



Clarifying the workforce for the future

An interview about the value of VETCAT® and CURCAT® with
Keri Bailey, Director Strategic Organisational Development,
Office DVC and Director TAFE, Swinburne University

Based on an interview conducted by Dr John Mitchell on 28 July 2011. The interview was recorded and fully transcribed then edited by Dr John Mitchell and validated by Keri Bailey.

Background

The VETCAT® and CURCAT® surveys were conducted at Swinburne University TAFE in February-March 2011. Swinburne received 26 reports of thirty pages or more for each of VETCAT® and CURCAT® – one for each of the five Schools and twenty Departments and one whole-of-Institute report. That is, a total of 52 reports. Keri Bailey and a committee oversaw the implementation of the surveys and the unpacking of the reports.

Audience and purposes

The intended audience for this document are workforce development peers of Keri Bailey who can use or are using VETCAT® and CURCAT® to enhance VET practice and the capacity of their organisations.

The purposes of this interview are to:

- stimulate ideas about how to use insights from VETCAT® and CURCAT® to inform workforce planning and development and the quality of teaching and learning
- encourage the development of a national community of practice among users of VETCAT® and CURCAT®.

THE INTERVIEW

Before we talk about VETCAT® and CURCAT®, what strategic journey has Swinburne been on?

Our journey has been to understand where we're going in an ever changing internal and external environment. Like a lot of VET providers in Victoria we've known for some time that contestable funding was coming and it has been implemented in earnest this year. But we

needed to know where we were going so we could position ourselves to best respond to the needs of the skills sector as well as the emerging tertiary sector.

Being a dual sector institution is quite an interesting spot because in 2012 the funding rules will change for higher education. As an organisation we are going into uncharted waters and so making sense of how we might best position ourselves in the skills sector, the tertiary sector and the higher education sector has really been part of the journey.

Before you undertook VETCAT® and CURCAT®, where had Swinburne reached on this journey?

Part of that journey was to undertake sophisticated and extensive research and analysis of where we're going. The next part – and this is where VETCAT® and CURCAT® came in – was to say

- Well, what's the optimum workforce to get us there?
- What should it look like?
- What skills do our teachers need to have?

Those types of questions were still unanswered.

Still other questions remained unanswered:

- Who's already here with us?
- What are their skills and aspirations?
- What areas are they mostly in and what are they mostly not in?
- How do they wish to develop?
- Are their skills still relevant and current?
- Are there any gaps in the knowledge and skills of our existing staff?
- What do we need to do about these gaps?
- What's the best way to build their skills and knowledge?

Some of the answers were intuitively known but until we completed VETCAT® and CURCAT® we could not verify and quantify our existing skills. The CATs gave us something to analyse. You can't analyse hunches.

What insights did VETCAT® provide?

The VETCAT® whole-of-organisation report and the five School reports were valuable but the best information of all came from the twenty VETCAT individual Department reports. For instance, while we know that across the board we have fewer novices than the national average, some Departments had 0% novice teachers which meant those Departments need to be looked at from a succession planning level. We wouldn't have known that had we not drilled down to those department reports. We might need to review their staffing requirement and consider what is the best mix of staff needed to deliver their set of courses?

In relation to the national averages in VETCAT®, we found that we had an extremely high number of our teaching staff with very high qualifications both in their industry specialisation and their teaching qualifications. That was a real boost and we do want to capitalise on this as we participate in the emerging tertiary sector.

The other thing we found, across the board, and like other organisations using VETCAT®, is that we still have a skill gap in the percentage of our staff who identify as learning and assessment specialists. So we've set up an immediate strategic response to that situation.

We also noted that we're higher than the national average for the number of commercial specialists so we're now currently thinking about how do we maximise and harness these teachers to best support their efforts in the commercial arena. This has been an eye-opener to us that we need to reinvigorate a supportive community of practice for these teachers.

Overall, we're doing something quite strategic about building skills where we have deficits but also capitalising on our strengths.

