Using VETCAT® to achieve strategic goals

An interview with Marilyn Capper, Organisational Development Manager, Human Resources, RMIT University

Based on an interview conducted on 30 March 2015 by Dr John Mitchell, Lead Consultant, ACER JMA Analytics. The interview was fully transcribed then edited by John Mitchell and validated as accurate by Marilyn Capper.

Purposes 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 Marilyn.

Background

RMIT University implemented VETCAT® in May 2014. The interview was conducted in late March 2015, eight months after the VETCAT® data was delivered in July 2014.

THE INTERVIEW

(John M) Why did RMIT decide to implement VETCAT® in 2014?

(Marilyn C): The impetus came from the VE [vocational education] strategic priorities that cascade from the University's Strategic Plan. The two big ones were a new educational model and tertiary pedagogy, and a more global orientation. In a nutshell these both required a substantial capability lift and I had a suspicion that we had capability gaps in these key areas but I had no evidence base to draw on. VETCAT® provided me with the opportunity to hear directly from the workforce about their skill needs and perceptions, and particularly from those involved directly in program delivery.

In deciding to use VETCAT®, what core questions about your workforce did you believe VETCAT® data would help you address?

The core questions for us were around advanced learning and teaching practice. I had some interest in commercial practice too, but the core questions were around high-level learning design and facilitation - especially in the online/flexible delivery space and in industry delivery. I was also interested in finding out about some bread and butter skills like diagnostic assessment, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and workplace assessment. This was primarily driven by an impending RTO [registered training organisation] re-registration audit. I knew that your [VETCAT®] questions around foundation practice would help me there. So for different reasons I needed responses from as broad a base as possible - at both foundation level and at the more experienced end.

The environment was - and still is - highly dynamic. We're negotiating a new EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement], we've got a new Vice Chancellor, there's the updated ASQA [Australian Skills Quality Authority] legislation and we have an RTO re-registration due – so I needed a picture of staff capability overall, and the VETCAT® questions provided an invaluable snapshot.

I expected to find that a significant body of the workforce identified as skilled in the commercial area, but I also needed to test whether we were low in learning and assessment specialisation and the data validated that. The big reason why I wanted to interrogate this skills specialisation is because we needed, strategically, to come up with a new workforce design and a new VE workforce plan. Part of this strategy was a proposal for a new classification level in our new EBA that would help us retain and develop learning and teaching specialists - not by automatic progression but by an endorsed merit-based academic promotions process for VE practitioners.

I needed granular data to support a case for that proposal, so all the [VETCAT®] questions around learning assessment specialisation helped enormously. The data gave me a burning platform for retaining and developing advanced VE practitioners who weren't in the management trajectory. We needed to utilise our instructional design and assessment experts in consulting and mentoring roles - working with industry and training other teachers - not lose them to management roles or to other institutions.

Why was benchmarking of your VETCAT® data against the VETCAT® data from other providers important to RMIT?

At RMIT we do a biannual benchmarked survey of all staff across both educational sectors and all parts of the business, but it isn't granular or customised enough to give us a meaningful sense of the VE-specific business and it doesn't tell me what I need to know about capability development for VE staff or professional staff working in the VE business.

I wanted to get the top end of our business – the Pro Vice Chancellors and Executive Directors – to engage with the future shape of their VE workforce. And to do that I needed to look at other models and exemplars of what innovative VE business might look like and the first way of doing that was looking at other people's VE workforce profiles and practices; to benchmark and make comparisons.

Why, do you think, did the VETCAT® survey receive such a strong response from ongoing staff?

The campaign to promote the survey [VETCAT®] was actually built on a VE perception problem at RMIT - VE staff felt that the RMIT 'brand' failed to recognise their very distinctive profile and heritage. The level of workforce engagement with the survey was 75% overall, so they clearly saw the survey [VETCAT®] as a vehicle for recognition and an endorsed and highly visible means to a 'voice'.

Since we received the data, I've drilled into the responses, right down to program level. I've looked at every report with every VE leader and, aside from a few red herrings, we've validated the findings and identified a robust and genuine engagement with the process. So all credit to the tool itself [VETCAT®], as well as to my team and the marketing campaign - and to the VE execs who stamped it with authenticity from the start.

Overall, what were the major findings about staff capability, from the VETCAT® project in 2014?

The data speaks to the fact that we had experienced teachers at the middle to upper end of their professional classification range all doing great work. And there is very good knowledge and skills base at the level of foundation practice.

Another finding was that we had solid skills in the specialist areas of generic and research skills. I hoped for this because we have a lot of postgraduate qualified educational managers now - including PhD qualified - so that was a good outcome.

The other thing I found out was that, unsurprisingly, we had a high demand for development in the flexible and online learning space and a high demand for development in learning and assessment design and validation. These are neutral findings, not negative, but they support our case for building innovation capacity enterprise-wide.

What were some broad areas where improvement in staff skills was needed?

Improvement is needed in learning and assessment specialist practice and flexible/online facilitation. We have a strategic intent to move many selective programs online and to move many programs into industry delivery mode. We also have a strategic priority around market reorientation. This means that some programs will be dropped and others will need to reinvent themselves. So what we need are some high-level skills in learning and assessment design and validation, in the flexible and e-learning sphere particularly.

