



# Using seven CATs to grow the business

An interview with Gail Eaton-Briggs, General Manager Operations, Organisational & Business Development, TasTAFE

*Based on an interview conducted on 27 March 2015 by Dr John Mitchell, Lead Consultant, ACER JMA Analytics. The interview was fully transcribed then edited by Dr John Mitchell and validated as accurate by Gail Eaton-Briggs.*

## Purpose and audience

The purposes of this interview are to:

- stimulate ideas about how to use capability analysis tools to improve staff capability and organisational performance
- encourage the development of a national community of practice among users of capability analysis tools (CATs) who are focused on improving their organisations.

The intended audience for this document are workforce development or other educational management peers of Gail.

## Background

TasTAFE implemented seven CATs as set out in the Table.

Table 1. Implementation timetable

Capability analysis tool (CAT)	Date implemented
1. ADMINCAT®	February 2014
2. COMPLETIONCAT®	February 2014
3. MANAGECAT®	April 2014
4. VETCAT®	May 2014
5. CURCAT®	May 2014
6. GROWCAT®	March 2015
7. LEADCAT®	May 2015

The interview was conducted two weeks after GROWCAT® was launched and before LEADCAT® was implemented.

## THE INTERVIEW

(John M) TasTAFE is the first organisation in Australia to implement seven capability analysis tools. What lies behind TasTAFE's commitment to capability analysis?

(Gail E-B) When TasTAFE was first established the Board agreed on the inaugural corporate plan but it was very clear that there were a number of areas in that corporate plan that we were not going to be able to achieve if we did not build on the current levels of [staff] capability. Some of those areas were the decision to put student needs at the centre of our activities, making a priority of organisational growth based on student/client needs, undertaking a staff benchmarking exercise and ensuring that we met the performance management framework around our funding contracts.

So we decided that we couldn't just expect that building of capability to happen: it can't really be a hit and miss approach to capability building because all those corporate goals underpin the sustainability and the success of the organisation. Adding that to the fact that we have a very strong reputation to uphold as well, as deliverers of high-quality VET, we decided that we would commit to building capability and of course to do that we needed to know where our staff capability actually was, hence the implementation of the analysis tools.

You have implemented the CATs at a time of some upheaval, first with the amalgamation of the Skills Institute and the Polytechnic, then with funding challenges and now with an organisational restructure. Many other organisations say that they cannot implement CATs until conditions are settled. Why did you go ahead with the CATs in this time of great change?

In recent years the public training provider here in Tasmania has undergone a number of iterations that have been created through government reforms. About six years ago, TAFE Tasmania was split into two organisations, a Polytechnic and a Skills Institute and over the next five years each of those organisations developed their own culture, their own norms, their own capabilities, based on the student cohorts for whom they were delivering vocational education and training.

When TasTAFE was created by legislation in July 2013 it was clear that the capabilities were patchy, depending on where staff had come from and what their experience had been over the previous five years. So we needed to build capability, but as well as that we also needed some kind of tool to bring two groups of staff together – as a bonding exercise if you like – and that needed a planned approach.

We needed to form brand new teams at TasTAFE and we could have done that in a whole range of ways and we used a number of strategies, but one of the keys was to get people working together on the capability analysis tools (CATs), the related surveys and the follow-up.

Staff response levels to the CATs have been exceptional, compared with national trends. Why, do you think, staff have been so responsive?

Our staff love an opportunity to get together and work on something that is across the organisation and so we've not had trouble getting people to attend the face-to-face launches of CATs for example and being able to come and sit together. You've probably noticed when you've been here that every time you stop talking they start talking to each other because it's one of the things that they like to do.

We had our communication and marketing team involved really early on and they came up with a professionally designed logo for the CAT projects and some collateral such as mouse pads and posters and also the CEO promoted it through his regular 'staff update'. We made the capability analysis project really visible, we made it a key strategy for the organisation and the staff. The staff would have seen some evidence that the CATs were on the way well before we actually made the survey available to them.

