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online regional Australia
learning barriers
volume 2
learning online
benefits and barriers
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regional Australia

Learning online

Benefits and barriers in regional Australia – Volume 2



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Australian Flexible Learning Framework
Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

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Publisher's note

Learning online: Benefits and barriers in regional Australia is published in two volumes. Volume 1 contains the main report, while volume 2 contains the case studies.

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.



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Contents

Case studies	4
Hospitality (Operations) Certificate II (VET-in-schools)	4
Electronics Certificate II	6
Assessment and Workplace Training Certificate IV	9
Information Technology Course Certificate IV	12
Visual Arts and Technology Certificate III	15
Small Business Certificate III and Information Technology Certificate IV	18
Telecommunications (Call Centres) Certificate III	22
Community Services Certificate II (VET-in-schools)	25

Case studies

Hospitality (Operations) Certificate II (VET-in-schools)

The course

The Certificate II Hospitality (Operations) course has been available in its present interactive form for two years. Until the WebCT platform was upgraded there were considerable teething problems, resulting in high levels of frustration for students and teachers. All but the practical components of this course are delivered online. As the registered training organisation, the institute provides the platform, materials and assessment. Students in Years 11 and 12 in metropolitan and regional schools study online in a classroom situation with a teacher–mentor. The role of the teacher–mentor is to ensure that students are up to date and making progress towards the required standard, and to provide both content and information technology support.

The types of assessment utilised range from objective tests, research work, reviews, developing menus, other written assignments (submitted online), and portfolios (hardcopy).

Some schools no longer participate in this program and it was thought that this was because of the early problems with the platform—systems in the schools were slower than the institutes, and because the small number of students made it not viable.

Before commencing the course, students attend the institute for a day where they meet their teacher–assessors and use the WebCT program. Individual schools fund this trip. Students also receive a hardcopy manual. The potential for interaction is designed in through the use of bulletin boards and email.

Support for teaching staff

Mentors are able to track students and download their marks. This assists mentors to provide feedback and motivation. As experienced teachers, mentors were at times frustrated at being unable to design curriculum, ‘many teachers ... feel the platform is telling them what to do’.

Teacher–assessors reported they have good information technology support, although they express some frustration with the feeling of isolation—they spend a great deal of their time in front of the computer. This section within the institute was successful in gaining grants to develop online units and to examine ways of facilitating online learning. The move to online delivery resulted in hours being cut back for some teachers. The rationale was that these teachers did not ‘see’ students. Other changes in work practices included providing less feedback on assessment items. This was due to the limitations of the size of the assessment screen.

Teacher perspective

The mentor system was reported to work well where a teacher was timetabled in, but not all schools provided this level of support.

There was a school in the sticks and where the teacher’s wife was sick a lot and he was never around too often, ... I think [the students] really didn’t know quite who to turn to in the end,

so they probably weren't kind of being kept on track and they do need to have somebody who says, 'Have you submitted this work today'.

In outer metropolitan schools there were often more students undertaking the course than in rural schools. Teachers believed that the larger peer group was a factor in students completing the course and keeping to deadlines.

[Students] can help each other a bit. It gets pretty easy for me to email them back if one's work is really bad and they really need some help, then you can say, please contact your teacher for information on this, or you can say to them so and so has done some excellent work, perhaps she'd be prepared to share it with you and let you have a look at what she found. So yes, where there are numbers it certainly seems that we're getting the benefits of it, whereas if there is a small number of students, 4 or 5 or something like that, then yes [students] do fall behind quite easily.

The mentor support and students working together appear to be critical elements in student success. Students see the work of their peers, and through dialogue identify processes used, learning skills in the process.

Student perspective

Online delivery was the only option for studying hospitality for these students in Years 11 and 12.

Students were very positive about this online learning experience. Many felt that they had gained a 'better perspective because you are taught by professionals' in the field as opposed to school teachers. They found this method of learning easy, time-efficient, and there was a quick turnaround time, with feedback on items submitted for assessment. Layout and navigation around the site were clear. Some students felt that the combination of the institute teacher and the teacher-mentor led to the provision of a greater range of information. Some teacher-mentors printed material and assessment tasks off and would work through the assignment with students, providing considerable structural and content support. The teacher-mentor was a vital resource in explaining terminology that was new to students. Students worked together online and face to face, sharing ideas and findings and helping each other, either at home, in their non-contact time or within the set classroom time. Group work in developing for example, a range of tourism products meant material was broken down into easy chunks and led to the development collaboration skills.

Students enjoyed being able to work at their own pace and not having to be at the same place in the program as everyone else. A major difference between classroom and online learning was the ability to work independently because the material was available and clearly set. This increased independence gained through working online was important in developing responsibility for students' learning. 'You can go online and learn something for yourself rather than having to wait for the teacher.' However, students found that the structured class time was essential for managing their time, for sharing ideas and gaining the support and structure provided by the teacher-mentor. There was a common perception that learning, 'it's more what we learn in class' than what happens online.

Students did experience a number of frustrations, including initial problems with logging on—the information given had been incorrect. A number of students had difficulty in sending in assignments. There were local problems with school networks—both access and slowness due to the number of people on the system.

Outcomes for students ranged from the course assisting with their career, to improved communication and information technology skills. One student had gained an apprenticeship as a result of gaining this qualification. Another realised that this industry was not the best option for her. The institute was a source of industry contacts for students who wished to pursue this area as a career.

As a result of working with people from industry, students felt more confident in 'talking with people'. Students developed increased awareness about where to find information about the industry. A number of students commented on their new skills in gathering information online which they used in other subjects. Students enjoyed the experience of studying online and would be happy to repeat the experience, preferably with a teacher–mentor being available, 'so problems could be addressed'. They also enjoyed the experience of working as a group.

Community perspective

Teacher–mentors from outlying areas reported that being able to offer this course online provided students with opportunities they would otherwise not have. It was a way of retaining young people for a little longer within their communities.

Hospitality industry bodies contacted reported they had little to do with choices in the delivery of courses or the development of courses. One respondent reported that they were once involved in training 'but it all got too complicated and there were too many changes'. Although these bodies had links with the institute, they were of a more strategic nature rather than being in relation to specific courses and delivery methods.

Benefits

- ✧ Hospitality training not otherwise available is provided for rural and outer metropolitan Year 11 and 12 students.
- ✧ Keeps some students in their rural communities for longer.
- ✧ Exposure to industry professionals increases confidence and contacts which help careers.
- ✧ They have improved information technology skills and better information literacy.
- ✧ Students develop independent learning skills.

Barriers

- ✧ information technology and bandwidth problems
- ✧ lack of teacher–mentor time in small schools
- ✧ lack of peer learning opportunities in small schools.

Promoters

- ✧ teacher–mentors in the students' schools
- ✧ peer interaction
- ✧ the suitability of the platform.

Electronics Certificate II

The course

This course has a small number of modules online; other modules are taught face to face. The department has moved from 100% online delivery to mixed mode. Students undertake classroom sessions each week. These often include practical sessions. In addition they spend a three-hour session per week working online in the classroom or working from home. Teachers were available in the classroom to address information technology difficulties. Students complete 140 hours of information technology skills at the beginning of the course. Support for students was available at any time. One day a week was an unstructured day, set aside for students to come and work on

practical requirements and/or to gain assistance with theoretical work. Some students chose to work from home, but teachers were very conscious that many students did not have access to computers or internet access at home.

