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Chapter 10

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AT A DISTANCE: TRANSFORMATION TO FLEXIBLE DELIVERY

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FOCUS OF THIS CHAPTER

This chapter will explore the position that distance education has held in the past in Australian vocational education and training (VET) and how that position has developed and transformed over the past couple of decades. It is argued here that after a period of VET provision through distance education that was largely based around an earlier centralised model, VET was early to recognise the potential that new technologies in distance education had for VET learners and learning. Concurrently there was recognition of the substantial limitations a centralised model of distance education posed for new demands on VET. Economic imperatives also contributed to what became a revolution in VET and its delivery to learners.

The chapter identifies these developments and the factors that have contributed to them, and tracks the transition of Australian VET distance education as it transformed away from centralised distance education provision towards its more recent forms of locally provided flexible delivery and blended learning.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF VET IN AUSTRALIA

Vocational education and training in Australia is provided at the levels of post compulsory upper secondary school and post-school. The post-school sector forms the major focus of this chapter, and the majority of VET training provision in Australia occurs at that level. Although there are some complexities and qualifications in the complex national statistical reports on VET provision, it is reasonably accurate to state that in 2003, 1.72 million students participated in post-school VET studies and 0.20 million in the VET in Schools sector (NCVER, 2004).

After 1974 and until the end of the twentieth century, VET in Australia was nearly completely delivered through what is known as the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system, which was set up as an outcome of the report of the Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education. That report established the TAFE system throughout the nation, and brought together under the one concept of TAFE what had previously been a fairly disparate set of arrangements. VET was largely delivered through a number of TAFE colleges set up in each of the Australian States, normally based around pre-existing technical institutes. TAFE has
been the funding responsibility of State governments, and administered through State education bureaucracies, with some contributions being made by the Australian Commonwealth Government. As the result of a growing recognition that TAPE provision throughout the nation needed increased uniformity between States, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was set up in 1992. Funded largely by the Commonwealth Government, ANTA had responsibilities to develop TAFE as a nationally coordinated response to industry and individual demand, with delivery assured through performance agreements with the States. In the middle of 2005, ANTA ceased to exist and its functions are now administered by the Australian Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training. That change is expected to signal a stronger Commonwealth Government interest in the provision of VET.

Readers so far may have detected some looseness between the terms TAPE and VET that requires some explanation. Prior to the 1990s, VET was delivered almost exclusively by TAFE colleges, such that the term VET was really taken to be synonymous with TAFE and, indeed, the latter was the term most commonly used. Since the early 1990s, VET has been provided by a much broader set of training organisations than TAFE colleges, such that VET is now the term used to describe vocational education and training as a larger functional concept, and TAFE is now just one of the structures within the "VET system" that provides VET. Each State had set up its TAFE system, which comprised the publicly owned and funded TAFE colleges, including an organisation for the provision of VET studies at a distance.

Most States had developed separate organisations to provide distance education at TAFE level, such as the College of External Studies in New South Wales (NSW), or the Technical Extension Service in Western Australia. With some minor variations between States, these organisations were operated like any other publicly owned TAFE provider, and, along with their campus-based sister institutions, provided distance courses to TAFE students unable or unwilling to attend face-to-face classes at a TAFE college.

In 2007 none of those organisations dedicated to distance education continue to exist, and most have not existed since the early to mid-1990s. In the rest of this chapter, I intend to examine some of the reasons that have led to a major change in the conceptualisations and provision of distance education in Australian VET, and some insights into what is now provided instead.

**ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES AND CHANGES IN VET**

In the mid-1980s, Australia experienced some economic awakenings that changed the nation's view of itself. A history of world demand for traditional exports of primary production commodities such as wool, wheat, and metals, together with a history of adequate prices being received for these commodities, had meant that Australia had been a comparatively rich country with a high standard of living. The traditional reliance on its primary products to generate economic wealth had fostered a neglect of trading opportunities in other areas. The strong economic recovery following the recession of 1983-1984 showed a rapid increase in import growth resulting from the uncompetitive nature of Australian traded goods and services. The weaknesses in the economy that required high levels of imports were further exposed when the world prices for primary produce and metals fell sharply in 1985-1986.

