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casual flexible learning
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Getting connected

Professional development of contract and casual staff
providing flexible learning: Volume 1

online
LEARNING

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Australian *Flexible* **Learning** Framework
Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

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Publisher's note

This report has been divided into two volumes. The detailed description of the project and its outcomes is contained in volume 1. Volume 2 contains the appendices referred to in the report which is available only in pdf format and can be downloaded from the NCVER website <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

Background

In August 1999, the Australian National Training Authority chief executive officers endorsed the *Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2000–2004*. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework has been developed by the Flexible Learning Advisory Group and represents a strategic plan for the five-year national project allocation for flexible learning. It is designed to support both accelerated take-up of flexible learning modes and to position Australian vocational education and training as a world leader in applying new technologies to vocational education products and services.

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

Managed by the Flexible Learning Advisory Group on behalf of the Commonwealth, all states and territories in conjunction with ANTA.

AUSTRALIAN
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Acknowledgements

Any research endeavour in the vocational education and training (VET) sector is necessarily a collaborative venture between a number of groups. This research project involved collaboration between the Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work (CREEW) of the University of South Australia, TAFE Queensland, Centre for Innovation and Development and the Marketing Science Centre (MSC) at the University of South Australia. Particular acknowledgement is made to Carl Driesner and Monico Telo from the Marketing Science Centre who analysed the data from the online survey.

The research also relied very heavily on the generosity and goodwill of 46 registered training organisations across a number of states and territories, and personnel responsible for the National Training Information Service (NTIS), the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) and Learnscope Victoria who were instrumental in supporting efforts to invite teachers and trainers to participate in the study.

Ultimately, research of this type becomes a reality only because a group of VET teachers and trainers were prepared to open up their teaching practice and share their experiences with us.

To all these people go our wholehearted thanks.

Executive summary

Introduction

Policy development within the vocational and education and training (VET) sector has led to an increased demand for flexible service delivery. This approach aims to give learners greater choice over when, where and how they learn. Flexible delivery includes strategies such as distance education, online learning, mixed mode delivery, self-paced learning and self-directed learning.

These policies are being developed at a time when the sector has 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, sometimes by more that one provider. 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.

This study explored 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 methodology for this study involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, which address 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.

Summary of key findings

Adoption of flexible and online approaches within VET providers

The six registered training organisations (RTOs) that participated in the study confirmed that the utilisation of flexible delivery, and the extent to which they include online technologies, varies significantly. The study found that about 10% of courses are delivered entirely online. In most cases a form of blended delivery is offered, involving a range of approaches, including face-to-face teaching, video streaming, on-the-job training and print-based options.

The study also highlights that the adoption of flexible delivery is often affected by the:

✧ availability of technology and resources

- ✧ reluctance of students
- ✧ hesitation to change by teachers and trainers
- ✧ time constraints of staff
- ✧ history of the RTO
- ✧ availability of funding
- ✧ recognition that online learning does not cater for all learning styles
- ✧ fact that not all programs lend themselves to this type of delivery.

Contract and casual staff involvement in flexible and online learning

Contract and casual staff usually become involved in flexible and online learning by choice when opportunities are offered to them. Some are motivated to keep their job or increase their employability; others see it as just being 'part of the job', while some are focused on giving students the best possible outcomes. Opportunities to become involved would seem equally available to all staff, regardless of employment status. In fact, in some organisations the employment of contract and casual staff is central to the overall organisational goals to adopt flexible and online learning. However, casual staff are generally involved in delivering and assessing flexible and online programs, not in designing and developing them. This is because designing and developing programs requires:

- ✧ time
- ✧ technical knowledge
- ✧ access to resources and information
- ✧ ongoing employment security.

These activities are therefore normally limited to full-time contract or permanent staff, meaning that short-term contract and casual staff—who are usually appointed directly from industry specifically for their current knowledge and experience—are subsequently faced with delivering a package developed and designed by someone else. This has implications for succession planning if casual staff are excluded from design and curriculum work, yet are assumed to be the next generation of full-time or permanent staff. It is therefore essential that they are not excluded from staff development opportunities in flexible and online learning. In fact, some training providers highlighted the benefits of ensuring they involved their contract and casual staff as much as possible, so that staff were an active part of the teaching team.

Knowledge, skills and attributes needed for flexible and online learning

There is little or no evidence that contract and casual teachers require different knowledge, skills and attributes for their work in flexible and online delivery from that required by permanent staff. All staff involved in flexible and online learning require a wider scope of knowledge This is due to the hybrid nature of the work, usually requiring staff to work across multiple learning environments (classroom, workplaces, web-based environments, distance education). However, the cornerstone of skill and knowledge development stills rests in the classroom, as classroom delivery is important for working in both flexible and online environments. This becomes an issue where contract and casual staff employed for their technical knowledge have had no previous face-to-face classroom experience.

In order to deliver online programs, well-developed skills in writing, communicating, interpreting, conveying meaning and providing logical concise information, are just as important as technological skills, such as the ability to use email, internet and power point applications. The design and development of online courses, however, does require a specific set of technical skills, as well as certain administrative and organisational skills. This highlights the importance of providing contract and casual staff with appropriate development opportunities.

Contract and casual staff development in flexible and online learning

The outcomes of this study indicate that a number of opportunities exist for contract and casual staff 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 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.

What also emerges from the study is that informal learning activities supporting flexible and online environments are significant, and that learning from peers and colleagues, self-directed study, hands-on practice and individual reading on the topic are very useful for personal and professional development. An interesting factor to emerge is the notion of support for development being team-based. For example, a staff member may be chosen to be involved in a program such as Learnscope (a professional development activity which aims to improve of the knowledge and skills of VET teachers and trainers, required for new learning technologies) and return to share new knowledge and skills with other staff.

Conclusion

All teachers and trainers, regardless of their employment status, are likely to be challenged by the introduction of flexible and online delivery and will require appropriate professional development opportunities to enable them to deal with these changing demands. What this study provides is an exploration of how contract and casual staff are prepared to react to this change.

While there are professional development opportunities available for contract and casual staff, they are usually more accessible for permanent and full-time staff. Often, the extent to which contract and casual staff become involved depends on the individual's enthusiasm and willingness, and how active they are in seeking out opportunities and information. It is also dependent on the culture of the organisation and the extent to which contract and casual staff are included in the communication networks, as well as the internal support available to them.

Access to professional development for contract and casual staff is vital as it has potential implications for succession planning of VET in the future. As contract or casual teachers of today may become the permanent teachers of tomorrow, it is essential that they hold the knowledge, skills and attributes required to ensure their professional competence. This includes an underpinning knowledge of education, learning styles and curriculum development, not just technical skills, knowledge of industry and content skills.

The benefits for individuals and teams from involvement in Learnscope projects emerge clearly from this study, and the receivers of such types of funding should ensure that appropriate opportunities are available to casual and contract staff, as well as permanent or full-time staff. A team-based approach to learning also emerges as a model of good practice in managing the skills requirements of a diverse and segmented workforce, in an evolving educational and technological environment.

Introduction to the study

Background

Policy development in education generally, and the VET sector in particular, has led to the increasing demand for more flexibility in service delivery due to changing patterns of work, study and life (Schofield 2000; TAFE NSW 2001). Flexible delivery approaches aim to provide learners with greater choice of when, where and how they learn, and include a range of strategies, including distance education, online learning, mixed-mode delivery (which combines various features of face-to-face and distance or online learning), self-paced learning and self-directed learning. Shifts to these new pedagogies have been underpinned by the development of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (AFL) and the subsequent opportunities created through Strategy 2002 projects in professional development in flexible delivery and online learning for VET staff.

These changes to the ways in which VET might be delivered to students have also been occurring at a time when the VET workforce has undergone considerable transformation. The sector has witnessed a growing cohort of practitioners with a part-time role in VET, or increasingly, several part-time roles across more than one provider. VET teachers are found mainly in industry, schools and as part-time staff in both public and private providers, with the primary role of teaching and assessing VET, although this may not be solely restricted to institutional settings. The growth of this group of VET practitioners is occurring at a time when overall employee costs within public VET providers have fallen from 68.4% of expenditure in 1994 to 60.8% in 1999, despite significant growth in student numbers (Kronemann 2001, p.4). This trend is indicative of a preference for an increasingly casualised workforce as a response to pressures from the increasingly competitive market for education (Malley et al. 1999).

The growing diversity of the VET workforce has implications for the ways in which staff might be prepared and supported to carry out their roles. Models of staff development have altered significantly over the past ten years, with work-based approaches to staff development being preferred and supported through programs such as Reframing the Future and Learnscope. However, recent research findings indicate that key VET stakeholders identify casualisation of the VET workforce as 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 technical and further education (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 five factors impacting on their work was changes in delivery modes (Kronemann 2001). These recent findings present contradictory messages for those concerned with questions about the best ways to provide professional development for contract and casual VET staff which are equitable and reflect a realistic commitment on the part of employers and VET staff.

While staff development needs in the area of flexible delivery, including online learning, have been identified in the literature (Evans & Tuckerman 2001; Walsh 2000) and supporting resource material is available (Mitchell et al. 2001, Blanco & Wighton 2001; Oliver 2001), the extent to which contract and casual staff are supported in being able to access these resources and address their

own particular professional development needs is not well researched. Difficulty in identifying and tracking such staff in large institutions, where staff defined as 'sessional' often fall through the cracks and become hidden from view, may partly account for this lack (Smith & Burrows 2000). In addition, the potential use of informal and work-based approaches to staff development may also impact on the degree to which activities are visible and able to be quantified, and hence contribute to an apparently declining demand or uptake for more formalised programs of staff development.

Purpose and aims of the study

The current study takes up the issue of the roles of contract and casual VET staff in relation to the implementation of more flexible approaches to the delivery of VET programs and the nature of the professional development activities being undertaken by these staff to support this work. The purpose of the study was to examine the extent to which contract and casual teachers and trainers in the VET sector are engaged in flexible delivery and to examine a range of issues in relation to the demand and supply of professional development for this group of staff. By identifying examples of good practice in professional development for contract and casual staff, an additional aim of the study was to provide information to assist VET authorities and providers in implementing strategic planning that achieves the objectives of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, which include building a critical mass of VET staff able to effectively utilise flexible learning approaches in delivering vocational education and training.

The project objectives were as follows:

✧ to map the nature of involvement of contract and casual staff in flexible delivery and online learning, including roles and capabilities, in public and private VET organisations

✧ to identify what technical skills and teaching practices are expected of contract and casual staff in planning and delivering flexible and online learning

✧ to identify the types of professional development activities being undertaken by contract and casual staff in these areas

✧ to determine the extent and type of support provided to contract and casual staff for professional development opportunities in flexible delivery and online learning

✧ to identify the barriers and risks confronting organisations in providing professional development to contract and casual staff.

Scope of the study

In examining and researching flexible delivery, one of the first issues to be addressed is that of understanding of the nature of the work of VET teachers and trainers. Here, arguably, definitional issues play a part in determining some indicators of this phenomenon. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework was specifically designed by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Flexible Delivery Taskforce to establish a strategic framework to guide policy implementation in this area of training reform. Through this process however, terms used to describe these initiatives have varied, resulting in some confusion concerning the interrelatedness, or otherwise, of online and flexible delivery. In order to establish parameters for this project, the following definitions relating to the nature of flexible delivery and the particular cohorts of VET staff involved in this activity were adopted.

Flexible delivery includes a range of strategies for providing education and training, giving learners greater choice in terms of when, where and how they learn. It can include online learning, distance education, a combination of face-to-face and distance education strategies or self-directed learning. Online learning is a subset of flexible delivery and refers specifically to learning facilitated by the

use of web-based technologies and resources, conducted via a computer network using the internet, a local area network or an intranet. Blended or hybrid learning is also a subset of flexible delivery whereby learning is facilitated through a combination of face-to-face and online methodologies, where the online component is an integral part of the delivery strategy (Cashion & Palmieri 2002 p.12).

In the context of this project, the term contract staff refers to VET practitioners who have been employed for a period of one year or less with a RTO. This employment could be on a full-time or part-time basis and can include self-employed contractors engaged by VET organisations to undertake specified tasks. The term casual staff refers to VET practitioners employed on an hourly or sessional basis but, unlike contract staff, these practitioners are not entitled to sick pay or paid holidays.

Research design and method

For this study, the units of analysis were VET staff and their work. In order to be included in this study, staff needed to fit within one of the two employment categories described above and be working in settings in which they used one or more flexible delivery strategies to facilitate learning for VET students. As noted previously, the research objectives used to frame this study sought to address the twin issues of the nature of involvement of contract and casual staff in flexible delivery and the extent and type of support provided to these staff undertaking this work. The study also focused on developing an explanation for current practice and providing insights into how and why professional development for contract and casual staff engaged in flexible delivery is being provided and experienced in a variety of ways. In order to provide the sorts of data required to address both the analytical and descriptive nature of the issues under investigation in the study, it was deemed appropriate to adopt a multi-method approach for the study.

A multi-method approach to research is built upon the assumption that both qualitative and quantitative data have the potential to provide valuable complementary information and are therefore of equal importance in addressing the central issue of the study (Brewer & Hunter 1989; Haese 2000). The purpose in mixing methods was not to 'pile up' findings, but rather to 'see in what ways the data sets complement and contradict each other' (ed Brannen 1992, p.31).

