

Using VETCAT™ and CURCAT™ to reconceptualise and re-vitalise VET work and workers

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Abstract

Work in the vocational education and training (VET) sector is becoming more complex: there are increasing demands from students and industry clients that learning not only be customised but where possible personalised. Are VET practitioners involved in training and assessment capable of providing this level of flexibility and customisation?

In the six months from June 2010 ten TAFE Institutes around Australia implemented either one or both of the following tools that assess the capabilities of their VET practitioners: VETCAT™, the vocational education and training capability analysis tool and CURCAT™, the industry currency tool for VET practitioners. This paper focuses on the way two of the ten responded to the findings: TAFE SA Regional and TAFE NSW – New England Institute.

The findings at both Institutes provided cause for optimism and encouraged the Institutes to carefully unpack the full meaning of the data. The VETCAT™ research at TAFE SA Regional found that practitioners do have a raft of capabilities, mapped to the categories of novice, established, specialist and advanced. They also have a clear idea of their skill gaps and many aspirations about what they would like to learn. The CURCAT™ survey at both Institutes found that some VET practitioners use strategies to directly engage with industry while others use strategies to research their industry, and some use both sets of strategies.

In response to the quantitative data collected and the findings, the two Institutes crafted a range of different approaches to assist VET practitioners to further grow their capabilities and maintain their industry currency. Such targeted capability building is essential if VET is to meet the new demands on its services. This paper focuses on the action learning approach – of experiencing, reviewing, concluding and planning – taken at both Institutes in implementing initiatives stemming from the findings.

Introduction

VET work is becoming more complex: there are increasing demands from students and industry clients that learning not only be customised but where possible personalised. Are VET practitioners involved in training and assessment capable of providing this level of flexibility and customisation?

In the six months from June-December 2010 ten TAFE Institutes around Australia implemented either one or both of the following tools that assess the capabilities of their VET practitioners: VETCAT™, the vocational education and training capability analysis tool and CURCAT™, the industry currency tool for VET practitioners. This presentation focuses on the responses to the survey data at two of those Institutes, TAFE SA Regional and TAFE NSW – New England Institute. This implementation of new strategies is still in progress at both Institutes.

While TAFE SA Regional conducted the surveys simultaneously in June 2010, New England Institute conducted CURCAT™ in November/December 2010 and VETCAT™ in March/April 2011. As the implementation of strategies in response to the VETCAT™ survey at New England Institute will not commence until after April 2011, it is not discussed in this paper.

The two diagnostic self-assessment tools VETCAT™ and CURCAT™ were developed as a result of a national survey of VET practitioners conducted by Dr John Mitchell and John Ward from JMA Analytics in October-November 2009, and following ongoing research, field testing and development. The use of each validated psychometric tool resulted in the provision of extensive reports to the Institute as well as reports sent directly to each survey respondent.

In collaboration with Institute managers, John Mitchell and John Ward took an action research approach to the implementation of the two tools, of planning, acting, observing and reflection. And their collection of quantitative survey data was accompanied in each case by the collection of qualitative data by the Institutes, including anecdotes, observations, written feedback and professional conversations.

The findings from this collaborative research provide cause for optimism. The VETCAT™ research found that practitioners do have a raft of capabilities and they can be mapped to the categories of novice, established, specialist and advanced. They also have a clear idea of their skill gaps and many aspirations about what they would like to learn. The CURCAT™ research found that some VET practitioners use strategies to directly engage with industry while others use strategies to research their industry, and some use both sets of strategies.

In response to the data collected, the two Institutes crafted a range of different approaches to assist VET practitioners to further grow their capabilities and industry currency. Such targeted capability building is essential if VET is to meet the new demands on its services. This paper focuses on the action learning approach – of experiencing, reviewing, concluding and planning – taken at both Institutes in implementing initiatives stemming from the findings. These approaches by the two Institutes, which are continuing, are the focus of this paper.

Literature review

This brief literature review comments on the significant body of literature in VET regarding VET practice and the scant body of work on industry currency.

