

The Managers' Role in the Professional Development of Teachers in a Vocational Education and Training Institution

Kenny Muscat

Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology
kenny.muscat@mcast.edu.mt

Abstract

Vocational Education and Training (VET) requires teachers that are dual professionals, with vocational and pedagogical expertise. Their professional development differs from that of other teachers. Several factors affect the VET teachers' professional development, and while they are the drivers of their own growth, other actors, such as managers of education institutions shape such growth.

This paper focuses on the role of managers in the professional development of VET teachers in a state-funded post-compulsory education institution in Malta. A qualitative research approach, based on Grounded Theory, uncovers the extent of managerial involvement and influence. Primary data are collected from four interviews with experienced managers in VET.

The paper reveals that while acknowledging that they can do more, managers are contributing to professional growth by supporting, empowering, and motivating teachers, and by facilitating engagement with professional development.

Keywords: managers' role; vocational education and training (VET); professional development of VET teachers; education institution.

Introduction

VET is crucial for nations as this form of education enhances prospects of employment, the economy and social cohesion (Thake, 2018). The context of this research is VET, which has registered increased popularity in recent years.

In a fast-changing world, professional development is key to ensure that employees adapt and remain effective in their work. VET teachers are no exception, especially since vocational education is synonymous with labour market needs.

In Malta, VET was given a boost in 2001 with the setting up of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). In 2019/20 MCAST and the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS), which is the second largest VET institution in Malta, together catered for over 12,000 full-time and part-time students. The

introduction of VET subjects in secondary schools, a decade later, made this approach in education available to students of a younger age. This led to an increased popularity of VET and higher student intakes at MCAST and ITS.

CEDEFOP, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2017) suggests that teachers in Europe are concerned that VET is still considered as an inferior educational proposition. The public perception is that quality of VET is inferior to that of general education, and there are concerns over the perceived equivalence of vocational qualifications compared to their academic counterparts. A priority area to improve the public's trust in VET is to strengthen the quality of this area of education, where the VET teachers' professional development plays an important part (CEDEFOP, 2016).

Various definitions of professional development exist. They commonly refer to processes and activities by which teachers improve their skills, knowledge, attitudes, and characteristics, over time. Lack of VET teachers' engagement with professional development can lead to low quality education, due to a lack of contact with the real work environment in industry (Serafini, 2018) and a lack of professional growth in pedagogy. This negatively affects the students' performance in their learning and their readiness for employment or for further education.

VET teachers do not work in a vacuum. Their professional development is also influenced by other actors, such as managers, education institutions, industry, and policy makers. Literature on the involvement of managers in the professional development of VET teachers in Malta is lacking, and considering the proximity and continuous interactions between managers and teachers, the research gap is worrying. Understanding the role of managers in the professional development of VET teachers can benefit knowledge, teachers, managers, VET education institutions, as well as policy makers.

To address the existing gap in literature, the study adopted the following main research question:

What is the managers' role in the VET teachers' professional development in a state-funded education institution in Malta?

Furthermore, the following sub-questions helped to provide answers to the main research question:

How do managers engage with own professional development and learning?

How do managers perceive professional development of VET teachers?

What are the managers' experiences with the professional development of VET teachers?

Definitions of Professional Development of Teachers

Various definitions of professional development exist, some of which include:

- “The process by which teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching” (Day, 2004, p. 13);
- “The process whereby an individual acquires or enhances the skills, knowledge and/or attitudes for improved practice” (Mitchell, 2013, p. 389); and
- “Activities that develop an individual’s skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as a teacher” (OECD, 2009, p. 49).

These definitions centre around developing teachers’ knowledge, skills, competences, attitudes, and characteristics, and are based on the assumption that professional development improves the practice of teaching. While appropriate for teachers in general, the definitions lack specific reference to VET teachers’ realities such as dual professionalism, vocational skills and work in industry.

Professional Development of VET Teachers

Various stakeholders contribute to VET and to students’ learning, but it is teachers who have the most significant effect (Serafini, 2018). Teachers in VET have a demanding work. They face various challenges such as working with low-academic-performance students (CEDEFOP, 2017) and the constant need to adapt to changing societal and economical needs. Teachers are expected to continue developing their competences in pedagogy, to keep up to date with their vocational area (Andersson & Kopsen, 2015) and to be reflective practitioners (Clow, 2006).

Lack of professional development opportunities for VET teachers due to a lack of contact with the real work environment (Serafini, 2018) and a lack of growth in their pedagogical approach can impact the quality of education. Hence, professional development is key to improve the quality of VET and the students’ learning.

Webster-Wright (2009) postulates that individuals have different learning needs and highlights the importance of catering for this. Hence, education institutions and policy makers cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all approach when planning strategies for effective CPD.