The research process comprised three interrelated phases:

Phase 1
Phase 1 involved a review of current policies and practices in flexible learning delivery in the VET sector and of the literature on professional development for VET teachers and trainers. This phase also involved the identification of six sites as case studies and the development of interview protocols for visits to these sites. Data were then collected by interviewing teaching staff, educational managers, human resource managers, and staff involved in professional development planning and delivery to provide interpretive data for addressing the research questions (see appendix A for copies of the interview protocols used for the case studies).

Phase 2
The findings from phase 1 informed this phase, which sought to add breadth to the study through an online survey which was developed and administered by the University of South Australia's Marketing Science Centre and promulgated through a number of networks of VET providers who were asked to forward the survey details to contract and casual staff in their organisation (see appendix B for a copy of the online survey and subsequent data analysis).

Phase 3
In this phase, the findings from the previous two phases of the study were consolidated and the subsequent implications and outcomes of the study identified.

Case studies

The existing literature provided the basis for the initial establishment of the case study protocols which were developed iteratively by the research team. Once a draft had been devised, it was piloted with one training organisation and revised in the light of feedback obtained from this activity.

The directors of six RTOs were approached for their consent to invite their staff to contribute to the case studies. Six case study sites representative of public and private VET providers were identified (three in South Australia and three in Queensland). At each site, interviews were conducted with contract and casual staff engaged in flexible delivery, with their manager and with a full-time staff member involved in flexible delivery. The purpose of the interview with the full-time staff member was to compare their experiences of flexible delivery with that of the contract and casual staff. A total of total of 32 interviews were conducted across the six sites. The sites were:

- Adelaide Institute of TAFE (AIT)
- Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE (TVT)
- HETA Incorporated
- Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE (CSIT)
- Queensland and Northern Territory Multimedia (QANTM)
- Tropical North Queensland Institute of TAFE (TNQIT)

The online survey

Information developed from the initial analysis of the case studies provided the foundation for the development of the online survey. The survey was systematically designed so that each question included in the final instrument could provide specific data on key issues central to the study. This ensured that no trivial or irrelevant questions which might unreasonably increase the time taken to complete the questionnaire were included. A mixture of open and closed questions was included. Closed questions were selected in order to facilitate responses and data analysis (Funnell 1996, p.70). Open-ended questions were used where it was anticipated that a diverse range of responses was possible and it was desirable to capture this diversity. 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, the recruitment of a sample of contract and casual teachers and trainers invited to respond to the survey was undertaken. 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 their participation. Due to the anticipated difficulty of identifying and contacting contract and casual staff directly, the employing organisations were used to target these staff.

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 if they completed the survey she would feel obliged to pay them. 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, it was established that a target of 200 useable responses should be achieved. The online survey was closed off in mid-April 2003, with the site

holding the questionnaire accessed 201 times, and 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 reach someone able to give the final authority and support for the process to proceed. This issue of over-surveying of organisations and staff appears to be an increasing one 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 participation is largely reliant on the generosity and goodwill of staff.

Data analysis

Analysis of the data collected was undertaken in a number of discrete stages in order to provide a basis for examining each set of data and to explore the ways in which each supported and contradicted the other.

Data collected from the site visits were transcribed and then returned to respondents for verification. Once returned, the transcripts were analysed with the assistance of NUD·IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorising) software. This software was useful for managing the large amounts of data generated from the site visits. Key themes and issues identified in this process were used as a basis for the design of the online survey.

Data from the online survey were analysed with the assistance of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency tables and cross-tabulations of data were used to illuminate patterns and potential linkages within the data.

Having undertaken a detailed analysis of each set of data, the final stage of the analysis involved consolidating these complementary sets of data for further analysis. Particular attention was paid to the manner in which data supported and/or contradicted each other.

The final stage in the analysis process focused on drawing conclusions, elaborating meanings and verifying the findings in the light of the available data. This was aided by a return to the research objectives established for the study, from which a series of conclusions were formulated. From this point these conclusions passed through several iterations, becoming more explicit with each iteration. The relevant literature was also consulted in order to develop extended arguments to support the veracity of the meanings emerging from the data.

Limitations of the study

The research team made the decision to administer a survey online as a means of attempting to engage a sample of contract and casual staff who were involved in a wide range of flexible delivery methods, particularly those who were working in an online environment. As noted previously, in a context where competency-based training forms the basis for all training delivery in VET, nearly all teachers and trainers could claim to be involved in flexible delivery. However, the brief for this study, which referred to flexible delivery and online learning, seemed to indicate that the focus for the study needed to be more narrowly defined. Thus an attempt was made to engage contract and casual staff who were working in program areas where greater degrees of flexibility were being

implemented beyond those achieved in learning environments which involved face-to-face contact with teachers/trainers and learners. This decision, however, did limit the study to contract and casual teachers with some involvement in online learning either as a sole method of delivery or in combination with other strategies, rather than encompassing a potentially larger group of contract and casual teachers engaged in flexible delivery.

Due to budget and time constraints, the construction of the sample of teachers and trainers used in the online survey was restricted to several geographical locations. On the basis of this restriction and the response rate for the online survey, it is not possible to assert the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of contract and casual staff involved in flexible delivery *per se*. However, since the survey was only one part of the overall research strategy to illuminate contract and casual teachers' and trainers' work in flexible delivery and their use of professional development to support this work, the issue of generalisability can be gauged in relation to a number of key characteristics of the study including:

✧ the use of a sample of VET teachers and trainers which theoretically is diverse enough to allow some assertions of broader applicability

✧ the provision of detailed descriptions of the research participants which allows for comparisons to be made between this and other studies

✧ acknowledgement of the boundaries of the study

✧ provision of a level of detail in the presentation of the findings of the study in this report which facilitates the reader reaching conclusions in relation to the generalisability of the findings based on their experience and knowledge

✧ the development of linkages between the findings of this study and prior studies in terms of their congruence, connection and confirmation of findings.

Structure of report

This report begins with a review of the background literature which informed the development of the study. It is followed by two chapters which focus on the findings from the study. The first of these provides a detailed exploration of the key themes emerging from the six site visits. The next chapter presents the findings from the online survey. The final chapter in this report synthesises the research findings and offers some conclusions and implications of the study for future research and practice.

Literature review

Introduction

Globalisation and technological innovation are crucial factors driving policy development in education generally and the vocational education and training sector in particular. These forces are leading to the increasing use of online technologies to support teaching and learning, and the demand for flexibility in service delivery due to changing patterns of work, study and life (Attwell 1997; Curtain 2000; Lingard et al. 1994; Seddon 1999; Waterhouse, Wilson & Ewer 1999; Young & Guile 1997).

The notions of flexibility and responsiveness have been cornerstones of training reform in Australia. A range of approaches to providing education and training, giving learners greater choice of when, where and how they learn, have been heavily promoted and the use of distance education, mixed-mode delivery, online learning, self-paced learning and self-directed learning are increasingly features of discourses relating to VET teachers' and trainers' work. By providing a brief overview of the introduction of flexible delivery and online learning within the VET sector and the changing nature of the VET workforce charged with the implementation of this major component of the training reform agenda, this literature review sets the context for this study. Definitional issues relating to the key concepts of online learning and flexible delivery are also examined. This context provides the backdrop for the second section of the review, which examines the perceived and anticipated impact of flexible and online technologies for the work of VET teachers and trainers. This then leads to a consideration of recently completed Australian research examining the experiences of VET teachers and trainers working in flexible and online environments and the issues that these data hold for addressing the staff development needs of VET teachers and trainers involved in this work. The final section examines the issues raised in the review for the work of contract and casual staff.

Context

The VET sector has undergone radical reform in the past ten years as successive governments sought to develop a nationally integrated system that is capable of delivering the type of training and education needed to create a flexible and skilled workforce. The implementation of a competency-based training system, with its accompanying features of modularised curricula and a preference for self-paced learning, along with a raft of administrative structures, was adopted to promote the development of flexible training pathways that would lead to nationally recognised qualifications. While training packages have replaced centralised curricula and administrative arrangements have undergone successive waves of reform, the overarching goal has remained to create a VET system able to promote learning experiences to equip workers for their emerging roles in the new economy (Avis 1999; Waterhouse, Wilson & Ewer 1999).

In particular, the growth and change in information technology has altered a range of work practices including:

> … [the] temporal and spatial organisation of work; the nature of manufacturing systems, the professional identity of employees and in-company human resource development.
>
> (Young & Guile 1999, pp.204–5)

Within this context, VET teachers and trainers are both subject to the dramatic changes that technology has wrought on society, while, as significant participants with schools and higher education in the education industry, also being expected to play a significant role in supporting and facilitating the change process in the wider society (Waterhouse, Wilson & Ewer 1999, p.1).

What can qualify as flexible delivery in the VET context?

Arguably, notions of flexibility have been present from the earliest days of the reforms. Modularised curricula, which encourage self-paced approaches to learning, are now generally unremarkable features of the VET landscape, and while providing students with some control over the pace at which they are able to learn, this represents what would be considered the 'lower' end of flexibility in terms of the amount of control of the learning process that rests with the learner. As teaching and learning within the VET sector have been increasingly exposed to the impact of information and communications technologies, there have been significant efforts to promote the adoption of flexible and online modes of delivery which have dramatically increased, at least at a theoretical level, the amount of control of the learning process that can be handed to learners in terms of where and how they might engage in learning. As these changes have proceeded, two perspectives have emerged from the literature that need to be noted. The first relates to distinguishing between the terms 'online learning' and 'flexible delivery'. The second is a tendency to use terms such as 'online learning' and 'online delivery' synonymously (Mitchell 2003, p.23).

In relation to the first issue, failure to distinguish between flexible delivery and online learning may not be helpful since, as noted above, flexibility has long been considered and championed as a key part of VET activity, and arguably, all VET teachers and trainers could make a case for their practices embracing some degree of flexibility. On the other hand, a narrower focus does provide some useful criteria for making distinctions between the degrees of flexibility that might be achieved in particular contexts. A more useful definition therefore views flexible delivery as focused on providing greater choice to learners in terms of when, where and how they learn. As such, it can refer to a range of approaches such as distance education, mixed-mode or hybrid delivery, online learning, self-paced learning and self-directed learning, each affording the learner varying degrees of flexibility. Arguably, the degree to which these different methodological approaches might be viewed as flexible by any individual or group of learners is open for debate. While the degree to which a program makes a range of flexible methodologies available for their students can provide some 'proxy' measurement of flexibility, the ultimate measure of flexibility largely rests with the learners making judgements about the different ways they perceive that the learning program accommodates their needs along a number of dimensions, including 'time, place, delivery method' and other features (Cashion & Palmieri 2002, p.23).

In relation to definitions of online learning and delivery, Harper et al. (2000, p.7) proposed an inclusive definition where 'online delivery [encompasses] all aspects of online activity including the design, development and implementation of web materials as well as teaching and learning activities'. Kilpatrick and Bound (2003), on the other hand, distinguish between the practices of online delivery, which is one of many approaches to facilitating learning which can be adopted by VET teachers and trainers, and online learning, which focuses on the individual who is invited to participate in processes where learning takes place using online delivery mechanisms.

In the context of this research project, Mitchell's (2003, p.24) definition which locates online learning within a broader flexible delivery framework (distance education, mixed-mode delivery, online learning and self-paced learning) most adequately exemplifies the distinct but interrelated nature of flexible and online delivery practices. It is also one that best fits with the evidence relating to current practices in relation to the penetration of online and flexible delivery in the current VET context and the particular preferences held by teachers and students for hybrid approaches to delivery (Cashion & Palmieri 2002).

Penetration of online and flexible delivery

Given these definitional issues, gauging the extent of online education and training in VET is a difficult task (Harper et al. 2000, p.9). In a recent review of online delivery in Australia, Brennan (2003, p.56) noted that the number of fully online courses was relatively small. This low penetration is also supported by statistics from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) 2000 student outcomes study which showed that only 2.2% of all graduates reported in that study experienced some form of online delivery. One-third experienced hybrid modes of delivery, but only 0.8% reported completing learning that involved a majority of online learning. Research by McKavanagh et al. (1999) and Misko (1999) confirms this low level of formal, accredited online programs. Writing about online learning in regional contexts, Horton and Osborne (2003, p.214) observe that much of the online delivery they observed in their research was embedded in classroom delivery or through off-campus (distance) modes of learning. Engagement with the online environment ranged from limited usage of email and online resources, through to fully online programs using technologies such as video streaming, asynchronous and synchronous forms of communication, and the web.

Brennan asserts this low penetration is due, in part, to VET teachers' and trainers' current practices which view the use of technology as a 'tool' and an adjunct to a range of hybrid teaching approaches, which most commonly adopts the integration of computer-based technology to deliver modules or a part of modules (Brennan 2003, p.57). Brennan further asserts that minimal penetration of fully online delivery is also a product of a preference by VET teachers and trainers for 'blended' practices, which are more concerned with promoting flexibility for learners than uptake of technology and its integration into teaching and learning.

