

# **Successes and future challenges in fostering and promoting innovation in flexible learning**

**Final report on the achievement of the 2002 Flexible  
Learning Innovations Project's objectives and  
recommendations for the future**

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*Managed by the Flexible Learning Advisory Group on behalf of the Commonwealth, all States  
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## Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1. FINDINGS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF THE SIX PROJECT TEAMS</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2. FINDINGS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF THE PROGRAM'S STAKEHOLDERS</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1: KEY FINDINGS FROM THE TWO FORMATIVE REPORTS</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH METHODS</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>APPENDIX 3: NAMES OF INTERVIEWEES</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS</b>	<b>37</b>

## **Executive Summary**

The Flexible Learning Innovations Project was conducted for the first time by the Flexible Learning Advisory Group (FLAG) in 2002. The program involved six project teams developing innovative products, ranging from a web-based instrument for learners to self-assess their computer-based skills and knowledge to a web-based simulation learning tool for horticulture.

This evaluation report shows that the pilot program in 2002 was successful in fostering innovation in certain sections of the VET sector and in establishing relationships between the projects and some VET customers and providers. The achievement of both these objectives can be enhanced by further initiatives by FLAG during 2003.

As a pilot program it appropriately and effectively highlighted a range of issues that can be considered by the ongoing FLAG program involving innovation and flexible learning, including the challenges of defining innovation and marketing disparate products.

The evaluation was conducted by John Mitchell from John Mitchell & Associates, from June 2002 to January 2003.

## **Evaluation brief**

The evaluation brief for this program covered two broad areas: project management processes and the achievement of objectives. The processes used or developed by the national Project Management Team – not the processes of the six funded project teams – were the focus of the formative evaluation and were the basis of the first two reports on the program. In response to the evaluation brief, these formative reports sought to establish the impact that the practices, processes and support activities of the Flexible Learning Innovations Project Team had on the program outcomes. Key findings from these formative two reports are set out in Appendix 1 and are not repeated in this report.

This final, summative evaluation report focuses on the second part of the evaluation brief – the extent to which the program's stated objectives were achieved, in response to the evaluation brief: "The major focus of the evaluation will be on identifying whether the Flexible Learning Innovations objectives were achieved and to make recommendations for the future".

Hence, this report focuses on:

1. whether the two key objectives for this program were achieved: that is, to foster innovation within the Australian VET sector; and to establish the relationship between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers;
2. recommendations for the future.

## **Methods**

The research methods used in the evaluation are described in Appendix 2 and included a survey of the six project team managers, interviews with program stakeholders and participants, observations of presentations and a review of documentation. The personnel interviewed are listed in Appendix 3, the interview questions are set out in Appendix 4 and the survey is described in Chapter 1.

## Major findings

The analysis of the six project teams indicates that the program partially achieved its two objectives: to foster innovation within the Australian VET sector and to establish the relationship between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers. In some cases the project teams exceeded expectations in achieving these objectives, but each of the six projects impacted differently on the extent to which each objective was achieved. These positive findings depend partly on the views of the project managers and need to be balanced by the more dispassionate positions taken by the other stakeholders in this program, as summarized next.

The stakeholders interviewed for this study included a sample of five members of the Steering Committee, five potential customers or users and three members of the National Project Management Committee. The analysis of stakeholders' views indicates that the program achieved its objective of fostering innovation within the Australian VET sector, in some pockets of VET, particularly with some practitioners associated with the AFL Framework, but that more innovation can be fostered in 2003, leveraging off the 2002 products. The stakeholder evaluation also shows that the 2002 program did establish relationships between the projects and some VET sector customers and providers, but that more can be done in 2003 to engage with practitioners who might use the products.

This 2002 program was valuable in raising a raft of challenges for the 2003 program focused on innovation in flexible learning in VET, *New Practices in Flexible Learning*. The challenges are reflected by the fifteen recommendations below.

Please note that the refrain 'if a similar program is conducted in future' is necessarily used in each of the recommendations below, as the brief for this evaluation did not include directly relating the findings of the 2002 FLAG program to the 2003 FLAG program on innovation in flexible learning. The brief for the 2002 evaluation simply called for 'recommendations for the future'.

## Recommendations

### Selection criteria

1. It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, the criteria for selection of projects to be funded include the demonstrated capabilities of the proposed RTO personnel and internal organisational support for the project.

### National project management

2. It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, the national project management emulate the 2002 provision of providing a mentoring service, conducting a start-up workshop, providing public profile for participating teams and preparing adequate documentation for teams.

### Submission preparation

3. It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, that considerable assistance and time be provided to project teams to enable them to develop the best possible project plans.

### Funding levels

4. It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, that funding levels per team of around \$50,000 each be considered.

### **Proposers' initial market research**

5. It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, that proposers be encouraged to access project staff who have existing knowledge about the needs of VET sector customers for innovative products in flexible learning.

### **Criteria for innovation**

6. It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, a set of criteria for innovation in flexible learning be identified in the program guidelines.

### **Target markets**

7. It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, that project teams are provided with advice and direction about identifying and consulting customer groups in different ways and that the project teams consult beyond their own organization.

### **Promotion**

8. It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, project teams be encouraged to promote their products within the VET sector.

### **Program guidelines**

9. It is recommended, that if a similar program is conducted in future, program guidelines make it clear whether the project teams are required to model innovative processes or develop an innovative product or both.

### **Exemplars**

10. It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in the future, and fostering innovation is an objective, then some specific examples be provided of what is meant by fostering innovation in VET.

### **Relationships with potential users**

11. It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in the future, and if establishing relationships with potential customers and users is an objective, then project teams are provided with advice about and given encouragement to develop a full range of possible relationships.

### **Definition**

12. It is recommended that, if a similar program is conducted in future, that a definition of innovation in flexible learning that is tied to the project's objectives be developed and guide the program.

### **Impact measurement**

13. It is recommended that the impact of the 2002 products be measured during and at the end of 2003.

### **Marketing planning criteria**

14. It is recommended that the 2002 products be marketed and promoted differentially, depending on the perceived value of the product to the VET sector, the availability of target markets and the possibility of the products' adoption.

### **Technical advice**

15. It is recommended that, if a similar program is conducted in future, the selection committee include a technical adviser and attempt the complex task of finding out what

other innovative activities are being conducted in the sector.

A further twenty one recommendations from the two formative reports are set out in Appendix 1.

## Abbreviations

For brevity and consistency, the six products in 2002 are described by the following abbreviations throughout the report:

Abbreviation	Product
<b>Engineering ‘black box’</b>	<b><i>Virtua-Lab.</i></b> A learningware module, operational across a range of learning management systems, that allows measurement data to be displayed on a PC, stored and sent, via the Internet, to a web server. Developed by TAFE NSW Southern Sydney Institute.
<b>Computer skills assessment</b>	<b><i>Skills Assessment for Computer Based Learning.</i></b> A web-based resource that includes 25 interactive activities covering 11 skill areas for basic skills required for computer based learning. Developed by Wide Bay Institute of TAFE.
<b>Building</b>	<b><i>Building Blocks to Reality.</i></b> 9 Learning Guides and an ArchiCAD template provided on a CD-ROM and accessible on a website in PDF format for downloading. Developed by Douglas Mawson Institute of Technology.
<b>Horticulture</b>	<b><i>Nursery Live!</i></b> This horticulture simulation prototype supports selected performance criteria of competencies from the Horticulture Training Package at AQF 3 level. Developed by Holmesglen Institute of TAFE.
<b>Assessment generator</b>	<b><i>Assessment Generator.</i></b> The Assessment Generator links all assessments to base data and allows for the generation of assessment plans and assessment tools. It is available on CD-ROM and contains the following components: Functional Specifications; Software; Installation Guide; User Guide. Developed by WestOne with support from CY O'Connor College of TAFE.
<b>Adaptive learning objects</b>	<b><i>Adaptive Learning Objects.</i></b> This prototype is a self-contained single web page made up of two main components: expository text that outlines subject matter on the right; and flash animation on the left side of the web page. Developed by Screen Art Production Pty Ltd in conjunction with North Melbourne Institute of TAFE.

Other abbreviations used in this document include:

AFL Framework	Australian Flexible Learning Framework
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
FLAG	Flexible Learning Advisory Group
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
VET	Vocational Education and Training

## **Program or Project?**

In an attempt to avoid confusion, throughout the report, the Flexible Learning Innovations Project is called 'the program' to distinguish it from the six funded 'projects', described above.