The (then) Labor Government recognised that Australia had to change and that Australian industry had to develop a wider range of products and services, and do so in a context of increasing international competition. A highly trained and flexible workforce was seen by the
Labor Government (Dawkins and Holding, 1987) as central to productivity improvement, which, in turn, was seen as essential to long-term economic well-being. It was clear that if Australia was to remain a country with a high living standard and play an active part in the global economy, attention would have to be paid to the nation's systems and processes for VET, and to the formation of productive skills. Mathews et al. (1988) observed widespread agreement that Australia was an underskilled and vulnerable society. Carter and Gribble (1991) observed that this underskilling represented

... a crisis in our human capital which has been created by a mismatch between rapid economic change and insufficient attention, particularly by the industry partners, to past workforce development.

(Carter and Gribble, 1991, p. 4)

Calder and McCollum (1998), in the United Kingdom, and Carter and Gribble (1991), in Australia, have observed that in both nations a dynamic relationship between education and training systems and economic growth is accepted as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for major economic reform. Nicoll (1998, p. 301) has suggested that post-secondary education has come to be viewed as an industry itself that "is required to contribute to the economic progress of the nation". Carter and Gribble (1991) cited the United Kingdom's National Economic Development Office (1990):

The prevailing issue is no longer whether education and training is a factor in economic performance, but what needs to be done to improve its provision, by what means, and where responsibility for action lies.

(Carter and Gribble, 1991, p. 66)

As a result of the need for greater productivity, and the analysis of Australia as a comparatively poor performer in training provision, the Federal Government in Skills for (Dawkins and Holding, 1987) set a number of policies and targets designed to increase participation in VET. These concerns and reforms were responsible for a wide range of changes within the Australian VET system, and largely formed the basis for what became known as the National Training Reform Agenda. Although these changes and reforms served Australia arguably well into the twenty-first century, more recently there have been new pressures on the Australian economy, and interest among State and Commonwealth governments for new training reforms has emerged (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). It is likely that further change and reform will impact on some of the argument within this chapter, but at this stage it is unclear what those changes might be.

The developments in VET in Australia as a response to economic concerns and aspirations most importantly represented a change in the way that governments conceptualised VET. Whereas VET had been largely viewed as a form of education and training that was to support individuals in their work and career aspirations, the new thinking saw it very much as an important part of government policy, of economic development and the development of the nation's stock of human capital. The relationships formed between VET authorities and employer and industry bodies were developed with some vigour to try and ensure that the content that was being taught was relevant to industry needs, and that the forms in which VET was to be delivered were amenable to participation by employees. Flexible delivery that was partially based in distance education mindsets and methods was seen as one of these important forms of training delivery.
DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRAINING MARKET

The economic and policy imperatives outlined above were accompanied by the deliberate creation of a "training market", where VET service providers were motivated through competition to more readily respond to enterprises and individuals in skill upgrading (Anderson, 1997). Skills for Australia (p. 30) reported that in 1974 there were 458,000 people enrolled in vocational and preparatory courses. In 2003 the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) reported that 1,720,000 people were enrolled in the public VET system (NCVER, 2004). Clearly, VET has developed into a sizeable business between 1974 and 2003. State training authorities have been active in the development of a more open market, where the pre-existing publicly funded TAFE institutions have become subjected to winning much more of their business through open tender. Additionally, government has re-conceptualised itself as customer, rather than as provider (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), and purchases a contracted number of places from VET providers, both public and private.

It is not easy to obtain good statistics on the contribution of private providers to Australia's VET effort. However, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (2004) report for NSW (the most populous State in the Commonwealth) shows that there were 792 VET providers within NSW, of which 455 were private training providers. It is useful, though, to observe that the remaining 337 providers were composed of publicly funded VET organisations or providers operated by individual enterprises, by industry groups, or by professional associations. The same report also notes that 673 interstate providers operate in NSW, taking the total to 1,465 providers in that State alone. Prior to the creation and encouragement of the private training provider market, NSW would have been serviced for VET by a combination of the following:

- Publicly owned and operated TAFE colleges in the major metropolitan areas and larger regional towns;
- Some satellite centres of these TAFE colleges in medium-sized rural towns;
- A central College of External Studies providing distance education throughout the State; and
- A very small number of privately operated organisations that were not supported by government funding.

