

From little acorns ...

An Evaluation of the Knowledge Tree – an e-journal of flexible learning in VET

March 2003

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



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1. BACKGROUND

1.1. The Flexible Learning Leaders Program

The Flexible Learning Leaders program is one of the professional development projects within the Australian Flexible Learning Framework that supports the goal area Creative Capable People. It aims to develop a nationwide group of people able to lead Australian VET in flexible learning pedagogy. The project provides development opportunities for VET managers, leaders or champions in order to increase their effectiveness in implementing flexible learning.

There have been 93 Flexible Learning Leaders (FLLs) over the period 2000 to 2002. In 2002 the Flexible Learning Fellowships program was merged with the Flexible Learning Leaders program, and an alumni – the Wollemi Ringleaders was created.

There is an expectation that the FLLs will share their experiences with others and contribute to the expansion of flexible learning capability in VET at a state and national level beyond their formal program. The Flexible Learning Leaders program's Steering Committee and the Leaders recognise knowledge management as a key focus of the program. Evaluation reports of the FLL program from 2001 and 2002 also emphasise the importance of developing tools and resources which will enable the FLLs to share, store, manage and promote the knowledge, skills and insights that have been developed through the program and in the years following it.

1.2. The Knowledge Tree

The Knowledge Tree is one of the key resources developed through the Flexible Learning Leaders program to provide Leaders and Fellows (i.e. the Wollemi Ringleaders) with a means of sharing findings and experiences on flexible learning issues in VET.

The genesis of the Knowledge Tree was in a concern of the 2000 FLLs that while they were breaking new ground they were not publishing and sharing this information with the broader flexible learning community in VET. Research from the University of Wollongong had also underlined the lack of publishing opportunities for flexible learning in Australian VET.

Following a formal tender process, Elearn.WA was contracted in May 2002 to undertake the Knowledge Tree project. The project encompassed development of the Knowledge Tree site, establishment of an editorial panel, marketing and promotion of the site to 2000, 2001 and 2002 Leaders and publication of two editions of the e-journal – in August and December. The August edition was largely about getting the format and structure of the journal right and providing a strong foundation for further editions.

An editorial panel was established with Jo Murray as editor. Representatives of each state and territory contribute to the peer review and critique sections of the journal and are responsible for preparation of news 'from the branches'.

The core objectives of the Knowledge Tree, as described in the editorial to the first edition, include:

- providing a platform for sharing new ideas in flexible learning and leadership
- keeping learning leaders and practitioners up to date
- promoting the practice of flexible learning and leadership
- facilitating flexible learning leader networking on a national and international basis.

The Knowledge Tree was formally launched with the Wollemi Ringleaders at the FLL sharing workshop in Adelaide in October 2002 and was promoted at the Networking 2002 conference. It is available through the Flexible Learning Leaders website.

1.3. Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the current and potential use of the Knowledge Tree as a mechanism for Flexible Learning Leaders to promote and share professional research and experiences on flexible learning issues. The evaluation addresses:

- whether the Knowledge Tree is being used by Flexible Learning Leaders and other VET practitioners
- the type of use and Leaders' impressions of the site as an effective platform for sharing ideas and experiences
- opportunities for enhancement of the Knowledge Tree and suggestions of alternative models and approaches to maximise engagement and sharing of ideas.

In undertaking this evaluation I & J Management Services reviewed the Knowledge Tree site and background project documentation and interviewed representatives of the Knowledge Tree editorial and project team, the Flexible Learning Leaders Project Manager and a sample of Flexible Learning Leaders and Fellows.

Attempts were made to obtain statistics from the Knowledge Tree site to indicate the number of users and hits on particular pages. However, this information is currently not available for technical reasons. It is recommended that steps be taken to ensure that such information is available for monitoring future editions of the Knowledge Tree.

2. USE OF THE KNOWLEDGE TREE

Evaluation interviews with the Flexible Learning Leaders and Fellows endeavoured to establish:

- whether and to what extent they have used the journal
- the factors that limit their current use of the journal
- what use they think they will make of the journal in the future.

Those who had not used the Knowledge Tree were asked the reasons for this and what would encourage them to use it in the future.

Scheduling of the interviews prompted a number of Leaders and Fellows to go back and have another look at the journal so they could make more informed comments on its content and design. Several others noted that the interview itself gave them a push to go and have a further look.

