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Mediating teacher professional identity: The emergence of humanness and ethical identity

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Abstract
Over the past couple of years, international vocational education and training has been much debated at the nexus of the commercialisation of vocational education and social justice for international students. This nexus has significantly affected the professional identity and responsibilities of teachers who are directly involved in providing vocational education and training for international students. Drawing on a research project funded by the Australian Research Council, this paper offers an alternative lens on vocational teachers’ process of mediating professional identity in response to the flow of international students and the commercialisation of vocational education. It employs the logic of relationality as a conceptual framework to interpret teachers’ journey of identity re-construction. The humanness and ethical dimensions of identity have been at the heart of the teachers’ negotiation over the kind of teachers they are and to which they aspire. The teachers in this research draw on humanness and ethical dimensions to engage in critical reflection of their own teaching practices, their interaction with international students and the socio-political context shaping international vocational education and training. They perceive their professional responsibility not only in relation to the facilitation of students’ development of vocational skills and knowledge, but also the provision of pastoral care for international students and the advocating for social justice for this student cohort.

Keywords: teacher professional identity, vocational education, international education, international students

Introduction
Teacher identity is anchored in the intersection of the individual teacher’s educational beliefs and practices, institutional policies, sectoral boundaries, and the socio-cultural, economic and political context in which their profession is embedded. A growing number of teachers in the vocational education and training (VET) sector are engaged in teaching international students and international education in VET. There are numerous changing discourses associated with the internationalisation trend within the VET sector. These changes dramatically reshape and transform conventional discourses influencing what it means to be a VET teacher, especially for those who are involved in teaching international students. Thus, the ways VET teachers perceive themselves and their
associated roles in response to these individual, institutional and sectoral changes need to be re-conceptualised.

The presence of international students and the internationalisation of VET have resulted in significant changes regarding VET teaching and learning practices, student experiences and outcomes, the provision of educational and support services for students, off-shore teaching and learning, the forging of cross-border institutional and industrial networks and teacher professionalism (Smith & Smith, 1999; Moran & Ryan, 2004; Cully, 2006; Hobart, 1999; Tran, 2013; Tran, 2013a). Key issues related to the internationalisation of VET educational services, off-shore teaching, international student experiences and pedagogical practices have been addressed in the literature (see Smith & Smith, 1999; Moran & Ryan, 2004; Cully, 2006; Hobart, 1999; Smith, 2010; Tran, 2013a, Tran & Nyland, 2011). Yet the aspect of teacher professionalism and teacher identity in the face of internationalisation in VET tends to be largely un-explored in scholarly research and policies.

In response to the above gap in the literature, this paper discusses the issue of teacher professional identity in response to the discourse of internationalisation in Australian VET. The paper focuses on the experiences of mediating professional identities of two teachers, one from a TAFE institute in Queensland and another from a private college in Victoria. It employs the logic of relationality (Hall, 1996, 2006; Settles, 2004; Woodward, 1997) as a conceptual framework to interpret the narratives of the two teachers.

The analysis reveals that the professional identity of a VET teacher is continuously mediated through their own way of being a teacher (ontology) and their way of seeing the broader world (epistemology) in which their professional practice is embedded. This indicates the complex context where different conflicting demands may intersect and shape the formation and re-formation of VET teacher identity within the context of international VET. Both teachers in the study draw on ‘humanness’ as the core to their professional identity but they mediate their professional identity through different dimensions of humanness. Embracing the humanness approach to teaching and engaging international students, one of the teachers in the case studies is able to harmonise the different demands encountered in teaching international students within a TAFE institute. Placing humanness at the heart of the teaching philosophy, the teacher from the TAFE institute does not see his professional responsibility in a pragmatic and narrow sense. Instead, he views his professional responsibility as well as his institute’s responsibility as extending far beyond merely providing students with professional knowledge and skills within the formal classroom to support them in their journey to mediate the complex cross-border world and facilitate their development as well-rounded human beings.

The second teacher also draws on a ‘humanness’ dimension but as a critical lens to make sense of his own experience at a private college, his institutional practice and the system operations. A sense of humanness and ethical responsibility has guided his choice of ‘resistance’ as a way to negotiate and re-construct his professional identity. His identity trajectory is a struggle through which professional identity and ethical identity are being juggled. During this struggle, the ethical dimension of identity is central to the nurturing of his agency and his choice of action as a powerful response to the malice and unethical side of the private college where he was based during a turbulence period.