Impact of flexible and online delivery on VET teachers and trainers

Regardless of the current status of online and flexible delivery within VET providers, there is little doubt that these innovations are viewed as one of the most significant factors shaping current and emerging patterns of work for VET practitioners. In a Delphi survey undertaken as part of a study on staff development in VET (Harris et al. 2001), a group of key stakeholders in VET, including those responsible for policy development, policy implementation, staff development and research, were asked to identify the challenges that VET teachers and trainers would face in the next five to seven years. Flexible delivery was ranked as the third most pressing challenge, after operating in a competitive environment and keeping up to date and understanding changes in VET. Skills in flexible delivery were rated fourth in a list of six skills thought to be needed by VET teachers and trainers (Harris et al. 2001, p. 15). Flexibility and adaptability was rated as the second most needed attribute required by VET teachers and trainers. At the time of the study, stakeholders estimated that only about half of the VET workforce was well prepared and able to demonstrate the flexibility thought to be required to operate effectively in the emerging environment. Less than one half of VET teachers and trainers were thought to have the necessary skills to cope with the demands of flexible delivery. Further:

> … nominated groups that [were] … considered not currently prepared [included] … casual, older [staff], in areas where there were no industry links, without teaching diploma/degree, part time, employed by some private providers or untrained.   (Harris et al. 2001, p.18)

In another study examining the impact of changes on the work of VET teachers and trainers, technology was listed as one of the top ten drivers of change in the VET sector (Harris, Simons & Clayton forthcoming, p. 19). In thinking about the changes they had experienced in their work, focus group respondents in this study noted that they believed they now had to demonstrate a greater degree of flexibility in terms of when and how they undertook their work than ever before.

Greater flexibility was embedded in tasks, for example, institution-based staff spending more time involved in workplace assessment and delivery. Greater flexibility was demanded of teachers and trainers because the support systems they relied upon had changed. The emphasis on the goal of VET being the development of 'a self-paced, self-reliant, independent learner' (Harris, Simons & Clayton forthcoming), has required significant shifts in thinking about the best ways in which education and training might be provided. Technology has played a role in this shift. Respondents believed that considerably more training and assessment was being conducted online and via the use of technology than ever before. Teachers and trainers are working with more international clients, and the use of email, audio and videoconferencing facilities has increased dramatically. The introduction of computer-based administration systems has also greatly affected teachers' and trainers' work, with concomitant increases in the levels of information technology literacy being a particularly significant issue.

One-third of respondents in interviews conducted attributed significant shifts in power relations between teachers/trainers and their students to the introduction of new teaching and learning practices, such as flexible learning and work-based learning, which demanded that teachers and trainers act more as mentors, counsellors and facilitators who offer support to students. In these interviews respondents were also asked an open-ended question on what three changes had exerted the greatest impact on their work over the past five years. Twenty-three out of 64 respondents listed technology as one of the three changes, while 22 listed flexible delivery as one of the three key changes that had affected their work. Projecting five years into the future, technology and flexible delivery were named as the first and third highest changes respectively, expected to impact most on VET teachers' and trainers' work. These projections differed depending on the location of the teachers and trainers. While teachers and trainers in public training providers believed flexible delivery would have the highest impact on their work, teachers and trainers in private training providers ranked it as sixth most important on a 10 item list. On the other hand, both groups of teachers and trainers viewed technology as having a very high impact: it was ranked number 1 by teachers and trainers in private training providers and equal second (with the competitive environment) by teachers and trainers in public training providers.

The emerging picture from these studies is that, while initial penetration of technology and flexible delivery is slow, it is anticipated that they will have a significant impact on the future work of VET teachers and trainers. However, the implications of these findings for the provision of professional development are not clear. On the one hand, expressions of concerns about the lack of preparedness of sections of the VET workforce could be interpreted as a training need exacerbated by a lack of appropriate professional development. Conversely, these findings could reflect a more general lack of anxiety (expressed by stakeholders, teachers and trainers), signalling the need for efforts to focus on understanding the impact of technology on VET teachers' and trainers' work. It also suggests that policy-makers and managers need to carefully monitor how their engagement with new technologies and their responses to increasing demands for more flexible approaches to the delivery of VET impact on the ways in which VET teachers' and trainers' work is organised, valued and managed. This study offers the opportunity to directly address the nature and involvement of contract and casual VET staff in flexible and online delivery, and the sorts of professional development activities that have supported these groups of staff to take up opportunities in this new area of work.

VET teachers and trainers in online and flexible environments

As with any educational innovation, the adoption of flexible and online delivery is not without its challenges and is shaped by a range of factors which have been well rehearsed in the general literature on change management in the VET sector (see, for example, Simons 2001). Educational innovations of the scope and nature of online and flexible learning place significant demands on

educators, not only in terms of their work practices but also in terms of challenging long-held beliefs, values and norms associated with understanding of what constitutes 'good teaching'. Research summarised by Brennan, McFadden and Law (2001), reinforces the impact of online technology and the 'very mixed reactions' that it has received from teachers and trainers (Brennan, McFadden & Law 2001, p.47). What is significant in the emerging body of literature relating to the students' and teachers' experiences is the unanimous view that the role of the teacher is 'critical' and is arguably the single most important factor in determining the quality of the online experience for students (Brennan 2003; Cashion & Palmieri 2002; Kemshall-Bell 2001).

Brennan (2003), McKavanagh et al. (2002) and Schofield, Walsh and Melville (2000) have noted the absence of any transparent articulation of teaching and learning theories in keeping with emerging understandings of online learning. In the absence of the carefully thought-out approaches to the instructional design of 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 & Palmieri 2002, p.22). As Brennan (2003, p.56) notes, thinking about teaching and pedagogical issues have 'assumed a higher profile' and arguably is a necessary step when teachers and trainers develop ways 'to use technology in ways that conform more closely with what they know about effective practice'.

To be implemented effectively, online and flexible delivery also require a considerable shift in the skill base of VET teachers and trainers. In the light of this imperative, there have been attempts to quantify and examine the skills required to make such a transition and to provide quality learning experiences for students.

Kemshall-Bell (2001), based on the analysis of 102 responses from a web-based survey (52 of whom were Australian-based educators) emphasised the importance of the educator adopting the role of facilitator in the online environment. Kemshall-Bell also highlighted the importance of the teaching and learning processes rather than an over-reliance on the technology as the key to effective learning environments for students. Skills in engaging learners, motivating them, building and maintaining relationships and using the technology appropriately and competently were seen as critical to achieving this goal.

Brennan (2003) agrees that the role of the teacher/trainer does alter significantly in the online environment. The roles of mentor, facilitator, motivator, and guide assume greater importance. Skills for these roles should include the ability to:

✧ use the technology effectively

✧ develop curriculum

✧ manage effectively—particularly in relation to the organisation of time and availability

✧ communicate and reflect the effectiveness of student learning.

(Brennan 2003, p.64)

Further, Brennan's research illustrates how ideas of 'good teaching' are challenged in the online environment. While using technology well and competently is considered important by teachers and trainers, effective teaching in this environment also has a strong affective and attitudinal dimension. Alongside technological and pedagogical skills, teachers and trainers are also being challenged to think about enhanced skills in communication and relationships with students, questioning strategies, giving feedback and creating learner-centred environments. Teachers and trainers will also need to come to grips with new rules relating to security and privacy in the online environment (Brennan 2003, pp.64–6).

In examining the nature of quality online learning, Cashion and Palmieri (2002) strongly assert the importance of good teachers to high-quality learning experiences for students. In their study, students reported that they relied on teachers for support, interaction, clear instruction, prompt and

clear responses to questions and well-timed feedback. Like the studies of Brennan (2003) and Horton and Osborne (2003), this study also found that teachers and students had a preference for flexible or hybrid approaches to learning, rather than a total reliance on online modes of learning, thus further adding to the work demands and potential impact of this learning on teachers' and trainers' work as they move across multiple learning environments.

Research suggests that a more realistic assessment of teacher and trainer workloads is needed as the online environment is more intensive than traditional distance education or face-to-face classroom work (Harper et al. 2000, p.21; Cashion & Palmieri 2002; Schofield, Walsh & Melville 2000). While preparation for teaching may be the same for both classroom and online environments, teaching and moderation online takes more time (Cashion & Palmieri 2002, p.79). In their study on the implications of online learning for the organisation of VET practitioners, Schofield, Walsh and Melville (2000) outlined a number of ways in which the nature of online delivery has brought about the redesign of teachers' work. Specifically, role functions had increased in breadth, expanding to embrace multiple roles. Building relationships with a range of stakeholders (other teachers, students, management and industry) had become a key element of the work role.

Further, because of the demands placed on teachers in relation to responsiveness to students in the online environment, coupled with students' and teachers' varying notions of parameters such as 'promptness' attached to this criterion, workloads can become difficult to quantify and contain (Cashion & Palmieri 2002). Clear expectations and standards in relation to contact with students are viewed as essential. Teachers participating in recent research studies (Cashion & Palmieri 2002; Kilpatrick & Bound 2003; Horton & Osborne 2003) point out that many of the changes to work arrangements have not been taken into account by management, particularly in relation to what 'counts' as teachers' work (student contact hours are not a meaningful indicator of levels of activity in a virtual classroom). Teachers believe that current budgeting and reporting requirements struggle to make visible the real level of their work efforts (Cashion & Palmieri 2002, Kilpatrick & Bound 2003). In a study of online delivery in regional Australia, Kilpatrick and Bound (2003) found that teachers' efforts in relation to online delivery were constantly undermined by a lack of institutional support, state and federal administrative requirements, and management's poor understanding of the demands that online delivery placed on them. Teachers in this study also observed that they believed their work lives had become more 'lonely', feeling that they had less time for interaction with their peers because they needed to spend more time at their computer (Kilpatrick & Bound 2003, p.193). Whether this experience is unique to teachers working in online environments located in regional areas, or a product of changing work design, is a debatable issue that warrants further attention.

The evidence to date suggests that the adoption of online and flexible delivery has significant implications for human resource management and industrial relations inside VET organisations. As Guthrie notes:

> … because students may be working at any time of the day or night, providing continuity of support is a challenge, especially given a teaching workforce which is becoming increasingly part-time and casualised. (Guthrie 2003, p.15)

This issue of the part-time and casualised nature of the workforce is significant since all of the research examining online and flexible delivery conducted over the past three years and involving teachers has, in all but one case, not explored the impact of online and flexible delivery on the work of part-time and contract staff compared with that of full-time tenured staff. In the study conducted by Schofield, Walsh and Melville (2000), 13 of the teachers who participated were employed mostly on long-term contracts. Only one was an hourly paid/sessional teacher. Comments from these teachers suggested that, rather than being a hindrance, their contract status had in fact propelled them towards engagement with online learning (Schofield, Walsh & Melville 2000, p.15). In many respects, the circumstances of these teachers reflects the trends identified in recently completed work on the changing role of VET practitioners (Harris, Simons & Clayton forthcoming) which emphasised the pursuit of 'opportunities' rather than any long-term planning

process as the means by which VET staff advance their employability and their career prospects. However, the researchers concluded:

> There are obviously substantial additional barriers to greater involvement of part-time teachers who are paid only for their class time and not for associated design or development work involved in taking online learning. (Schofield, Walsh & Melville 2000, p.16)

The literature examining the experiences of VET teachers and trainers in online and flexible delivery emphasises the significance of the move to these environments for teachers and trainers, not only in terms of their work but also in relation to their perceptions of themselves and their understandings of the teaching/learning process. Evidence also suggests that teachers and trainers need to play an active role in shaping how technology is integrated into practice. Arguably, these issues could equally apply to all VET teachers and trainers, regardless of the nature of their employment. However, the research also highlights that the adoption of flexible and online technologies does have implications for human resource management and industrial relations within VET organisations. The changed labour market conditions for VET teachers and trainers appears to offer opportunities for those willing to take up the 'opportunities' offered by online and flexible delivery to create new spaces in which they can develop their knowledge and skills, and hence their employability. This current project tests these assertions by examining in closer detail the ways in which contract and casual staff are engaged in online and flexible delivery, and explores the differences between the experiences of these staff and their full-time, tenured counterparts.

Professional development to support teachers and trainers in online and flexible delivery

In addition to providing a variety of insights into the changing role of VET teachers and trainers working in online and flexible delivery environments, the literature also suggests that professional development issues need to be addressed to support the implementation of quality online and flexible approaches to learning. These issues are summarised in table 1.

There is considerable agreement amongst researchers that online and flexible delivery requires teachers and trainers to develop significant sets of new knowledge, attributes and skills. While learning related to technology is suggested by a number of authors, the development of a wide range of teaching skills is rated significantly more frequently, supporting assertions in the literature that the adoption of online and flexible delivery requires much more than a translation of classroom teaching skills into online or flexible delivery environments.

Many of the suggested areas for professional development could potentially be provided using a range of strategies. Schofield, Walsh and Melville (2000) found that teachers involved in online delivery had participated in a range of informal and formal training programs, including development and action learning projects. Four main sources of learning were cited:

✧ learning by doing

✧ learning through work colleagues and teamwork

✧ learning through communities of practice

✧ learning through formal off-the-job professional development.

