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# Flexible ACE

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## More than just technology....

A report into the current practices in flexible teaching and learning  
in Adult Community and Further Education, Victoria.

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Southern Western Port Learning Communities: A flexible learning community partnership

Commissioned by TAFE frontiers

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## Acknowledgements

Participating in these focus groups was a real privilege for the project team. It was a wonderful opportunity to actively listen to ACE describe their organisations, their learners, their communities and their practice. It was obvious that everyone around the table was equally interested and engaged. Many were taking copious notes and were actively asking questions both during the sessions and privately during the breaks. Several focus group participants commented that *'days like today are the most valuable professional development opportunities'*. The sense of openness, sharing and honesty was evident throughout the State.

We were left with a renewed sense of respect and admiration for the wonderful program delivery that is ACE in Victoria. It is responsive to community needs, and always, but always, has the learner clearly at its very centre. We have much to learn from each other, and we have much to offer other parts of our education sector.

We would sincerely like to thank all the participating centres and the individuals for so generously donating their time.

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For more information about the project and to obtain a very practical insight into a range of creative approaches to flexible teaching and learning in ACE in Victoria, please visit the website on:

<http://www.swplc.vic.edu.au/>

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## Overview

A recent study<sup>1</sup> into the experiences of contract and casual staff in the provision of flexible delivery and online learning in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, particularly their ability to 'get connected' with flexible and online learning technologies and the opportunities they have to engage in professional development activities to support their teaching practice in these areas, found that all teachers and trainers, regardless of their employment status, are likely to be challenged by the introduction of flexible and online delivery and will require appropriate professional development opportunities.

During the past four years various state and national initiatives have contributed in varying degrees towards providing targeted professional development opportunities for ACE staff in the area of flexible teaching and learning.

TAFE frontiers commissioned research into flexible learning in ACE, to explore the degree of impact these may have had on a local level. A series of focus group discussions were held around Victoria in May and June, 2004.

This research project aimed to capture a snapshot of current practice in flexible teaching and learning in ACE, which would in turn translate into a series of scenarios that would exemplify good practice. Those involved in the project reflected on their journey, as well as the challenges and obstacles along the way.

What follows is a "big picture" view that also provides details on how flexible delivery and e-learning are impacting on specific individuals, communities and program areas.

The research found that despite some significant obstacles flexible teaching and learning is flourishing in ACE- as it has for a long time. The use and constant exploration of ICT tools to further enhance a teaching culture so firmly rooted in learner centered approaches, has confirmed that for ACE flexible delivery is...more than just ICT.

## Methodology

The project team decided on a methodology that would allow them maximum flexibility but would also ensure that they received specific information about the range and depth of professional development initiatives available to ACE and their access to these. The project team therefore used both focus group questions and a short questionnaire. Participants completed the questionnaire before or after attending the session.

Victorian ACE organisations were invited by TAFE frontiers to participate through their regional ACE office. Meetings were held at Frankston, Bendigo, Benalla, Geelong and two in Melbourne for the metropolitan regions. The sessions were facilitated by Glenda

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<sup>1</sup>Stehlik, T. et al (2003). Getting Connected: Professional Development of contract and casual staff providing flexible learning: Volume 1. Adelaide, National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

McPherson (TAFE frontiers) and Josie Rose (Southern Westernport Learning Communities). Mary Schooneveldt (Southern Westernport Learning Communities) provided technical support.

Questions explored areas of interest such as the impact of various state and national flexible learning initiatives on ACE organisations, significant events, achievements, professional development and change. Discussion was not constrained by the initial questions. The discussions were lively, interesting honest and open. Many participants remarked on how much they had enjoyed the session – it was also a valuable information gathering tool for them!

Sessions were recorded and photographs taken to enable later analysis and for use on this website and in print based material.

The project team also developed a blog where they shared their initial impressions of the sessions as well as analysed themes and issues.

## Defining flexible learning

ACE organisations define flexible learning in the ways that relate to their ethos and culture. ACE sees its approaches as inherently flexible - providing what the learners need when they need, i.e. “creating a whole program that is flexible, with an increasing use of technology to support this”.

There was a marked difference in emphasis between metropolitan and non-metropolitan ACE on the role of ICT in the support of course delivery. For metropolitan ACE flexible learning did not include any distance components whilst it did for regional and rural ACE. ICT in metropolitan ACE seemed to be more about the expectation of both teacher and learner that ICTs are embedded in most courses, whether accredited or not. In regional Victoria, ICT is still being seen as a way of breaking down barriers of time, distance and access. Whilst none of these are mutually exclusive, it has led to two quite polarised views on the use of ICT and flexible learning generally.

This dichotomy opens up possibilities for metropolitan and regional ACE to look at collaborating across projects which are ICT enabled. Metropolitan organisations would benefit greatly by thinking about ICT as a way of widening their learner base and meeting the varying needs of traditionally non-ACE learners. On the other hand, regional organisations would benefit from thinking about how to incorporate some elements of ICT in all their offerings – both accredited and non-accredited, as a matter of course.

By adding the dimension of information communication technology to the discussion around flexible learning, we found that centres or individuals who had experienced the use of carefully selected ICT tools to their program delivery reported that it:

- Provided clients with greater choice and control over where, what and how they learn
- Enhanced their learner centered and client focused repertoire with carefully chosen ICT tools;

- Provided a blended learning experience as far as their infrastructure, connectivity and human resource capacity allowed;
- Overcame distance and time issues as well as a range of other barriers – specifically in the rural and regional centres.

Participants felt that flexible learning was a way of encouraging learners to become independent lifelong learners – in the classroom or at home using computers. This included offering them opportunities to work in their own time and at home should the circumstances dictate whilst still allowing them to enter and exit learning programs as required or dictated by circumstance. As one participant described it... “flexible learning is more than just ICTs”. Another remarked that “flexible learning is a learner centered hands-on approach”.

