

How to extract strategic value from the VETCAT™ reports

An interview with Anne Dening

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Based on an interview conducted by Dr John Mitchell, 16 August 2010. The interview was fully transcribed then edited by Dr John Mitchell and validated as accurate by Anne Dening.

Purpose and audience

The purposes of this recorded interview are to provide good practice models and stimulate ideas about how to extract optimal strategic value from the VETCAT™ reports.

The intended audience for this document is that group of senior managers who are peers of Anne Dening and her colleagues at TAFE SA Regional Institute, who, as a result of receiving VETCAT™ reports, will manage the implementation of changes to:

- professional development
- workforce development
- human resource management
- performance management
- quality systems
- innovation systems
- flexible delivery
- quality in teaching and learning.

Background

Anne Dening chaired the reference group that implemented the VETCAT™ survey in TAFE SA Regional in June 2010. She is now leading the implementation of strategies arising from the survey and reports. The VETCAT™ survey was conducted for the first three weeks of June 2010 and the reports for the whole of Institute and the six faculties were delivered to her and the reference group on 16 July 2010.

The response rate to the VETCAT™ survey at TAFE SA Regional was extraordinary: 420 of the 455 teachers/trainers and assessors, both permanent and sessional, at this regional Institute; that is, 92%. This high response rate was the result of many factors, including the strong support for the process by managers and the active campaign to encourage staff to complete the survey.

TAFE SA Regional staff completed the CURCAT™ industry currency survey at the same time as VETCAT™, but Anne agreed to have a later conversation about CURCAT™ as VETCAT™ alone raised so many issues.

THE INTERVIEW

What were the first steps you took after receiving the VETCAT™ reports?

I distributed the whole-of-organisation report to the Institute Director, the three general managers and to the senior training managers in the faculties. Then I made a time to talk with the ID and the A/Director Programs and Services – for about an hour and a half – and by the time I got to them I had filled the whole-of-institute report with pink sticky labels. On each page, as I read it, I wrote down the things that leapt out and hit me in the face and added pink sticky labels.

For example, I wrote down notes about how many Advanced VET Practitioners we have, which is slightly higher than the national average, and what were we going to do with them? I thought they should be mentors to the Foundation Established lecturers, to bring them on.

We have a methodology models paper that I wrote for the institute. I thought that what we were finding out from VETCAT™ would inform the review of that paper and that if, for example, we were going to have mentors we needed to formalise the mentoring program in the institute. So from each page of the report I was teasing out the implications and saying to myself “OK, what can we do out of that piece of information?”

And the reason I’m very keen to make sure we do plenty is that we told our lecturers that if they got involved in this we would make changes happen for them: we would allocate professional development (PD) money to fill their skills gaps and help give them career progression through the different layers of the model.

Given this massive response from our lecturers, I feel a huge responsibility to actually be credible and actually make things happen. I feel really beholden to these people.

How did you present your analysis of the VETCAT™ data to the Institute Director?

By the time I met with the Institute Director and the A/Director Programs and Services, I had also gone through every single VETCAT™ skill area and put it onto a grid, for the whole of institute and for each faculty. Where it said the skills were 80% plus, I filled the box in green. Where they were 75 to 79% I put it in as an orange, and used red for anything under that.

What I was able to show them was this visual summary of skills gaps in the Institute. And it was perfect for all the visual learners: it really hit them between the eyes. All the red were our skills gaps that needed to be filled immediately. For busy people like the IDA and A/ID, it was right in front of their eyes.

How have you presented your analysis of the VETCAT™ data to other senior managers?

My next appointments were with the general managers. I wanted buy-in from all of the general managers and I wanted them not to feel like it was just me telling the ID the results; they have very influential roles and they also have big jobs to do and they need to be kept in the loop.

How did you handle the distribution of the VETCAT™ faculty reports?

I gave each faculty manager the report for their faculty so they received two reports, the whole of institute so they could see what the whole of institute was saying, and they also received their own faculty report.

I have made appointments which each one of them to go and sit down and talk to them about their faculty report and how it's different from or similar to the whole of institute report and therefore what they can expect the whole of institute rollout of PD to be and how we might need to tailor the PD for their particular faculty.

How have the conversations about VETCAT™ unfolded with the faculty managers?

The conversations have actually worked really well. In terms of the professional conversation topics that I have discussed, they have included "OK, these are your identified skills pluses, your areas of great expertise, and these are your skills gaps, and this is what we're going to do as an institute about the gaps. Will that meet your needs?"

The responses from the faculty managers have been very positive. For instance, I spoke to one about her faculty report and the report showed that almost 50% of her team have either undergraduate or postgraduate degrees in their industry specialisation. This encouraged her because strategically what she wants, and has been wanting to do for a while, is to develop relationships with the university sector in a whole range of areas and to have joint delivery of diploma, advanced diploma and degree programs. She now sees that she has the perfect staff mix to make that happen. She has a range of very high level skills. And that thinking came out of the discussion of the faculty report.

What else are the faculty managers saying in response to the VETCAT™ reports?

