

## Overtly marketing the skills of VET practitioners

An interview about the value of VETCAT® and CURCAT® with Robyn Pinel, Manager, Centre for VET, Sunshine Coast Institute of TAFE

*Based on an interview conducted by Dr John Mitchell on 27 Sept 2011. The interview was recorded and fully transcribed then edited by Dr John Mitchell and validated by Robyn Pinel.*

### Background

The VETCAT® survey was conducted at Sunshine Coast Institute of TAFE (SCIT) in February-March 2011 and CURCAT® in June 2011. Robyn Pinel and a committee oversaw the implementation of the surveys at SCIT and the unpacking of the reports.

### Audience and purposes

The intended audience for this document are workforce development peers of Robyn Pinel 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

What surprised or pleased you about the VETCAT® results for SCIT?

The most pleasing thing was the survey completion rate for VETCAT®. That was built upon your attendance at our annual staff conference in January and we opened up the survey straight after that. We had around a 67% completion rate so that was a really good start. Then when you came up in April after the survey was completed and we had the follow-up meetings, what I saw was great participation in those conversations around what are VET practitioners. It was an eye-opener for all of us: people came into those meetings reluctantly and then left bouncing out of the room, so that was a really good result.

They rated their skills in the VETCAT® survey at around 77% in meeting VET practitioner requirements which was near the national average. Their demand for PD was around 64% which was above the national average but left some room for improvement.

What surprised or pleased you about the CURCAT® results?

The lower CURCAT® completion rate was disappointing. We had less buy-in from the casual staff than we'd expected, and that took our completion rate down a little bit. Also, some of the CURCAT® results showed that we have a lot of work to do as an Institute to support and encourage and refocus attention back onto industry currency.

So overall the pleasing result is that we have focused attention on the complete VET practitioner. That has been achieved through the VETCAT® and CURCAT® surveys, but we've also had a number of other parallel PD strategies in place, and the language about the VET practitioner is now becoming consistent in different pockets of the organisation.

What were some of the overall findings from your VETCAT® data discussed at strategic level within the Institute?

Often we focus on the business side at the strategic level and less on the VET practitioner, so the major new focus was raising the professional conversations around the role of the VET practitioner and that's from a number of areas within the Institute: from the Business Leadership team, HR, and from Business Improvement.

We also have a team called Building Excellence in Teaching, a targeted team which supports teaching and learning outcomes, and they repeated the same language about the VET practitioner around the Institute.

It was raised in a number of other forums, particularly around performance and professional development planning (PPDP). We now have strengthened conversations or more robust conversations where people bring along their individual VETCAT® and CURCAT® reports. The Heads of School have really bought into that conversation: it's given them more structure around that PPDP conversation.

The VETCAT® data has also influenced the tailored learning and development planning where we are now looking at how we plan to meet the identified skills gaps and the demand for PD.

What is discussed in these conversations about the VET practitioner?

There's a new awareness and validation of the diversity and the complexity of being a VET practitioner, especially as we're in a dynamic and competitive environment and we now hear far more about workforce development. It's a far different role to the trainer standing in the classroom. We are now broadening our practitioners' skills sets. We now say this is where we need to build capability, these are the advanced practitioner skills or these are the commercial specialists skills, and we need to better understand industry currency.

We have facilitated those types of conversations through Communication Corridors that we and other TAFEs use here, where Schools have a designated time to talk about educational matters. That's where there's been an increased focus on skills sets and educational programs.

What new ideas about capability development were spurred by the Institute's VETCAT® data?

The main thing is that we realised there were a lot more opportunities to do things in-house using our Advanced VET Practitioners to meet some of the demands for PD.

We also noticed that there was a more diverse demand for PD, it wasn't just about attending seminars and workshops and conferences, and we could meet that need either through in-house training, and we've done some of that already, or through mentoring programs, or by just having showcases of best practice.

We've also noticed in our VETCAT® data that we had a low number of novices and we acknowledged the need to address our recruitment strategies and induction processes to support an increase in the number of novice practitioners.

We now encourage people to think about building capability and skill development continually through their career, not just in the early days of their career.

What are some of the responses by the schools to their VETCAT® results?

Now they can identify the areas for skills improvement, with individuals talking to their Head of School through that PPDP process. That process started as a conversation, and now it has more structure. By identifying and using the VETCAT® results the Head of School can say "here's a mentoring opportunity; or here's an advanced VET practitioner".

The advanced VET practitioners you met when you came up to SCIT in April want to be involved, not just in their School but across the board, so we've pulled in some of those people to be in the Building Excellence in Teaching Team. It's allowed the Heads of School to look more at succession planning and areas where they need to address a shortage of novices. But mainly the VETCAT® results strengthened that PPDP conversation.

How are you using your advanced VET practitioners?

Mary Sutton manages the Building Excellence in Teaching Team and she has three teachers who are advanced VET practitioners who are seconded for a year into that team. They are seen as champions and their main role is to be mentors. We recognised that our induction processes could be better, and the mentors help there.

The team has targeted their activities to align with the VETCAT® skills sets, so our L&D plan is structured around those skills sets and the development needs of particular schools and individuals. For example we saw that one of the biggest areas of demand for PD was for more knowledge of pedagogy, so we run that as generic PD through our normal L&D plans.

What were the key findings from your CURCAT® data?

We got a reality check that we need to do more to support and encourage our VET practitioners, and to recognise and validate the range of activities that contribute to our VET practitioners' currency and the relevance of their training.

We have some external stakeholder feedback at the moment in which some people say our training is very relevant, but others say there are some areas there where we need to lift our game. It probably isn't as high a level of currency as we'd like, so we've identified through the CURCAT® data that there needs to be a culture of support for industry engagement. We need to look at our reporting procedures and how our staff engage with industry so that it's a recognised and validated process and part of being a VET practitioner.