To maintain that momentum one of our young women in the marketing team really embraced the CATs and promoted them internally. She has been very creative and very persistent in the way that she has targeted various strategies for different CATs. The CATs have had different audiences and she has been very creative around how she targeted them. We haven't had an enormous budget for marketing but it hasn't stopped her from being able to run competitions, give away morning teas, and give away TasTAFE goodie bags to individuals and groups.

The other thing that we've done is convene a group called the Continuing CATs Conversation Committee (CCCC). At TasTAFE we don't have a large department that can manage this whole of organisation capability building approach so I've been able to secure the commitment of people who are genuinely interested in taking their CATs forward. We've formed this CCCC group of people who are keeping the follow-up work alive through individual projects and updates in the 'staff update' that goes out fortnightly. The CCCC group is keeping the CATs visible and when something new occurs we put it up on the intranet so that people know that this has happened as a result of the CATs.

Why did you start with ADMINCAT® and COMPLETIONCAT®?

I was very attracted to those two CATs as the starting point for this organisation. That might not be the right two CATs for other organisations to start with, but there were two that fitted us best.

Regarding ADMINCAT®, I knew that one of the previous entities [that formed part of the new TasTAFE] had held a very successful capability development program for administration staff and it had been exceptionally well received and we could see tangible evidence of its effectiveness. I also knew that the group of people that had participated wanted more and more development: they love to get together; they love to learn from each other.

I also knew that the group of admin staff that had come from the other entity were very different in terms of their capability, particularly around the use of systems and data integrity and these were very important things for us an organisation to get right.

As a largely female cohort I do have some empathy for that cohort as a group because I know that they do feel sometimes they are not thought about first, as top of mind, and so I

wanted to acknowledge and recognise their role that they play in an incredibly complex environment. They were the reasons for choosing ADMINCAT®.

And why did you also start with COMPLETIONCAT®?

COMPLETIONCAT® was a natural choice because TasTAFE was created at a time when the funding body was focusing much more on payment for students' completions, so the really practical reason to go to with COMPLETIONCAT® was to assist the financial sustainability of the organisation.

I also recognised that there are so many variables that contribute to whether or not a student completes. We know that every staff member – and it doesn't matter where you are in the organisation – contributes to the student experience through their use of systems or face-to-face or phone or online communication, so COMPLETIONCAT® was a project that all staff could participate in and that was very important for us at that stage at the creation of TasTAFE.

COMPLETIONCAT® had a very practical outcome: in itself it was a tool for bringing people together with a common language and common thinking around how can we work with students to give them that great experience so that they can complete.

How did ADMINCAT® fit with your ongoing focus on improving administrative services?

Administration staff here at TasTAFE are often the staff who are doing the enrolments and supporting of teachers and students. They work in a team environment and sometimes they do feel a bit underwhelmed with the support they perceive as receiving. ADMINCAT® data has helped put a sharper edge on the staff development that they get: it is now more targeted for them.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the things that they really love to do is to learn from each other and so we have re-established the communities of practice in each of the regions for administrative staff to attend. That has been terrific in helping people learn some of the systems that they didn't need to use when they were in a previous entity and it also has created an environment where people actually help each other out more now.

What were some of the key findings from COMPLETIONCAT®?

COMPLETIONCAT® has been quite powerful. For example, we've identified through unpacking COMPLETIONCAT® the great potential for TasTAFE to enhance its partnerships with the community. To that end we've put in place a process to develop a partnership framework and we are going to actively use that to look at all sorts of innovative partnerships. We're now thinking about how can we open up our facilities to the community? How can we bring the community onto our campuses so that they can be providing a greater level of accessibility and support for the students? COMPLETIONCAT® stimulated that kind of thinking.

We've also recognised through COMPLETIONCAT® that our own people are crying out for mentoring and coaching and for the skills to be able to do that with their own groups. So we think that we will utilise a specific unit of competence for a number of people to take that on and build their capability in mentoring and coaching. We've recognised that whereas perhaps previously we had thought that professional development was about sending

people off to a course and that's all that our staff wanted, we now know that they realise the power of mentoring and coaching so if we can build that capability in the organisation, that's going to be quite important.