2.1. Current use

Twelve of the people interviewed had visited the Knowledge Tree on at least four occasions and had read some of its content in depth. However, around half had skimmed the material, briefly read some articles and noted items of interest that they might return to in the future. As one Leader noted, this use of the Knowledge Tree is consistent with the way people use journals.

“We need to think about how people use journals in general. You get them, flip through them, note what is there and go back to it when it becomes relevant. For this reason most journals have a catalogue or index – and this will be important for the Knowledge Tree.”

Among the Leaders and Fellows there is clear recognition of the effort that has been put into developing the journal and a feeling that ‘we should be using it more’. Most believed that they would make more use of the journal in the future as it builds up a base of information.

“I found a good article there. I intend to go back and look at it later in more depth.”

2.2. Factors that limit use

A number of factors were identified by Leaders as limiting their use to date of the Knowledge Tree.

Time

The biggest factor mentioned as limiting use of the Knowledge Tree is people being pushed for time. The majority said they would use the journal given the opportunity.

“It is rare beast that has time to go grazing. You have to focus on what is on your desk.”

“The first two editions of the journal came out at a busy time of the year. I will sit down later and enjoy them.”

However, most noted that in the end devotion of time to this form of personal research and development came down to priorities.

“If I needed it overwhelmingly - I would use it.”

“People keep blaming time constraints, but how true is this? If it is really useful we will make time.”

A small number of Leaders said they would not continue to use the Knowledge Tree unless it was more 'in their face'. They emphasised that they do not have the time to go and search for the Knowledge Tree on the Internet.

“They don't use push technology – it doesn't come to you – there is no mechanism by which it goes out and brings you in. We must put it up in front of people.”

Their preference would be for an email alerting Leaders (and other 'subscribers') to new editions of the Knowledge Tree, summarizing the content and providing a hot link to the site, thereby making it easier to access. Some further suggestions of how the Knowledge Tree could be made more usable for those facing tight time constraints are discussed in Section 6 of this report.

Relevance to core role

Several users noted that to get on their 'radar screen' the Knowledge Tree would need to actively support them in carrying out their core responsibilities as 'otherwise it tends to fall to bottom of my list.' Ensuring this level of relevance to all users is a particular challenge for the Knowledge Tree when consideration is given to the diverse range of roles the Leaders and Fellows occupy and the different sectors of VET from which they come. The people interviewed as part of this evaluation came from the TAFE, ACE, industry, government and private sectors and spanned positions as lecturers and teachers, managers (of units involved in flexible learning, ICT and online delivery, HR and organisational development), directors, deans and research officers.

While there is a shared interest in flexible learning, Leaders also have specific fields of interest (e.g. application of technology, learning pedagogy, organisational change and development, change management, etc.) that set them apart.

Promotion

There was a feeling among those interviewed that the Knowledge Tree had not been promoted as extensively as it should have been, and a few questioned how new users would find out about the Knowledge Tree. It was recognised that this was probably due to limited resources for marketing. A promotional campaign was seen as essential for increasing use in the future.

Most users found out about the Knowledge Tree at its formal launch in Adelaide or through the NET*Working 2002 conference. A smaller number were prompted to use it when an item from the journal was referred to in the Wollemi Ringleaders email discussion group.

The interviews highlighted that a small number of people are still confused about the distinction between the Knowledge Tree, the Flexible Learning Leaders' site and the email and online discussion groups held through LearnScope. Some could not recall having heard the name Knowledge Tree before and others commented that the use of both terms Knowledge Tree and Knowledge Pool added to their confusion. However, as it becomes more widely known, the Knowledge Tree is starting to attract promotion from external sources, such as TAFE Frontiers, and this will partly overcome this problem.

Competing sources of information

About half of the Leaders and Fellows already have other preferred sites for accessing information on flexible learning.

“The Knowledge Tree is competing with other flexible learning web sites and information. We are suffering information overload.”

They are looking to the Knowledge Tree for something distinct such as commentary, trends, updates on what people have found in their research and continuing contacts with the flexible learning

community. They felt that there is a need to articulate more clearly what niche the Knowledge Tree is occupying and what added value it provides.