The paper begins by discussing the literature that focuses on teacher professional identity. We then proceed to detail the methodology and the conceptual framework shaping the research and the analysis of the interview data. This will be followed by a discussion of the educational landscape which shapes the evolution of humanness and the ethical identity of the two teachers on whom this paper is focused.
TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Teacher professional identity entails the interplay of the inward journey to make sense of oneself as being a teacher and the outward journey to engage with the professional world. There are different views on how teacher professional identity should be conceptualised, perhaps due to the complex nature of professional identity. An established stream of the literature views teacher professional identity as a negotiation of multiple intersecting discourses (Stronach et al., 2002; Patrick, 2010; Sachs, 2001; Wenger, 1998; Chappell, 2001). These discourses may involve the competing layers of policy, ideology and practice (Stronach et al., 2002) or a complex set of relations of practice (Wenger, 1998). This argument echoes with findings from Patrick’s (2010) study with new teachers during the first two years of their teaching careers, which reveals teachers’ process of identity formation is centred around the juggling of policy, biography, social history and schooling practices. In other words, teacher professional identity is mediated at the intersections of their individual experiences and the external socio-cultural and political context surrounding their professional practices (Zembylas, 2005).

Supporting the view that teacher professional development seems to be influenced by competing worlds and complex circumstances, Sachs (2001), however, offers a different lens into this issue. The author argues that teacher professional identity needs to be re-conceptualised in light of the dual dimensions embedded in democratic and managerial professionalism. In her view, democratic professionalism is ‘emerging from the profession itself while managerialist professionalism is being reinforced by employing authorities through their policies on teacher professional development’ (p.149). In sum, this body of literature addresses the enactment of teacher professional identity in relation to both macro and micro layers, collective and individual dimensions, and internal and external factors.

The process of being and becoming has been regarded as fundamental to professional identity development. Wenger (1998), one of the leading scholars devoted to exploring different dimensions of identity, proposed the metaphor of ‘learning trajectory’ as an effective way to capture the fluid and ongoing nature of professional identity. Identity as ‘learning trajectory’ captures the being (where we have been) and the becoming (where we are going) of professional identity. This view recognises what Mockler (2011) refers to as how teacher professional identity is shaped and reshaped through their experiences and the kinds of teacher they are becoming. Teacher professional identity is interwoven with a process of ‘becoming’ because it is based on individual teachers’ evolving perspectives and philosophies that are continually re-constructed through teaching experience and the interaction with the broader world shaping professional practices (Walkington, 2005). Thus the process of teacher professional identity formation has been characterised in the scholarly literature as being open, diverse, shifting, continuing and neither unitary nor rigid.

In a recent paper, Moodie and Wheelahan (2012) highlight the controversy on conceptualising the professional identity of vocational teachers, which is manifest through the debates on the appropriate terminology to call vocational teachers. The authors report TAFE teachers prefer to be positioned as ‘teacher’ because this ‘restored the value of their role and their sense of worth’ (p. 322). Notably, Chappell (2001) argues that the construction of VET teacher professional identity needs to take into account the historical and contemporary discourses shaping the operation of VET institutes. He identifies three dominant discourses including industrial skills development, liberal education and public service which contribute to constructing ‘TAFE teachers as particular types of teachers’ (p. 5). VET teachers see themselves being aligned with both discourse of vocationalism, the world of work, and discourse of liberal education, the world of vocational education (Chappell, 2001).

Haycock and Kelly (2009) further discuss the notion of professional identity in transition as many VET teachers negotiated a complex professional world due to the discursive shift from a
professional practitioner in the industry to a vocational teacher. In the field of adult education, professional identity of educators has been reconstructed based on terms such as ‘human resource developers’ or ‘workplace trainers’ (Haycock, 2009). In a recent paper, Nakar (2012) notes that the dilemmas VET teachers might encounter in teaching international students have been accorded insufficient attention in the literature. Based on interviews with 15 VET teachers in Queensland, her study highlights the dilemmas teachers face in relation to professional, educational and personal identities.

**Teacher Professional Identity Re-conceptualised in Response to Internationalisation**

Competency-based training and training packages are mandatory for Australian vocational education and training. VET qualifications are designed to provide learners with skills, knowledge and attributes centred on the demands of Australian industry. However, there were 145,540 international student enrolments in the Australian VET sector by the end of 2012 (Australian Education International, 2012). The presence of international students in VET classrooms, along with their varied learning characteristics and needs, has been associated with increased demands for teachers to stretch beyond the boundaries of traditional VET teaching and learning (Tran, 2013; Tran & Nyland, 2013). VET teacher professional identity has been reshaped by the changing nature of their profession associated with the commercialisation of vocational education.