Online learning is certainly happening in ACE – there were many examples of how organisations have integrated online learning in course delivery. **Merinda Park Community Centre** is delivering its Certificate IV in Assessment & Workplace Training with a significant online component, delivered through a learner management system. **RecruitNet Inc** is also meeting the needs of very specific community groups through courses on the TAFE Virtual Campus (VC). **Olympic Adult Education** has set up a teacher’s hub on the TAFE VC which operates as their intranet. **MACE** in Mansfield is using a very different delivery platform with significant outcomes for participants working in more inaccessible areas of Victoria such as Mt Buller.

It was interesting to note that rural and regional participants initially equated flexible learning with online learning. In fact the term *online* – and specifically as it equates to online delivery platforms - is not well understood in many regions of ACFE. The majority agreed that *online learning* was a term that did not sit well in ACE – there was still resistance from many teachers in taking up anything *online*. This would specifically include online management systems such as the TAFE VC. Many felt that sustaining online activity over a period of time is problematic.

Knowledge of and expertise in accessing the range and depth of courseware available to ACE on the TAFE VC was patchy. Rural ACE managers and teachers did not seem familiar with the range and depth of what it has to offer and neither were they particularly convinced of its application or even benefits in ACE program delivery. Questions around specific learner management systems currently in operation in ACE was not part of our brief, but the focus groups identified that the learning curve in becoming conversant with a Learner Management System such as TAFE VC was beyond the time allocation of the sessional ACE teacher, or often out side the reach of regional and rural ACE, due to connectivity problems.

However, our investigations revealed that the use of web based tools such as email, discussion forums, internet for research and even chat is absolutely ubiquitous in ACE program delivery. Their use of the Victorian *My Connected Community* (MC<sup>2</sup>) community tools was particularly inspiring. Language and literacy teachers are particularly interested in the collaborative potential of the net. Organisations in the northern ACFE region are currently working on a collaborative project for their language and literacy students.

It is interesting to note that in a recent publication on emerging issues and key trends in e-learning in Australia a similar observation was made about e-learning in the VET sector<sup>2</sup>:

Collaborative activities, sites where students can use e-mail, forums, bulletin boards and share and edit documents online arise as alternatives to the more rigid Learner Management Systems, like WebCT. Jasinski (2001) argues that collaboration with students renews the teacher/learner relationship, while maintaining immediacy and minimising the need for technical expertise.

Our research confirms that this is currently the trend in ACE. Ultimately flexible learning in ACE can be summarized as embodying responsiveness - a desire to create the learning students want.

## Themes

There were many common themes that emerged from the various focus group sessions. These are some of the more frequent ones. The practical guide section provides a wide range of more detailed examples of how ACE is addressing the specific issues as outlined in this section of the report.

### VET: accredited and non accredited programs

"I've never seen a teacher who cares so much about where every single person learns something".

The delivery of VET programs continues to be an important growth area for a large number of ACE organisations. Data gathered from the ACFE annual report<sup>3</sup> for 2001-2002 indicates that vocational education made up 36.6 per cent of student contact hours and 51.7 per cent of enrolments. Potentially this is an area that can benefit greatly from the tools and resources produced by the State government to facilitate more flexible delivery practices. Issues around flexibility in both accredited and non accredited courses tended to vary between regional and metropolitan ACE, but there were also many commonalities. The debate on accredited/non accredited approaches was a lively one.

### Chunking courses

Many smaller ACE organisations are now modularising larger certificate courses into smaller chunks to better meet the needs of their local community. They combine modules and outcomes targeted to what is needed in the workplace and customise their courses accordingly. This delivery is often supported by ICTs. This is particularly prevalent in business qualifications.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr John Eklund, e. a. 2003. **E-learning: Emerging Issues and Key Trends**. Australian National Training Authority.

<sup>3</sup> 3 ACFEB (2002). 2001 -2002 Annual Report., Adult Community and Further Education Board.

Centres like **GECC** (Geelong Ethnic Communities Council) in Geelong and **Campaspe College of Education** in Echuca have developed a sophisticated distance learning approach to delivering Certificate and Diploma level courses for specific client groups, and targeting specific training packages and integrating a range of resources such as toolboxes and online communication tools in its delivery. At the other end of the spectrum, many ACE organisations continue to meet local community needs through programs that have a formalized structure, high standards, incorporate ICT and multimedia but are not necessarily accredited.

(See the *practical guide* section on the web site for examples such as **Dingley Village Neighbourhood Centre** and **Flemington Reading & Writing**).

#### Debate

Metropolitan participants expressed the view that accredited courses tended to lock organisations in to a style or delivery pattern, whereas non accredited courses allowed much greater flexibility and also offered a greater opportunity to accommodate differing student needs and to building a sustainable community - which was seen as a key issue. Regional participants indicated that the social and employment climate had changed so much that providers and policy makers needed to rethink how they address this issue. Many participants thought that current funding models did not recognise this shift.

One metropolitan group discussed accredited/non accredited provision in relation to preparing students with IT skills for the workplace. Their students want the IT skills to facilitate a return to work but did not necessarily need the qualification. They agreed that the reality of the workplace was that employers are looking for workers who are computer literate to the point where they can be trained in specific software and many employers were not concerned whether or not these people held an accredited certificate.

#### Full certificate & diplomas – ACE advantage

The growing group of regional and rural ACE organisations who do deliver full certificate and diploma courses see their size as a definite advantage in competing with larger organisations for market share as they feel that they are more responsive and therefore more flexible. Practical placement arrangements were cited as an example. These organisations have been able to be more flexible by meeting individual student needs, something that more structured block placements in larger Institutes makes very difficult.