Some users said that the Knowledge Tree could provide a useful means for filtering key information about flexible learning and provide a portal through which other sites could be accessed, thereby helping to reduce the information overload.

Several mentioned Stephen Downes' regular email as an important way of linking to flexible learning information and to topical articles. They liked the way he presented this information via an email with hot links to sites and organised by topic of interest and wondered whether the Knowledge Tree could do something similar.

2.3. Non users

Ten of the people interviewed had not used the Knowledge Tree at all. Three of these were from the TAFE sector while the others spanned industry, state training authorities, government and the private sector. The reasons for Leaders not using the Knowledge Tree included:

- they are already accessing other e-journals on a regular basis and find the Knowledge Tree duplicates what they are already getting
- lack of relevance to their areas of interest (e.g. 'not tackling flexible learning issues outside the online issues')
- the Leader moving into a new role that has a focus outside flexible learning
- they have access to other forums which provide a way of keeping in contact with the Leaders (e.g. virtual learning community)
- a feeling that the Leaders and Fellows programs are quite different (i.e. 'the Leaders program is much more about community than the Fellows program and the Knowledge Tree has less to say to us')
- lack of time – this was a key issue for people in the private sector who felt that they had to be careful regarding how much time they spent on their own personal development
- they were not aware of its existence.

All but two of this group see themselves as potential users of the Knowledge Tree and would need the following things to happen to prompt their use:

- make it more accessible and provide hardcopy and email to alert people
- provide greater academic rigour
- improve the relevance of the information.

2.4. Promoting use by a broader audience

Most of the people interviewed emphasised the importance of the Knowledge Tree gaining a broader audience within the VET community.

"If the Knowledge Tree is to get credibility it needs a broader audience not just a small group of users."

"One of my concerns is that we don't make ourselves an exclusive club – we may find we are not taking other people with us. There is a need to share the knowledge of what we are doing more broadly."

A small number of the Leaders said that they knew of people in their institution who were already using the Knowledge Tree and that this had occurred without prompting from them.

The Leaders and Fellows feel that they should be playing a role in promoting the Knowledge Tree to other members of the flexible learning community. This has already come about on a small scale but people said they hoped to do more of it in the future.

A few Leaders and Fellows had suggested to colleagues new to flexible learning that they have a look at the Knowledge Tree. They saw the articles, discussion of current research and experience of implementation of flexible learning as especially useful for this group. One Leader uses the Knowledge Tree to provide information to her network and finds it particularly useful in responding to issues of concern. However, a number of people commented that they found it hard to send on information from the Knowledge Tree to those who might be interested.

“I now tend to send them to the original report rather than the Knowledge Tree material.”

3. BENEFITS

During the interviews respondents were asked to outline the benefits from the Knowledge Tree for themselves and more broadly for the alumni.

3.1. Networks

Over half of the current users see the Knowledge Tree as particularly important for maintaining the community of Leaders and Fellows.

“Networking is a prime thing. The Knowledge Tree creates awareness of what your peers are doing.”

The point was made that while each year of the Leaders program has built trust and collaboration within its particular cohort, the journal provides an important means for promoting this across the alumni as a whole. The Knowledge Tree was seen as potentially a critical way of inducting Leaders from each new year into the alumni.

The Knowledge Tree was regarded as providing essential links to the alumni for people who are working in more isolated areas. Several commented that it was a big plus to have the journal as it prevented them feeling cut off. For a small number of people the Knowledge Tree has helped them broaden their flexible learning networks outside the alumni. A Knowledge Tree editor in one state noted that:

“The opportunity to write the state reports was fantastic. You go out beyond your boundaries and make new connections. It provides a learning opportunity.”

A smaller number of users said they had other means to link to the alumni and did not see this as an essential function of the Knowledge Tree.

3.2. Leading edge information and thinking

The Knowledge Tree was seen by most users as providing an important store of leading edge information – information from people who are working in flexible learning and who have experimented with different approaches and tools.

“A body of knowledge is developing and I will know where to go to access it.”

A number of people said that the Knowledge Tree would become an important part of their professional development. Others had already made direct use of material from the Knowledge Tree in preparing presentations. One person noted that it gave them the material they needed and contacts that could provide further assistance.

The journal format is seen as useful as people are able to go back and revisit articles and other information.

“The advantage of it being a journal is that you have the opportunity to access it when you want to.”

