

Australian Flexible Learning Framework

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

Summary: Phase 2 Evaluation of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework 2000-2004



Introduction



Phase 2 Evaluation of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, 2001-2003

In 2001, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and the Flexible Learning Advisory Group (FLAG) commissioned an evaluation of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework) 2000-2001. In September 2003, ANTA and FLAG commissioned a Phase 2 Evaluation of the Framework 2002-2003. This document summarises the Phase 2 Evaluation findings.

Shaping the VET landscape: the Australian Flexible Learning Framework

The Framework was established in 2000 as a five year strategy by the Australian Government and all States and Territories to increase the take-up of flexible learning and e-learning among training providers and industry and enterprise to achieve a skilled Australian workforce. It set out to position the Australian vocational education and training (VET) system as a world leader in applying new technologies to VET products, services and networks. The Framework's vision states that:

“By 2004, Australia will be recognised as the global leader in applying new technologies to vocational education and training products and services.”

The Framework aims to build the flexible learning capability of the Australian VET sector, particularly in the areas of enabling and promoting the effective use of technologies in teaching and learning, and supporting organisational processes. The Evaluation finds that the Framework and its model of national collaborative investment has been an effective catalyst for the take-up of flexible learning and information and communication technology (ICT) across the VET system.

The Evaluation states that the Framework has created a national statement of intent which has:

- legitimised investment in flexible learning
- created powerful problem solving networks
- leveraged the use of resources across its own programs and with other initiatives of State and Territory agencies and registered training providers
- enabled a consistent and efficient approach to be taken to the adoption of technologies in VET and support of Australia's transition to an information economy
- delivered significant returns on the investment of the Australian Government and States and Territories.

The major finding of the Evaluation is that the Framework has significantly influenced Australia's VET system through the development of products, services and networks to support flexible learning. This has built the capability of the VET workforce and organisations, resulting in the creation of an effective knowledge management infrastructure and changing attitudes towards flexible learning throughout the VET system.

Exponential growth in the take-up of flexible learning

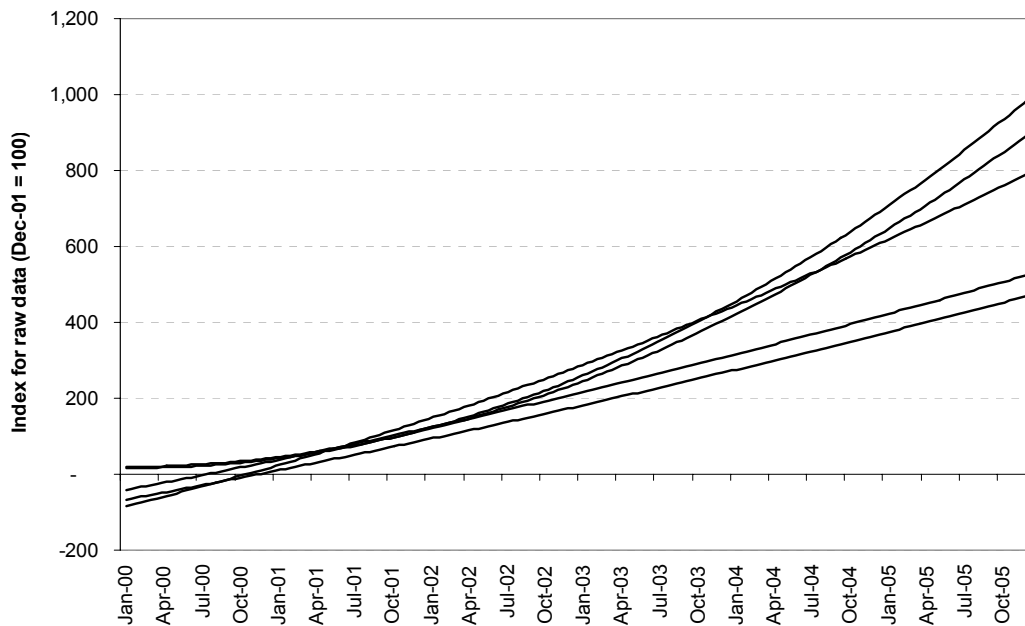
With the VET system's flexible learning capability enhanced, and the use of ICT becoming more widespread, there has been exponential growth in the take-up of flexible learning in VET since 2000. Use of technology is becoming part of a blended approach to teaching and learning, with technologies being used in the classroom or for selected learning or communication activities, rather than 100% online learning.