The student population in this course is largely comprised of young males, of whom a considerable number have part-time work to meet financial commitments. The student population is drawn from the town and surrounds, including students living an hour or more away from the institute. Most students understood that this provider was the only option available locally and chose to enrol as it was the nearest provider. Only four students reported using email and one student reported using the bulletin board. Most students did their online study in the classroom.

Assessment online is 'fairly simplistic', consisting of multiple-choice questions or a numerical response with instant feedback. For these reasons teachers tend to use online assessment as a means of determining progress through the module. The platform does not allow teachers to see the number of times an online test is tried before the result is submitted.

Support for teaching staff

One teacher noted that, although teachers in electronics have good information technology skills, they do not necessarily have adequate knowledge about learning processes using this medium. So then if you get:

Non-technical people [developing graphics and putting it on the web] they don't have the technical expertise to make it sensible either, so you need a good mix to actually make a clever [graphic].

This perception assumes that it is up to individuals to develop material, rather than a team effort where different expertise is combined. There was a strong feeling that the institute did not support the development of online material. If teachers wanted to develop material, then it was up to them. This was evidenced when one teacher offered to develop an online module in his own time, as there was no time available in the working day. However, on applying for the cost of an internet connection from home so he could access the institution's site and files, his application was 'laughed out of the room' by the board. No formal professional development was offered within the institute although teachers were supported to attend courses or sessions they knew about outside the institution.

Teacher perspective

Current teachers believed that the online resources were not adequate enough to determine whether the student 'actually understood what they were doing', nor was there any guarantee that the work had been completed by the students themselves, important in an electronics course where safety is paramount. While information technology skills were not a concern, literacy skills were. Literacy skills were spoken of in terms of young adolescent boys who tend not to read and who were used to the sophisticated graphics and sounds of computer games. There had been attempts to develop high-level sophisticated graphics in the materials, but bandwidth and hardware capacity and the length of time required to develop such material were barriers. An additional concern was the students' lack of self-motivation and organisational skills:

They're not good at organising themselves, they're not good at completing things, they lose interest.

Concerns with online delivery include the difficulty of conveying conceptual material, particularly in the fields of physics and mathematics which underpin electronics. Teachers of these units were strongly of the belief that:

When people don't understand concepts it works best if there's one to one, with someone assisting them verbally or graphically, next to them.

For students using email and bulletin boards from home, there was a commitment on the part of teachers to provide quick response time, despite this work not being structured into their teaching load. There was concern from teachers about the difficulties of adequately explaining concepts using email. One teacher noted that he could draw a diagram on the computer, or scan it in, but the student would often then ring him not understanding what was being conveyed. Online delivery of such material required considerable teacher time, again not factored into teaching loads. Teacher commitment was evidenced when teachers came into check emails during their two-week break.

Teacher respondents believed that students from areas distant from the institute were disadvantaged because they were not able to come to the institute to gain support due to time and transport costs. Such factors were, at times, significant when students experienced problems with family or work commitments and led to students withdrawing from the course. Teachers were always ready to offer alternatives where students experienced difficulties in meeting course commitments.

Student perspective

Most students reported the online experience as a positive and enjoyable one. The online session was conducted in the classroom, with only a very small number of respondents choosing to work from home. For those students who did work at home, they found the flexibility important for a range of reasons—from casual work commitments, family or being able to do the work when they ‘felt like it’.

Some students, when asked if they would prefer a classroom environment or 100% online, opted for the 100% online because they were better able to express their voice online, there was no domination of time or teacher access by particular individuals or groups. Some also enjoyed the opportunity to read material on screen, digest it and then write it down—‘better than listening to a teacher explain the material’.

All students spoke of the advantages of the mixed mode where a teacher was accessible face to face and the support from peers was also available through face-to-face interaction. This was particularly important for those students who experienced difficulty with the content and felt they needed a lot of teacher time. One student spoke of difficulties with the maths, and being able to sit down with the teacher and discuss this. The mixed mode meant that students worked together face to face on projects and this was seen as an advantage.

Disadvantages identified by students included the slowness of the hardware system both at home and at the institute. Other difficulties included headaches from using a computer screen and repetitive strain injury. One student who relied on public transport and did not own a computer would have preferred access at home to avoid the difficulty and sometimes frightening experience of using public transport at night. Most students felt that the support online was not nearly as good as face-to-face teacher interaction.

Changes students would like to make included, for some, having a computer at home. Many said would like to see more online interaction.

Outcomes identified by students from doing this course included a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, working towards a new career or developing electronics as a hobby. Some older students spoke of gaining confidence in the use of computers. Other students spoke of the increased knowledge about how and where to access information. Most students enjoyed the online learning experience and would be happy to do more online study.

Community perspective

As there was no direct link with industry, the community for this course was determined geographically, with an employment organisation and the area consultative committee being interviewed. Both organisations had representatives from the institute on their boards and ‘worked

closely' with the institute. The aim of the community employment organisation is to develop better links between education and industry in the region, leading to better outcomes for young people and making education more responsive to local industry.

Perceived advantages of online courses included variety and flexibility in more isolated rural areas and also in regional areas.

It gives the opportunity to have access to knowledge that is usually only available in the cities' ... It opens up the world in terms of study groups and ... anyone anywhere in the world and that is good for communities to have an opportunity to have dialogue with people outside their own community.

Respondents reported that online delivery provides the opportunity for students in rural areas to broaden their Victorian Certificate of Education opportunities, and to undertake Year 13 subjects, not otherwise available within the formal school system.

Disadvantages of online delivery centred round the technology and the slow download time. There were a number of stories of the lack of knowledge by community groups and small business in how to use the internet, even where it was available. Such organisations did not perceive a need to master these skills. Important factors for a community's development and use of online technology were identified as education in the use of the technology and the provision of equipment. It was pointed out that young people proficient in the use of online resources take that knowledge with them as they move out of the area in search of work or to other educational opportunities.

One respondent's experience of online VET courses led to her feeling that the VET system requirements precluded input into the development of courses.

Benefits

- ✧ flexibility of pace, time and place of study
- ✧ able to express 'voice' online; not necessarily time in the classroom
- ✧ improved computer skills for mature-aged students
- ✧ improved information literacy.

Barriers

- ✧ cost of home computers
- ✧ inadequate teacher skills and insufficient professional development, insufficient support from institute
- ✧ inadequacies of platform for subject content.

Promoters

- ✧ face-to-face contact with teachers and peers.

Assessment and Workplace Training Certificate IV

The course

The program of which this course is a part was originally put together through the state central online provider. The course was originally offered online to public servants so they could assess their administration officers at levels II and III as a result of enterprise bargaining agreements. Online delivery has since been extended to a range of occupations. When the course was first delivered, some two years ago, chat rooms were not available. Since that time there have been attempts to

establish a chat room. However, technical problems and time differences 'defeated the attempt'. Teleconferencing is also used. Subsequently students experienced mixed delivery, with some units being delivered online and others in a classroom situation.

Enrolment is through the state central online provider who contacts the appropriate institute and teachers who facilitate the course. An induction process was provided by the state central online provider whereby students and staff had phone contact and were walked through the process of accessing and using the site. However the website was not complete when the first teachers were taken through the process. The state central online provider supplied ongoing information technology support for staff and students.