Information on the Knowledge Tree was valued highly for providing:

- current Australian research which is a bit more up-to-date than other sources
- a different perspectives on things

- great and innovative ideas
- a resource to take information from and disseminate out.

The information on the Knowledge Tree was seen as more credible than some other sources as the people providing the information were well known to the group

“It is a real benefit that you know the people contributing to the journal and you can follow up with them on particular issues. You know and respect their views.”

“People you know put the Knowledge Tree together and you are interested in what they have to say.”

3.3. Credibility and pride

The evaluation interviews identified many benefits to the wider alumni in having the journal. By publishing information on what they are doing the Knowledge Tree was seen as promoting the Leaders and Fellows as a credible group and giving them an identity.

“The importance of having a journal is that it says we are serious, we are grappling with the issues.”

“I am excited about it. We didn’t have a journal that we could report in before. This has put Australia on the map.”

“Before we felt we were the poor relation of the higher education sector. This has given esteem to the VET sector.”

For some there was a sense of personal pride in what had been achieved.

“Being associated with the Knowledge Tree provides kudos. We will always be able to say ‘this is what we did’ and be proud of it. It is of high value to be recognized by your peers.”

3.4. An opportunity to share knowledge

The Knowledge Tree was also seen as a convenient way to polish an article and put it up for others to read.

“The Knowledge Tree provides a more immediate place to publish and discuss issues with a wider audience. The fact it is electronic helps it to be more immediate.”

“It provides an opportunity for exposing your projects. It is not as daunting as presenting at a conference and it helps you develop a profile with your peers.”

4. JOURNAL CONTENT

Users were asked about the relevance to them of the content of the Knowledge Tree, what they thought of the overall quality and which sections of the journal they found the most useful.

4.1. Relevance

The majority of users are looking for practical information and are positive about what they have found in the Knowledge Tree.

“The Knowledge Tree has a good focus on the practical and we should keep this. It is in touch with the grass roots implementation issues.”

“The Knowledge Tree is about people at the coalface, people who have been there done that, words of wisdom to blaze the trail.”

“The focus is practical, hands on, real experience. This is what people want to hear about.”

“It’s good to know what people are trying and how it is working. This is especially important for people in small RTOs.”

Users identified a number of specific factors that made the Knowledge Tree relevant to them, including the fact that it provides a sense of what the current issues are by linking in to the critical debates in VET. It is also seen as covering a range of issues from the ‘nitty gritty’ to the big picture (e.g. managerial issues, leading edge technology, research) and providing a forum for different views.

While all users had found something of relevance within the Knowledge Tree, their assessment of how relevant the overall journal was tended to depend on the sector they came from and the focus of their work.

“What situation people find themselves in after the Leaders program impacts on how they use the journal and what they want from it. The role they are in may stimulate continued networking and interest in flexible learning. For others flexible learning may still be their passion but is not their core business.”

Those from the private sector and ACE were less likely to find the Knowledge Tree content relevant to them, and this was also true of people who had more of an academic bent or those heavily involved in research. Several of these users stressed that the Knowledge Tree might not be the right place to focus on their specific interest.

4.2. Quality

Views varied on the quality of the Knowledge Tree content. The majority of users were happy with the quality and recognised that they were looking at early editions of the Knowledge Tree and these had been prepared to tight deadlines. It was felt that quality of the material would improve overtime.

“A lot of effort has gone into producing it, and it is a quality tool.”

Most thought the right amount of detail was provided, however a small number would like summaries with the capacity to drill down to detail.

Some users felt that at this stage the content is a bit rudimentary and gives the appearance of ‘a first run through’. A few were looking for greater academic rigour. It was suggested that quality could be lifted if the editorial team provided a template and standard format.

4.3. Views on the key sections of the journal

People were asked to comment on the various sections of the journal and what they thought works well and areas that do not work as well.

Peer reviewed articles

The articles were considered to be of good quality. The fact that practitioners review the articles makes it more useful.

“Peer review is helpful, especially given that you know the people and respect their views.”

One user noted that there is a lot of scope for further developing this section. Another commented that they found papers here that they would not have got elsewhere.

Critique

This was seen as a section that added significant value to the user. It was seen as important for providing views on the resources and tools that people have used in flexible learning and their opinions of them and assessing if ‘this is the way to go’. One person criticised the currency of the reports critiqued, noting that these had already been published elsewhere.

