contribution to learners, industry and society, yet research on their work is limited. This has direct implications for ensuring leadership is most effective, and for framing evidence-based capacity development. To assist the sector, and in particular the people who find themselves running large and complex training organisations, this study paints a picture of what VET leaders do, and of how they can do it best.

Effective leadership is now more important and challenging than ever. Leaders are under constant pressure to be more responsive to the mounting expectations of government, the fluctuating requirements of industry, and the diverse needs of communities and individuals. Commercial pressures have been with VET leaders for some time, but they now face new pressures arising from the recognition of VET as a key vehicle for national workforce development and productivity. Increasingly, the Australian VET sector is becoming globally focused, domestically competitive, and plays an ever-more vital role in social and economic life. VET leaders are central to determining how the sector continues to develop, deliver and expand, both as a vehicle for workforce development and for improving broader equity and social outcomes.

As VET leadership grows in significance so too does the clear and present need for sustained research. To further define and boost understanding of the profession, there is a need for greater insight into what leadership involves in the unique operating context of VET – what leaders do, what influences shape their work and, in particular, the defining characteristics of effective leadership (see Figure 1). Leadership is commonly conceptualised in terms of task-specific competencies, but it is much more than just a 'to do' list. Hence this study goes behind the assumptions, delving deeper to build a more nuanced picture of the emotional, social and cognitive capabilities that underpin effective leadership. The Australian VET sector needs strategies for managing the looming leadership succession crisis, and to help VET leaders excel in times of change and uncertainty.

Looming succession crisis from large-scale staff departure over next decade

Great challenges facing tertiary institutions – effective leadership now more important than ever

Need for more and better insight on identifying and developing leaders

Need for insights on leadership nuanced by the unique operating context of VET

Profile leaders – little information is available on leaders' backgrounds or daily experiences

Most conceptions of leadership list task-specific competencies – leadership is more than a 'to do' list

Much leadership research based on concept and anecdote, not theory and evidence

The capabilities that underpin effective leadership are hitherto undefined

Optimum approaches for leadership selection and learning untested

Figure 1: Factors driving this study

Drawing together research-based insights, this study defines strategies for identifying and developing future leaders and thereby assuring capacity across the system.

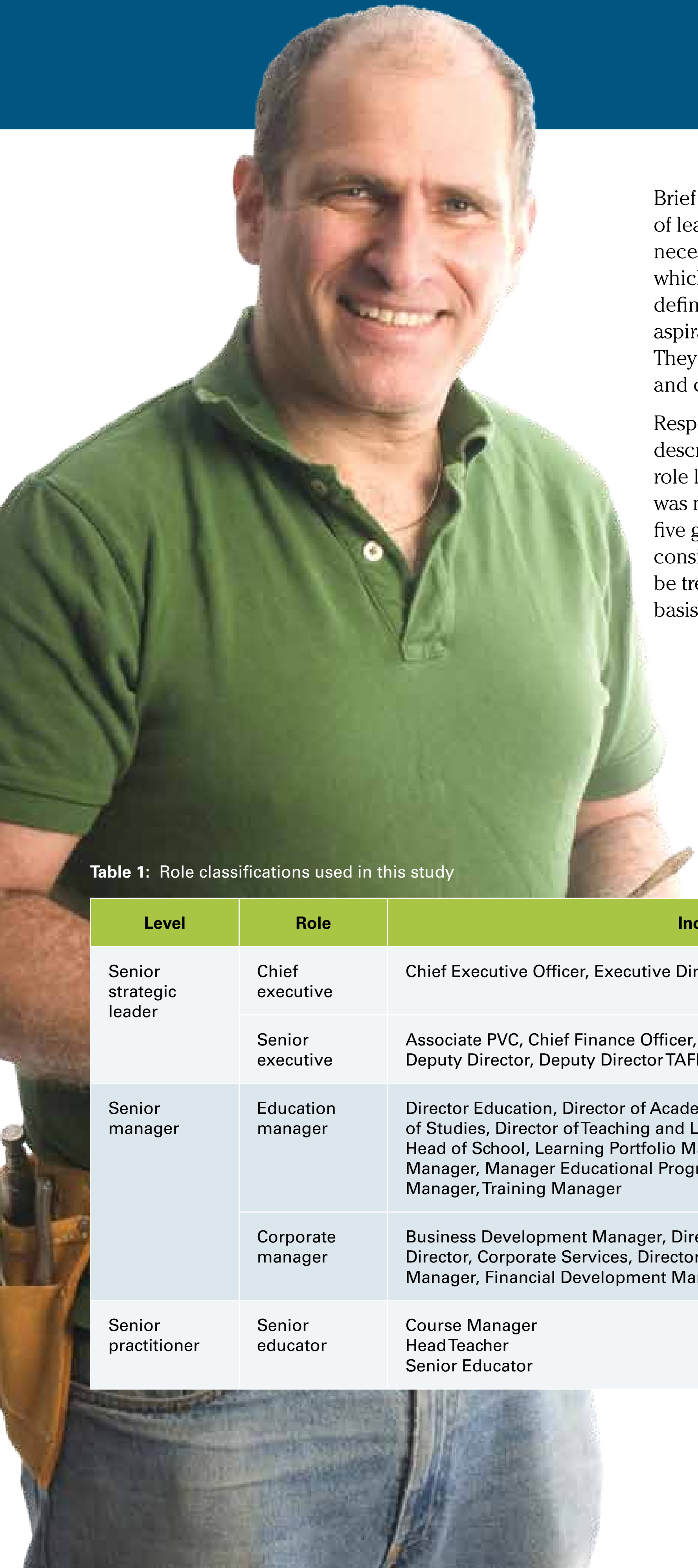
This research is multipronged in its approach, drawing together reviews of complex and often competing contexts, analyses of prior research, and results from a national survey of 327 practising VET leaders. While the study is squarely about VET leadership, it builds on prior research into those who lead learning and teaching in higher education. The study is squarely about VET leadership. It builds on prior research into those who lead learning and teaching in higher and school education (see: Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008; Scott, 2003).

An edge, and at the same time constraint, of the current study is that it is based on the perception of practising leaders. This helps delve into the ways VET leaders see their work, into its intrinsic qualities and characteristics. Like any complex phenomenon leadership can be studied from many angles, and future research will extend the insights of the leaders' reported here.

To frame the study's empirical insights it is helpful to flag characteristics of the respondent sample. In reviewing these, it is useful to consider as a counterpoint the extent to which the leaders' demography reflects Australia's VET student or staff populations. Of the 327 responses from a stratified purposive sample of 27 RTOs:

- 61.5 per cent were from a public institution, 9.8 per cent were from a private RTO, and 28.7 per cent were from a dual-sector university;
- just over half – 54.7 per cent – were female;
- 4.6 per cent were between 25 and 35 years of age, 16.8 per cent were between 36 and 45, 53.5 per cent were between 46 and 55, 24.2 per cent were between 56 and 65, and just 0.9 per cent were over 65;
- about half (48.6%) had a background in the education industry, and the largest industry background outside this was business (9.8%);
- a large number of roles were identified, with just under a fifth being in the top two leadership ranks, just under a fifth having a program or school level directorship, slightly more than half having a management position, and small number identifying as teachers;
- around a sixth (16.4%) had held their current role for under a year, while the largest proportion (44.1%) had held their role for between one and three years and 39.5% had held their role for more than four years;
- most (55.3%) intended to apply for another VET leadership role within the next five years; and
- just over two-thirds (68.4%) previously held a leadership role outside an RTO.