We also now know that our support for learners needs to be enhanced and structured in a different way and so I've been able to take some of the findings from COMPLETIONCAT® through to our newly redesigned organisation. The COMPLETIONCAT® data has influenced our future model for the provision of student support to the extent that I could probably talk to you for another hour about some of those things; that's been exciting.

The COMPLETIONCAT® System Checker has been brilliant. We really have only scratched the surface of thinking about how to address some of the matters that have come to light there. One of my frustrations is that you can have staff who have really great intent and really strong capabilities, but if the systems don't allow the good intent and all those strong capabilities to shine through you can be constrained in the level of service that you can provide. For example, an enrolment system is not good where the technology means that the process takes several minutes to enrol an individual whilst they're tapping their feet at the front counter. We are now identifying the gaps in our systems and how we ensure that that learning support is systemically applied across the organisation. The COMPLETIONCAT® System Checker has been fantastic.

What were some of the headline findings from MANAGECAT® that you are now working through?

We're looking at the MANAGECAT® data through the lens of our new managers who will be managing functions and staff from the 1 July this year, so to that end we haven't done an enormous amount of unpacking of the data, because we want to make sure that we use that group of managers to do the unpacking. One of the powerful aspects of the whole CAT model is that you use the people who are in the relevant cohort to help you do the unpacking.

There are a couple of key messages from MANAGECAT® and one is that managers want professional development (PD). They are desperate for PD in relation to a range of the core groups of skills sets in MANAGECAT®, but we may have assumed people had a much higher level of confidence as managers, and it's clear that that's not the case. And the main way that they want to learn is through an organisationally provided development program that has a really strong collegial aspect to it. So the aim will be to leverage off (a) they want PD and (b) they want a program that has a collegial aspect, to it to get them to help unpack the data, develop the program and then participate in it.

The other thing that's been really interesting in the MANAGECAT® data is about gender and the differences between males and female managers assessing their capability. I thought that was very interesting and useful to take forward.

How have you responded to key findings from VETCAT® and CURCAT®?

Sometimes you do get things absolutely right and one of the things that I got right recently was to give the responsibility for coordinating the VETCAT® and CURCAT® unpacking and follow-up work to two of our learning managers who are passionate about developing teachers. They have come up with a project plan that has a range of outcomes that they want to achieve. One of the headline things that came out of that plan for us as they started

to unpack the CATs data was their embracing of the 70, 20, 10 learning and development model, where 70 is learning and developing through experience, 20 is learning and developing through others and 10 is learning and developing through structured courses and development.

Some of the ways that these learning managers think will achieve building capability, based on the data, are things like a system of structured teacher mentoring and coaching, an expanded teacher development program to include online and blended options, perhaps a program of scholarships available to have teachers progress their qualification pathways, the development of networks and action learning projects, blogs, informal self-directed teacher groups and a range of industry currency developments.

Also, there was a myth in TasTAFE that return to industry was not available. That's not true and we've been able to resend all the information and the forms and put it up on the intranet so that people are aware that it is available. They're also thinking about implementing more structured mentoring that might include the use of video and recording of teachers in their practice. They've realised that our current processes for recording teacher competency and currency is too convoluted and can be simplified dramatically and that will encourage much more people to focus on the conversation around currency and competency and focus less on ticking boxes and filling in a form.

Particularly in relation to your own strategic role in the organisation, why is GROWCAT® important to the Institute?

The external environment is just so dynamic. There is so much happening and, in terms of market forces, the only way I believe that the public training provider is going to survive is to have a planned approach to growth. And for me a significant part of that planned approach is about building the capability of staff.

I do think our staff undersell themselves dramatically in terms of the contribution that they make and they could make to developing business and growing business so I am very keen to get in place a program of capability development that responds to the GROWCAT® data.