## **Chapter 1. Findings from the analysis of the six project teams**

This chapter provides a summary of the findings from data collected from the six 2002 project teams.

### **Key points**

The key points in this chapter include:

- ? In general, the positive outcomes of the program – as perceived by the project managers – far outweighed any negative outcomes.
- ? The 2002 program provides future planners with specific examples of innovation in flexible learning in VET, some of which could be promoted as exemplars.
- ? The range of criteria for innovation identified by the six project teams shows the breadth of possible criteria for innovation in flexible learning in the VET sector but also provides a challenge for the program in the future, in deciding whether to emphasise some criteria over others.
- ? Projects within this Innovations program are most likely to achieve the program objectives where the funded project teams are from organisations with relevant staff capabilities – such as project planning expertise – and appropriate support systems.
- ? To achieve the program objectives in the future, the national project management team could model the good practice of the 2002 National Project Management Team by providing extensive mentoring, a start-up workshop, public profile for participating teams and adequate documentation.
- ? Unsolicited, the 2002 project teams used a range of strategies to promote their products in VET. This suggests that if the program is conducted in future, the project teams could be either encouraged or required to promote their products.
- ? In future programs, additional advice, based on the 2002 experience, might be provided to project teams, to draw to the attention of project teams the full range of possible relationships with VET customers and providers.

### **Methods**

The research methods used to obtain data from the six project teams included interviews, a survey, observations and an analysis of the final reports. The data-gathering focused on the two objectives of this evaluation: to foster innovation within the Australian VET sector; and to establish the relationship between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers. When reading the views of the project managers set out in this chapter, the reader is encouraged to be mindful of the normal tendency of project managers to promote the positive aspects of their projects.

### **Findings from the survey**

A survey was conducted of the six project team managers regarding the factors affecting the achievement of objectives. The survey form consisted of three sections, as described below.

### Ranking the factors affecting the achievement of objectives

The respondents were asked to rank, from a list of sixteen possible factors, the five most important factors to influence the achievement of the program's two objectives, as set out above. The results of their responses are set out in Table 1.1 below.

**Table 1.1: Project managers' selections of the most important factors affecting the achievement of the FLAG program's objectives**

Factor, in order of descending importance	Number of times selected by the six teams	Votes given by the six teams (out of a maximum of 30 per factor )
1. Your project plan	4	16
2 a. The amount of funding for this project.	4	11
2b. The knowledge in your team about the needs of VET sector customers for innovative products in flexible learning.	3	11
4. Your organisation's existing infrastructure and support for product development in flexible delivery.	4	9
5a. The previous experience of members of your team in developing innovative products in flexible learning.	3	8
5b. The mentoring provided by the National Project Management Team.	2	8
7a. The Start-up workshop on 7 June with the National Project Management Team.	2	7
7b. The need for innovative products in flexible delivery to be developed within your organisation.	2	7
9. The positive public profile from being involved in a national project.	2	6
10. The corporate objectives of your organisation.	1	5
11. The project documentation provided by the National Project Management Team.	2	2
12. Your project's self-evaluation activities.	1	1

Factors not selected by the respondents as being in the top five factors affecting the achievement of program objectives were:

- ? The previous experience of members of your team in work based learning.
- ? The national program website.
- ? The teleconferences with the National Project Management Team.
- ? Other (please specify).

The first, overall observation of the results in Table 1.1 is as follows: of the top twelve factors selected by the project managers as affecting the achievement of objectives, seven are internal characteristics of the funded organisations, including four of the top six factors. These internal factors are:

1. Your project plan
- 2b. The knowledge in your team about the needs of VET sector customers for innovative products in flexible learning.
4. Your organisation's existing infrastructure and support for product development in flexible delivery.
- 5a. The previous experience of members of your team in developing innovative products in flexible learning.
- 7b. The need for innovative products in flexible delivery to be developed within your organisation.
10. The corporate objectives of your organisation.
12. Your project's self-evaluation activities.

This finding suggests that projects are most likely to achieve Innovation Project objectives where such internal pre-conditions (e.g. the ability to prepare an appropriate project plan) exist within the organisations bidding for funding. That is, the achievement of objectives is much more likely in RTOs with relevant staff capabilities and appropriate support systems.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, the criteria for selection of projects to be funded include the demonstrated capabilities of the proposed RTO personnel and internal organisational support for the project.

The second, overall observation of these results is as follows: of the top twelve factors selected by the project managers as affecting the achievement of objectives, five are factors determined by the national program. These factors – which are external to and beyond the control of the project teams – are:

- 2 a. The amount of funding for this project.
- 5b. The mentoring provided by the National Project Management Team.
- 7a. The Start-up workshop with the National Project Management Team.
9. The positive public profile from being involved in a national project.
11. The project documentation provided by the National Project Management Team.

This finding suggests that - aside from maintaining similar levels of funding support as discussed below - future national project management could model the good practice of the 2002 National Project Management Team by providing extensive support for project teams.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, the national project management emulate the 2002 provision of providing a mentoring service, conducting a start-up workshop, providing public profile for participating teams and preparing adequate documentation for teams.

Comments about the top three factors selected by the project managers are now set out below. The project managers identified as the most important factor affecting the achievement of the program's objectives were their own project plans. This is a credit to all personnel involved in project planning for the 2002 project teams, as obviously teams put both time and expertise into the preparation of project plans. The finding suggests that, if similar projects are conducted in future, project planning be given priority attention.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, that considerable assistance and time be provided to project teams to enable them to develop the best possible project plans.

The managers identified as the equal second most important factor affecting the achievement of the program's objectives the amount of funding for each project, suggesting that the funding level of \$50,000 was appropriate. This is a credit to those planners in 2002 who proposed such a funding level.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, that funding levels per team of around \$50,000 each be considered.

The other equal second most important factor affecting the achievement of the program's objectives was the knowledge in each team about the needs of VET sector customers for innovative products in flexible learning, suggesting that the selection of project team members knowledgeable in these areas was a key to success.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, that proposers be encouraged to access project staff who have existing knowledge about the needs of VET sector customers for innovative products in flexible learning.

Rating each factor affecting the achievement of objectives

In the second part of the survey the project managers were asked to rate, using a Likert scale of 1-5, the usefulness of each of fifteen factors (omitting 'other') affecting the achievement of the program's objectives. This cross-checking of the same factors provided some different insights into the value the project managers attached to each of the factors.

The respondents were asked to rate from 1-5 how each of the following factors affected the achievement of the program's objectives. The average score for each of the sixteen factors – with an average of five the highest possible – was calculated and the results are set out below.

**Table 1.2: Average score from the project managers for each factor affecting the achievement of the program's objectives**

<b>Factors affecting the achievement of the program's objectives</b>	<b>Ranking scale</b>	<b>Average Score (out of 5)</b>	<b>Ranking (descending order)</b>
The mentoring provided by the National Project Management Team.	<i>Useless 1 2 3 4 5 Very useful</i>	4.7	1a
Your organisation's existing infrastructure and support for product development in flexible delivery.	<i>Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Very important</i>	4.7	1b
The importance of your project's self-evaluation activities (e.g. interviewing team members; group discussions; reflection).	<i>Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Very important</i>	4.5	3
The previous experience of members of your team in developing innovative products in flexible learning.	<i>Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Very important</i>	4.3	4a

The importance of your Project Plan.	<i>Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Very important</i>	4.3	4b
The knowledge in your team about the needs of VET sector customers for innovative products in flexible learning.	<i>Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Very important</i>	4.0	6a
The project documentation provided by the National Project Management Team.	<i>Useless 1 2 3 4 5 Very useful</i>	4.0	6b
The amount of funding for this project.	<i>Very insufficient 1 2 3 4 5 Very sufficient</i>	4.0	6c
The corporate objectives of your organisation.	<i>Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Very important</i>	4.0	6d
The Start-up workshop on 7 June with the National Project Management Team.	<i>Very insufficient 1 2 3 4 5 Very sufficient</i>	3.8	10
The need for innovative products in flexible delivery to be developed within your organisation.	<i>Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Very important</i>	3.7	11
The positive public profile from being involved in a national project.	<i>Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Very important</i>	3.5	12
The teleconferences with the National Project Management Team.	<i>Very insufficient 1 2 3 4 5 Very sufficient</i>	3.2	13
The previous experience of members of your team in workbased learning:	<i>Very unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 Very important</i>	2.8	14
The usefulness of the national program website.	<i>Useless 1 2 3 4 5 Very useful</i>	2.7	15

The results in Table 1.2 above indicate only slightly different preferences to those expressed in Table 1.1 earlier. For instance, the top five rated factors in Table 1.2 are rated in the top-six in Table 1.1. The most noteworthy shifts among the top-rating factors are that mentoring moved up from the fifth factor in Table 1.1 to be the top factor in Table 1.2, and self-evaluation moved up from twelfth to third. The high value attached to mentoring is a credit to the 2002 National Project Management Team. An earlier recommendation encouraged any future national program to emulate the 2002 use of mentoring.