The purpose of this study was not to produce statistical estimates representative of a specific population. In turn, a purposive rather than probabilistic sampling approach was used. This involved developing strata for RTOs and leaders, and using a snowballing technique to recruit organisations and leaders into the study. Very few organisations that were approached declined to participate, but the purposive selection approach means that only those organisations willing to participate became involved. Further, while RTO contacts were given parameters to guide their selection of target leaders, cross-validating population lists to ensure their comparability across organisations is inherently difficult for reasons explored below. The results may be further influenced by the voluntary nature of the response process and hence biased towards certain kinds of leaders. These uncertainties are compounded by the previously identified lack of national statistics on the VET workforce.



Brief reflection and caution on the classifications of leaders' roles is helpful. Leaders' roles are almost necessarily peculiar to the organisation and industry in which they work, and are rarely generalisable or linearly defined. Role titles reflect organisational histories and aspirations, as well as professional status and preference. They say much about the many different descriptions and conceptualisation of RTO leaders.

Respondents were asked to provide an open-ended description of their role in the survey. A vast variety of role labels were provided as anticipated, and an effort was made to categorise in terms of the three levels and five groups listed in Table 1. These groupings conflate considerable role and organisational diversity and must be treated as indicative. They do, however, provide a basis for analysis and reporting.

Table 1: Role classifications used in this study

Level	Role	Indicative position titles
Senior strategic leader	Chief executive	Chief Executive Officer, Executive Director, Managing Director, General Manager, Director
	Senior executive	Associate PVC, Chief Finance Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Dean, Deputy Chief Executive, Deputy Director, Deputy Director TAFE, Executive Director Academic, PVC VET, Registrar
Senior manager	Education manager	Director Education, Director of Academic Services, Director of Course Development, Director of Studies, Director of Teaching and Learning, Educational Manager, Head of Department, Head of School, Learning Portfolio Manager, Learning Portfolio Manager, Learning Programs Manager, Manager Educational Programs, Program Coordinator, Program Manager, Program Manager, Training Manager
	Corporate manager	Business Development Manager, Director Planning, Director Strategy and Performance, Director, Corporate Services, Director, Workforce Development, Faculty Administration Manager, Financial Development Manager, IT manager, Manager Financial Development
Senior practitioner	Senior educator	Course Manager Head Teacher Senior Educator

The experience of VET leadership

Survey respondents were invited to develop and explain an analogy that best describes what it was like to be in their current VET leadership role. These analogies offer an inviting entrée into the world of the leader. Importantly, they reveal how leaders see themselves and their work – its challenges, influences and opportunities.

Table 2 reports a subset of these analogies sorted by five very broad role classifications. While the role groupings are tentative, sorting by role is informative for it shows a movement through different types and pressures of leadership – from 'being a magician' and 'running a very small country with several different and distinct cultures', to 'being on a roller coaster', 'juggling with lots of balls', and 'owning a fantastic car – having the keys and a full tank of petrol, but very little of the map to where we are going' and 'skating on thin ice'.

Read broadly, analysis of the hundreds of analogies provided reveal that many VET leaders may not see themselves as 'leaders' or, that they do not see themselves having sufficient capacity to lead change. This reflects the complex and ever changing policy, funding and regulatory environment within which VET leaders operate. The analogies given by many leaders spotlight efforts to struggle or cope with these conditions, taking time and energy away from enacting and delivering effective change. One respondent likened the job to 'being in a blender with the government pouring in more and more policy, scrutiny, compliance and audits, at the same time dimming the lights.' This underlines the need affirmed in many results given below, to define the profession of the VET leader.

Table 2: VET leaders' analogies for their work

Role	Leadership analogy
Chief executive	Balancing a seesaw on an ocean liner in the high seas. Being a magician. Running a very small country with several different and distinct cultures. State and federal policy and legislation is diametrically opposed to organisation health and sustainability.
Senior executive	Herding cats in a dustbowl where few want to explore past the edges, they just mill and hide. Being a meerkat, spending time in the burrow (office) getting on with stuff, and regularly sticking my head out so I know what is going on and immediately respond to what's important for survival. Being a sheepdog, you have a whole flock of very keen people ready to run off in all directions and you need to keep them focused and heading in the right direction. Steering a ship that is slowly moving forward because the current is moving very fast.
Education manager	An Air traffic controller, decisions need to be made continually, correctly and in the minimum time. Being a rabbit caught in crossfire. Being given responsibility for a luxury car and not being allowed to drive it. Keeping bees alive in a jar. Need to keep the passion levels (i.e. buzz) high whilst harnessing this energy into teaching. Most staff have passion for their industry and need encouragement into their teaching and learning.
Corporate manager	Being a fighter jet pilot: keeping hands firmly on the controls, while closely monitoring the instrument displays and regularly looking towards the distant horizon. Cooking a soufflé - when it rises it is the most wonderful experience and all enjoy the experience, but when not everything comes together perfectly, at the right time, it looks unappealing and tastes terrible.
Senior educator	Being on a roller coaster, there are as many high's as there are low's, lots of thrills and excitement coupled with fear of the unknown and at the same time the anticipation of what will be new around the next bend! Skating on thin ice; when it works well it's graceful, exhilarating and rewarding, but there's a looming sense of danger and it can turn wet and cold very quickly.

Building and maintaining strong links with industry in order to meet their training needs.

What VET leaders do – the focus of their work

The analogies paint interesting images about leadership, providing general insights into leaders' perceptions of their roles. To build a rich picture of leadership it is helpful to probe further and to find out what leaders report as the focus of their work. A review of research and practical resources was conducted to shape up a list of work tasks that could serve to test empirically what VET leaders do in their work. These tasks were grouped into several scales.

Figure 2 reports average scores for these scales and the defined leadership roles. Tellingly, managing organisational change is flagged as highly important by leaders in all roles. Leaders in more senior ranks engage in more organisational planning and development, and more networking and community engagement. With the notable exception of leaders who identified as being directly involved in teaching, teaching and learning was flagged by all other leaders as the least important facet of their work. Given that teaching and learning is the core business, this finding is of significant concern.

