

Flexible Learning and the National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 2004- 2010

**A response to the ANTA 'Shaping Our Future' discussion
paper by The Flexible Learning Advisory Group**

Web address: flexiblelearning.net.au

The Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2000-2004, is also available at the above URL.

The companion document, Implementation Plan 2003 can be viewed and downloaded at: flexiblelearning.net.au/aboutus/keydocuments.htm

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An initiative within the Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2000-2004.

Managed by the Flexible Learning Advisory Group on behalf of the Commonwealth, all States and Territories in conjunction with ANTA



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Introduction

This paper is a submission by the Flexible Learning Advisory Group (FLAG) in response to the ANTA 'Shaping Our Future' (SOF) discussion paper. The paper is structured as follows:

- **Section 1: ICT, VET and the future – making the links**
This section gives an overview of the impact of ICT in all industries, including VET. It demonstrates that ICT must be a key driver in the future vision for VET and shows the links between ICT and flexible or e-learning.
- **Section 2: Flexible and e-learning and the national strategy – building on the groundwork.**
This section provides specific responses to five of the aims outlined in 'Shaping Our Future'. It shows how flexible and e-learning approaches underpin all of these aims and notes initiatives that have already and will continue to progress the development of flexible and e-learning.

Since its establishment in 1996, FLAG has been the lead body to facilitate national collaboration for flexible and e-learning in the VET sector. As well as the provision of policy advice to ANTA CEOs and cross-sectorally through the Australian Information and Communication Technologies in Education Committee (AICTEC), FLAG oversees the implementation of *The Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2000-2004* (Framework) and is accountable to the ANTA CEOs for delivery against agreed outcomes.¹

FLAG's response to the Shaping the Future discussion paper highlights:

- The importance of information and communication technologies (ICT) in planning for the future.
- The relationship between ICT and flexible learning.
- The role of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework for National Vocational Education and Training 2000-4 (Framework) in promoting and driving flexible learning.

The paper notes that:

- There is an integral relationship between the impact of ICT in VET and in all industry sectors.
- To realise the vision for VET, the links between flexible and e-learning and the key elements of national VET policy must be explicitly recognised and fostered.
- A learner centred and client focused culture in VET relies on the proactive nurture of *innovation*.

It is FLAG's view that flexible and e-learning underpins the aims outlined in the SOF discussion paper and is fundamental to the formulation of the next national VET strategy. The 2000-04 national investment in flexible learning will only be fully realised if the next strategy continues to build on the foundations laid so far.

¹ FLAG terms of reference can be viewed at: <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/aboutus/flag.htm>

Section 1: Context and imperatives for VET 2004-2010

“ICT, VET and the future – making the links”

Section 1 is a response to the general context and imperatives for VET as outlined in the ‘Shaping Our Future’ discussion paper.

1.1 ICT: Setting the context for change

By 2010, the use of ICT will be dominant in workplace, educational and social contexts. A visionary plan for VET cannot have a ‘wait and see’ position on ICT. It must continue to build on the foundations laid by the national investment in flexible learning (Framework 2000-04).

Despite the sometimes heated debate around the impact of ICT on the global economy, particularly since the ‘tech-wreck’ of 2001, many soundly credentialed sources note the continuing growth dynamic of ICT on the economies of OECD countries. As the OECD’s *Information Technology Outlook 2002* Report notes:

‘Information technology (IT) continues to be a major driver of economic change, restructuring businesses, affecting skills and employment, and contributing significantly to growth and wealth creation.’²

This sense of priority has been reflected in Commonwealth Government policy throughout the 1990s and the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) notes:

‘The information and communications technology industry is one of the fastest growing and most innovative sectors in the Australian economy. Throughout the 1990s the sector achieved an annual sustained growth of around 17% bringing annual sales to \$75 billion.’³

A recent study of Australia’s performance as a Knowledge Nation notes:

‘Technology-based products are now the fastest growing element in world trade. And innovation, the process of developing both services and technology-based products, takes on an ever greater strategic significance.

