

# **Flexible Learning Best Practice Project**

## **Literature and Website Reviews**

### **Synopsis**

**Prepared by**

**Chris Todd Labyrinth Consultancy**

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## Introduction

The Flexible Learning Best Practice project is a research and development initiative within the *Framework for National Collaboration in Flexible Learning in VET 2000-2004*.

The overall brief for this project is to investigate existing flexible learning techniques and practices and to report on methodologies and associated technologies that are used to facilitate these new modes of learning. The focus of investigation is to be restricted to online modes of flexible learning. The results will be collated into a single point of entry web site providing access to online content, discussion forums and direct links to other useful sites.

This document completes the first stage in the research for the Project. The second stage will further investigate a number of the organisations identified in this initial research through physical visits by project team members. The third stage of the project is to analyse findings of the literature review, the website review and the site visits to develop content for the website.

As with the full report this document is presented in two parts:

**Part 1** is a **Literature Review** and has investigated relevant literature concerned with flexible online learning.

**Part 2** is a **Website Review** of the web presence of organisations that offer online learning.

Both parts of the document include an Executive Summary, details of the methodology used in the research, and findings.

# Part 1 Literature Review

## Executive Summary

### *Findings*

- ◆ The focus of academic writings is not upon the online technologies themselves but on the educational and pedagogical issues raised by the use of such technological advances for flexible online learning.
- ◆ Most writers see significant potential benefits from online learning, particularly in the context of the growing necessity for life-long learning and the need for the learner to fit their study into an increasingly busy schedule.
- ◆ These same writers, however, stress the need to:
  - ◆ recognise the fundamental differences between this mode of learning and traditional models;
  - ◆ use the technology to improve the facilitation of learning, not simply to reduce the cost of delivery;
  - ◆ develop valid pedagogical models to underpin the changes in ‘delivery’;
  - ◆ provide online teachers (facilitators) with training and support to both understand the medium and to work effectively within it;
  - ◆ provide online learners with on-demand support and interaction to reduce their isolation and to maximise their educational experience; and
  - ◆ use the capabilities of online learning technologies to provide learning experiences that make online learning valid in its own right.
- ◆ There is little written about assessment of online learning and of the needs of learners who do not have strong literacy skills.
- ◆ No writings could be located that deal with the provision of online learning and assessment for practical units of competency within Training Packages.

## **Suggested questions for identifying best practice in further research.**

- ◆ Can the provider of flexible online learning clearly articulate the different skills required by online learning facilitators?
- ◆ Does the provider offer a comprehensive training program for online learning facilitators?
- ◆ Does the provider use teams of people with skills in teaching, instructional design, technology (etc)?
- ◆ Does the provider make use of the potential of flexible online learning technology to maximise the educational value of its offerings?
- ◆ Does the pedagogy drive the choice of instructional design or vice versa?
- ◆ Does the provider have a learner-centred approach to flexible online learning?
- ◆ Can the provider's staff clearly articulate the cognitive learning strategies they are employing

To what extent does the provider of flexible online learning make full use of the potential of the technology to:

- ◆ Collaborate electronically with other providers?
- ◆ Provide a range of learning modes?
- ◆ Provide media-rich resources?
- ◆ Continuously evaluate and adapt the system?
- ◆ Provide access to the very best available educators and educational resources?

To what extent is the provider of flexible online learning and its teaching staff aware of the differences and the different requirements of flexible online learning and traditional on-campus delivery of training?

Is the provider's approach to flexible online learning planned and structured to improve the educational values of learning provision rather for economic considerations?

Can the provider of flexible online learning clearly articulate:

- ◆ the limitations of online learners for some types of learner?
- ◆ the limitations of online learning for some fields of learning?
- ◆ the characteristics of the successful online learner?
- ◆ the principles of good design for online learning?

and

- ◆ the importance of interaction for the learner?

Does the provider offer learners:

- ◆ a structured program of support throughout the learning program?
- ◆ appropriate, valid and fair assessment?

## Part 2 Website Review

### ***Executive Summary***

Only the 'public domain' of websites were available for review. The actual courses were not, in the main accessible as this required enrolment. Some websites offered example courses and these were reviewed where possible.

Costs are often hard to find and generally not inclusive of all costs, such as resource materials, that a student would need to consider when comparing study options. Students are often required to work out their costs with calculations based on hourly delivery rates and the addition of other on-costs. (an exercise in numeracy but maybe not appreciated)

Lack of information on career pathways: few sites give an indication of how the qualification is viewed by the appropriate industry and what career options or further study it might lead to.

Accredited vrs non-accredited: few sites in Australia give any indication whether the online qualification offered is part of Nationally accredited curriculum.

Of interest is that some of the best sites use standard multimedia web pages & Java applets rather than courseware such as WebCT. Most courseware style sites lack substance and few of the built in options are fully activated or utilised.

