

A FLEXIBLE INVESTMENT: THE AUSTRALIAN VET SECTOR'S FRAMEWORK FOR APPLYING NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN LEARNING

Sandra Lerch

Australian National Training Authority, Australia

Peter Le Cornu

Australian Capital Territory representative,

EdNA VET Advisory Group, Australia

Index: Flexible learning, educational partnerships, lifelong learning

Abstract: In 1999, the Australian VET sector developed a five-year strategic plan, Flexible Learning for the Information Economy: A Framework for National Collaboration in Vocational Education and Training 2000-2004. Known commonly as the Collaborative Framework, the plan is a fluid platform upon which the Australian VET sector can strategically plan for the use and expansion of learning technologies in training and industry. This paper will explore the Collaborative Framework not only as an integrated policy response to the emergence of new learning technologies, but also as a model of collaboration between governments and a bold experiment in cultural change within the VET sector.

INTRODUCTION

The role of government in the adoption of new learning technologies has often been limited to the provision of regulatory and infrastructure systems. It is an approach premised on the belief that the participation of government in substantive matters of staff professional development and online resources acts only to constrain the innovation and responsiveness of education services. The Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector has recently revisited this issue in response to concerns over the quality, consistency, cost and broad adoption of new learning technologies in the sector. Their response to the innovation / consistency conundrum are interesting in both policy and practice.

In 1999, the Australian VET sector developed a five-year strategic plan, Flexible Learning for the Information Economy: The Framework for National Collaboration in Vocational Education and Training 2000-2004. Known commonly as the Collaborative Framework, the five year plan is a fluid platform upon which the Australian VET sector can strategically plan for the use and expansion of learning technologies in training and industry. In articulating this role, however, the Collaborative Framework raises a range of questions about the role and challenges of government in planning for learning technologies:

- Can coherent technology policy emerge in a federalist government environment, and what are the implications for education policy planning and innovation?
- Is government involvement intrinsically at odds with innovation and the creation of a dynamic, responsive education system? What kinds of innovation and dynamism might emerge from government collaboration?

- How do the five goal areas of the *Collaborative Framework* interact to provide an integrated response to the emergence of new learning technologies? Why are they strategically important to the development and expansion of Australia's flexible learning capability?
- How might the *Collaborative Framework* position the Australian VET sector in a competitive global market, when previous attempts at federalist collaboration in education have been less successful? What makes this work where others have failed?

This paper will focus on these four questions, before turning to consider future iterations of governmental collaboration in the VET sector within and outside of Australia.

AUSTRALIA'S FEDERALIST SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON VET POLICY

The need for a national collaborative approach to flexible learning in the VET sector is in part a consequence of Australia's federalist structure of government. The jurisdictional complexity of the Australian education sector, combining the Commonwealth government as well as eight separate State and Territory jurisdictions, has meant that VET policy has evolved in neither a systematic nor consistent manner. Indeed, States and Territories assumed responsibility for the majority of VET policy in their jurisdictions until 1987, when the Commonwealth developed policy platforms that for the first time directly linked VET with issues of national economic development and wealth (Mitchell, Robertson and Shorten 1999:107). A particular interest in national collaboration on flexible learning issues in VET did not emerge, however, until 1995, when a National Taskforce on Flexible Delivery was formed (National Flexible Delivery Taskforce 1996).

While the origins of a coherent policy framework for flexible learning in Australian VET can be traced to 1995, the consequences of inadequate planning were already apparent. States and Territories first began to expand their flexible learning activities in the 1990s, but this expansion occurred largely in isolation, with limited collaboration across jurisdictions. The most salient outcome of this atomistic approach was the lack of interoperability of many infrastructure networks, which resulted in increased service duplication, inefficiency and cost for States and Territories. Issues of equity and choice became paramount, with both industry and learners experiencing a restricted range of training market options. Against this background, the provision of VET services lacked genuine flexibility, and in its piecemeal development and delivery, offered little strategic or economic advantage to the nation. The need for a collaborative policy framework for the expansion of flexible learning services in VET was identified, but with this need, emerged a debate concerning the most appropriate model for cross-government collaboration.

CREATIVE INNOVATION AND THE ROLE OF CATALYTIC GOVERNMENT

At issue was the dilemma of how to promote the expansion and export of training services that utilise new learning technologies, without constraining the sector's innovation and responsiveness in a competitive global training market. It was clear that some degree of government support would be necessary to ameliorate the impact of expensive infrastructure costs. But it was also apparent that Australia's position in the training market was just as dependent on intellectual infrastructure as it was on cabling and satellite links. In 1999, the *Collaborative Framework* was developed to meld traditional notions of infrastructure, government regulation and facilitative support, with new and largely experimental approaches to the development of people, skills, and online services and content. It is a framework that reiterates the important catalytic role governments assume in

working collaboratively together to encourage innovation, and to support the adoption of new learning technologies.