What insights did CURCAT® provide?

The importance of rolling out CURCAT® side by side with VETCAT® can't be underestimated, because had we not done that we might have just been very cosy and comfortable thinking that we've got it all in the bag. But doing CURCAT® blew us away from the perspective of the honesty of the teachers who completed the tool. In some ways these highly qualified individual teachers have actually put out a bit of a cry for help from an organisational perspective, because they know that they need to maintain their currency but they perceived some real roadblocks.

So CURCAT® has been a really valuable tool for us in that it taught us that a one-size-fits-all approach to assisting teachers to maintain their vocational and educational currency will not be the answer. Again, teachers from the different Departments have a really different set of reasons and blockages that need to be considered deeply. We need to ask ourselves whether these reasons or blockages are something that we can assist with from an organisational perspective or if there are other factors that need to be taken into account. For instance, one department is largely made up of women at a particular stage of their lives with specific family commitments which was identified as their major stumbling block to maintaining industry currency. How does an organisation work with that sort of information?

Another stumbling block or finding was that a majority of our teachers prefer to undertake professional development in half or full day blocks. That might be something to do with the options provided by the survey tool but organisationally it's something that we're keen to unpack because we don't want our teachers to think of PD as an event. It means that we've got a bit of work to do to reframe what sort of things people can do for professional development; it's not just about going to a workshop. Some of our managers are doing a great job with that topic and they're having individual discussions with their teachers and have actually started to plan re-orientations of jobs or secondments or special development projects which really will assist the development of industry currency.

In general terms it's been useful to have CURCAT® to drive conversations across the organisation, but the conversations in specific Departments where trends are obvious have been really valuable.

I understand there are five pillars of the Swinburne Strategic Plan. Can VETCAT® or CURCAT® reports provide information to inform those pillars?

The first pillar is to do with market diversification so the next layer of information that we needed was research into which industry or market sector we can work in effectively, for commercial growth. We can see now with the results from VETCAT® that some Departments have identified multiple commercial specialists so we can use that information to pursue the diversified markets that we've identified and match specific teachers to these.

Because the staff have their own individual reports and because different Departments have different percentages of commercial specialists, the call can go out 'Well who's got these commercial specialist skills?' VETCAT® has given us a way of looking internally first, for those skills. That's been useful.

The second pillar?

The second pillar of the strategic plan is growth and VETCAT® identified that we actually have a gap in learning and assessment specialists. We need those specialist skills to ensure growth across all of our revenue sources: government-funded, international, fee for service. Knowing we have this gap we've now put together an approach to centrally support the rapid deployment of skills and knowledge in that area. We're going to call it Curriculum Central or something like that. Essentially we are bringing together self-identified people into a community of practice and strengthening this area.

The third pillar?

The third pillar is about optimising benefits to students and we need information to support that pillar. The TAFE student isn't a homogenous group and so neither should be the team who support them be. We really need to consider the best makeup of the team that supports each of our students. An option for employment in a dual sector includes a category of higher education worker, youth worker, and so how do we best combine these categories of staff with the TAFE teacher role identified by VETCAT®? Is the VET professional always a teacher? Those questions have really come out of unpacking the question of what do we do to optimise benefits to the student. Is it always the teacher? Have we missed a vital point? And that's why we're keen to look at ADMINCAT® for a VET professional.

The fourth pillar?

The fourth pillar is about efficient and effective utilisation of resources. Our staff is our most important critical resource so we have recently implemented a sophisticated, performance development and review (PDR) system which formalises the development approaches on a one-on-one basis whereby the staff member and their supervisor agree on set parameters. Now the results of VETCAT® and CURCAT® are being used across the organisation to streamline what each teacher does as part of this PDR process for their future options.

The performance review process works on a one-on-one basis. On a central level it also helps us to plan the most critical and targeted PD for the year.

The fifth pillar?