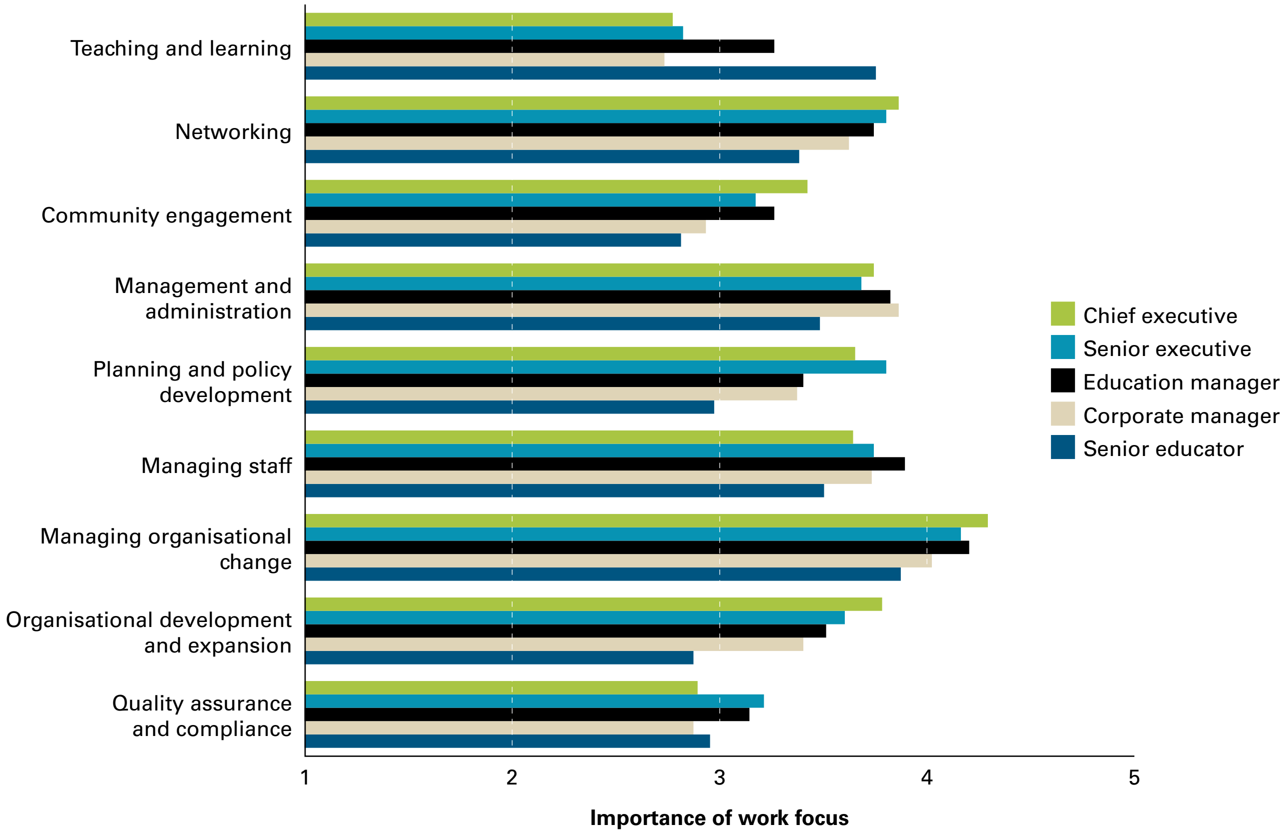


Figure 2: Variation in work focus by role group (scale average scores)

The pressures shaping leaders' work

VET leadership is shaped by a range of organisational and external forces. Leaders are under constant pressure to be more responsive to the mounting expectations of government, the fluctuating requirements of industry, and the diverse needs of communities and individuals. Commercial pressures have been with VET leaders for some time, but leaders now face new pressures arising from the elevation of VET as a key vehicle for national workforce development and productivity.

Analysing the pressures leaders face provides critical insight into their work. These drivers shape people's aspirations and daily work, and they also influence the outcomes. Hence understanding the work of VET leaders requires not just analysis of what they do, but also of the pressures shaping their work. In responding to the survey, VET leaders were asked to rate the relative importance of a series of influences shaping their roles.

Figure 3 links perceptions of work pressures with role groups. Again, the indicative nature of the role groupings must be affirmed, but nonetheless very interesting patterns jump out. Notable is the low emphasis put by most leaders on student-related pressures. Industry and regulatory pressures are higher, but still lower than might be expected. By contrast, leaders put most emphasis on productivity-focused influences – institutional change, productivity improvement, and competition. Interesting patterns emerge across roles, particularly in relation to institutional change.

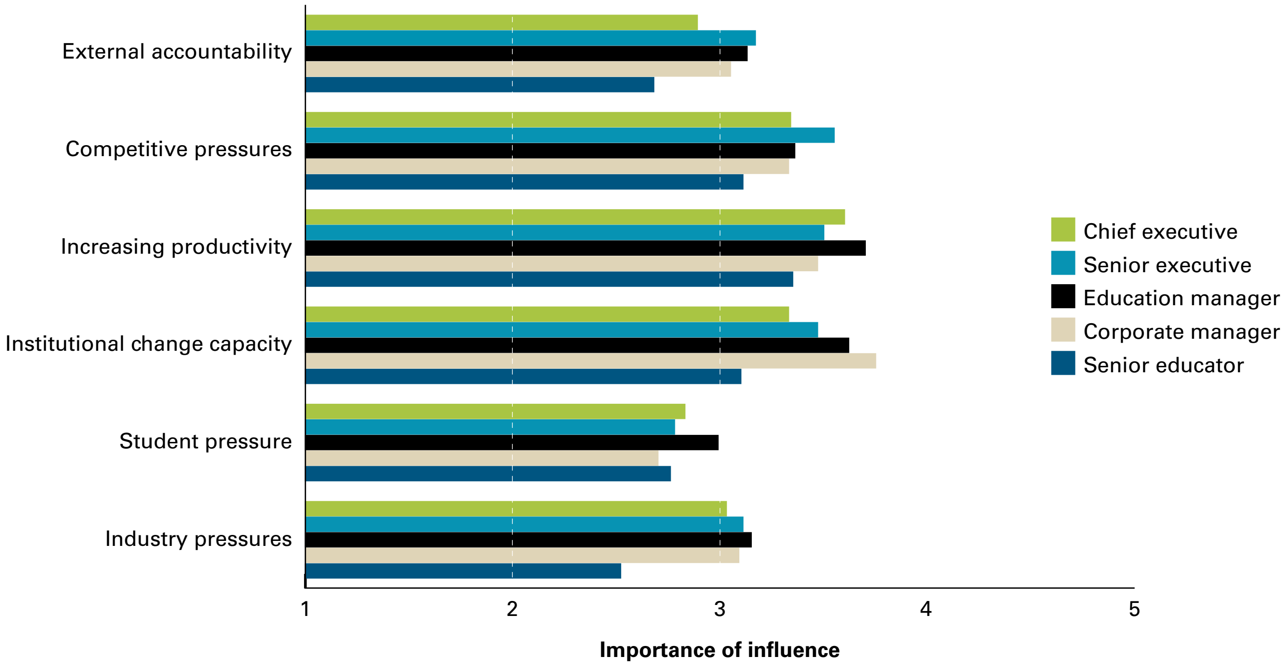


Figure 3: Variation in work pressures by role group (scale average scores)

Indicators of effective VET leadership

VET leadership is not only composed of what leaders do and the externalities that shape this work, but also by what leaders themselves desire to do and achieve. Leadership is intrinsically aspirational, and exploring this dimension – specifically, what VET leaders see as the indicators of effective leadership – further rounds out a picture of VET leadership in Australia.

Considered broadly, perceptions of effective VET leadership appear to have changed little over the last decade. Core capabilities identified at the start of the decade (TDA, 2001; Callan, 2001; Mulcahy, 2003) and that are still advocated (Callan et al., 2007) include providing corporate vision and direction, focusing strategically, achieving outcomes, and developing and empowering people. These core capabilities are very similar to the ones advocated by the Australian Public Service's Senior Executive Leadership Capability Framework (APS, 2009) and the United Kingdom's Management and Leadership National Occupation Standards (LLUK, 2009). It is useful to take stock of these and related developments.

Insights from the literature were distilled into a list of 33 specific indicators that VET leaders might consider relevant as indicators of effective performance. These focus on positive implementation and impact rather than indicators concerned with the quality of inputs, which are seen as being necessary but not sufficient to indicate effective performance. The survey asked respondents to rate the importance of each indicator as a criterion for judging effectiveness in their role.

Table 3 lists each of the 33 indicators ranked by the indicative role classifications. Although the variation between those performance indicators rated low and high was not great, those rated down the list tended to concentrate on systems pertaining to learning and quality assurance. In contrast, the top five areas concentrated on achieving positive outcomes, funding and producing significant improvements in learning and training quality.

To summarise – analysing what VET leaders reporting doing in their jobs suggests that while they are attuned to the education-focused demands of their roles, they now need new capabilities to respond to internal and external developments. VET leaders have the capacity to manage industry and clients, but they need skills to deal with contexts that are made increasingly complex by tensions between competition and regulation. This requires the deployment of commercial practices in ways that are sensitive to underlying educational motives and objectives.

Interestingly, results from the national survey show that in many respects the concerns of leaders are only loosely aligned with the broader pressures confronting the VET sector – graduate outcomes, quality and education fundamentals. In broad terms, VET leaders are focused on input-side factors such as student numbers and funding. A challenge for the future involves developing a more outcomes-focused orientation, one centered on effective change implementation, on delivery, and on high-quality graduate outcomes.