Central to this catalytic role of government is the importance placed on partnerships between key stakeholders within and beyond the VET sector. Most notably, cooperation between the VET industry and the private sector has brought new markets and enormous innovation to the public VET sector. These private-public linkages were not without precedent; in 1998, multimedia companies worked cooperatively with VET providers and governments to develop the *Toolbox* project, which produced online training programs for national Training Packages (Australia's nationally recognised courses of training). The *Collaborative Framework* sought to build on these successful partnerships, and while such cooperative activities introduce a degree of risk in policy and practice, the partnership model is designed as a facilitating mechanism for the provision of creative and innovative flexible learning solutions (EVAG 2000a:15).

SEAMLESS SOLUTIONS: THE FIVE GOALS OF THE COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORK

The *Collaborative Framework* was developed by the VET sector in response to a discussion paper prepared by Australia's National Office for the Information Economy. This discussion paper was designed to address the expansion of the information economy in a diverse range of industry sectors in Australia, and the *Collaborative Framework* represents the VET sector's response to this call for an integrated strategic approach to technology issues.

The *Collaborative Framework* contains five goals, which were selected on the basis of their strategic importance for VET in Australia's transition to the information economy. These goals require a national collaborative effort if optimum results are to be achieved (EVAG 2000a). The goals are:

- Goal 1: Creative, Capable People
- Goal 2: Supportive Technological Infrastructure
- Goal 3: World-Class Online Content Development, Applications and Services
- Goal 4: Enabling Policies
- Goal 5: Problem-Solving Regulation

It is useful to briefly explore the scope and content of each of the five goals.

Creative, capable people: aims to accelerate Australia's transition to the information economy through developing the skills of VET staff in the use of flexible learning approaches (EVAG 2000b:7). The goal travels beyond conventional notions of professional development, to embrace a suite of online conferencing, business planning and research tools that reflect the breadth of experiences VET staff require to work effectively in flexible learning.

Supportive technological infrastructure: aims to provide affordable access to online training services for use by communities, learners and employers. The goal supports the use of advanced and interoperable communication technologies in the VET sector, to support the application of new technologies in both training and business processes (EVAG 2000b).

World-class online content development, applications and services: aims to maintain and expand the VET sector's share of the training market both in Australia and internationally (EVAG 2000b). A diverse range of initiatives support this aim, including the development of online training

products, quality assurance supports, VET sector e-commerce activities, and online student services.

Enabling policies: aims to ensure that national VET policies and protocols support the use and expansion of flexible learning opportunities. The goal focuses on the construction of consistent policy frameworks across States and Territories, and developing data collection and performance measurement systems which support and reflect flexible learning activities (EVAG 2000b).

Problem-solving regulation: aims to improve the Australian legal and regulatory framework to further support the use of new technologies in the VET sector. In partnership with other education and training sectors, the goal will focus on providing consumer protection for learners, exporting Australian VET products and services, and removing any legal and regulatory barriers which restrict the use and expansion of information technology in VET (EVAG 2000b).

The five goals outlined in the *Collaborative Framework* provide a strategic platform for the expansion of new learning technologies in the Australian VET sector. However, the success of this expansionary policy is dependent on the implementation of a range of supporting projects, managed largely at the State and Territory level. The projects span all five goal areas, and cover a range of strategic policy and operational issues. There are 26 projects in total, all of which are outlined in *Strategy 2000*, the implementation plan which supports the *Framework* in 2000. In all, up to \$20 million in funding is available each year to support the five-year *Framework*.

To maintain the fluidity and responsiveness of the five-year plan, a new Strategy will be developed for each year of the *Framework*. Individual projects will be retained, recast or omitted within each goal area in an annual evaluation process. This continuous evaluation process ensures that the *Framework* remains responsive to the needs of VET clientele, as well as developments in the global VET training market.

An important instrument in the management and communication of the *Collaborative Framework* is the project web site, at flexiblelearning.net.au. This site is the gateway to all *Collaborative Framework* projects and activities, and is due to go online in July 2000.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR THE COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORK

The abiding issue for policy makers is the identification of the critical factors that will ensure the continued success of the *Collaborative Framework*. It is true that the competitive nature of the global education market makes competitive collaboration at a national level an urgent imperative of governments at both the Commonwealth and State and Territory level. Yet the extent of cooperation across governments, and their active participation in *Collaborative Framework* policy development and project management, points to other factors relevant to its success.