The government’s new skilled migration policy has an important implication for the professionalism of VET teachers involved in teaching international students (Tran & Nyland, 2011). While competency-based training aims to prepare students for the demands of Australian workplaces, the migration policy change means teachers take on the challenge to cater for the vocational and learning needs of international students who are unlikely to remain permanently in Australia and participate in the Australian labour market, but are supposed to return and apply what they have learnt from their VET courses in their home country’s industry. Therefore what counts as relevant vocational education to international students and as meaningful learning experiences with the presence of international students needs to be re-visited. This emerging situation challenges the view of VET teacher as the transmitter of skills within a pre-prescribed curriculum. Teachers have to juggle between the increasing pressure to demonstrate compliance within competency-based training and accommodating the diverse learning needs of international students who are no longer positioned as potential migrants.

**Method and Methodology**

This paper emerges from a research project funded by the Australian Research Council of which the first-named author is the sole investigator. The research draws on semi-structured interviews with VET teachers and students. The teacher respondents teach in a range of fields including cookery, hairdressing, hospitality management, law, finance, accounting, building and carpentry. The interviews focused on how teachers adapt their teaching to accommodate the learning needs of international students in their program and how they construct their professional identity in the current context of VET. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, we have used pseudonyms for the participants and kept the institutes anonymous.

The face-to-face interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The researchers read the interview transcripts several times and coded interview data. A short report that focused on preliminary analysis of selected quotes under specific themes was then sent to teacher participants for further comments and reader-check. This paper is centred on the narratives of two VET teachers, Raheem and Ajani, on their process of reconstructing professional identity.
Drawing on the stories of these two teachers, we do not intend to make claims or generalisations about teacher professional identity. While collective stories provide a fuller picture of how different teachers juggle their professional identity in response to internationalisation in VET and the impetus for policy change, individual stories based on extended narratives offer valuable insights into the liveliness, depth and complexity of teachers’ journeys of mediating professional identity. This paper thus centres on the compelling stories of negotiating professional identities of two individual teachers. A forthcoming paper which is also derived from this research focuses on the salient themes related to the plurality of identities reconstructed by 50 teachers who participated in this research.

In order to unpack the professional identity negotiation of the two teachers on whom this paper focuses, we draw on the concept of professional self-narratives (Sachs, 2001). According to Sachs (2001, pp.157-158), ‘teachers themselves construct these self-narratives, and they relate to their social, political and professional agendas… These self-narratives provide a glue for a collective professional identity’. We viewed the open-ended interviews as the process where the teachers unfold their professional self-narratives and make connections with the contextual factors shaping their professional responsibilities.

Raheem’s and Ajani’s stories have been chosen as the focus of this paper because they offer two compelling pictures of negotiating professional identity in two different VET settings: a private college and a TAFE institute. In a way, each teacher reconstructs their professional identity through their internal interactions with ethical identity and social identity along with the changing discourses of international vocational education. Each contributes an exceptional cannon into the current scholarly debate on VET teacher professional identity formation, which challenges us to reconceptualise this concept in the field of relationality that sees professional identity conditional on, as well as conditioned by, other identities (to be extensively discussed in the subsequent data interpretation). Thus, these two cases are significant for the attainment of a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of VET teacher professional identity and its corresponding politics.

Specifically, Raheem and Ajani have taught carpentry in a TAFE institute and hospitality management in a private college, respectively. Both have been teaching in their field for three years. Raheem is a full-time teacher while Ajani is working on a casual basis. Raheem and Ajani are from different ethnic backgrounds – South African and Anglo-Saxon. Both teachers have completed a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and Raheem is studying towards a degree in teaching.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework guiding the analysis of the case study is the logic of relationality (Hall, 1996, 2006; Settles, 2004; Woodward, 1997) in which teacher professional identity constitutes and is constitutive of other relational identities, amongst which are ethical and social identities. The logic of relationality is relevant to the nature of this research because teachers’ responsibilities and professional identity in contemporary VET tend to be shaped and reshaped by interrelated discourses characterised by their exposure to the growth of international students, the changing institutional context, and the social and political context in which the education and migration nexus prevails. The logic of relationality that sheds light on the interpretation of how the two teacher respondents mediate professional identity is captured in Figure 1.

