

New practices in flexible learning in rural and remote communities in Western Australia

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This paper provides the findings of an evaluation of a pilot program initiated by the Department of Education and Training, Western Australia (DETWA), through WestOne Services, the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE), Central West TAFE (CWC), the Mid West District Education Office (MWDEO) and three district high schools located in rural and remote areas of Western Australia. The research reports on the identification and development of models of best practice in these local communities in collaboration with their district high schools to achieve the provision of a range of flexible teaching and learning resources, for delivering vocational education and training.

Introduction

This paper reports on an evaluation of *The New Practices in Flexible Learning in Rural and Remote Communities Project* which was a pilot program initiated by the Department of Education and Training, Western Australia (DETWA) in semester two, 2004. The project involved key staff from WestOne Services, the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE), Central West TAFE (CWC), the Mid West District Education Office (MWDEO) and three district high schools in rural and remote areas of Western Australia. It aimed to identify and develop models of best practice with regard to flexible teaching and learning in vocational education and training (VET).

More specifically, the project leadership group, (which included the district director, both CEOs of WestOne and SIDE, district education officers, principals, members of the TAFE teaching staff and secondary teaching/support staff and the project co-ordinator), identified five clear philosophical aims drawn from the Evaluation of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, 2000–2004 (Phillips et al., 2004). These aims include the development of creative and capable people, supportive technological infrastructure, world-class online content development application and services, enabling policies and problem-solving regulation.

Underpinning philosophy one, *Creative capable people* informed the plan to develop models of best practice in education and training pathways for rural and remote 15–19-year-old students, ensuring a broader range of seamless and flexible education and an increase in the use of distance education teaching and learning resources. It aspired to increase the use of distance education teaching and learning resources by staff in the TAFE and secondary sectors with the aim of increasing their capacity to meet the needs of rural, remote and indigenous students. It also identified the capacity of the project to increase staff skills in facilitating training relevant to local industries, strengthening collaboration with local communities and industries across the education and training sectors.

Underpinning philosophy two, *Supportive technological infrastructure*, attempted to strengthen the current capacity of TAFE and secondary school infrastructure and link community resources such as telecentres, distance education, local district high schools and the flexible learning resources provider (WestOne), to enable greater access by rural and remote students to education and training opportunities. It was recognised by the project managers that these organisations and infrastructure could be linked through collaborative practice

models to provide more efficient use of resources. It was however noted that current low level of technological infrastructure was a limiting factor in providing a broad range of educational and training pathways.

Underpinning philosophy three, *World-class online content development, applications and services* aimed to combine flexible VET teaching and learning resources, including online content, applications and services, with distance secondary education resources to implement new pathway opportunities for rural and remote students.

Underpinning philosophy four, *Enabling policies*, was posited in an attempt to demonstrate how nationally agreed VET policies and education policies and protocols enabled TAFE colleges to collaborate with the secondary sector to provide a broad range of seamless and flexible opportunities for students and contribute to the role of VET in sustaining vibrant rural and remote communities.

Underpinning philosophy five, *Problem-solving regulation* was predicated on the assumption that there are regulatory and administrative barriers to collaboration between education and training organisations that must be identified and overcome.

The project team proposed to involve all stakeholders including local communities and businesses in providing opportunities for students. The evaluation of the project initiatives sought to understand the extent to which the program met its predetermined goals and the effectiveness of the process in achieving these goals, including timeliness, implementation processes, the adequacy of resource provision and allocation in equipment, infrastructure and facilities and training. Furthermore, it aimed to understand how the program worked, on what basis decisions were made to determine needs for the program, what was required of management and teachers to deliver the program, how training needs were met, what the strengths and weaknesses of the program were and on what basis decisions regarding the future of the program should be made.

This investigation stems from an evaluation of the activities, strategies, techniques and type of treatment that comprise the program and compares these with the outputs such as changes in individual and community behaviour, improvements or otherwise in skills, knowledge attitudes values and condition of participants. It attempts to map the current program, identifies key issues, highlights current best practices and proposes solutions to problems.