Other States were similarly serviced through their systems of TAFE colleges and publicly funded distance education provider.

The development of the training market and the growth in the number of training providers has, it is argued here, had a profound effect on the relevance of the older more centralised model of publicly funded distance education provision. Where a VET learner is not living in a town large enough to have a TAFE college or a satellite of one, the alternative is no longer only one of enrolling with a central distance education provider. The distribution of training providers throughout the nation has become much richer with the smallest of communities now most likely boasting a training provider of one sort or another. In small communities these providers are commensurately small as well, but they offer the VET programmes that are relevant to the industry and other economic activities of that community. Learners can respond to their local provider and gain access to group learning, to actual demonstrations, and to the physical contexts demanded by competency-based training (CBT) and assessment. These developments have not been friendly to centrally provided distance education models. The
marketisation of VET in Australia, and the wider geographical distribution of training providers are not without problems, and Anderson (2004) has written cogently on some of the dysfunctions in user choice that are present.

Training providers and the communities they serve are supported in each of the States by new forms of organisations that have replaced the earlier distance education providers. Staying with NSW for a moment, the publicly owned Open Training and Education Network (OTEN) (http://www.oten.edu.au) provides distance education programmes to individuals throughout the State, as well as developing study materials and online learning programmes for local providers to use with their own enrolled students, and for business to purchase and use for employee training. In Victoria, the smallest and most densely populated mainland State, the TAFE Virtual Campus (http://www.tafevc.com.au) produces and provides online learning opportunities to students who are enrolled at a registered training organisation (RTO). Important here is that TAFE virtual campus does not directly enrol individual learners, but serves RTOs and the students who enrol with them. Western Australia, the largest and most sparsely populated State, has a similar organisation called WestOne (http://www.westone.wa.gov.au), which also does not enrol students directly, but produces learning resources (largely online) for use by students enrolled at RTOs throughout that State. The relationships here are similar to those between any wholesaler of goods and services and the retailers who sell those goods to the public. There are variations on that relationship, since local training providers and other organisations also develop curriculum and learning materials to suit local clienteles; and in some States (e.g. OTEN in NSW; the Open Learning Institute in Queensland) the "wholesaler" also retails its goods directly to the consumer.

In summary, the move to marketisation of the provision of VET has resulted in a wholesaler/retailer network providing for a rich geographical distribution of training providers throughout the nation, where each of these training providers is locally focussed and able to provide face-to-face training and demonstration, and assessment in situated contexts. These developments have overtaken the need for centralised distance education providers as they once existed.

COMPETENCY-BASED TRAINING AND ASSESSMENT

In pursuit of the development of a national training system through ANT A, the Commonwealth, State, and Territory Ministers of Employment, Education, and Training set up the Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Council (VEETAC), which published its Framework for the Implementation of a Competency-Based Vocational Education and Training System in 1993. The framework comprised the following components:

- competency-based training;
- recognition of training;
- curriculum development;
- assessment; and
- administrative processes.

Competency-based training was seen as an approach to learning and a system for VET, as well as forming the basis for assessment. It emphasises outcomes and skills rather than the processes for learning and the time taken to reach a prescribed standard of competency. Not without its detractors (e.g. Marginson, 1992; Roffey-Mitchell, 1997), CBT is claimed to enable the training outcomes to be closely aligned to the level of skill required by the enterprise.
Therefore, it is argued, the costs of training can be contained to support development of only those skills required by industries and enterprises. CBT can also be related to the quality assurance process (Hager, 1997). Additionally, since CBT instruction does not need to take place in a group or classroom setting, and learning programme length is not expressed in units of time, flexible delivery was viewed as part of the strategic responses to the need for increased training efforts and outputs (Kearns, 1997).