The answers around industry currency aren't as straightforward as the VETCAT® findings: the VET practitioners themselves identified that some of their problems were finding time and money to remain current, and of course those are scarce commodities in any TAFE organisation.

What steps have been taken to date to use the CURCAT® data to influence schools about their approaches to maintaining industry currency?

We want to recognise that there are legitimate ways that you can gain industry currency and how they align to the CURCAT® model.

The VETCAT® and the CURCAT® reports have helped us to keep the focus on both sides of the equation of the VET practitioner; we want them to be in balance. We did VETCAT® first and there was a lot of discussion and talk about that. CURCAT® language has been slower to build into the vernacular around our organisation, but that's because we're still working on tailoring the L&D plan to each school; so it will come, it will happen.

The language has increased around industry currency. We recognise there's insufficient emphasis in valuing the industry currency post-employment. We value industry currency when we employ someone, but we don't always do it after that. So we need to improve our practices in that area.

Just an example, where we can we're validating those practices or activities that are already happening, for example we have vocational placement and teachers go out and meet the employer or visit the students while they're out on vocational placement, we are now more overt in saying that that interaction can be recorded as contributing to industry currency.

What strengths in terms of workforce capability were identified in the VETCAT® and CURCAT® results?

The major one is that we now know we have a large number of advanced VET practitioners who we see as mentors and who are happy to be mentors. We see them being able to share their learning and we've built opportunities for that sharing like the Paradigm Showcase where people can demonstrate their own best practice.

We can see now that we can do in-house, low-cost mentoring, using our advanced VET practitioners. This also has the benefit of building collegiality, of staff knowing who to go and talk to, and using a shared language, as opposed to people going outside of our organisation for mentoring. We have also introduced the Bright Ideas program.

What is the Paradigm Showcase?

We've identified, similar to the Challenger model, different paradigms of delivery. We asked people to demonstrate best practice of what they're doing in the different paradigms, using different media like videoconferencing to explain what they are doing at the moment.

There seems to be a lot of enthusiasm for improvement within SCIT.

There is a new confidence and buzz around the place. It means that we can use the VETCAT® and CURCAT® data to address barriers that were identified in the survey data. We can explore better options to formalise, for example, what activities support industry engagement.

I understand you want to use the VETCAT® and CURCAT® data to position staff skills as a market differentiator.

Yes, we want to be able to say to industry that, as a selling point, our training is industry-relevant and delivered by quality trainers who understand industry training needs and are engaged with industry. Our current feedback from both enterprises and students is that our teachers and trainers are good trainers, the rapport that they build with them facilitates learning, and industry says that they participate with them, but we still need to say that the training is relevant to the practice or for employability of their graduates. We want to be able to trade on that.

Recently we won the award for Queensland Large Training Provider of the Year so that supports this vision we're moving towards. The award is a good recognition of what's happening around here. So we want to be able to use the industry engagement and industry currency of an individual teacher to market ourselves, particularly here on the Sunshine Coast.

The father of a student sat next to me at a function recently and he said his daughter came home so rapt with her teachers. They were fashion teachers and one had worked with Versace and someone had worked somewhere else overseas, and she was so enthralled with what the teachers had done and where they'd worked. So we're now building the profiles of the staff and their industry currency into our program overviews. CURCAT® has made us aware that this staff information needs to be made more overt.

You seem to be putting your staff capability at the centre of what you're offering your customers.

What we are working on is a customer value proposition: we want to be able to say to our customers that our educational staff are industry-current and their training is relevant to your industry. So we can say in the fashion area, for example, that our teachers are industry-current, have a good reputation in the industry and provide training that is relevant to employment.

Our students in our satisfaction survey say we have good trainers and anecdotally they say that the trainer got me through the course. What we want them to say as well, and we need to be more overt about it, is that because the teacher knows the industry so well it has facilitated my employment as well. We need to be more overt about that in our marketing and in our profiling of our teachers.

What are your next steps in capability development at SCIT?

We often talk about our business drivers but these surveys have repositioned education at the core of the business. The surveys have definitely raised enthusiasm about professional practice.

With capability development in industry currency we are now saying, if we're going to be more industry-relevant, what do we need to do to get there? What does each School need to do? Where are their deficits? What can they do? And through the Communication Corridors or mentoring or the tailored learning and development plans, how do we allow maximum participation for our people in capability development?

The CURCAT® survey has given us the opportunity to review how we run industry reference groups. What's their purpose? How are they best structured to facilitate true industry engagement and industry currency? How do we use validation moderation as an industry currency activity?

And we want that customer value proposition to be about us understanding their business, their industry and their training needs, so our business becomes their business.

And the next correlation we are examining is using the measurable industry currency results from CURCAT® alongside our student satisfaction results for training and assessment and seeing the relationship between the two. A number of these developments across the Institute keep repeating and reinforcing the value of VETCAT® and CURCAT®.

We envisage that we'd repeat the surveys in about 18 months' time and assess the progress of our educational staff and I think that we'll be pleased with what we see then.

Where are the professional conversations now headed?

We're broadening the conversations with our educational staff and our Heads of School and what we've identified is that not all Heads of Schools have been employed from an educational background. Some have a business background so that's where the BEIT team supports them.

Now the Heads of School discuss how they're using VETCAT® and CURCAT® in their monthly business health checks with the Institute Director. There's a new level of professional conversation; it's inspiring.

That's been a planned approach, it's not just happened; and we've now raised the questions at the monthly business health checks and we keep referring as much as we can to the nine skills sets in VETCAT® and the VETCAT® language. And our learning and development plan is shaped around novice, foundation, specialist and advanced practitioners.

We're making steady progress and we're still unpacking the VETCAT® and CURCAT® data.