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) suggest that CPD should be based on enquiry and collaboration. Teachers need to learn from each other (Shain &

Gleeson, 1999) and for growth to occur managers need to negotiate with teachers (Kirk, 2019).

Research identifies barriers to participation in CPD. These can be situational, institutional and dispositional (Cross, 1981). Andersson and Kopsen (2015) identify the education background of VET teachers as an important situational barrier. Organisational culture is one of the institutional barriers which affect teachers' views, perspectives and attitudes towards professional development (Kirk, 2019). Negative past experiences and lack of motivation are examples of dispositional barriers to participation in CPD. Kirk (2019) adds attitudes and cultures of teachers to the list.

In a local study, Curmi (2019) suggests that there are four categories of VET teachers whose engagement with professional development varies according to the number of hours, from low to high, and the type of CPD, from teacher-related to industry-related. She suggests that throughout their career, VET teachers can and will move between the four stages.

Role of Managers in Teachers' Professional Development

Blandford (2000) suggests that managers should assist and guide teachers in their professional development, particularly in their early years, by focusing on various aspects related to students' talents and needs, students' holistic development, assessment, working relationships with different stakeholders, teachers' responsibilities, together with skills, knowledge, competences, characteristics, beliefs, and values. This approach places teachers more at the receiving end in the professional development process.

Contrastingly, Andersson et al. (2018) highlight that VET teachers are the drivers for maintaining and building connections as part of their professional development, but state that "other actors in school and working life, can enable the professional development of VET teachers through measures that create CPD value among them" (Andersson, et al., 2018, p. 161). Other actors include managers of education institutions.

Curmi (2019) focuses indirectly on the role of managers in the VET teachers' professional development and reveals that contextual factors, strategies and intervening conditions affect teachers' professional development experiences, making specific reference to: VET policies and regulations; conditions of employment; cultivating a CPD culture; organisational culture; and CPD offer and awareness (Curmi, 2019).

Institutional culture is also highlighted by Blandford (2000) who suggests that the management of professional development requires a mindset that this is ongoing; promotes its importance; provides teachers with opportunities of

growth; provides “expert support and guidance” on professional development (p. 8); encourages reflection; as well as motivates, values and rewards teachers who engage with professional development.

Referring to a higher education context, Burlakova et al. (2019) highlight the need of “supporting teachers in designing their own professional development” (p. 539) as this increases motivation for lifelong learning and improves management of educational resources.

Culture in VET Institutions

An analysis of the organisation culture within a VET institution helps to understand how VET teachers engage with professional development, and the involvement of managers in this. Several definitions of culture exist. Hofstede (2011) defines it as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 3). Hofstede (2011) identifies six dimensions which reveal characteristics of a culture and his website (www.hofstede-insights.com) provides detailed analysis of the cultures in different countries. Figure 1 shows Hofstede’s culture dimensions for Malta.

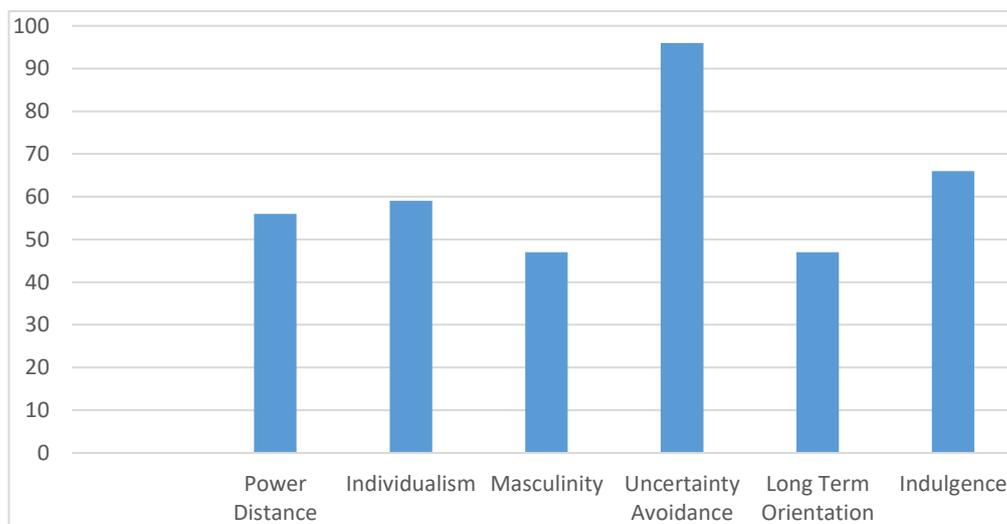


Figure 1. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions for Malta – adapted from www.hofstede-insights.com (2022)

Of specific interest for this research is the power distance dimension, for which Malta scores highly, revealing a hierarchical society, where inherent inequalities, centralisation and prescription are common (Hofstede, 2011). The latter two are particularly important as they help us understand the power dynamics within Maltese institutions.