A raft of VET reports from 2002-2006 noted that VET practice was changing, and expanding. These reports included, among others:

- *Shaping the VET Practitioner of the Future* (Rumsey 2002)
- *Enhancing the Capability of VET professionals project: Final report* (Dickie, Eccles, FitzGerald & McDonald 2004)
- *Moving on...Report of the high level review of Training Packages* (Schofield & McDonald 2004)
- *The vocational education and training workforce. New roles and ways of working. At a glance* (Guthrie 2004)
- *Shifting mindsets: The changing work roles of vocational education and training practitioners* (Harris, Simons & Clayton 2005)
- *New ways of working in VET* (Mitchell, McKenna, Perry & Bald 2005)
- *Quality is the Key: Critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment in VET* (Mitchell, Chappel, Bateman & Roy 2006).

Schofield and McDonald (2004) believe that, to enhance the professional growth of assessors, consideration should be given to 'ways of developing a stronger sense of professional identity' and to 'provide better professional guidance to teachers and assessors at a pedagogical level' as well as 'encourage robust national dialogue around alternative pedagogies and assessment practices' (p. 29).

Guthrie (2004) summarises research about the changing roles of VET leaders, managers, teaching and support staff, and the way they work. In particular, the role of VET teachers is becoming more diverse and team-based. Guthrie portrays the breadth of different VET practitioners and implies that each group actively needs to develop new ways of working, if VET is to meet the increasing demands for timely and relevant training.

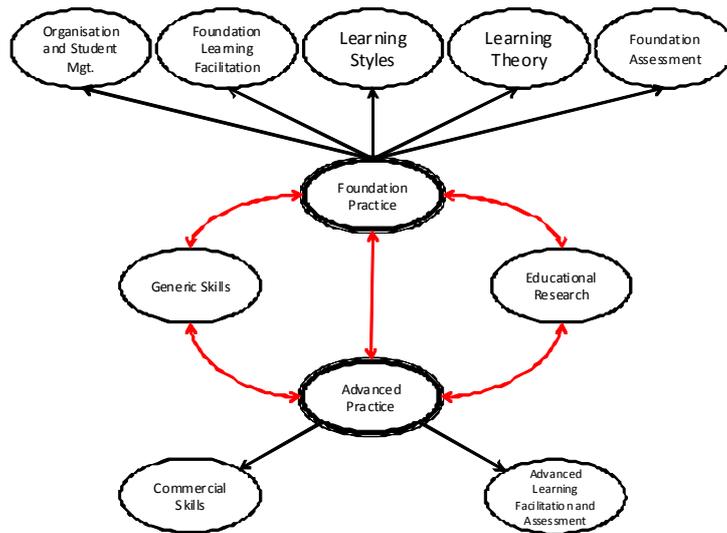
Mitchell, Chappel, Bateman and Roy (2006) find that, to address the idiosyncratic demands of each enterprise client and every student, the VET practitioner needs a raft of new skills: so many, in fact, that many practitioners need to be able to draw on the specialist skills and knowledge of colleagues and partners by working in teams or partnership arrangements.

Despite this body of work, one of the gaps in the above literature was a clear model of VET practice. This was addressed by Mitchell and Ward (2010) who reported on the national survey of VET skills conducted in late 2009 and undertaken by 2,230 VET practitioners. Survey respondents identified a significant gap between the current skill levels of VET trainers and assessors and the skills required to perform all their professional duties. These current skills face rapid redundancy over the next five years. The survey results also showed that the current skill levels of the average Australian VET trainer and assessor meet only 80% of this group's professional work

requirements. By 2014, the current skill levels of the average Australian VET trainer and assessor will meet only 62% of this group’s professional work requirements.

