

PA 012

Getting connected: Professional development in online learning and flexible delivery for contract and casual VET staff.

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***Abstract:** A recent contract research project commissioned by the Flexible Learning Research Program, an initiative within the Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System, found that while flexible and online teaching methodologies were prevalent in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, only about 10 percent of courses in the sector are being delivered entirely online.*

It appears that learners still need a certain amount of human contact and social interaction not only with teaching staff but with other students, and that the virtual online community does not always satisfy this requirement. In addition, while online learning lends itself well to some VET subjects (such as IT and business) there are other areas – for example construction and hospitality – where there is no substitute for practical, hands-on lessons.

The study also scrutinised the professional development opportunities available to help get VET teaching staff up to speed in the online learning environment. While formal professional development opportunities were noted to be lacking for casual and contract staff in particular, many educators were effectively making use of the internet and other informal networks, for example asking for help from more IT-proficient colleagues and peers. The paper presents the key findings of the project and also discusses the relative merits of using online survey instruments to gather data for such research projects.

Keywords: flexible delivery, online learning, professional development, casualisation.

Introduction

The Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector is experiencing increasing demand for flexible service delivery, due to policy development, technological innovations, industry demands and the changing needs of learners (Schofield, 2000). From a pedagogical perspective, flexible delivery of formal VET programs aims to give learners greater choice over when, where and how they learn, and includes strategies such as distance education, online learning, mixed mode delivery, self-paced learning and self-directed learning. However, as occurs in other sectors of education, new learning technologies are not always introduced for sound educational reasons. Often expediency and accountability or economic imperatives drive the agenda for change, with developments in technology and processes taking up more attention and resources than the professional development of teachers and educators who are expected to keep up and adapt to change in addition to all of the other demands on their time.

The national VET sector has also witnessed a growth in the number of contract and casual teachers and trainers who are usually employed on a part-time or short-term basis direct from

industry, in recognition of their currency and recency in a particular vocational field. The nature of this employment arrangement has potential implications for the extent to which contract and casual staff are able to implement flexible and online approaches to learning, as well as their access to professional development to support this work. Recent research findings indicate that casualisation of the VET workforce is one of the top eight barriers to staff development, and that there is disproportionate engagement in a range of professional development activities by contract and casual staff compared with those employed on a permanent and ongoing basis (Harris et al, 2001). Further to this finding, contract and casual TAFE staff report that a large proportion of professional development activities are undertaken in their own time, leading them to work more than their official hours, and that one of the top 5 factors impacting on their work was changes in delivery modes (Kronemann, 2001).

The Research Project

A study was therefore commissioned by the Flexible Learning Research Program, an initiative within the Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System, to explore the experiences of contract and casual staff in the provision of flexible delivery and online learning in the VET sector, particularly their ability to 'get connected' with flexible and online learning technologies and the opportunities they have to engage in professional development activities to support their teaching practice in these areas.

The project was managed by the Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work at the University of South Australia, in collaboration with the TAFE Queensland Centre for Innovation and Development. The full report of the project titled *Getting connected: The experiences of contract and casual staff in the provision of flexible and online learning in the VET sector* was published in 2003 by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Stehlik et al, 2003).

The methodology for this study involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, which addressed both the analytical and descriptive nature of the issues being studied. This multi-method approach included:

- ✍ a review of current policies and practices in flexible learning delivery in the VET sector and the literature on professional development for VET teachers and trainers
- ✍ case study interviews with teaching staff and educational managers at six VET sites representing public and private providers in South Australia and Queensland
- ✍ an online survey administered by the University of South Australia's Marketing Science Centre and directed at contract and casual teaching/training staff, disseminated through a number of networks of VET providers.

The key findings of the research project are introduced and discussed under the following headings:

1. Adoption of flexible and online approaches within VET providers
2. Contract and casual staff involvement in flexible and online learning
3. Knowledge, skills and attributes needed for flexible and online learning
4. Professional development in flexible and online learning

Adoption of flexible and online approaches within VET providers

While the program areas and providers represented in the case studies necessarily offered flexible delivery and online learning options as a pre-requisite for involvement in this study, the extent to which they did so varied. Public providers saw involvement in flexible learning as a strategic priority in their planning cycle while private RTOs (Registered Training Organisations) saw it as a market edge and an inevitable future direction. While online learning options were also included under this priority, the extent to which they can be offered in practice is subject to a greater number of limitations than flexible delivery in general. Some of these limitations related to technology, some to methodological considerations, but they were also linked to the type of industry or program area involved.