Early enrolments experienced technical problems not only with access but also as a result of problematic default settings where students correctly completed assessment items but the program marked these as incorrect. However, in later courses, where these technical difficulties had been addressed, completion rates were also very poor.

Although the majority of students were located in regional areas, many did access teacher-assessors face to face. A number of students discontinued the online delivery and began to attend face-to-face classes instead.

Assessment included developing contracts of agreements and assessment forms and being observed undertaking a workplace assessment, ranging from objective tests to higher conceptual level assessment tasks. In the early delivery of this course workplace mentors observed students setting up and undertaking an assessment. Later versions of the course allowed students to video their final assessment task as they took someone through an assessment. The success of assessment using workplace mentor observation 'depended on the quality of the mentor'. Contact with the mentors was limited to the provision of documentation.

Support for teaching staff

Professional development consisted of the induction process to the WebCT platform. These teachers were undertaking their own study online and therefore had some familiarity with online learning and delivery. For the initial delivery, teachers were allocated time to support these students. This did not appear to be the case for the delivery of later versions of the course. One teacher pointed out that delivery of this course is only a small part of his total load, so:

Students are left on their own. I basically respond when they ask a question or after a couple of weeks if I haven't heard from them I'll ring and find out what's going on.

The audit trail teachers are required to keep necessitated large chunks of time taken away from potential support of learning. Management of online delivery was therefore an issue. Teachers were about to undertake professional development on this issue.

Teacher perspective

Teachers believed that student moves from online to face-to-face study was due, at least in part, to access difficulties. They also reported that students found the assessor language as presented online difficult.

Teachers reported that they did not develop a personal contact with students through online delivery. As a result they used phone contact to:

... get to know [student] background, where they were working so you at least in some way [were] in tune with their needs and where they are coming from.

Teachers noted that even if online did have the capacity to provide this type of contextual information about students, teachers did not have the skills to elicit it online. A considerable element of trust was required.

I always sense that so much can be typed that may not always be authentic, you get into the habit of playing academic games, whereas in the classroom you can read people pretty well, see where they are at.

Teachers suggested low completion rates may be due to a number of factors, from students not realising what was involved in completing the course, to requiring more support than the delivery mode allowed. An interesting comparison was drawn with another course where video conferencing was provided and there was only a very small drop-out rate. It was possible to provide this type of support, along with 15 hours per week teacher time because the large number of enrolments made it viable. The video stream was an opportunity to ensure relevance and variety of material through guest speakers, lectures and tutorials. Student questions were answered. These videoed sessions were then placed on the bulletin board. As one teacher observed, 'while that support is there I think that's why they are succeeding'.

Student perspective

Reasons for choosing to study online:

- ✧ flexibility in managing work and family
- ✧ being able to work at their own pace.

Students described the advantages of studying online as being able to work at their own pace, and managing their own time. However, students noted that it is necessary 'to organise yourself and push yourself'. A small number of students found they were more relaxed and focussed on the task than in a classroom situation. The ready availability and accessibility of information was seen as an advantage. For some, studying online did mean a greater depth of learning as they were required to read the material, rather than listen to a teacher. Some students noted that support was only a phone call away.

A number of students commented that: 'It was hard to begin with because there was nobody there to help me when I got stuck'. A sense of isolation was evident for many students, some of whom felt 'there was nobody there to help me'. This was particularly the case for students who had limited computer skills. A self-confessed lover of the internet reported that she would find the 'content easier to acquire in a classroom situation with face-to-face discussion and then build on it online'.

Some students experienced considerable technical difficulties in gaining access and completing work. Others undertaking the course at a later date did not experience such difficulties. Many students expressed surprise at the amount of work required to complete this course.

Suggested changes included receiving a manual containing material and tasks to overcome hurdles experienced during the course. More information on the workload prior to enrolment would assist students in making decisions about study choices. Although the information is received after enrolment, it is not available online prior to enrolment. To address initial difficulties, students would like to see more support provided, with an induction into how to work the online package. Discussion with other students online would add to learning and provide the opportunity to exchange ideas and concerns. Other students suggested it would be useful to meet their peers and teachers at the beginning of the course.

Many students indicated that they would prefer to do this course in a classroom situation than online. Most said they would not voluntarily do further study through online delivery. Students felt the course content and qualification provided increased security and possibilities of extending their opportunities at work by broadening their professional skills base. Some students gained increased skills in using the internet.

Benefits

- ✧ flexibility of pace, time and place of study
- ✧ qualification useful for career
- ✧ skills in using the internet
- ✧ suits learning style of some students.

Barriers

- ✧ poor design and technical problems
- ✧ lack of peer interaction
- ✧ lack of teacher skills and support for professional development
- ✧ lack of information about what was required for assessment.

Promoters

- ✧ quality workplace mentors.

Information Technology Course Certificate IV

The course

This course is 100% online, with the material being stored on a central server and controlled by the state online provider. Registered training organisations nominate themselves for online delivery and identify staff who are responsible for 'supporting, delivering and facilitating particular competencies'.

The move from classroom-based delivery to online delivery was reported as being a result of the move from working with accredited courses to training packages. New students were enrolled under the package which teachers were 'developing and delivering at the same time'.

Once enrolled through and by the state online provider, this organisation provides students with a user name and password and access to the webmaster for information technology support. They also receive a handbook and other online facilities such as 'trainee extra information' and a tutor email link.

All but one student reported using email and one student reported using the bulletin board. Most students did not meet each other face to face (n=11), five met at the beginning of the course and two met more than once. Most students did their online study at home. Students met each other online using the bulletin board, email and chat room.

Support for teaching staff

Teachers undertake multiple forms of delivery and reported that the time required to effectively deliver online is poorly understood by management:

I look after trainees, so I'm out and about all the time. I mean I could be gone for two days at a time. If I have to go out and visit a regional trainee, then I could be away for at least two days. So yes there is a problem there in that for me being involved in teaching online, also delivering face-to-face material and also dealing with trainees as well, it is difficult for me, even though I might sit down and allocate a certain amount of time each day for looking after, I can never guarantee that I'm going to be able to commit to that time. That's been my

number one concern and I think it's also management ... [don't] necessarily understand just how long, just exactly what's involved.

Teacher perspective

Teachers expressed frustrations with feedback difficulties and with the limitations of online delivery for explaining concepts.

Because for me, if I need to explain a concept to someone online, it's going to take me a lot longer than what it is if I have that person physically here.

Teachers had some concerns about the external enrolment process as it meant that teachers were not able to identify literacy and numeracy needs, something which was done for classroom-based delivery through an interview process.

Essentially when we do our interviews in our mainstream [courses] we actually identify a skill set that we believe will get a student through that particular certificate. So we're more or less controlling a person's success or failure in a course by doing that preliminary interview. We're trying to identify that people aren't going to fail, essentially in a subject. When you're talking about certificate III and certificate IV, they really do need those underpinning skills and knowledge to get them through, otherwise they're coming in to a group, if it's a set class and the material starts, and I mean the last thing you want is a student to get quite behind.

There was frustration about the ability to provide quality learning support for students within the limitations of the technology, teachers' own skills and structural arrangements within which they worked.