Overall, there is more consistency than inconsistency in the selection of top-ranking factors, over the two tables. Notably, four of the five top-ranking factors in Table 1.2, as in Table 1.1, relate to internal aspects, such as the RTO's existing infrastructure, self-evaluation, previous experience and project planning. Again, this indicates the value of selecting project teams that have both existing capabilities and organisational support.

The discussion above shows that the survey instrument provided clear suggestions about what affected the achievement of objectives and what could be focused on in future, if a similar program is conducted. On the other hand, it needs to be noted that a sample of six project teams is very small, so the results might vary with a larger sample, in, say, the 2003 program.

### **Unanticipated outcomes**

So as not to rely solely on the survey and interviews, the survey respondents were invited to comment in writing on unanticipated outcomes from their project - either positive or negative outcomes. The invitation was taken up by four of the six project managers.

There are some common threads in these responses, with the regular identification of the following outcomes:

- ? increased self-confidence of the staff;
- ? improved student outcomes;
- ? expressions of interest from potential users;
- ? heightened profile from participating in a national program.

Respondent A commented on the growth in self-belief and the increase in his department's profile in the VET sector:

The product we have developed has certainly raised the bar internally as to what the team believed they could achieve which will flow on into other projects. Additionally, the department's profile has been significantly raised as a result of this project and the VET sector's interest in it.

In terms of unanticipated outcomes, respondent B commented on the improvement in student achievement, interest from other users and the potential to market the product:

Capacity & ease with which students involved in the trials 'learned' the program to the level required by the "Frameworks" & subsequently carried out the tasks. Interest from other work groups to use the product or adapt the concept. Potential marketing of the product nationally & internationally.

Respondent C commented on the additional learning of the team members and the positive interest shown by others:

The additional learning achieved by some of the team e.g. some had never been involved in videoconferencing or using an online discussion board. This technology was used as the team members were from across three campus locations and face-to-face meetings proved impossible. In addition the links, interest and positive feedback from other organizations throughout Australia, although anticipated, exceeded expectation.

Respondent D remarked on the implementation of improved project processes within the RTO; contacts made with external parties, which are valuable for marketing the product; and opportunities for staff workplace learning:

Processes within the organization were put in place to make it easier for project work of this nature to be done using contracts as per the project submission.

Contacts with organizations, incidental to the scope of the project, were established which will generate interest in, or applications for the outputs of the project as well as the possibility of further research or re-development.

The project team became larger than was proposed due to the need for specific technical expertise or because of the limited time for which specific team members were available.

This meant that the opportunities for workplace learning were expanded.

Only two of the respondents noted negative outcomes. One respondent commented on how the project had raised expectations of continuing innovation:

A perceived negative outcome is that the Unit must continue to develop products of this calibre for other secured project regardless of funding or other (eg technical) constraints applied. Given the amount of additional work outside of budgeted time required to complete the project, this could improperly raise stakeholder's expectations of project outcomes to unattainable levels.

Another respondent noted that the investment in time for development had been underestimated, but this negative result was offset by the increased knowledge of how to cost future projects:

It was recognised that, due to the innovative nature of the project, the estimated investment in time for development had been underestimated. This became the primary issue with regard to risk, and change management. The report that will be provided to the organization as a result of this outcome will, however, be positive in that the realistic costing of future development projects may more easily be constructed.

In summary, the positive outcomes of the program – as perceived by the project managers – far outweighed any negative outcomes.

## **Findings from the interviews of project team managers**

The six project managers were interviewed in early December 2002 and provided responses to the three questions italicised below.

### ***To what extent do you believe your product is innovative?***

The six project managers were confident that their products were innovative, but used different criteria in making this assessment. One project manager considered his product innovative in relation to two criteria – it was ahead of a benchmark, the Defence Forces, and it was part of a coordinated Institute strategy:

Our product is highly innovative in its application. One of the Flexible Learning Leaders said we were ahead of the Defence Department in our approach. Lessons from our project will help the VET sector. I believe that where innovation is a bolt-on in the Institute, it will have limited impact. I was attempting a coordinated strategy in our Institute, changing perceptions as well.

Another project manager used the two criteria that their product represents an untried approach and services a need not satisfied previously:

Our approach hasn't been tried before in VET. We are servicing a need that isn't being serviced at the moment. We had a phone call from another State today: they will use it.

The next project manager used the criterion that his product reduced the time taken to complete tasks:

Our product is a dramatic improvement: it will dramatically cut down the time needed to do tasks, although the documentation added by Colleges will be the key.

The following project manager used the three criteria that his product provided better integration with practice, doesn't require sitting in front of a computer and can be transferred to other areas:

From all reports, people feel it is really revolutionary. They see current online learning as point and click, whereas this interface will allow a whole new dimension – and will provide better integration with practice. It takes online learning beyond sitting in front of a computer. It can be extended to lots of different areas.

The next project manager believed that his product was innovative using three criteria – innovative idea, innovative content and innovative assembly:

Aspects of my product are innovative. The idea is innovative and some of the content is innovative. The way I have put it together is innovative.

The final project manager was clear that the criterion for innovation met by his product was that his team had converted an existing software for educational application:

We took a piece of existing computer software that wasn't meant to do what we wanted to do, and have manipulated it so it is a powerful teaching tool.

The above responses represent around twelve different criteria for deciding whether the product was innovative. This range of criteria shows the breadth of possible criteria for innovation in flexible learning in the VET sector but also provides a challenge for the program in the future, in deciding whether to emphasise some criteria over others. If no boundaries are put around the criteria used to assess innovation, and if each project team is allowed to identify its own criteria for innovation, the program outcomes could become so broad or loose or unfocused as to be of limited value to the sector.

**Recommendation.** It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, a set of criteria for innovation in flexible learning be identified in the program guidelines.

### **To what extent do you believe your product is customer-focused?**

All of the project managers believed that their products were customer-focused, as all of them consulted their main customer groups – either students or lecturers or both – during their projects. Some consulted extensively, beyond their own RTOs, while others used more informal strategies to obtain input and feedback:

Our customers are lecturers or practitioners and academic directors. I believe our product is highly responsive to customers. We couldn't help but get that feedback, as all of our field testers were practitioners, with eight from one Institute.

Our product is customer-focused because it was a work-based learning project and staff (outside the Institute) gave us information about what they wanted and we were asking our staff as well. Our customers are both staff and learners.

I have tested it with students all along and have spoken to teachers. I have taken notes based on feedback from students. The tool can be customised to suit teachers and students.

Two of the respondents emphasised their focus on student customers:

We designed our model with the needs of engineering students in mind. We wanted to be able to provide them with something different. We had an early prototype and people were very impressed that data could be recorded and displayed graphically, immediately, which adds value. If you are measuring two properties, you can see the relationship. Science students are looking for this relationship.

Our product promotes student learning using a virtual facility. It links codes of practice and building standards (which are not easy to see) and provides results of interpretations. It demonstrates a range of key competencies about how students use technology and concepts.

One respondent noted that his team's product was initially targeted at developers, not teachers and students:

The initial customers for our product are developers, not just teachers and learners. This resource has a highly technical approach and requires some understanding and some upskilling by the developers. For teachers, the resource is exciting for them to use with learners: it is different, unstructured, not lock-step or didactic. However, getting teachers involved is difficult as the resource is unstructured. I believe we have built a resource that meets learners' needs, as it closely models the workplace and is fun to use.

Responses to the question about customer-focus showed that there were three broad customer groups for the 2002 projects: teachers and educational managers; students; and developers.

Experience from the 2002 projects shows that project teams can consult each of these customer groups in different ways and that a project team can consult beyond their own organisation. However, the process in 2002 was voluntary and random: each project team used their own initiative regarding customer consultation and the processes and results varied markedly.

**Recommendation.** It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, that project teams are provided with advice and direction about identifying and consulting customer groups in different ways and that the project teams consult beyond their own organization.