Well first of all they're saying yes, this [data] gels with what we're thinking about our capability. Secondly they're saying that, because of the professional development program that I can now put in place that is really responsive to this whole survey, they will get the skilled workforce they need.

I was talking to one manager and she said it's as if all the ducks are lining up: "Because contestable funding is going to be brought in we're at a stage where the quality of our teaching and learning is going to be really, really important to us," and the reports will help us develop that quality.

The reports raise a lot of other things that relate to contestable environment. For instance, in the VETCAT™ survey one of the things that our people said they weren't very good at was getting consulting with or getting feedback from industry to inform their training and the use of the training packages. So I said to the Institute that we need develop a system of industry reference groups for each industry we teach in, to meet that skills gap.

If you actually don't ever ask the question [through a process like VETCAT™] about how do you do something [like consulting with industry], you won't find out that whether lecturers perceive that as a skills gap of their own.

Any unexpected responses from faculties to the VETCAT™ data?

One of the other responses I am receiving is, as one of the faculty managers said, the lecturers now have a language to describe what they do. So every document I put out I'm using that language and we will make the language part of how we talk about our capability in the institute. They are words like established and specialist and also the skills of foundation practice: learning style, learning theory, pedagogy, andragogy; that sort of language.

I think our people have been brutally honest about their skills and that's something that needs to be respected, and so I'm very careful of the way I discuss the results. I think they're to be commended for their honesty.

As a result of the data in the VETCAT™ reports, broadly speaking what changes are you making to PD?

I've identified about six or seven skills gaps in the Institute that need immediate attention. I've taken the red list from my tables as a starting point. They're what we're going to work on in the next 12 months.

I will have three people roll out a program across the institute. They will go to the 8 or 10 biggest campuses and deliver training on learning styles and learning theory.

AQTF documentation also emerged from VETCAT™ as a skills gap for us. I don't know whether it's a skills gap or whether people just don't feel confident. We've got a project that will run asking people to identify the documentation that every course will have just systemised; it's about learning theory, learning styles, AQTF documentation.

Funnily enough we scored ourselves low (in the VETCAT™ survey) on flexible delivery skills and I think that's about processes and procedures and guidelines so we'll have a project running on that one.

[Regarding other VETCAT foundation skills sets] there's a new assessment policy for TAFE SA, so we're going to run some workshops on that, and there's a new TAFE SA student conduct policy which will impact on classroom management and student behaviour, so we'll run that as a short course.

Can we talk about the VETCAT™ individual reports now? I understand you've said to people that if they come forward with their individual reports you'll allocate some of the PD money to skills gaps identified in them? Is that so?

Yes. That's going to happen. I only manage half the PD money, the other half gets managed by the manager in each of the teams. Every team has an allocation for workforce development money. But if a manager comes to me, as they often do, and says this particular individual needs to do this [as a finding from the VETCAT™ individual report] then we will find the money somehow to do that.

Beyond PD, how are the VETCAT™ reports influencing workforce development?

The responsibility for workforce development sits in our HR unit, but we have an organisational development committee within the Institute and I sit on that committee and

our HR manager actually runs it. The data we have from VETCAT™ around how many novices, specialists etc, and the actual structure of our lecturing staff, will be invaluable to that committee. So will the data about age and gender.

The HR manager and I are meeting soon - she already has a copy of the whole of institute report – and there are some issues in the report that she will take on board in terms of what should our workforce look like as we move into this contestable arena? For instance, I would say we need more novices, and I think we need some of our Foundation-Established practitioners to move through to the next stage. We don't have enough Learning and Assessment specialists so some of our Foundation-Established practitioners need to move into that specialist area.

And we have all of this data against a background of a new enterprise bargaining agreement with lecturer classification that should be informed by VETCAT™ but isn't yet. We're just going to have to work with it but I think this whole VETCAT™ process we'll actually inform the next EB in this Institute.

What strategic conversation topics have you raised with the quality manager, based on VETCAT™?

We have talked about the systemising the documentations for audit purposes for AOTF, which I mentioned before and which came out the survey as a weakness we need to fix.

One of the other things that people identified in the VETCAT™ survey is that they didn't feel confident about making sure their learning materials actually met the needs of the training package. We need program managers to take on board that finding.

VETCAT™ is the tool that's brought it together some issues around see teaching and learning and quality, whereas in the past quality might have sat off to one side as being much more audit-focused and about AOTF documentation. Theoretically, you could have somebody pass an audit who couldn't teach to save their life. Now to me that's crummy. Fortunately VETCAT™ has uncapped the teaching dimensions of VET practice.

I understand innovation is in your portfolio. What changes will the VETCAT™ reports bring to your thinking about innovation?

I've always been on about innovation in teaching methodology and better delivery to students for improved access. What I think VETCAT™ has done for me is to complement my belief that innovative delivery is a high level skill and we do a lot of innovative delivery: we have a lot of activity happening on Moodle, we have a lot of things happening on videoconference. We do a lot of "Come in for a day, have intensive theory day, go away and use technology for the rest of it and then come back in again for another day".