Student perspective

Students undertook units from these courses online because:

- ✧ particular units only available online
- ✧ flexibility in meeting family and/or work commitments while studying
- ✧ online delivery cheaper.

Only three students reported they had received some form of induction for their online learning. All students reported they were not taught how to communicate electronically. Students did read bulletin board postings although they were reported as being anything up to a year old. There was no chat room interaction.

The reported advantages of studying online were the flexibility, comfort of working at home and working at your own pace. Others mentioned that this form of delivery meant there was less distraction than in a classroom environment and that there more individual attention is given. For a small number of students, online learning suited their preferred learning style.

You can be intimidated in the classroom. You can be one of the shy people in the classroom. It might go too fast for you and you're not the type to stand up and ask a question because the teacher has so much to deliver in those X number of minutes and you don't hear it all. For a person like me who has to take her time to learn it and understand it, I could take all the time I liked doing this and finding out my own answers all the time.

Frustrations and disadvantages included a lack of induction, particularly frustrating when students did not know what a web board was and how to use it. However, some students did report success in overcoming this problem: 'in a way it forced me to learn those techniques'. Nearly all students reported difficulties initially in navigating their way through the platform. Feelings of isolation were reported and difficulties in establishing their own structures and study routines, to the extent that a

small number of respondents withdrew. Some students found it difficult to interpret requirements and processes to be undertaken:

I was unsure exactly what I was supposed to be studying ... the assessment down and it had lots of examples and what have you but I wasn't quite sure how I was supposed to use what they gave me.

There appears to be little intervention to assist students who may be struggling. One student who chose not to continue early on in the course heard from her tutor five months later when he informed all students that he would be unavailable for a couple of weeks due to taking leave. The lack of feedback on assessment items was also an issue for most students. Other students reported confusion over knowing who their tutor was and where to send email assessment items. This issue was not addressed at any time during the unit. One student preferred phone calls to emails, but the cost of long-distance calls and the difficulties she had in understanding the material and in explaining the problem over the phone, resulted in her describing the experience as 'just too hard'.

Some students undertaking this course were experienced in the field of information technology but lacked qualifications. They found there was no recognition of these skills, and they were required to undertake all competencies. It is not known if students were made aware of the possibility of having their current competencies assessed. Students not working in the industry experienced different frustrations:

In a classroom with a teacher they sort of assess you on your abilities and they suss you out before they set an assignment and they kind of know whether you'd be able to do it or not, whereas one of the problems I found doing it online is they assumed a lot of knowledge and they assumed that you were working in the industry, so the assignments that they set were targeted at people who had contacts in the industry or were working in whatever they were talking about. And they just wanted you to use examples from your own experience, and it's a bit hard if you haven't got any experience.

The very depersonalised approach made it difficult for either party to enter into negotiations over what may be appropriate to draw on for assessment. These students also referred to the lack of contact from the institute. A welcoming letter had been received from the state online provider, but nothing from the facilitating institute.

Changes students would like to see included feedback on assessment items, in addition to opportunities for face-to-face contact with other students. An alternative suggestion was to set up times for chat rooms.

You do miss the class interaction, not the personal social thing, but the interaction that everybody has different problems or different areas of expertise or whatever, and they just introduce that into a given scenario. And I just imagine that situation could well crop up on the bulletin board, but yeah it is a bit isolating.

Opportunities for students to meet face to face or undertake group problem-solving online did not appear to be designed into these units. A few students commented that they would like to see sites 'less boring and made a little bit more interesting' with the use of colour, animation and 'fun as opposed to well I have to do this'. Some students recognised their need to be more self-disciplined with allocating time on a regular basis, rather than allowing themselves to 'be overwhelmed by it'.

Outcomes from completing the course included the potential for diversifying career opportunities and increased confidence, and for some, learning 'how to learn online'.

Community perspective

As this course concerns a generic skill the community chosen was the local geographic area. The Chamber of Commerce was interviewed.

These respondents identified concerns with the bandwidth and affordability. While there is extensive use of basic internet services, there does not appear to be much use made of high-level bandwidth. As many businesses in this region were reported as having an export focus, internet use was considered a must. One respondent believed the excellent information technology students who were studying locally went elsewhere to work in the information technology industry.

The community stakeholder's perception of the information technology courses available online were that they required greater streamlining and 'were just playing at the edges'.

It's not ground-breaking stuff, it seems to be a little on the lecture side of things rather than being a replacement.

Stakeholders believed that small and micro businesses would benefit from greater use of information technology, therefore the provision of quality online learning was paramount.

Benefits

- ✧ career opportunities not otherwise available
- ✧ flexibility of time and place of study
- ✧ cost savings for students
- ✧ learning to learn online
- ✧ suited learning style of some.

Barriers

- ✧ insufficient/inadequate support for students from institute
- ✧ inadequate feedback on assessment
- ✧ lack of clear instructions on how to study and about the assessment
- ✧ poorly designed materials
- ✧ insufficient opportunities for peer interaction.

Visual Arts and Technology Certificate III

The course

The Visual Arts and Technology Certificate III delivered one unit online, a theoretical unit called Art in context. The unit was originally available externally through hard copy and drew students from around Australia. The hard copy was replaced with an online version as there was a large demand for the course.

Students undertaking the whole course tended to be full-time, on-campus students, so were seen regularly in other units by the teacher of the online unit. Part-time students often undertook the course or units from the course for interest, especially the online unit as it provided necessary underpinning knowledge for further study. At a campus further north, students who chose this course were unable to complete and gain their qualification because they did not have access to the core units (such as Art in context). The teacher at the northern campus had only very recently become aware of the availability of the online unit. As a result, another seven to eight students from this campus may soon enrol to undertake the Art in context course. This would be the first group of students who would be undertaking it without face-to-face access to the teacher delivering the unit.

Interaction is built into the unit, with students introducing themselves through the bulletin board and using it to post responses to discussion questions. The teacher regularly emailed students to

motivate and provide feedback. In this unit the teacher tracked student participation, providing gentle encouragement and motivation when students did not keep up. This was often provided through the face-to-face contact in other sessions.

Assessment is a mixture of objective testing and essay work. Much of the objective test work is supported by small self-assessment tests throughout the unit.

Support for teaching staff

This teacher felt supported in her delivery of online teaching. She was undertaking a course and updating her knowledge of a new WebCT package, and had three hours administration time as co-ordinator of the certificate III and IV courses. It was this time that she tended to use for online delivery.

Teacher observations

Students have ready access to information technology support via phone or email. The advantage of seeing students on campus was that concerns about lack of computer knowledge and internet use were alleviated by the teacher when she stepped them through some basic processes prior to enrolment in the unit. Personal contact with students was regarded as important:

The personal interaction gets them back on track. That's where it is most successful—where you can actually have face-to-face contact with the students.

Student perspective

Reasons for students undertaking online delivery included:

- ✧ the unit only available online
- ✧ being able to undertake the work at their own pace
- ✧ flexibility.

The response to this online course was predominantly positive. A number of students commented on the friendliness and clarity of the online unit and work. Students did use the bulletin board and emails for discussions which were designed into the course for this purpose.

[Bulletin board discussion] was non-threatening because there was no argument. It was only just making statements and sort of saying well that was a good idea or not a good idea, or I don't agree with that, or whatever and everyone took it in a very good way. It was quite a good learning thing as well. And then also the lecturer put her side of it as well, and she came back to you—if you put it up on the bulletin board, she'd come back and say well, I agree with that; that was why it happened; or she'd put something else into it to give us a bit more background; and that helped as well.