Literature review

The project being evaluated sought innovative solutions to the problems associated with the delivery of VET to remote and rural Western Australia, by seeking to share pathways of learning and draw upon resources across traditional boundaries and by questioning established articulation arrangements between schools and VET providers. New educational alliances and new pathways need to be forged to provide for post-compulsory students. Henry and Grundy (2004) contend that a number of critical developmental transformations are needed in secondary schools including new conceptualisations of quality curriculum that establish applied learning of vocationally oriented knowledge, the development of teaching approaches that are informed by the principles of adult education, the emergence of partnerships and collaborative arrangements between schools, employers, TAFE providers and local community service agencies, and the need to overturn negative community perceptions about vocationally applied learning as opposed to academic learning.

According to Polesel et al. (2004), the essential factors which contribute to effective VET programs in schools include a strongly supportive principal, time release to allow teachers to focus on the administrative demands of VET, the establishment of a team of dedicated VET staff, high enrolments and the ability to offer courses on a cost-neutral basis. Polesel et al. (2004) also indicate that positive, modern views of VET as improving learning and sound relationships with TAFE are also helpful in advancing a re-conceptualisation of VET in schools.

The Western Australian Department of Training in its *Submission of the Western Australian Department of Training to the Higher Education Review*, envisaged its role in 2002 largely as providing trained and employable people. This goal was underpinned by a strategic plan to

support economic and employment growth through training, empowering individuals to take control of their learning and employment pathways and targeting employment and training services to the needs of the community, businesses, industry and regions. Along with the need for industry linkages and collaboration with business the key role of TAFE colleges was also noted. The Report differentiated the VET sector by listing its properties as exemplifying qualities which require direct relevance to industry and contemporary work, the importance of industry investment in training, the breadth of the needs it serves, the diversity of the circumstances of its students and the importance of non-classroom based learning environments.

A framework that emerged from a study by Kilpatrick, Field and Falk, (2001), could be useful for measuring community capacity in future projects such as the one this paper concerns. 'The Social Capital Framework' expounds on the value of understanding the balance between internal and external networks; the presence and diversity of brokers; the level of self confidence and self esteem of community members; the norms present within the community and the extent to which the community shares a common vision for its future. This has the potential to inform the programs that are offered to the 15–19 year old cohort of students within rural and remote educational settings.

Kilpatrick, Field, & Falk (2001), report that the commitment by a school and its leadership (particularly by the principal and senior staff) was an integral feature of successful VET programs in rural and remote education. The research also distinguished the resource-intensive needs that resulted from this approach, making a case for small class sizes and for the professional development of teachers. It cited the need for developing teachers' professional skills for interacting with community and business links.

Rural communities

Mid West communities are generally characterised by their remote and rural nature, including a high proportion of indigenous inhabitants, low population densities, large distances and poor technological infrastructure (Kilpatrick, Field & Falk, 2001). Furthermore, the community faces a number of the typical regional difficulties reported throughout Australia, which include a lack of properly trained teaching staff, difficulty in recruiting and maintaining appropriate teaching and support staff, low levels of literacy and numeracy, reports of substance abuse, low socio-economic status and a lack of value being placed on education per se (Evans, 2001; Kilpatrick & Bell, 1998; Spierings, 2001).

Participation rates in Western Australia of 15–19-year-old students in education, training or work is at 91 per cent, declining from 96.9 per cent at age fifteen to 87.2 per cent at age nineteen. The Mid West District has a participation rate of 87.2 per cent at age fifteen, declining to 84.9 per cent at the post-compulsory age of 18–19 (DEWTA, 2004).

The region has a population of approximately 51,000 people spread over 466,766 square kilometres, extending 800 kilometres inland and comprising diverse rural remote and indigenous communities. It is not uncommon for some students to be up to 500 kilometres from their nearest VET face-to-face, onsite training facility (Wallace, 2005).