I now realised that unpacking a training package to do that sort of flexible delivery is not something to give to Novices and we might in the past have been guilty of that. So what VETCAT™ has done for me is to say you actually need to put the Foundation skills into somebody before you ask them to use high level skills: you've got to crawl before you can run. I will be putting to Executive a recommendation that in order to do video-conferencing, Moodle or workplace training delivery, that methodology training prior to that is compulsory.

Also, we will be making the TALENT program compulsory for all our novices, where everybody in their first year of teaching in TAFE does the first three units of the Certificate IV in TAA, they do it in a very structured way and they have a formal mentor assigned to them by their program manager and my budget pays to train the mentors. We will expand that. Up to now it's been a nice to do thing and most programs have involved themselves in it. But I will be recommending to executive that that's made compulsory.

I understand you are convening a full day debrief on the VETCAT™ results with staff. What are you planning for the workshop?

We will have four sessions. The first session will be about our context, the contestable funding arrangements the regional strategic plan. Then we will look at what did we find out about ourselves as a result of VETCAT™? And how will the new lecturer classification impact on the business so the first session is actually all about contextual stuff.

The second session is a workshop around addressing the skills gap identified by VETCAT™. I have written three discussion papers for workshopping: a discussion paper on an individual PD plan for all staff; a discussion paper on the mentoring; and a discussion paper on the policy for performance management. I've also developed a VETCAT™ checklist and CURCAT™ checklist so we'll discuss how are we going to incorporate those checklists into the individual PD plan for use in a performance management context.

I've written these discussion papers and they will be on everybody's desk. They are up for group discussion: "Here's your chance for consultation, tell me what you want changed". The redrafted papers will go on the intranet the following Monday for the rest of the staff to consult about and then they're going to Executive for endorsement.

After lunch in session three I'm going to do a presentation about what did we find out about ourselves from CURCAT™? And then they'll have the discussion paper and the CURCAT™ checklist. And I want our Quality Manager to also present on what are the AQTF requirements for industry credibility and currency? So people will find out exactly what it is they have to do.

In session four we're going to focus on performance management for excellence in teaching and learning. We will give them a copy of the dummy individual reports that you gave me and I'll walk them through it and say to them "OK, if a lecturer comes to you with an VETCAT™ individual report that looks like this, let's tease it out, let's work out what it's telling you about this person's skills and needs and where are you going to take it then?"

The workshop is an opportunity for people to actually open up a bit about the individual reports. So I thought if we used the dummy reports, then that'll be fine.

The last question we'll address on the day is what is the role of the educational leader in our Institute? What are our expectations of you as Advanced Skills Lecturer 1 or 2 (ASL1, ASL2)? And if VETCAT™ individual report says you don't have those skills, you'd better tell us about it because we'll fix it.

Who is attending the workshop?

All the people who are paid as ASL1s and 2s. And I very cheekily sent out an email saying if you have been assessed by the VETCAT™ process as an Advanced VET Practitioner but we don't pay you as an ASL1 or 2, you are welcome too.

I am inviting the educational managers [EM] as well, because sometimes it has been a long time since they have taught. The mentoring discussion paper that I have written says that the Advanced VET Practitioners and the Learning and Assessment Specialists should be in a position to provide advice to the educational manager about methodology, learning strategies, and about methodology reports for people who are moving through the classification range. I believe that a really good lecturer in a team who's credible is much better placed to provide advice to other lecturers than an EM who hasn't taught for 15 years.

The other thing that the ID was really quick to spot from the VETCAT™ reports was that we need principal lecturers in each faculty. And a couple of faculties have in fact done that now. One faculty manager has now put in two new Principal Lecturers. She was going to do that anyway but she said VETCAT™ gave them a direction about what she wanted those people to do.

What are your own next steps in responding to the VETCAT™ reports?

The upcoming workshop is a big focus, it will give us the approval from the staff to move forward with changes to the PD regime in terms of filling the gaps identified by VETCAT™. The whole structure of the VETCAT™ model will give us a language to move that forward. Following the workshop I'll be able to go to executive with recommendations that I hope they will endorse about flexible delivery.

There's a whole other layer of issues in terms of strategic directions. We have one faculty who have very aged workforce but we have another faculty with a big proportion of their staff with low level qualifications in their industry area. They can now look at their workforce and say "OK, this is where we're moving in five years' time with contestable funding, so do I have the workforce to make that happen?" And then we will say "If we're going to move forward with the staff we've got, these are the things we need to do to allow them to have the career progression and the skills to be able to do that."

Have VETCAT™ and CURCAT™ given you the data, the evidence, to go forward with workforce development?

Yes. And we're not finished unpacking this data. I've unpacked it as much as I can manage at present. And then when we get that fixed and you know those issues done, we will unpack the next bit. We have focused on VETCAT™ to date, but there's a whole mind change around the CURCAT™ data that's still to come.

Interestingly, the individual PD plan we're putting out for consultation suggests that every staff member will be responsible for 30 hours a year of PD that will be signed off by their manager. They will be responsible for keeping tally and so that whole issue of personal responsibility for industry currency and PD is a whole other agenda which CURCAT raises. Happy to talk about CURCAT next time.