#### Scope

Another area of particular concern to many small ACE organisations in rural communities is the absence of a local TAFE, or private providers able to offer accredited courses. For these small rural ACE organisations the cost in adding courses to a scope of registration is prohibitive, and this impacts greatly on the educational opportunities and pathways available within a local community. In their pathway to employment, many learners are forced by circumstances beyond their control, (e.g. with the effects of the recent drought) to re-train and change their career path completely. This often involves retraining with the expectation of gaining some level of VET qualification, where transferability and portability of skills and qualifications are paramount.

A suggested model for regional and rural ACE – to enable smaller ACE organisations to deliver accredited courses to their communities - was for the regional ACFE office to hold

the Scope of Registration and ACE organisations prove to them that they can deliver under that Scope. The benefit of flexible learning for smaller non RTOs would be the availability of using someone else's Scope to deliver accredited courses and which will in turn help them build capacity and credibility as a reputable training organisation in their community.

#### RCC/RPL

Participants felt that when small regional and rural ACE providers deliver accredited courses as short, non-accredited courses, the client can be grossly disadvantaged. Whilst RCC and RPL theoretically exists, cost, fear and reluctance of many training organisations to offer it, means that it is just as expensive to undertake the RCC process as it is to re-do the course. The learner is the loser – financially and in time spent retraining. This poses a dilemma for the small provider - are they really offering a service by delivering non-accredited courses or are they offering their communities false hope?

#### Resources & staffing

Many participants highlighted issues around resources (or the lack thereof) in delivering accredited courses – be it multimedia or print based. Their experience is that when a training package is released there are often no accompanying teaching resources. This is an issue for smaller RTOs who are reliant on a sessional workforce. These organisations are constantly and actively seeking out strategies that will significantly reduce work loads for their sessional trainers. They reported that toolboxes are being used but more as an “add on” in the classroom or as a reference for the trainer. Many identified the need for more information on how to integrate these “off the shelf” products into their programs. Participants highlighted the fact that getting and keeping qualified staff was really difficult and funding models were often restrictive and unhelpful.

Nonetheless, the work that is being done to specifically meet the needs of learners though the range of (accredited) training options offered, is impressive, although several providers felt they were being reactive rather than proactive in relation to flexible learning in VET. Regional and rural ACE face unique challenges, but as the practical guide illustrates, they have developed an impressive range of unique solutions.

ACE prepares students for the workplace, further education, community participation and enhances life skills. The feedback from the all the focus groups was that ACE sees true flexibility as allowing a student to work their way through a course in a way, at a time and a pace that suits them. Approaches may or may not include ICT but for ACE flexibility is always about meeting the individual needs of a very diverse group of people.

#### Organisational learning: building organisational capability

“In the beginning I wanted to do everything. I can't do that. I don't have the manpower and I don't have the money, so the TAFE VC concept is really good...because half of it is done for you. If I can go in there and enhance and develop, that is the way I want to go. But, I need to have a model up there that I can adapt. I would like things aimed at me as a manager rather than the teacher or the webtooler.. I have learners who are hungry for different experiences and I want to give it to them. I am trying to find my way in this maze... and I can't find it.”

For ACE managers flexibility can be summarized as being responsive – responsiveness to community and individuals needs – whatever form that takes. An ad hoc approach to offering such flexibility or a disinterested senior management can create a significant strain on the financial and other resources or stifle innovation completely.

The changes in delivery practices around the uptake of ICTs have been mainly a bottom up approach – a professional development led change management model. For many teachers it was also a shift in attitudinal change. The uptake of ICT enabled teaching and learning specifically, represents a significant shift or even in some cases threat to the way ACE sees its role in meeting community and individual needs.

ACE favours more emergent approaches to change management which is typified by a “bottom up rather than a top down approach to change which sees change as an open-ended and continuous process of adaptation to changing conditions and circumstances<sup>4</sup>”.

This approach often appears in more turbulent environments. Lack of adequate funding and professional development support to embed ICT practices in teaching and learning, teacher employment conditions, technical issues such as equipment and connectivity, and no clear policy direction from policy makers are just some of the issues raised by participants.

In this turbulent environment most ACE managers operate on both a strategic and an operational level, partly because of their size and partly because they operate under severe budget constraints.

The ACE organisations represented felt that budgets are still a restraint and that most of their flexible learning initiatives were reactive rather than proactive, they felt that they would like to change this but that required money.

And yet the size and culture of ACE can have distinct benefits for the organisation in the exploration of innovation and the introduction of change. One such organisation is **Peninsula Adult Education and Literacy (PAEL)** in Rosebud, where the manager has driven the change. This is partly due to their size, and partly due to the nature of their provision.

Organisational change is a slow process and ACE managers are finding that the majority of teachers are still struggling with ICTs themselves and are therefore not keen to take it into the classroom. One manager remarked that it had taken her three years to get her staff on board – relevance to their employment situation and teacher buy in were seen as crucial.

The integration of ICTs into work practices was seen as both a personal and organisational achievement – it empowered staff and individuals reported that it made the organisation more effective.

Staff turnover is still a great problem – with some managers commenting that as soon as teachers are skilled up they are offered employment outside of ACE. Teachers who have taught outside ACE agree that ACE is often better able to respond to student needs - can still be flexible by providing alternative learning solutions.

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<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, J. and S. Young (2001). Change management strategies for VET. From High-Skilled High performing VET, ANTA: page 15.

Time to explore and prepare is a constant issue – organisations want regular opportunities for trainers to have time to explore and share resources, and they need a person in a paid continuing role, who can facilitate and speed up the exploration process. (See **PRACE** (Preston/Reservoir Adult and Community Education) and **Olympic Adult Education** in the *Practical Guide* section of the website for examples of organisations who have appointed e-learning coordinators). The reality is though, that it is still common practice within the sector for teachers to put in significant amounts of their own time in order to pursue innovation.

## Teacher support

### Professional development ...what works

" Introducing concepts that I understood"

If one word could summarize such a complex concept, it would have to be **integration**. Managers across the state commented on the fact that what teachers needed most was support in the integration of ICT resources into the curriculum.