The figure includes two layers. The core layer weaves three internal dimensions together: professional identity, ethical identity and social identity, amongst which the centrality of identity is assumed through its engagement with other identities (Settles, 2004). This occurs as the con-
sequence of multiple identities’ interactions. For instance, at the most intermediate level, VET teachers have multiple roles and group memberships with which they identify and find meanings and thus are tied up with a plurality of relations (as can be found in the data interpretation) in diverse social situations. Conditioned by these interactions, the logic of relationality neither sees identity as stable nor constantly changing, but a combination of both (Hall, 2006). Identity formation is therefore a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ and undergoes ‘constant transformation’ (Hall, 2006, p. 435).

It is necessary to note that these identity dimensions are contextualised within, and thus receive direct impacts from, the institution (e.g. its policy and practices) in which the teacher engages. The logic of relationality extends the identity of VET teachers to the wider context. So at the outer level is the economic and political context of international VET which has posed dramatic changes in conventional discourses associated with VET teacher professional identity, challenging the ethical identity and extending their social identity beyond its normativity.

**RAHEEM**

**Reshaping professional identity through pedagogic practices and social identities**

Through the in-depth interview, Raheem narrated his own stories of teaching international VET students. Based on his genuine engagement with both local and international students, Raheem tended to construct his professional identity through his negotiation between the traditional identity of VET teacher supposed to facilitate students’ development of vocational skills and knowledge, with a new set of emerging identities brought about via changes in his micro and macro contexts. These contexts are shaped by the attendance of the new body of international students in his class as well as the changes happening in his institution and the VET sector.

The process of ‘being’ is primarily significant in defining Raheem’s professional identity as a VET teacher. Raheem actively constructed his core identity as a VET teacher in a way that it is closely tied with his pedagogic practices. He is passionate about his teaching practices that generate meanings for his self-definition and his relationship with international students. Responsibility occupies Raheem’s main concern. His narrative reveals that finding work placements for international students and forming a collegial relationship with the students appear to be at the centre of his professional identity formation. Especially, the sense of connectedness and sense of responsibility mark a significant contribution to his core teacher identity and correspondingly to his pedagogic work. The phrase ‘my boys’ is used on a frequent basis. Raheem stated:

> I work with that class. That’s my class. They’re my boys. They’re my boys. That’s what I do.

> I take responsibility for finding work placement for them. I go with them. I go and knock on the doors before them and when they go, I go with them, introduce them, have a chat.
Raheem accentuated the correlation between the pedagogy of engagement and student motivation. He asserted the intrinsic engagement and considers himself an important knot of this relationship network. Raheem took the initiative to find work placements for his students and then accompanied his students to the workplace. Only by a true recognition of the learner as a valued member of the class community, a sincere respect towards the learner and a strong commitment towards creating work-integrated learning for his students, can students’ engagement be enhanced and their learning be optimised. He concluded that ‘I think it’s got a lot to do with your teaching style’.

A plethora of literature tends to link the motives of international students enrolled in VET course to permanent residency (PR) and claim these students have no or little intrinsic motivation to learn (for example, see Birrell & Perry 2009; Birrell, Healy & Kinnaird, 2009; Bass, 2006). However, Raheem’s account contested this widely-held bias. To him, teaching international VET students is closely connected with the recognition and the treatment of these students as a human being and a learner rather than as a ‘mere PR hunter’ (Tran & Nyland, 2011). More importantly, Raheem’s narrative is largely concerned with the pedagogy of engagement that treats international students in the ways they should be treated: intellectually equal and being motivated by their aspirations, rather than as a commodity within the neo-liberal commercialisation of education.

Another aspect of the teacher’s method of engagement (de)constructed by Raheem, which is interwoven with his core professional identity, is the appreciation of the learner’s identity. It is not an unusual practice that Australian teachers prefer to call international students by their English name rather than their real name. Reasons for this practice vary. It may be for the convenience of remembering the students’ names at the expense of cultural sensitiveness or ignorance. Such a practice may also stem from the imperialist view that Australia is superior to other nations, and that it is quite natural for an international student to fit into this society with an English name (Robertson, 2012). Calling international students by their native names may generate numerous positive impacts on their psyche. Addressing international students with their native names is a simple practice but it weighs. Raheem noted:

Simple things, simple things. Call everyone on their [native] name, everybody. I got a simple rule for myself and my class… I say, ‘No, no. I call you on your name’. And when, I don’t give people English names. If that is Korean name, that’s what I’ll call him. And he’ll say to me, ‘Oh, you can call me Bob or whatever’. You call people on their name and always talk to them on their name, they go, ‘Man, this guy, he uses my name’. So immediately, there’s a bond.