Interviews

While people often enjoyed these, the structure of the interviews was criticised. It was felt that they could do with tighter editing, more careful scripting and a better sense of what message are they trying to communicate.

2002 Conferences

Many users thought it was good to have this information accessible as it helped them to identify where to go to get best value for their professional development dollar, while others said they could get more comprehensive information elsewhere (e.g. EdNA, ANTA).

Digital storytelling

This section attracted strong and conflicting views, with about half the users finding it useful and interesting and the other half regarding it as too verbose.

The first group saw digital storytelling as a different way of producing information that encourages people to step outside their comfort zone. One noted that the information in this section will be particularly helpful for FLLs in 2003 as they will be able to look at some of the end results of the Leaders program.

“Providing a profile of Leaders and what they are doing three years down the track helps to promote the practice of flexible learning. It also gives people an idea of what career they may pursue.”

But there were as many who did not like this style. These tended to be people who saw themselves as outcomes focused and not having the time to spend on material that did not directly help them do their job.

“I won’t use it to just keep in contact. I need a real reason to use it.”

“This sort of material belongs somewhere else, not in a journal.”

A number of people commented that the varying view on the digital storytelling section reflects that Leaders have distinct learning styles and that the Knowledge Tree is striving to cater for these.

From the branches

More than half the users found this section useful and providing an opportunity to look outside their own states to see what is happening and how people are tackling e-learning elsewhere.

Where are they now?

As with the digital storytelling, about half of the users found this interesting and enjoyed looking at it, while the other half said they would not use it.

5. DESIGN AND STRUCTURE

Users were asked if they found the journal easy to access and use, and what they thought of the design and style and the use of different media to deliver information.

5.1. Accessibility

For some users the entry point to the Knowledge Tree is not displayed prominently enough on the Flexible Learning Leaders site and they had not realised this was an easy way to access the journal. Other users said it was not clear that they could get to each edition of the journal by clicking on the links under the photo of the alumni.

About one third of the users commented on the need to have clearer information on the opening pages of the Knowledge Tree – telling users what the journal is about and how it works. They would like this clearly linked to an index page that gives titles of articles and other information. It was felt that the current approach of sending users to a ‘randomly’ chosen page was confusing.

One user suggested that the branches of the tree could be used as a way of linking users to the key components of the journal (e.g. one branch may represent ‘peer reviewed’ articles).

A small number of users commented that if the journal is for the alumni then access through the FLL site is not appropriate and alumni should have their own site. This was seen as important for creating an identity for the alumni and bringing new groups in over the coming years. It was felt that the Knowledge Tree must not be allowed to meld into the Flexible Learning Leaders site.

Some users said they would like to have sections of the Knowledge Tree in hardcopy. They indicated that this would be convenient for looking at material outside the office and also noted that they get tired of reading computer screens all day and then at night too.

“It should be available in hard copy. People could then read it over a cup of tea.”

“The Knowledge Tree is great in the way it caters for learning preferences. This should be extended to providing it in hard copy.”

5.2. Usability

The majority of users found it easy to navigate around the Knowledge Tree but made a number of suggestions on how this could be further improved. They wanted it easier to:

- find key material through provision of an index or site map
- search for items (the search function was not seen as effective at this stage)
- move between articles, rather than having to hop back and forward to the main screen to access articles
- print out material.

5.3. Style and design

Many of those interviewed were very positive about the design of the journal and saw it as nice, clear and uncluttered.

“It is very well designed and innovative in the way it is put together. They have done a fantastic job.”

Many liked it because it makes good use of white space and thought the use of photos made the site more interesting. However, a handful of users commented that the style of the Knowledge Tree made it hard to distinguish it from other sites. A large number mentioned they did not like the scrolling on the right hand side of the front screen.

5.4. Use of different media

The Knowledge Tree was seen as pushing the boundaries in the use of audio and video materials and providing users with an alternative way of looking at things areas. This had provided an incentive for some to use the Knowledge Tree.

“The visuals are great. They make you feel like you are getting to know people and have an enormous impact.”

It was seen as important that the Leaders and Fellows make the best use of technology, as this is part of the business they are in. However, for some the quality of video screening was seen as an issue. It was stressed that more care must be taken with the compression ratio on streaming audio/video.