Clayton et al. (2004), note that rural communities are identified as being potentially disadvantaged. They emphasise the 'thin markets' and geographical isolation that limit choices to training programs and access to institutional or work-based training. Issues of 'shrinking rural economies, high youth unemployment and a drift to the city by the rural disenchanting' (Clayton et al., 2004, p.10) have combined to illustrate the urgency of providing vocational education and training to support ailing communities and to providing skills and strategies for managing change. However the need for support is somewhat ameliorated by economic imperatives which determine the allocation of funding by government, in an inefficient environment within a thin population, low enrolments, inadequate public transport and telecommunications as well as limited workplace opportunities, (Clayton et al., 2004).

Methodology

The research is interpretative in nature and was based upon a qualitative methodology that used a series of open questions applied in a semi-structured interview conducted over the telephone to stakeholders, to gauge the attitudes and perceptions of participants in the New Practices in Flexible Learning in Rural and Remote Communities Project (see Appendix A). Interviews ranged in duration of between a half an hour to just over an hour with an average of approximately forty minutes. Stakeholders interviewed included volunteers to the project team, which consisted of fourteen key participants in leadership positions as well as the Principal's, Deputy Principals and VET teachers of participating schools – a total of twenty-one people. All participants were interviewed.

Interpretative research focuses upon a specific social setting or phenomena. As noted by Patton (1990) and Denzin & Lincoln (1994), within the interpretative approach there are many methods. However, they all share the same philosophical assumption, that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds (Merriam, 1998). The data, which were collected as a result of the semi-structured interview were analysed through a tabulation of frequency of response and content analysis, using Huck, Cormier and Bounds' (1974), inter-rater reliability formula. This resulted in the emergence of key themes regarding the effectiveness of the project, problems experienced and the cases of best practices that emerged over time, which are reported in findings and discussion.

Findings and discussion

From every perspective, the stakeholders interviewed in the New Practices Project considered the program to be a success. The goals of the project as outlined in the proposal document were met. As a result of this, a number of 'best practices' and models for best practice emerged from the study. These are discussed below in detail, in four sections: a) general concerns and problems being experienced by Mid-West remote and rural schools b) Kalbarri DHS, c) Carnamah DHS, d) Meekatharra DHS. Notwithstanding the overwhelming success of the project, a number of inadequacies and barriers to future success are brought to light and discussed.

Major problems perceived in Mid West district high schools

One of the major concerns for many district high schools is the challenge of planning and implementing programs aimed at addressing the Youth Advantage Strategy (YAS), a WA government initiative to raise the school leaving age, which includes providing training and VET programs to address 15–19 year old student needs in 2005-2006.

In comparison to large community centres, which have by sheer economy of scale, access to agencies and opportunities to develop the changes brought about by the implementation of YAS, particularly in VET and traineeships, smaller rural and remote centres like the Mid West Region do not have supportive infrastructure (staffing, resources equipment, access to TAFE and training providers) nor access to experienced and qualified staff and general funding opportunities.

Some of the risk factors identified by participants in the project who live in towns servicing the Mid West region included limited opportunities for success for rural students, a high proportion of indigenous students, absence of other training/education, low levels of apprenticeship/traineeship possibilities, low levels of literacy and numeracy, substance abuse, low expectations of achievement and limited inter-agency access and service provision.

The major identifiable problems experienced by district high schools in the Mid-West region fall into seven broad categories: funding mechanisms, staffing, resources and facilities, provision of technology, administration, access and general concerns.

Table 1 Major Problems in VET identified by stakeholders in Mid West District High Schools by frequency (%)

Problems	Frequency (%)
Funding Mechanisms	90
Staffing	86
Resources and Facilities	71
Provision of Technology	71
Administration	62
Tafe Access	38
General Concerns	29

Funding mechanisms

The current level of funding programs is perceived as inadequate. The current funding does, not offset the high cost of providing VET in thin markets. Compounding the problem is the fact that the allocation mechanism is based on the number of students enrolled. This gives rise to the need for consideration of threshold funding for implementation, establishment costs and particularly resources for the practical nature of some of the VET courses. Furthermore, the nature of the cohort serviced in rural and remote regions means that students and their families are unable to pay contributions, so costs cannot be passed on and are therefore borne by the school.