I can see how their face light up when you speak to them and you call them on their name.

Flexibility, helpfulness and patience constitute equally imperative attributes of Raheem’s professional practice. Teaching international students requires him to moderate his own teaching pace and accent so as to accommodate to his students’ pace of learning. He mentioned:

It’s just a matter of being flexible and helping the student belong and soon he understands what I’m saying. Because the thing is, the way I look at it, is I have an accent as well. So I don’t sound like everybody else either. So it’s hard for me, sometimes I can go very quick and speak fast and then they don’t understand what I’m saying.

Raheem’s co-construction of his professional and social identities confirms the logic of relationality which places a person’s identity in the network of inter-connected plural identities. This further validates Hall’s (1992) observation of multiple identities. The scholar argues that
‘individuals are formed subjectively through their membership of, and participation in, wider social relationship’ (p. 284). It is therefore possible to say that Raheem’s social identity does not place his professional identity under erasure. It co-exists with and enhances his professional identity through his commitment to foster the connection between different groups of students, between international students and himself, and between international students and the community:

It’s just easier with the internationals when they come in for me, and me being an international as well, my class room is like a United Nations… They just come in and they come into a country and they form like a friend, like a bond. And that class is almost like a family. They become buddies. I become buddies with them too, in the sense where I’ll go out with them sometimes or we’ll have a barbeque together. So they form like a close-knit group and they help each other along the way too, which is awesome. I love it as a teacher.

I really enjoy having the boys and I have formed friendships with them that will probably stay with me, and they’ll stay mates with me because we are teaching the same fields that they’re going to be working in… So it’s a relationship that’s formed that I think will just be there for as long as we are in the same area or stay in contact with each other. And with the IT age, everybody’s on Facebook. We all got each other on Facebook and we all speak to each other all the time. So there’s contact all the time. And that makes a difference too, because you almost get to know each other on a more personal level, even though at school, we still do what needs to be done.

Raheem’s professional identity is not confined to a pragmatic and narrowly defined sense as being merely a ‘trainer’ or ‘knowledge transmitter’, but is extended to being a nurturer who provides pastoral care to international students and at the same time is their friend. These multiple identities when being interwoven are indeed integral for a well-rounded development of international student sojourners. The interaction amongst international students themselves and between international students and domestic students is enhanced through social activities such as organising a barbeque and buddying. The sense of belonging, sense of connectedness and thereby sense of self are equally recognised and promoted. For example, an array of ‘family’ vocabulary is repeatedly used such as ‘friend’, ‘family’, ‘boy’, ‘buddy’ and ‘we’. It is this connectedness that shapes Raheem’s professional identity.

Engaging with the Ubuntu approach to construct professional identity

The logic of relationality places a great deal of emphasis on the socio-historical and cultural context which backbones a person’s strong sense of agency and identities. However, what seems to be missing in this is that it seems to either oversee or ignore the importance of the central identity – the core, coherent, cultural identity. The existence of the core identity, in light of the logic of relationality, remains highly controversial and thus, intriguing (Hall, 1992). Our research, while supporting this framework, adds another important conceptual insight.

What we find particularly compelling in Raheem’s case is the incessant construction of Raheem’s professional identity appears to be originated in his core cultural identity as a South African native. Raheem’s cultural identity creates the meaning of his own professional practice. Raheem’s professional identity essentially engages with the concept of Ubuntu, a South African term which means ‘I am who I am because of who you are’. The Ubuntu perspective centres on the humanness approach to international teaching and learning and the reciprocal connectivity between teachers and learners as human beings (Tran, 2013). ‘Humanness’ is the word that reflects his teaching philosophy and practice. Raheem revealed:
You know, the way I’m treating them like a person with full respect. Ubuntu approach and it’s a term that is used in South Africa and directly translated it means humanness, [that is] our people are but one another. You keep that human factor in your teaching, that humanness between one another. And also when you’re teaching, everybody’s job is important. Not only the best students, every single job is important. I make a point of paying individual attention to every student, to all my students… I don’t drift off and talk to someone else and someone else. I’m with him and I give him all of my attention. And even if he’s the weaker student, I still make him feel that what he’s doing is important. He mustn’t feel that he’s just carrying along because this is what we do. And when you engage students like that I find it amazing. I find it amazing, the response you can get. If you’ve got a teaching style where you can engage the students in such a way that they feel important and they feel that they want to come to TAFE, then you’ve got a good learner.