“It is a great idea to use the audio and video but the reception is too poor for most of us. I could hardly hear the sound clips. It may be the system I’m using but they should cater for the average user and the quality of system they are likely to be using.”

A handful of the Leaders were frustrated by the fact that their system was unable to play the video and audio clips (they assumed this was due to firewall problems). One person commented that this did not occur with other sites that provided these media.

6. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION IN 2003

A great majority of the Leaders and Fellows considered it important that the Knowledge Tree continue in 2003. They emphasised that it is early days for the journal but it is already starting to gather momentum and support. Initial evidence gathered through this evaluation also points to the Knowledge Tree as an effective tool for meeting the original goals set.

The work undertaken in producing the two editions of the Knowledge Tree in August and December 2002 provide a strong foundation for further editions of the journal in 2003. Many of the features of the journal which people are keen to maintain have been described above.

A number of issues were identified by the Leaders and Fellows as requiring consideration in setting directions for the Knowledge Tree in 2003.

6.1. Clarify the purpose and target audience

About a third of the Leaders and Fellows interviewed suggested that the time is now right for further critical discussion regarding the purpose and audience for the Knowledge Tree.

“We need to look again at what is the right niche for the Knowledge Tree. What distinguishes it from other information sources? We should rethink who the audience is and what they want from the journal.”

“We need to set some parameters around the Knowledge Tree. It is so hard to describe at the moment and this restricts me referring other people to it. We should think more clearly about what people will get from it and how we want to market it.”

It was felt that the alumni need to give specific consideration to defining the right balance of material in the Knowledge Tree across the practical, research and theoretical, and also across topics such as application of technology to flexible learning, flexible learning pedagogy, leading and facilitating critical results in organizations, and other issues.

The view was expressed that the Knowledge Tree should not be competing with refereed journals or duplicating information that can be obtained from other sources. The Knowledge Tree should be looking at how it can add value to and build on these other sources.

“It must provide something you cannot get elsewhere. There are some things it doesn’t need to do because there are other methods of achieving this.”

A number of people specifically highlighted the need to better integrate the various knowledge management tools available to the Leaders and Fellows including the Knowledge Tree, the Flexible Learning Leaders’ site and the discussion groups – and to be clear about the specific function of each of these. A few commented that they thought hosting of the discussion groups through the LearnScope site made things more confusing. Several people said that they would like to see direct links from the journal to the discussion forums.

One person felt strongly that the Knowledge Tree needed to be clear whether it is about advertising and promoting particular companies or products or if it aims to help flexible learning in the VET sector move on ... ‘because it can’t do both.’

Many stressed the importance of the Knowledge Tree gaining a broader audience within the VET community in 2003. As one person noted:

“If we are going to try and attract a broader audience for the Knowledge Tree then we need to go through a stage of evaluating it for new users. What will people who haven’t gone through the Leaders program want from it?”

6.2. Put greater effort into marketing

It was recognised that resources had not been available for a comprehensive marketing strategy for the Knowledge Tree in 2002 and that opportunities such as NET*Working 2002 and the Adelaide workshop had been used for promotional purposes. It was felt that if in 2003 a broader group of readers is to be captured greater effort should be given to marketing the journal. The marketing strategy will need to tie in with the work undertaken to review the purpose and target audience of the journal.

6.3. Ensure content meets users needs

About a half of the users interviewed felt that the Knowledge Tree should maintain its emphasis on practical implementation issues. That is, what kind of tools, structures and resources can be adopted to make flexible learning easier to develop.

“The Flexible Learning Leaders program provided an opportunity to digest a wide range of information. We no longer have this luxury. Our focus now is on coming up with the tools that make implementation easier.”

“We need to move from the idea to action. We need resources for the classroom, administration and for accountability.”

“We want more information at a granular level to develop our knowledge about resources that can work for us.”

“We need to look at very practical ways of improving things to get away from some of the hype and be aware of how much is happening in reality. We are still trying to make some of the basics work.”

“It’s not just stories of what people did but real ‘battle stories’ that occur in the application of things. We want to get the inside story.”