Specifically, there have been exponential increases in:

- the number of students using technology in their learning programs
- the number of students using technology to communicate with their peers and their teachers, share information and submit work for assessment
- the number of technology-enabled learning resources available to teachers to use
- the number of training organisations providing enrolment, administrative and support services online
- the number of VET practitioners accessing information on flexible learning and resources.

This exponential growth is illustrated in the graph below where each variable was standardised by converting to an index, with December 2001 as the base of 100 (ie the value of each variable in any month is calculated as a proportion of the value of that variable in December 2001).

Exponential growth in the take-up of flexible learning (actual to December 2003, estimates for 2004 and 2005)



Source: Multiple data sources.

The Impact of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework



Investing in flexible learning and e-learning

Over its five year timeframe to the end of 2004 the Framework will have invested approximately AUD\$15 million per year in flexible learning infrastructure in the VET system (including TAFE, private training providers, Adult and Community Education (ACE) and VET in schools and industry and enterprise). As of mid-2004, the Framework has directly supported more than 20,000 teaching and training professionals and created more than 500 products and resources. Through its products, resources and multiple support networks, the Framework has created a solid foundation of flexible learning awareness, knowledge and expertise among teaching and training professionals within VET and industry and enterprise.

Building creative, capable people

The goal of building creative, capable people has been a major focus area for the Framework, with 41% of its total resources (\$26.5 million) committed to projects with a direct professional development objective. As the Evaluation highlights, the Framework has made a concerted effort to uniformly raise the core skills of VET practitioners across Australia in their familiarity with, understanding of, and use of, technology in teaching and learning. Its three-pronged approach to build capability through professional development has focussed on the areas of leadership, practitioner core skills and networking. The following four project areas recognise that people are the key to sustainably deliver more flexible and client-centred VET services:

1. **LearnScope:** a national professional development project that focuses on obtaining the skills to apply new technologies to make learning more flexible within VET. To date, more than 17,500 teachers, trainers, managers, technical and support staff have benefited from funding and support through the LearnScope initiative.
2. **Flexible Learning Leaders:** the Framework has provided professional development funding to more than 200 people who are leading the way in flexible learning, to support their ideas and initiatives and help them lead and achieve change within their teaching and training organisations.
3. **NET*Working Conferences:** a leading national flexible learning professional development online event which has involved more than 4,000 people and showcases innovations in the application and use of learning technology.
4. **Australian Flexible Learning Community:** the Australian Flexible Learning Community is a virtual place that offers a rich resource for discussions for approximately 5,000 teachers and trainers about how technology is being applied for quality teaching and learning outcomes.

World-class online content development, applications and services

Beyond the direct investment in people, the Framework has invested almost half of its resources in world-class online content development, applications and services to assist the Australian VET system to maintain and expand its share of the training market within Australia and internationally. The Evaluation finds that as of mid-2004, the Framework had produced an enviable pool of flexible resources to support national training packages that are increasingly being used and adapted in training organisations throughout the VET system.

The high quality, relevance and ease of useability of the Toolbox products have accelerated the VET system's understanding and take-up of flexible learning. In total, 75 Toolboxes are currently available and are used by VET practitioners to support the online delivery of VET qualifications from Certificate 1 to Diploma level. The full range of Toolboxes has the capability to deliver over

100 qualifications and more than 820 competencies from nationally endorsed training packages. Preliminary results from a recent survey of Toolboxes usage show that in 2003, 80% of TAFE institutes were using Toolboxes.

In addition to the simple output of online resources, the involvement of almost 60% of TAFE institutes in Toolbox development has increased the sector's capacity to create online content, produced technical standards for sector-wide access and useability, and stimulated new understandings of teaching and learning.