When teaching touches on the essence of human values teaching, outcomes flourish. It is through his own philosophy of ‘engagement’ that Raheem can identify his professional identity and practice as well as nurture his sense of connectedness, sense of belongingness and the true meaning of his teaching profession. Raheem’s philosophical stance in alignment with his commitment to the humanness approach tends to challenge the essentialisation of teaching in the neoliberal, globalised time as merely enterprise-driven and industrially compromised (Sachs, 2001). The teacher enthusiastically subscribes to the philosophy of humanness in teaching. He asserts:

You create that interest with teaching style or humanness, or your humanness, I’d say.

I hope so because as teachers we influence the way people think. And the things we say because you’re a teacher, the students look at it and they start thinking more or less in those lines. Even if we have like an argument or a discussion in class, it impacts on [the students] and the students impact on me as well. We learn from each other all the time. But I’d hope to think that [is] my way of thinking and not only teaching cabinet making, but just my way of thinking... You know, the way I’m being like a person.

This Ubuntu approach encompasses a number of aspects mentioned in the comments above. Our interview with Raheem reveals the ways he constructed his insightful answers through self-narrative (Sachs, 2001) in which his own way of being and becoming (ontology) and his way of seeing the world (epistemology) are fundamental to the ways he constructed his identity. His core value, stemming from his own cultural heritage, tends to shape his professional practices. Here we see the connection of how teacher professional identity is shaped and reshaped along with teaching international students. There is so much cultural value implicitly and explicitly driving his pedagogical choices and his ontological and epistemological stance.

**AJANI**

**Negotiating ethical identity with the commercialisation of vocational education**

Raheem’s case provides us with valuable insights into the co-construction of VET teacher professional and social identities. Also, his useful accounts of his African cultural identity, the Ubuntu, add an important theoretical lens into the logic of relationality. It is this cultural identity that guides his teaching practices and shapes his professional identities. Meanwhile, Ajani presents us with an ironic, exceptional case of juggling dimensions of his ethical and professional identities within the con-
text of commercialisation of education. Ajani has been engaged in the teaching profession for three years but his expertise is remarkable because of his 20 years of prior experiences in the hospitality management industry. His narrative was mainly centred on his experience in teaching international students at a private college between 2008 and 2010. This was a period which marked the establishment of a number of private VET colleges in Australia. Many of these colleges were solely finance-driven and used migration chances rather than quality education as an attractor to recruit international students (Tran & Nyland, 2011). In such a climate, Ajani’s identity trajectory is inextricably intertwined with a process to mediate between conflicting demands and values. The realities he witnessed in his organisation challenged his ethical responsibility and his core values as a human being. It is the ethical dimension of his identity and his humanness lens that guided his way to exercise his personal agency and leave the private college.

Ajani highlighted the importance of industry experience in teaching international students. It is his experience that is central to the formation of his professional identity and thus enables him to engage with the teaching more effectively. He stated:

I’ve got 23 years’ experience in hospitality so there is a lot of, the subjects I teach are more the business subjects. So I explain the principles for the business subjects can be translated to any industry.

Again, more experience and you get better at your job.

But seriously I make sure that my students know that, when I’m teaching them, it’s not a joke. I’m teaching you, I’ve got a lot of experience, you can take this information and put it to any career. It’s not a joke here, we’re here to learn.

Professional experience in the hospitality field informs Ajani’s identity as a VET teacher as well as his pedagogic work. The highlight of his professional identity was, he maintained, closely shaped by his capability of translating his authentic knowledge in hotel management into the teaching of skills and knowledge imperative for his students and its relevancy in any industry. From Ajani’s perspective, the more experience is accumulated, the better quality and outcomes his teaching produces.

Apart from experience, Ajani underlined the necessity of morality and codes of conduct when dealing with international students, particularly because of differences in cultural practice and expectation. He recalled:

The only challenge is just the plagiarism. I don’t think I’ve ever had a case of plagiarism at A institute. And alternatively, here there is always every class, a few assignments that are plagiarised or someone trying to cheat in a test. So that’s the challenge. And that’s just the ones obviously that are just here to try and get through the whole administrative process as quick as possible to get their PR.