Other things that Leaders were looking for in 2003 included:

- flow-on articles that develop issues further and establish discussion threads
- case studies
- a focus on supporting teachers
- research and innovation
- education technology
- continuation of the storytelling technique to tell of people’s successes
- examination of new possibilities such as hyper stories that are more dynamic and provide animated imagery
- a focus on what skills are needed for getting things right
- a full list of the alumni and what their major research project is (‘this would make it easy to contact them’).

Those from an academic background or making a transition to higher education generally wanted to see more academic substance and more rigour. They felt that if what is being said is made more worthwhile then more people will use it.

It was seen as important that the Knowledge Tree pick up on topical issues in the VET sector. For example, one Leader would like more information about developing products for commercial clients and selling and marketing to this sector. Others would like to see what evaluation has been done on what students think of flexible learning.

6.4. Actively encourage more people to contribute

One of the biggest challenges facing the Knowledge Tree is encouraging more people to contribute. A significant amount of time in producing the first two editions has gone in to chasing up articles and other items. During the interviews the issue was explored of why it was difficult to get contributions to the Knowledge Tree and what would encourage more people to contribute.

It was noted that there is not as much emphasis on publishing in the VET sector as in the higher education sector, and that this is not rewarded in the same way. Some of the Leaders and Fellows said it is hard for them to get their institution to recognise publishing as a legitimate role for them. Many Leaders do see the Knowledge Tree as a credible place for publishing their own research and a large number of those interviewed saw themselves as future contributors. The things that would prompt them to do this include:

- being invited and encouraged by the editors to contribute (this has occurred with some Leaders)
- feeling that what they said would be taken seriously and have an impact, especially in gaining a voice with policy makers
- some sense of recognition for the contributor and their organization ('then your institution is more likely to see your contribution as legitimate')
- recognition at a national level of the contribution (e.g. 'best' paper awards)
- making it easy for people to contribute.

"If I thought I was communicating with key people, people who might listen to what I was saying and maybe take it into account, that would encourage me."

"If my institute were paid for my contribution then it would become a priority for them."

"Encourage contributors to look at things they are already doing, say for a conference, and if they are not starting from scratch it will not seem so onerous."

A small number of people said that they would be more likely to contribute articles to the Knowledge Tree if these were refereed. This was particularly important for those looking to make the move to academia. One Leader in a technical role indicated that they would like to contribute to the journal but wondered if their material would bore everyone. They said that they would put information up if people showed an interest in the area. Another person would like to contribute but was worried that their contribution may not be seen as good enough. Another Leader talked about encouraging a 'come and join us' approach, not just to read to journal but also to experience various aspects of publishing.

"Leaders may not have published in the past and it can be daunting. Training and confidence boosting is needed to support writing online. It would be a good idea to start small and encourage people to put up small snippets."

6.5. Make it easier for users to identify relevant material

A number of ways were identified for making it easier for users to find the information they want on the Knowledge Tree. These included providing a full index/catalogue, providing a brief email or newsletter with hot links to items and using push technology to alert users to material of specific relevance to them.

A small number of people would like to see the Knowledge Tree using email more extensively (e.g. as a way to deliver content) but many others did not like this idea as it would exacerbate their information overload.

Given that users have different preferences on how they access and receive information, it is seen as crucial that the Knowledge Tree make use of as many communication mechanisms as possible.

6.6. Increase frequency of production

Views varied on how often the Knowledge Tree should be published over the year, but people most nominated four times a year as a compromise between resource commitment and the need to retain currency and depth of information. Several people felt that if the Knowledge Tree came out less frequently than this people would soon forget it.

“Less than four and you don’t stay on top of things. More than four and you run the risk of losing quality.”

A smaller group thought that twice a year was ideal as the Knowledge Tree is a specialist area and ‘good issues will come up about every six months’. This was noted as emphasising relevance and avoiding the scramble to meet deadlines and preventing the journal becoming a ‘glorified newsletter’.

A couple of people suggested six editions a year, reflecting the nature of how quickly things are changing.

“If we don’t keep up-to-date it will become tired. It needs to be updated every two months.”

It was agreed that production of the Knowledge Tree should be timed to fit in with the schedule of the Leaders program. It was also seen as useful to tie marketing of the Knowledge Tree to key events such as the Networking*2003 conference.