Another interesting dimension is the long-term orientation, for which Malta scores below average, revealing a short-term-oriented society where citizens want immediate results.

Methodology

The Onion Research model by Saunders et al. (2016), which is demonstrated in Figure 2, summarizes the methodology adopted in this research.

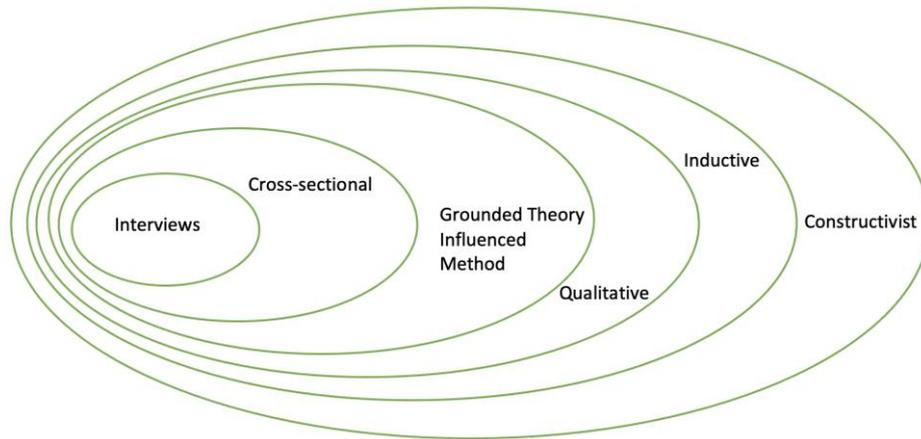


Figure 2. Onion Research Model adapted by Saunders et al., (2016)

This research is situated within the constructivist paradigm which allows researchers to “make sense of, or interpret, the meanings others have about the world” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8) - where “others” refers to the managers of the VET institution, and “the world” refers to the professional development of VET teachers. The constructivist paradigm is appropriate for this research as it is based on individuals who “seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). The researcher has a special interest in the professional development of VET teachers, and hence the “world”, and is also a VET practitioner. The research approach is inductive as the objective was to generate theory and not test it.

A qualitative approach was adopted, as the main interest was in the personal experiences of managers. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that this is appropriate when “the researcher does not know the important variables to examine” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Irrespective of existing preconceptions, there was openness on the research variables and awareness that these could evolve as research progressed. The number of managers in the chosen institution is small, making a qualitative approach even more appropriate.

The research design was influenced by Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM). Creswell and Creswell (2018) refer to Straus and Corbin (1998) when they suggest that GTM is used when researchers “hope to discover and

advance a theory that is grounded in information from participants” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 63).

The research was cross-sectional as data was collected at one point only. In-depth face-to-face or online interviews were carried out with participants as these allow researchers to “explore in detail the experiences, motives and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3).

Sampling

Data were collected from managers through purposive and convenience sampling. The first interviewee was the one who, according to the researcher, could provide significant insights, due to the several years of experience at the institution. The rest of the managers were chosen out of convenience albeit purposively, because they could also shed light into questions that were emerging. Interviewees are responsible for specific vocational fields and since there are only a few departments, this approach allowed most of the vocational fields to be represented. All managers who were approached by email showed interest and participated in the research.

Ethics

Upon clearance from the VET institution’s Research Ethics Committee, information letters and consent forms were sent to managers. These communicated what the research was about, what was expected from participants, how data were to be collected, and that participation in the research is voluntary with the possibility to withdraw at any stage. The consent forms were used as proof of the participants’ consent to use the data collected.

Participants were informed about data protection measures adopted to preserve their identity. Great care was taken to ensure confidentiality throughout this research and to abide by research ethics policies. Protecting the identities of managers in the VET institution, and within a small island state, is particularly important (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020) and this was done by referring to managers without revealing their gender, their years of experience in management, the department they are responsible for, and other criteria that would otherwise reveal their identity.