I’ve had some Indian students tell me that, offer me money and stuff like that, to pass them through because they’re driving taxis all night and they can’t get to class or get to the exam. And I just explain that that might be the way it works in your country but you’re in Australia now, it doesn’t work that way here.

Ajani found dealing with plagiarism and cheating the most challenging when teaching international students and perceived those who committed plagiarism or cheated in the exam as having no intrinsic motivation for learning, but obviously only seeking permanent residency. His ethical identity is negotiated and appropriated through these cultural differences and thus his duty is to explain how the teacher codes of conduct operate differently in Australia. Ajani’s ethical identity came to the fore when interacting with the cultural differences and varying aspirations of international students.
Identity is context dependent (Hall, 1992, 1996; Woodward, 1997; Stronach et al., 2002; Patrick, 2010; Sachs, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Any changes in the micro and macro contexts may to some extent affect the trajectory of identity formation. The changing discourses in the VET sector due to the commercialisation trend might bring along enormous opportunities on the one hand and dilemmas on the other hand to its stakeholders. Being a teacher of international students in a private institute and witnessing how they are treated by the institutional system make Ajani become highly critical of the institutional practices and the government's policy. He soberly noted:

I think it's terrible. Yeah, that's disgusting. They pay their fees upfront most of the time and it's more expensive than a domestic student. And yeah, I think that's terrible. I think the government should seriously do something. That just more so, I think, exacerbates — if a student is on the edge, should I plagiarise or not? Should I get a job in hospitality or should I drive a taxi? And I think if we don't help them in these small things which are quite large things, by giving them a concession ticket, it sometimes might push a student to the wrong side. Because they think this country we're giving all this money into study and our fees for visas and all these things and they're not helping us in, for instance, public transport. You know what I mean? So I think that might have an impact on future actions or decisions that a student might make.

Being hinged on the commercialised industry, Ajani's ethical identity and sense of humanness are walled up against the unfairness of the system he is engaged in. It seems that Ajani was thrown into the ambivalent state where his ethics and moral responsibility were struggling over and resisting against the nightmares of the system. This implies that his ethical identity is indeed conflicting with the realities of commercialisation in the private VET sector of which he is highly critical.

Ajani reveals through his narrative:

I think we definitely should give them concessions and other entitlements. They deserve that. I think that would improve the whole morale and attitude of the students. As I said before, they might go the wrong side if I think there's a lot of terrible colleges out there that are just interested in the money. And I think the government should do more to shut them down because I don't know how they can continue to operate because there are some smart operators that have colleges that when the audit comes they get everybody to work 48 hours straight to get everything in order so it all looks beautiful and everything in order. And then as soon as the auditors go, everything goes back the same.

As a teacher, Ajani felt ashamed of the system and 'smart operators' who were successful in deceiving auditors and attempting to 'clean up' the system on paper just to pass auditing hurdles. He was defiant against the ways the institution treats international students and censoriously criticised the paradoxes of the 'use-value' in the international VET sector. As he articulated, international students should be entitled to minimal rights in line with the teaching, facilities and support services standard. Being a teacher and seeing these unjust practices involving his international students, his ethics and morality seemed to be challenged and become fragmented. His ethical identity is represented through emotional words such as 'disgusted,' 'embarrassed' and 'ashamed' as part of his personal discourse on and resistance against the unethical practices of some private institutes between 2008 and 2010. He agonistically recalled his awful experiences:

I worked in and I was disgusted. International students were just like sheep. The sheep come in, you shear them, take their money, open the door and send them out. There were no facilities. They were not teaching them correctly. We were doing practical classes to make cocktails
and we weren’t using alcohol, we were using water and food colouring. We were using practical classes to make coffee, we were using polystyrene cups, not proper glasses. And they were making so much money from these students and I was embarrassed to be part of that. And I was embarrassed to be Australian almost because of the ways we treat these students, whether they want to stay in hospitality or not, they deserve proper value for their money they’re spending on their education. Because as I said, a lot of the subjects can be transferred to other careers, other industries. So if they’re paying $22,000 we should give them some monies worth and a lot of colleges don’t do that. They cut corners and that disgusts me. I think it’s embarrassing to our country to do that to them.

He sarcastically recalled further:

Yeah, I know, it’s terrible. And that’s just an example of just in it for money, money, money.