Assessment of VET outcomes were addressed through four key features - validity, reliability, fairness, and flexibility (Tovey, 1997). These features were to be implemented to provide equitability of assessment among all groups of learners, and to provide full information to learners on procedures and judging criteria. Also to be provided was a participatory approach to assessment that included the person to be assessed, and the requirement for a process to enable challenge to assessments and re-assessment. Some of these changes were not able to be implemented successfully within the previous distance education provision framework of VET organisations that specialised in distance education. First, as noted by Hyde et al. (2004), much of the assessment of competency needs to be carried out as demonstrations or execution of manual tasks and skills. Accordingly, assessment has to be quite localised. Adding further to the need for localisation, learning of competencies and their assessment can be achieved using the equipment and processes in use by the employer. As long as the competency is achieved, the actual vehicle of its acquisition and demonstration is largely immaterial, but what is important to employers is that the people they are paying to learn are learning directly applicable skills. Selection of the most appropriate training materials and delivery method has become a user-based decision. Again, the previous model of centralised distance education providers of VET was substantially challenged.

**SITUATED LEARNING AND WORKPLACE LEARNING**

Interest in situated and workplace learning has developed strongly since the publication of work by Resnick (1987) and Brown et al. (1989), each of whom questioned the hegemony of classroom-based instruction, and argued for learning that is undertaken in the same situation as the knowledge is used. Researchers were also recognising and exploring the value of workplace communities of practice as part of the legitimate learning experiences that take place in enterprises (Lave and Wenger, 1991). At the same time as this increased interest in situated learning was occurring, commercial and industrial enterprises were experiencing the rapid changes in production technology that occurred throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century, and continued into the twenty-first century.

The technological changes in the business world resulted in a stronger need for learners to learn skills on the equipment that was in-house. That was partly due to the difficulties confronting education and training providers in purchasing the highly expensive equipment for training purposes, and the decreasing amount of time elapsing before it became superseded or obsolete. A further consideration was the differentiation in the market for production equipment resulting in major differences between firms in the equipment that they purchased, and the way it may be configured, even among firms producing similar goods in the same industry sector. That differentiation among firms also made it less effective for training organisations to provide fairly standard learning experiences on the same piece of equipment to all their students, or to produce distance education learning materials that could be used by all students irrespective of where they worked.
Again, these changes in workplace circumstances represented a challenge to the more traditional model of distance education provision, where learning materials could be centrally developed, centrally distributed, and learning outcomes centrally assessed. What was more emergent in demand was training that could be more directly related to the processes and the equipment used in a particular firm where the learner was employed.

The VET authorities in Australia were quick to question the provision of public funds to purchase expensive equipment for training purposes in the context of limited currency for the equipment, and a larger variety of needs by the learners and their individual workplaces. Similarly, there was a reticence to provide funding to develop detailed materials for individual learners. The preference became one for developing materials to support trainers in workplaces and VET institutions. These trainer-support materials addressed the acquisition and assessment of prescribed competencies, but could fairly easily be supplemented by trainers to take account of enterprise-specific or otherwise localised processes and equipment.

In support of these changed circumstances, in which a great deal more training could be carried out and assessed in workplaces, courses were developed for trainers and assessors (e.g. Certificate IV in Training and Assessment) so that the people already working in enterprises could become proficient at training and assessing others within their workplace. Apart from enabling the training and assessment to be conducted in the workplace, using its own equipment and processes, this also enabled enterprises to train people whenever it suited them, and to have the requisite competencies assessed whenever the learner was ready. In that way the trainee could be deployed to the new task in a proficient way, and within quality assurance guidelines, at a time that suited the enterprise rather than at a time that suited the large and centrally organised distance education provider. Again, though, these developments were not kindly towards the traditionally organised form of distance education. Where an enterprise had access to a responsive local training provider there would be some interest in using that provider rather than being in the business of training themselves (Evans, 2001); but where they were not able to access a local provider the enterprise could now conduct the training and assess it in-house, rather than continue to depend on a distance education provider.