Mention was made of the teacher's active encouragement to use the bulletin board. Consequently students commented that:

I never felt I was totally on my own doing the course. I didn't actually feel as isolated as I thought I might, but I was as isolated as I chose to be.

A number of students in this course liked being able to go back through material they initially had difficulties with.

I found the part that you could go back at any time and check and just test yourself for your own benefit, really helpful.

Disadvantages were the length of time students had to wait for a response from the teacher, and inadequate hardware resulting in long download times. The first students who undertook this unit online experienced some difficulty with computer-generated answers to a small number of

assessment items. Although their response was correct, the computer would mark them as incorrect. Not all students preferred online delivery. Their preferred mode of delivery was the face-to-face classroom contact because of peer and teacher interaction and the motivation the structured arrangement provides along with teacher encouragement.

I would prefer, personally, a classroom situation. I find it very impersonal working online. I don't think I learnt as easily and absorb things as easily ... Well, for me it was a disadvantage because I need to be pushed a little bit.

However, this same student, who was disabled and is now studying at university did not have a computer at the time and found transport to an access centre difficult.

Students who were well ahead of the rest of the group were unable to take advantage of bulletin board discussion since other students had not yet reached this point.

Outcomes for students ranged from learning how to use a computer, learning how to use email, resulting in email contact with friends and relatives:

As a total computer novice, I enjoyed conquering that box that sits in my office called a computer. I really did get a lot out of that. I found that I was very nervous actually, I have to tell you, I was very nervous and I would have preferred at the beginning for it to be in a classroom situation. But once I got on there and found that I actually could do it, I found that part of it really good.

Students also spoke of increased confidence and a sense that they were 'broadening the mind'.

Community perspective

There was no identifiable geographic or professional 'community' for this course.

Benefits

- ✧ flexibility of pace, and place of study
- ✧ learning to learn online
- ✧ improved information technology skills
- ✧ being able to study a subject not otherwise available.

Barriers

- ✧ few/minor technical problems
- ✧ bulletin board not useful to the faster students.

Promoters

- ✧ good induction
- ✧ face-to-face contact with teacher and other students
- ✧ operation of bulletin board; teacher encouragement and modelling of bulletin board use
- ✧ time allocated by institution for teacher
- ✧ teacher's skills and professional development activities.

Small Business Certificate III and Information Technology Certificate IV

The course: Small Business Certificate III

This course is delivered 100% online. The small business management course is designed for people who wish to go into small business or who are already in small business. The course was developed by an outside organisation providing a range of materials for support. The TAFE Institute contracted the developer to put the course online. It is also available through traditional classroom delivery. The online version is based on the classroom model with similar activities and resources. The area in which the institution is located has many small businesses—‘a ready made market’—and it was this that led to the decision to offer the course online.

Students receive a ‘welcome pack’ with instructions for working online from home. Information technology support comes from the state online provider. A recent upgrade of the WebCT platform has improved access and speed.

Most students studied at home; others used a combination of home and work. Chat rooms are not used, but email and bulletin board discussion is.

Support for teaching staff

Professional development included a five-week WebCT course delivered over 10 weeks. There was no other support provided for information technology or teaching strategies, although content support is available through the developer of the course. An informal support group of online teachers had been operating in the institution, but had ‘dissipated’.

Teacher perspective

The first contact students have with each other is when they are required to provide their opinion in relation to a case study, very early in the course. The teacher emails students who are not submitting work; however, if there is no response, then the teacher believes: ‘There’s not much more I can do besides that’.

The greatest difficulty this teacher experienced was in motivating students to do the course work steadily and continuously so they did not fall too far behind and then withdraw. The teacher had a personal commitment to responding to emails from students within one to two days. He claimed that the time spent on the internet was ‘far greater’ than equivalent time required for the same course delivered in the classroom’. Feedback provided to students was largely in response to assessment tasks and what was required to improve these.

This teacher was committed to online delivery of the course as it ‘opened up horizons of new knowledge for small business people that they may not have been aware of previously’.

The course: Information Technology Certificate IV

This is also delivered 100% online. Students are enrolled from across Australia. As with small business, students receive a welcome pack. Contained in the pack is an explanation that teachers may take two to three days to respond to emails. There is no face-to-face teacher or student contact. Limited interaction takes place through the use of email and via phone. Technical support was reported as being excellent and provided by the state online provider who is also responsible for developing many of the online courses and maintaining them on the web.

Five students reported that they had received some form of induction for their online learning, rating it as a little helpful. No students were taught how to communicate electronically. This may have been because the course was a Certificate IV Information Technology course and it was

expected students would already have this skill. All students used email, with only six using the bulletin board. Most students worked at home; others used a combination of home and work as places to study and access the course.

Support for teaching staff

This teacher had good information technology skills so did not require information technology support but was disappointed about the lack of support on how to interact with students online, and how to make learning 'easy or fun'. Support from peers was not present as this teacher was the one with more experience and was placed in the position of mentor and coach for her peers. Administrative support also seemed to be lacking and knowledge on how to make the most of the system in order to ensure adequate funding. For example: 'nobody tells you how you need to complete the necessary paperwork in relation to recording hours'.

So a lot of people have come to me to see what I have done to capture all these first attendances (via the web) so that we get our funding. It's all about bums on seats basically.

Teaching staff are allocated one hour for contact time for each student from start to finish. This means that there is not the quick response time to emails that teachers would like to deliver. It also means that support is not provided over the weekend. Payment is made for students completing the course although some may have been supported most of the way through the course before withdrawing. As with other teachers interviewed, this teacher had a full face-to-face classroom load in addition to the online delivery.

Teacher perspective

Self-motivated students really enjoyed the course and completed it quickly. Student self-motivation was identified as being very important to study successfully online, along with experience with computers and a course that was suited to being online. Other advantages identified were the flexibility with time and space. Some students prefer online to classroom delivery, because of the nature of the interaction in a classroom. This teacher did say that, for most students, face-to-face was the better mode of delivery, unless students were highly motivated to work on their own and to work through problems they may encounter.

Student perspective

Students from both courses identified the following reasons for studying online:

- ✧ employment, therefore were unable to attend TAFE
- ✧ too late to enrol in the classroom delivery mode
- ✧ has a disability
- ✧ being too distant from the campus
- ✧ cheaper than face-to-face
- ✧ being able to work at their own pace
- ✧ flexibility for family and/or work commitments.

Flexibility of online delivery was cited by all students as an advantage. This was not only in relation to not having to be in a particular place at a particular time but being able to work on tasks when they wanted and also to complete tasks at their own pace:

The advantage of working online is that you are not limited by other people going slow. If there is an area that I am fluent in I can go ahead. I found I can get through the course much quicker by myself (small business course).

An alternative perspective was:

I've got time to work things out in my own mind without worrying about what other people are thinking (information technology course).

Another student felt that working online provided a challenge she enjoyed because:

I've had to think about things because somebody is not available to me immediately, so I've had to work things out for myself (small business course).

