

# Flexible Delivery of Education in Kalgoorlie: Planning and Opening a Flexible Delivery Centre of Education at Curtin University Kalgoorlie Campus

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Many learning institutions have been restructuring to meet the demands of clients and staff (Nicholls 1996). Over the last two years the Kalgoorlie campus has been re-engineering its structure, including its management practices and teaching and learning strategies.

Just as the administration has to be lean and mean in these economic times, so the teaching and learning has to be cost effective, however our main reason for bringing in flexible learning is to improve customer service and increase the number of student enrolments. In other campuses offering flexible learning it has been found that offering more control and choice dramatically increases enrolments

Our market is aimed at adults and adults have a more practical approach to their educational needs and also more experience to bring to the learning process. Flexible delivery both attracts students and is an economical method of delivery. We have been moving piecemeal towards a more flexible approach but the opening of a flexible learning centre is an announcement to the world that we are committed to our customers.

In February I was given a project to open a flexible learning centre in nine weeks. I could access \$50,000. I did manage to access another two small grants; however we were operating on a shoestring. It has taken 9 months [just like a baby] but we have a successful outcome. The following are some of my findings as I researched the topic and some conclusions I reached.

## Flexible Delivery Defined

Flexible delivery in vocational education and training (VET) is defined in the National Flexible Delivery Taskforce Final Report (cited in Hampton, unpublished) as:

*...an approach rather than a system or technique; it is based on the skill needs and delivery requirements of clients, not the interests of the trainer 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 facilities of technology; it changes the role of the trainer from a source of knowledge to a manager of learning and a facilitator.*

*Flexible delivery in VET is characterised by :*

- placing control on the demand side of training – where clients determine the content, sequence, time, place and method of learning*
- the provision of appropriate information systems*
- the provision of appropriate learning support systems*
- the provision of appropriate learning management systems and flexible assessment processes.*

*(ANTA, June 1996)*

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## **Customer Responsive Training**

At Kalgoorlie Campus as at Onkaparinga Institute (Hanson, unpublished) and Southport Institute (personal communication Mara Egan 1999) the focus for promoting a flexible delivery approach had been on responsiveness to customer needs. External pressures from funding bodies have been to promote flexible delivery as a means of increasing productivity.

The lecturers delivering education and training in a flexible manner all had the customer as the focus driving the move. They were committed to providing a customer-focussed service and to this end were selective about how they delivered the education. If practical skills were to be assessed then a workshop may be included in the timetable. Whyalla Institute of TAFE has moved to extensive work-based assessment for clients who could not attend the campus for a workshop. (Personal communication, Rod Grundy, April 1999) By forming partnerships with industry there is no reason why any form of training could not be delivered in a flexible manner, either on campus or by external studies.

The changes being driven clearly place the learner as the focus for learning. It is vital that Kalgoorlie provides quality products, services and relationships wherever it is involved in the learning process. Nicholls (1996) identified four strands of activity to set up a learning centre as:

- physical resources
- professional development
- curriculum issues
- administrative and support issues

## **Physical Resources**

In looking at resources required we first needed somewhere to deliver from and fortunately there was a vacant bookshop which was earmarked for adult numeracy and literacy delivered in a flexible manner. It was a short step to making it a multi use facility, rather than for a single purpose. The most successful flexible delivery centres have been located in the centre of shopping malls (Nicholls 1996), that is, they are easily accessible. Our site is a one minute walk from the town centre and is easily found.

We had somewhere to deliver from, we needed something to deliver with. Six computers came with the adult numeracy and literacy program and we added another five making eleven. This number was a matter of expediency rather than choice. Most centres have many more than that and it is our intention to expand. However, for now, that number is adequate. Other requirements included a computer server, a computer hub, category 5 cabling throughout the building, workstations, ergonomic chairs, desks for paper-based work and last but not least, comfortable chairs.

## **Staff Development**

The need for staff development is highlighted in many papers as a crucial element for success. Teaching students by flexible learning is very different from lecturing to a class. The lecturer is called on for a greater spread of knowledge and needs to anticipate what students will be needing. Students should not have to put up their hands (Personal communication, Ian Abraham 1998) because the lecturer should have been around, have noted where students were at and have run through potential problems before they arose. We did arrange inservices on how to publish

courses on the Web and currently have some more sessions planned, however more needs to be done in this area.