### **To what extent have you and/or other VET parties sought to gain 'buy-in' of potential VET users of your product?**

It is important to note that it was not a requirement of the six project teams that they seek to gain 'buy-in' from potential VET users of their product. However, the evaluator asked the project managers if they did seek 'buy-in', to see whether future project teams may be able to make a useful contribution to marketing the products.

The responses by the six project managers show that the project teams did make a useful contribution to marketing, albeit in different ways and to different extents. For instance, one team sought the support of teachers at his own Institute:

We have liaised with the appropriate teaching area within our Institute with our testing of the product. We have sought to bring on board teachers who might use the product. We have attempted to gain uptake from teachers, as we ultimately require them to endorse the product. The feedback from teachers is that they find it exciting. The product needs to be appropriate for their strategies, as it could suit some but not others, although the days of the lock-step learning resource are gone.

Another team let their partners from another Institute drive their project:

Our proposal was driven by feedback from our practitioner base. They indicated that it was needed and they committed staff as field testers and focus group members.

Another team used their State-wide position as Toolbox Champions to promote their product:

My Institute provides Toolbox Champion support for our State, and these users of Toolboxes are asking me about our product. I will be presenting our product to State-wide representatives this week. We're proud of what we've done: why not promote it?

One team actively pitched their product at the Statewide online learning unit:

The NSW TAFE Online project wants to incorporate our tool into their project. My brother is working with the science faculty at another Institute and it is very interested. The tool can be customized for other online learning training.

One project manager sought out the views of likely users of the product:

I have been in touch with people at other Institutes involved in Cisco certification, to get their interest in using using this material. The tool has potential, but I haven't set out to create a course, I have created a tool.

Another team approached the relevant software developer to seek preferential treatment for other RTOs:

We have discussed with the software agent the possibility of an ongoing working relationship and sponsorship deals for other units in our Institute and for other RTOs. I have talked to staff development people in our Institute and will promote it at our national conference for our industry. The product has a national perspective and the marketing gurus are interested.

Unsolicited, the 2002 project teams used a range of strategies to promote their products in VET. This suggests that if the program is conducted in future, the project teams could be either encouraged or required to promote their products.

**Recommendation.** It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in future, project teams be encouraged to promote their products within the VET sector.

### Other comments?

To capture other experiences of the project teams, the project managers were invited in their interviews to make any other comments. Their comments ranged from the citing of positive benefits, to suggestions for modifying the program in future.

One project manager commented on the benefits of the project for his Institute:

Broadly, the team was challenged by this project and it gave online learning a new lease of life in our Institute. Other projects can learn from us.

Another project manager noted that he had taken on more than he had expected:

I succeeded in over-committing myself. I tried for a long time to maintain my other duties but realized I couldn't, so I had to pull back.

Another project manager appealed to ANTA to fund innovation regularly:

Innovation needs to be funded by ANTA. Innovation needs to be part of the VET sector. There is a huge opportunity to test positive approaches.

The same project manager also raised the concern that this project suffered from 'scope creep', in that the national program tried to both encourage the innovative process and seek an innovative product:

Innovation to me is risk-taking; being prepared to make mistakes; where the project management is flexible. But there was a pressure in this project to produce a product – "We can't afford to make mistakes". I believe that innovation needs to be funded throughout the whole sector, not just in a pocket here or there. There was 'scope-creep' in this program: first we were told to take risks; then we were encouraged to create a product or resource; then we were asked to produce a low-maintenance product, as no maintenance funding was put aside, unlike for Toolboxes. The Project Management Team was fantastic, but we need to be careful about changing the scope of these innovation projects. With innovative practices, we need a coordinated strategy; we need to be consistent. Chopping and changing doesn't look good.

The related topic of whether project teams sensed a tension between product development and the innovative process, was one of the topics project teams were asked to address in their final reports. The issue of different interpretations of the point of the program was raised in the Interim Report of December 2002 and it is important that it is clarified for the future.

**Recommendation.** It is recommended, that if a similar program is conducted in future, project guidelines make it clear whether the project teams are required to model innovative processes or develop an innovative product or both.

## Findings from the final reports

Only samples of those aspects of the final reports prepared by the project teams that are relevant to the foci of this summative evaluation are discussed below.

### Fostering of innovation in VET

In relation to whether the program fostered innovation within the Australian VET sector, the final reports by project teams show that many different types of innovation were fostered in three domains: among the six project teams, within their organisations and among other organisations who were involved in the project in both small or significant ways.

Typical comments about how a project encouraged the diffusion of innovative skills and products across an RTO included:

Involvement in this project has provided a number of benefits for Wide Bay TAFE including but not limited to:

Professional skill development for a range of staff across the Institute;

Access to a product that will be widely used in the Institute;

Use of a product that will promote and enhance the use and uptake of information and communication technology;

A team of people who can share their learning with others in the organisation;

Recognition for involvement in a FLAG project and the development of a unique, innovative and nationally applicable resource.

One project manager commented on how the project fostered in some team members the development of new perspectives about innovation:

I have also learned that a remarkable amount of work can be done when you have a tight, broadly skilled team. The members of the team either came to the project with a broad set of skills that enabled them to appreciate the roles of others or they, through their own enthusiasm for the project and their desire to understand various aspects of the technology or the development process, grew and learned, enabling them to see the work and the product from perspectives other than their own.

One project manager felt that his project had shown that innovation in RTOs needs to be understood as a cultural change which challenges traditional structures:

Innovation is critical to the success of an organisation. However, innovation requires support from all staff, frontline and management alike. Innovation is a cultural change. What this means is that team members need to let go of established processes and the comfort of existing skills and be prepared to 'learn on the fly'. Although this can raise the effort levels, it keeps staff constantly evolving in their roles and provides the motivation and enthusiasm to produce better products. This can be difficult in organisations where the structures and work processes are locked down tightly. Evolution of processes and methodologies can assist in supporting flexible work practices that generate and sustain innovation.

The program has fostered the concept that innovation can result from involvement in national projects. A typical comment was that involvement in the project had the following effect:

It confirmed to our many clients that participating in national projects can be the catalyst for producing quick results for the practitioner in the field.

One project team appealed to ANTA to foster more innovation by providing dedicated funding for innovation in the trades areas:

We certainly hope that it (the product) will have an impact on ANTA and demonstrate what TRADES can do and that ANTA consider making a specific investment into encouraging TRADES to become involved in future projects. A category of Innovations funding just for trades we believe would be a most worthwhile.

One project manager believes that innovation can be fostered even more by requiring VET staff to 'think outside of the box':

A combination of 'thinking outside the box' and 'challenging existing methods' is really what would encourage VET practitioners. Many VET practitioners can explain why things don't work and how they can work better. I would argue that this is what innovation is requiring us to ask of ourselves constantly.

While the objective of fostering innovation is laudable, it can be interpreted differently, as shown above. The 2002 program's products provide future planners with specific examples of innovation in flexible learning in VET, some of which could be promoted as exemplars for future groups, in order to foster some types of innovation in flexible learning.

**Recommendation.** It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in the future, and fostering innovation is an objective, then some specific examples be provided of what is meant by fostering innovation in VET.

### **Establishing relationships with customers and providers**

In relation to whether the program established the relationship between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers, the final reports by project teams show that a range of relationships were established by the 2002 teams. For instance, one commented that participation in this initiative has provided the opportunity to:

- Involve a range of people, who may not otherwise have the opportunity, in a FLAG project;
- Inform others of FLAG initiatives;
- Encourage innovation and the sharing of ideas and skills.

A number of the project managers commented that they would like to be involved in ongoing promotion of their products. A typical comment included:

It would be useful to have the opportunity to present our material to Construction Education units across the country and run half day to day sessions in each state to kick-start the awareness and use of this product.

This type of suggestion makes good sense, as the products are, in some cases, very specifically related to some teaching areas and it would be useful if the inventors talked to potential customers from the same specialist teaching areas.

In one of the projects involving the partnership of the developer and an RTO – which is a potential user of the product – the project manager identified benefits for both parties:

This project has had a positive two-fold effect on two separate organisations. Firstly it has had a positive result on the way Screen Art can work in serving the VET sector in co-operation with RTOs. Secondly, it has had a positive effect on the teaching culture of NMIT, the supporting RTO, since the staff and higher administrative personnel have seen the potential to improve their quality of service to the learner.

This model of a developer partnering an RTO was used in two of the six projects and seems to have brought benefits to all parties.

One project manager – using sentiments expressed by many of the project teams – encouraged other VET practitioners to get involved in this program:

I would strongly advocate for other VET practitioners to get involved in this program. Innovation and change are the way of the future and we all need to take an active part in it. There are a lot of people out there with innovative ideas. All they need is the encouragement to promote these ideas – this program is one way of doing this.