A student who 'was never very good at school' enjoyed online delivery because 'there is no one standing over your shoulder pressing you, you do it in your own time, or relaxing in your own atmosphere'. One student described this as:

You can do it in your pyjamas while you're stuffing your face with a cream bun (information technology course)

Students who enjoyed online delivery spoke of the lack of pressure when studying using this mode of delivery. There was also a sense of one-on-one attention with a more personalised delivery. Other advantages of studying online included the immediate availability of information and the extensive range of information. This was particularly the case with the small business course.

While many students had positive responses to studying online, there were also many who experienced considerable frustration. These included the difficulties students experience organising their time and motivating themselves, along with:

- ✧ difficulties with logging on, sometimes phone lines were down, download times were often slow due to the nature of the access at home (both courses)
- ✧ a typing error in the welcome pack leading to difficulties of access (both courses)
- ✧ no instruction on how to use the bulletin board (both courses)
- ✧ lack of information on how the units interlocked to lead to a qualification. A number of students mentioned they would like information on what order to enrol in subjects (information technology course)
- ✧ not all the information and layout was clear (information technology course)
- ✧ a number of students claiming that 'you need to be in a class to get the full benefit of the course' to gain support when you needed it (small business)
- ✧ not being able to access the tutor when you needed them (both courses)
- ✧ lack of support, 'lack of someone to help teach me how to do it, like there was nothing to show me what to do' (small business)
- ✧ delays in receiving feedback (both courses) and lack of feedback, not knowing what competencies had been completed and not completed. One student did not complete the module. His first preference had been to enrol in classroom delivery, but had missed this opportunity (information technology course)
- ✧ no contact once the final assessment was complete, so no feedback was available (information technology course)
- ✧ online assessment marked by the computer not giving specific feedback on where you went wrong and what you need to do to improve your result. Some students preferred to read from a hard copy and then complete the required tasks online (information technology course).

Most students enrolled with the provider because it was the nearest provider. All but one student reported they had received some form of induction for their online learning, with most students rating it as helpful. Ten students reported they were not taught how to communicate electronically. All students reported using email and the bulletin board.

The need for clear instructions and expectations was a concern for a number of students.

But I was overwhelmed by how long it actually took. It took longer than the 20 hours ... I don't think a lot of students actually completed [a web page] or two of the units, because some of the web pages really never looked like anything else had happened to them since they started. So I'm not really too sure what the success rate of that course was ... And probably because they might have had the same problems as me, not really knowing what the next step was and by looking at other people, I think you were even thinking, well, why are they doing it that way, when I'm reading this it's telling me to do it this way, and am I going to do it right or am I going to do it wrong. So you really never know. I think it would be better to have the lecturer tell you what she expects of you and if she had told me what was expected of me I would have followed her guidelines and not tried to work it out myself (information technology course).

Changes students mentioned they would like ranged from meeting the lecturer and other students before the course began, and gaining some background information on the course and an explanation of what was expected of students. Many respondents would like to see interaction between students built into these courses. While many accessed the bulletin board to view their peer responses to assessment tasks, no student interaction resulted from this. Greater accessibility and contact with lecturers would assist with motivation. This is why some students did not complete the module. Many students mentioned the need for more feedback on tests and assignments.

None of the [lecturers at TAFE] have trained to work with students ... [the course] (information technology course).

Another student wanted more continuous feedback on progress from teachers:

Some way of giving you more responses to how you're going, giving you more direction so that you have got a better understanding of how you're going (information technology course).

As in other courses, students expected rapid feedback times from electronic communication. The following quote is typical of both courses.

You might submit something on Monday and Tuesday, you might have missed the lecturer's time that he does feedback, so you've got a week to wait to get feedback on what you've done. Sometimes there isn't enough feedback, there might only be like a little bit of a comment so you don't really know whether you've got it or you've just picked up on one thing you've missed out on.

Quite a number of students mentioned that they would like a phone call from the lecturers 'once in a while'. The difficulty of trying to sort out a concept using email was also discussed. Information technology students would like to see better guidelines on how to complete tasks.

Outcomes ranged from skills gained as a result of the course content to improved networking in the case of the small business course. A number of students referred to increased confidence as a result of doing the course; for example, in being able to market a business—that it clarified and confirmed existing skills. The course assisted with information required in setting up a business, clarifying what their business was. Links to information sites had led to meeting people. Students undertaking the information technology course listed the ability to design a web page, which for a small number of students had the potential to open up further career or work opportunities. One mature-age student undertook the course as an interest and to determine if she was capable of undertaking further study in her retirement.

A small number of information technology students went on to further study. Another saw a business opportunity to apply their new knowledge in the small community in which they lived and made approaches to the telecentre where he was offered free office space in return for volunteering his skills.

Community perspective

Given the generic nature of these two courses, community in this instance was defined geographically as the Chamber of Commerce and the area consultative committee in the local area of the provider being approached. The response was that online delivery and learning was not a 'big topic amongst business in this area'. Given that this is the metropolitan area, respondents pointed out that potential students have access to a university and TAFE campuses. Travel is 'only one to one-and-a-half hours away' and campuses tend to organise timetables so that students stay two to three days, then travel back home for the remainder of the week. The inference was that there was little perceived need by the business community for online delivery.

Respondents reported that small business has a need for short courses that do not take the person away from the workplace. Where online had been used, it was often to access information about new legislation.

Benefits

- ✧ flexibility of pace and place of study
- ✧ suited many of the students' learning styles (face-to-face is a real alternative for many of the students)
- ✧ only alternative for some students to get the qualifications
- ✧ cost savings for students
- ✧ increased confidence
- ✧ career outcomes
- ✧ pathway to other study for some students.

Barriers

- ✧ inadequate and slow feedback on assessment
- ✧ not enough support for teachers; small teacher time allocation compared to amount required
- ✧ information technology and design problems, minor errors in materials
- ✧ slow response to student emails, no phone contact from teachers
- ✧ no interaction with other students.

Promoters

- ✧ student motivation and having the 'right' learning style.

Telecommunications (Call Centres) Certificate III

The course

This course uses mixed-mode forms of delivery, including face-to-face classroom tutorials, use of a WebCT platform and an online simulation program. Three units are delivered partially online. One includes an online call centre simulation program used both as a recruitment and assessment tool. Students are advised on enrolment that internet usage and a sound card are requirements, and three hours per week are required between classes. There is considerable demand for this course which is offered statewide. The program and statewide team were established in 2000, and has undergone a number of changes in attempts to meet and manage the demand. The latest arrangement is a six-week course, both evening and day courses, five times per year.

Additional online resources have been developed to support the online package. There is some discontent with the use of the simulation tool as a teaching tool as it was designed for recruitment. It is hoped that new resources will be developed over the coming year.

Some students do not have computers in their homes and use the local TAFEcentre or access centre; others purchased a computer during the course. Some students experience poor internet connections. The minimum requirements 'are barely adequate' for the online resource, with the technology causing some problems for students with limited hardware and access. To obtain a quality connection, students who 'live out in the country' sometimes find it necessary to travel into the local town.

Support for teaching staff

The program has won Learnscope funding for professional development of the teachers in online learning. Teachers are expected to use their 'duties other than teaching' time to respond to student enquiries. The developer of the online delivery felt limited support was received, largely working alone with some support from the WebCT staff, but little in terms of professional development and support from the institute. For example, HECS fees were not reimbursed, although the institute directly benefited from this teacher's study. This appears to be a common experience for initiators and developers of online delivery within institutes.