RECOGNITION OF STAKEHOLDERS

Distance education providers typically enrol individual students as their clients, and they develop their administrative and support processes to cater to individual learners. The recognition that training and skills development is an important contributor to the productivity and competitiveness of individual enterprises and of nations (Carter and Gribble, 1991; Nicoll, 1998) brought with it a further recognition that individual learners pursuing their own aspirations were not the only stakeholders in training, and possibly not even the most important ones in economic terms. Other stakeholders included the enterprises employing these learners, and paying for the time of their employees and the services of the training provider. Government also sees itself as a stakeholder (acting on behalf of the community), where all or part of the funding for training organisations is provided from the public purse. Government exercised its rights as a stakeholder in Australian VET by, typically, contracting with training providers (both public and private) for the purchase of an agreed number of training places (or training hours or training effort) in each field of vocational study. The training provider was then paid to deliver those outcomes. One result of that process was that no longer was the number of people enrolled in any course determined either by the provider or by individual learners. The actual number of individual subscriber enrolments was determined by what
government had purchased on behalf of the community, based on manpower requirements data. Retention of students became something of an issue to governments in this context in that they were reluctant to be paying for a service that was not ultimately delivered, and an outcome that was not achieved. High levels of attrition in VET distance education were seen as a management and cost problem, and the amounts that government paid to the providers was discounted by attrition. Hence, providers became more urgent in their wish to reduce attrition. Whereas once they had been able to rather liberally and luxuriously view attrition as somewhat wasteful of human effort and aspiration, or argue it as the learners' achievement of something less than the entire course, but an achievement nonetheless, they now started to see it as a source of funding leakage. Accordingly, the attention of provider managements was more closely focussed on attrition than it had been, and a spotlight went on to distance education as characterised by high attrition (Misko, 2000).

The third stakeholder to be recognised by the public VET sector was the employer (King, 1996; Evans and Smith, 1999). Employers were free to purchase from training providers training effort and services above those funded by government. Providers were also free to make government-purchased places available to individual enterprises under certain conditions. Employers were the individual enterprises, big and small, that employed (or consumed) the products of VET, where these products might be student graduates, or other goods and services associated with training, such as training design, materials, advice, and consultancy. Employers were also represented by peak bodies, set up for each industry sector as Industry Training Advisory Boards (IT ABs). Through these IT ABs VET authorities and providers were provided with intelligence on the training needs of the industry sector, and the delivery modes that may best suit the sector.

These developments, it can be argued, changed the conceptualisation of distance education as it had been in the centrally operated more traditional organisations where the individual student had been the customer. In the context of enterprise training, this again raises the question of who is the learner and who is the customer. While the learner is likely to be an individual within the enterprise, that person may not be the customer who pays the bills and who makes the training decisions. The customer is most likely to be the enterprise and its management. King (1996) has examined the language used in ANT A reports and concludes that the principal client is seen as the enterprise, rather than the individual learner. It is the enterprise which largely determines content and sequence of training, along with the length of time provided to complete the learning programme. Again, this change in recognition of the customer did not sit well with centrally organised distance education. The flexibility and responsiveness required to negotiate content with the enterprise customer, and to also negotiate and deliver on timing and sequence at customer demand place enormous demands on large centrally driven systems. The attraction of moving towards flexibly and responsively provided local or workplace-based training is again apparent, at the expense of centrally provided distance education, with a purchase of training materials from the wholesale provider.

Evans and Smith (1999) explored the differences in conceptualisation of flexible delivery that are apparent between the higher education sector and the VET sector. They argued that in the higher education sector the notion of flexible delivery is very firmly rooted in distance education, and represents "the delivery of university-developed and controlled courses of study to students in such a way that they can study where and when they wish" (Evans and Smith, 1999, p. 120). On the other hand, the VET sector, according to Evans and Smith, saw flexible delivery as borrowing from distance education for some of its thinking and its methods, but
central to the VET conceptualisation is the idea of customer control over content, form of delivery, timing, and sequencing.

The earlier central providers of VET distance education in fact saw their business in much the same way as Evans and Smith suggested that the university sector sees it - as providing supplier-designed courses at a distance (or at least remotely) to learners who largely studied to a provider-determined timetable. Although Evans and Smith did not make the argument in their 1999 paper, it is possible to suggest that it is the difference they identified between the two conceptualisations of flexible delivery that best represents the transformation that has occurred in VET distance education since the late 1980s.