Many of the focus group participants, specifically managers, noted that time was a significant issue in the uptake of something as specialised and relatively radical as the introduction of ICTs into an essentially face-to-face teaching culture. This was borne out by many teachers who reiterated the need for sustained, supported and continuing professional development over a period of time. Experience in the Southern Western Port Region.<sup>5</sup> has demonstrated that it can take as much as 4 years for teachers to successfully integrate ICT enabled teaching and learning into their repertoire.

Continuing, ongoing support mechanisms were highlighted by most participants as very important for teachers who had participated in work based professional development (PD) opportunities.

Participants indicated that the most effective work based learning model was a combination of face-to-face instruction and online i.e. a blended approach to PD, which models good practice over a period of time. The opportunities for networking as well as being part of a group, who were working towards a common agreed goal, were invaluable. Participants agreed that a model which allows for reflection and application in the workplace was the most productive, especially when it allowed for opportunities to follow through and re-visit specific aspects.

Having a dedicated, responsive facilitator was also seen as important. Tangible outcomes / products at the end of the project were also seen as valuable.

However, managers acknowledged that it was often not practical or feasible to embark on such an extended PD program unless it was adequately funded. The context and employment conditions of ACE teachers is not, on balance, conducive to opportunities for PD.

Money available for extended PD is often predicated by an in-kind contribution which puts severe strain on the organization's budget and the time of the sessional teacher. One

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<sup>5</sup> Schooneveldt, M. and J. Rose ( 2003). Flexible Learning in SWP - Making it Real., TAFE frontiers Case Study.

manager remarked on the fact that even if she had project funds, workloads would make it impossible for teachers to attend a more extended PD project.

Building confidence in the integration of ICTs requires complex skills and knowledge and takes time to develop. Teachers who may work for more than one ACE organisation are reluctant to give up classes to attend PD. They are understandably reluctant to continually attend PD on their days off. It therefore stands to reason that a variety of PD models will need to be available. Some of the suggestions included:

- One day workshops on very specific topics for manager and teachers
- Peer mentoring - learning from others @ their centre
- Task / project based PD
- Conferences
- Becoming a member of a community of practice – within your own state or across boundaries
- Team teaching opportunities within and across centres

Participants were very encouraging in their descriptions of the impact and flow-on effects of PD. They felt that it introduced a broader range of opportunities for learning, a broader range of resources within the centre and greater use of existing resources within the centre. Everyone agreed that the impact of PD on individuals and course delivery was significant. Centres reported a broader awareness of the potential of ICTs. For many teachers it also confirmed their own abilities and provided an opportunity to broaden interests and skills. It excited people to try out new things and it has a big flow on effect to the learners.

Teachers reported on many and varied PD opportunities in ACE. ICT specific ones were mentioned, such as *Mooing*, *WebCT*, the accredited short course *ICT Skills for Teachers* and various *LearnScope* initiatives. Participants noted that PD in complex learner management systems often left participants confused if it was not well targeted, with the result that application at centre level was patchy. There is also a perception that much of the PD at that level is aimed at people with technical skills. This is frustrating for managers who feel they can direct the learning but feel left out.

One organisation reported that there was great enthusiasm for TAFE VC after their last *LearnScope* project but that the knowledge and skills that had been developed were hard to maintain. There was also a problem with funding ongoing time to continue to develop skills for teachers individually, until it became an integral part of their work commitments. Sustained funding to cover hidden cost of flexible delivery and sustained support for deliverers needs to be ongoing, and current ACFE funding models do not support this.

The ACE sector has long been heavily dependent on a sessionalised, casual workforce. This is one of the single most important factors in tempering the uptake of any new initiatives. Stehlik et al found that while there are professional development opportunities for contract and casual staff they tend to be less accessible. Contract and casual staff need to be more active in seeking out information and opportunities, and the extent of the access they have is *dependent on the culture of the organisation*, and the extent to which contract and casual staff are included in the communication networks and the internal support available to them.

## Key people

How this internal support manifests itself was very apparent. Some organisations have appointed specific individuals to provide this internal support in ICT enabled teaching and learning. The availability of a person who can provide that immediate just-in-time support was recognised as crucial. The role of the person depended somewhat on the size and the region in which the organisation operated. Some organisations in rural and regional ACE appointed an IT technical expert who was responsible for the organisation's infrastructure, and also had the brief of developing ICT enabled flexible learning solutions. One regional provider commented on the fact that making this permanent appointment had been one of his more significant achievements in taking the organisation forward in flexible learning. It is interesting to note that many of these individuals attended the focus group sessions.

Others felt that they needed someone with a more educational background but who also had a good grounding in technical matters. These e-learning mentors, who had knowledge and experience in content development and the educational issues involved, and were also connected to others in the field was seen as a crucial for the development of flexible learning in their organisation.

There is knowledge and skills base already available to the sector but teachers do not, universally, tap in to this. Access to this support base needs to be efficient and effective in order to maintain enthusiasm and momentum. Often innovations in flexible learning at centre level are driven by one or two enthusiastic teachers or managers. This is hard to sustain. There are still many teachers who are not particularly confident or don't have the skills to "go it alone". These e-learning mentors are also vital in getting reluctant staff interested. Most online initiatives need a champion to keep them going – resources to support this are often lacking. Centres like **Olympic Adult Education** and **PRACE** have appointed e-learning coordinators who provide this on-site support.

ACE has a high turnover of staff, and this often results in lost expertise. The many flexible learning networks that were in operation in Victoria from 1999 – 2002 often operated as de-facto e-learning mentors for smaller ACE providers. The continued growth of the Southern Western Port Learning Communities partnership is a good example (see practical guide). This model allows for the network as a whole to:

- nurture, support and develop the expertise available in the region
- seek out suitable funding opportunities
- work with member organisations to provide professional development
- provide administration services for online delivery platforms
- research issues around ICT in the community

ACE has developed considerable expertise in developing, integrating and embedding ICT enabled teaching and learning resources into a range of program areas. Knowing who these key individuals in flexible teaching and learning are in ACE, and utilising their considerable expertise, will do much to share skills and expertise across centres and regions.