To identify the powerful forces which shape leadership, the study established criteria seen to mark out effective performance in each role. It highlighted a set of indicators identified by VET leaders as being the ones most important in making judgements about the effective delivery of each role. Identifying indicators of effective performance is important, as it is these which, ideally, drive leaders' aspirations and behaviours. Leaders are driven by these outcomes which, in turn, play an important role in shaping leadership.

Encourage and support new and existing leaders to gain formal qualifications in Educational Leadership and management.

Table 3: Indicators of leadership effectiveness by role (item ranks)

	Chief executive	Senior executive	Education manager	Corporate manager	Senior educator	All leaders
Achieving high quality graduate outcomes	3	1	1	1	3	1
Delivering successful team projects	6	7	3	4	5	2
Delivering agreed tasks or projects on time and to specification	8	3	9	2	2	3
Successful re-registration audits	11	5	4	3	7	4
Receiving positive feedback from the community	1	2	2	8	22	5
Winning resources for your area of responsibility	8	4	5	6	9	6
Establishing a collegial working environment	5	9	8	7	24	7
Bringing innovative policies and practices into action	18	11	14	5	17	8
Receiving positive feedback from industry	13	6	13	12	10	9
Improving student satisfaction ratings	10	19	19	9	20	10
Receiving positive user feedback for your area of responsibility	20	17	15	10	25	11
Enhanced representation of equity groups	2	21	12	14	14	12
Formative involvement of external stakeholders in your work	4	18	7	24	4	13
Maintaining high levels of staff support	7	8	25	13	21	14
Successful implementation of new initiatives	28	15	22	11	19	15
Achieving a positive financial outcome for your area of responsibility	23	24	10	20	1	16
Promoting your teams achievements	22	12	21	15	17	17
Securing competitive funds or increasing revenue	13	9	17	18	29	18
Winning awards and prizes	16	16	20	23	6	19
Achieving positive outcomes for other staff in your division or area	17	13	6	27	16	20
Producing significant improvements in learning and training quality	18	14	16	26	7	21
Increased student completion rates	25	20	18	16	28	22
Achieving goals set for your own professional development	15	22	11	28	12	23
Producing future leaders	11	23	23	22	23	24
Successful variation to scope applications	23	24	24	25	11	25
Achieving positive outcomes from external reviews of the area	21	27	26	19	15	26
Receiving positive feedback from enterprises	30	26	29	17	13	27
Being invited to present to key groups	29	28	27	21	27	28
Meeting enrolment targets	26	29	30	30	26	29
Achieving a high profile for your area of responsibility	27	30	28	31	31	30
Implementing successful learning systems or infrastructures	31	31	31	29	30	31
Effective management of quality and compliance	32	32	32	32	32	32

Evidence-based strategies for improving practice

- **Use the list of tasks to look at what practicing leaders actually do, and align this with role and organisational requirements.**
- **Support programs that help leaders understand the characteristics of change, strategies for making RTOs more change-capable, and how to balance commercial and educational forces.**
- **Implement programs that help leaders develop systems thinking and, in particular, link education processes and outcomes with commercial realities.**
- **Review the influences shaping leaders' roles, and coordinate institutional research that helps leaders make operational sense of challenges, complex systems and emerging opportunities.**
- **Align indicators of effective leadership with performance indicators, and revise incentive structures where necessary.**
- **Workshop these high-level findings with cohorts of leaders, using the data and conversations as a springboard for understanding and developing practice, and in particular developing new narratives about leadership.**
- **Use an analysis of work roles, pressures and incentives to forecast looming flashpoints and build space that helps people lead.**

Capabilities for effective VET leadership

While the previous results looked at the experience of VET leaders – the work leaders do, the influences shaping their work, and the indicators of effective performance – the study extended the analysis of effectiveness by reviewing capabilities and competencies that leaders flag as important for successful delivery of their roles. As in the precursor study (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008) the evidence affirms that a specific set of capabilities centring around personal and interpersonal intelligence, along with a contingent and diagnostic way of thinking, are critical to effective VET leadership.

As the following analysis suggestions, 'effectiveness' is not a neutral term but one which requires careful elucidation. Conceptually, effectiveness is linked with productivity, targeting and delivery – achieving things in the right ways. Effectiveness is not the same as efficiency, although the terms are often conflated in management contexts. The current analysis attaches the concept of effectiveness to the style or stance rather than the outcomes of leadership, and sees this effectiveness as multidimensional in nature.

The study is driven by a conceptual perspective on leadership capability. This framework has underpinned the study's design, and has been tested through the empirical work. It is based on the framework validated in studies of successful early career university graduates in nine professions (Vescio, 2005), in a detailed study of 322 effective school leaders (Scott, 2003), and in the precursor higher education leadership study (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008). It draws on insights developed in previous studies on how VET leaders manage change (Scott, 1999).The framework provides a window into much of the literature reviewed above, as well as the empirical literature reviewed by Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008).

Figure 4 shows three overlapping aspects of leadership capability: personal, interpersonal and cognitive. These domains are underpinned by two overlapping forms of skill and knowledge: role-specific and generic leadership competencies. The overlapping nature of the framework indicates that all five dimensions are necessary for effective performance as a VET leader, and