The other area for improvement wasn't so much about existing capability levels per se, but there was a strong voice that teachers wanted ongoing and regular development in some core foundation practice skills like designing learning strategies, facilitating LLN [language, literacy and numeracy] and RPL [recognition of prior learning], and interpreting and applying the ASQA standards and the new VQF [VET Qualifications Framework].

There is a fundamental issue in a dual sector university context around assessment, where graded assessment is the normative practice and dominant discourse - especially as associate degrees become stronger (associate degrees are delivered by VE staff at RMIT). Designing good competency-based assessment in VE still appears to be a challenge here! We have several models of graded assessment and they're all valid however we're not finding the underpinning skills are there in competency based assessment first. We're drifting away from it in the context of pathways and associate degrees and staff are not getting the PD

[professional development] they deserve in current practice and thinking around competency based delivery. So that came out of the survey results [VETCAT®] - it was a strong message from the workforce and I'm glad it was made.

What else did it expose? It showed that we have some very good learning design at course (subject) level but that we haven't got cohesive validation and continuous improvement planning at program-level. We haven't got robust, uniform, accessible templates. Our practice is still highly localised. So the survey data galvanised action for a wider enterprise intervention - not just for a knowledge and skills upgrade but for a systems upgrade to support timely training and regular communication.

The other callout generally across every cohort was that capability development was hit-and-miss at RMIT, it hasn't been seen as strategic or integrated. There have been too many stakeholders in the PD space across the university, but the survey has helped bring all those players to the table.

What were some of the other strategic planning responses to these findings by you in late 2014-early 15?

VETCAT® triggered both strategic and tactical responses. The strategic response was led by the VE Practitioner Capability Survey steering group - a group established to oversee the operational process until the end of last year. The strategic framework we identified and agreed on is still in place and we are working on the five core workforce development pillars; two at established foundation level and two at advanced learning and assessment skills level and one at specialist commercial skills level.

The survey steering group doesn't meet anymore: the job has been handed to me in 2015 to tactically shepherd things through. I design programs and interventions and respond to environmental opportunities to support our wider strategy. For example, assessment skills training has been delivered for Program Coordinators around the interface between CBA and graded assessment practice, and we now plan to roll out a more forensic investigation of the nexus/ points of difference in reflective practice and assessment design at AQF 6 level, that is between associate degrees and advanced diplomas.

What were some of the other practical interventions (e.g. targeted PD) you made in response to the 2014 data?

We have created a new VE Quality role in the Office of the Dean, Learning and Teaching, partly because of an ASQA re-registration but also because of the story from the data around advanced learning and teaching practice more generally.

I used our ASQA RTO registration as a burning platform to get PD funding and with that I was able to fund some nuts and bolts "established practitioner" level training around assessment design: I ran that straight away, late last year. I also approached the VET Development Centre with the survey traffic lights report and high level findings [VETCAT® summary results presented in the three traffic light colours]. I submitted a proposal for capability development in online design practice and they funded us for an overarching professional learning series for VE program leaders who are developing online product.

What else? Undertaking the survey [VETCAT®] means that the VE business is well ahead of the mark in analysing workforce profile and in identifying capability gaps and a future workforce state. We've been able to provide a data-driven position on what strategic professional development could look like. We've been able to use this evidence-base to

inform targeted work planning and development systems for PD documentation. We've also been able to investigate practitioner qualifications and classification levels in a much more robust and informed way.

Further to this, RMIT is building a new online work planning tool where it is possible for the first time to have a development objective library. By using the VETCAT® skill categories, I was able to draft the learning and teaching and commercial practice development objectives in such a way that these work for both VE *and* HE. I specifically drew on the VETCAT® capabilities and aligned them to our VE Practice Capability Model, then expanded them into meaningful work/task objectives. It was a big leap of faith, to assume that they could be used for both VE and HE and that my HE colleagues would accept them, but they did – good teaching practice is good teaching practice.

What is meant by RMIT's expression "VE Expectations" and how will the VETCAT® data help you meet these expectations?

"VE Expectations" is a holistic capability and standards framework for VE at RMIT that aligns comfortably with the categories in VETCAT®. The VETCAT® survey allowed us to reinvigorate "VE Expectations" and it gave us a commentary on whether our targets are realistic. As a result of VETCAT®, they're being reworked now. "VE Expectations" was a beautiful model with some lovely rubrics sitting underneath it, but it needed to be humanised and actualised so that performance development discussions could be had meaningfully.

Because 75% of VE practitioners now have their own VETCAT® survey report, they can go into those performance development discussions with the capability model in one hand and a meaningful, personalised set of results in the other. And their manager will also have a framework from me committing us to the five strategic PD priorities.

With those artefacts in hand – and a more responsive online work planning system – both parties should now be empowered to build a development solution that fits the professional learning needs of the individual and the workforce design needs of the organisation.

We're off and running I think! This approach has already made a difference to morale and I think it can also make a difference to the narrative that there's 'no-where' a VET practitioner can go. It should help with career planning, as well as organisational development planning – and that's a fabulous outcome too.