Data Analysis

The research design was influenced by, and made use of several important characteristics of GTM, as suggested by Birks and Mills (2015), to maximise the benefits of this method. These include: coding and categorising data; collecting, generating and analysing data concurrently, which led to some different questions asked during each interview; writing memos throughout the

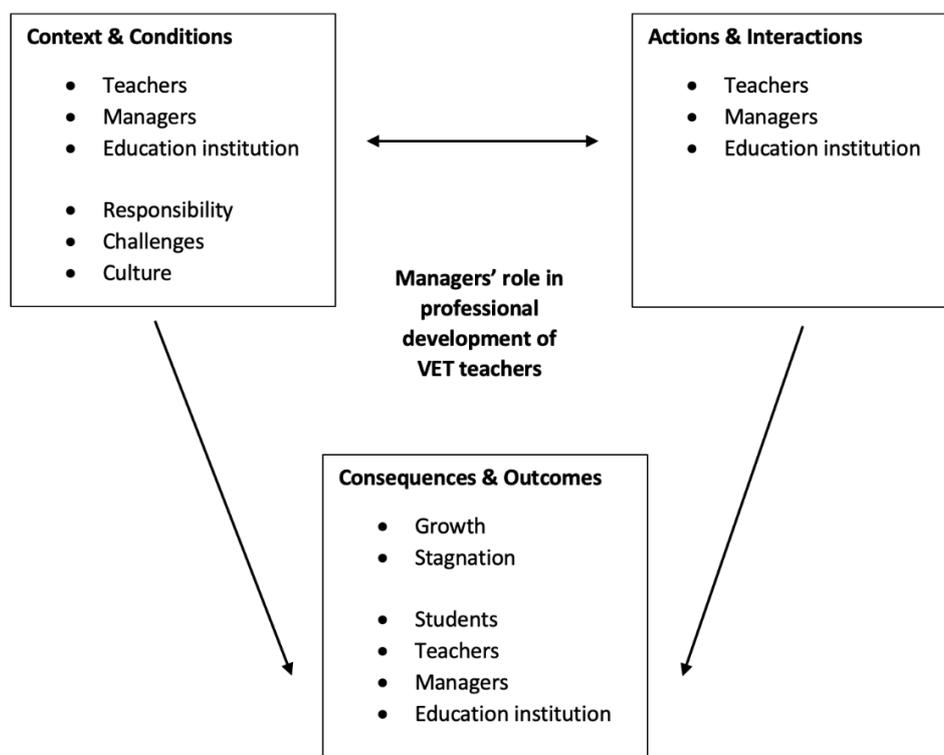
research process; theoretical sampling, although this proved to be challenging with the maximum number of possible interviewees being small; constant comparative analysis, where incidents were compared with other incidents and then with categories, an important aspect of GTM to “build theory from the data itself” (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 11); theoretical sensitivity which was enhanced by the researcher’s ideas, preconceptions, experiences and biases, and by the literature reviewed; intermediate coding; identifying a core category; advanced coding and theoretical integration; and generating theory. MAXQDA 22.2.0, a software programme designed for data analysis, was used to support the analysis process in this research, and facilitated the organisation of interviews, data incidents, codes, as well as memos.

Results and Analysis

The analysis was structured on Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) Conditional and Consequential Matrix, where a total of 382 data incidents were categorised into 16 sub-themes under three main themes: context and conditions; actions and interactions; and consequences and outcomes.

The model in Figure 3 attempts to simplify the complexity of the role of managers in the professional development of VET teachers.

Figure 3. Model summarizing the role of managers in the professional development of VET teachers



The teachers, managers and education institution feature in the three main themes. This was expected as managers and teachers are constantly interacting at the education institution. The context and conditions are also characterised by the responsibility for, and the challenges to engage with, professional development, together with the organizational culture. The context and conditions are affecting, and being affected by, the actions and interactions. Together, these result in consequences and outcomes in the form of various aspects of stagnation and growth.

Context and Conditions Theme

The starting point of the model is the context and conditions, and these are the managers, teachers, organizational culture, responsibility of, and challenges to engage with, professional development, and general context.

Managers' context

The managers are qualified, have experience in industry, have worked for several years at the institution, and had either previously worked as teachers or joined the institution as managers.

Interviewees acknowledge the importance of professional development. The managers' perceptions of professional development are more general and include investment; opportunities of improvement, development, and growth; a journey of lifelong learning; education to fill lacunas; increasing knowledge; a form of motivation; and an outcome of training needs analysis. Some managers value the need of engaging with professional development to learn more than to progress at work.

Most managers "struggle" with their own professional development, and while they wish they can do more, their work makes it "very difficult" to do so. Managers are concerned and "worried" about the lack of time they have, and that work takes priority over their professional development. Nevertheless, they still seek different opportunities of growth, such as: attending meetings with stakeholders; formal qualifications; studying topical subjects; attending conferences and presentations; participating in projects; and supervising students to keep in touch "with the reality of an educator". Some managers have additional commitments outside work, making it even more challenging. One manager encourages teachers to visit education institutions abroad but is missing out on similar opportunities because of family commitments.

