Using COMPLETIONCAT® to increase staff capabilities for retaining students

An interview with Hayley Macdonald, Manager Organisational Capability, People and Culture Directorate CQUniversity

Based on an interview conducted on 8 February 2016 by Dr John Mitchell, Lead Consultant, ACER JMA Analytics. The interview was fully transcribed then edited by John and validated as accurate by Hayley.

Purpose and audience

The purpose of this documented interview is to:

- stimulate ideas about how to use capability analysis tools (CATs) to improve staff capability and organisational performance, and

- encourage the development of a national community of practice among users of capability analysis tools who are focused on improving their organisations.

The main intended readers of this document are workforce development or other educational management peers of Hayley.

Background

CQUniversity implemented COMPLETIONCAT® in May 2015. The interview was conducted in February 2016, eight months after the COMPLETIONCAT® data was delivered to the University.

THE INTERVIEW

(John Mitchell) What were the main reasons why the university implemented COMPLETIONCAT®?

(Hayley Macdonald) The top reason basically was to improve student completion rates: like others, we have a lower than preferred retention rate so the project was about trying to find ways that we could keep our students engaged long-term.

We are a dual-sector organisation and student completion is different for vocational education and higher education: in VET there is a shorter time period before the student completes but in the higher education sector it can be a three to four-year process of keeping them engaged through to completion. The project was designed to engage the whole university to focus on student completions.

How did you go about obtaining senior management support for the project?

I had previous experience with the capability analysis tools (CATs) before this project. I also had the support of the Deputy Vice Chancellor for the VET Division who'd also used the CATS previously.

Obtaining the support of senior management was about selling the idea to the senior executive team through our Vice Chancellor's Advisory Committee which consists of all our senior managers and, executive managers; and I did this in partnership with the executive manager for the VET Division.

What strategies did you and your colleagues use to promote COMPLETIONCAT® before and during the survey period?

It was very varied. We spread the message about COMPLETIONCAT® to everyone we could: we visited team meetings and presented; or we attended monthly meetings and spoke for five or 10 minutes about what it was. We also spoke about it during our training sessions, across all our sites. We worked with our communication team and we had a communication plan that included integrated emails going out to everyone, with a theme that the CATS are coming. We started this theme and then continued to promote it.

During the survey period we set up a competition with our managers as to how many people in their unit had completed the survey; and we asked them to promote the competition to their staff. It was about promoting it at all different levels.

Why do you think so many people completed the survey?

I think a lot of it was the enthusiasm from our team. They were talking to people about it all the time. When we visited the other sites across the nation we spoke to them about what it was and what we were trying to obtain from the data. We were informing and educating them and the reason that they completed it is because of the continued communication. It was out there and it was everywhere and we would get phone calls about what is it? Why do we need to complete it?

We also had a link to it from our emails into the portal page that had all the information, had all the research behind it. We very much promoted the research behind the survey especially to our academic staff.

How did the staff respond?

The most pleasing part for us was the fact that so many responded to the survey. It was also pleasing that a lot of people in our academic or higher education field responded. I thought that the VET Division would have provided the higher response rate, but the academics dominated.

Generally speaking how has the COMPLETIONCAT® data influenced the planning around capability development?

It has influenced a lot of our understanding of training needs. It's one of the components that we're using in our planning. We have a few other tools and surveys that measure different aspects of university staff life but the CAT data added top those.

We used the COMPLETIONCAT® report for the whole organisation to generate a training

needs analysis about the things we needed to do within the university to grow awareness of our students. Our students are the most important aspect of our organisation and COMPLETIONCAT® data has helped us guide that staff capability building.

We now factor in the CAT data when we're planning with teams around their capability and what they need. We use it as a tool to help us say "Look, these are the results that came from your team or the results that came from your division".

One of the training programs that have been implemented now is called First Response Training and it's about what do you do when you come across a student who's upset: What's your first response? What do you do? How do we keep them engaged? We've put that thinking into our capability building in all our departments.

After receiving the data how did you brief the senior managers throughout the university about the results?

First we briefed the VC's team. Then we sent out all the reports to the divisions and started talking to the Deans and Directors about them. And in a lot of cases we've got to a point of building a matrix or training needs analysis for their team and also providing the training. It's not necessarily about their staff attending sessions, it may be about having a discussion or brainstorming or other activities that they can do around their data to increase student completion (the 70 in the 70-20-10 model).

Do you use a 70-20-10 approach to the capability development?

We're starting to integrate that model of professional development into the university. Capability building is not just about sitting in a classroom, the 10%. It's really getting the mentoring happening (the 20%) and looking at groups that have been successful and then seeing what they do and how they do it well. When working with teams who aren't quite there with being student-facing, it's about building their knowledge around student retention and student completion.

Which sections of the university are leading the way in responding to the CAT data and why?

My People and Culture unit's customer service team is leading the way because they have so much experience with students; they're also leading because they're at the frontline.

I regularly talk with the manager in a department about the training needs that have come out of COMPLETIONCAT®. And then we start to work on development activities for their teams.

It sounds as though COMPLETIONCAT® has helped you develop a richer framework for understanding the issues around student retention.

Yes, it has given us a lot of data for that. And in the background for me is the understanding that we need to focus on student completions. Our whole university relies on enrolling our students and getting our students through and there are a lot of other initiatives that are happening around students' retention. So we tap into that but also we are using COMPLETIONCAT® to create new strategies and to consider what else we need to in specific teams.

What do you think will be the two or three main benefits of using the COMPLETIONCAT®️ data?

Most likely the main benefit will be that it's given us a path for capability development that is focused on increasing our student completion or increasing our student retention rate. I believe that COMPLETIONCAT®️ has given us that focus of "Yes, we do need to build staff capability in the skills that they need for their job but we also need to build the capability for retaining our students once we get them".

We spend a lot of time marketing and getting our students who enrol with us. We now are on a path of developing our staff to keep them.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about how the data will be used?

I think the main thing for us is using the data for the development of the training needs analysis for specific teams and then developing initiatives around the data. We integrate the COMPLETIONCAT®️ data into programs that address directly the question of how can we increase the completion rates of our students.