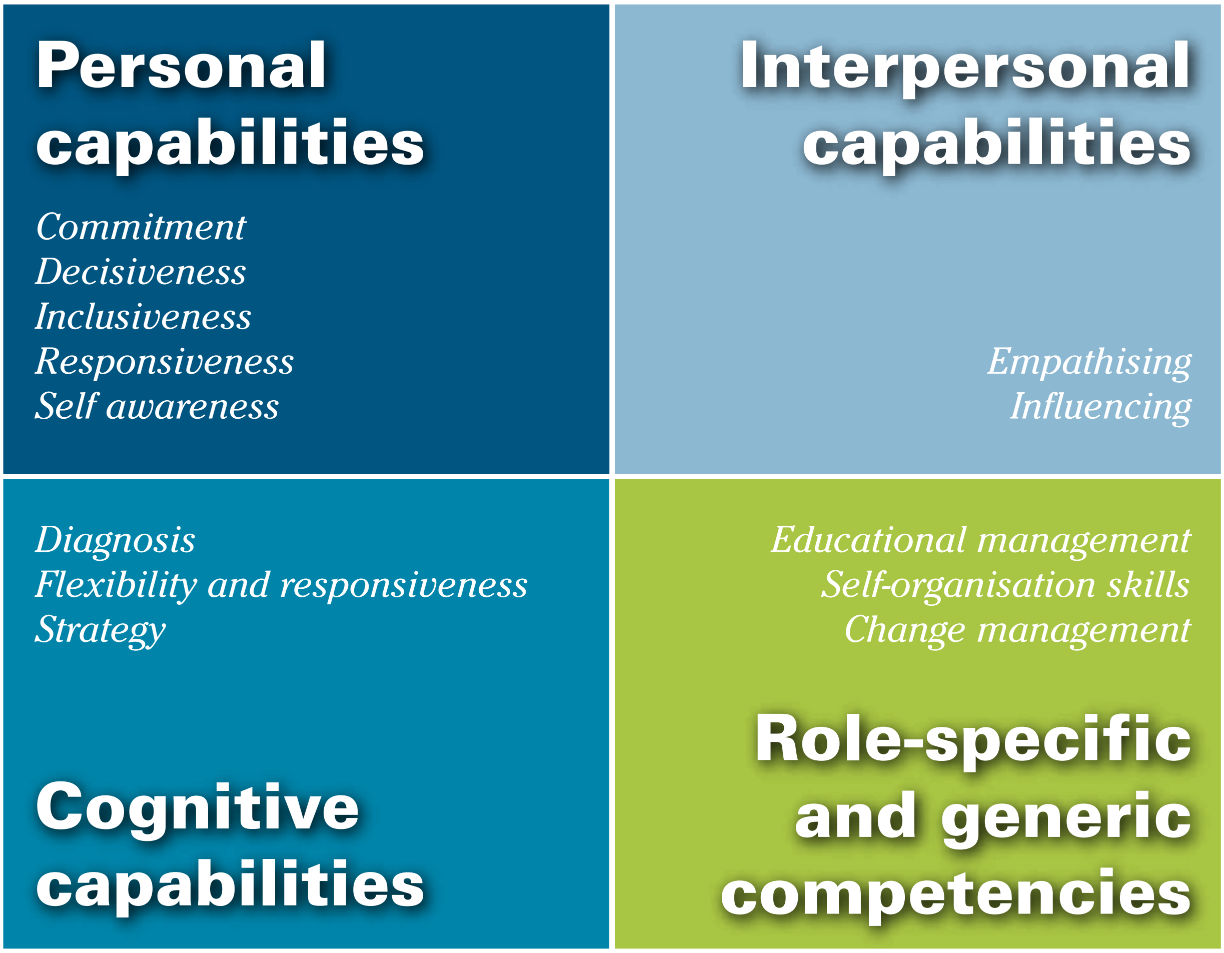

Personal capabilities
Commitment
Decisiveness
Inclusiveness
Responsiveness
Self awareness
Interpersonal capabilities
Empathising
Influencing
Diagnosis
Flexibility and responsiveness
Strategy
Cognitive capabilities
Educational management
Self-organisation skills
Change management
Role-specific and generic competencies

Figure 4: Leadership capability framework

that the five domains identified both feed into and off each other. A number of scales are flagged in dialogue boxes. These are summarised below.

The leadership framework makes a distinction between 'capabilities' and 'competencies'. It is helpful to clarity these two commonly used (and confused) concepts, a confusion compounded in the context of VET where the term 'competence' is a cornerstone of the sectoral nomenclature. For the purposes of this study, 'capability' refers to largely intangible or holistic psychological qualities that may be characterised as an enduring talent or gift. In contrast, 'competence' refers to knowledge and skill that can be documented in discrete units, learned and demonstrated. Prior leadership research has focused on both these dimensions of leadership (Rankin, 2004; Byham, 1996; Tucker, 1992; Aziz et al., 2005; Ramsden, 1998), with USA-based research putting particular emphasis on capability.

The framework assumes that leadership involves:

- reading human and non-human situations;

More rigorous selection process that addresses personal capabilities and emotional intelligence.

- interpreting situations and problems;
- forming and drawing on response strategies — often with only partial information; and
- implementing solutions through a mixture of generic and role-specific competencies.

As this sequence suggests, the framework helps clarify how effective VET leaders work with, learn from and respond to changing circumstances. It allows for the fact that leadership is a highly contextualised phenomenon. It blends the competency and capability perspectives on leadership. It emphasises that possessing a high level of skill and knowledge about how one's organisation operates or what makes for a productive approach to education is necessary but is not sufficient for effective VET leadership. It is also essential to have a highly developed emotional intelligence and a contingent way of thinking that enables people to know when to deploy these competencies.

Figure 5 summarises the ratings given by responding leaders to each of the capability scales. Average scores for both VET higher education (HE) leaders are also included. This summary shows that all leadership capabilities and competencies are ranked highly with the notable exception of competencies associated with learning and teaching. This corroborates other insights from the survey and the workshops that it is planning and leading change in increasingly commercial contexts that is the focus of VET leadership, rather than education-specific matters.

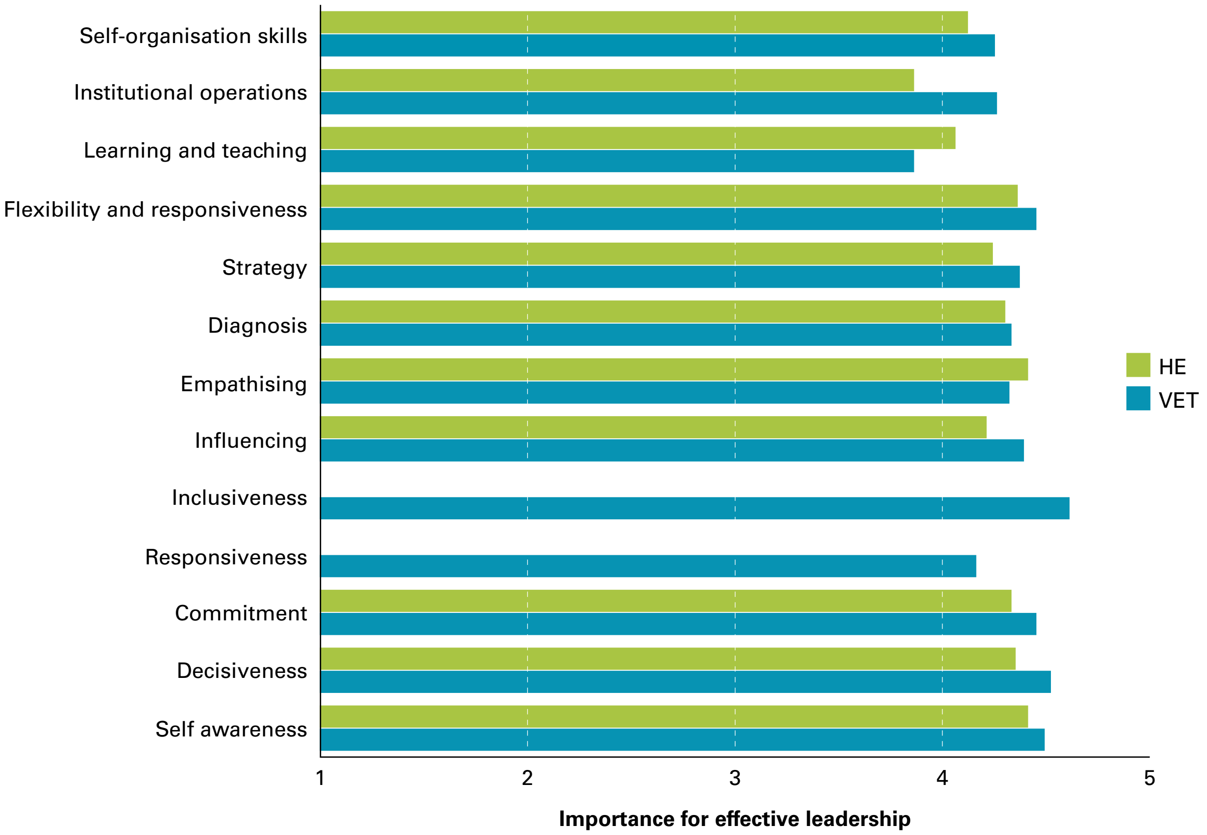


Figure 5: Leadership capabilities importance (scale average scores)

Juxtaposing the VET and HE results is telling, for it suggests that the same underlying capabilities drive effective leadership in both areas of tertiary education. This commonality carries important implications for building tertiary-wide conceptions of effective leadership.

This framework affirms and extends earlier work with higher education and school leaders. Such cross-sector parallels are important for they affirm the value of helping leaders build a portfolio of skills that are somewhat portable across contexts. Broadly, this raises questions about whether these are generic capabilities for leading professional organisations. Identifying a common substrate can do much to help focus the development of leadership capacity.

The framework bridges two perspectives on leadership – a focus on people's talent and capability, and a focus on people's capacity to learn and implement generic and role-specific competencies. Evidence from the 327 leaders who participated in this study affirms that effective leadership involves both individual talent and a situated capacity to implement. Specifically, leadership involves reading the human and practical dimensions of opportunities and uncertainties, diagnosing a situation's salient characteristics, identifying and selecting appropriate solutions, and implementing effective responses.