Managers have different personalities, beliefs and values, that are the basis of their management styles, together with actions and interactions at work. A

manager who values relationships constantly looks for opportunities to bring teachers together to learn from each other, to support each other, and to grow together. Another, values knowledge, has a passion for professional development, gives importance to qualifications, and encourages teachers to continue studying. A third manager values any learning, even if this is not related to own vocational area. The fourth manager “takes pride” in the teachers’ practical work outside the institution, and considers this as an institutions’ strength.

Some managers feel that their managerial position pressures them to engage in professional development. One of them feels the need to continue studying in a vocational area, while another would like to invest further in pedagogy.

Teachers’ Context

Managers believe that teachers are learners on a journey, and that their growth is affected by personal experiences and encounters, including those with their own teachers. Another aspect related to identity is that VET teachers transit between two professions (Curmi, 2019).

Various VET teachers’ roles and duties were discussed, and these include preparing students for employment; supporting students holistically; staying updated “with new theories, ideas, ways of doing things”; “reading, enquiring, and asking”; building relationships with students; and reflecting on own practices which was also advised by Clow (2006). The roles and duties of VET teachers go beyond the ones revealed during the interviews.

The managers’ perception is that, generally, teachers are “enthusiastic” and willing to engage with professional development. One manager believes that the institution prioritizes CPD, and whoever tries and is proactive, benefits from professional development opportunities. The teachers’ enthusiasm varies, and while some take initiative and only contact managers for their support or approval, others need to be “pushed”. Managers recount negative experiences with passive teachers that resist learning, or do not engage with professional development. Certain teachers believe that they have “averaged a plateau” and simply wait for new collective agreements for improved working conditions. Others have a pessimistic outlook at whatever is organised by the institution. A manager believes that such “unhappy” teachers should consider alternative employment elsewhere. Some teachers attend CPD only because they must, while others do so only for progression purposes.

Two managers highlighted the teachers’ low salaries and suggested that these could have adverse effects on the teachers’ motivation and their willingness to seek opportunities of growth.

Education Institution

Managers have concerns about the corporate culture of the institution and feel that this negatively affects the VET teachers' professional development and their involvement in it.

They are aware of opportunities for teachers' professional development but are concerned that the institution is not doing enough. They have expressed their wish, and the need, for more work in this area. One of the managers reveals how during the weekly management meetings, professional development is barely discussed. Another manager discusses how proposals for professional development are made but are eventually turned down because of a lack of budget or difficulties with paying for external services. Two managers pointed out that the institution lacks a training plan for staff. However, a recent increase in opportunities for professional development of managers themselves was acknowledged as a step in the right direction.

The managers see the existing collective agreement as problematic since it does not motivate teachers to invest in training. However, a review of the collective agreement indicates otherwise as teachers that further their studies progress in their grade and receive higher remuneration. Other managers expressed their concern that with the existing collective agreement "everything has become pounds, shillings and pence ... counting and checking". The managers' perceptions of the collective agreement indicates that they were either not involved in its drafting, or else that their suggestions fell through.

The "controlling environment" and excessive documentation at the institution can be stifling VET teachers' enthusiasm to participate in certain professional development opportunities e.g., Erasmus+ mobilities and research projects. While accountability is important, the perception is that this is overdone and that "procedures have become more important than the core business".

A culture of working in isolation is another concern raised. Different departments are not working enough together, and there is lack of awareness of work being done outside their departments. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem because several opportunities of networking had to be cancelled.

On a more positive note, managers revealed how proactive teachers get the necessary support. Several opportunities of professional development are provided, and these are found in the collective agreement. The institution has a dedicated office for the professional development of its teachers, and different collaborations between this office and the other departments have been discussed.

While managers have a very important role in the VET institution, they seem to be distant from the education institution, which raises questions on their agency as leaders.

Responsibility of professional development of VET teachers

Managers believe that the responsibility of professional development of VET teachers is “multi-faceted” and should be a shared responsibility of teachers, managers as well as the education institution. However, there is agreement with Andersson et al. (2018) that, ultimately, professional development remains the individual’s responsibility.

Despite this, some managers believe that the education institution’s personnel department should focus more on professional development. An infrastructure that “facilitates and accommodates various realities which constitute professional development” is needed. The reference to “various realities” substantiates Webster-Wright’s (2009) argument that different persons have different learning needs.

Challenges of Professional Development

Andersson and Koppsen (2018) highlight barriers that teachers face to access professional development. These are mirrored by the managers who acknowledge that engaging with professional development is challenging, especially for those with family and financial commitments. Other challenges include the individuals’ internal and external motivation to engage with professional development and time to organise CPD opportunities at department level.