All these aspects of economic performance are closely affected by national capacity in education, research and development, and in information and communications technologies...here smart policy can and does make a difference; and its effects multiply over time.’⁴

It is FLAG’s view that ICT integration is a key change agent for enabling the future vision for VET and the following must be given due prominence in the next national strategy:

² OECD Information Technology Outlook 2002

<http://www.oecd.org/EN/document/0,,EN-document-13-nodirectorate-no-1-30897-13,00.html>

³ Advancing Australia, The Information Economy Progress Report 2002, November 2002
http://www.noie.gov.au/publications/NOIE/progress_report/start.htm

⁴ The Comparative Performance of Australia as a Knowledge Nation, Report to the Chifley Research Centre, Mark Considine et al, page 1.

- The role of E-Commerce⁵ in VET delivery and in all workplaces.
- To navigate a rapidly changing workplace, VET graduates need core ICT skills as part of their generic skill-set.
- To increase flexibility and address different styles of teaching and learning, innovation must be fostered as a priority.

1.2 How does ICT impact on industries serviced by VET?

Driving rapid change

Technology developments will continue to cause rapid change in the industries that the VET sector aims to service. The nature and groupings of industries are changing and individuals will need to work across multiple industries. VET will need to find new ways of consulting and supporting new and emerging areas.

The vision for VET provision must embrace the concept of training provision for rapidly changing jobs and roles within a rapidly changing society. This will be especially important when presented in the context of an increasingly casualised workforce.

New skills for a new workplace

These changes mean that initial VET provision must link with ongoing skills maintenance and professional development programs that focus on the individual and their ongoing relationship with their industry. On completion of a training program in 2010, as well as the technical skills needed for the industry at that point in time, a VET learner must have acquired skills to:

- Track and anticipate changes in industry.
- Identify and locate training opportunities in their industry.
- Learn how to learn – or develop the skills to learn in many different ways.
- Contribute to and benefit from systems of organisational learning.

All of these skills require workers to be ICT literate.

1.3 How does ICT impact on the VET Industry?

New technology will lead to a new culture

By 2010 we can anticipate a whole new culture of teaching and learning in the VET sector. The vision for VET needs to recognise that the education and training industry is itself changing as the result of new technology. While VET systems are still largely built on an institution-oriented, classroom model, the tools of the industry are beginning to change, as are the systems they support. E-business is itself acting as a change agent – pushing educators and administrators to re-think the use of their existing tools and the appropriateness of their existing business systems.

Technology is increasing the number and effectiveness of tools which support the teaching and learning process. By 2010 we can anticipate that most of the barriers to the uptake of technology based tools will have been breached. Teachers and students will be able to select the most appropriate tool for a particular teaching or learning objective and integrate its use seamlessly into an individual educational program.

⁵ E-commerce is defined as 'every type of business transaction in which the participants (i.e. suppliers, end users etc.) prepare or transact business or conduct their trade in goods or services electronically', page 9, Mitchell, J.G. 2000, E-Competent Australia, Australian National Training Authority, Melbourne.

Changing VET practitioners

By 2010 VET practitioners will be different. They will need to have acquired a range of professional skills required by any worker employed in a fast moving, technology enhanced industry.

Technology in general, but e-business and e-learning in particular are already breaking down the barriers between levels of educational provision. This process will potentially lead to a system of provision where the customer does not perceive clear distinctions between school, VET and higher education provision. In an environment without such barriers and with learners needing both extended and short periods of training intermittently throughout their working lives, the systems for qualifications, credit recognition and provider registration and accreditation may be completely different to what we know now.

1.4 Flexible and e-Learning supports innovation

The Australian Flexible Learning Framework is a major research and development strategy for driving innovation in VET through a collaborative national approach to flexible and e-learning. It represents an important acknowledgment by VET of the present and expanding impact of ICT for any future vision for VET:

'The ultimate purpose of the Framework is to make the VET System more flexible. Flexibility means not only responding to but also anticipating the ever-changing needs and expectations of VET clients – enterprises, learners and communities.'⁶

Flexible learning fosters an innovative teaching and learning culture that is learner centred and client focused. It enables the implementation of key elements of the national policy platform encompassed in the National Training Framework, AQTF and Training Packages. The achievements of the VET system are assisted through flexible learning products and services, as well as the more intangible benefits of communication and dialogue.