FOCUS ON LEARNERS

The VET distance education had operated largely on a basis of what was feasible within the resources available. Accordingly, it meant that the majority of learning materials developed and provided to students were printed notes sent through the mail, and assignments were returned for assessment. In other words, it was a fairly typical correspondence education model (Foks, 1987).

The new technologies of the 1980s ushered in new opportunities for distance and other resource-based learning in VET. Household-owned video-cassette equipment provided opportunity for moving images to be cheaply distributed to learners; desktop personal computers provided opportunity for computer-based training materials and systems to be developed. Videodisc, although very expensive to produce and reproduce, was seen as a further opportunity because of its random accessing capability. Along with the new opportunities to provide VET in different formats came concerns for costs that would be greater than those incurred in the reproduction of printed notes. Together with increases in costs came an interest in whether higher-cost training materials produced through the newer electronic formats were indeed what learners would want and effectively use.

In the VET sector in Australia Thompson (1985) had explored the newly available individualised systems of instruction in each of the Australian States and concluded that catering to the characteristics of individual learners in VET is an important contributor to teaching and learning success. She also showed that selection of media and delivery methods to suit individual learner characteristics was an important factor in the effectiveness of individualised instruction. In 1986, Smith and Lindner published their report on learning styles among VET students and how well those student characteristics were served by teaching delivery methods. The report showed that the relationship between learner characteristics and teaching delivery was by no means strong, and that there was considerable room for development if VET was to become more client-focused. Both the Thompson and the Smith and Lindner research projects were funded by government VET authorities, indicating an interest commencing at that level in the issues of client focus and service. At a national level the issues of learner characteristics and client focus were again revisited by Misko (1994a, 1994b) in her research conducted on behalf of the national VET research authority. Later research on student characteristics by Boote (1998), Smith (2000, 2001, 2003), and Warner et al. (1998) showed that VET learners were typically not self-directed learners and neither did they have a preference for learning from text. The most typical VET learner was characterised by a preference to learn through hands-on direct experience in an instructor-guided context. In other words, distance education through resource-based packaged learning materials and
provided remotely from an instructor was almost diametrically opposed to learner preferences commonly observed among VET learners. Although showing there is diversity among VET learners, each of these studies indicated that large numbers, if not a majority, are typically hands-on learners who prefer an instructor-led learning context.

These same learner characteristics also represented a challenge for online learning. Australian State VET systems were enthusiastic to develop a sophisticated and comprehensive online learning platform and service (Mitchell, 2000). The motivations for these developments were partially associated with the State image and a sense of having to develop such a system to project currency (Zemsky and Massy, 2004), but also, as Mitchell (2000) has pointed out, with a genuine attempt to provide online programmes and services to learners and corporate clients. However, as Mitchell's research indicated, the business models underlying these developments seldom took account of desired educational outcomes nor the nature of the end users. Later, nationally funded research by Brennan (2003) confirmed that online courses frequently make unfounded assumptions about VET learners, such as that they are motivated, text-capable learners, well organised, and have well-developed higher-order cognitive skills. As Brennan points out, many VET students do not have those characteristics (Boote, 1998; Warner et al. 1998; Smith, 2000, 2001, 2003). Accordingly, as Brennan identified in her national study, the trend in VET has been to use online learning within a learning environment where online learning and face-to-face contact are blended.

In summary, a model of distance education where learners are typically remote from their teacher and access their learning materials from an education provider through electronic mediation has fallen from favour in VET. There is recognition that VET learners are not typically well suited to that independent and self-directed form of learning, and that good customer service in a competitive and marketised VET environment is not provided through that model. National research by Smith and Dalton (2005) has shown that VET providers claim that accommodating the learning styles of client learners is an important part of their business and customer service.

A TRANSFORMATION TO FLEXIBLE DELIVERY

Summarising to this point, by the early 1990s a number of threats to the success of the centrally organised distance education organisations available in each State could be identified; and a number of new opportunities had become similarly apparent. The threats were related to the requirements of CBT and assessment; workplace learning relevant to the specific needs of the enterprise; and the need for VET learners to have hands-on learning through direct experience, and an instructor-guided context for learning. There were new opportunities related to the potential for new technologies to deliver resource-based VET in a wider set of forms than print-based learning materials; and the structures put in place to support the “wholesaler/retailer” model with its liberal distribution of competitive public and private training providers throughout the nation.