(Schofield, Walsh & Melville 2000 pp.11–13)

Table 1:   Perspectives from the literature on issues that should be addressed in staff development

Author(s)	Suggested focus for professional development for teachers and trainers working in online and flexible delivery environments
Brennan (2003)	◇ Knowledge/information relating to privacy, interactivity and security in online environments
	◇ Communications skills—written and verbal, focusing on clarity and regularity
	◇ Understanding of constructivist approaches to teaching
	◇ Development of 'attitudinal predispositions' of perception, compassion, creativity and collaboration
	◇ Curriculum development, implementation, assessment
	◇ New management practices to support work reorganisation
	◇ Skills to enable reflection on effectiveness of student learning
	◇ New technological and facilitation skills
Candy (2003)	◇ Development of information literacies across a range of technologies
Cashion and Palmieri (2003)	◇ Training in online facilitation
	◇ Management of self-paced learning groups
	◇ Moderation of online discussion
	◇ Familiarisation with all aspects (subject content, options for students, available resources) of materials prepared by others
	◇ Instructional design for a variety of media
	◇ Team-working skills
Kemshall-Bell (2001)	◇ Skill sets in five specific areas:
	◇ Relating to learners
	◇ Communication
	◇ Technical skills
	◇ Managing the learning environment
	◇ Online teaching methods
Guthrie (2003)	◇ Teaching
	◇ Use of technologies
	◇ Opportunities to see what others are doing (best practice)
	◇ Keeping up to date
	◇ Resource development
	◇ Adequate levels of written and other communication skills
	◇ Training in assessment, evaluation
	◇ Online facilitation

These approaches resonate with a number of the products and services developed under the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, which specifically aim to provide the necessary support for VET teachers and trainers engaged in the adoption of flexible and online delivery. They also illustrate the devolution of responsibility for professional development to both employers and employees, and the value placed on informal learning and learning through work, as well as more structured professional development.

These products and services include:

◇ Toolboxes: a collection of resources such as assignments and learning activities which have been developed to support the development of specific sets of competencies

◇ Learnscope: a professional development activity which aims to encourage the development of the knowledge and skills needed by VET teachers and trainers to apply new learning technologies in their own contexts

◇ Flexways: an online tool which assists VET teachers and trainers learning about flexible delivery to plan their professional development

◇ Flexible delivery business planning framework: tools to assist training providers develop sustainable practice in the use of flexible delivery

◇ Flexible learning leaders: selected key staff, strategically positioned to provide support for other VET teachers and trainers and promote flexible learning.

Along with a range of other professional development programs (including Reframing the Future) and specific state/territory-based initiatives (for example see Evans & Ferguson 2001; Wright 1999), VET teachers and trainers are being encouraged to explore the potential of flexible and technology-based delivery mechanisms as a core part of their service provision. However, diverse approaches to the provision of professional development which only address technical or pedagogical issues represent only one part (albeit a significant one) of the larger task of supporting teachers and trainers to meet the challenges and dilemmas inherent in moving to online and flexible environments.

Literature on change management in the VET sector more generally, and online and flexible delivery specifically, also highlights the importance of professional development moving beyond 'technical skills and operational understandings' to addressing wider conceptual and affective issues (Walsh 2000, p.15). Arguably, the VET sector is now moving into the next phase in the adoption process in relation to online and flexible delivery. The 'early adopters' have held sway and it is now time to consider those who follow in their footsteps, who may not be as technologically adept nor so favourably disposed to facing yet another significant demand on their time and further pressure for change. 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). More critically:

> Online development also … [challenges] traditional notions of … working in isolation bringing together teams of people each with unique contributions of skills to be made to course design, development and delivery.   (Ellis & Phelps 1999, p. 2)

Current understandings of the sociology of VET teaching are being challenged. Ideological beliefs, motivations and, above all, culture change in organisations are issues to consider if online and flexible delivery are to become institutionalised. All these factors have significant implications for the types of staff development that best facilitate this process and how responsibility for professional development might be shared amongst VET teachers/trainers and their employers. It also has implications on how the development of knowledge, skills and attributes required by staff to work in flexible delivery environments might be provided in fair and equitable ways, while reflecting the return on investment in human capital potentially accrued to both employers and employees through these processes.

The change management literature is also replete with warnings against viewing change as an event rather than a process and as a de-personalised rather than a personalised and 'felt' experience (Simons 2001). Oliver (1996, cited in Jackson & Ferranti 2000, p. 52) alerts us to the stressful nature of educational change because 'education [demands] a level of personal commitment, which in turn brings a high degree of attachment to one's work'. Oliver (1996, cited in Jackson and Ferranti 2000, p, 2) also notes that teachers, being at different stages of their careers, often view change differently through their various lenses of previous experiences, current demands, and in light of other factors, such as job prospects and security of tenure. These latter issues are of relevance to this current study with its primary focus on VET teachers and trainers who are employed in contract or casual positions. The salience of this issue is further underscored by research examining participation in staff development by these staff in the VET sector.

Recent research undertaken by Harris et al. (2001) indicates that key stakeholders identify casualisation of the vocational education and training workforce as 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. 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 five factors impacting on their work was changes in delivery modes (Kronemann 2001).

Conclusion

The changing nature of teachers' and trainers' work in an online or flexible delivery environment represents significant challenges to current conceptualisations of what it means to teach in the VET sector. In a context where there is evidence of an increasing diversity in the ways in which VET teachers and trainers might be employed in the sector, it is becoming more difficult to untangle the relationship between employment status and what might be considered to be the optimal amount of professional development for different groups of employees and who might be best placed to take or share responsibility for this provision. Research examining the implementation of flexible and online delivery of VET, however, is notable for a general lack of attention to the roles of contract and casual staff in this work or the ways in which they are prepared for their roles in relation to these activities. This is despite evidence that suggests that issues relating to workforce attachment and job security matter when considering the best ways to prepare and support educators for significant educational change. This study therefore aims to grasp this issue and explore the degree to which contract and casual staff in VET are involved in and prepared for their work in flexible and online learning environments.

Case studies

This chapter focuses on the expectations and perspectives of contract and casual teachers and trainers involved in flexible delivery and online learning. The analysis is based on interview data obtained during visits to the selected case sites outlined below. The analysis commences with an examination of the nature and extent of involvement by contract and casual staff in online and flexible delivery. The knowledge, skills and attributes they need to operate in online and flexible environments are then explored. The next section of the chapter presents an overview of the professional development that teachers and trainers have undertaken to support their work in online and flexible delivery. In the final section the perspectives of permanent staff and managers working with these staff are presented to highlight some of the similarities and differences between experiences of contract and casual teachers and their full-time counterparts. The chapter concludes with the major findings from the case studies.

Case study sites

The case study sites were chosen for their potential to provide theoretically diverse perspectives on the issues of central concern to the study. The following information gives a comparative summary of the sites:

Adelaide Institute of TAFE (AIT)

✧ The Adelaide Institute of TAFE is a large public RTO with about 22 000 students enrolled annually.

✧ The program areas involved in the case study were justice studies, tourism studies and international languages.

✧ Students may choose to attend classes or select alternatives such as distance learning, electronic classroom or online studies.

✧ The Bachelor of Business (Tourism Management) is a three-year full-time course or equivalent. (The two-year Advanced Diploma of Tourism Management articulates to a one-year add-on degree level.) The Centre for Tourism also has links with the University of South Australia through a two-year articulation into a three-year Bachelor of Applied Science, Recreation Planning and Management. With Flinders University it jointly delivers the specialist tourism components of the Bachelor of Technology Ecotourism and Bachelor of Cultural Tourism.

✧ The Advanced Diploma of Tourism is two years full time and offers flexible options subject to availability.

✧ In the Certificate IV and Diploma in Justice Administration most modules are available through attendance or external mode. In Security (Guarding) Certificates II and III, some units are available through flexible delivery; the Justice Studies Certificate III is available by attendance or external mode.

Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE (TVT)

✧ The Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE is a large public RTO with over 10 000 students.

✧ The program areas involved in the case study are business services and para-dental studies.

✧ The institute uses flexible delivery extensively, including workplace learning, workshops, print-based materials, email contact with lecturers, bulletin boards, chat rooms and communication hubs.

✧ The Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training is available entirely online but some students choose a blended mode of delivery including some face-to-face contact.

✧ Toolboxes are being introduced to enhance the flexibility for on-campus students in some programs.

✧ Online technology is being developed with new training packages.

✧ Casual staff are usually employed for their content knowledge, and largely to deliver the external studies subjects.

HETA Incorporated

✧ HETA Incorporated is a small private RTO whose core business is not training but the provision of services—for example, placement of youth with disability.

✧ Program areas include computer training, return to work, pre-vocational training, assessment counselling, industry workshops.

✧ Flexibility includes self-pacing, options for face-to-face contact and distance education mode for rural students.

✧ Online learning is limited at this stage.

✧ Contract staff are part time and also work for other RTOs.

Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE (CSIT)

✧ Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE is a large public RTO with over 13 000 students, mostly part time.

✧ Program areas involved in the case study are tourism/hospitality and sport/recreation.

✧ Courses involve a joint venture and articulation with Sunshine Coast University.

✧ Flexible delivery includes face-to-face delivery of sessions that are also available online, negotiable attendance and electronic communication protocols.

✧ Staff are recruited for their industry experience and given paid training in delivery technology prior to the course beginning.

Queensland and Northern Territory Multimedia (QANTM)

✧ Queensland and Northern Territory Multimedia is a large private RTO with over 50 full-time employees and 15 contractors.

✧ It consists of two departments—QANTM Education delivering training in design, graphics, animation, multimedia and IT (information technology); and QANTM Studio producing eLearning courseware, CD-ROM products and undertaking web construction.

✧ This training provider maintains joint ventures and articulates with higher education, schools and TAFE institutes.

✧ Flexible delivery includes fast-tracking of programs.

◇ Instructors require current industry experience and specialised skills and knowledge.

Tropical North Institute of TAFE (TNIT)

◇ The program area involved in this case study is the Diploma of Nursing.

◇ The program uses a combination of face-to-face, clinical on-the-job training and video streaming over the 18-month program.

◇ The program is run by contract staff who are selected for industry knowledge but who have no background in teaching but must have Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training.

Getting involved in flexible and online delivery

The starting point for involvement in flexible and online delivery varied widely across the sample of contract and casual teachers and trainers. For some, their introduction was as developers of materials. Other teachers and trainers became involved as facilitators initially, and then expanded their activities into other areas. There were also some teachers and trainers who commenced and remained primarily involved as facilitators. Regardless of the initial functions they were engaged to undertake, all teachers and trainers shared the common experience of taking up 'opportunities' that were presented to them in their broader world of work as teachers and trainers. They reported a combination of circumstances, varying degrees of personal interest and motivation, and prior knowledge and experience that led to opportunities for involvement in flexible and online delivery. Staff working in private RTOs seemed more likely to have become involved because it was part of the job that they were employed to do. In the words of these teachers and trainers, flexible delivery 'came with the job' and involvement was 'something that just happened' because of the type of work they were involved in as contractors and consultants. The choice to become involved in this instance was limited, but nonetheless, enjoyable, interesting and, in part, a contributing factor to taking up employment.

In many respects, the group of teachers and trainers appear to have many of the characteristics of the 'early adopters' described in the change-management literature. They were 'champions' of flexible and online learning, motivated and eager to learn about new technologies and the possibilities. There was also an element of luck and 'being in the right place at the right time' to take advantage of opportunities, incentives and professional development opportunities that suited their interest and enthusiasm. Significantly, learner needs were often included in statements about the factors that led to involvement. The desire to increase access for learners unable to attend face-to-face classes and the development of ways to address the diversity of learner needs, learning styles and personal circumstances were the most often cited reasons motivating teachers' involvement. Where online learning was the focus of teachers' and trainers' efforts, it was the potential that the technology held in terms of promoting learning rather than the adoption of the technology *per se*, which was one of the key drivers for teachers and trainers taking up opportunities.

Teachers' and trainers' early experiences with flexible and online delivery were very diverse. This was partly a reflection of the history of the institutions in which they were located and appeared to be linked into the strategic management of program areas. For example, two teachers (working for the same public training provider, but each in a different program area) became involved in flexible delivery by virtue of expertise in a particular subject area. Originally employed to develop materials for face-to-face delivery in an area where the organisation had little experience, these teachers were then asked to convert these materials for use in flexible modes, which involved combinations of face-to-face and distance learning. In this instance it would appear that these contract staff were employed by virtue of their expertise meeting the needs of the organisation in areas where it wished to expand and this development focus shaped their introduction into flexible delivery.

Nature of involvement

The majority of respondents described themselves as involved in flexible delivery. These practices involved providing students with options in relation to when, where and, to a lesser extent, how they will learn. While some students were limited to distance or flexible modes because of geographic location, there were also attempts being made to provide options for students to enable them to choose the best mode of learning for them (for example, face-to-face or web-based learning). The use of print-based materials was usually combined with technologies such as email, bulletin boards, chat rooms and some face-to-face delivery. In some programs, flexibility was also reduced by the demands of completing work placements at particular times, in order to accommodate the needs of employers involved in these processes.

In keeping with previous research, the majority of teachers and trainers expressed a preference for hybrid or mixed-mode approaches to delivering training as they believed that this best met the needs of their students. In addition, a number of respondents noted that the practical nature of some courses (for example, nursing, floristry, security guarding, dental hygiene) required the development and assessment of practical skills which teachers and trainers believe warranted some face-to-face attendance. In the case of dental hygiene however, efforts had been made to extend flexibility to enable development and assessment of skills in workplaces:

> … a few of the students actually worked in the same practice or the same state or city and they actually got together and practised on each other. We require that there is a dentist in the clinic that actually supervises that practice. And we have a system when they have to fill out a journal and record what practices they carry out. And then the student has to sign and so does the dentist.