Funding mechanisms are perceived as being changeable and unreliable and therefore issues of sustainability of current initiatives; particularly those dependent on maintenance funding could be affected.

Staffing

The allocation of staffing in the Mid West is perceived as inequitable compared to larger centres, because larger centres are eligible for Curriculum Access in years 11 and 12, yet smaller centres providing similar services are not eligible. With schools endeavouring to provide Structured Workplace Learning in all VET programs, including Year 10, there is a need to increase the staffing formula to reflect the extra organisation and supervision required to facilitate this. Moreover reforms in post-compulsory education requires specific expertise currently not available in teachers, who are required to teach outside of their areas, increasing their workload. This has ramifications for training needs, attracting the right staff, providing incentives for staff to stay on, avoiding the current transience leading to problems with continuity of programs, succession planning and loss of 'intellectual capital'.

Administrators in these same schools have little background in VET (many are primary trained) and need help negotiating the provision of workplace recognition for students. Finally, perceived lack of staffing allocation is proving to be problematic in providing duty of care obligations with some students required to work independently, unsupervised and without contingency plans established to cater for emergencies.

Resources and facilities

Most of the schools in the Mid West are built to cater for K–10 and were not designed to cater for older students or to provide courses that require industry standard equipment. The flexible allocation of resources such as extra classrooms is not available when required, even though they are needed to facilitate new courses. Current facilities are considered old and often in a poor state of repair.

Provision of technology

If the solution to the provision of adequate courses is to be partially met with technological solutions, then the real issues of technical support, adequate ICT provision, training and

maintenance issues need consideration. However it is perceived that ICT alone will not necessarily meet the needs of many of the 'at risk' students.

Administration

The nature of rural and remote district high schools necessarily limits the number of administrators available, despite a minimum amount of administrative work needed for the efficient running of a school. It is perceived that there are a disproportionate number of meetings to support the new initiatives. Data entry and reporting requirements require new learning and large amounts of time.

TAFE access

Many of the schools in the Mid-West are large distances from their TAFE, requiring long and expensive travel arrangements. Profile hours are considered inadequate. Teacher relief and accommodation costs for isolated students must be reconsidered.

General concerns

Questions were raised as to the viability and sustainability of online courses, in terms of resources, training and infrastructure, especially in light of perceived low levels of support, lack of student motivation and the need for dedicated classrooms. Issues of high staff turnover, loss of intellectual capital, continuity and subsequent succession planning problems were pointed out. Concerns were voiced about the levels of communication skills in teachers, students and community whereby training and professional mediation processes are needed to bring together harmonious and desirable outcomes.

Best practices

Kalbarri DHS best practices

Table 2 Best practices identified by stakeholders for Kalbarri DHS District High School by frequency (%)

Best Practice Characteristic	Frequency (%)
Leadership	89%
Staff enthusiasm	41%
Timetable Flexibility	41%
Provision of administrative assistance	24%
Cost Waiver	14%

Highlighting the success of the project at Kalbarri DHS is to highlight the efforts of the principal of the school, who has championed the provision of post-compulsory pathways for VET by vigorously creating funding opportunities. In many ways this provides concrete evidence for the findings of recent studies that emphasise the importance of educational leadership in organisational change and the importance of educational leaders in driving initiatives, (Kilpatrick & Bell, 1998; Peterson, 2002; and Rasmussen et al., 2004). The acknowledged experience and enthusiasm of staff integral to the project, is supplemented by timetable flexibility and administrative assistance from local community members including business. A recent submission from the Mid West secondary schools developed a Lighthouse Career Cluster (JOBSMARTS), which has resulted from the pilot project and continues to run successfully. Central TAFE has begun delivering a Certificate II in Information Technology to students utilising flexible delivery, incorporating mixed mode electronic delivery, face-to-face classes and hard copy workbooks. The cost associated with setting up and delivering this was waived by DETWA. Administrative structures have been rearranged to suit the needs of learners, including the provision of extra staffing who are provided with a modified and flexible timetable. An administrative assistant has been employed to complete management and

assessment responsibilities for the Structured Work Place Learning program. This administrative assistant has strong contacts within the business and general community and therefore provides a greater influence and input than could be expected from other teaching staff who are not necessarily from the region.