A move towards the flexible delivery of VET was a response to these threats and opportunities, where flexible delivery was conceptualised as a combination of resource-based learning, hands-on experience in workplaces, and a social context for learning with fellow workers or learners and with face-to-face instruction delivered through training providers or in workplaces. In the Australian VET sector, the Flexible Delivery Working Party (1992) proposed the following definition of flexible delivery:
Flexible delivery is an approach to vocational education and training which allows for the adoption of a range of learning strategies in a variety of learning environments to cater for differences in learning styles, learning interests and needs, and variations in learning opportunities.

(Flexible Delivery Working Party, 1992, p. 2)

The Working Party further suggested that flexible delivery provides students with greater flexibility in

- delivery modes;
- delivery venues; and
- assessment practices.

The Working Party suggested several features of flexible delivery, each of which was seen as providing considerable advantages for training. Flexible delivery has the potential to enable considerable customisation towards learner preferences. Through access to a wide range of learning resources, and a wide range of teaching options, it is possible for a learner to assemble the resources that best fit learning requirements, preferences, and the teaching methods that are most favoured, to yield a learning experience that is comfortable and effective.

Observing this identified capacity for flexible delivery to enable the learner (or other end-user) considerable flexibility in choice of place of learning, level of content to be learned, actual content to be learned, and the method through which the learning takes place, Misko (1994b) called it a "client focused" approach to the delivery of education and training. She listed the forms of learning available with flexible delivery as

- competency-based learning
- discovery learning
- self-paced learning
- resource-based learning
- group-paced learning
- mixed modes of learning
- integrated theory and practical learning
- integrated on-the-job and off-the-job learning
- problem-based learning.

(Misko, 1994b, p. 3)

Further development in the thinking is indicated in 1996 when the Australian National Training Authority's National Flexible Delivery Taskforce adopted the definition:

Flexible delivery is an approach rather than a system or technique; it is based on the skill needs and delivery requirements of clients, not the interests of trainers or providers; it gives clients as much control as possible over what and when and where and how they learn; it commonly uses the delivery methods of distance education and the facilities of technology; it changes the role of trainer from a source of knowledge to a manager of learning and a facilitator.

(ANT A, 1996, p. 11)

This description is precisely that proposed by Johnson (1990, p. 4) to define "open learning", and captures the two focuses most commonly associated with flexible delivery—extended access to learning through the removal of barriers, and a philosophy of learner-centred provision.
where learner choice is the key. Also evident in that definition is an understanding of the role that new technologies could play in converging resource-based or distance forms of training delivery with other face-to-face forms of teaching, demonstration, and practice (Smith and Kelly, 1987; Tait and Mills, 1999; Distance Education Special Issue, 2005).

As Rumble (1989) suggests, open learning is a very different idea from distance education. He also points out that there is no shortage of definitions of open learning. Rumble argues cogently that education practices fall on a continuum between contiguous and distance modes of teaching, but where on the continuum a practice lies has nothing to do with its openness. Rumble concludes by observing that

The concept of open education is ill-defined but has to do with matters related to access, freedom from the constraints of time and place, means, structure, dialogue and the presence of support services.

(Rumble, 1989, p. 41)

He points out that distance education systems may be quite closed, and not meet the criteria for openness that he has established. A different insight into the distinction between distance education and open learning was provided by Edwards (1995) as part of his analysis of these terms in a post-Fordist context. Edwards suggested that distance education, with its emphasis on provision of learning opportunities at a distance" ... is consistent with a Fordist model of organisation in which mass produced products are available to a mass market" (Edwards, 1995, p. 242). In contrast, Edwards saw open learning, similarly to flexible delivery, as being more market sensitive with a greater emphasis on meeting the needs of the learner/consumer. He also saw the "privileged discourses of providers" (Edwards, 1995, p. 250) being replaced with discourses that place the learner as a consumer in the centre. In his suggestion that technologically mediated knowledge provides the vehicle for individualising learning, Edwards recognised that distance is subservient to the discourse of open learning, and becomes "reconstituted as relationships between producers and consumers in which knowledge is exchanged on the basis of the usefulness it has to the consumer" (Edwards, 1995, p. 251). It is through that notion of subservience that Rumble's and Edwards' analyses form congruence with, as Rumble (1989) has argued, the continuum of distance being independent from that of openness. This relationship between open learning and flexible delivery was further explored in the Report of the Australian Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, Part 2 (1995) when it suggested that

If open learning is considered an expression of a certain educational philosophy, the notion of "flexible delivery" favoured by the VET sector may be considered as an education and training strategy which emerges from the philosophy.