1.5 Concluding comments

ICT is having a parallel impact on the education and training sector and on the business and industry clients of VET. Whilst it may not be able to accurately describe the future, a key objective of the next strategy must be to bring about a culture of innovation. FLAG would like to see the following incorporated into a more futures-oriented visionary strategy for VET:

- The cultural and technological shifts required to support change must be recognised. To date, education and training has not moved at the same pace of learning and technology integration as other industry sectors. By 2010, the VET sector will have had to adopt a whole new culture of teaching and learning.
- The learner must be put firmly at the centre of this thinking.
- ICT literacy is, and will increasingly become, a core generic and transferable skill for all workers.
- Flexible learning provides a learner centred development model that empowers lifelong learning and long term employability
- Flexible learning must be acknowledged as a catalyst for innovation.
- The strategy for achieving VET's 2010 vision must reflect short, medium and long-term requirements.

⁶ Ibid, page 2.

Section 2: Flexible and e-learning & the national strategy “building on the groundwork”

Section 2 consists of specific responses to five of the aims outlined in the ‘Shaping Our Future’ discussion paper.

2.1 Building skills for Australian Industry

This aim reaffirms industry’s leadership in defining the very best and latest skills, and its active partnership in the delivery of those skills, so that Australia’s economic opportunities can be realised.

How can industry be more involved in defining, and partnering in the delivery of, the very best and latest skills in the future?

Flexible and e-learning is designed to meet the needs of an industry-led training system.

Industry demands and expects greater flexibility in learning delivery

To increase our skills base, and ensure access to employment, there is a need for a strong focus on workforce planning and training matched to industry development. An industry-led system demands training that is not only easily tailored to specific needs, but also able to link into the long-term needs of formal recognition. Australia’s current flexible learning offerings in VET, and its affiliation with Training Packages, is designed to effectively meet these ongoing demands.

Responsive to change

Flexible learning methodologies enable providers to deliver the immediate and relevant training that meets the skill needs of emergent and developing industries. The electronic delivery of components of Training Packages (including e-learning support) assists industry, through a responsive training system, to build a workforce with the very best and latest skills.

Modelled on best practice

An increase in the commitment of industry to the sharing of best practice, the development of leading edge industries, and export markets is required. Moving ahead means incorporating strategies that include training for managers and the sharing of knowledge and expertise in best practice within industry and with training providers.

Led by people

Industry should take advantage of the leaders within the VET sector. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework has made significant progress in developing a group of leaders within the VET sector who have a commitment to flexibly delivered workplace training. The flexible learning approach to leadership development is a model that should be extended to build partnerships between industry and training providers.

2.2 Supporting Communities

This aim looks at addressing the challenges of social, economic and environmental change in communities, especially in regional, remote and outer urban fringe areas, addressing inequality and building community capacity through skills and learning.

How can vocational education and training organisations play an even bigger part in building and sustaining the communities that they serve? How will we know when this is working well?

Flexible and e-learning facilitates learning environments beyond the classroom, bridging time and distance in the development of new understandings of communities.

Community involvement

Vocational education and training can be delivered across geographic, technological and cultural boundaries providing access strategies are developed in ways which focus on the needs of particular groups of learners, including indigenous communities and remote and isolated learners. Community involvement should be a key strategy in meeting the needs of particular groups of learners via project based learning, flexible delivery and the development of local initiatives to support lifelong learning and economic growth.

National-local partnerships

Flexible learning has an instrumental role to play in building community capacity through skills and learning. One of the most significant advantages of national collaboration on flexible learning initiatives is the potential to combine national resources and expertise with local education providers to deliver the vocational training needs of communities that would otherwise face limited resources and access.

Building Communities of Practice

Social capital goes beyond the investment made in the skills and knowledge of individual; it consists of the 'features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to achieve shared objectives.'⁷

Communities of Practice, dependent upon the valuing of the social capital within the group, are another key method of delivering training to communities that face limited access. The influence of Communities of Practice built through and around flexible learning should not be underestimated. The flow on effect from virtual communities where knowledge is shared and expertise distributed transcends geographical barriers and contributes directly to local community needs.