The *Collaborative Framework* contains seven principles that were designed to guide the direction and values of work undertaken as part of the five-year plan. These principles were agreed upon by the Commonwealth, States and Territories to guide national collaborative activities, and form a critical element in the success of the *Collaborative Framework* (EVAG 2000a:18):

- Shared benefit to all States and Territories
- Strategic use of new learning technologies
- Accelerated take-up of flexible learning methodologies
- Strategic partnerships between governments, VET agencies, and other organisations in the public and private sector
- Leveraged investment of national funds for maximum impact

- Employee involvement in flexible learning practices
- Driven by client demand

These principles operate at two levels. In the first instance, they provide strategic direction for the development and evaluation of policy and project initiatives. However, these principles also operate at a process level, guiding the way in which decisions are made, and providing a structure in which a strong working relationship between the Commonwealth, States and Territories can be maintained.

It is perhaps this issue of process that provides the key to understanding the distinctive nature of the *Collaborative Framework*. A central element in its success resides with the equality and independence of its constituent stakeholders. The policy body responsible for provision of advice on flexible learning issues in Australian VET, the EdNA VET Advisory Group (EVAG), developed the *Collaborative Framework* in consultation with each of its constituent members, drawn from the Commonwealth, the Australian National Training Authority and each State and Territory. Each constituent member has equal weight in policy negotiations. Within this context, the level of collaboration is indeed remarkable, but is a consequence of democratic discussion and shared visions for flexible learning, rather than compulsion. It is this fluidity in the development of policy frameworks that allows the *Collaborative Framework* to remain innovative and responsive, both to the needs of the constituent members, and the external education and technological environment.

The equality and independence of EVAG stakeholders occurs within a wider VET policy environment that is committed to the development of a national system of VET in Australia. This commitment is reflected in the 1992 agreement of the Commonwealth, States and Territories for the establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). ANTA's primary policy responsibility is to oversee the development of a national system of VET that ensures that "the skills of the Australian labour force are sufficient to support internationally competitive commerce and industry and to provide individuals with opportunities to optimise their potential" (ANTA 1998; see also www.anta.gov.au). In this context, the *Framework* represents a continuation of broader Australian VET policy, which is mindful of the international developments in new technologies, and their impact on flexible learning in education.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Of course, an important component of the *Collaborative Framework* is its continuing commitment to evaluation. The five year plan includes six agreed national outcomes by which the VET sector can measure the success of the *Collaborative Framework* in facilitating the application of new technologies to VET products and services (EVAG 2000). The six outcomes are:

- A high level of learner and employer satisfaction with the quality, quantity and results of online training programs and services
- Increased participation in learning away from an institutional setting
- Increased participation in VET as a result of the use of online technologies, including those groups who have difficulties accessing traditional institution-based training
- Increased investment in flexible learning projects by ANTA, other public organisations, and private sector bodies
- Increased overseas online VET enrolments and revenue earned from those enrolments
- Accumulated case study examples of how the Collaborative Framework has accelerated the use of flexible delivery methods, and improved the quantity and quality of flexible learning in VET

The *Collaborative Framework's* capacity to measure its performance in relation to these six outcomes is limited by current data collection methods. A more robust suite of measures to evaluate VET sector performance is currently under development, and should be available for use in 2001 (EVAG 2000a:19).

FLEXIBLE LEARNING IN 2004 AND BEYOND

The dynamic nature of new technologies will ensure that VET policy planning is a continuing process that extends well beyond the five-year horizon outlined in the *Collaborative Framework*. An important challenge for the Australian VET sector in this climate is to ensure that the policy and planning framework remains relevant to the external world. More than this, however, the *Collaborative Framework* must 'speak' to the clients of the Australian VET sector itself, for without their participation and support, new flexible learning initiatives in the sector will not be taken up. This, then, may be the greatest task of the Australian VET sector: to create a level of excitement and achievement in flexible learning at the local level, in a global market that waits for no-one.

REFERENCES

- Australian National Training Authority (1998). "A Bridge to the Future: Australia's National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 1998-2003." Brisbane: Australian National Training Authority.
- EdNA VET Advisory Group (2000a). "Flexible Learning for the Information Economy: A Framework for National Collaboration in Vocational Education and Training 2000-2004." Brisbane: Australian National Training Authority.
- EdNA VET Advisory Group (2000b). "Strategy 2000." Brisbane: Australian National Training Authority.
- Mitchell, R, Robertson I, and Shorten A (1999). "Law and Policy in Vocational Education and Training: A Contemporary Survey." Leabrook, South Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- National Flexible Delivery Taskforce (1996). "National Flexible Delivery Taskforce Final Report." Brisbane: Australian National Training Authority.