The Southwest Institute of TAFE offers CD-ROM as an alternative medium for some of their web-based courses. OTEN also produce a range of CD-ROMs

**Site Variables**

**Learning Guide versus Learning Material**

Much material advertised as an online course was limited to references to other resources, whether web-based or hardcopy. Typically learning guides are along the lines of "read pages 1-57 of your textbook". Example: South West TAFE's online Automotive Cert 2. Whereas Learning Material actually delivers a learning opportunity through explanation, demonstration, suggestions of observations to make or things to try, feedback or some other form of interactivity. Some sites such as Wodonga's Cert1&2 modules provide both.

**Learning Toolkit versus Communication Toolkit**

Often an online site is nothing more than a distribution & communication medium for information that would otherwise need to be printed or posted. As such it saves on printing costs for the institution and is quicker than "snail mail" through the postal system. Usually there is email access to a tutor or at the least a distance/flexible delivery office. Sometimes there are opportunities for students and teachers to communicate using a bulletin board (asynchronous communication) or a chatroom, web-blackboard or conference facilities (synchronous communication) but if content of sample sites is anything to go by then these facilities aren't highly utilised. Synchronous communication has the disadvantage that participants need to make themselves available to be online at a certain time, contrary to flexible delivery theory that not being on-campus means you can study anytime at your leisure and fit around work commitments. This may be the reason that such facilities are rarely used.

While we are discussing online courses as a communication medium: of interest is the Catholic University's individual web pages for students - the intent being that students in a course could put up a web page for other class members to see a picture of them and read about their background and interest in the course.

**Text-based versus Interactive**

Sadly many online courses could easily be replaced, at convenience to the student, by a hardcopy print-out of the material. Thereby saving online costs with their Internet service provider for material they can browse in a book.

While the Internet is a cheap distribution medium for institutions looking at saving printing costs it is actually expensive for the student. The student must have access to:

A computer

A printer

Web browser and email software + any plug-ins required to view interactive components

Hourly costs for online time

Phone costs for when all other forms of communication fail - as they do.

To offset these costs the online course should offer something more than the equivalent hardcopy course (i.e some form of interactive learning experience).

Many flexible delivery students not using online courses are still able to use a full range of online services as well as email to deliver assignments and communicate with their tutor and other students. They don't face the same costs for material downloads and printing or browse time. Example: Northern Territory University which has excellent online services such as online enrolment and course information.

## Sites suggested for further research

Due to the limitations of viewing online learning through the websites the following list has been developed for consideration in the further research. As the Flexible Learning Best Practice Project is a national project an attempt has been made to include all states and territories on the listing where possible. At this time, however, Northern Territory and ACT do not have web presences that indicate the delivery of flexible online learning and have not been included in the list.

### Australian TAFES

[Online@TAFE](#) (TAS)  
Tropical North Queensland  
OTEN  
Box Hill TAFE  
Wodonga TAFE  
Sunraysia Institute of TAFE (Malee Learning Network)  
William Ingliss Institute of TAFE  
South West TAFE (VIC)  
TAFE div of Swinburne University

### Australian Universities

Northern Territory University  
Open Learning Australia  
Charles Sturt University  
Australian Catholic University (VIC)  
Murdoch Online

### Other sites

Launceston Senior Secondary College (TAS)

### Sites that really shone above the others (Best Practice?)

**Wodonga TAFE** for its comprehensive kit of learning materials, communication media and attempts at interactive content

**Australian Catholic University and Murdoch University** for their use of the Internet for delivering both learning guides and learning material. However both sites lack interactivity and assume an existing, highly academic, understanding of course related terminology/jargon.

Overseas both the **University of Illinois and Athabasca University** offer great examples of how the courses can more fully utilise the power of the Internet

***Reviewer's  
Recommendations  
for creating an  
ultimate online  
learning  
experience***

The reviewer's ideal site would include:

- ◆ Clear indication of skills, resources and finances needed to do the course
- ◆ Online learning material, learning guide, resource list & assessment material with the option of a printed or CD version available for purchase as a supplement.
- ◆ Email & asynchronous chat facilities
- ◆ Tutor and student web pages to introduce themselves and their interest in the course
- ◆ Comprehensive list of other web resources - with no dead hyperlinks
- ◆ Interactive examples, experiments or demonstrations
- ◆ Self help quizzes with instant feedback
- ◆ Real life case studies and applications
- ◆ A guide to assessment, including learning outcomes, and details of any technical or procedural considerations related to assessment clearly explained.
- ◆ Guide to career and training pathways once the course is completed - a "where to now?"
- ◆ A 1800 number for contacting the institution's open learning administration unit when need requires.
- ◆ Quick response times on assignment turn around, enrolment processing and query responses.
- ◆ A state of the art website: visually pleasing, well designed, consistent pages, easy to locate information and quick to load.
- ◆ A bit of humour/fun