Underpinned by interviews, surveys workshops and previous research, this framework paints a vivid picture of how VET leaders manage change, and also what change-capable leadership looks like. While this conceptually grounded the model is not complex, it offers a sophisticated instrument for understanding and building leadership capacity. Coupled with insights from the previous chapter, it offers a rich picture of contemporary VET leadership, and flags those nuances of particular relevance to effective performance. It also yields evidence for developing a suite of resources and strategies – the focus of the next chapter

Evidence-based strategies for improving practice

- **Develop leaders' understanding of the capabilities that underpin effective leadership, of the characteristics of change, and of how change plays out in RTOs.**
- **Identify context-specific management strategies that leaders can use to make RTOs more change-capable, and to work productively with ambiguity and the unexpected.**
- **Map existing selection, development and promotions resources against the validated leadership capability framework, noting overlaps and areas for revision.**
- **Embed these findings into the organisation – report in staff orientation and induction programs, invite current leaders to reflect on these characteristics, and use this validated perspective to identify future leaders.**
- **Use this validated framework as a basis for benchmarking across like RTOs, looking towards forming broader profession-, industry- or tertiary-wide conceptions of leadership.**

Putting those with expertise in education into leadership positions

Educating VET leaders

The future capacity of VET in Australia will be underpinned by the capability and regeneration of its leadership. Building the capacity of Australia's VET leaders, in terms of both capability and numbers, hinges in no small way on effective professional learning. Clearly professional learning is not essential for leadership – many leaders have little formal training in leadership prior to assuming their roles and perform well. But leadership training is a helpful and undoubtedly useful means of ensuring leadership is done well.

Yet this study's findings suggest that leadership programs may lack currency, and that there is a need to recast the focus and approach of leadership support and training. New programs need to focus on concrete change management skills, working through complex real-world problems, and leading change in ambiguous environments. The more authentic and active modes of learning were advocated by VET leaders, who expressed an overwhelming preference for practice-based and self-managed, as opposed to formal, forms of professional learning.

Unless leadership training programs target the capabilities that are essential for effective leadership then they will miss the mark and fail to provide the boost to VET leadership that Australia requires.

To test whether leadership programs experienced by practising leaders have been effective, survey respondents were asked to rate the relative importance of the various statements that make up the study's leadership capability framework. They were asked to identify the extent to which leadership development programs to date had focused on each of the aspects of capability they rated as most important.

Figure 6 presents the results, with 1 indicating 'low importance' and 5 indicating 'high importance'. These results indicate that only a moderate amount of professional development has been devoted to enhancing the capabilities that respondents identify as being the most telling for effective leadership. Average scores for selection and promotion are even lower, indicating a misalignment between the capabilities identified as important for effective leadership and how leaders are identified and promoted.

Leadership can be learned and taught in many different ways. Spotlighting not only the preferred focus areas for leadership development but also the preferred strategies is important in order to ensure that training programs are most effective.

Working from extensive review of the adult learning and professional development literature (Tough, 1977; Foley, 2000), prior research with higher education leaders (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008), recent research on productive learning in higher education (Coates, 2006), and a parallel study of leadership learning in school education (Scott, 2003), this study enumerated different strategies for learning leadership. These were shortlisted into 21 strategies which, in turn, were clustered into three broader styles: self-managed learning, practice-based learning, and formal leadership development.

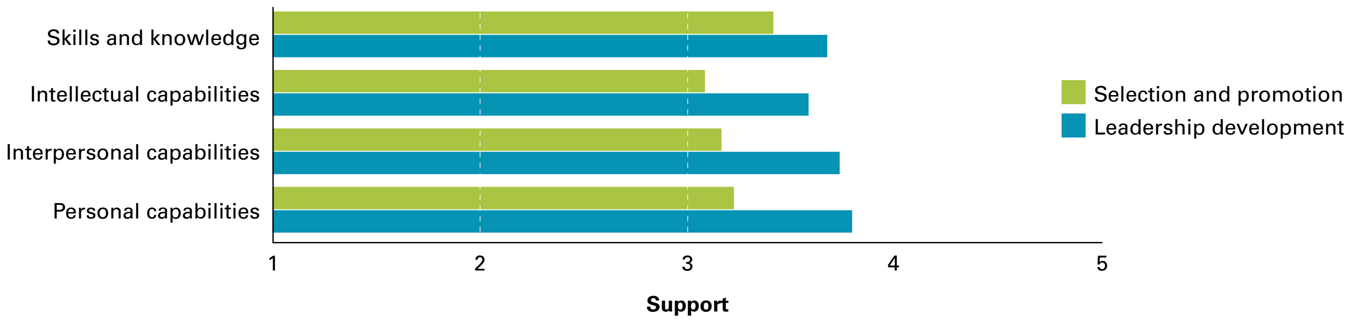


Figure 6: Emphasis given to various capabilities (scale average scores)

Establishing and maintaining relationships with customers in order to design learning programs that suit the market.

Table 4: Approaches for learning leadership (item average scores)

	Chief executive	Senior executive	Education manager	Corporate manager	Senior educator	All leaders
Learning on-the-job	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.0	4.0	4.1
Study of real-life workplace problems	3.3	3.8	3.8	3.6	3.8	3.7
Ad hoc conversations about work with people in similar roles	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.4	3.6
Undertaking a tertiary qualification relevant to leadership	3.7	3.4	3.6	3.4	4.2	3.6
Being involved in informal mentoring/coaching	3.2	3.6	3.4	3.8	3.7	3.5
Participating in peer networks within the organisation	3.4	3.4	3.5	3.5	4.0	3.5
Participating in peer networks beyond the organisation	4.1	3.5	3.4	3.5	3.5	3.5
Undertaking self-guided reading on leadership	3.5	2.9	3.2	3.6	3.4	3.3
Being involved in formal mentoring/coaching programs	3.4	3.1	3.4	3.4	3.5	3.3
Completing formal leadership programs given by external providers	2.8	3.2	3.4	3.3	3.3	3.3
Participating in 360 degree feedback reviews based on known leadership capabilities	3.4	3.0	3.3	3.3	3.4	3.3
Attending conferences	3.2	3.3	3.2	3.2	3.5	3.2
Participating in annual performance reviews	3.4	3.2	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.2
Completing formal leadership programs provided by your organisation	2.6	2.8	3.2	3.2	3.4	3.1
Participating in leadership development programs which are custom-tailored to your needs	3.1	3.2	3.0	3.2	3.1	3.1
Undertaking site visits to other institutions or agencies	3.4	3.4	3.0	3.0	2.9	3.1
Participating in VET leadership seminars	2.8	3.2	3.1	3.0	3.5	3.1
Involvement in professional leadership groups or associations	3.4	2.9	2.9	3.0	3.5	3.0
Undertaking work-placements or exchanges	2.6	2.4	3.1	3.0	3.6	3.0
Shadowing a peer from another organisation	2.3	2.6	2.5	2.5	3.4	2.6
Accessing leadership information on the internet	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.7	2.5	2.6

In the study's online survey the 327 respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of each of the above learning approaches in assisting their development. A code of 1 was used to flag 'low' and 5 as 'high'. The results are given in Table 4.

The figures show that most leaders express a preference for practice-based learning, followed by formal development activities and finally self-managed learning. It is possible that the relatively low ratings for many of the more formal development activities may be due to poor execution or misalignment with the focus of training rather than their intrinsic worth.

The relative emphases given to different kinds of leadership learning were largely sustained across the demographic and leadership sub-groups assessed as part of the survey, with the notable exception of age. A leader's age was inversely related to support for both practice-based and formal leadership development, but not for self-managed learning.