One project manager argued that ANTA could add to the success of this pilot program by building up the skills of a wide range of contributors:

ANTA has a commitment to world class online content development. The current e:learning resource development approach is fast becoming a base standard. With professional development providing teachers with basic skills in e-learning resource development (HTML, graphics, etc), the development community needs to push the boundaries further and develop the next breed of world class e:learning resources. This program aims to build on that and in addition to just up-skilling the development community. It will also serve to up-skill the wide range of contributors required in e:learning resource development (ie teachers, instructional designers, project managers, graphic artists).

Clearly, the program objective of the project teams establishing relationships with customers and providers was achieved, and in a variety of ways and to varying depths. In future programs, additional advice, based on the 2002 experience, might be provided, to draw to the attention of project teams the full range of possible relationships. It might also be a requirement of project teams that they develop a range of types of relationships and demonstrate the depth of each relationship.

**Recommendation.** It is recommended that if a similar program is conducted in the future, and if establishing relationships with potential customers and users is an objective, then project teams are provided with advice about and given encouragement to develop a full range of possible relationships.

## Conclusion

This evaluation of the six project teams indicates that the program partially achieved its two objectives: to foster innovation within the Australian VET sector and to establish the relationship between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers. In some cases the project teams exceeded expectations in achieving these objectives, but the extent to which each objective was achieved varied from one project team to the next.

This set of positive findings needs to be balanced by the more dispassionate positions taken by the other stakeholders in this program, as set out in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2. Findings from the analysis of the program's stakeholders

This chapter provides a summary of the findings from interviews with thirteen stakeholders from the following groups: a sample of five members of the Steering Committee, five potential customers or users and three members of the National Project Management Committee.

### Key points

The key points in this chapter include:

- ? The deliberate attempt by the 2002 Steering Committee to create a variety of types of potentially innovative products was a valuable strategy in the first year of the program, as it uncovered a range of issues that, once resolved, could assist a future program.
- ? A future program could benefit from the development of a settled definition of innovation and a range of criteria for innovation that can guide the program and project teams.
- ? The objective of fostering innovation in VET was ambitious and it may take another year to determine the full extent to which the program has fostered innovation in the sector.
- ? The national project management team's initiatives have raised the profile of the program in the sector, to the extent that the program was known about in the VET sector, particularly by those familiar with the AFL Framework.
- ? The Steering Committee is left with the quandary of how much to promote the products from the first year of the program, given that the products were the result of an experimental pilot. A compromise is that the Committee can promote each product in different ways, and some more than others.
- ? A future selection committee could include a technical adviser and attempt the complex task of finding out what other innovative activities are being conducted in the sector.

### To what extent did the program foster innovation within the Australian VET sector?

The two questions italicized below were used to provide answers to the over-arching question above.

#### *Which innovative aspects of the six 2002 projects do you most value?*

To start the interviews with the members of the Steering Committee, the interviewees were each asked to comment on which innovative aspects of the six 2002 projects they valued most. This question prompted extensive comments from the interviewees, revealing insights into their definitions and criteria for innovation. For example, two definitions were:

Innovation means moving forward. It is about using technology differently.

Innovation is a quantum leap.

A number of interviewees found innovation in all six products:

All of the projects are innovative, in different ways.

Parts of all of the six are innovative.

However, many of the interviewees commented about the difficulties of finding instances of innovation in all of the products:

I struggled to find six innovative ones, but it was OK for the program to take risks in its first year.

When I saw the applications for this program I thought this is stunning, there is such

interesting stuff out there. But is it innovative? It gets back to the selection process. The selection panel needs to know everything around.

What is innovation? Given the diversity of the six projects, it is hard to say. Is it innovative if the product, like the skills assessment one, can be used across all teaching departments, or is a product innovative if it involves a technologically enhanced approach? I think all six products have value in terms of innovation, but I personally can't define innovation in terms of instructional design.

One member of the Steering Committee felt that in the field of innovation it is difficult to be directive and this may mean some projects are not successful:

With the Toolboxes, we gradually refined the guidelines and became more directive. The problem in the field of innovation is inviting a range of activities, where it is difficult to set priorities. One or two of the projects in 2002 were not so good. I don't really know what the answer is.

Most of the interviewees chose to comment separately on each of the six projects, again revealing a range of criteria for innovation. For example, in relation to the horticulture product, comments included quite opposing views:

Brilliant simulation. Quite innovative. We have few examples of such simulation. It raises people's view of what simulation can achieve. A real simulation will bring real benefits.

The horticulture product is not innovative. It is Toolbox product.

Similarly, the interviewees applied different criteria and different ratings to the 'building' product:

The building product is exciting but limited. It could be used across all of engineering and building programs but I think it will be mostly used in building. It is an interesting use of an existing software product.

The building product is innovative because it is 3D, while Toolboxes are 2D.

The building product is a great resource.

There is other software available for building which are more interactive.

The engineering 'black box' challenged most interviewees, who were unfamiliar with both engineering and the technology used in the product:

It is hard to assess when it is not in your field. The inventor has some great ideas and has thought about it and it might be the top product, in five years' time. The box raises questions for the sector about how to commercialise products; and patents raise issues for us.

I don't understand the black box, but it appears to be innovative, because there is nothing else like it.

The computer skills assessment product also was judged by different criteria:

The PC product is very useful, but is it innovative? It is 'Toolboxie'.

The PC skills product is really useful for both teachers and learners.

The skills product meets our needs but it is not innovative: we had a LearnScope project on the same area, but they did it better than us.

I'm told that there are about ten other similar products out there.

I'm not convinced its innovative.

The assessment generator was viewed through a number of different lenses:

I am waiting for the release of the generator. I like the fact that it is intuitive and easy to use; it has guest access; and doubles as a repository.

It could be innovative. The jury is out.

I have my reservations. If it is just a database, there are lots of databases out there... They have added to other databases I have seen. Maybe it is innovative. I have questions about the transferability of the database to other jurisdictions.

The adaptive learning objects product also provoked contrasting responses:

I didn't understand this one. I am not sure we got what we thought we would get.

I am left with question marks. I am not convinced. We have to know more.

I have thought a lot more about this one since I saw the presentation. I am now thinking it is good the way it suits different learning styles.

Some of the potential customers and users had a similar range of views about the different degrees of innovation reflected in the products:

Six products from six projects is very impressive. The best thing is variety, although some have similarities with Toolboxes.

Not all of the products were that innovative, but for each of their organizations they were innovative.

I liked the horticulture product because it is adaptable. We can take their nursery and design a new shell, for problem solving in other areas. The assessment generator database has national potential.

It is understood that the 2002 projects were deliberately chosen on an experimental basis to reflect a range of different types of innovation and that the Steering Committee knew from the time of the selection of the six projects that the six projects would produce very different products. This deliberate attempt to create a variety of types of potentially innovative products was a valuable strategy in the first year of the program, as it uncovered a range of issues that, once resolved, could assist a more targeted future program.

The various quotations above contain around twenty different criteria for innovation, such as 'an interesting use of an existing software product'; 'it is 3D'; 'there is nothing else like it'; 'it is intuitive'; 'easy to use'; 'it suits different learning styles'. This wide range of criteria raises a challenge for the Steering Committee. Should the Steering Committee publicly articulate a range of criteria for innovation, to provide the program with more focus? Or should the Steering Committee deliberately be open to different criteria for and interpretations of innovation? A compromise is for the Steering Committee to set out a definition that covers all of its objectives and a sample set of criteria. As part of its deliberations on these issues, the Steering Committee could consider whether it is part or all of a proposed product that could be classified as innovative.

During the 2002 program, the National Project Director produced several useful papers that included a discussion of the definition of innovation in relation to flexible learning. These papers could form the basis for developing a definition of innovation for the 2003 program.

As a previous recommendation advocated the identification of criteria for innovation in flexible learning, the following recommendation only addresses the companion issue, the development of a definition of innovation that is tied to the program's objectives.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that, if a similar program is conducted in future, that a definition of innovation in flexible learning that is tied to the program's objectives be developed and guide the program.

To what extent do you believe this program has fostered or will foster innovation within the Australian VET sector?