The impact of the Framework's products, resources and support networks, including Toolboxes, have received both national and international recognition, as is evident from this comment from Professor Thomas Reeves, Professor of Instructional Technology, College of Education, University of Georgia:

"The Flexible Learning Toolboxes have to be one of the most important developments in e-learning support ever produced anywhere. The integration of sound pedagogical principles such as authentic tasks, seamless assessment, and reflective activities represents state-of-the-art design for online learning that I have not seen equalled in North America, Europe or elsewhere."

The full impact of two other projects within this area, Flexible Learning Innovations and New Practices in Flexible Learning, are yet to be felt, however feedback indicates that some of the products from the 2002 Innovations project are being widely taken up.

Policy, research and standards

Growing focus is being placed on strengthening the VET sector's technological infrastructure to ensure affordable access to, and sustainable delivery of, flexible learning. The Framework's work with the Australian Information and Communication Technology in Education Committee (AICTEC) has contributed to national policy issues related to online technologies including interoperability, content development, bandwidth, metadata, copyright and electronic authentication.

The Evaluation finds that in the area of interoperability, the Framework has supplied training providers with valuable information and guidelines to establish national standards and systems. The Framework's 2003 Collaborative Interoperability Project undertook research into information management and technical standards to find ways to increase access to resources for the VET sector. In 2003 the Framework's VET Learning Object Repository Project recommended a standardised national system for the VET sector and put forward a number of key recommendations. The resulting 2004 VET Learning Object Repository Project is trialling key recommendations to establish a sustainable, national system for equitable access to learning objects.

Realising the investment: flexible learning beyond 2004



Building on the 2000-2004 investment

Despite the year on year growth in the take-up of flexible learning, the Evaluation finds that there is still much work to be done to realise the efforts of the past five years. Many large enterprises are using ICT to efficiently deliver training. TAFE institutes are also making solid progress. Some small training providers have made advances in niche markets.

The Evaluation suggests that during the next three years, the VET system would benefit from further investment in technology-related teaching and learning infrastructure (people, systems,

content and standards) to build and embed its capability for flexible learning for the future. The Evaluation states that if Australia is to realise and sustain the value of the investment made under the Framework during 2000-2004, a commitment to national collaborative investment in flexible learning for 2005-2007 should be made. This will encourage the effective use of ICT in VET teaching and learning and enable increased take-up of technologies at the organisational level and across the VET system. More specifically, the Evaluation suggests programs that:

- realise and sustain the value of the investment made under the Australian Flexible Learning Framework in 2000-2004
- further build the capability of the entire VET sector to effectively use technologies that enable the achievement of the national VET strategy for 2004-2010
- enable the VET system, its providers and staff to respond to the emerging demand for technology-enabled flexibility
- test the development of sustainable business models that remove or significantly reduce the requirement for further national investment in flexible learning.

Growing demand for flexibility and the effective use of ICT

Australia's recently launched national VET strategy for 2004-2010, '*Shaping our Future*', sets a future vision that is more client-driven and delivers products and services designed to suit all learners. It identifies four key objectives that will require action across a range of fronts, including national collaboration to maximise the potential of flexible and technology-assisted learning and of e-business:

- industry will have a highly skilled workforce to support strong performance in the global economy
- employers and individuals will be at the centre of vocational education and training
- communities and regions will be strengthened economically and socially through learning and employment
- Indigenous Australians will have skills for viable jobs and their learning culture will be shared.

Collaborating for success in flexible learning

Collaboration in the Australian VET system is not an option, but a necessity. Australia has a national VET system with students, businesses, curriculum, technology and access and equity issues that do not stop at State or Territory borders. The Framework is evidence of the success that can be achieved through national collaborative effort. The Evaluation suggests that "when the Australian Government and States and Territories pool a relatively small amount of money in the overall VET context, they can produce outputs that increase the value of that investment many times over, while at the same time retaining each jurisdiction's capacity to pursue its own education and training priorities." The Evaluation further suggests that this approach reflects the National VET Strategy objectives 2004-2010 adopted by Australian Ministers for Education and Training.

A full copy of the Phase 2 Evaluation can be found at:

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/aboutus/keydocuments.htm#evaluation>