Along with looking at specific approaches to leadership development, the survey asked leaders to identify the one key step that their organisation could do to improve the selection and development of leaders. The following list summarises (in no particular order) the suggestions that were made:

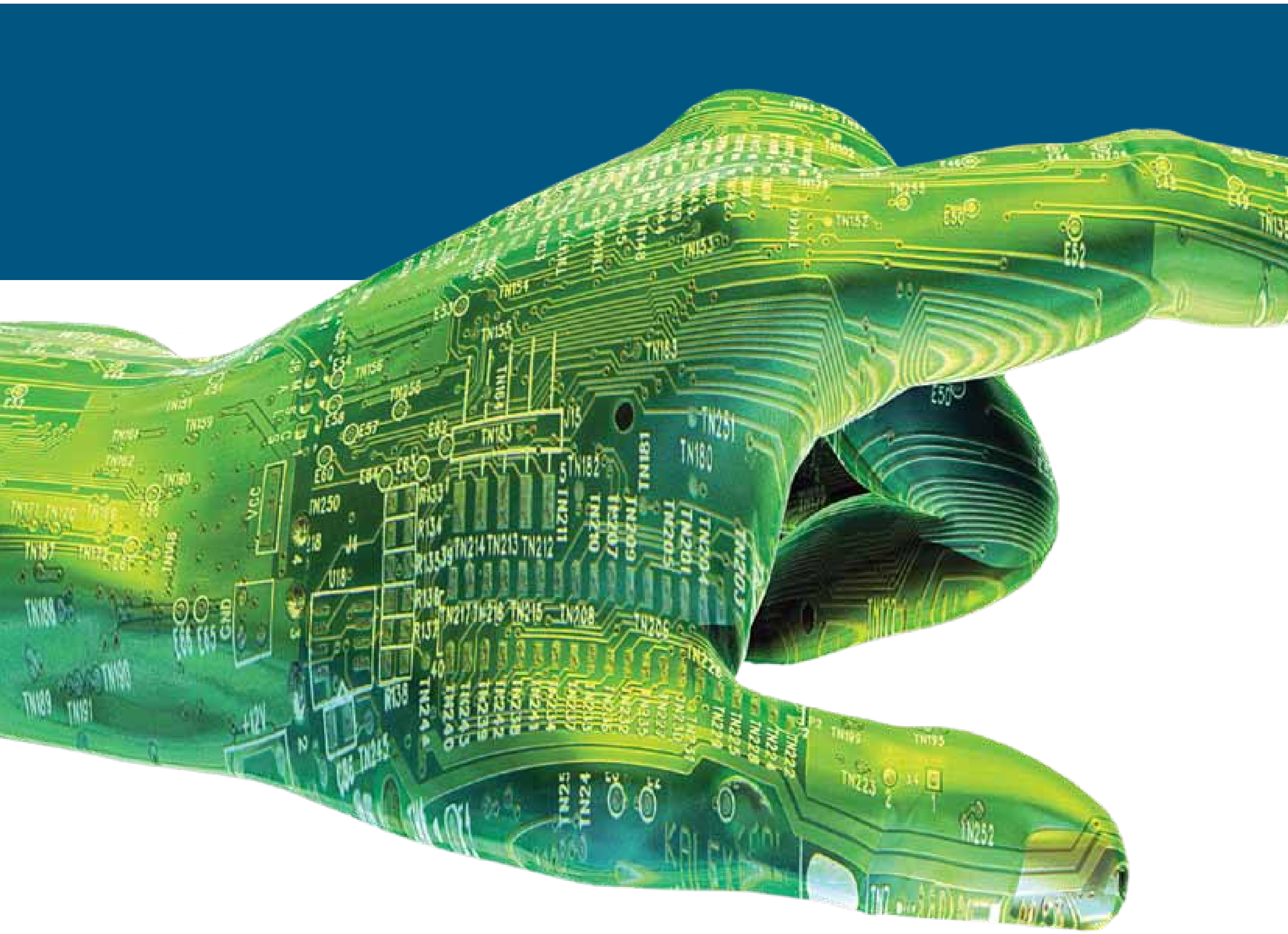
- developing a robust capability framework to set expectations and serve as a basis for building leadership capability;
- actively identifying potential leaders and accelerating the advancement of younger staff;
- developing clear pathways for leadership development that highlight opportunities and requirements;
- implementing personalised and targeted programs, and particularly mechanisms for immersing emerging leaders through mentoring, exchanges, acting roles and work shadowing;
- greater formalisation of leadership development – potentially as a baseline requirement – and incorporating training programs and peer support into ongoing professional learning;
- generating space and capacity for people to lead – finding a way of giving people space for creativity, reflection and growth;
- evidence-based and independent promotions processes, based on people's skills as well as experience and qualifications; and
- diversifying leadership teams in terms of demographics, professional backgrounds and existing alliances.

An evident theme underlying these suggestions is that more could and should be done to boost leadership development, particularly among emerging leaders. The need for effort across the board was stressed – for boosting the conceptualisation, identification, selection, diversification, development, promotion, support and recognition of leaders and leadership. Considered broadly, this could be seen as a general call to give increased definition and structure to the profession of VET leadership.

Various approaches can be used to give more structure to the definition of VET leadership. A good way to begin is by drawing together the research-based pictures presented in this study. Such perspectives of leadership have the potential to act as a springboard for building more extensive professional frameworks that define different types and standards of leadership. Qualification expectations and professional learning can then be derived from such frameworks. In turn, this can provide an evidence-based foundation for building capacity for the future.

In summary, like their peers in higher education, VET leaders prefer to learn leadership in ways that involve supported experience of, interaction with and reflection on challenging, uncertain and relevant real-world situations. Key ingredients of this observation include:

- support – engaging leaders with the confidence and opportunity to test new ideas, and providing tailored structures that help them work through complexity and uncertainty;
- experience – being exposed to and involved with challenging and thought-provoking situations;
- interaction – optimally, people 'get involved' as active participants when learning leadership;
- reflection – training should support leaders in taking stock and diagnosing their reading of situations, and how they have planned and enacted a response;
- relevant – the training must engage a leader and be aligned with a leaders' current or future work; and



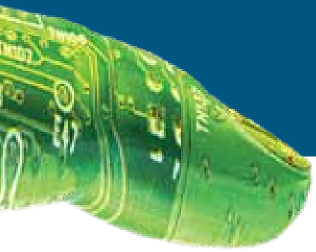
- real-world – the situation, whether simulated or 'ready made', should be complex and realistic, and as with all learning it must be pitched at threshold levels that challenge learner's knowledge and mental models.

Leadership development and learning programs should be reviewed and aligned with the findings of the study concerning how and what VET leaders prefer to learn. Where possible, programs should be underpinned by evidence-based insights into effective professional practice. In doing this it is recommended that RTOs set up learning networks for people in the same leadership roles.

These broad criteria could be read as affirming one-on-one mentoring or coaching as the ideal format for all leadership development. This is not necessarily the case, and nor is it often the most efficient or scalable approach. As with the practice of leadership itself, many forms of leadership education will be networked or distributed rather than solo in style. Hence this summary does not attempt to sow a formulaic approach for leadership development, and neither does it attempt to define in a prescriptive way what leadership development should necessarily be.

These insights have the potential to play a major role in reshaping the approaches which are used for leadership selection. Current position descriptions, performance management criteria, selection and succession plans should be reviewed against the evidence-based presented in this report. Items in generic performance management systems should be checked for validity and relative importance against this study's findings, which has explored leadership in detail in a VET context. Organisations should build key findings concerning the priority areas of focus in each leadership role, along with the performance indicators and the capabilities identified as counting most for effective performance, into revised position descriptions, succession plans, selection procedures, development processes and performance management systems.

Arguably the most important implication of this study is the need to implement tested strategies for identifying and developing aspiring leaders. Given the size and significance of the challenge these need to be structured and well planned. Yet at the same time they must be nimble and facilitate devolved practice-based learning. They must be sufficiently flexible to spot and



accelerate capability through a suite of pathways rather than make essential a stepwise progression.