Through a deliberate strategy to build a pool of flexible learning experts and to support the evolution of learning communities beyond the classroom, the Australian Flexible Learning Framework has succeeded in developing a community capable of influencing current practice. Programs such as Flexible Learning Leaders/Fellows, LearnScope and Toolbox Champions have enhanced the ability of individuals, organisations and communities to meet the demands of a vocational education and training system that is being led by developments in the application of information and communication technologies to learning.

⁷ Gary Putnam, "Bowling Alone" *Journal of Democracy* 6:1, Jan 1995, 65-78

2.3 Enabling Individuals to Learn Throughout Life

What features will make it easier for individuals to value learning, and manage a portfolio of skills throughout life? How will we know when we have made a difference?

Flexible learning enables individuals to learn throughout life.

An individualised approach to teaching and learning

Flexible learning is client focused and based on the learner's skill needs, learning styles and delivery requirements. Successful flexible learning will develop the individual's capacity for autonomous learning and enable them to access the resources and people they need.

The implementation of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework has confirmed that moving towards a more flexible and individualised approach to teaching and learning requires changes in five areas:

- Staff who can use flexible learning approaches
- Infrastructure that facilitates affordable access by learners from the workplace, community facility, home or institute campus
- Content, applications and services that can be easily used to individualise learning
- Policies that support the implementation of more flexible forms of learning
- Legal and regulatory framework that supports flexibility and affordability

Informal learning

People learn skills through a variety of experiences many of which are informal, unstructured and difficult to quantify. ICT has the potential to assist in the important process of skills recognition by integrating the process of pre-assessment (skills recognition), formative assessment and summative assessment within a flexible learning environment. When underpinned by technology, flexible learning provides more choice and control for the individual learner in this process.

The needs of Australians who are not part of the workforce must also be accommodated. Flexible learning provides options that enable people to continue to develop skills and maintain expertise when they are not working. Flexibility in training, such as the option to select competencies from a variety of training packages and have these recognised in a qualification, is an important way to support learning throughout life.

Emergent skills and industry change

Industry is changing. This is reflected in rapidly changing jobs and roles and VET provision must respond to the need for ongoing skills maintenance and professional development programs that focus on the individual's ongoing relationships with industry. Flexible learning supports the individual's capacity to anticipate industry change and to rapidly re-skill in response to it.

ICT literacy as a core generic skill

Few occupations will remain untouched by the need for a level of ICT competence. Integral to the flexible learning approach is the recognition that ICT literacy is a core generic skill that enables individuals to adapt to new demands in their work roles, and leads to new avenues of learning.

2.4 Renewing and Sharing Indigenous Learning Culture

How can the vocational education and training systems best contribute to a better future for Indigenous Australians?

Flexible learning has already, and will continue to, create opportunities for Indigenous Australians to engage with VET.

This is reflected in the:

- development of flexible learning resources that are designed or customised to meet the specific needs of Indigenous people.
- support that flexible learning approaches provide for delivery of vocational education and training in rural and remote areas.
- development of guidelines for practitioners working with Indigenous people.
- opportunity that flexible learning provides for the development of core generic skills and the learning skills of individuals.

2.5 Guaranteeing quality products and services

This aim commits the national system to providing high quality learning experiences for everyone, every time.

How can training providers be supported to deliver high quality learning experiences to everyone every time?

Flexible and e-learning supports quality and innovation in the development of products and services.

Enhancing flexibility of the system

Achieving a quality national VET system requires an understanding of the importance of three key relationships:

- the VET sector and industry
- the provider and the enterprise
- the teacher and the learner.

Building these client-focused relationships requires the increased emphasis on enhancing flexibility in the teaching and learning process and supporting training providers in their capacity to build strong partnerships with enterprises and industry bodies. This requires substantial ongoing commitment to support professional development of VET staff, infrastructure enhancement and the shared development of content and services.

The national strategy for VET 2004-2010 needs to pursue an integrated quality learning approach, recognising that quality products and services do not stand-alone and must be supported by an integrated system.