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Attention: Higher education editors

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VET sector faces leadership succession crisis

The Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector needs strategies for managing the looming leadership succession crisis, according to a new report

VET Leadership for the Future by the LH Martin Institute at the University of Melbourne and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) predicts large-scale staff departure over the next few decades.

Associate Professor Hamish Coates co-authored the report, which draws together reviews, prior research and a national survey of 327 practicing VET leaders. He says the current selection process for VET leaders needs to be revised against evidence of effective leadership capabilities.

“New narratives are driving contemporary leadership – such as competition, commercial pressures and developing change-capable cultures” he says. “Our understanding of new leaders needs to change accordingly”.

The study reveals VET leaders view managing change as more important than teaching and learning, which are flagged as the least important facet of their work. VET leaders have the capacity to manage industry and clients, but need skills to deal with new complex contexts that juggle competition with regulation. Many reported feeling hamstrung about changing expectations of what it means to be a leader in VET and the contexts in which they work.

The report’s recommendations for identifying and developing future leaders include better leadership training focused on concrete change management skills and reshaping the approaches used for leadership selection. Boosting development among emerging leaders is also identified, as well as providing more definition and structure to the profession of VET leadership.

Professor Lynn Meek, who also co-authored the report and is Director of the LH Martin Institute, says greater clarity about role functions in VET leadership is an important step.

“Demystifying VET leadership will support recruitment, ongoing development and, ultimately, succession”, he says.

The report also finds that organisations and governments will need to highlight the importance of VET leadership in order to attract a new generation of leaders as the current, older generation leaves the system.

Report findings will be discussed at the forthcoming LH Martin Institute Conference: *Building Australia's Tertiary Education Sector: Alternative Models and their Challenges*, 11-12 November, Quay West Suites, Melbourne.

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