Leadership education carries the weighty responsibility of making leading VET an attractive proposition to a new generation of leaders. As current leaders retire, it must attract, engage and retain new people, both from inside and outside the sector. In doing this, it has the capacity to map out new conceptualisations of the profession. Education must be individually tailored, but developed against leadership standards to assist with definition of the profession. Organisations and governments must continue to highlight the importance of VET leadership in order to attract a new generation of leaders as the current, older generation of leaders leaves the system.

Developing leadership capacity is important in itself, but it also carries wider implications for the overall formation of the VET workforce. Hence there is a need for broader workforce development agendas to address leadership development, and also to unfold leadership development in ways that advance the workforce.

Evidence-based strategies for improving practice

- **Revise current selection approaches against evidence of the capabilities required for effective leadership.**
- **Re-validate position descriptions, succession plans, selection procedures, development processes and performance management systems**
- **Design and implement RTO-specific and more general industry-wide strategies and pathways for identifying and developing aspiring leaders.**
- **Implement more practice-based approaches to learning leadership, ensuring that these are based on evidence of what works and are scalable.**
- **Blend formal, structured leadership development programs with informal/incidental approaches to self learning.**
- **Use tools such as the Online Leadership Learning System to enhance the science of leadership education by embedding the collection of evidence.**
- **Review existing programs to ensure currency, and focus professional learning on boosting leaders' capacity to understand external change and to propel internal change.**
- **Define a new conceptualisation of VET leadership that sets forth key qualities and rewards of the profession, and seeds growth of a standards framework that acknowledges progression and success.**

VET leadership for the future

The Australian VET sector needs strategies for managing the looming leadership succession crisis, and for helping VET leaders excel in times of change and uncertainty. But too little is known about leaders and their work – what leaders do, what influences and aspirations shape their role, and what capabilities and competencies underpin effective performance. This study has shed light on these facets of VET leadership, and insights on focusing leadership selection, learning and promotion.

In broad terms, the findings profile leadership as focused on managing change. This learning and growth requires a change-capable culture, and the opportunities and resources to allow leaders the room to grow. Hence the findings carry implications for leaders and for their organisations as well. A focus on effective change implementation is central because of the need for RTOs to continually adapt to a uncertain and shifting operating environment.

Change is evidently an important facet of leadership, but there is more to leading VET than leading change. As the reports from leaders in this study convey, leadership often involves sustaining consistency and direction, in volatile contexts or otherwise. To some extent, a preoccupation with change is concerning given the core business of teaching and learning. Constantly responding to shifting goalposts, or focusing on shifting goalposts, may be deterring from attention to education.

The study has produced information on what VET leaders do in their jobs. This data is important, for much of the knowledge and understanding of VET leadership has been fragmented and incomplete. Yet it seems difficult to advance leadership without a cogent picture of leaders' experiences and leadership practice. Results from the survey have helped to build insight into what leaders see as the criteria for effective performance. Demystifying VET leadership is an important step to addressing issues of role function and succession, such as recruitment and ongoing development.

Analysing leaders' duties suggests that while VET leaders have adjusted to education-focused demands of their roles, they now need new capabilities to respond to change pressures. Leaders have the capacity to manage industry and clients, but they need skills to deal with new complex contexts that carry tensions between competition and regulation.

The results show that in many respects the concerns of leaders are only loosely aligned with the broader pressures confronting the VET sector – graduate outcomes, quality and education fundamentals. In broad terms, VET leaders are focused on input-side factors such as student numbers and funding. A challenge for the future involves developing a more outcomes-focused orientation, one centered on effective change implementation, on delivery, and on high-quality graduate outcomes.

To identify the powerful forces which shape leadership, the study established criteria seen to mark out effective performance in each role. It highlighted a set of indicators identified by VET leaders as being the ones most important in making judgements about the effective delivery of each role. Identifying indicators of effective performance is important, as it is these which, ideally, drive leaders' aspirations and behaviours. Leaders are driven by these outcomes which play an important role in shaping leadership.

In line with the initial aims, this study has produced an empirically-validated leadership capability framework. The capabilities are based on a conceptual model of leadership grounded in educational and psychological theory, and empirically validated in the survey of VET and, previously, higher education and school leaders. It has yielded evidence for developing a suite of resources and strategies that organisations can use to develop leadership, along with data on which forms of formal/informal support were most useful for developing leadership capabilities.

Read together, findings from this study propel the need for new conceptualisations of VET leadership. While the results affirm prior trends, new narratives appear to be driving contemporary leadership – such as competition, commercial pressures, and developing change-capable cultures. Our understanding of leaders needs to change accordingly, and these new understandings need to be drafted in ways that advance policy and practice. Fundamentally, this should involve raising the profile of VET leadership.

Part of this new understanding should involve developing industry-wide understandings of different

Move those with leadership aspirations into different leadership positions in the organisation for at least brief "real life" experiences with mentoring support and provide reports on performance for selection panels. Provide some funding to supplement costs of relevant formal quals.

leadership roles. The large number of role descriptors and loose association between roles and activities highlights a lack of role clarity. This has implications for, among other issues, the mobility and recognition of VET leaders within and from outside the sector.

Role confusion and role clarity are both contributing factors in what the study brings out as another finding about the world of VET leaders. Many leaders reported inconsistency between the expectations and requirements of the role and the resources – not least time and thinking space – available to deliver.

More broadly, while the term 'leader' implies influence, innovation and development, many VET leaders reported feeling hamstrung by changing expectations of what it means to be a leader in VET and the contexts in which they work. People are only able to exercise leadership to the extent that organisational conditions configure and allow for that to happen.

Hence the findings also affirm the need to build more change-capable cultures. Reports from leaders suggest that at present many RTOs are unable to respond effectively in increasingly competitive operating environments.

The study examined how to improve the focus and approach of leadership development. The findings suggest that many current programs lack currency. New programs need to focus on concrete change management skills and leading in times of change. More authentic and active modes of learning were advocated by VET leaders. In their survey responses, leaders expressed an overwhelming preference for practice-based and self-managed leadership development as opposed to formal forms of professional learning. Leaders say they learn leadership most effectively from other people and their own experiences of leading.

The findings also indicate that the selection of VET leaders should be shaped by an understanding of the characteristics of effective leadership. The findings highlight the need to ensure a better alignment between formal processes and the actual activities, effectiveness indicators and capabilities necessary for successful performance. There is scope, as a result, for the findings from this study to play a major role in reshaping the approaches which are used for leadership selection. Current position descriptions, performance management criteria, selection and succession plans should be reviewed against the study's findings.

More broadly, there is scope for converting the research-driven picture of leadership formed through this study into a professional framework that captures different kinds and levels of performance. The outcomes of the current research are not singularly sufficient to underpin this framework, but they affirm the need and value of further work on this front. An integral part of this framework could be the specification of entry-level qualifications for VET leadership, as well as ongoing professional development.

This study has advanced new thoughts about VET leadership, including that there is much more to be known. Two specific directions are defined. First, there is a need to ripple this study into larger national research on the tertiary workforce and leaders. Second, and optimally in a coordinated fashion, there is a need to replicate such inquiry in more detailed fashion within specific roles, and with sub-sections of the VET industry. Enacting more evidence-based approaches to leadership development should, in future, make such work routine.

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LH Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Management
Level 1 715 Swanston Street
Carlton VIC 3010 Australia

Telephone +61 3 8344 0756
Facsimile +61 3 9347 8922
Email martin-institute@unimelb.edu.au
Website www.mihelm.unimelb.edu.au

Australian Council for Educational Research
19 Prospect Hill Road (Private Bag 55)
Camberwell VIC 3124 Australia

Telephone +61 3 9277 5555
Facsimile +61 3 9277 5500
Email highereducation@acer.edu.au
Website www.acer.edu.au

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