



Repeating VETCAT® to maintain high quality

An interview with Janine Loves, R/Manager Organisational Capability,
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Based on an interview conducted by Dr John Mitchell, 27 August 2014. The interview was fully transcribed then edited by Dr John Mitchell and validated as accurate by Janine Loves and approved for release by Institute Director Peter Roberts.

Purpose and audience

The purposes of this interview are to:

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

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

Background

VETCAT® was conducted at TAFE NSW-South Western Sydney Institute (SWSi) in June 2010 and repeated in May 2013.

THE INTERVIEW

Why did SWSi decide to repeat VETCAT® in 2013, nearly three years after conducting it in 2010?

We repeated it because during those three years we made some very deliberate and targeted efforts to build staff capability, based on the information gained from VETCAT® in 2010. For instance we had the Bright Ideas program and some other major programs and initiatives to build capability. There also was a cultural shift to encourage individuals to take more responsibility; and now that they had their VETCAT® 2010 reports they had something they could work with.

So we decided to repeat VETCAT® in 2013 in order to look at the changes and see if the interventions were working and whether we were on the right track. We also wanted to get a snapshot of where we were in 2013, because three years is a long time in any organisation, particularly in some of the hotspot areas like e-learning. There was a lot of effort put into

developing those areas so we wanted to see if the interventions were working and to see where we were at.

It was not just the Organisational Capability Unit that was interested in the changes. Faculties and individuals were given that same opportunity to see where they've improved and any changes that have occurred.

What were the major findings from VETCAT® in 2010?

In 2010 first of all VETCAT® showed we had very few novice practitioners and the bulk of our people were foundation-established practitioners, which I guess wasn't too much of a surprise. But we were a little worried with the percentage of Learning and Assessment Specialists and Advanced VET Practitioners: we thought those figures needed to be higher, as this is where the e-learning skills come in.

Even though we had a good result with the proportion of commercial specialists we really wanted to identify who they were. We were aware that there were some people across the Institute who had those commercial skills. The results suggested that there were other people who also had those skills and were quietly going about their business and not necessarily working in the commercial space.

The VETCAT® results showed us our strengths, which we wanted to build on, and identified hotspots, that is, the areas that we needed to work on.

What were some of the planning responses to these findings by your unit in 2010?

Over the three years to 2013, we decided to ramp up what we were doing in e-learning. The Bright Ideas program from 2009 to 2011 and the SWSi innovate program from 2012 to 2013 encouraged hands-on projects; learning by doing. My predecessor, Jenni Harding, was very strategic and targeted with capability building. The VETCAT® data helped to pinpoint skills in faculties and sections, so we could be more targeted again in developing capability.

What were some of the interventions implemented in response to the 2010 VETCAT® data?

With the VETCAT® commercial specialist skills in particular, we went round the Institute and held, what we called, 'commercial conversations'. They were short, sharp lunchbox-type conversations aimed at all staff but with an educational focus: it was very much about what is a commercial specialist? The VETCAT® definition of a commercial specialist was helpful.

Another initiative related to [the VETCAT® category of] commercial specialists was a Bright Ideas project called 'Win Win'. The project team built 'Win Win' as a road map, a just in time self-help tool that individuals or groups can work through to build some of the commercial skills. It sets out some of the steps in developing specialist commercial capability, including looking at your environment, looking at yourself as an individual, looking at the team and engaging with industry.

With generic skills and some of the other skills identified in VETCAT® showing where we were strong, we didn't want to take the foot off the pedal. Part of the strategy for growing the skills for the category of advanced learning and assessment specialist was getting more people involved in e-learning projects and in workshops and activities aimed at enhancing

the use of technology in teaching and learning. One of the really critical things our Innovation and Technology Enhanced Learning (iTEL) team is focused on is pedagogy in using technology. So it's not just technology for technology's sake, its technology for learning, including excellent facilitation skills.

What were the major findings from VETCAT® in 2013?

The number of our novice practitioners had dropped dramatically so that was interesting, 7.2% to 2%. This was probably the result of a combination of two things, we have a teacher mentoring program and we implemented refreshed workshops and professional development activities. We have people moving from the VETCAT® novice category to the foundation-established practitioner category fairly quickly.