The Covid-19 pandemic has adversely affected, and in some instances even halted, specific professional development opportunities, such as teambuilding activities or participating in Erasmus+ mobilities. Disappointment was expressed that for two years the managerial role entailed significant work to address restrictions imposed by the pandemic, leaving “little or no time” to work concretely on activities related to teachers’ development.

General Context

Some managers are concerned that teachers are embracing a more “transactional” working relationship with the management, where things “become calculated” and where they frequently ask “what is in it” for them. More than before, money is being prioritised over learning. Another concern is the short-term vision that prevails in Maltese culture, as revealed by Hofstede (2022), where teachers expect to see immediate benefits and results rather than gradual growth when they engage with professional development. A final concern is Malta’s limitations in being a small country and the importance of looking beyond for personal and professional growth.

Actions and Interactions Theme

This section discusses the managers' perceptions on the actions and interactions of the VET teachers, the managers themselves, and the education institution.

Teachers

Teachers respond differently to obligatory and voluntary professional development, but "there is always somebody who responds" depending on the teachers' perceptions on professional development, their dispositions to grow, their previous experiences with professional development, and on other circumstances like time and resources. Teachers have different characteristics: some are confident while others are not; some see themselves as novice teachers compared to their experienced colleagues and may take a step back; some are reluctant to take up opportunities as "they want to stay where they are"; some are proactive and come up with initiatives or requests themselves; while some only react when presented with an opportunity.

Managers believe that teachers influence and can learn from each other. Educators who generally have a positive outlook can make an impact by influencing their colleagues - a manager reveals: "I'd rather involve as many people as possible and let their positivity influence those who are not interested". Certain teachers can find engaging in professional development with their colleagues more motivating than doing this on their own. Some teachers have contributed directly to their colleagues' professional development by taking the lead and asking for logistic support to offer training.

As dual professionals, VET teachers are expected to engage with professional development to remain up-to-date and relevant in their vocational area and in pedagogy. One of the managers explains: "I need my teachers to know about today's and tomorrow's [requirements] ... we should be forward looking because students will be in industry in three years' time".

Managers

Managers acknowledge the importance of "encouraging", "supporting", "empowering", "motivating", and "influencing" teachers to engage in professional development. One way of encouraging teachers is to highlight opportunities of progression and providing higher salaries. A manager explains the need to support "because if I don't ... if the first door they knock on says no ... then I'm stifling them". Support is particularly necessary when teachers approach managers with ideas that they cannot do on their own.

A manager that gives special importance to relationships with teachers believes that it is managers who “should be going to them ... going around the classrooms ... making [themselves] available ... being present for them”. Healthy relationships enable teachers to approach managers when they have ideas that can lead to growth. Another manager wants “teachers to be happy”, as this reflects on their work with students.

Kirk (2019) postulates that the role of managers entails “negotiating” with teachers. While not mentioned directly by managers, examples of negotiation, such as VET teachers asking to teach a new unit, were shared.

Two managers spoke about the need to “push” teachers to engage with professional development, as not all teachers have the will or the drive to do so on their own. They shared success stories of teachers that finished formal qualifications or engaged in research after managers “pushed” them and supported them along the journey.

Managers acknowledge that their role entails making teachers “feel confident” and allowing them “to do things differently”. Allowing teachers to explore new areas, e.g., teaching a new subject not completely familiar for the teacher, and engaging with research, helps them to recognize their potential and grow. Since the institution comes across as too “controlling”, one manager stresses that managers should not do the same. Understanding the teachers’ needs by asking for their opinions is also seen as important.

Managers have a very good perspective of the CPD opportunities provided by the institution. However, a manager expresses caution of their misuse such as Erasmus+ projects as certain individuals see these as opportunities for “holidays” instead of professional development.

Most of the managers feel that, while they are contributing to the professional development of VET teachers, they could and should do more. A manager finished the interview by sharing: “You’ve made me aware that I have to do more”.

Education Institution

The institution provides different forms of professional development opportunities for VET teachers, including: sabbatical leave; work resource allowance that can be used for CPD; free courses offered by the education institution; research projects; attending conferences; presenting papers; CPD focusing on vocational skills and pedagogy; collaborating with industry; Erasmus+ projects; and study leave. The collective agreement refers to additional opportunities of professional development.

While acknowledging the various professional development opportunities, the managers would like to see the institution doing more. Some of the suggestions include: running small business ventures; getting more people together; offering CPD through distance learning; investing in new portals for learning; having a more integrated approach for CPD; devising training plans for teachers; allocating mentors to new teachers; investing more in the administrative arm of CPD; linking progression to performance and training; maximising the potential of peer-learning and shadowing; associating experienced teachers with new ones; revising policy on teachers' work in industry; and getting managers together on practices relating to VET teachers' professional development.