## Open Access and volunteers

“Sometimes flexibility is just having access to the equipment ”

Another positive move has been increased public access to computers within ACE centres. This can sometimes be a difficult issue but has the crossover effect of introducing ACE to the community and makes resources available to the local community. They use the open access facilities predominantly for internet and email, and many centres reported that it was an excellent marketing strategy to bring more potential students into the centre. Many language and literacy providers have set up open access language learning spaces with a tutor available for guidance and mentoring support.

ACE centres depend on the skills and expertise and significant time commitments of volunteers to staff their open access facilities. One such centre who has had excellent success with open access is **Ontrack** in Eaglehawk. (To find out more – see the practical guide on website).

In fact, the crucial role of volunteering (even within a paid position) was raised in all the regional and rural areas we visited. In regional areas a class of four is not uncommon. Examples were given where an accredited course began with four people, two of whom then got jobs but needed to continue studying as well. The tutor continued to ‘teach’ the class of two at the provider level and then voluntarily continued teaching the other two, individually in their own homes and at times to suit them. Payment was not possible for the teaching done outside the paid time. This delivery was often supported by ICTs such as email and bulletin boards.

Metropolitan ACE is also exploring the design and availability of flexible learning spaces. One organisation had experimented with one computer in most classrooms and felt that it was rarely used very well within the classroom. It was generally agreed that one computer is too little, and that the ideal flexible learning space would have 6 – 8 computers as well as tables and chairs so face-to-face classroom activities and computer usage was seamless and integrated.

This is an emerging future for all ACE organisations. Many metropolitan organisations can already see the end of IT application training and the need for the computer to be used as a tool rather than as the object being studied. This realisation is happening in varying degrees across the state; with pockets of regional areas still very heavily delivering application training.

There was a sense that regional and rural organisations were much further down the track in providing Open Learning support for the community; indeed for many small communities this is the only computer access they have. Open access is often primarily for those who were studying various flexi-courses through TAFE. Participants acknowledged it as an option worth pursuing for ACE in regional and rural Victoria, as demographics often prohibited them from filling a whole class, despite the fact that not many community members made use of this service. Everyone agreed that connectivity was still one of the greatest factors that mitigated against this becoming a mainstream activity in flexible learning for them.

## Resourcing

Resourcing was a constant theme across all the regions. Knowledge of and access to resources for flexible teaching and learning was one of the major topics under discussion. Aspects of resources that were discussed can be grouped as follows:

- Multimedia resources: specifically Toolboxes and online courseware
- Hardware and software
- Portability
- Connectivity

### Multimedia resources

#### Toolboxes

A recent study<sup>6</sup> into emerging issues and key trends in elearning, identified that teachers regarded Toolboxes as alternative sources of content, which were useful to augment their existing materials and delivery. Using the Toolbox as a secondary resource allowed the teacher to become accustomed to the content of the Toolbox and gradually introduce it into their delivery. In other words, the ICT-experience of the teacher and their confidence with using new technologies were factors in choosing the delivery approach. This is one of the key reasons that blended approaches are emerging – they arise naturally from a consideration of context in the adoption of new learning technologies.

The focus groups confirmed a similar trend in ACE. The groups presented with a very mixed response to Toolboxes. As indicated above, it usually depended on the blend of teacher skills, the user friendliness of the Toolbox, the technology available and the capacity of the audience to navigate the resource.

A good case in point was the use of the *Truvision* Toolbox, an Equity Toolbox developed for vision impaired learners. Teachers who had tried to use it with ACE learners other than the intended audience, found it disappointing.

The most popular Toolboxes were the Equity Toolboxes, and Toolboxes that related to the Community Services (specifically Cybertots), Business and Information Technology Training Packages.

Rural and regional ACE feels very isolated in accessing resources – sharing across state boundaries was discussed, specifically in the accredited area. Many organisations suggested that a register of the most effective / popular resources be prepared which would provide details of customised resources and contact people who have use these successfully or otherwise.

Participants reported a limited use and knowledge of supporting resources such as the resource generator<sup>7</sup> - it was usually through more structured state based professional

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<sup>6</sup> Eklund, Kay and Lynch. 2003. Page 22. e-learning: emerging issues and key trends. ANTA.  
<http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/research/2003/elearning250903final.pdf> . Accessed 2.8.04

<sup>7</sup> <http://toolbox.flexiblelearning.net.au/search.asp>

development activities such as TAFE frontiers activities, LearnScope or through individuals networks that ACE gained knowledge of the full range of resources available to them – specifically in relation to toolboxes and their customization. Participants also reported that partnerships with TAFEs in customising specific Toolboxes have worked well in some cases.

### Online courseware

Participants agreed that online learning materials (as available on the TAFE Virtual Campus) gave smaller ACE organisations a lot more options and flexibility in the content and structure of their delivery. Many individuals and organisations have developed or customized modules (See **Longbeach Place** OH&S in the practical guide on the web site) from the TAFE VC online course catalogue. Many of these courses have a broad appeal and application across the sector. Participants felt that there was a need to find a way of sharing these resources across the ACE sector.

This has been attempted on a limited and very regional basis. The Southern Western Port region funded a traineeship model in 2001 – 2002 where ACE organisations customised a range of generic courses available to organisations in that region through the TAFE Virtual Campus. (See **PAEL** and their development of an online volunteer literacy tutor training module in the practical guide section of the web site).

Managers commented on the fact that the online modules contained a lot of information and content but did not stipulate a clear pathway to training packages and related modules in (other training packages). Participants suggested a library with everything in one place, i.e. a reworked course catalogue which has, amongst others, a section for managers and coordinators with information on alignment with training packages.