The fifth one is about creating a difference with our teaching and learning and basically that's about ensuring that our teachers are up-to-date. That really does form a key feature and a key performance indicator that each school has to sign off on

So they are the five pillars. And VETCAT® and CURCAT® fit into all of them in some way. The reports provided something for every one of our strategic pillars.

Why is it vital to have your people up to date?

If our product and our internal and external environments are always changing it's pretty vital to have the people that you've already got in your organisation to be able to advance and develop and grow. They have to be able to deliver our product and operate in this turbulent environment because we can't deliver on our plan unless the people are on board with the right set of skills, knowledge and attitude. It's all very well to go off and create different ways of delivering, but you can't do it if you haven't got a team of people who can do it.

The VETCAT® and CURCAT® data has really deepened our understanding of how we might need to strengthen and deepen further our skills within the organisation. The CAT data is part of the picture; it's not a picture by itself: the big picture is strategic planning, workforce development and mobilisation to deliver a quality product. All of those things are only possible if we have the right people with the right skills.

The "lean" approach is very much based on the Toyota principle that you can't make the product if you haven't got the people. There's also the book 'Good to Great' which says you have to get the right people on the bus for your journey. But if they're already on board then we need to know who they are and how best to support them on the ride.

How can the VETCAT® and CURCAT® data assist you to get the people on board?

The next part of our work is in September when we're having a planning retreat and we'll review the pillars and the KPIs around the pillars, but we'll also ask the critical question:

What skills do we actually need in our workforce to ensure that we can achieve these KPIs?

We're looking at a longer term workforce development plan and we'll definitely use the VETCAT® and CURCAT® data to draft the plan, revisit the pillars and analyse at a local level what the CATS are telling us, and all of that will get fed into that strategic mix.

We're looking at the skills in the VETCAT® and CURCAT® model and developing a workforce development plan that will better target some of those skills either by recruitment or development or extension, so it's a very useful model.

Why is data-based planning so important?

In developing the whole picture of where we're going and why and how, we are aware of the myriad of transitions that our people need to go through: moving from using existing to new technology including changes in communication and social networking, implementation

of new student management systems, ensuring sustainable practices in everything we do, and so it goes..... its all transitioning from the existing state to a desired future state, all at the same time with the same people. It reminds everybody of how rapid and how turbulent our current environment is and how wearing it can be. So a plan based on actual data really becomes a steadying influence and gives everyone a sense of actual and measurable achievement.

You can go fast and furious but if in all of that we have a plan, and it involves knowing who our staff are, what they're good at and what they still need to do to develop or to become more current, what the organisation can do to support these aspirations and who we need on board in future. It actually is a steadying and calming feeling in these turbulent waters. In a way it tells us that we actually do have some solid life rafts that we can use to ride through the rapids.

So the VETCAT® and CURCAT® data contribute to that steadying feeling?

Very much so, because people in a turbulent time can feel overlooked.

Managers have reported that in the PDR interviews this time they were able to have valuable performance discussion with each of their key members who brought with them their individual VETCAT® and CURCAT® reports. For the first time valuable performance discussions have been held and related directly to the areas of further development identified by completing these tools.

The PDR conversations were more meaningful and the PD plans more targeted, rather than going for the same old PD solutions. And in fact many in-house solutions have been determined, so we've gone from the big picture to the small picture and the most critical picture, where the staff member works with their team leader or their manager. That's a wonderful way to go.

In a few words why are VETCAT® and CURCAT® reports important for Swinburne?

The discussions due to VETCAT® and CURCAT® are not over by a long shot. The way we can manipulate and use this data and interrogate it and ask different questions comes up on a day-to-day basis: 'What's this telling us? What's that telling us?' And it's good to have some data rather than just a hunch or gut feel.

VETCAT® and CURCAT® are part of the whole picture of strategic planning, workforce development, and mobilisation of staff to deliver a quality product, all of which is possible if you've got the right people with the right skills. VETCAT® and CURCAT® data is not just sitting out on the side; it's interwoven.