Carnamah DHS best practices

Table 3 Best practices identified by stakeholders for Carnamah DHS District High School by frequency (%)

Best Practice Characteristic	Frequency (%)
Delivery of Cert 1, IT by Central Tafe	62%
Negotiation of School Based Traineeships	57%
Flexible Delivery	24%
Flexible Timetabling	24%
Collaboration with WestOne	14%

Carnamah DHS participants described the initiative as 'bringing a new dimension to what the school could offer.' The Certificate I in Information Technology, which is also delivered by Central West TAFE, has been considered a success, particularly because it offers students' exposure to, and experience with, the technology. Importantly, this course provides accreditation towards the Western Australian Certificate of Education.

Carnamah DHS has a very good relationship with the town's major employer, and has capitalised on this by negotiating School Based Traineeships. Units of competence required for the traineeships are provided in a blended, flexible mode of delivery facilitated by both the school and CWTAPE. To date this has proved to be very successful and the relationship between students, the school, the employer and CWTAPE has strengthened, illustrating Balatti & Fork's (2002) notion of creating community capacity.

Flexible timetabling and staffing arrangements by the respective school and TAFE administration team was a key issue in promoting the successful implementation of the project and maximising the use of precious resources. Considerations for expanding the program into 2006 will concentrate on developing relationships with other businesses in the region including the Local Government, Retail industry and Agricultural industry mining and complimentary trade support.

Participants in the project at Carnamah were keen to investigate more collaboration and a stronger relationship with WestOne particularly for the provision of resources and SIDE in the delivery of programs. It was suggested that the tourism industry is a generally untapped resource in the region, which could be developed with the assistance of funding and government initiatives as well as local business interests to investigate collaboration with the schools and TAFE in promoting ongoing employment, and potential traineeships.

Meekatharra DHS best practices

Meekatharra DHS has had a major success in the delivery of the Certificate I in Workplace Readiness and in the Certificate I in Information Technology, both delivered in collaboration with CWTAPE. It has also succeeded in providing School Based Traineeships for the first time. It initiated a partnership with the local Youth centre to provide programs for 16–18 year olds as a local drop in centre.

The school and CWTAPE are collaborating with the Yullella corporation to provide a Certificate I in Furnishing, taking advantage of the currently under-utilised Manual Arts Centre in the school. This is also facilitated by flexible staffing and timetabling by the respective administration teams.

Table 4 Best practices identified by stakeholders for Meekatharra DHS District High School by frequency (%)

Best Practice Characteristic	Frequency (%)
Collaboration with TAFE	89%
School Based Traineeships	71%
Partnership with Yullella	62%
Flexible Timetabling	41%
Local Community collaboration	38%
Community Projects	38%

Meekatharra DHS in collaboration with CWTAPE has developed key relationships with the local community. In particular there has been a concentration on the indigenous population where the partnership has provided a Certificate I in New Opportunities for Women, (this has the potential for expansion) and a bridging Certificate I in Gaining Access to Training and Education. Furthermore students worked with the Meekatharra Shire to construct the Meekatharra Heritage Walk Trail, a playground and nursery, providing employment and retaining students in further studies. A Certificate I in Introduction to Construction with the Yullella Corporation is another initiative taking advantage of and developing community capacity building.