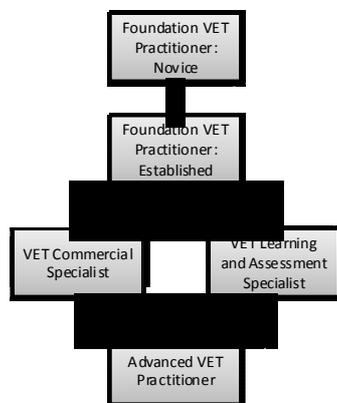
The model that emerged out of their research now underpins the VETCAT™ survey. That model is shown in Figure 1 and shows that there are two levels of VET practice, as perceived by VET practitioners, foundation and advanced practice. Foundation practice consists of five skills sets and advanced practice includes those five plus two additional ones. Two further skills sets support both foundation and advanced practice.

Figure 1: VETCAT™ structural model of VET professional practice



The research also identified a taxonomy of categories of VET practitioners, based on the model in Figure 1: novice, established, specialist and advanced practitioners.

Figure 2. VETCAT™ categories of VET practitioners

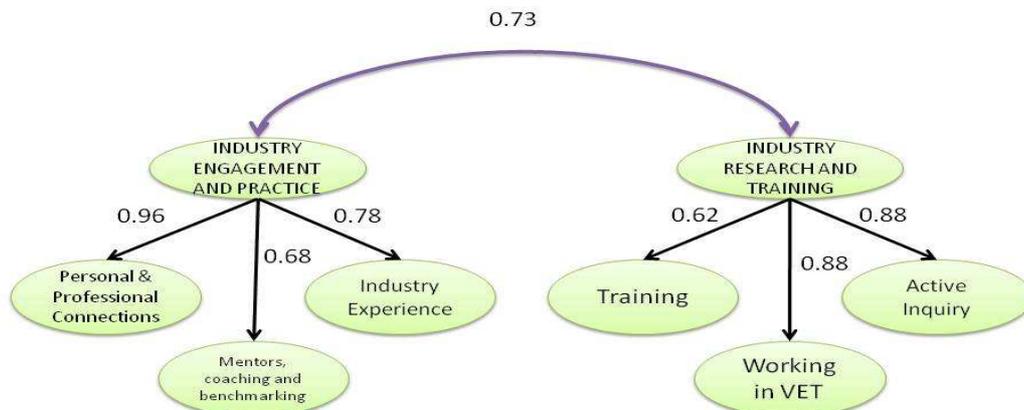


The credibility of the VET sector hinges largely on whether the skills of its practitioners match the skills used in contemporary industry. But the industry currency of VET practitioners is rarely discussed in public, and when it is raised people normally talk about practitioners undertaking a quick stint in industry. In taking up the challenge to broaden the understanding of the term, Queensland's department of education and training (DET 2010) released a research paper entitled 'Keeping it real. Industry currency of trainers in Queensland'. The aims of the paper were to raise awareness about the issues relating to industry currency and to stimulate discussion about what is required, so trainers can demonstrate and maintain their industry currency.

The Queensland paper fits well with the research results arising from the use of the CURCAT™ survey tool which shows that VET practitioners perceive that they maintain their industry currency through two broad pathways: industry engagement and practice and industry research and training. Within each pathway three different strategies are used by practitioners.

The following diagram illustrates the strength of the relationship between pathways such as industry research and training and strategies such as 'active inquiry'. In the diagram, the closer a figure is to 1.0 the stronger the relationship. The diagram also shows that there is a strong relationship (0.73) between the two pathways.

Figure 3. CURCAT™ structural equation model



The definitions of the pathways and strategies are set out in figure 4.

Figure 4. Definitions of pathways and strategies

Pathway A: industry engagement and practice ('The Engager')

1. **Strategy: Professional networks and personal contacts.** The professional networks and personal contacts of VET practitioners greatly assist practitioners in the maintenance of their industry currency. This strategy includes the use of established industry networks and contact with ex-colleagues and

leading people in industry.