### Software and hardware

Many smaller organisations reported ongoing problems with upgrades, internet access and maintenance. Both centres and students need up-to-date equipment, software and internet access to make ICT enabled learning work. The need for firewalls and the resultant problems was also mentioned as a barrier to integration.

Organisations from one region (Loddon Campaspe Mallee) suggested that remote students who signed up for an accredited course which incorporated technology should be able to purchase a computer at a reasonable as part of their course: "*Technology goes with the training*". All the resources would be supplied with the courses.

They also felt that this opened up possible partnership opportunities with businesses for regional and remote ACE organisations.

### Portability

There were numerous examples of organisations taking the learning to the learner. Time and distance have given most organisations opportunities to tailor training to small, isolated communities, or companies and industry settings and to deliver programs on site. In rural areas their local ACE organisation is often the only place for adult education. And "local" may mean 50 to 80 kilometers of travel. Changes in the rural economy, of how and where people work has led to some innovative methods of delivering programs to learners. This is where flexible learning offers organisations an increased opportunity to

take the learning to the learner. This is done in a number of ways from mobile laptops to one or two face-to-face classes supplemented by email, CD ROMs, Toolboxes, printed materials and other 'flexible' options.

## Connectivity

"A lot of our smaller towns don't have ADSL or broadband - they just have dialup"

For regional and rural and some metropolitan ACE organisations connectivity is still an issue. Although everyone agreed that Internet access and connectivity has improved considerably through programs like *Connected ACE* and *Networking the Nation*, many regional and specifically rural ACE organisations deliver to communities that can still not access this improved bandwidth. ICT enabled teaching and learning has tremendous potential in regional and rural ACE as a means of conquering distance. Constant dropouts and unstable connections make this a less than attractive option. Internet speed varies widely across the region and for some offers wonderful opportunities, whilst for others, frustration and disappointment.

## Online learning and communication platforms

"The TAFE VC concept is really good – because half if it is done for you".

Our research indicated that there are two main online systems currently in operation in ACE, My Connected Community (MC2) and the TAFE Virtual Campus. The extent to which they support or deliver content is unclear, as it was not explicitly part of our brief to investigate this aspect of flexible learning. At this stage it would perhaps be wise to pause and consider the differences in definition between **flexible** and **online** learning.

A recently published report<sup>8</sup> notes the lack of agreed terminology to describe the different types of online practice in VET: the terms 'online learning', 'online delivery' and 'virtual education' tend to be used interchangeably. The report describes three 'modes' of online learning currently in use:

- as an enhancement to the traditional mode of delivery where classes are held on campus, with interaction with fellow students and the teacher
- as stand-alone online delivery on campus with a classroom facilitator
- using only online material off campus.

The online delivery paradigm in ACE has been summarised in the following table, See Fig 1. below.<sup>9</sup> ACE is characterised as having a "facilitated, interactive, group based, learner-centered delivery driven by participant objectives, with or without formal assessment and

<sup>8</sup> Hill et al, (2003), Researching the size and scope of online usage in the vocational education and training sector. Pages 6 - 18. NCVET

<sup>9</sup> Smith, C. 2003. Online Assessment; Strategies and Models. Research Analysis; Issues and implications.

recognition.” Its dominant e-learning model is “web in the classroom, with emphasis on collaborative tools and learner publishing”. And the meaning of blended learning for ACE is one of “short courses online, with emphasis on building the learning community”.

It is within this context that we need to view the use of online technologies and platforms in ACE. The extent to which TAFE VC plays a role in this varies from region to region and centre to centre.

Fig. 1

Sector	Default (traditional) delivery technology	Dominant e-learning model(s)	Meaning of 'blended learning'
Secondary education	Teacher-led content delivery to broad curriculum goals through participatory classrooms with range of teacher-assessed individual and group work. Norm-based assessment.	Web-enriched classroom, including courseware and collaborative tools – almost no engagement with 'distance' or 'independent' models.	Using the Web in the classroom, increasingly with nationally funded courseware modules and online collaborative tools.
TAFE	Teacher-led skill development to industry-based standards, in classroom or workshop settings, with mixed assessment models (some knowledge-based, some performance-based) varying widely with content area.  Off-campus variation of independent learning using centrally produced courseware, minimum tuition and correspondence-style feedback on assignments.	Web-enriched classroom (or library) can include access to courseware and use of collaborative tools  and  teacher facilitated, LMS-based online delivery of content and interaction via Web, using some state-funded or nationally funded courseware, to industry competencies requiring criterion-based assessment of performance outcomes in authentic settings (workplace).	Including face-to-face components or requirements in online courses  or  offering face-to-face students the option of taking some units or components in the online mode.
Adult Community Education	Facilitated, interactive, group-based, learner-centred delivery driven by participant objectives, with or without formal assessment and recognition.	Web in the classroom, with emphasis on collaborative tools and learner publishing.  Short courses online, with emphasis on building the learning community.	Collaborative online communities.

Smith, C. et al. 2003. Online Assessment Strategies and Models: Research Analysis

ACE managers are beginning to see the potential benefits of online tools and learners demand it. The most creative and possibly successful use of the TAFE VC by ACE organisations is using it as a communications hub. In the Southern Western Port region the early adopters who tried it a few years ago (2001) are now ready to try it again as they feel that teachers and Committees Of Management have now progressed enough (in skills knowledge and understanding) to give an online intranet through the VC another go. Organisations who have implemented it successfully have done this to improve communications in what is largely a sessional workforce with significant support from management.

**Olympic Adult Education** reported that they decided on the TAFE Virtual Campus for their staff communication tool:

“Our communication hub is working fantastically; we use it as our major means of communication. Most staff would log in twice a week. Very few times do we need to put files or notes in people’s pigeon holes – most of it goes on the hub”. They see the value in accessing it out of hours. We are now extending

that through to the students. It is providing teachers and students will skills and confidence in using online communication tools”.