The above suggestions mirror Curmi's (2019) call for a CPD policy which should take into consideration the nature of a VET institution, the needs of its teachers as dual professionals, and the problems faced by the economy and society. The managers also wish to see more investment in the centralised unit focusing on the professional development of teachers. This substantiates Hofstede's (2022) overview of culture in Malta, where centralisation is more common and preferred.

Managers believe that the institution should be more supportive particularly with new teachers. A manager refers to a specific year where the institution did not organise induction sessions for new teachers. Contrastingly, Blandford (2000) highlights that it is the managers that need to support teachers in their early years of service.

One of the managers highlights the need to take into consideration the part-time teachers as "when it comes to CPD we tend to focus on full-timers, but half of the workforce here is made up of part-timers".

Finally, managers hope for a change at the education institution. A manager points out "I feel that professional development needs to be on a bigger scale".

Consequences and Outcomes Theme

Actions and interactions of the teachers, managers and education institution lead to consequences and outcomes in the form of growth and stagnation.

Growth

Managers believe that the professional development of VET teachers leads to growth in students, teachers, managers and the education institution.

Students of an institution that invests in professional development of staff are offered more beneficial "opportunities". When proactive teachers organise

lessons outside the classroom, possibly at the place of work, students experience the working environment and students “show more interest”, are “more engaged” and “improve their behaviour”. Students taught by “active” teachers “get more” as they are provided with up-to-date information and real experiences through innovative pedagogical approaches.

The managers acknowledge that VET teachers who invest in professional development will experience significant growth. Growth happens when teachers interact with colleagues and with other professionals – “when you meet other professionals who share the same love that you share and you start talking and discussing, that reignites the flame every time”. Teachers that work together improve their teamworking skills and can support their students to work in teams themselves. Colleagues can exert positive influence on each other. If a teacher has a positive experience with an Erasmus+ project, then it is likely that other colleagues will be interested in participating. One of the managers recounts how teachers can resist working on a new initiative on their own but are less resistant if they do this with their colleagues. Teachers that feel trusted by managers tend to be “happy” at work which is reflected in their performance.

VET teachers who engage with professional development are more likely to increase their “confidence as professionals” and can “bring a [lesson] alive”. Teachers tend to take initiatives if they are encouraged by managers. Working in industry helps VET teachers to stay updated and confident in their respective vocational field. A manager believes that different professional development activities enrich the teachers’ CV, which might become handy if these decide to progress the career ladder or change employment. The collective agreement facilitates teachers’ progression to higher teaching grades if they invest in formal qualifications and provides financial allowances for additional qualifications. The higher the teaching grade the less the contact hours teachers have with students, and the more hours they can invest in additional professional development.

Teachers that invest in professional development related to pedagogy can use new teaching approaches that enhance student learning, facilitate a better rapport with students, and find teaching easier.

Managers can benefit, and grow, if they are cognizant of other departments’ work, and if they share and explore best practices related to the professional development of teachers. One manager discussed how engaging in the same professional development opportunities with teachers, such as teacher training, helps in becoming more effective leaders and to better understand the teachers’ role, their difficulties, and required support. Supporting teachers’ initiatives is seen as important since teachers feel valued and empowered, while benefiting managers too as they grow professionally. The managers’

relationships with teachers and how one “approaches” them makes a difference. One of the managers strives to create a less controlling environment, not assuming that teachers “are skiving”, and instead checking politely if something came up or if they need support.

Healthier relationships with teachers lead to growth as managers can dedicate time on meaningful work rather than on teachers’ challenging behaviours. A final area of growth for managers is positive experiences with professional development, including those related to VET teachers. Positive experiences lead to managers feeling motivated, engaged, enthusiastic and empowered.

The education institution is one of the main drivers of professional development of VET teachers which is central to the quality of VET (CEDEFOP, 2016), and it is the same institution that can benefit significantly from investing on this. The quality of education tends to improve, teachers are up-to-date with industry requirements, relationships with industry partners and other stakeholders are enhanced possibly leading to collaborations in future. Investing in professional development leads to motivated staff that are enthusiastic and empowered to carry on. Most importantly, the education institution that prioritises professional development remains relevant to its students and to its “core business”.

Stagnation

Lack of VET teachers’ interest in professional development, lack of support from managers, or lack of opportunities provided by education institutions lead to stagnation of students, teachers, managers, as well as the education institution. Stagnation in a VET institution can exacerbate the already existing problem that VET suffers from: that of a lower status when compared to general education (CEDEFOP, 2017).

Students will “gain much less” when they are taught by “stagnant teachers” which can have undesirable effects on the students’ personal and professional lives.