### **Curriculum Issues / Products**

As well as the profile courses for numeracy and literacy, computer aided drafting, instrumentation, cabinet making and communication modules we decided to offer fee for service education. I contracted some course materials from a commercial firm called CBT, Computer Based Training systems. These are totally computer based teaching. They were slow to take off in people's minds but are now proving to be popular. They give the client the flexibility of being able to choose attendance times, length of each learning session and place of learning as either on campus or home (if a computer is available).

### **Some Findings from Other Learning Centres Related to Administration**

Centres had varying opening hours from 08.00 to 21.00 with a variety of combinations. No one was open on Sunday or for 24 hours except for a small unit within an organisation that delivered all modules in a flexible manner. This campus was security monitored both electronically and by personnel monitoring the video. Security is a big problem, more in personal safety than pilfering and this was one reason why centres were not open late. Those open till 2100hrs had security escorts for each lecturer from the classroom to his/her parked car. The lecturers I saw in the main were women since the highest incidence of flexible delivery occurred with the subjects allied to office administration.

Few centres had resources in with the computers. Most were opposite in the library which held the resources and had a book security gate. Libraries also had computers but not tutors. The system of one lecturer/tutor delivering a spread of 5 - 10 modules and being present for less than the sum of teaching hours allocated to those modules was common.

All small flexible learning centres had an administrative assistant who dealt with paperwork and office administration. The day to day running of the flexible learning centres was usually done by an administrative assistant present from 9am - 5pm who enrolled students (if that was done locally), kept statistics, stocked the resources, answered telephones, and generally was responsible for the smooth running of the centre and keeping paperwork up to date. In some centres this included sessional staff pay spreadsheets. Usually enrolments were carried out in a separate client services area if the campus had multiple areas of subjects delivered flexibly over the whole campus.

Resources such as booklets were held in the centre and given to students when they produced the enrolment paperwork. For centres delivering external studies there was a small room containing the course resources set out ready to be sent out for an enrolment. Enrolments occurred throughout the whole year. Generally not a large stock of each booklet was kept, to reduce wastage if there were low enrolments or if the content was changed

All campuses seemed to be working towards flexible delivery in every discipline. Often flexibility had commenced in a small way, but all campuses I visited, except North Point, had branched out and were offering a wide variety of units delivered flexibly. North Point had one

electronic learning centre that had concentrated only on office secretarial education. Childcare modules were shortly to be offered there.

Tracking systems for monitoring student access and results were a combination of paper based and electronic systems.

### **1998 Benchmark for Comparison at a Later Date**

In 1994 few courses or modules were delivered externally from Kalgoorlie Campus. Approximately 3000 Student Contact Hours (SCH) were delivered by distance education and no records exist for flexible SCH. The numbers have gradually increased until in 1998 the figures were as presented below. Figures submitted for profile returns were used to generate the numbers below.

- Applied Science delivered 12,000SCH externally and nil flexibly
- Trades delivered 0 externally or flexibly
- Art and Design delivered 0 externally or flexibly, though did deliver multi level classes which can easily move to varied time slots
- Computing delivered minimal externally or flexibly, the only flexible delivery being to accommodate a few students who requested special consideration. They did combine similar course content from different courses into one time slot.
- Business had begun moving to flexible delivery, but cannot give accurate figures on how many SCH were delivered in this mode in 1998 though 'not many' is quoted. In 1999 the business sections within the school of commerce have a large focus on flexible delivery and have a wide variety of offerings
- General Studies delivered 800 SCH externally and all the CGEA in flexible mode approximately 34,000 SCH. Communication modules were available in a flexible mode ie students were given work and had one time slot per week with the option of attending. Completion rates on both the above courses was extremely low. Of 20 students enrolled flexibly in communications modules only three obtained a valid result, though anecdotal statements indicate nearer 10.