2. **Strategy: Industry experience and engagement.** VET practitioners maintain their industry currency through industry experience and engagement. This strategy includes industry placements and release, undertaking projects within industry, work shadowing in industry and visiting industry specialist centres.
3. **Strategy: Mentors and coaches and peers for benchmarking.** To maintain industry currency, VET practitioners use mentors and coaches. They also access their peers for formal and informal benchmarking of their industry knowledge and skills.

Pathway B: industry research and training ('The Researcher')

4. **Strategy: Training courses.** VET practitioners maintain their industry currency through both accredited and non-accredited training that includes long and short courses, workshops and seminars and industry conferences.
5. **Strategy: Working in VET.** VET practitioners have numerous opportunities to maintain their industry currency through their work in the VET sector. Such opportunities include regular contact with employers, regular contact with students employed in industry, regular contact with industry representatives and industry liaison people, and professional conversations with colleagues both within their RTO and in other RTOs.
6. **Strategy: Active inquiry.** VET practitioners maintain their industry currency through active inquiry into changing industry practices. This strategy includes accessing information about such changes through the Internet, government publications, general business magazines and other literature, and specialist industry publications.

Methods

The aim of the field research was to obtain some qualitative insights into how the two Institutes responded to the availability of a considerable amount of quantitative survey data from VETCAT™ and CURCAT™. The paper attempts to capture aspects of the action learning approach – of experiencing, reviewing, concluding and planning – taken at both Institutes in progressively implementing initiatives stemming from their unpacking and analysis of the survey findings.

The qualitative evidence for the paper is derived from a number of methods including the following: three separate structured interviews with Anne Dening on 16 August 2010 and on 1 March 2011; a structured interview with David Kemp on 1 March 2011; analysis of a presentation delivered and a paper tabled at a national forum on the survey tools by Anne Dening in Sydney on 3 December 2010; rapporteur comments by David Kemp at the same national forum; and numerous discussions and correspondence with the two senior managers from May 2010-April 2011. The structured interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed and sent back to the interviewees for validation.

Findings: response by TAFE SA Regional to VETCAT™ and CURCAT™ data

The VETCAT™ and CURCAT™ surveys were conducted at TAFE SA Regional in June 2010. The Institute later received seven reports of thirty pages for CURCAT™ –

one for each of the six faculties and one whole-of-Institute report. The 340 staff who undertook the survey each received a ten page confidential report on their VET practice. The same number of reports was provided on VETCAT™, and 420 staff received an individual VETCAT™ report. 420 represented 92% of the eligible trainers and assessors at the Institute.

The role of leading the response to the VETCAT™ data was performed by Anne Denning, Senior Educational Manager – Innovations, Teaching & Learning, TAFE SA Regional. She spent some weeks unpacking the extensive data and developing summaries that she could use with different audiences within the Institute. Then in July 2010 she launched an extensive range of activities which are continuing beyond April 2011.

Some of the initial practical activities included briefing the Institute Director and other members of the Executive, meeting one-to-one with faculty directors, conducting workshops for managers and senior lecturers and promoting professional development initiatives tied to the issues identified in the surveys. For instance, the surveys showed that 45.9% of Institute teaching staff have as their highest qualification a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA), so the Institute has now put in place policies to provide financial support for degree programs and to offer a customised Diploma TAA for Institute teachers as well as a Vocational Graduate Certificate in Management (Learning). Specifically in response to CURCAT™ data, the Institute has made available funding for action learning projects to develop models for increasing industry skills and knowledge.

A major internal workshop was conducted by TAFE SA in Adelaide in August 2010 as the “VETCAT CURCAT Implementation Workshop”, attended by 82 of the Institute’s educational staff, where four discussion papers were tabled, on the following topics: a mentoring policy for the Institute; a paper on teaching and learning skills; a paper on industry currency, skills and experience; and a new version of the Individual Development Plan. Separate workshops on the same four topics were held with each of the eight faculties.