I know. It’s disgusting. I mean, it’s embarrassing. We’ve got to clean up the industry because we’re getting a very bad name as just a lazy, uncaring culture. It’s bad for our reputation.

A lot of staff have left. I think only two are left there, Mary and Ruth [pseudonyms] are the only two when I was there are still there. A lot of staff have left because it’s very frustrating and it’s not fair for the students, really not fair.

Ironically, the realities of VET commercialisation push the teacher’s ethics to the fore and result in identity conflict. When multiple identities intersect with each other and especially when they conflict with the external environment, the identity trajectory is split into two paths. The agent may appropriate his/her identity to accommodate changes. Alternatively, s/he may refuse to accommodate this change and be more likely to resist against the tyranny of the external context (Giroux, 1983). On the condition that resistance is powerful, it may even be well turned into the internal strength (agency) to fight against the system and/or abandon it. For Ajani and some of his colleagues, their ethical identity came to the fore and guided their self-determination to leave that private college. Again, Ajani’s perception of this ‘dollar site’ of the system is manifest through a plethora of negative terms such as ‘frustrating’, ‘not fair’, ‘disgusting’, ‘lazy, uncaring culture’, ‘terrible’, ‘just for money’, ‘bad name’ and the like. Notably, the phrase ‘not fair’ was repeated twice in one sentential unit while ‘disgusting’ and ‘embarrassed’ are deliberately mentioned more than once throughout the interview. This wording is strong and emotionally-laden.

Therefore, it is powerful to convey his dilemma as well as his self-determined subscription to ethical identity. In particular, his morality as a ‘human being’ and an ‘Australian being’ was confronted when being exposed to the reality of the ‘educational’ practices at the college in which he taught.

Ajani’s narrative depicted a time of turbulence of the private VET sector that witnessed the collapse of some ‘dodgy’ private colleges that were financially unviable and unethically administered (Tran & Nyland, 2013). Though stories of colleges exploiting international students and failing to provide them with a proper education have been widely documented in the media, Ajani’s narrative as a teacher-insider in this system provides us with a deeper lens into the teacher’s dilemmas and struggle within his professional world.

**Conclusion**

This paper has provided valuable insights into the formation and reformation of professional identity of two teachers within the context of international VET. It shows that VET teacher professional identity is mediated through their engagement with international students, their teaching philosophies, their personal views of the system they are operating in and the socio-political world in which international VET is embedded. The human and ethical dimensions of identity have emerged as being essential in teachers’ negotiation over the kind of teachers they are and to which
they aspire. The teachers draw on human and ethical dimensions to engage in critical reflection of their own teaching practices and the broader environment surrounding their professional practices. These humanistic and ethical aspects are brought to the fore by the teachers in the process of conceptualising their professional identity as a response to their engagement with international students and the socio-political context of international VET during a crisis period. Thus, teacher professional identity, reshaped at the nexus of international education and social justice for international students, constitutes a distinctive feature of international VET.

To a large extent, the journey outward in which the VET teacher engages in their professional practices may be turned into the inward journey which constructs their professional identity. On the one hand, ethical identity is translated into the parlance of robust agency, which is the internal strength to guide the teacher’s professional practices and even in critical situations to resist the institutional power structure and unethical practices. On the other hand, ethical identity nurtures the ontological and epistemological stances which further inform the practices of VET teachers and provide them with passion and meanings for their own construction of professional identity. These findings highlight the original contribution of this study to the re-conceptualisation of VET teacher professional identity, ethical identity and social identity in correlation with institutional, sectoral and governmental policy and practices.

The teachers’ acts of making sense of their own teaching practices and of reflecting on their professional responsibilities have indicated useful implications for the way we interpret teachers’ professional lives, their dilemmas and their aspirations at a time of turbulence for international VET. The two teachers in this paper perceived their professional responsibility not only in relation to the facilitation of international students’ development of vocational skills and knowledge but also the provision of pastoral care and the advocating for social justice for this group. Yet, teaching international students in the private sector may be interconnected to an internal struggle where teachers have to exercise agency to negotiate the demands of their institution, its missions and practices within the private system, their teaching beliefs, their understandings of the student experiences and their core values as human beings. Within the international VET context, the teaching world and the identity trajectory of teachers involved in teaching international students appear to be increasingly complex and multi-dimensional. All these important issues need to be taken into account at both the level of policy and practice regarding the provision of professional development for VET teachers.

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References


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