(The Australian Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, Part 2, 1995, p. 7)

The notions of learner control over content, sequence, and length of time to complete the programme are included in the conceptualisation of flexible learning as crucial components in the provision of learning programmes to enterprises (Evans and Smith, 1999). Behind the inclusion of those notions in flexible learning is the fundamental idea that flexible learning is learner (or customer) controlled rather than provider controlled. It is the learner or the enterprise that largely determines content and sequence, along with the length of time provided to complete the learning programme.
A definition of distance education and its key characteristics was comprehensively addressed by Keegan (1980) at a time before the newer terms of "flexible learning" and "flexible delivery" emerged in the language of educators. Keegan's work sought to examine the confusion between the then new term "distance education", and the older commonly used terms such as "home study", "external studies", and "correspondence study". Keegan reviewed a number of definitions of distance education and concluded that the main elements any definition needs to include are

- the separation of teacher and learner (to distinguish from face to face instruction)
- the influence of an educational organisation (to distinguish from private study)
- the use of technical media (including print) to unite the teacher and learner,
- and to carry the educational content
- the provision of two-way communication between teacher and learner
- the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation reasons
- the participation in an industrialised form of education where there is division
- of labour such as instructional design, graphics, word processing and typography,
- teaching etc.

(Keegan, 1980, p. 33)

The Keegan review provides an insight into the distinction that may be made between distance education and flexible learning in that he does not include any notions of flexible entry or exit, or learner control over content, sequence, and pace of progress, or the potential co-location of teacher and learner. The features of distance education proposed by Keegan are preserved in a provision of education or training that has a set syllabus which learners must cover, and determined periods of study such as semesters, and expected progression rates to meet provider requirements for assessment and receipt of accredited awards. The characteristics of flexible learning can be met, however, in a system of educational provision which provides for substantial learner control over content, sequence, and progression rate. Where controls are introduced, they are not initiated by the training provider but by another party such as the learner's employer. Support for this view, also expressed by Evans and Smith (1999), that the key characteristics of flexible learning lie within this notion of learner control is given by Ellington (1997) when he writes,

... I would suggest that we all try to promote the general adoption of this wider interpretation, and start using the term "flexible delivery" as a generic term that covers all those situations where the learners have some say in how, where or when learning takes place - whether within the context of traditional institution-centred courses or in non-traditional contexts such as open learning, distance learning, CAT schemes, wider access courses or continuing professional development.

(Ellington, 1997, p. 4)

CONCLUSION

It has been argued in this chapter that in the VET sector, in Australia at least, what was provided as distance education at one time has developed into flexible delivery. It is also suggested here that this has not been a passive transformation, but rather one that has been deliberately planned and developed in response to change in economic circumstances and imperatives in the conceptualisations of relationships between providers and their customers. That transformation was largely forged by VET authorities at State and federal levels of government~ and with
industry and trade union support. Few, if any, of those people came from within the discipline of distance education, and the drivers of change were economic, rather than educational. It is arguable that major changes such as those discussed in this chapter may have been easier to achieve in a politically stable, well-organised, and prosperous country such as Australia with its six States and Federal system of national government. A larger country with a more complex or fraught political structure may not have been able to complete the transformation quite as quickly.

Partially fuelling the transformation, but also stimulated as a result of it, has been the convergence that new technologies have forged between distance education and more traditional face-to-face delivery methods. However, in the context of VET, it is argued in this chapter that the transformation from distance education to flexible delivery has been even more strongly driven by other broader economic, organisational, and conceptual changes identified and discussed in this chapter.

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