

Australian *Flexible Learning* Framework

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

Debating the future of learning Exploring online learning in the culture of correctional services organisations

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Executive Summary

Correctional services organisations, public and private, invest heavily in the training of staff, especially in preparing recruits for work readiness. While vocational training in Australia over the past decade has developed new strategies to make training more accessible and more flexible for users, there has been little change in the training strategies in correctional services. Training in Australia has seen the introduction of national industry standards and qualifications, the diversifying of a competitive training market, and the re-legitimisation of workplace learning. In many ways, the reforms have brought training in corrections into a wider VET system, together with other industry-based training. However, the reforms in the VET system have brought little change to the methods of training in corrections to reflect the rhetoric of flexibility, accessibility and continuous learning. This is, in the main, because corrections, in common with many industry training cultures, has never moved very far from the workplace for the skills development of staff.

The introduction of online learning has the potential to challenge and to extend established training practices by providing greater access to corporate information and expectations, transparent training content and learning processes, and more reliable assessment and record keeping. The project identified general support for the advantages online learning provides in using available technology to overcome distance, provide immediate access to information, link individuals and whole organisations through digital communication, and employ database software to automatically generate reports and maintain records. These factors alone are seen to justify investing in online learning for many organisations in correctional services.

However, new technology brings the promise of more fundamental reforms in its capacity to sweep away the obstacles of the past. Often things have been done in the only way that they could be done. The research project looked at the factors, which are influencing decisions about adopting online learning, and it saw a potentially new way of managing organisational learning. Through the alignment of individual learning with organisational development, the potential in online learning takes on a new dimension. The relationship between training and organisational development requires a consistency of focus and commitment throughout the organisational culture. In a report on the role of workplace training, the authors observe: "Work and learning are inextricably interlinked, and shape each other in a dynamic inter-relationship: for example, when trainers structure and manipulate work processes to accommodate employee learning" (Harris et al 2000:vi). Concepts such as

'the learning organisation' propose interdependence between organisational and personal development, associated with the continuous construction of skills, knowledge and values in a collective and corporate context. The language of organisational culture change suggests a dialectic process between those directing change in practice and values and those undergoing change (Tennant, 2000: 54; Viljoen & Dann 2000: 496).

From the research documenting the experiences of institutional VET providers, the project confirmed the importance of four key requirements, which need to be addressed in any successful preparation for online learning. Essentially these define the commitment of the organisation to supporting and building the confidence of trainers and learners in their involvement with learning technology. This includes:

- specific professional development for trainers who are involved in online delivery in both design and facilitation skills;
- allocation of dedicated IT and training staff to support online learners so they can depend on rapid response to enquiries and help on technology problems;
- establishing policies and guidelines for online learning and for trainers, workplace supervisors and learners;
- establishing the roles and responsibilities of learners, trainers, workplace supervisors, managers and assessors.

The most obvious advantage that online learning has is its capacity to provide a structure to the learning that happens in the workplace. This is in contrast to classroom training, which can comment on, but cannot actively construct workplace practice. It is also different from routine work experience, which is unstructured and which may or may not result in positive learning and which has limited context in which to challenge existing practices and construct future practice. Through the action research projects, it has been attractive to speculate on how online learning might be directed at reforming workplace culture. Is it realistic to expect that online learning can build self-directed learners and thereby foster a strong sense of personal responsibility in staff; can it encourage staff to take more risks, experiment with different ways of working and develop new awareness from reflection on experiences; and can it create commitment to the inevitability that continuous improvement in practice requires continuous change? Or is online learning, as some more cynical participants observed, simply another use of training to resolve management's problems.

The project concluded that there is already a strong expectation in correctional organisations that online learning is on its way. Of the fifty-seven survey returns, forty-nine predicted that online learning would come 'in the longer term'. While there are many features of correctional organisations that will provide a good foundation for online learning, there are still significant obstacles, which will have to be addressed. Trainers and supervisors

identified the factors they believed are likely to influence both the corporate decision to introduce online learning and the potential for its acceptance and its effectiveness. At a broad level these factors include the attitude toward learning in the culture of the organisation, the attitude to change of practice and values, and the investment in technology. Other influential factors include investment cost, support resources, quality of learning, learner support, and technology. The personal issues of those involved in training included consideration of their roles and responsibilities, their professional development, the demands of course development and maintenance, and technology. Everyone was concerned about technology. The project tried to limit its involvement in matters of technology, with singular lack of success. It may help to first recognise that the shortfalls in technology were the most cited issue of concern throughout all the project activities.

Summary of conclusions

- There is a high level of support and enthusiasm for the introduction of online learning and for the advantages of accessible and more flexible provision of training for staff.
- The viability of online learning requires a commitment from organisations to invest in the technology needed to run the programs and on policies, which ensure appropriate access for learning and collaborative work agreements between specialists in training and IT.
- The current government strategies to promote and inform flexible learning in VET have limited appeal and influence in many industries, and especially in those industries which have no traditional relationship with public training provision.
- There is support for online learning developed within a training model, which integrates a continuum of structured and informal learning strategies and resources based on measures of learning effectiveness and corporate priorities.
- Online learning will redefine the roles and skills of training staff and will require investment in the development of existing training staff into new roles and new job descriptions.
- Training staff will benefit from encouragement to participate in wider VET networks promoting and supporting flexible learning models, and drawing on more advanced experiences and resources.
- The extension of structured training into work locations will require a formalisation of the roles of workplace supervisors in providing support to learners and in manipulating the work environment for the coordination of online learning activities with workplace experiences.
- Training resources will benefit from advocacy alliances and peer support networks of trainers in partnerships with allied industries.
- The development of online learning programs provides organisational decision makers with the opportunity to ensure that corporate standards

and expectations, and the culture needed to implement new work practices are clearly reflected in the design and content of the materials.