Also, there was a drop in the proportion of foundation-established practitioners, but the reason it dropped was because of an increase in specialist and advanced areas. The notable ones for us were an increase in the proportion of learning and assessment specialists, and commercial specialists jumping from 23.9% to 41%. The jump in the proportion of advanced VET practitioners from 6.7% to 25% was the really outstanding change.

The advanced VET practitioner combines the learning and assessment speciality and commercial speciality. This tells us that our number of learning and assessment specialists and commercial specialists increased significantly. This is important because we need both specialists and advanced VET practitioners to continue to meet the needs of our stakeholders.

VET's all about helping our students become truly capable and you need capable staff to make that happen. So the changes in the VETCAT® data were significant; and it was a shift to the high end [of VETCAT® categories] which was pleasing.

We didn't get 100% anywhere, not that you ever will, and there's still work to do, but we're continuing to head in the right direction: that was what jumped out for us.

What did the findings from VETCAT® in 2013 indicate about improved staff capability?

The increased capabilities across the faculties were good. In unpacking the 2013 VETCAT® results, we talked to the faculties and had qualitative discussions about the improvements. Some faculties experienced a real shift in the way their teachers deliver.

The higher proportion of teaching and learning specialists, commercial specialists and advanced VET practitioners in the 2013 data is important because what they all have in common is that it's a shift towards customising or adapting the delivery style to suit the student or the organisation you're dealing with. This shows that the approach is customised and focused on the individuals and organisations that engage with us. The approach is demand-driven: not just demand for training but demand for the way the training is delivered.

What do these findings suggest about the effectiveness of the interventions from 2010-13?

All these results were pleasing, across the board. There was a shift in the right direction across the faculties, and across many of the capabilities, not just in pockets or in very specific areas, and that was gratifying.

What were some of the planning responses to these findings by your unit in 2013?

We know we're not there yet. We never will be, because it's not a destination we're going to reach, it's an ongoing journey. As they say, change is not a destination and certainly we'll keep targeting our activities.

We have been targeting capability development for a long time but the targeting is becoming even more specific and it's about faculties working with Organisational Capability and Institute management. It's a very collaborative approach where we work with the faculties and they are strategic about who attends workshops. The teaching and learning activities are influenced by the 2013 VETCAT® data.

However, rather than workshops being seen as the answer to all capability building, they're part of a process, they support learning, they're not the whole picture by any stretch of the imagination. We're using the 70/20/10 approach when planning professional development activities.

We're also using an internal SharePoint site called WeLearn. The Institute's strategic plan provides the overarching framework, while VETCAT®, GROWCAT® and other things such as [the government policy] Smart and Skilled also inform what the development priorities are across the Institute. The idea of WeLearn is that for each topic, there are some self-help tools, including moodles and links to information and research. It's about helping people find just in time information to enable them to take that personal professional responsibility for their own learning.

What changes did you notice in the demand for professional development, from 2010-2013?

It stayed high. First we noticed that demand across the board was good and people want to engage. The second thing was generally where people felt they needed to improve was also where they were interested in more professional development.

Where there was low demand it was usually areas where people are already confident. Alternatively, it was in areas where we don't necessarily need as many of our teachers to be highly skilled. The example I often give is offshore assessing; there is not a huge demand for PD in that area, as it is a niche activity.

What is the long-term goal of SWSi regarding staff capability levels in training and assessing?

We have 2010 baseline data and we now have a 2013 benchmark. We also have benchmarking opportunities with other organisations across Australia that have used VETCAT®. That's always great for discussion, generating fresh ideas and networking with others.

We are also focused on keeping capability levels high. When we talk about compliance in terms of training and assessing we're talking about quality. We pride ourselves on being a quality organisation. We are the current national Large Training Provider of the Year and that reflects a belief by others that we are a high quality organisation.

Training and assessing is our core business so the long-term goal is obviously to keep those levels high and always improving, always looking for that next level of excellence.

Is there anything else you would like to comment on that I haven't asked about?

I would like to repeat that teaching and learning is critical and the skills tested in VETCAT® are essential skills for our core business. At the end of the day it's the facilitator/practitioner/teacher interacting with the students, whether it is face-to-face, in the workplace or online, that is critical to success.