There were misconceptions regarding online study in general - the relationship between RTO status and accredited courses studied online needs to be made more explicit. The feeling was that online learning for non-RTOs was not realistic and that there was no perceived and direct benefit for ACE organisations. ACE sees its role in supporting online delivery through providing computer drop in facilities for online learning in partnership with TAFE, but in terms of Student Contact Hours (SCHs) there seemed to be little or no benefit.

There is a very real and accurate perception amongst ACE providers that setting up and maintaining online learning and its systems is cost prohibitive for ACE organisations. A constant theme was concern about the hidden cost of online delivery. Managers feel that they do not have the relevant information regarding what is available to them for free. Organisations need information to make decisions around appropriacy and cost. Online delivery components are not factored in to the SCH rate, which is the same for all regions across the state.

The majority of ACE organisations are not using TAFE VC – there were quite a few language and literacy providers who felt that it was too difficult for their teachers and learners and no amount of centralised support would convince them to use it. Many have diversified in different directions – for example some reported that web publishing was a more productive way of incorporating online. On the other hand, many other centres reported that they are using it very successfully in language and literacy provision.

Having access to a State based system open to all is an incredibly valuable asset and one that small to medium sized RTOs appreciate that they would never normally be able to access as individual organisations. Everyone agreed that it had a place in the delivery of accredited programs and that they would investigate the TAFE VC in the future delivery of accredited VET programs.

It would be a great pity to lose this valuable asset just as organisations are making great strides in embedding ICTs in more and more aspects of program delivery. The well managed and well supported integration of online tools such as the TAFE VC has an ever increasing role to play in this. It should be part of a flexible teaching and learning strategy for ACE that recognises the nature and diversity of ACE whilst also recognising the ongoing support required by its greatest asset – its teachers.

## Partnerships

### Partnerships as pathways

With student centered learning being at the heart of flexible learning in ACE, it comes as no surprise that the focus group sessions revealed a dynamic, complex web of partnerships across rural, regional and metropolitan ACE. Organisations are actively pursuing partnerships with the community and other training providers in order to meet community needs.

In metropolitan ACE partnerships with libraries, councils and private providers, Koori communities were examples of the ACE approach to flexible learning". The sophistication of the partnering arrangements was an interesting feature of this group.

They reported on a wide range of partnerships that involved and created opportunities for learners:

- Work for the Dole projects/participants who work in retirement villages to set up MC2 sites
- Carlton ESL students developing a simple directory of Neighbourhood Houses in the City of Yarra
- One centre reported a partnership with a computer recycling center in Collingwood
- Many are meeting the special training needs of particular groups such as Probus
- Partnerships with the Deaf community in Box Hill
- Flemington Reading and Writing has formed a partnership with the local library to offer a wider range of literacy and computer courses.
- Springvale Neighbourhood Literacy Centre's highly successful partnership with the City of Greater Dandenong's library network - ELLA

In regional and rural ACE partnerships enable ACE to widen their repertoire and deliver courses under the scope of a partner. One regional ACE provider has partnered with a TAFE in order to access its resources to create pathways to employment programs such as *Responsible Service of Gaming*. **Murray ACE - Swan Hill** has formed partnerships with private providers, Melbourne University and TAFE in order to meet the needs of its community.

Particularly impressive in the Barwon South West region was the range of initiatives in place for ACE organisations to work with local industries to meet specific needs. **Corangamite District Adult Education Group** in Camperdown, in their work with *Avec Esprit & Tallyho*, **GECC** in Geelong and the food processing industry plus their ability to offer dual certificates in Aged Care/Home care.

Partnerships as collaboration

Partnerships in outreach to rural communities was particularly strong in regional and rural ACE. They reported on *Learning to Learn Online* where 5 ACE learning centres received funding in partnership with Wodonga TAFE. The role of ACE will probably be to provide the learning to learn bridging courses that will enable individuals to eventually take up TAFE courses. Potentially this is a great network that could develop realistic pathways for the five communities involved.

ACE organisations that were part of the **OTTE Flexible Learning Networks** see its impact as both positive and negative. Some miss the networking and sharing of a common goal, whilst others felt the pressures of delivering SCH delivery targets on platforms such as the VC was too great.

Nonetheless, organisations agreed that it provided them with a springboard to exploration of online learning and the use of online in their course delivery. They are now looking at ways of extending their partnerships online – by connecting students and adding another valuable dimension to partnerships: online collaboration.

### The learner perspective – an access and equity issue?

“Our greatest achievement is that my language and literacy students want to use IT now. When we first started it was... oh no, we have to use pens but now they tell me when it is time to go to the computer room.. but, it is still their choice to go in. My beginners are really angry because I am here today and they are not in the computer room!”

Is e-learning what learners in ACE want? As the example above indicates, once introduced...they do!

Participants reported that in general learners' skill levels were developing and they were becoming much more enthusiastic towards experimenting with a range of flexible learning options. Some regions reported that students were becoming more familiar with online terminology and they were also becoming more sophisticated in their requests of what they wanted to learn. They wanted to design and develop web pages and explore more sophisticated online tools. Most teachers still only have limited access to computer time but despite that the students still use online tools very creatively. The one area of ACE provision in which this was particularly significant was language and literacy. Teachers commented on how literacy students are benefiting from having control - as one teacher explained: *“it is now in their power to change words”*.

For example **Cheltenham Neighbourhood House and Activity Centre** is creating a newsletter for their centre – the ESL students are writing and producing this, the teacher is a resource in the classroom and the students have taken control.

The teacher commented on how ICTs have changed her role to that of learning facilitator – in the classroom. For ESL students the connectedness that email brings is one of the most important factors in students wanting to use ICTs in their studies.