The external forces on us at the moment are huge and yet there will always be a role for the public provider. There will always however be the financial lens that goes over us and says "Well, if you don't have particular volume, if you don't have a particular reach, then maybe you are no longer that critical public provider." Our future is about growth, it is about making sure that we've got a footprint that means that VET training is credible and reaches out into the community as far as it possibly can.

What are you looking forward to with LEADCAT®?

LEADCAT® has deliberately been left to last, and again leaving it to last might not suit every organisation, but it was a strategic choice for us knowing that our leadership model will shift as we move towards a redefined structure from the 1 July 2015 that is in many ways different to what we've had before. We will use LEADCAT® very specifically with those that become the leaders for TasTAFE.

Because of the processes that we're going through with the staffing structure and our new organisational design we know that leaders are going to be at various stages of their leadership journey and there will be a huge variety of behaviours, skills and backgrounds, so

we have a huge responsibility to help them identify their own skills and behaviours and know the ones that they need to learn. Also we need to help other members of the leadership team know the strengths or weaknesses of their colleagues. So that's why we've left it until last.

When I met with the incoming leadership team, earlier this week we started our conversations around leadership and it was really interesting to hear them verbalise "Well, we are the leaders, we need to work as a team" and I thought "Great, I've got the tool for you."

In your experience, what are the immediate benefits of using the CATs?

One of our TasTAFE values is being connected, so by default just having these CAT surveys means that we've got email going out talking about the CATs, they're mentioned in the staff update, and it's helping us form that one TasTAFE, one team approach. And we have started to use the data as an evidence base upon which to design tactics, programs and strategies; so there are very immediate benefits for us.

What long term benefits or advantages do you believe will emerge for TasTAFE from using the CATs?

One of the things that we do need to do as TasTAFE is to develop a workforce development plan. We don't have that yet but I do think that the CATs are going to enable us to have an evidence base on which to build the workforce development plan. I do think that the benefits that we get out of paying attention to the COMPLETIONCAT® data will see us in better financial shape: we will get more completions and that is going to translate into dollars.

I think what's starting to emerge at TasTAFE is a new respect for teachers as professional practising teachers, so a focus on VETCAT® and CURCAT® data and many of the aspects of COMPLETIONCAT® is going to impact directly on the professional development that the teachers receive and access and are inspired to access.

As well as that, as a result of MANAGECAT®, our managers are going to be more respectful of our core business. In some of the skills sets in MANAGECAT® that you would expect managers in an education environment to be really strong in, they themselves, say they aren't, so we need to flip that around and work with them on that because our core business is vocational education and training and we need to be great at managing it.

Is there anything else about the CATs that you would like to comment on?

I would like to say to other organisations that are thinking about using CATS my instinct is always to look at how you stack up against the national averages for CAT skills sets and I had to tone myself down in relation to that because, even if we had a low score (across the organisation), some of the national averages might have been low as well. I needed to recognise the message "don't beat yourself up, take the CAT information for what it is and then aim to build on it and improve".

One of the things that I've noticed that has been terrific for me is that the corporate plan that was developed by the TasTAFE Board has a number of priorities that are actually supported by the data that's coming out of the CATs. The data supports the reason why an

organisation would need to do something or act in a particular way. It also gives you the impetus to say to the staff whom you need to get on board not just that the TasTAFE Board has a corporate plan that says you need to have a need to work in partnership, we actually have data that comes out of COMPLETIONCAT® that says if we can work much more strongly in partnership with others we will have better outcomes for our students.

That is a powerful conversation to have with staff. I think that the suite of capability analysis tools enables you to join the dots if you're smart enough to look out for where those connections are.

The final thing I would like to say is that the capability analysis tools are completely defensible: I love the fact that they are psychometrically tested, they provide an evidence base and they are not just done and dusted within a couple of weeks, it is a long-term process and we are looking forward to using them again in a couple of years to see how the capability of the TasTAFE staff has grown.