Anne Denning described some of her initial actions in response to VETCAT™ data, as follows:

The headline things were me unpacking it for myself for each faculty and then going to the senior manager, unpacking it in conversations with them about the implications of their data, saying ‘This is what your data says, these are the implications, this is what we need to do’. Then I was invited to each of their faculties. They have two-day PD planning days where they get all of their staff from all around South Australia to come in and I made presentations at all of those meetings and answered all their questions. As I said at Executive today, every time I’ve put on a PD workshop the headline always is ‘As a result of the VETCAT™ data’. This is to make sure that your skills are being recognised or your skill gaps are being filled.

I don’t leave it to chance. I had a special workshop for the managers and another one for the senior lecturers, the people who are at the top of the classification steps and I briefed the Executive as a group. Also had a one-on-one with the Directors so that the Managing Director was kept in the loop all the time.

Changes were also made to the Individual Development Plan to incorporate information about industry currency and skills and teaching and assessment skills, for discussion at the annual performance management interviews between teachers and their managers. The Institute also developed a policy that ties together this Individual Development Plan with the data from VETCAT™ and CURCAT™ and with lecturer classification progression and the Institute's overall professional development plan.

Customised responses were developed to the following skills gaps identified in the surveys: learning styles and learning theories; research and evaluation skills; assessment skills; working with different cultures; and understanding documentation required to meet the Australian Qualifications Training Framework (AQTF). These customised responses included facilitating workshops on learning styles, funding action learning projects and conducting workshops on cultural respect and student conduct.

VETCAT™ in particular provided data about how many teaching staff are in different categories, from novice to established to specialist to advanced. TAFE SA Regional used this data to identify appropriate mentors who have specialist or advanced skills, pairing them with mentees, including at the novice level. The mentors were provided with training in specific areas where VETCAT™ identified a shortage of practitioners, for instance in the area of using blended methodologies.

Findings: response by New England Institute to CURCAT™ data

The response by TAFE NSW – New England Institute to the CURCAT™ data is still in its early phase, as the tabling of the survey results and the debriefing did not conclude until March 2011. However, David Kemp, Manager Workforce Planning and Development, and his colleagues have undertaken some initial activities similar to the TAFE SA response. These strategies include presenting results to a teaching staff conference, briefing faculty directors as a group and meeting one-to-one with faculty leaders. The data is expected to be used to guide future planning around funding for professional development activities related to industry currency.

As with TAFE SA Regional, the CURCAT™ data was mapped to New England Institute's extensive previous frameworks for professional development. New England Institute previously had developed a 'Capability Model' and embedded in this is a capability stream around "Capacity to Deliver: Vocational Education and Training (VET)". The focus is primarily VET practitioner capabilities related to the context of practice. The NEI VET capability model is well aligned with both the planning frameworks of the Institute, the NSW DET and TAFE NSW Workforce Guarantee pathways for VET practitioners, and importantly it has local variations which make it all the more likely to be effective within the Institute.

Within the NEI capability stream, the competency to "maintain industry currency" is a core competency within the foundational dimension, "VET practitioner core capabilities". The dimension is targeted at all VET practitioners, regardless of practice environments, and contains the critical underpinning capabilities to effectively make

the transition to the other VET Practitioner Dimensions. This structured approach by NEI ensures that industry currency is viewed as a core not optional competency.

David Kemp finds that the CURCAT™ data now builds on that pre-existing platform and adds to the professional conversations and understanding within the Institute:

We have the CURCAT™ data now and from that we have an interpretation of how we are placed as an Institute. In terms of industry currency we look good, but what we want to be able to do is to develop [with Institute managers, practitioners and support staff] a common focus and a common language about the results. It is important that all of us say what we consider are the high priority areas around industry currency, so that we can say ‘This is where we’re at, this is what we need to be focusing on’. Then we can promote the key messages in terms of currency for NEI: ‘These are the shared five priority areas on which we have to work’.

I think that approach opens up the shared meaning, the shared understanding, from management, practitioners, support staff. We all can see why we’re doing certain things about industry currency.