The development of online learning programs and materials is more cost effective for the industry and more feasible for medium to small correctional organisations when undertaken in collaboration across jurisdictions. Such an approach will require high-level agreement on copyright and intellectual property. The design of online learning programs should optimise the commonality of practice across services and allow ease of local customisation.

Recommendations

For Correctional organisations

If correctional organisations are to invest in online learning for staff development they will need to address the technical, environmental and cultural barriers that impede access and acceptance.

Technology

Correctional organisations must invest in information technology systems able to support and deliver interactive and multimedia programs. Operational staff need to have fair access to computers, printers, e-mail, the Internet, CD-ROM, sound and video and support systems comparable to that available to central office staff. The investment in online learning will be frustrated and counterproductive without the technology to support it.

Relationships

Correctional organisations need to seriously address the adversarial nature of the relationships between staff and management and between operational facilities and central office and focus attention on culture change management, the development of positive relationships of mutual benefit and trust and the development of a professional work culture.

Leadership

Correctional organisations need to recognise the change management process required to influence the culture of the correctional work environment and the importance of sponsoring leadership positions aimed at providing credibility, support and role modelling for colleagues in using diverse workplace learning and moving the workplace to a learning environment.

Policy

Correctional organisations need to develop corporate policy with two purposes; to engage staff in the formulation of principles and practice, and to provide a guide to ongoing practice through expressions of corporate objectives, commitment and resources.

Support

Correctional organisations need to support the new demands of online learning through:

- professional development of training staff,
- allocation of online study time in staff rosters,

- programs which encourage and acknowledge diversity and innovation in practice and in the learning environment,
- encouraging training staff to build their knowledge and confidence through participation in wider networks of VET professionals,
- defining the roles and responsibilities of supervisors, trainers and assessors in linking learning with the work environment, and
- recognising the outcomes of online learning in career progress.

Continuous improvement

Correctional organisation need to consider the benefits of promoting continuous learning by ensuring that all training includes a component which is available online and which is designed to provide underpinning knowledge, learning resources, preparation for learning, self assessment exercises, simulations and assessment reports. Online programs should be accessible for primary skills development and for continuous reference, refreshment and advancement of knowledge and practice. Learning strategies need to reflect the dynamic nature of organisational development and the relationship between on-going individual learning and service quality and improvement.

Collaboration

Correctional organisations need to consider the benefits of working collaboratively across jurisdictions to share the high cost of design and development of online learning and to optimise the cost effective demand for and use of resources. This can be achieved through:

- agreement on a common design platform,
- division of responsibilities for development,
- shared intellectual property,
- supporting close collaboration and sharing resources amongst RTOs, including work exchanges and cross jurisdictional professional development,
- recognition of the different needs and resources of jurisdictions,
- pooled resources for project management, coordination and resources development,
- industry-wide partnerships for funding contracts with national promotional programs.

For the Flexible Learning Framework

Networks

Flexible Learning initiatives for the promotion and implementation of online learning need to set targets and invest resources in the extension of learning technology and programs throughout industry, where the majority of vocational learning takes place. Industry RTOs need to be able to provide their learners with the same quality of accessible and flexible learning resources as those available through TAFE institutes. This can be achieved through:

- actively promoting and funding innovative leadership positions in key industries and in industry partnerships through dedicated programs which

take account of the specific conditions of workplace learning and the differences between workplace learning and public learning;

- establishing industry exemplars of online learning with resources for wider mentoring, case studies and role modelling;
- commissioning inexpensive and user-friendly online learning platforms and templates available for organisations whose RTO work is not their core business and who do not have dedicated experts in learning technology;
- dedicating resources and priorities to industries' need for professional development programs and for resources to address the limitations of technology systems, especially in promoting the new units on online learning in the Workplace Training and Assessment Training Package;
- providing incentives to promote collaborative partnerships between allied industries and industry market and supply chains to encourage cost effective development and supply of online learning programs and resources;
- providing incentives for the publicly funded experts in online learning to share their skills through the development of expert practitioners on industry;
- targeting industry RTOs in promotional programs and for conferences, showcasing and innovation awards;
- if toolbox development is to continue it should introduce criteria which reflects workplace learning conditions, industry determined needs, and the promotion of online learning design and maintenance skills in industry RTOs.

For Government Training Departments and Authorities

In developing policies and strategies to promote and expand flexible learning, consultation processes should ensure that there is a healthy representation from industry RTOs and should make use of inclusive language and rhetoric that recognises that industries themselves are significant providers of training. Formal policies and promotional material should guard against perpetuating the assumption that the training provider is TAFE (or a commercial RTO) and that industry is the consumer of training. The rhetoric of reports and promotional material maintains a dichotomy between VET providers and industry, rather than representing industry as a serious VET provider in its own right. Governments need to ensure that policies and strategies for flexible learning flow through to generic VET policies and strategies, especially in the measures of learning activities and outcomes and in the calculation of resources.

Implementation Guides for Training Package qualifications should consider allowing RTOs to identify the components of training which are suitable for online learning and allocate resources for the initial development of programs, replacing delivery formula based on student contact hours. User Choice funding for traineeships should factor in the development of online learning resources based on state targets and priorities for converting student contact training to suitable online material. The incentive payments from the Commonwealth Department should provide incentives to transfer suitable learning materials to online delivery. Governments have to seriously tackle the contradiction in using student contact hours as a measure of the cost of

competency based learning and RTOs should be given incentives to improve the productivity of learning investment through creative approaches to technology and workplace experience.

Government should consider extending its programs to provide broadband access for public training providers to industry training providers.