Barriers to involvement

Contract and casual staff experienced a number of barriers to becoming involved in flexible and online delivery, with only some being directly related to their employment status. In a number of instances, resistance from students and clients were significant issues. One trainer in a private training organisation expressed the view that, in many instances, clients did not understand what flexible delivery meant and this limited the degree to which it could be implemented. Another teacher suggested that some students did not have access to the technology and this also limited the degree to which flexible delivery could be implemented. The limitations of existing technology and networks were also cited as barriers to expanding online and flexible delivery and hence teacher involvement in the process.

Two trainers (contract employees) working in a private training organisation stated that they experienced significant barriers in 'getting started' with flexible delivery. One found the 'complexities of getting started' an issue while the other explained that adjusting to the facilitation techniques needed to function effectively when using technology, such as chat rooms, presented a significant challenge. In particular, adjustments to the lack of face-to-face interaction when using the technology were particularly problematic and compounded by his client group (youth, rural clients, people with disabilities). These statements were made in a context where the trainers had basically been employed to work in a flexible environment and largely felt that they had been 'thrown in the deep end'.

Two teachers who had commenced their involvement in flexible and online delivery as casual (hourly paid) staff and had subsequently become contract staff presented two interesting but divergent points of view. For one teacher, her status as a part-time employee meant that much of the early involvement was done in her own time:

> … when I was a part-time person … basically I did it from the goodness of my heart. I put
> hundreds of hours in. I used my computer at home. I used my internet connection at home. I
> used my electricity at home. I've probably donated thousands [of dollars] to the development
> of online learning. And that's not being a martyr. It's just the reality of what happened … It's
> not very long ago. And probably that's the situation still if you are a part-time person.

By way of contrast, another teacher who started her involvement in online delivery as a casual staff
member believed that her employment status, combined with different working conditions,
provided her with the freedom to take up the opportunities for involvement that were on offer at
the time:

> At the time I had the time. And we had more of a structured management structure. So
> therefore we were not so much of the self-managing workgroup that we are now. So there is a
> freedom about either being a [casual] or contract person. There was a freedom at that time
> that you can take on projects. And it's often if they don't have enough hours for your
> teaching you can support your time with development. So you are not so obsessive in the
> early contract days or late [casual] days…about getting enough hours to keep you going to
> your next contract. That comes later.

The quote also hints at the pressures that may be experienced by teachers as conditions of
employment change over time, supplanting old or creating new pressures to which the teacher must
adjust.

Some contract and casual staff also noted that their willingness to be involved in activities, such as
Learnscope projects, Reframing the Future and Toolbox development, 'singled them out' with
positive consequences:

> … as soon as you put your hand up for anything like that you are targeted as a person who
> will take on different bits and pieces … we are probably viewed as change agents in our
> section because we are happy to take on new things …

There was some conflicting evidence relating to the particular aspects of online and flexible delivery
that contract and casual staff might become involved in. Evidence in some program areas suggests
that casual staff (in contrast to those employed on full-time contracts or permanent part-time
positions) are unlikely to be involved in development of materials as they are 'usually employed for
their content knowledge' and therefore would more likely be involved in delivery of online and
flexible programs. Development work is largely the province of permanent and full-time staff who,
it was assumed, could bring 'continuity' to this task. In other circumstances, content expertise
provided a good reference point for involvement in materials development rather than delivery.

Skills, knowledge and attributes for flexible and online environments

Contract and casual teachers in the case study settings were able to provide extensive lists of the
knowledge, skills and attributes they needed to operate in flexible and online environments. These
are summarised in table 2. In many respects, the lists of knowledge, skills and attributes mirrors
those developed in other research (see for example, Brennan 2003; Kemshall-Bell 2001).

Table 2: Skills, knowledge and attributes needed to operate in flexible and online environments

Flexible delivery environment

Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
✧ subject matter expertise	✧ typing skills	✧ flexibility
✧ adult education and training	✧ ability to use a variety of resources and strategies to facilitate learning	✧ creativity
✧ working in industry	✧ ability to use software to design materials	✧ approachable
✧ how people learn	✧ good communication skills (listening, talking, questioning)	✧ supportive
✧ 'big picture' knowledge—how subjects link together across a program/course	✧ counselling/advising	✧ flair for design
✧ knowledge of appropriate software and technologies and their uses	✧ giving feedback	✧ understanding
✧ education	✧ encouraging/motivating students	✧ confidence
✧ how to translate courses from face-to-face to flexible delivery	✧ use of email, chat rooms, bulletin boards, video and audio conferencing	✧ ability to be a learner
✧ knowledge of technology and its capacity	✧ writing skills	✧ sense of humour
✧ workplaces—their demands and needs	✧ design skills	✧ commitment
✧ student needs/life experiences	✧ project management	✧ passion
✧ assessment	✧ record-keeping	
	✧ ability to facilitate learning for wide range of learners	
	✧ leading and facilitating discussion	
	✧ developing a 'social environment' in virtual classroom	
	✧ time management	
	✧ research skills	
	✧ ability to read and interpret written information	
	✧ dealing with resistant learners	
	✧ internet searching strategies	
	✧ assessment	
	✧ selecting appropriate resources and content	
	✧ skills in the operational side (receiving assignments, responding to students, managing the education process)	

Online environment

Knowledge	Skills	Attributes
✧ keeping up to date with industry	✧ ability to work in teams/work collaboratively with others	✧ encouraging
✧ subject matter expertise	✧ facilitation skills (encouraging, motivating)	✧ patience
✧ knowledge of how subject matter taught in classroom settings	✧ specific communication skills (being soothing, encouraging)	✧ interested in subject area
✧ in-depth knowledge of software applications (not just surface knowledge)	✧ use of range of tools (bulletin boards, chat rooms, email)	✧ flexible
✧ curriculum development from training packages	✧ managing time	✧ open to change
✧ management	✧ managing students	✧ acceptance of people 'where they are at' (empathy)
✧ models of teaching	✧ monitor student progress	✧ passion
✧ how to teach thinking skills	✧ developing relationships appropriate to supporting learning	✧ tact
	✧ writing skills	✧ diplomacy
	✧ research skills	
	✧ ability to troubleshoot	
	✧ manage complexities of online environment	
	✧ multi-tasking	
	✧ ability to establish clear ground rules with students about engagement in online environment	
	✧ liaison with management and other groups of people who assist in online environment	

It is also interesting to note the wider scope of knowledge required for work in a flexible environment suggested by respondents. This is perhaps indicative of the hybrid nature of the work, usually requiring staff to work across multiple learning environments (classroom, workplaces, web-based environments, distance education). It would appear that the cornerstone of the development of teaching knowledge, skills and attributes within the VET environment still rests in the classroom, since respondents made a significant number of references to knowledge of classroom delivery as important for working in both flexible and online environments. It is also perhaps indicative of the often-stated preference for hybrid or mixed-mode forms of the delivery.

A number of contract and casual staff raised knowledge and skill requirements they believed were unique to their experience. While not directly related to their work in online and flexible delivery, these issues pointed to some of the work environment issues that directly impacted on their efforts to fulfill their assigned work roles. The first of these issues relates to the manner in which contract and casual staff might be integrated into the communication networks within a particular program or department. Arguing that constant communication between staff is important for the overall quality of student learning, one teacher asserted that particular attention needs to be paid to the ways in which contract and casual staff are included, and the supports which are established to enable this process. What appears to be at the core of this issue is the ways in which communities of practice enable contract and casual staff to move from the periphery towards the core of the community and to be actively engaged in aspects of that community.

The second issue related to the ways in which a trainer (employed as a contractor by a private training organisation) felt the need to establish their credibility as a key part of their role. This appears to be an issue in a context where trainers are employed in workplaces on a short-term basis on behalf of a registered training organisation:

> [What] I was referring to … is if you enter a room or talk on the phone or speaking to someone as a trainer … there's an expectation that what you are going to provide is at least a feeling or semblance of knowledge … because people … will say this person sounds like they actually know what they are talking about … and if you don't have that, or lose that for some reason, it doesn't mean that it can't be regained. But you need to work on it. And I believe you have to do it a lot more actively and consciously than someone who is in an established position with a title.

The third issue related to the ability of a contract or casual staff member to be able to 'go in and out' of organisations according to the requirements of a contract. This often involved dealing with contingencies (for example, when resources were unexpectedly unavailable) and feeling confident enough to 'do what you have to do' largely unsupervised. The following quote from a teacher involved in flexible delivery for a private training provider illustrates this aspect of the work:

> … probably being able to go with the flow is the important thing. To be able to walk in, know what you've got to do, make sure it's all delivered in the right way and then actually just leave and that's it.

The latter part of this quote also alludes to the issue of maintaining boundaries around work roles and being clear about what a contract or casual staff member might be reasonably be expected to do within a particular context.

The final issues were related to access to information and the perception that permanent staff had easier access to information than casual staff. This meant that these staff needed to be more proactive and confident in asking for information when needed, particularly in relation to services for students and workplace policies. The importance of being self-directed in these matters was also related to the need to look to future employment prospects:

> … I need to train myself to be ready for what's to come a few months down the track … [I am] fairly focused on trying to end up with a permanent job [and] … need to be futures orientated; if you sit around and wait for things to happen you will be sitting around at home.

Another contract teacher noted:

> You know you are not there five days a week and decisions are made and you are not included, you don't get the information which … is necessary and relevant … and in a lot of cases you have to fight for the information and go looking for it … and … you don't find out vital information until you have [made a mistake] … Most of the time they say "well that's no excuse—it's on the intranet". OK maybe I should take more responsibility and get on the intranet every day but if I am casual or part-time and I am only here for 12 hours a week when do I have the time?

While these issues are not centrally related to working in online and flexible environments, they do point to the importance of taking into account the context in which contract and casual staff find themselves and the reality that employment status does matter in terms of perceptions of roles and their relationships with the permanent VET workforce. In particular, knowledge of the system in which a contract or casual person is working seems vital, particularly in relation to what one casual teacher called the 'pedestrian things'; that is, the right forms to complete or how to complete roll books.

Transition from face-to-face to online and flexible delivery

The variety of perspectives offered in relation to the challenges teachers and trainers face in shifting from face-to-face to online and flexible delivery underscore the very personal nature of change and how different individuals react to change. At the core of many challenges were issues about the changing relationship between teachers and trainers and their students, and the ways in which taken-for-granted interactions in a face-to-face environment were radically altered by the introduction of technology and the time it takes for teachers and trainers to be able to master the use of the technology and actively use it to create effective learning environments. This was perhaps best exemplified by the experience of a trainer working in a private training organisation where he was responsible for facilitating student interaction via a chat room. He found being unable to utilise physical activities, and physical and (to a lesser extent) visual representations in his teaching practice very limiting. Moreover, identifying ways of communicating with students presented significant challenges that took time to overcome.

A significant number of teachers and trainers noted how communication with students changed in an online environment and that this was one of the most significant challenges they faced in the transition. Keeping control of the 'reams of information' that were generated by students required the development of particular strategies, as did the task of encouraging the 'quieter' student to participate in discussions. Responding to the number of emails and 'discussion threads' could become overwhelming even when trying to keep up on a daily basis. Several trainers considered this aspect of online work to be two or three times more time-consuming than communicating in face-to-face settings:

> It is substantially easier to deliver in the classroom and then walk out within that two or three-hour period.

Another trainer spoke of the transition from classroom to online and the challenge this created for her in understanding why some students were not progressing. In face-to-face teaching situations, the trainer could use verbal and non-verbal cues to ascertain interest and motivation. These were absent in an online situation. Establishing new patterns and contracts in relation to the amount and timing of communication between trainer and students was a new task to master. Another teacher (in a public training organisation) supported this experience, suggesting that learning to communicate in a

simple and efficient manner and establishing personal links with each person were the two most distinguishing features of her work in an online environment. However, she went on to claim that these were issues that 'good' teachers concentrated on, regardless of the learning environment and she felt that, in many respects, the years of experience she had accumulated in classroom environments had equipped her well for the transition to the online environment.

Several teachers and trainers believed that learning new software packages and how to use technologies such as digital cameras represented the single biggest issue in the transition from classroom to flexible delivery. In one instance, the challenge lay not so much in mastering the technology, as learning to work in teams with other people who had the technical expertise to support the teacher/trainer in the process of developing materials for the online and flexible environment.

Professional development for the online and flexible environment

Data from case study respondents suggest that there is a discernable link between employment status and opportunities for professional development and, as with previous research, access and opportunity appear to increase as the degree of attachment to a workplace increases. It is also apparent that significant proportions of professional development in the area of online and flexible delivery are informal and rely heavily on teachers and trainers engaging in experiential learning or informal learning and networking with colleagues. The reality would appear to be that professional development usually follows after a teacher or trainer has commenced the transition to working online or flexible delivery environments.

The case studies also illustrate that the content of professional development activities varied widely according to the needs of individual teachers and trainers and the work issues they were facing. Aside from initial training qualifications such as those required under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), the content of professional development activities could be classified into three broad groupings. Those which:

✧ concentrated on information technology skills and developing abilities with the technology that teachers and trainers were expected to use

✧ related to the task of developing materials for the online or flexible learning environment

✧ focused on the knowledge and skills needed to deliver and assess in an online environment.