It became apparent from this research that some industry/program areas are more likely to be able to embrace online learning than others. For example, industries like retail, hospitality and business can transfer learning materials and activities to online environments more readily than industries like manufacturing where more traditional methods which involve technicians working alongside learners in the workplace are seen to be more effective in terms of cost and transfer of learning. However it was also acknowledged that in management training courses for example, interaction with a group is still important and students gain more from this than they would from interacting online, which can also be more difficult to manage.

From a sample of 149 usable responses to the online survey, it was found that only about 10% of courses referred to by respondents were delivered entirely online. In most cases a form of blended delivery was being offered, involving a range of approaches that included face-to-face teaching, video streaming, on-the-job training and print-based options.

The study further highlighted the fact that the adoption of flexible delivery was often affected by the availability of technology and resources, some hesitation towards change by teachers and trainers, the time constraints of staff, the availability of funding, and a recognition that online learning does not necessarily cater to all learning styles.

Contract and casual staff involvement in flexible and online learning

Contract and casual staff reported becoming involved in flexible and online delivery almost as an opportunistic rather than a systematic decision – in some cases they were motivated to keep their job or increase their employability by embracing what they believe to be the future of learning, in others it was just seen as ‘part of the job’, and in other cases it was a matter of adopting an innovation that would increase access and learning outcomes for students. Some of the case study respondents reported that their initial employment was on an hourly paid basis, but increasing involvement in flexible and online delivery had led to more secure contract positions.

Ironically, the more their paid teaching hours increased however, the less time there was for professional development and involvement in projects for developing technical skills, which were often done in their own time when they were casual.

There were also broader contextual factors shaping the likelihood of involvement in flexible delivery, including the history of the institutions in which the teachers and trainers were located and the strategic management of program areas, as well as the individual employment histories of the teachers and trainers themselves.

In general, while opportunities to become involved with flexible and online delivery would seem to be equally available to all staff regardless of their employment status, staff employed on a casual basis seem to be involved in delivering and assessing flexible and online programs and courses but not in designing or developing them, as this requires time, technical knowledge, access to resources and information and a certain amount of ongoing employment security which makes such work limited to full-time contract or permanent staff. While it was established that

this was often a pragmatic management decision, it could be an issue for casual staff who are usually appointed directly from industry specifically for their recent knowledge and experience, yet are then faced with delivering a package developed and designed by someone else. It also has implications for succession planning if casual staff are excluded from design and curriculum work yet could be assumed to be the next generation of full-time or permanent staff, presumably with requirements to understand curriculum development.

Knowledge, skills and attributes needed for flexible and online learning

The fact that many casual teaching staff are employed by both public and private providers directly from industry specifically because of their recent industry knowledge and experience was a recurring theme in this study. They are often employed at short notice for fixed term contracts and for specific skills, and as part of a human resource strategy where casual employment can be varied depending on demand for courses and numbers of students and to further the strategic goals of the organisation.

For example one case study confirmed that a team of teachers employed for their technical knowledge had no previous face-to-face classroom teaching history at all before being brought in to teach a program using a web-based management system that included video streaming, email, chat facilities and a bulletin board. The fact that the program was very successful was put down to sheer dedication, perseverance and team work on behalf of the staff who needed to develop a complete new set of skills, knowledge and abilities to meet the needs of the students in this online environment.

This contrasts with the view also expressed that the types of skills required for effective teaching in flexible and online modes are no different from those used in more traditional teaching situations such as face-to-face in classrooms. However, this view was more representative of permanent and full-time staff who also tended to believe that underpinning knowledge about education and learning styles are just as important as technical skills, knowledge of industry and content skills. Educational managers were also of the view that knowledge, skill and attribute development should be premised on an underpinning knowledge of classroom delivery, which links with the preference expressed in a number of settings for delivery that was not just online but a mixture of methods described variously as *mixed-mode*, *integrated*, *hybrid* or *blended*.

Knowledge and skills requirements for all staff regardless of employment status would also seem to be dependent on a range of factors including the extent to which they were involved in teaching that was fully online. Design and development of online courses requires a specific set of technical skills in addition to content knowledge, which some staff reported as being not appreciated or understood by those who had little knowledge of this form of delivery. Some staff also reported that they did not need to develop the technical skills as there were other people within the organisation who could supply those, while others wanted to develop technical skills for their own interest and personal development

Professional development in flexible and online learning

One of the main factors influencing professional development in the VET sector appears to be the enthusiasm and willingness of staff to embrace flexible and online learning technologies, which underpins a commitment to self-directed learning. Those who were early adopters of flexible and online learning technologies tended to identify themselves as change agents in the organisation, adopting a role of promulgating information and mentoring colleagues, being seen as knowledge experts and generally driving change within their workgroup, program or organisation, described as 'bringing people along with you and helping them through the change process'. In general, informal mentoring, coaching and talking to peers have emerged as significant processes in

professional development, and the extent to which organisations support such informal learning networks could be further investigated.