Members of the Steering Committee were asked the above question and responded with a number of different perspectives. Some thought the objective was too ambitious and some thought it will take another year to determine the extent to which the program has fostered innovation. One interviewee was aware that a pilot program can never expect to achieve complete success:

I am not sure whether we were realistic in saying we could foster innovation in VET. This program on its own couldn't do it. We have taken an idea and given resources to it, to deliver prototype products. Out of the six, three-four have moved down the innovation path a long way. From the individual project's points of view, they have all been innovative and have achieved good things. Compared to other R&D program, this success rate is a bit better than normal. This program was a high risk for FLAG. If 2-3 of the projects succeed, we will have done well.

Others agreed that benefits have already accrued but that the outcomes of the program may not be known for some time and the program needs more promotion. Two responses were:

It is too early to tell. The people involved, the innovators, got a big bang from it and a lot of their energy will filter around. But the program, not necessarily the products, need promotion and marketing in 2003, to take the program forward.

Fostering innovation in the VET sector is a big call. I hope the program will develop more momentum. It will depend partly on how we promote the products. For the next stage and the second iteration of the program, WA needs to put its mind to it: PR has to happen in 2003. The boundaries of the 2003 program need to be finalized.

Another interviewee cautioned about expecting too much of the inaugural year:

2002 is only the first year of the program. The program is a great idea. WestOne will broaden the program in 2003. It is a gradual process, as the VET sector at practitioner level hasn't been allowed to take risks before. Look at the improvements in the first round of Toolboxes to now.

Some Steering Committee members were focused on the positive message the program sent to practitioners:

The more people can be exposed to possibilities, the more it fuels innovation. Teams start to think: how can we be more innovative. Funding makes people think 'I can get funded'.

Anytime any one puts up funding, people have ideas; people think about innovating. The products will foster innovation as specialist groups will use the products, such as the time-based horticulture innovation. Where adopted, the products will lead to little circles of innovation. The products will foster innovation by example: they provide different ways of solving a problem. For example, the building project's use of existing software. Teams themselves are learning to push the envelope.

A member of the national project management team commented on the choice that may need to be made in the future between product development and 'pushing the envelope':

It was a good start but I am wondering how we will do the next stage. Will it foster innovation or just produce products? The program needs more profile or push. Are they going to produce different products or will they keep pushing the envelope?

Some potential users of or customers for the products focused on the encouragement the program provided to practitioners:

Even if nothing else, it engenders in staff a bit of excitement and a work ethic and a sense of a bit of fun.

I think the project has offered encouragement to others. There are lots of other good things worth exploring.

Other comments from potential users of or customers for the products identified other benefits for both the participants and the sector:

One of the most valuable things about the program was the level of support and documentation for each of the projects rather than just products. Both the horticulture product and the engineering black box have moved away from the delivery of information to the delivery of experience. It was a really worthwhile investment.

For the RTOs involved, there were clear benefits: invaluable lessons from the development of online resources; the skilling of staff. Innovative ideas are most likely to come from educators who also have an understanding of IT, but the kernel of the idea might come from educators.

The comments above from the Steering Committee, potential users and project management team indicate that innovation was fostered to some degree, but that it is too soon to judge fully whether the objective of fostering innovation in VET was achieved. Some members of the Steering Committee felt that this objective was possibly unrealistic, given that the program was in its first year of operation.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that the impact of the 2002 products be measured during and at the end of 2003.

### **To what extent was a relationship established between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers?**

The steps taken by the national project management team to gain 'buy-in' and awareness of the AFL Framework and to establish relationships between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers included liaising with LearnScope to ensure products were presented in the State which hosted the project; involving Flexible Learning Leaders in the program; producing a promotional booklet; participating in NetWorking 2002; and maintaining a website.

The national team also sought greater participation of VET personnel in using the emerging products by making multiple presentations throughout the sector, during the life of the program. In response to the question "To what extent was a relationship established between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers?", several Steering Committee members were aware of these steps:

I know that the Flexible Learning Leaders got involved to help with design, and to meet needs, and to help the project teams establish relationships, but this has not been consistent across the six projects.

The relationships were assisted by the booklet produced by the national project management team and the roadshow of State/Territory presentations.

The relationship was extended through the Flexible Learning Leaders and its activities and through the State demonstrations in association with LearnScope reports. These demonstrations made it efficient to see both at once: both were seen as FLAG projects. The booklet looks good. The Educational Supplement of the Age ran a story on the project. This project is outside of the whole range of activities normally linked to FLAG. It shows that FLAG is extending its reach.

Generally, interviewees felt that the national project management team's initiatives had raised the profile of the program in the sector, particularly through connecting with the Flexible Learning Leaders and providing presentations alongside LearnScope projects in each State and Territory, to the extent that the program was known about in the VET sector, particularly by those familiar with the AFL Framework.

### **In what ways could relationships between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers be enhanced in the next twelve months?**

One customer noted that more work in establishing relationships needs to happen in the next phase:

To establish relationships, the products need to be implemented at the coalface. The products need to be taken to the people.

At the time of interviewing in mid-December 2002, a number of the Steering Committee felt that the development of a relationship between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers was only at the start. They also indicated that they were not yet abreast of marketing plans for the project in 2003.

One Steering Committee member held the view that marketing planning may not be straightforward and commented on the complexities of marketing the six different products:

The draft marketing plan is not yet right. There are six different products and six different markets. For instance, with the horticulture product, the extent of take-up depends on the level of support provided in each RTO. We have learnt from the Toolboxes that just providing the product is not enough. We have got to get down to the teaching team level. We can't talk about relationships till we work out the different markets and work out the patent issue with the black box. We need a different marketing strategy for each of the six products. I am not convinced that a new roadshow will work, as there are different market segments. If we do a roadshow, we could split up the showcase.

Another Steering Committee member talked about similar challenges in marketing dissimilar products:

There are some issues. The building product is relevant within the construction industry but at the moment it only relates to timber walls. I don't know how to promote the PC skills product or the adaptive learning objects. The assessment generator needs significant additional work to embed it in each State and Territory. The blackbox is relevant within electronics but there are not a huge number of students there; and it needs a help desk. But the ANTA legal people need specifications for the black box: they need incredible detail. If it has got commercial value we need to tie it down. Some relationships can be formed through help desks.

Another two Committee members suggested the use of different communication channels:

For the marketing strategy we need to think of different channels. We need to market through key people in different States. If I was looking for one of the products from 2002 I would go to ATP, but these products don't fit with that.

The relationships could be enhanced by the FLAG Communication and Adoption Program. The Innovation in Practice program could contribute. FLAG and ANTA can conduct other activities. VET customers can turn to ATP, the Resource Generator and AShareNet.

A number of the potential customers and Steering Committee felt that a roadshow in 2003, possibly with some additional activities, would assist in the development of relationships:

A roadshow is a good idea.

I would love to see the products roadshowed. The more the products can be demonstrated in the VET sector and the more the documentation can be disseminated, the better. I suggest they go around and show the products to individual teachers, face to face, because success and failure of many online learning resources rely on the uptake by teachers.

The roadshows should include training sessions. People need assistance on adapting. I can hear staff saying "I don't know what to do and where to go with it."

Some sort of roadshow would be very valuable. Meetings could be set up with lead into richer discussions about the product.

However, not every member of the Steering Committee was convinced of the value of a roadshow:

I am not sure if a roadshow in 2003 of the 2002 products will hit the right people.

The discussion above suggests that, at the end of this 2002 pilot program, the Steering Committee is left with the quandary of how much to promote the products from the first year of the program, given that the products were the result of the experimental pilot. On the other hand, until and unless the products are promoted, it will not be clear which ones are seen as innovative or popular by the VET sector. From the point of view of optimizing the investment in the first year of the program, the Steering Committee could encourage the promotion and marketing of the products. A compromise suggested by one member of the Steering Committee is that the Committee could exercise its judgment and recommend the promotion of each product in different ways, and some more than others.

It is understood that a marketing plan for the 2002 products is being tabled with the Steering Committee in early 2003, so the following recommendation could be seen as a suggestion contributing to the finalizing of the plan.

**Recommendation.** It is recommended that the 2002 products be marketed and promoted differentially, depending on the perceived value of the product to the VET sector, the availability of target markets and the possibility of the products' adoption.

## Unanticipated outcomes

To identify the full range of outcomes from the 2002 program, Steering Committee members interviewed for the evaluation were asked the following question.

### **What unanticipated outcomes have emerged from the 2002 national program - either positive or negative outcomes?**

One member of the Committee noted benefits as well as some negatives or challenges:

A positive is that individuals have furthered an idea. For instance, the South Australian guys have taken an area and been innovative, but three years ago they did not want to know about technology. I wasn't convinced they would at the original selection table. It is a wonderful story about innovation. There are other negatives or challenges: how do we handle the intellectual property and commercialise it? The New Practices program will need to look at these.