Teacher perspective

A small number of students are not computer-literate, requiring considerable time and support 'just to get them to the starting point, not to mention getting them through the program'. Teachers offer one-on-one support through holidays to assist individuals who are struggling. However, a lack of computer skills was not necessarily a problem if the student had an aptitude for this technology. One such student now mentors other students in the class, as she is well ahead in her work and has developed an excellent grasp of the skills and concepts involved.

The online components of the course are seen as important in developing necessary call centre skills in internet use and familiarisation with using and developing confidence in using technology. The online components of the course facilitated group dynamics, with students using email and the discussion forum to 'bounce ideas ... that really bonded the group because it was facilitating such a positive line'. Teachers also thought it was an excellent way of 'maintaining the momentum and keeps them thinking' between one weekly lesson and the next, with tasks set for completion online using bulletin board discussion. Students were reported as 'embracing' the internet and the website once introduced to it. Teachers also felt that online study required students to have a much more problem-solving approach and to be more motivated than required for classroom learning.

Teachers had some issues about the quality of online learning, expressing this as unease about who was completing the work at the other end of the line, and therefore levels of competency. However, because the course is delivered using mixed-mode strategies, assessors feel confident in being able to determine competence. It was noted that this was a course where it was not appropriate to have 100% online, that experience in using the technology along with opportunities for coaching were essential.

Student perspective

Reasons for undertaking online study:

- ✧ career change or to get back into the workforce
- ✧ course recommended
- ✧ to learn computer skills.

There was an overwhelmingly positive response from students to this course. Students enjoyed being able to study online at their own pace and being away from the ‘eye’ of the teacher. Students also felt that they ‘were not holding others up if they did not understand something’. Being online meant students ‘could think about the work in your own time and in your own way’.

Learning online you really have to use your imagination and stop and think because you don’t have someone standing there in the classroom to lean over your shoulder and you do this and this ... If you’re online it’s a matter of well that didn’t work so I’ll go back out and I’ll go back in and I’ll try a different way and it makes you think and you learn more whereas asking someone is easy. Discovering the answer to it yourself is harder but more satisfying because you have done it yourself.

One student who came to the course without computer skills commented that you had ‘to make your own mistakes to get your [computer skills] up properly’. This reflects a preparedness to take risks and learn through a problem-solving approach or perceiving these as challenges. Being online was, for many, an enjoyable experience—combining social exchanges with the task requirements. Working online with other students involved exchanging difficulties experienced and how these were addressed. Both teacher and peer support were constantly provided through the face-to-face contact and email and bulletin board.

A small number of students experienced difficulties in navigating their way around and through the web.

Outcomes included a sense of increasing ability to use their own initiative, and increased web skills. For one student, the experience had shaped her career choices towards working with computer technology. One student expressed her greater determination to gain work with these newly acquired skills. Other students who had gained employment found that the course had opened up employment possibilities other than call centre work as it provided both computer and customer service skills. A number of groups continued to meet on a social basis after the course, indicating there was a strong group identity. Newly acquired web skills were useful for assisting children with homework and organising family events. Learning to use email provided another means of communication with adult children, including sending photos over the internet.

Community perspective

The program has strong industry links, providing potential recruits into the call centre industry and also fee-for-service work for industry. Community was therefore defined as the firms in the industry. The perception of the teachers and other institute representatives was that ‘industry dictates’ the nature of the course. For example, in response to industry demand the program had changed the units offered. The program director explains this:

We had a situation just recently whereby an employer was concerned that we were offering these prerequisite units in total because it really jeopardised their funding for traineeship. Most of the students that do gain employment go through as trainees. Industry are suggesting to us that we don’t offer the full core, we offer not all of the core but we can add an elective to that course which would mean that they would still be entitled to their full funding. It is quite important to employers and we need to take that feedback on board. So statewide we’ve made a decision just recently to offer an elective instead of one of the core units. We’re working with industry not against industry and it doesn’t jeopardise our students’ prospects of getting employment in a job. So quite—we’re very industry driven. We need to be. Our reason for being.

Industry partners were impressed with the quality and standards of delivery, as explained by a program manager from one firm:

[We] made contact with [the institute] and they came in and talked about doing the call centre recognition of current competencies, but what they didn’t do however, was rubber

stamp. They came in and they sat with the staff, they worked with them as far as giving them tips and ideas, they were insistent on proper and understandable evidence. Really from there the relationship has developed. [The institute] really, really lifted the profile and you know they no longer probably look at themselves as just a training facilitator ... They tend to focus on what the industry needs now rather than trying to give people skills where they just don't really suit. That was one thing that has impressed me.

The program team works with industry to design customised training although the degree of customisation is limited due to the requirements of the national training package.

There is a history of relationships developing over a number of years, leading to an ongoing dialogue on an informal basis. As a result, firms have the capacity for input into the course. Respondents observed that having local people with the necessary skills provided positive outcomes for the firm and for the region. The link between industry and an educational institution was highly valued for its opportunity to exchange information and to develop a sense of support within the industry, since, in a regional centre, there is little peer and professional support.

Benefits

Online delivery is an excellent way of learning the skills needed for work in a call centre. These are summarised as:

- ✧ has industry support and links
- ✧ positive career and employment outcomes
- ✧ able to learn at own pace
- ✧ improved information technology and internet skills.

Barriers

- ✧ None observed.

Promoters

- ✧ institution's support with resources and professional development for teachers and culture encouraging industry links.

Community Services Certificate II (VET-in-schools)

The course

This course is delivered using mixed mode, including online delivery using WebCT technology, often in a classroom environment or working from home, and work placements. The course was available online through this provider in 2001. The course is part of the VET-in-schools program which delivers to rural areas around the state. Each school has a teacher-mentor who supports the classroom delivery and provides content and information technology support for students locally. The co-ordinator does all initial assessments and provides trainers with support.

Support provided for teaching staff

Workload was an issue as more students from other schools around the state joined the course. The teacher-assessor felt that she was unable to provide the degree of support to students she would have liked. Although an additional part-time teacher was allocated, the growing enrolment required a rethink of her role. There appeared to be little institutional support for these changes. Unlike

classroom situations where relief is provided when a teacher is ill, online provision did not have this need recognised.

Teacher-mentors working in a secondary school environment were allocated time based on a classroom loading.

Teacher perspective

The teacher assessor states that the 'biggest advantage to delivering online is being able to cater to the flexible needs of my students'. She also spoke enthusiastically of being able to be in two places at the one time, although it is a lot of work. She claims:

It's like cloning yourself in the classroom, you can have students working online and take one or two students aside and give them very individualised attention

The teacher commented that she would not go back to teaching the course without the online component, because of the added flexibility and resources it provides.

Teacher-mentors were also enthusiastic, particularly where there had been a previous relationship with the co-ordinator. Teacher-mentors provided structured time and teaching and information technology support in a classroom environment. They were also responsible for establishing community links for work placement.

Teacher-mentors felt that the classroom environment, with the option of study at home, was important for these students, many of whom had no previous computer experience. The exchange of ideas and peer support were essential factors in students' learning and gaining of confidence.

Student perspective

Reasons for undertaking the course online

- ✧ to avoid extensive daily travel and/or additional accommodation costs
- ✧ being able to work at home
- ✧ flexibility due to home and work commitments
- ✧ to learn how to use computers.