**Flemington Reading & Writing Program** reported that the response to IT programs has been positive and has added diversity to its literacy and IT programs. They have now developed pathways in response to requests from people in the community. Pathways in Information Technology and literacy led to needing more advanced skills in computers - the mixing of those two kinds of learners has been a great **community building aspect** of the use of ICTs. The longer term older students are becoming more involved in induction programs and training the new ones – in some sense they are driving the curriculum development. (See Flemington Reading & Writing FLW 2004 Case Study in the practical guide section of the web site).

The research revealed that there was an important caveat: the acknowledgement that ICT enabled teaching and learning does not suit all students. Often the students who need it or take to it are part of a mixed group – they work online in the classroom for specific reasons: extension activities or specific training needs. The teachers acknowledged that it added significantly to their workload. One teacher reported that many students still accessed online materials used in the classroom three to four months later.

The discussions also reaffirmed the crucial role of the teacher in whatever flexible teaching and leaning option was selected. Managers in metropolitan ACE indicated that students were hungry for the range of new learning experiences that ICT enabled learning brings, but that there were a number of factors that mitigate against introducing it. Research conducted by Daniels<sup>10</sup> indicates that skilled, confident teachers made a difference in the successful uptake of ICTs in the classroom.

...“the methodological process must stem from a thorough understanding of the online learning venue and media – the Internet, including (mainly) the World Wide Web and electronic mail, but also bulletin boards, newsgroups, chat and other technologies. In short, teachers should be proficient in the use of computers and in accessing, navigating, and otherwise utilising the Internet. **And it is desirable that they not only have this proficiency as confident users for their own personal or professional purposes, but are able to deconstruct or break down their own experience of Internet as an essential grounding for understanding the difficulties** that the Target Groups are likely to encounter because of their cultural differences, circumstances, learning needs and other factors”.

ACE works with many specific access and equity groups. The new ministerial statement<sup>11</sup> identifies ACE learners as a wide range of learners, with diverse backgrounds. Typically, ACE learners are people who:

- have few or low-level qualifications
- want to improve their basic English language and numeracy
- need basic education to obtain a job or further education
- want training to start work, or go back to work, or change jobs, or keep their job
- want to do personal interest courses or other enrichment programs in a local community
- prefer to learn in the smaller, more intimate environment of a local centre
- want to be part of a learning community.

The challenge for ACE in Victoria will be to continue to explore and introduce flexible learning solutions that will enable ACE learners to develop their full potential as lifelong learners, whilst being given every opportunity to access the skills and knowledge needed to fully participate in the information economy.

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<sup>10</sup> Daniels, R. (2001) Access and Equity in online Learning. ANTA

<sup>11</sup> ACFEB. 2004. Future Directions for Adult, Community Education in Victoria. A statement by Lynne Kosky, MP. Minister for Education and Training. State of Victoria.

## Conclusion: how flexible is ACE?

As outlined in the overview of the report, our research showed overwhelmingly that flexible teaching and learning is flourishing in ACE – as it has for a long time. The report demonstrates that ACE has a broad, inclusive view of flexibility, in which ICT enabled teaching and learning has a part to play. However ACE has, to a certain extent, been on the periphery of the push towards flexible teaching and learning in VET. For a range of reasons, some detailed in this report, it has not been able or willing to fully embrace the potential benefits of ICT enabled teaching and learning.

Perhaps the answer can be sought in Roger's Diffusion of Innovation model. Rogers identified 5 distinct categories for the adoption of technology<sup>12</sup>:

- Innovators – interested in the technology and the application. Are often members of broad networks of like-minded individuals
- Early adopters – this group are risk takers, but project oriented, looking for a practical application of the technology that relates to their work situation. They are reasonably self sufficient and willing to take risks.
- Mainstream: Early majority - this group is much more pragmatic and want proven applicability to their teaching situation. This group has predominantly vertical discipline based networks.
- Mainstream: Later majority - similar to the early majority but less comfortable with technology
- Conservatives - may never take up the innovation.

The focus group sessions confirmed that ACE is moving into the mainstream – in most cases it is demonstrating many of the characteristics of the early and late majority – managers and teachers, with varying degrees of confidence, looking for vertical, discipline based networks where they can get practical advice and support.

The literature<sup>13</sup> further suggests that there is a potential chasm between the innovators, the early adopters and the mainstream. It suggests reasons for this chasm as well as four steps that need to be taken to bridge the gap.

There needs to be:

- a recognition that the mainstream group is different, and not necessarily easily brought around to the visions of the innovators;
- a recognition that they need support from peers;

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<sup>12</sup> Adapted from Corbel, C., Ed. . Ed. ((in press)). Building a bridge: a case study in crossing the innovation chasm. Information Technology and Innovation in Language Education (tentative), Hong Kong University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Geoghegan, W. (1994). What Ever Happened to Instructional Technology? Reaching Mainstream Faculty. Proceedings from the 22nd Annual Conference of the International Business Schools Computing Association, July 17-20. IBM Academic Consulting.

- a recognition that the mainstream needs a compelling reason to adopt this technology; and
- a recognition that there needs to be institutional commitment.

It is therefore crucial that we build on the successes so richly demonstrated in the practical guide section of the accompanying web site and also clearly demonstrated throughout this report, by providing knowledge and training, and by reassuring potential adopters that an innovation will or can meet their needs. Promoting and supporting innovation at organisational level is vital.

Perhaps it is time that we look at enriching and embedding ICT enabled teaching and learning and its concomitant organisational practices in an overarching **flexible ACE** framework.

**The practical guide exemplars will soon be available at:**  
**<http://www.swplc.vic.edu.au/>**

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## Glossary

ACE	Adult, Community Education
ACFE	Adult, Community and Further Education
ESL	English as a Second Language
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
PD	Professional Development
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SCHs	Student Contact Hours
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TAFE VC	TAFE Virtual Campus
VET	Vocational Education and Training