The specific insights from CURCAT™ about pathways and strategies have deepened the professional conversations:

[Prior to CURCAT™ data becoming available] if you had asked people what is a definitive pathway that builds currency you’d have a high percentage of respondents saying ‘Oh, its return to industry’.

The CURCAT™ data has given us an insight into many strategies that people can use to build currency and a lot of those strategies include the practitioner’s own workplace development.

Interestingly, Anne Dening at TAFE SA Regional made similar comments about the CURCAT™ data showing that currency was not just about a return to industry:

Because I’ve got the CURCAT™ data and I’ve been through the process, CURCAT™ gave me a different group of strategies that could be on the agenda in terms of keeping people vocationally current. It isn’t just about return to industry, there are a lot of other strategies that could assist as well, and that part of the CURCAT™ process was very useful.

David Kemp also believes his unit now has a strong platform from which to encourage professional conversation:

From our perspective within Workforce Planning and Development we’ve now got a great platform to have that dialogue with VET practitioners. We can say to them ‘How can we strengthen and support your strategies for maintaining industry currency to ensure that it’s [funding support] equitable and accessible to everyone?’

Conclusions

Both Anne Dening and David Kemp found the survey quantitative data valuable for reconceptualising and revitalising VET work and workers. Anne Dening found that the surveys unearthed vitality in the staff, which she is now attempting to sustain:

For us running the survey was fantastic because we got such buy-in from our staff. That told me something really important too: that not only was my role ready to move on to reconceptualising teaching but they were as well. It was obvious that they were very committed to doing the VETCAT™ survey: they were very committed and keen to find out the results and to see how the Institute was going to use that.

If our people hadn't been interested in teaching and learning they wouldn't have bothered with VETCAT™, quite frankly. We went through a process of seeing the enthusiasm, capturing it and then using that momentum to drive some changes in things like a formal mentoring program that's been endorsed. A formal requirement that has been Executive-endorsed is for everyone to have 30 hours of PD per annum as part of a performance management plan. Tying together performance management, PD planning and skills updating really began with the VETCAT™ process and capturing that momentum.

David Kemp also believes that the CURCAT™ survey was helpful in his Workforce Planning and Development role, in reconceptualising and revitalising TAFE work and workers:

It's revitalised in that we've given VET practitioners a platform to have a say. We know there is a lot of national research, and we know the key goals of federal and state governments, but we often don't provide a platform for VET practitioners in the workplace to have a say or to have influence around their own practice. I think CURCAT™ has allowed them the opportunity to say 'This is what I'm doing, this is what's happening, this is how I do it'.

We now have an opportunity to go to the staff and say 'Alright, how can we maximise the benefits of that self-knowledge?'

CURCAT™ data has enabled observers like David Kemp to get "inside" the head of VET practitioners and find out what they are thinking about their currency:

Predominantly we see in TAFE that a major strategy recommended for maintaining currency is 'return to industry'. But that is from the perspective of people looking from the outside into TAFE. What actually now is happening through CURCAT™ is that we're getting inside the VET practitioner who is saying 'I'm a current practitioner and look at the pathways and look at the strategies I'm using'.

CURCAT™ data has also provided further evidence of the passionate nature of the teaching staff at New England Institute:

When we received the CURCAT™ results we saw that the currency level in the Institute was high and we then connected that result to our engagement survey which demonstrated that our workforce is passionate about what they do. So we have a passionate workforce and their currency level is high, and we're starting to see a great relationship between engagement and currency and workforce motivation.

Both Anne Dening and David Kemp value the fact that the surveys provide some new words to refresh professional conversations. Speaking in relation to VETCAT™, Anne Dening shared this observation:

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.

David Kemp added that allowing teachers to voluntarily undertake the CURCAT™ survey has other significant benefits about fostering professionalism:

... the more you involve teachers and allow them to influence, the more teachers will mobilise because they are a professional part of the organisation. And as a profession we need to allow them the self-leadership to influence their own profession, and not dictate to them. CURCAT™ has allowed us to do that.

Teachers are a professional group. Let them decide and influence how they maintain their currency.

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