The flexibility of being able to access the material when students had time was an important factor in this choice of delivery.

Students said they felt more able to ask questions in an online environment about material they found difficult, or questions that may be ambiguous where they would not in a classroom situation. Working together online using email was considered helpful since between them they worked out problems and approaches to the work required. A number of students commented that they enjoyed being able to put their work up on the bulletin board for other students' comment and being able to access others' work.

Students like the capacity to go back over material compared to a classroom situation where they feel they often miss material. Quite a number of students preferred face-to-face learning while at the same time acknowledging the convenience of online delivery. The face-to-face option was a means of providing assurance that what they were doing was correct, or exploring other ways of completing tasks.

There were difficulties and frustrations experienced by students. Technical difficulties arose when students were accessing the course through the school because three different access codes and passwords were required. These did not always allow access. Working from home did not lead to the same problems. Students reported links, such as a quiz-link, were often missing resulting in students falling behind with their work. One group of mature-aged students was timetabled for

computer access at the same time in the same room as Grade 10 students being taught 'on the other side of the room'. The school claimed there was support available when the mentor–teacher was not available due to illness; however, students felt uncomfortable asking for assistance from a teacher already occupied and in front of young students.

All students expressed dissatisfaction with feedback, or the lack of it. For example, queries to the teacher–assessor were reported as eliciting 'insufficient answering'; feedback generally was considered 'minimalist'. Comments such as 'good work' were not supported with explanations on what made it 'good' or what could be improved and how. A number of students also reported that assessment tasks had been lost on a number of accessions or not received. There was a long time between sending in work and results, both from teacher–mentors and the assessor. The teacher–assessor was absent for many weeks due to illness and was not replaced.

It appears there were considerable communication difficulties, with students not being informed or being informed late of meetings and workshops. 'We're absolutely floundering. Communication is pathetic.' A number of students are close to pulling out because of these frustrations.

Work placements had been expected to be completed by the time of interview; however, these had not yet been organised, despite the considerable number of hours required. There did not appear to be consistency in the approach to recognising volunteer work. Other perceptions of inequity were concerns that some students were being 'signed off' as competent and having completed the course when they had not yet completed the course, but had worked for twelve months in the field. This maybe due to a process of recognition of current competence, not explained to students. There was confusion over workbooks which arrived late and were poorly laid out.

The course appeared to be managed similarly to a secondary classroom where students who were ahead were reportedly required to wait until new students were up to date with them.

The small number of students who were highly computer-literate were frustrated even when attending the scheduled teacher–mentor time as the increasing number of students who were not computer-literate were in 'greater need'. Requests for help sent via email were apparently unanswered or would take a week. However, it should be pointed out that some students expected an immediate response when using email. For students undertaking the certificate III, frustrations included time lost in waiting for material to 'come up' online.

The teacher–assessor is leaving, after a period of illness. It has led to a sense of uncertainty amongst students as there had not been any reason given for the lack of contact during this time. Four modules from term one were not yet online, putting students behind by as much as one month. This is difficult when balancing work and family. In the face of these considerable difficulties, the local mentor was identified as being important in maintaining motivation.

Students identified a number of changes they wanted implemented. These included:

- ✧ being informed of the need for computer skills prior to enrolment. For some students this would have meant they may have undertaken a basic computer course before commencing the course
- ✧ being taught internet etiquette
- ✧ improved communication to students and mentors about meetings, workshops with adequate time given to organise childcare and travel
- ✧ better linkages between the material and availability of the quiz links which were stated as being available but were not
- ✧ more support and quicker response time to assessment tasks and detail given in feedback
- ✧ putting up the whole term's work from the beginning of the year or paper copies so students could continue at their own pace.

Students were informed at enrolment that their prior learning would be taken into consideration but apparently this did not happen. Some of the criteria such as punctuality, and dressing appropriately were felt not to be appropriate for mature-aged students, especially those who were already working on a paid or voluntary basis in the industry.

Outcomes included learning how to use a computer, and ‘getting the brain going again’. Students did not feel positive about learning online, although they gained confidence in assisting children with schoolwork and researching material and presentation skills. For another small group this course was an important step to further study. For a small number of students, ‘it taught them discipline’ in developing study routines and maintaining motivation. New social contacts were made through the structured teacher–mentor time.

Community perspective

The community was defined as the professional community, with local community health centres representatives being interviewed. Centres are multidisciplinary, providing family and child health, mental health, community social work and community nursing care along with the hospital catering for acute and residential beds. These centres service large geographical rural areas—in one case up to 2480 km with a population of 2000.

Respondents said there were potential long-term benefits to the whole community with long-term gains in employment in the community:

Employment is an issue, we’re in a depressed socio-economic climate anyway and being a rural area there’s inherent issues around unemployment and isolation, access to services generally or access to training and opportunities.

In addition, it was reported that it was important to be able to employ local people with the necessary skills and qualifications as this led to less travel and greater availability.

There were some teething issues in establishing contact; it took time and considerable effort. There was also some confusion over what was required for the placement and the subsequent assessment.

They had internal issues around what the student had to do, so we thought we’d finished and then she said, ‘oh no they’ve given me all this other stuff’ and we had to then sit down again and go through all of this extra stuff. So it seemed like there were internal hiccups around the placement and the person doing this particular training.

This respondent felt that communication processes could be improved. On occasions assessment materials were lost. This was all explained as a result of being the first time the teachers involved had undertaken this type of process. As the respondent was also an auditor for quality systems she was able to use her knowledge to assist in addressing issues as they unfolded.

In another regional area the process was better established, with personnel from the local school, the health centre and other business people and local government personnel forming a committee to oversee the implementation of VET programs, including this course, in the area. Issues ranging from the workbook, workers’ compensation arrangements to occupational health and safety (OH&S) training are discussed. The process was perceived as consultative, and providing a framework for each type of workplace to clarify its own needs in relation to, for example, OH&S requirements. Contact and dialogue with the local school and personnel organising the placements is ongoing. As a result there is constant evolution of requirements and processes for mentoring and assessing student placements.

The perception of the online course by this respondent was that it meant students went on to complete Years 11 and 12, and were not lost to the town, or alternatively being forced to finish school at Year 10 because they were unable to meet the costs of travel and board in the city. The course attracted many mature-age students, providing them with new career pathways. For mature-

age students, it also opened up pathways to nursing that would otherwise not be available because of university entrance requirements. The course was perceived as a source of education for local people and also as a source of trained people for the health centre to draw on. Having local people to draw on was important because:

By employing local people, you get a commitment to the community because they live here and are committed to the growth of the area and to the facility, so normally you find they stay with you for quite some time. And they are also more likely to advance, to go on the pathway. So because of what they've already accomplished, then they get confidence to move on. So it actually is a ready source, if you like, of employees.

Benefits

- ✧ training available in a depressed area with no other opportunities for training
- ✧ employment outcomes and skills for local health services industry
- ✧ flexibility of pace and place of study
- ✧ improved computer skills
- ✧ improved confidence.

Barriers

- ✧ organisation and integration of work placements poor
- ✧ not truly self-paced delivery
- ✧ communication between teacher assessor and other schools poor
- ✧ no resources to replace teacher when ill.



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