The majority of casual staff in the case studies reported that they attended professional development 'when they could'. Issues of cost and time were constantly cited as reasons for non-participation. Teachers (along with managers) reported that casual staff were expected to fund and attend professional development in their own time and at their own expense. The threshold at which employers offered assistance varied from organisation to organisation. For example, one private training provider suggested a casual employee who worked 20 hours a week would receive 'some commitment but for someone who is only working a short amount of hours we would expect that they do that themselves'. Personal circumstances often prohibited participation even though the willingness was there. For example, women who may be available during the day often have childcare responsibilities and it would cost them money to attend meetings. Another teacher cited an interest in further study but finances were limited because of her casual employment status.

For many contract and casual staff, formal professional development was often initially restricted to completing the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training and, in some instances, in-house courses on online and flexible delivery. This latter form of professional development was the most prevalent in public training providers. A large amount of professional development was informal, work-based and included support and mentoring from colleagues, sometimes

supplemented by formal programs. Access to formal programs of professional development was reported in many instances as 'limited'. Casual staff who had made the transition into part-time or full-time contract positions often reported that formal professional development was done in their time, and sometimes in response to an invitation to which 'they had put up their hand'. As their employment status changed and their skills and knowledge grew with experience, they gained access to more formal courses which filled any 'gaps' in their knowledge and provided opportunities for immersion in flexible and online learning work.

Staff who worked as self-employed contractors for private training organisations reported that they relied heavily on their colleagues for support and assistance. Formal professional development opportunities were minimal and rarely offered by the employing training organisation. This was often a product of the employing relationship and the reality of working life:

> While some RTOs [registered training organisations] have programs of some sort within the organisation, getting timely information is an issue: not because they ignore you. It's just that you are a contractor. So why would you be on their mailing list? It's an internal memo … So you can keep chasing, but reality is life goes by pretty fast and usually you only hear about it at its happening. By then you can't fit it into your schedule

Another trainer supported this perspective, adding that: 'because you are employed on contract most places will assume that you will go out and do it yourself'. However, this trainer did expand on this observation by stating that the organisation with which he was currently employed did make sure that the teacher was up to date through quality assurance processes well integrated in the organisation's processes.

Despite the clear challenges and sometimes conflicting views about who might be responsible for the provision of professional development for contract and casual teachers, there was unanimous support for its importance in assisting teachers and trainers to deal with the challenges of moving to an online or flexible learning environment. Respondents, when asked to identify the characteristics of good professional development, suggested that tailored professional development, sensitive to the life experiences of contract and casual staff was essential. Professional development most valued by teachers and trainers included courses that were practical and well designed. Learnscope projects were often noted as an example of this type of development. As an example of an ideal mix of activities, one respondent cited a combination of access to courses for online learning, Web CT, involvement in Learnscope projects and opportunities to work with a 'buddy' to put into practice what had been learnt in courses. Professional development provided opportunities for teachers and trainers to 'get the big picture' was also considered important. Ensuring access for contract and casual staff could also be enhanced by offering courses in a variety of ways and by people who understood their capabilities.

Perspectives of permanent staff

In order to further highlight some of the key similarities and differences between contract and casual teachers and trainers, and their permanent counterparts, interviews were also held with a small number of permanent staff at each of the case study cities.

Staff employed on a permanent basis in public training providers described the move into flexible and online delivery as arising out of their personal responses to opportunities that presented themselves. For example, two respondents (permanent part-time staff) reported that their prior experience in distance education was a significant catalyst to their taking up the option of expanding from flexible into web-based delivery of training. Another respondent was invited to become involved because of her particular subject expertise, which formed the basis of her initial work as a developer of online materials.

In many respects the reasons for becoming involved in flexible delivery were the same as for their contract and casual counterparts. All were very committed to what flexible delivery might be able to offer students and all expressed that there was an 'element of luck' in being able to take up the available opportunities to engage in new technologies or experiment with more flexible modes of delivery. The strong motivator for involvement in flexible and online delivery came from the opportunities for promoting student-centred learning rather than the opportunity to use new technologies.

As stated previously, the history of the institution and the program areas in which teachers and trainers were employed played a significant determining role in shaping the extent to which all teachers and trainers (regardless of their employment status) become involved in flexible and online delivery. For example, flexible delivery was widely used in the business services program of one public training provider. This provided greater opportunities for all staff to be involved in a wide range of programs, particularly those with an external studies component. Flexible delivery had been a strategic priority in the annual plan for the program area 'for the last few years' and there had been considerable involvement in projects such as Learnscope and Toolbox development. This had been achieved in a context where the institute had a flexible learning manager (partly funded through Learnscope) and a number of flexible learning leaders to mentor and support staff.

Permanent teachers (whether full- or part-time) appeared to have had the opportunity to develop their experience in antecedent practices—such as distance education, audio and video conferencing—in ways which prepared them well for the transition into more flexible modes of delivery employing new technologies. For example, a teacher in a public training provider (who was employed on a permanent part-time contract) described her employer as 'always having an interest in flexible learning'. Her pathway initially included experimenting with video and audio conferencing, which led to a scholarship from her employer to travel overseas to learn more about flexible learning. Opportunities to be involved in various aspects of development of materials (making videos, preparing print-based materials) unfolded over time. This background provided a solid foundation from which the teacher could take advantage of the opportunities made available under the Australian Flexible Learning Framework for involvement in projects such as the Flexible Learning Leaders and further immersion in online delivery. Over time, these opportunities were taken up in parallel with other teaching duties, including face-to face teaching. This type of experience provides a strong contrast to that of contract and casual teachers who often experienced a more contracted pathway into flexible and online delivery by virtue of the nature of their employment ('it is what we were employed to do').

Initial involvement in flexible and online delivery offered challenges for all staff, regardless of their employment status. Resistance from students, clients and lack of access to technology reflected broader contextual issues with which all teachers had to grapple. Similarly, all teachers and trainers needed to come to terms with their own feelings and concerns about the adoption of flexible and online delivery and work through these issues. An inability to manage all the demands that this move placed on teachers and trainers transcended employment status and seemed to be more a product of individual teachers' and trainers' employment histories and their deeply held beliefs about the nature of quality teaching and learning. For example, one teacher (employed in a permanent part-time position) believed that her resistance and initial belief that flexible delivery 'would not work' in her area because it could not accommodate all the requisite 'hands-on' learning was a significant issue that she personally needed to resolve. In addition, this teacher also reported that the sight of herself during a video conference combined with managing all the demands of video streaming taxed her confidence and skills considerably, given her admission that she 'could send an email and that's about it and use a word processor'!

Full-time and permanent teachers suggested that time was a significant barrier to their involvement, since work with online and flexible delivery had to be undertaken alongside their other work tasks such as teaching, coordinating and 'keeping the courses going'. The tension between opportunities to

be involved in activities which teachers and trainers found exciting, challenging and stimulating, and other work activities were keenly felt in some circumstances, limiting involvement in tasks such as development of materials normally required large amounts of uninterrupted time. Some permanent teachers suggested that these time pressures were similar to those experienced by contract and part-time staff whose time was necessarily limited because they were 'generally working' more than one job. However, some permanent staff argued that, because of this division of time and loyalties, they were often better placed to take up offers of involvement in development for online and flexible delivery than their contract and casual colleagues.

When asked to identify any specialist knowledge, skills and attributes that contract or casual staff specifically needed to develop, permanent respondents were either reluctant or not able to do so. Comments seem to suggest that, while the knowledge and skill base was arguably the same, the experience of working in a contract or casual role required teachers and trainers to adapt and work within the constraints of their employment contracts. For example, one teacher argued that casual teachers necessarily have a limited role and often do not need to deal with the full scope of work required of a full-time, permanent employee (for example marketing of courses, preparation of teaching resources). Another teacher argued that, while the knowledge and skills are the same, contract and casual teachers may take longer to develop them simply because they do not work as intensively as full-time teachers. In addition, a teacher from a public training provider suggested that contract and casual staff are more often employed for their subject expertise rather than their skills in facilitating learning. The assumption here (supported in other research such as Harris et al. 2001) is that public training organisations are willing and able to support new staff with the required mentoring and supervision as they develop their teaching skills over time.

Staff employed in permanent positions reported participation in significant amounts of formal professional development attached to initiatives available under the Australian Flexible Learning Framework. Learnscope projects were frequently mentioned, along with various activities associated with Toolboxes as well as the Flexible Learning Leaders initiative. In many instances, these activities were taken in parallel with their growing involvement and expertise in flexible and online delivery. The teachers and trainers were very appreciative of these activities and the opportunities afforded by their employers for their participation. A majority of teachers and trainers reported they felt 'encouraged' to participate 'within budgetary constraints' which also had to be 'balanced with productivity'. As one full-time contract teacher noted:

> Everybody would agree that a lot of it takes place in your own time, even if it is supported by a system or a program.

There were a number of respondents who reported that systemic issues were a significant factor in the availability of professional development for all staff, regardless of their employment status. Some asserted that their employer 'does not have a budget' for professional development or that these budgets had recently been cut. One teacher perhaps best summed up the situation:

> … people are prepared to put in nonetheless. But I always think it's a bit of a farce. We are teaching people about learning organisations and these are the kinds of things that learning organisations do and we're not. We don't exhibit a lot of those qualities. And we have a management that is very supportive. But it's the sector that's the problem …

Perspectives of managers

As stated previously, the case studies offered conflicting evidence relating to the various aspects of online and flexible delivery that contract and casual staff might become involved in. When asked about this issue, several managers suggested that the involvement of these staff can vary according to the specific conditions under which they are employed and there are no 'hard and fast rules' relating to the ways in which these teachers and trainers might be employed. Normally, these staff

are employed to undertake a particular task and there may or may not be any scope for extending or justifying their involvement in flexible and online delivery. Permanent staff, on the other hand, were often expected to be 'responsive to whatever comes in the door' and were more likely to be more involved in tasks such as development work, rather than meeting tightly defined needs. Notwithstanding these observations, a few managers also stated that contract and casual staff could be employed specifically to undertake development work for flexible and online delivery, particularly if they were subject experts. In this instance they were likely to be paired with a permanent staff member to work on a particular project, implying the key role that permanent staff play in bringing 'continuity' to work.

The manager in a private training organisation placed early experiments with flexible delivery within a business context, claiming that adoption of this mode was a necessary strategy if the organisation was to continue 'moving forward':

> … prior to that we were stuck very much in the old delivery of training … but it's a very thin market and you have to look at where the dollar is so that you can deliver to benefit the client. And if the money is not there to support that, you have to be innovative in the way that you produce a program, so that it has further reach, so that you can increase participation … when numbers are an issue … through changes of government and changes with the ways grants are given and the funding that has been available for training specifically, we have been forced to look at the flexible element with what we do.

Access to funding in the form of Learnscope projects and the requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework also added impetus to these moves. In this context, early pathways were characterised as increasingly 'adding flexibility', as teachers moved away from solely (although not entirely) classroom-based teaching to hybrid forms of delivery that combined various technologies (email, chat rooms) with a variety of face-to-face delivery methods in order to expand the business. This move affected all staff, regardless of their employment status with the organisation, with managers observing both full-time and contract staff feeling the impact of these developments on their early experiences with flexible delivery.

Managers were able to offer some observations on the challenges that contract and casual staff have in maintaining equitable boundaries around their work which can impact on their ability to participate in new developments in flexible and online learning. Management of the workload within their paid time is an issue for these staff. Permanent staff employed on campus full time can manage their time around teaching and preparation and 'can pick up a bit of external, online etc. while they are on campus'. While attempting to ensure that staff who wanted to be involved were able to, the manager believed there were some problems with the idea that everyone should be involved in every single activity. She further argued that there are human resource issues relating to online and flexible delivery that affect all staff:

> The issue of work conditions for any staff are becoming more and more complex … measuring productivity … what is an hour? Is it an hour on the phone to an individual? An hour spent doing emails? Or is it an hour in front of a group of 15 students in a class? Nobody has really worked that out yet in terms of productivity. And when you are talking about [casuals] it's even more complex.

Another manager offered a different perspective on the issue of facilitating the transition from classroom to flexible and online delivery, suggesting that contract and casual staff do face some significant issues because of their sometimes tenuous attachment to their workplaces. This lack of attachment, usually due to their fewer working hours, meant that they did not 'get the whole picture':

> … as much as you try to be inclusive of hourly paid or part-time people, they are not here all the time so they don't get all the nuances … So they tend to come in and just do what they need to do for the subject but don't get the surrounding information. So I think that it makes it difficult for them …

In addition, this manager also claimed that online delivery required all staff to have a different 'mind set', whereby, instead of relating to groups, online delivery required teachers and trainers to develop sound one-to-one relationships with students. Moreover, the different medium places specific demands on teachers and trainers:

> … so they have to be switched on to how that's structured … I think that some of them still see online delivery as being like [print-based distance education] … That's different again. Once they get their heads around the fact that it's quite interactive and it's quite personalised, then I think they can move ahead with an understanding that is educationally sound …

Managers also offered a number of perspectives on the issue of professional development in flexible and online delivery for all staff in general, and for contract and casual staff specifically. Several managers noted that the identification of professional development needs of staff had become more formalised under the recently revised Australian Quality Training Framework. The requirement for planning for professional development had, however, created some frustration when funding is not made available to meet the needs identified by staff. One manager (employed in a public training organisation), while insisting that he should not make any distinction between casual, contract and permanent staff in relation to their access to professional development, accepted that the reality was often different from the rhetoric. He further elaborated on this issue:

> … in terms of funding professional development, there is a fair bit of pressure on us to put that towards permanent staff in a priority process … So if we are not giving them professional development, but giving it all to part-time people … we need to be a little bit careful about that because that's seen as a threat. You are developing all these people to take my place. It is difficult.