Another member commented on the debate about definitions and the value of Flexible Learning Leaders being involved:

On the negative side, the debate about what is innovative is a problem. Some people will say 'You're kidding: this product isn't innovative'. On the positive side, a lot of the Flexible Learning Leaders got involved and helped mentor teams: this was not anticipated. We are trying to use the Flexible Learning Leaders as leaders in technology skills, so we can maximise our investment in the Flexible Learning Leaders. The VET sector is interested in the general concept of innovation and we (Steering Committee) are prepared to have the occasional failure, and the benefits should outweigh the risks.

Another unanticipated outcome was the full impact of the national project management team:

I am personally disappointed that the program is moving from South Australia to Western Australia. I am disappointed not because of where it is moving to, but because of the quality of the job done in South Australia...They accelerated the understanding of the AFL and national dynamics.

The 2002 projects also raised some issues that are not yet resolved that will need to be considered by the 2003 program management:

There are a number of issues from the 2002 program: promotion, help desks and the currency of each product. The 2002 national project director could take up these issues with the 2003 equivalent.

### **What recommendations could you suggest for the future?**

The three questions italicised below were used to prompt the interviewees to discuss improvements to the program for the future.

### **What changes would you make to this program if it was conducted again and why?**

Some members of the Steering Committee felt that the 2003 program on Innovation in Practice appropriately had a different design to the pilot program. The new design reflected a shift in thinking about the value of products and process and where e-learning fits in to the sector:

The scope for 2003 has been broadened beyond an emphasis on products. It's on applying innovation. There is more emphasis on systemic innovation.

The program has been broadened for 2003: New Practices is not so focused on technology solutions. Flexible learning is not just based around technology. The world has changed a lot. Four-five years ago the online learning world believed that online learning would be the next big thing. There is a maturing of thinking now. Now it is a tool to assist the teacher/trainer in delivery. We need to broaden the concept of flexible learning and move away from technology solutions.

Another member of the Committee felt that the 2002 program has raised some issues that the 2003 program will need to address:

In essence the program is being conducted again. The collaboration aspect needs to be looked at. The new ideas from the 2002 projects are still being looked at. The national project management has done a wonderful job, but within the six individual projects, often there was a bright person leading it, but you need a business manager as well. We probably should have been focusing on the protection of IP earlier: we cannot promote the black box till it is sorted out; the patent application process is slow.

Four of the respondents commented on the need to include a technical adviser on the 2003 selection committee:

The selection committee needs a techno. We need to use the process of shortlisting and interviewing and mentoring the proposers.

The selection committee needs to have a range of people. There needs to be someone on it with great technical skills. I was very wary of one of the 2002 projects that was selected, as the language sounded dodgy: it sounded as though they were fudging it. There is a big gap between a project getting funded and delivering the product they promised. Is there some better selection process, e.g. a short list and interviews? The Steering Committee needs not just those up with flexible learning: it needs a broad range of skills, which it didn't have in 2002.

I would change the selection process: the national project team could have done an initial analysis of the proposals before the selection committee met. The skill mix on the selection committee was not quite right. The timeline for selection was tight. WA might benefit from this advice.

Several respondents noted the need to liaise with the States and Territories and to find out what other innovative projects are being conducted:

The selection panel needs to make changes in 2003. We need greater advice from around the sector on the proposals on the question "Are these innovative?". I don't know the

answer most times. Other FLAG members may not be able to help.

Before we made the decision in 2002 there needed to be more of a focusing of the Group on how we were to make the selection. I didn't know about things that were happening elsewhere. It was a big ask to know what was happening elsewhere. And the selection was made all the more difficult because of the word innovation.

We need to let the key people in each State know what projects are being proposed.

The interviews strongly underline the need to modify the composition of the selection committee and the selection processes.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that, if a similar program is conducted in future, the selection committee include a technical adviser and attempt the complex task of finding out what other innovative activities are being conducted in the sector.

### **What are the best ways to obtain a return on the investment in the 2002 program?**

Two Steering Committee member believed that marketing will be a key to gaining a return on the investment:

It is a promotion exercise now. We need to get the developers to be part of it. They know their product better than we do. They have excitement about their product. We need to maximize the good news story.

We can learn from the evaluation; we can learn from what we saw of the projects; we can see learning as spread across the whole program. We can gain an ROI through promotion.

One of the Steering Committee members dissected a number of the challenging marketing issues for 2003:

We need to use the products to drive flexible learning in RTOs. But three of the products give us marketing issues. I am not sure about the market for adaptive learning objects. With the black box we need to get the patent issue sorted out. I suggest we hand this issue over to someone else. I am not sure what marketing the assessment generator means: at the RTO level, we could work out links to the NTIS, so we are not duplicating it, but this hasn't been worked out yet; at the system level, which is probably the right level, I think five of the systems including NT, ACT and Tasmania could justify the expense; and as a national resource, we need to move it out of WestOne. So there are marketing issues and we have to get answers to questions about what collaboration might work best at RTO level. There is a crying need for someone to start looking at databases in VET – the Resource Generator, the NTIS and AShareNet, regarding access to resources. It doesn't work at the moment. My teachers say they get lost when they look for resources. How do you make it easy and accessible?

Another committee member believed that the products automatically are made available for free from the AFL Framework website:

The AFL's policy is to make the products free via the website. It is critical that the SA and WA team have a dialogue about this matter.

One interviewee suggested that the emphasis be placed on promoting the processes used in the 2002 projects:

The products are OK, but it is the processes used to develop the products that might be of more value. Even with the adaptive learning objects, if the project manager could clearly write up the problems he faced, there would be value. The assessment generator is a prototype and documentation is really important.

Please comment on any other related issues you wish to raise.

A member of the Steering Committee was concerned about how to build on the experience of the 2002 project team:

One issue is my respect for the 2002 national project team and how can we build on their experience. From an AFL perspective, the experience of the project team is very valuable.

A number of interviewees saw ongoing challenges for the management of the program:

Communication and leadership are big issues. How do we take the program forward?

The products raise some issues, e.g. copyright. We need to pursue the commercialisation issue with ANTA and WestOne. The AFL secretariat can look at the product maintenance issue.

There is a tension for the selection committee between identifying innovation not done before and identifying innovation that might influence the system.

Another committee member raised concerns about where innovation in flexible learning fits with other components of the national training system:

I query the connectedness of the program to the National Training Framework. It is a little bit tenuous at the moment. From now on each State and Territory needs to put an innovation statement into their Annual Plan. We need to know whether these projects fit those plans.

I am concerned that flexible learning could be seen as the only place supporting innovation. It is a criticism of the entire sector that there is not overt support for innovation, beyond lip service.

## **Conclusion**

This evaluation of stakeholders indicates that the program achieved its objective of fostering innovation within the Australian VET sector, in some pockets of VET, particularly with some practitioners associated with the AFL Framework, but that more innovation can be fostered in 2003, leveraging off the 2002 products. The evaluation also shows that the 2002 program did establish relationships between the projects and some VET sector customers and providers, but that more can be done in 2003 to engage with practitioners who might use the products.

The 2002 program identified both successes and ongoing challenges for the Steering Committee.

## Appendix 1: Key findings from the two formative reports

The major findings and the twenty one recommendations from the feedback report of 27 July 2002 and the interim report of 2 December 2002 are set out below.

### Feedback report, 27 July 2002

The first evaluative report of 27 July 2002 covered the start-up and initial phases of the program.

#### Major findings

This report shows that the inaugural Flexible Learning Innovative program was extraordinarily well received by the VET community, resulting in 87 submissions. However, this popularity suggests that the program will come under considerable scrutiny, not least by the 81 proposers not funded.

Although the Project Management Team has worked tirelessly to support the program, the following report shows that many aspects of this program can be reconsidered if it is repeated in 2003, including the tendering and selection process. The main outstanding issue is the need for a rigorous and thorough discussion in FLAG about the concept of innovation and FLAG's expectations of this program.

#### Recommendations

Re: initial promotion

1. It is recommended that, in order to streamline promotional activities in 2003, the Project Management Team contact a selection of the 2002 applicants to find out how they found out about the program.
2. It is recommended that, in future, the newspaper advertisement include the maximum funding available for each project and the criterion that applicants need to have an RTO partner.
3. It is recommended that, for 2002, the Project Management Team emphasise that the program is operating for the first time and findings from this pilot phase will influence the framing of the 2003 program.