A considerable problem is when VET teachers have not experienced, or have stopped experiencing, work in industry. One of the managers questions the adequacy of VET teachers who “teach and prepare students for the world if [they lack] this experience” as they will surely “be detached from what’s happening out there”.

Bureaucratic processes and excessive controlling can be barriers to access certain professional development opportunities. Negative reactions from managers when approached by teachers will instil a sense of hesitation when they have ideas which they would like to discuss. While encouraging teachers

to engage with professional development is necessary, forcing them to do so backfires.

Two managers sum up the outcomes of VET teachers who do not engage with professional development and learning – “If that flame dies out ... then you cannot pass on that love, that passion for the field ... whatever you’re teaching” and they end up “not teaching the [subject] but history of [the subject] ... what was done in industry in the past”.

Managers who dedicate time to the professional development of VET teachers with little or no success can experience stagnation too. When teachers do not participate or have a “negative mindset”, managers feel that their effort is pointless. When managers are proactive but are not supported by the institution and “left on [their] own”, they can take a step back as their credibility is at stake – “I think that we will do [the initiative] again next year but doing it and getting [the teachers’] feedback and then I cannot implement ... then I have to pay attention”.

The education institution risks stagnation if the managers’ perception of excessive focus on “pounds, shillings and pence, counting and checking” remains. A manager shares the concern that “until [this] changes I don’t see the whole atmosphere changing”. Lack of engaged staff, including teachers and managers, will hinder the education institution from providing a “[learning] experience of a certain level” where its reputation suffers. Lack of appropriate working conditions for teachers can also lead to stagnation, especially if they do not remain “loyal” and start seeking other teaching opportunities outside the institution, leading to a conflict of interest “at the expense of the institution”.

Conclusion

The objective of this qualitative research was to understand the role of managers in the professional development of VET teachers in a local education institution. An analysis of primary data collected from four interviews reveals that managers are indeed aware of the importance of professional development of VET teachers, and they feel that they are involved in their journey of professional growth. They do this by supporting, empowering, motivating, and pushing teachers and by facilitating professional development opportunities.

Managers recount varying experiences and interactions with VET teachers, ranging from those who are enthusiastic about their professional development and come up with their several initiatives, to those who have no interest and who are pessimistic about whatever is happening at the institution. In between there are VET teachers that need to be pushed.

In general, managers struggle with their own professional development due to the excessive workload. However, they still make their utmost to benefit from opportunities of growth in their vocational area and/or in pedagogy.

Several opportunities of professional development were highlighted, and the managers acknowledged that the education institution's department focusing on professional development, together with more opportunities for managers themselves, were a step in the right direction.

In some instances, the managers' agency is questioned, as they tend to distance themselves from the institution's organizational culture. Their major concerns are related to the excessive bureaucracy, the controlling environment, the sense of isolation where individuals are often working on their own, and the existing collective agreement, as these are perceived to have adverse effects on the VET teachers' professional development. Managers feel that a change at the education institution is needed and that professional development of staff, including of the VET teachers, should take centre stage where additional opportunities are offered. Several opportunities for professional development of VET teachers were proposed and managers look forward to seeing these implemented.

Different managers have different personalities, and they have different principles and values. They acknowledge that VET teachers are dual professionals and hence need to engage in professional development related to the vocational areas and to pedagogy. The links with industry are seen as crucial opportunities of growth for VET teachers. The managers are aware of different expectations of teachers and of the various challenges to access professional development opportunities like financial and family commitments.

Managers are concerned about the transactional working relationship between VET teachers and the education institution, and they wish to see their teachers working more with, and influencing positively, their colleagues. They recognise the importance of investing in their relationships with teachers for a healthier working environment and for more achievements.

While managers acknowledge that they are, and should be, involved in the professional development of VET teachers, they highlight that the ultimate responsibility of this lies with teachers themselves.

Professional development of VET teachers leads to growth of students, teachers, managers as well as the education institution, while lack of it leads to their stagnation. VET requires more attention to provide quality education and to improve its status. Teachers, managers and the education institution have

an excellent occasion to collaborate together to maximise the potential of existing professional development opportunities, and to seek additional ones to adapt as the world changes. The managers of the VET institution have a unique role in bringing all parties together to achieve this.

Limitations and Further Research

This research explored the managers' perception of their own involvement in the professional development of VET teachers. A limitation of the study is that only four managers who work with the same institution were interviewed. Another limitation is that only the perspectives of managers were taken. Further research can include the views of other stakeholders, such as VET teachers and heads of schools. Expanding the research to other VET institutions can reveal whether the findings in this paper are unique to one VET institution or if these apply to other contexts.

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