The experience of this manager highlights the politics of managing diverse workforces, where issues of power and influence necessarily impinge upon a range of work-related issues, if not in reality, then certainly in the minds of those charged with the management of that workforce.

One manager noted that professional development is the barrier to casual staff moving from traditional to flexible learning environments as there are usually gaps in knowledge and experience (compared with that held by permanent teachers). This necessarily requires a 'different lead-in time'. This barrier is further compounded by the fact that identifying development needs for casual staff is 'problematic'. Since casual staff are usually employed for their 'specific expertise in an area that we don't have expertise in', professional development needs have tended to focus on workplace policy or changes in curriculum (for example, the introduction of training packages):

> … something like professional development in online for [casuals] is pretty far down the agenda in terms of priorities.

These comments suggested that permanent staff have received stronger encouragement to participate in a range of professional development activities related to the introduction of flexible and online delivery, and in an ideal world this should not be the case. One manager observed that the challenges of providing professional development for casual staff are the same as for permanent staff. Both have workloads and it is not always possible to release them to 'do things that don't produce productivity'. Other demands (for example, the introduction of revised training packages) also affect priorities. The reality is that flexible learning is only one change among many that VET teachers and trainers are facing.

It was also crucial that professional development be delivered by people who understood the capabilities of contract and casual staff. As one manager noted:

> … I think most of the time you look at teachers *per se* and think that teachers should know this … a lot of the casual staff come from industry … they have just done the Certificate IV and … have a different capacities to what a full time teacher might have … casual staff have that flexible understanding and attitude which is a lot different to what it is in a teaching

> framework … AQTF [Australian Quality Training Framework] was a perfect example …
> trying to give AQTF elements to casual staff who had only been with you for a very short
> time … there is so much more work trying to explain the whys and wheres …

In relation to the provision of professional development, managers supported the observations of contract and casual staff that professional development follows work; that is, professional development needs only become apparent once the transition to the new learning environment has begun. One manager summarised the situation in the following manner:

> … there is a demand for us to develop this sort of delivery. Once we know we are doing it
> but we know that person is not going to have all the skills … what we generally [do] is use the
> first time they do this as a training exercise … the first time that you develop a subject online
> its one the first part of the evolution anyway … It's just that from the student delivery point
> of view it's a bit too experimental. And so what we generally do is get some students to pilot
> the first lot of material and then we sort it out from there. But that's not ideal. An ideal way
> would be train the person, develop it properly and then deliver. We tend to mix all this stuff
> together in one.

Another manager of a private training provider reported that professional development needs for all staff are identified in the same way, but the reality is that permanent staff are often more involved in professional development activities, simply 'because they are around more'. In addition, the manager asserted that the organisation has less influence over what contract staff might decide to undertake for professional development, but pointed out that all that could be done was to ensure that staff are told what they need to undertake in terms of awareness of the Australian Quality Training Framework standards and legislative requirements.

Conclusion

Teachers and trainers working as contract and casual employees in registered training organisations occupy a unique position within the VET workforce. Their roles can vary enormously in terms of the work that they are contracted to do. Working in flexible and online delivery is no exception and the respondents in the case studies reported in this chapter paint a rich picture of varied experiences as they move into this evolving field of work. In many respects, the teachers and trainers whose experiences are reported here are exceptional in that all of them are drawn from the group of VET practitioners who were the 'early adopters' of flexible and online delivery. As such, they have been able to exploit the opportunities this innovation has offered, albeit in some circumstances in a limited way. It is therefore questionable to infer that the experiences reported by the teachers and trainers in this study are indicative of teachers and trainers who have only recently begun to engage with online and flexible delivery. Changing circumstances—for example the apparent reduction in budgets for professional development—coupled with the reluctance (and resistance) of many 'later adopters' create a very different context in which the politics of managing a casualised workforce are played out.

Within the boundaries of their working conditions, opportunities to become involved with flexible and online delivery would seem to be equally available to all staff, regardless of their employment status. Factors such as the development histories of particular RTOs and the program areas in which teachers and trainers are employed would appear to play a greater role in determining involvement than employment status. Furthermore, individual teachers' and trainers' employment histories (for example, involvement in distance education, extensive experience in the classroom environment) appear to impact on the ability of staff to take up the opportunities offered to them. It is difficult to gauge from this study the extent to which these opportunities were a matter of luck or the strategic choices made by management to encourage those staff considered to be most suitable. The reality perhaps lies between these two extremes. It is also clear that decisions made in relation to workforce management play a role in determining opportunities for all staff to engage in flexible and online

delivery. In some organisations these work functions are viewed as the province of permanent staff, and casual/contract staff are employed in ways that free permanent staff to take up this work. In other instances, the employment of contract and casual staff is central to overall organisational goals to adopt flexible and online delivery as part of broader business plans.

The variety of perspectives offered by contract and casual teachers and trainers in the case studies underscores the very personal nature of the change and how individuals react to change. All teachers and trainers, regardless of their employment status, are likely to be challenged by the introduction of flexible and online delivery. The degree of challenge will vary, but the essential issue in providing suitable professional development rests with understanding the subjective experiences of those experiencing the change (Fullan & Stiegelbauer 1991; Fullan 1998, p.231). The case studies reinforce the importance of understanding the 'life world' of teachers and trainers as a necessary precondition to any change process, and the consequent establishment of professional development activities to address the actual concerns of teachers and trainers rather than preconceived ideas of what staff might need.

The experiences of the teachers and trainers reported in this chapter alert us to the problematic issue of thinking about contract and casual teachers as a homogeneous group, or as working in ways different from their permanent counterparts. There is little or no evidence from the case studies to claim that contract and casual teachers require different knowledge, skills and attributes for their work in flexible and online delivery from their permanent colleagues. Involvement in flexible delivery, like all VET delivery, rests on the development of a deep and thorough knowledge of classroom delivery as a cornerstone of all teachers' and trainers' work. However, the degree to which all contract and casual teachers are trained for this 'cornerstone' delivery on which other skills sets are based (those for flexible and online delivery), is arguable. The question that necessarily follows this line of thinking is whether contract and casual staff might be able to be trained for specialist roles in online delivery without having the requisite skills for flexible delivery.

The case studies reinforce the already documented link between employment status and opportunities for professional development. However, this study also extends our understanding by emphasising that a significant proportion of professional development in the area of online and flexible delivery relies heavily on experiential learning, informal learning and networking with colleagues, and that professional development follows work. Moreover, contract and casual staff appear to be highlighting some of the problematic features of a professional development pathway (broadly conceived as consisting of both formal structured, work-based and informal learning opportunities) which is framed by a particular employment relationship. The apparently more limited opportunities for informal learning, barriers to integration into wider working groups (and hence the learning opportunities afforded by these) are of concern as they raise issues of access and equity, and the potential for assumptions to be made about the roles of contract and casual staff on the basis of their employment status rather than on the recognition of the knowledge, skills and attributes that these teachers and trainers bring to their work, and the fact that professional development needs emerge out of the experience of the transition to new ways of working.

The case studies highlight the challenges and dilemmas inherent in managing and being part of a diverse VET workforce, where issues of power and influence necessarily impact on a range of work-related issues. Flexible delivery is only one of many challenges demanding professional development activities. The interests of the various groups—permanent versus contract and casual staff; management versus teachers and trainers—are inherently bound up in decisions about who might be encouraged to participate in professional development opportunities and how these opportunities might be made available. The case studies also highlight the importance of clear and strategic thinking about issues relating to the management of the VET workforce more broadly, and the importance of questioning the decisions made in relation to the ways in which particular segments of the workforce can be engaged in particular functions, and hence in need of particular forms of professional development.

Online survey

The survey instrument

The survey instrument contained a total of 43 questions in three separate sections:

✧ background information

✧ involvement in flexible delivery

✧ involvement in online learning

Participants were asked to complete either section 2 or 3, or both 2 and 3, depending on whether they were involved in flexible delivery only, online learning only, or both. Most questions required selection of an answer from a choice of responses, while some were open-ended and invited an extended response. Participants needed to record answers sequentially. Once completed, the survey was submitted electronically.

The summary below is based on a total of 149 usable responses received from participants in Victoria (42%), Queensland (24%), South Australia (16%), New South Wales (11%), Western Australia (5%), Australian Capital Territory (1%) and Northern Territory (1%).

Summary of responses

Background information

✧ Nearly two-thirds (64%) reported that they were employed by a public RTO; the remainder were employed by private training organisations, except for six respondents who were unsure of the status of their employing organisation.

✧ Forty-five per cent of respondents recorded the status of their employment as contract and 35% as hourly paid (interpreted in this report as casual). The remaining 20% chose 'other' rather than describe their employment according to either of these descriptors.

✧ Forty-two per cent of respondents claimed to be working between 11 and 35 hours per week, whereas 21% of respondents reported to be working fewer than 10 hours per week. However, a notable percentage reported to be working from 36 to 40 hours per week (20%) or over 40 hours per week (17%).

✧ Most respondents (77%) claimed to be employed as a VET teacher/trainer by only one RTO.

✧ Sixty per cent of respondents stated that their main occupation was teaching.

✧ Computing (17%), business administration (13%), multi-field education (11%), health/community services (10%) and service/hospitality (9%) were the top five programs in which respondents were involved.

✧ Sixty-two per cent of respondents were female, and just over half (55%) of the sample reported to be aged between 40 and 54. Only 10% were under 30 years of age.

This information reinforces the picture of a highly segmented and diverse workforce within the VET environment, particularly amongst those teachers and trainers who do not describe themselves as full-time or permanent employees. Furthermore, the large number of respondents who reported working more than 36 hours per week demonstrates that the nature of casualised employment in this sector does not necessarily equate with working fewer hours than full-time permanent staff.

Involvement in flexible delivery

The following comments refer to those respondents who were involved in flexible delivery. There were 113 such respondents, representing 76% of the sample.

✧ Over half of those involved in flexible delivery had been involved for more than two years; 40% of respondents had been involved from 6 months to 2 years.

✧ Of those who were involved in flexible delivery, 53% reported that their role was learning through a mixture of face-to-face and online learning. Thirty-seven per cent claimed to have facilitated learning through a mixture of online learning and distance (print-based) materials. Interestingly, 9% claimed to facilitate learning totally online.

✧ The course/modules offered students the flexibility to decide their own rate of progression through a course, including how they learned (56%) and where they learned (50%).

✧ Forty-fiver per cent of respondents stated that they found most aspects of flexible delivery different or very different from that of a classroom teacher. These respondents considered this due to the needs of the student and working environment being personalised and customised, and that flexible delivery is a more hands-on approach, requiring more organisational skills and resources. At the other end of the scale, 18% found flexible delivery to be similar or mostly similar to that of a classroom teacher, with some stating that, regardless of delivery, all students receive the same qualification and are offered the same amount of information.

✧ Forty-five per cent of those respondents involved in flexible delivery reported to have completed or were currently studying formal qualifications. About half of these respondents received or were receiving employer support, mainly through assistance with Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) fees.

✧ Almost 80% of respondents who had completed or were currently completing formal qualifications, stated that their studies were useful in relation to learning about flexible delivery.

✧ Forty-three per cent claimed that they have completed some employer-offered structured education and training. Respondents perceived these courses/programs to be mostly useful because they helped with instructing students, improving computer skills and providing support.

✧ Fifty-eight per cent of respondents involved in flexible delivery claimed to have completed informal learning activities in the last 12 months. Over half of these respondents found the informal learning activities to be useful in learning about flexible delivery because they helped them with their own teaching and they learnt from others through sharing knowledge.

✧ Almost half of the respondents claimed that location and timing difficulties prevented them from accessing the professional development needed for flexible learning. Forty-three per cent stated that work pressures prevented them from attending.

✧ When asked about the probability of starting any formal qualifications within the next 12 months, only 13% of respondents reported that they were certain they would begin, while 15% reported there was almost no chance of doing so.

✧ Twenty-six per cent of respondents stated that there was a very slight probability to no chance that they would receive employer-offered education and training, while 9% were certain that they would. Overall, 43% of respondents believed that they would receive some form of structured training in flexible delivery in the next 12 months.

Involvement in online learning

The following comments refer to those respondents who were involved in online learning. There were 78 such respondents, representing 52% of the sample.

✧ Over a third of those involved in online training had been involved for more than two years.

✧ Sixty-five per cent of respondents claimed to facilitate learning mainly through a mixture of face-to-face and online learning. Nearly 40% stated a mixture of online learning and distance (print-based) materials. About a quarter facilitated learning totally online.

✧ Sixty-seven per cent of respondents stated that the courses/modules offered students the flexibility to choose their own rate of progression. This was also stated for flexible delivery. Fifty-eight per cent also stated that students had the flexibility to decide where they wanted to study and 46% reported that students could decide how they wanted to study.