An interesting factor to emerge is the notion of support for development being team-based. While professional development is often seen as an individual development process, responses in this study showed that a larger perspective from the point of view of the team or workgroup also needs to be acknowledged. For example, a manager in one public RTO mentioned the fact that one staff member from a particular program had been chosen to become involved in a Learnscope project which was seen as 'extensive professional development'. This had taken her away from teaching duties for three weeks and placed a lot of pressure on the team in the short term who 'struggled with her load' while she was away. However the longer term outcome was that 'the team benefited enormously' when she returned and was able to share new knowledge and skills and facilitate the development of better technical resources.

Most casual and short-term contract staff considered that professional development was not readily available to them or that it was expected they undertake it in their own time. Some spoke of support from their organisation being there 'if you want it', while others considered it was offered on a needs basis and if a need could be identified, some support might be obtained.

Of the types of support for formal learning in flexible delivery mentioned in the online survey, the main method cited was assistance with HECS or course fees followed by assistance with the cost of books and materials, and some form of paid or unpaid leave in order to attend study or flexible working arrangements to allow study time. However half of the respondents undertaking formal learning in flexible delivery reported receiving no support at all from their organisation.

A smaller number of respondents (20) reported involvement in formal study specifically in online learning, and 12 of these reported receiving support including payment for fees, materials and some assistance with leave.

Implications for managing professional development

The outcomes of this research study indicate that a number of opportunities exist for teaching staff in the VET sector to undertake professional development in flexible and online learning, ranging from university degrees to in-house training, with some receiving financial support from their employer. However, the less attached staff are to the workforce, the less likely they are to have access to professional development.

Contract and casual staff are usually employed part-time, while also working in the industry from which they have been recruited to teach. They are also possibly teaching in more than one organisation, and the time spent with the RTO is limited to what they are paid for. As a result, managers are more likely to give permanent and full-time staff priority for staff development when funding is available. Contract and casual staff who do get selected for training opportunities tend to be those who show interest and are already seen as experts in the field. This highlights the politics and practical difficulties involved in managing a diverse workforce.

The case studies also emphasised the fact that professional development needs will often only become apparent after the transition to online learning delivery has begun. That is, it is only after experiential learning, informal learning and networking with colleagues, that more formal staff development needs are identified.

However, the bigger picture illustrated by the literature on change management in online and flexible delivery and reinforced by this research project is one which highlights the importance of professional development moving beyond 'technical skills and operational understandings' to addressing wider conceptual and affective issues (Walsh 2000, p.15). Like many contemporary educational reforms, the integration of online and flexible delivery requires much more than

technical skills; it requires new pedagogical approaches (McKavanagh et al. 2002, Brennan, 2003, Ellis & Phelps, 1999). It challenges previously held assumptions relating to assessment (Hyde, Booth & Wilson, 2003) and to the norms, habits and beliefs that surround student / teacher interactions (Ellis & Phelps, 1999).

Further, Brennan (2003), McKavanagh et al. (2002), Schofield, Walsh and Melville (2000) have noted the absence of any transparent articulation of thinking about teaching and learning theories that are in keeping with emerging understandings of online learning. Furthermore, in the absence of any carefully thought out approaches to instructional design which are matched to new technologies, online technologies run the risk of being reduced to information transfer and storage systems rather than the repositories of rich learning experiences (Nowak 1998, cited in Cashion and Palmieri 2002, p. 22). The case study interviews with VET managers confirmed the view that the base qualification Certificate IV in Workplace Assessment and Training for example was very limited in being able to provide VET staff with breadth and depth of understanding in adult education theory and methodology as well as important elements of VET policy such as the AQTF.

Limitations of online approaches to teaching, learning and research

It is suggested that these arguments and observations are equally valid when applied to the higher education sector, particularly in reducing online technologies to systems of retrieving and crunching data for evaluation of programs and courses; with their integration into teaching methodology being rather patchy and more or less dependent on the initiative, enthusiasm and application of individuals - much like the early adopters in the VET study. To use the authors' own institution as an example, all courses must be evaluated using an online Course Evaluation Instrument (CEI) with an associated Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) instrument which combined are intended to provide feedback for teaching staff not only on their course materials but their own teaching performance.

There are several issues associated with the introduction and use of such online evaluation instruments, but the main one to be pointed out here is that students are not completing them. In the experience of one of the authors for example, only three out of a class of 46 external students completed the CEI and SET instruments for an undergraduate course taught in Semester 2, 2002. This was despite clear instructions in course materials and email reminders, and shows that even when proficient in IT skills, students are just not interested in spending even 10 – 15 minutes completing an online survey. On the other hand, when human interaction is possible in a face-to-face situation, course evaluation can become a dialogue between students and lecturers with rich and meaningful results. While the CEI and SET results can be instantly aggregated and tabulated and produce colourful bar graphs at the touch of a keyboard, a sample of three responses makes the data become meaningless. The administration has recently suggested strategies for increasing response rates such as offering rewards and incentives to students, for example chocolate, in return for completing the online evaluation. The authors believe this practice would normally be viewed as compromising any data collection process in terms of ethics and validity, as discussed below in relation to the research project.