Conclusion

The most important outcomes from the project include the collaborative relationship that developed between the TAFE, schools, district office and the communities supporting the initiative. Sharing of information and developing plans between these stakeholders in a cooperative manner ensured a high level of success measured against the projects' own criteria. This must continue to develop and grow through regular contact, furthering contributions of ideas and knowledge as VET delivery grows in importance, developing community capacity and strengthening rural and remote communities.

The status of VET is clouded by perceptions that these pathways are designed for the less capable student. There is a general ignorance of the range of scope of VET options in many quarters of the community. VET is clearly not only for less able participants, but encompasses a wide range of complex skills and abilities measured by a broad spectrum of achievement levels through the world class Australian Qualification Framework. This wrong perception must be addressed through awareness raising activities such as regular community, school and TAFE meetings and information sharing activities.

The business and local community must be included and briefed and their opinions and contributions sought in an effort to widen the range of school based traineeships. This should be underpinned by responsive and creative development by education providers and the utilisation of relevant, flexible curriculum and training packages. This curriculum should also include generic skills such as Workplace Readiness, Information and Communication Technology, Communication skills and other skills training deemed necessary to support the perceived needs of the community.

The development of a virtual campus, which takes advantage of the current levels of technology infrastructure and capitalises on imminent upgrading and provision of resources, should be considered for providing a wider range of flexibly delivered curricula pertinent to the respective communities. There is great need for such delivery styles, which takes advantage of the current resources that WestOne and SIDE already provide, without impacting enormously on budget arrangements.

Training of staff to develop appropriate VET packages, to deliver VET, to assess VET and to handle the onerous reporting and bureaucratic procedures, along with providing incentives for

well trained staff to persist in this environment and feel supported by their employer, remain the challenges yet to be met in remote and regional regions of Australia.

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Appendix A

Evaluation questions

What models of best practice emerged from the project?
In your opinion, did the project provide a broader range of education and training pathways? If so, can you elaborate?
Did the project provide seamless, flexible education and training pathways? What were they?
Is there any evidence that the use by students of flexible VET and secondary learning resources was increased?
Is there any evidence to suggest that distance education teaching and learning resources were utilised more by staff in the TAFE sector/secondary sector?
Was there a more innovative use of flexible resources during the program? If so, by whom and to what extent?
Were staff skills in facilitating training relevant to local industries improved? How?
Is there evidence to suggest that collaboration between training staff, local communities and industries was improved? In what way?
Is the existing technological infrastructure to support flexible learning adequate?
If not, please explain what believe should be provided.
Was the linking of resources from different organisations successful in promoting collaboration? Did it improve efficiency? Did the project address the perceived lack of technological infrastructure?
Were new pathways created for rural and remote students? What were they? How successful do you think they were?
How would you characterise the relationship between TAFE college staff and DETWA staff in terms of their collaboration on this project? Has the relationship between TAFE colleges and local schools strengthened?
How has the project contributed to your understanding of the role of VET and education in sustaining vibrant rural and remote communities?
Has the project addressed the regulative and administrative barriers to collaboration between education and training organisations for the flexible delivery of VET to remote and rural communities? Have any solutions been postulated? Did the project highlight any new barriers?
What do you perceive was the importance of WESTONE and SIDE in providing for indigenous students in terms of high levels of flexibility and pathway solutions?
What are the most important collaborative practices to emerge from the pilot? Is there more work required in this area? If so, what?
Are there other organisations that you think should be involved in improving the quality of flexible delivery to remote and rural communities?
Has the project overcome the problem of 'thin' populations limiting training opportunities?
Does DETWA need to recruit and train more staff to deliver requirements to remote and rural communities? If so, in what areas?
Are the current teaching and learning resources adequate for efficient, flexible delivery to remote and rural communities? What needs to be done?
In what ways do you think we can overcome the limited access to infrastructure to support

flexible education delivery?
What multimedia resources have been developed as a result of this project?
What model has been developed (which utilises appropriate resources) to work from?
Has a skill database for each of the regions been completed?
Is there any issue I haven't yet raised which should be addressed in this evaluation?