Re: tender process

4. It is recommended that, in 2003, the program website house examples of effective written applications.

Re: application guidelines and application form

5. It is recommended that 2003 application guidelines contain examples of the categories of submissions from 2002.
6. It is recommended that the guidelines refer to access and equity issues.
7. It is recommended that the program's public website contain a rich discussion of the concept of innovation and its importance to VET organisations and VET practitioners.
8. It is recommended that the application form be revised, to withdraw unnecessarily difficult questions.
9. It is recommended that the Steering Committee and Project Management Team develop advice for non-RTOs on issues of intellectual property and copyright that could assist non-RTOs involved in future submissions.

Re: selection process

10. It is recommended that in 2003 follow-up phone calls or interviews be conducted with short-listed candidates, as required, to obtain all necessary information for making a selection.

Re: start-up workshop

11. It is recommended that any similar start-up workshop provides more time for the participants from the funding to interact and share their plans.

12. It is recommended that the three members of the Project Management Team reconsider their earlier decision that all three act as mentors to the funded projects and, instead, one of the three withdraw as a mentor and oversee contractual arrangements.

13. It is recommended that in future start-up workshops the innovators, not just the funded project's project manager, be invited to attend.

14. It is recommended that in future start-up workshops the participation of representatives of other FLAG programs be restricted to those programs that overlap most with the Flexible Learning Innovations program.

15. It is recommended that the mentors connect not just with the project managers but with the innovators in each funded project team.

Re: appropriateness of the program

16. It is recommended that the wording of the desired outcomes for 2003 be recast, addressing the issues raised in Table 1.

17. It is recommended that the wording of the desired outcomes for 2003 be recast, to include ways that the successful achievement of outcomes will be measured and recognised.

18. It is recommended that the program's objectives be reviewed, to include specific comments about target groups.

19. It is recommended that the relationship between the program, FLAG projects and the implementation of the National Training Framework be addressed in public program documentation.

## **Interim report, 2 December 2002**

This second, formative evaluation report was in response to the evaluator's responsibility to conduct a participative evaluation of the Flexible Learning Innovations program. This interim report covered the middle and later phases of the program, during which time the six funded project teams developed their innovative products

### **Major findings**

This interim report on the Flexible Learning Innovative program covered the period from August-December 2002 and focused on the processes and practices used by the national Project Management Team to monitor and support the six project teams.

Summary points were as follows:

- ? extensive mentoring services were provided by the national Project Management Team and were valued by the six project management teams;
- ? other support services offered by the national Project Management Team included visits to project sites, email, website and teleconferences, with visits judged the most effective strategy;

- ? of the promotional activities undertaken by the Project Management Team, the presentations by the project managers to their State audiences were the most effective;
- ? the use of a workbased learning methodology enabled the members of some project teams to improve their own learning as well as to deliver an enhanced product;
- ? the product development aspect of the Innovation Program could be improved by employing some of the milestones and reporting processes used in Toolbox projects;
- ? the national Project Management Team provided a thoroughly professional service through to the end of the program.

## **Recommendations**

Re mentoring:

20. It is recommended that, in future, at least one member of the national Project Management Team not be a mentor to individual project teams, as one member of the national Project Management Team may need to supervise the project teams' compliance with contractual requirements.

Re the use of workbased learning methodology and product development strategies:

21. It is recommended that, in future, the program guidelines make very clear whether the program is about modelling a process for being innovative, or producing a product or both.

*It is recommended that, if the program is repeated in future, the product development milestones and processes used by the Toolbox project be used, where appropriate.*

## Appendix 2: Research methods

In accordance with the Evaluation Brief, the major focus of the summative evaluation is identify whether the Flexible Learning innovations objectives were achieved and to make recommendations for the future. The evaluation also seeks to establish the relationship between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers.

In evaluating effectiveness of the program, the following actions were undertaken:

- ? measuring the factors affecting the achievement of objectives;
- ? establishing cause-effect interpretations as to whether the outcomes were caused by the program or by external factors;
- ? identifying whether there are unanticipated outcomes which are contributing to the achievement of objectives or impacting negatively on clients.

The set of summative evaluation methods included:

1. Use of a three-part survey tool, distributed to the six project managers on 28 November 2002.
2. Observations of final presentations in Melbourne on 5 December, 2002.
3. Discussions with the Project Management Team, in December 2002, about outcomes, based around this Feedback Report.
4. Interviews with a sample of five members of the Steering Committee, after 5 December 2002.
5. Interviews with a sample of five VET providers and customers who have seen demonstrations of one or more of the products developed in 2002.
6. Review of the final reports of the six project teams, due on 20 December.

## **Appendix 3: Names of interviewees**

### **Members of the Steering Committee**

Graeme Brownfield, ETTE, VIC (check)

Julie Ahern, FLAG, VIC

Peter Le Cornu, CIT, ACT

Nic Pearl, ANTA, QLD

Melanie Sorensen, WestOne, WA

### **VET providers and customers who have seen demonstrations of a product or products from this project**

Brian Gepp, Douglas Mawson Institute of Technology, SA

Helen Houston, Institute of TAFE Tasmania

Gordon Dobson, TAFE Queensland Online, QLD (check)

Robin Wilden, Douglas Mawson Institute of Technology, SA

Simon Stokes, Open Training and Education Network (OTEN), NSW

### **Project Managers of Innovation Projects**

Arthur D'Aprano, ScreenArt

Denise Morgan, Wide Bay Institute of TAFE, QLD

Gerard Marcus, Holmesglen Institute of TAFE

Jeff Stokes, Southern Sydney Institute of TAFE

Roger Parry, Douglas Mawson Institute of Technology, SA

Tony Mulligan, WestOne, WA

### **National Project Management Team**

Carol Hampton, Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE, SA

Leura Cathcart, TAFE Queensland On-line, QLD

Ros Gill, Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE, SA

## **Appendix 4: Interview questions**

### **Interview questions for a sample of five members of the Steering Committee**

1. Which innovative aspects of the six 2002 projects do you most value?
2. To what extent do you believe this program has fostered or will foster innovation within the Australian VET sector?
3. In what ways has the program established relationships between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers?
4. In what ways could relationships between the projects and the VET sector customers and providers be enhanced in the next twelve months?
5. What unanticipated outcomes have emerged from the 2002 national program - either positive or negative outcomes?
6. What changes would you make to this program if it was conducted again and why?
7. What are the best ways to obtain a return on the investment in the 2002 program?
8. Please comment on any other related issues you wish to raise.

### **Interview questions for a sample of five VET providers and customers who have seen demonstrations of a product or products from this program**

1. How did you become aware of the program and its products?
2. Which innovative aspects of the six 2002 projects do you most value?
3. To what extent do you believe this program has fostered or will foster innovation within the Australian VET sector?
4. How well, do you think, has the program established relationships between the projects and VET sector customers and providers like yourself?
5. In what ways could relationships between the programs' products and the VET sector customers and providers be enhanced in the next twelve months?

### **Interview questions for Project Director, Project Manager and Project Consultant between, November – December 2002**

1. Please describe the types and amount of mentoring and other guidance and support services provided to each of the six project teams.
2. How effective was the NetWorking 2002 discussion?
3. How effective was the November teleconference?
4. How effective was the Project Managers' website?

5. How effectively did each of the Project Teams use workbased learning?
6. How valuable were the public presentations in each State?
7. To what extent are the emerging products innovative and customer-focused?
8. How have you sought to gain 'buy-in' and awareness of the AFL Framework?
9. How have you sought to gain greater participation of VET personnel in using the emerging products?
10. What would you do differently if you managed this program again?

**Interview questions for the six Project Team Managers, regarding (1) support processes provided by the national Project Management Team and (2) outputs**

1. Please comment on the types and amount of mentoring and other guidance and support services provided by the Project Management Team.
2. How useful was the NetWorking 2002 discussion?
3. How useful was the November teleconference?
4. How useful was the Program website?
5. How useful was workbased learning?
6. How valuable was your public presentation in your State?
7. To what extent do you believe your product is innovative?
8. To what extent do you believe your product is customer-focused?
9. To what extent have you and/or other VET parties sought to gain 'buy-in' of potential VET users of your product?

NB: Responses to questions 1-6 were covered in the Interim Report of 2 December 2002.

Responses to questions 7-9 are covered in this final report.

## **Acknowledgements**

This evaluation was undertaken by John Mitchell & Associates

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