The research team took the decision to administer a survey online as a means of attempting to engage a sample of casual and contract staff who were involved in a wide range of flexible delivery methods, particularly those who were working in an online environment. Once the survey instrument was developed, piloted and revised it was then placed online where it was active for a period of two months. Alongside preparation of the questionnaire, work also focused on the recruitment of a sample of contract and casual teachers and trainers to be invited to

respond to the survey. Using personal networks, and information gleaned from the National Training Information Service (NTIS) database, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) and Learnscope Victoria, 40 VET providers known to be engaged in flexible delivery across four states (South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria) were identified. These organisations were then contacted to seek their permission to advertise the availability of the survey to their staff and encourage them to participate. Due to the perceived difficulty of identifying and contacting contract and casual staff directly, targeting was deliberately done this way through the employing organisations.

Initial contact with these organisations was interesting in itself. Most representatives from the organisations contacted expressed interest in issues related to the provision of professional development for contract and casual staff, even if, for various reasons they did not want to extend the invitation to their staff to participate in the survey. For example, a representative from one RTO pointed out that the sessional staff she employed came into the organisation only when they were engaged in teaching and she would be obliged to pay her staff if they completed the survey. Several potential sites contacted in Victoria said that contract and casual teachers were 'surveyed out' as there had been at least three requests for participation in surveys over the last 12 months.

As part of the funding agreement for the study, a target of 200 useable responses was established. Initial response was slow, and emails encouraging participation were sent a number of times to those organisations and individuals who had agreed to promulgate the survey details to contract and casual staff. By the time the online survey was closed off in mid April 2003, the site holding the questionnaire had been accessed 201 times with a total 149 surveys being completed. While this did not achieve the target for the survey, a significant proportion of the hits to the site were translated into usable responses (74.1%) suggesting that the targeting was at least partially successful in reaching those participants most likely to be able to respond to the questionnaire.

Notwithstanding, obtaining this number of responses was a difficult and challenging process. In many respects the difficulties experienced by the research team mirror those of other researchers who have attempted to use the online environment for research (see for example, the online survey of students conducted by Cashion and Palmieri 2002). While organisations are often willing to give permission for researchers to approach their staff, this can be time consuming as such requests are handed from section to section until they rest with someone able to give the final authority and support for the contact process to proceed. This issue of over-surveying of organisations and staff appears to be an increasing issue confronting VET researchers. As noted by Cashion and Palmieri (2002, p. 37), ethics approvals obtained under the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines do not permit the use of incentives to increase participation and hence are reliant on the generosity and goodwill of staff to participate.

Over-surveying and using online evaluation processes which reduce qualitative information to quantitative data for purposes of accountability may ultimately be having the effect of turning off teaching staff in both VET and higher education sectors to the use of online technologies for genuine integrated, mixed-mode or blended teaching, which brings us to the conclusion that professional development is the key to 'switching them on' or getting them connected. Where it is less likely in the higher education sector to employ direct from industry contract and casual staff who have less pre-conceived notions about teaching and therefore may be more willing to embrace integrated learning technologies, professional development of permanent or established staff needs to focus on ways to make online processes such as evaluation instruments more integrated with the teaching process rather than being seen as add-ons

A recent study of the extent to which lecturers at Queensland University of Technology were using online learning technologies found just this – that many were just posting their lecture notes and using the internet as an information tool rather than as an interactive and integrated teaching medium. However, as found in the VET research study, professional development is not just an individual process that occurs in a vacuum, which was confirmed by the review at QUT which went on to conclude that achieving an integrated approach to online teaching, assessment and evaluation ‘will need a change in culture, a whole-of-institution approach and changes to staff development, workload management, rewards and policy’ (Illing, 2003: 23).

The conclusions to be drawn from the various threads introduced in this paper are that:

- ?? flexible educational methodologies and online technologies need to be underpinned by sound theoretical considerations and presented within an integrated framework that includes a range of delivery methods.
- ?? online evaluations that are not connected to educational theories and are not part of an integrated course design process are examples of ‘add-ons’ rather than an integrated approach.
- ?? achieving such an integrated approach requires not only professional development but an awareness of contextual institutional issues including workforce management.
- ?? casualisation of the educational workforce can result in a separation of the design and development of courses from their delivery and assessment - an issue of quality and accountability.

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