6.7. Enhanced design and structure

One user suggested that it was important to avoid playing around too much with the design and layout of the Knowledge Tree, as ‘it will only annoy people if it changes’. While this is good advice a few small changes are needed as described in Section 5. In particular, a bit of a facelift is needed to ensure that the various modes of delivering information (including audio and video) function in the variety of technical environments in which they are delivered.

7. CONCLUSION

The Knowledge Tree has been generally well received by the 45 Leaders and Fellows interviewed as part of this evaluation. Twelve of these are 'in-depth' users and twenty three 'moderate to low' users who tend to browse the journal and read some material in greater detail. The remaining ten have not used the journal at all. Most of these people, including several of the current non-users, expect to make greater use of the Knowledge Tree in the future.

Given that there have only been two editions of the Knowledge Tree to date (in August and December 2002) and that it was only formally launched in October 2002, these figures are encouraging and suggest higher levels of use in the future.

"I would like to congratulate the Flexible Learning Leaders for getting this going. It is a way of having us continue sharing our leading work with people of similar interest."

There is strong appreciation of the opportunity the Knowledge Tree provides 'to drill back through the editions' as time can be found in busy schedules. Many benefits were identified for the KT including:

- developing and maintaining the alumni network
- providing leading edge information and thinking
- providing a convenient way to publish research
- promoting credibility and building pride of the alumni.

Most considered the journal an efficient way to meet the goals set for it. They did not believe there were viable alternative models.

Without prompting more than half the Leaders and Fellows commented on what a good job the key project personnel - Frank Bate (Elearn.WA) and Jo Murray (Pelion Consulting Pty Ltd) – had done in getting the journal up and going.

"I have great respect for Frank and Jo. They put a lot of work in and have the passion and drive for making it a success."

"Because of their association with Leaders they have been able to select relevant and quality material for the journal."

Not surprisingly then, the great majority of those interviewed want to continue production of the journal.

"It is important that funding continue. While things may have started slowly momentum is building. It will get better and better."

"This is an excellent initiative and I want to see it continue and grow. It is important not only for the Leaders and Fellows but the flexible learning community in general."

It was felt that the experience of producing and using the journal over the last ten months provides an important base for thinking carefully about future directions. In particular, the following tasks were identified for 2003:

- clarify the purpose and target audience
- put greater effort into marketing
- ensure content meets users needs
- actively encourage more people to contribute
- make it easier for users to identify relevant material

- increase frequency of production
- make small enhancements to the design and structure of the Knowledge Tree.

The Flexible Learning Leaders and Fellows look forward to participating in these tasks and working to ensure that the Knowledge Tree continues to be nurtured and given every chance to grow into a critical store of leading edge information and knowledge for flexible learning in VET.

APPENDIX A: PROJECT CONSULTATION

The following Flexible Learning Leaders and Fellows participated in telephone interviews as part of the evaluation of the Knowledge Tree. They include a cross-section of Leaders from different years, states and territories, and different VET sectors.

| Flexible Learning Leaders and Fellows consulted during the evaluation | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kerry Ashcroft ▪ Jennifer Batten ▪ Margaret Barron ▪ Frank Bate (Knowledge Tree Project Manager) ▪ Brad Beach ▪ John Blakeley ▪ Melanie Burke ▪ Leura Cathcart ▪ Bev Childs ▪ Julie Collareda ▪ Chrishna Dixon ▪ Sally Drummond ▪ Yvonne Ellis ▪ Megan Funston ▪ Keith Gear ▪ Martha Goldman ▪ Lyn Goodear ▪ Ken Gooding ▪ Jock Grady ▪ Margaret Granger ▪ Peter Heilbuth ▪ Donna Hensley ▪ Peter Higgs ▪ Jennifer Jackson | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kathy Kelly ▪ Jim Kesting ▪ Marlene Manto ▪ Carole McCulloch ▪ Elizabeth McPherson ▪ Barbara McPherson ▪ Melissa Mills ▪ Jo Murray (Knowledge Tree Editor) ▪ Claire O’Conor ▪ Allan Parsons ▪ Peta Pash ▪ Josie Rose ▪ John Smith ▪ Katrina Sommers ▪ Melanie Sorensen ▪ Nancy Stanelis ▪ Leonie Stanfield ▪ Ray Tuckey ▪ John Weatherley ▪ Greg Webb ▪ Leone Wheeler ▪ Kathy Whye |