The challenge will be to increase these figures so that at the close of the millennium we will have all flexible delivery

### **Currently Employed Staff Members**

The reports *Staffing TAFE for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, *Return to Industry* and *Making TAFE Competitive* have highlighted the changing roles and responsibilities of lecturers and a changing profile in the VET organisations. These changes incorporate the need for a limited number of highly skilled lecturing staff together with an increasing number of staff involved in facilitating learning

Currently the staff members employed within the schools deliver the flexible learning by generating the resources and acting as tutors and assessors for students. This system is expensive and only viable on a small scale with lecturers working extra hours in their own time. Many

institutes I visited used lecturers to generate resources and to assess students. A tutor who assisted the clients to follow learning guides (North Point and Onkaparinga) conducted the flexible sessions.

There is also an unresolved problem of how much teaching time to allocate to lecturers since their productivity is managed in teaching hours. It may make allocation more simple if productivity is measured in Curriculum hours delivered rather than teaching hours. One student attending for one hour = one curriculum hour. Productivity would then be measured in how many students were being taught rather than how long the lecturer was teaching.

Clearly, to embrace the significant changes in educational delivery Kalgoorlie VTEC will require significant re-engineering of both its workforce and work practices, including teaching skills. This will include substantial changes in roles and responsibilities for staff, in particular teaching staff. The degree of change should not be underestimated. It requires a planned approach to change management involving a commitment to professional development, a large investment in resource based materials, modification of current policies, practices and work patterns and for some, a new approach to customer service and feedback.

### **Learning Resources**

The development of learning resources is a key area and is frequently overlooked. It relies on the skills of staff to customise materials. Work in this area could provide us with a competitive edge in the education market, however it is expensive. Initially it will be more cost effective to purchase materials already developed by other agencies. While many observe the savings on lecturers' salaries with the introduction of flexible approaches, few realise the increased costs associated with materials development. The recognised time for development of materials for a new course or module is up to 10 times the module or course length. The development of resources from existing materials and courseware is estimated at up to 3 times the module or course length.

While the above statements indicate that it will be more cost effective to purchase learning resources initially, this does not rule out the possibility of creating a flexible delivery production unit. The profits generated from the sale of both fee-for-service courses and profile courses could be used in the future to generate learning materials and to market them. History has shown that selling high quality learning resources is profitable. The future of education is heading towards the production of high quality technological based learning resources with the judicious use of personal interactions. Clearly this is a market which is relatively new at this stage. Contrary to popular perception there is not a multitude of high quality technology based learning resources available. If we could begin to manufacture our own then this would be a market advantage

### **Higher Education**

The flexible learning centre forms a natural bridge between the two sectors of the Kalgoorlie campus. Following the amalgamation of The Western Australian School of Mines with Kalgoorlie College in 1996 to form the Kalgoorlie Campus little interaction occurred in the academic area. The Flexible Learning Centre is available for use by the two sectors and all areas can use it to promote flexible delivery of education. It is particularly relevant for delivery of Computer based learning such as the Rural and Remote Area Nurses Course. It will also be used

for University Bridging courses, extension units and on-line education such as Research Methodology and Microbiology. It will be used to enable rural and isolated potential students to access tertiary education thus addressing the equity issue of isolation.

### **Recommendations from the Fact Finding Study**

- Ensure training delivery is based on customer needs
- Put Flexible Delivery on School Meeting Agenda so that it is given a high priority
- Encourage the use of work place assessment for students
- Place greater emphasis on pastoral care
- Make the Flexible Learning Centre a classroom for use by the schools
- Have an administrative assistant coordinate the Flexible Learning Centre on a day to day
- Use an electronic tracking system in the Flexible Learning Centre to monitor student usage and record results
- Change the opening hours for the Flexible Learning Centre to reflect demand
- Allocate teaching time to lecturers by SCH
- Split the costs of the electronic learning centre between the three schools
- Increase staff development funds to provide activities to support quality learning and teaching using flexible approaches
- Set up an Internet café using a private provider for access
- All staff associated with the FLC wear name badges
- Buy in learning resources to support flexible delivery
- Incorporate the creation of a flexible delivery resource development unit within the university
- Make the Flexible Learning Centre available for use by both VET and Higher Education students.

### **References**

Nicholls, P. (1996). *We're bending over backwards to make study easier for you*. Gold Coast Institute of TAFE