✧ Eighty-five per cent of respondents claimed to undertake the role of facilitation in relation to online learning. Sixty-one per cent stated that they developed the material and 32% were involved in the design of material.

✧ Online learning activities, online content delivery and email communication with students were the instructional strategies used most often by respondents. These strategies were used twice as much as discussion forums and online submission of assignments. The least used strategies were online assessment and chat rooms.

✧ Just over half (53%) of the respondents involved in online learning stated that most aspects of online learning are different from classroom-based teaching. The most common reasons given for this were that students can work at their own pace and the difference in delivery of content. Eleven per cent however stated that they were similar or mostly similar.

✧ Thirty per cent of respondents had either completed or were currently studying some form of formal qualification. Of the respondents, 60% claimed to have received or are receiving support from their employer, mainly by way of assistance with HECS fees. Most (75%) respondents stated that these formal qualifications were useful/very useful in relation to online learning.

✧ The majority of respondents (79%) claimed that the employer-offered activities were useful/ very useful as they were relevant and up to date and allowed respondents to try different things.

✧ Two-thirds of respondents involved in online learning have completed informal learning activities in the last 12 months. The informal activities were considered useful/very useful. Respondents claimed that these activities were useful/very useful as they were up to date and allowed respondents to share information, which they found very beneficial.

✧ Respondents stated that location and timing difficulties and work pressures (both equal on 41%), a lack of funding (21%) and insufficient information (20%) prevented their access to professional development.

✧ About two-thirds of respondents gave a low probability to beginning some form of formal qualification or receiving employer-offered structured training within the next 12 months.

✧ It is estimated that 41% of respondents believed that they would begin to study some form of formal qualification in online learning in the next 12 months.

✧ It is estimated that 43% of respondents believed that they would receive structured training in online learning in the next 12 months.

Conclusion

The online survey findings reflect the literature reviewed in relation to the penetration of online and flexible delivery, with only 9% of respondents claiming to facilitate learning totally online. The majority were still using a hybrid form of delivery which included a mixture of face-to-face, online

learning and print-based materials. This also resonates with the case study data, as most interviewees, including managers, made similar comments regarding mixed-mode or blended delivery as optimal for catering to a diversity of learning styles and needs.

The extent to which respondents considered flexible delivery to involve different ways of working from teaching face to face varied, but the individual comments to be found in tables 17, 18 and 19 (appendix B) are interesting and highlight the range of views about what constitutes teaching and facilitating in any environment. These responses reflect those of the case study interviewees in relation to aspects that are similar—for example, engaging learners, getting them to take responsibility for their own learning and being a facilitator, and aspects that are different; having to customise and adapt curriculum, take on new strategies and techniques and develop different organisational skills.

A significant proportion of respondents (85%) claimed to undertake the role of facilitation in relation to online learning, while, consistent with the case study findings, only 32% claimed to be involved in the design of material. However, the fact that 61% stated they were involved in developing the material suggests that facilitating online learning requires skills and knowledge that go beyond the level of basic delivery.

A relatively high number of respondents (45%) claimed to have completed or currently be studying formal qualifications in flexible delivery. As shown in the responses to question 18 in appendix B, formal courses were identified mainly as the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. A range of undergraduate and postgraduate university degrees in education and training—some specific to e-learning but mostly generic—were also identified. Interestingly, only 30% of those involved in online learning had completed or were studying formal qualifications in online learning, and only three of these mentioned the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, suggesting that, in its current form, this training package does not address online learning to a great extent.

A higher number of respondents (58%) reported informal learning activities in flexible delivery, with the responses to question 25 in appendix B indicating that discussions, seminars and workshops with peers and colleagues rated highly, as well as 'reading on the topic'. Furthermore, 10 respondents who regarded informal learning activities as useful or very useful qualified their responses with the observation that they 'learn from others involved, through sharing knowledge'. Such informal learning through interaction with colleagues and in work teams was also a feature of interviewee responses to questions about professional development opportunities.

The main barriers to professional development opportunities in both flexible delivery and online learning included location, timing, funding and family commitments, but also insufficient information and communication about opportunities, which accorded with the case study findings, especially for casual staff.

Key findings

Conclusions and key findings from the case study and survey data are presented against the nine research questions which were framed within the following four categories:

✧ context

✧ capabilities

✧ support structures

✧ barriers and outcomes

Context

1   What types of providers, courses and program areas offer flexible delivery and online learning options?

While the program areas and providers represented in the case studies offer flexible delivery and online learning options as a prerequisite for involvement in this study, the extent to which they do so varies. Public providers see involvement in flexible learning as a strategic priority in their planning cycle, while private RTOs see it as a market edge and an inevitable future direction. While online learning options are 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 relate to technology and some to methodological considerations, but they are 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.

The program areas represented in the case studies reflect these types of industries (for example, business studies, tourism, computing, nursing, pre-vocational training) and are reinforced quite markedly in the fields of education represented in the online survey, the top five being computing, business administration, multi-field education, health and community services and service/ hospitality. The only traditional trade-based areas or 'hard' industries mentioned by survey respondents were surveying/engineering (three responses), transport industries (two responses), architecture/building and telecommunications (one response each).

2   To what extent are contract/casual staff involved in the design and delivery of flexible and online learning services?

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 believed to be the future of learning. In

others it was just seen as 'part of the job', and still 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, however, the more their paid teaching hours increased, 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. These activities therefore are normally 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, but who are subsequently 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. This issue is addressed further in the next section.

Capabilities

3   *What are the skill, knowledge and attribute requirements of contract/casual staff in designing and delivering flexible and online learning programs?*

4   *How do the skill, knowledge and attribute requirements of contract/casual staff differ from those of permanent ongoing staff?*

5   *To what extent are these differences a product of system requirements, individual work roles or individual preferences?*

The fact that many contract and 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. This is already a well-known aspect of the VET sector that the study reinforces.

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 is very successful was attributed to sheer dedication, perseverance and team work on the part 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. From this perspective, knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning styles were seen as crucial. It was mentioned several times that the base qualification Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training 'left a lot to be desired' in this context.

Knowledge and skill 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 and technical skills, 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.

6 What are the implications for the pedagogical practices of contract/casual staff in operating in a flexible and online learning environment?

In order to effectively deliver online programs, it was considered that well-developed skills in writing, communicating, interpreting, conveying meaning and providing logical concise information were just as important, if not more so, than technological skills like using email, internet and power point applications.

For all staff there are also issues in terms of productivity and time-management skills in delivering online learning, as there was often an expectation by students that staff were available to respond to their needs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Relevant here are issues in terms of productivity and economies of scale—is one hour spent answering emails or talking on the phone to an individual student as productive as one hour spent in the classroom in front of a group? To date these issues have not really been identified in terms of the cost versus benefit of flexible and online delivery.

Apart from the issues identified above applying to all staff, the main differences in work roles between casual and permanent staff are that casual staff are less likely to be involved in design and development of courses and less likely to undertake coordination and administration roles than permanent staff—roles which require different skill, knowledge and attribute requirements. In fact, given tight professional development budgets and organisational priorities, it was stated in one public RTO that, rather than development of technical or pedagogical skills, any skills development for staff moving from casual to more permanent positions would be equally likely to focus on systems and administrative procedures; in a private RTO, priorities would, in all probability, focus on updates to assessment procedures and competencies.

Support structures

7 What current opportunities and support systems are available for contract/casual staff to undertake formal and informal professional development in flexible delivery and online learning?

From both the case study and online data, it can be seen that a range of opportunities exist for contract and casual staff to undertake professional development activities in flexible and online

learning, but accessibility depends on a number of factors and can be limited by the types of barriers outlined in the following section.

One of the main factors appears to be the enthusiasm and willingness of staff to embrace flexible and online learning technologies, which underpins their 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 disseminating information and mentoring colleagues, being seen as knowledge experts and generally driving change within their work group, 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 show that a larger perspective from the point of view of the team or work group 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 contract and casual 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 the 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.

8   *To what extent are VET institutions and systems continuously improving the capabilities of contract/casual staff to provide flexible learning services?*

It is difficult to determine the extent to which VET institutions and systems are continuously improving the capabilities of contract and casual staff to provide flexible learning services, as the area in general is constantly evolving and changing, and this has not been a longitudinal study but a snapshot of the current situation. However, it can be said that this study reinforces the findings of previous research (for example, Brennan 2003) in demonstrating that RTOs often rely on the goodwill and enthusiasm of contract and casual staff, firstly to embrace flexible and online learning methodologies, and secondly, to undertake the kind of skills development needed in each particular context. In some instances the capabilities required are less complex, such as being able to use email and the internet, which are often assumed to be basic and generally held skills. Where more complex capabilities are required, such as in developing Web CT resources and online curricula, RTOs seem to rely on permanent or full-time contract staff to either possess those skills or be prepared to develop them. Even with support of various kinds, a great deal of this development still

relies on individual goodwill and willingness to learn. In some cases, it was even seen as more cost-effective to hire a technical expert than invest in training of teaching staff.

A significant exception to this general finding is the case study of one public RTO which developed a program that articulated with a university degree and therefore placed more emphasis on support for professional development, to the extent that staff brought in to teach in the program were given five weeks of paid training in the technology required for flexible delivery of the program as well as orientation to the program. It is perhaps in joint ventures and specific initiatives like this where professional development is emerging as a crucial aspect of planning, and is being built in to the development and funding of new programs.

Barriers and outcomes

9   What specific factors in VET settings encourage or inhibit the provision of professional development opportunities for contract/casual staff?

The main barriers for contract and casual staff in accessing professional development opportunities relate specifically to their employment status. At the same time as taking up part-time training positions, casual staff are often still working in the industry from which they have been recruited to teach. They are also likely to be teaching in more than one organisation, especially in the case of private RTOs. For this reason, their time spent with the RTO is limited to what they are paid for, for example delivering and assessing programs and courses. Several managers stated that casual staff do not attend team meetings for this reason and are even less likely to undertake professional development activities in their own time. Yet ironically, casual staff reported that lack of access to information about professional development opportunities was seen as a major disadvantage to them by comparison with permanent staff, and several stated that they had undertaken extensive training and development, particularly in information and communication technologies, in their own time and at their own expense.

There would appear to be an issue here in relation to the management of casual staff by comparison with contract and permanent staff. Casual staff can sometimes be on the periphery of work groups and teams, and given the importance of team-based professional development as mentioned above, this lack of integration would limit such opportunities. As discussed elsewhere in this report, the less attached staff are to the workforce, the less likely they are to have access to professional development. It was also reported by permanent staff that they are more likely to be committed to professional development because this was their whole job, whereas hourly paid staff are 'generally working one of many jobs … so they do their job [teaching] but it's not necessarily their real job'. So while access may be a barrier, commitment is also a factor.

The other main barrier to professional development identified relates to funding and the cost of development activities, whether formal or informal. This includes not only the cost of attending any formal courses but the downtime for the organisation and extra costs involved in covering staff who are away at training courses. Again this militates against both permanent and casual staff. For example, in one public RTO, the team consisted of about 30 full-time staff and about 50 hourly paid instructors, and the point was made that the limited professional development budget had to be spread around many people who would all benefit from some form of development. In reality however, full-time staff were more likely to benefit while 'it depends on who you are as a casual whether or not you get PD'. Those who do get selected tend to be those who show interest and are already seen as change agents or experts in the field. Again this highlights the issue of the politics of managing a diverse workforce, as discussed in the case study chapter.

Apart from access to professional development programs, a perceived barrier includes the failure by some organisations to acknowledge that professional development needs for online or flexible learning may be different from other professional development requirements, and may involve

more time, resources and support than merely a half-day workshop. Furthermore, development opportunities that involve online tutorials and self-paced training packages may not necessarily suit all learning styles. At the same time, it was considered that not everyone needs technical training, but for effective teaching in all modes of delivery, facilitation skills were overwhelmingly seen as a necessity for all staff.

Finally, an interesting finding to emerge is the fact that there are also perceived barriers to flexible and online learning, many of them relating to the media used but most often in the attitudes of students and also staff. These can be summarised as follows:

✧ There is a lack of understanding by people not involved in flexible learning.

✧ Some students (and staff) are uncomfortable with a flexible and/or technological teaching approach, being 'still comfortable with the old classroom approach, fairly normal and structured'.

✧ While teaching methods may be flexible, systems may not be flexible enough to support them, for example, rolling enrolments, assessment and resulting.

✧ Managing online learning impinges upon the personal life of staff.

✧ There is greater pressure on staff by students for quicker response times.

✧ Online learning can be very boring, requiring a lot of self-motivation.

✧ Learning entirely online doesn't suit everyone.

✧ Students and staff need information technology skills and confidence.

✧ Building relationships with students is always harder than when face to face.

✧ Students will seek support from someone with whom they have built a trust relationship.

✧ Technical problems, for example, network constraints and firewalls that don't let certain information through, by their very nature are very real barriers.

The benefits for individuals and teams from involvement in Learnscope projects emerge clearly from this study, and it would appear that a priority for improving professional development for casual staff would be to modify funding to make these opportunities more available to them as well as to full-time staff. This would require a certain amount of risk management on the part of RTOs who have been perceived as avoiding funding development opportunities for contract or casual staff in case they leave the organisation. A team-based approach to professional development in general also emerges as a model of good practice in managing the skill requirements of a diverse and segmented workforce operating in an evolving educational and technological environment.

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