

CHANGE MANAGEMENT: HOW TO REALLY MAKE OPEN LEARNING WORK

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Background

A reform agenda was being driven at a national, state and local level to optimise efficiency, increase customer focus and decrease the barriers to access within the vocational education and training sector within Australia. It was deemed that *flexible delivery* was the focus for the future. So in our usual manner we encouraged staff to be flexible. Nothing happened. We told them it was important. Nothing happened. Some students even asked for more flexible options. They were labelled as difficult students and nothing happened. Obviously a more strategic approach was required.

An intentional approach

In 1997, a Project Officer was appointed for 6 months to research the implementation of Flexible Delivery at Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE. The report, *No limits to learning*, made wide ranging recommendations that would influence every aspect of the Institute from the development of resources, improved customer service through the support of learning and the adaptation of systems and practices.

As a result of the report, the Flexible Delivery Unit was established in July 1997. It has 3 main functions:

- staff development;
- research and development; and
- materials development.

With 2 lecturing staff, 2 Multimedia Trainees and a very modest budget, the unit provided support for the entire Institute, an area of 27 400 square kilometres, which offered 150 awards and over 2 000 separate modules to its 14 000 students. It encompasses the fast growing southern metropolitan fringe of Adelaide, the Adelaide Hills, remote regions including Kangaroo Island and some of the most scarcely populated regions of the state through the Murray Mallee.

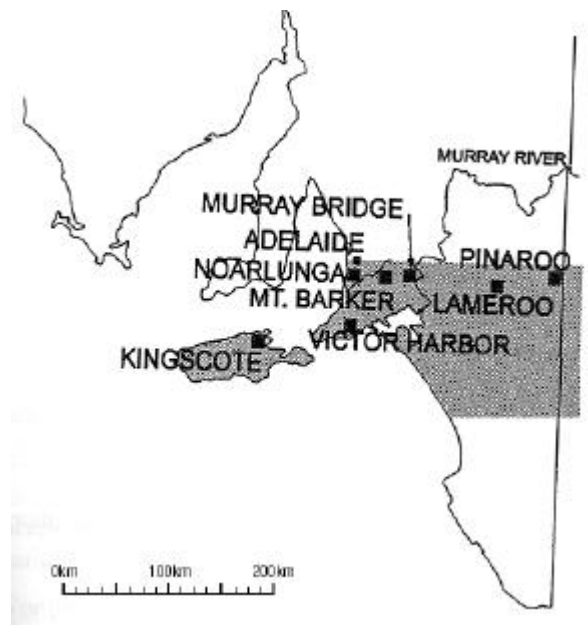


Figure 1. The shaded region represents the region of South Australia served by the Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE.

A commitment to change

The commitment to establish the Flexible Delivery Unit sent a message to staff across the Institute. The provision of this service to all educational programs, at no cost to them, flagged a new priority and approach

especially at a time when resources were tight and cross charging was the order of the day. The Unit's beginnings had people talking whether positively or negatively.

An immediate priority was to define and promote flexible delivery and build the awareness of a variety of options for staff. Flexible delivery showcase activities were planned and conducted at each of the 5 major campuses. Educational teams were encouraged to request showcase activities targeted at their needs at regular team meetings. Information was included in every staff newsletter, additional information was distributed individually to all staff member, bookmarks were printed, sample modules were circulated, a website created and staff were encouraged to attend related workshops, forums and conferences at no cost to their section. Guest speakers were invited from every corner of the world to provide first hand information and ideas to interested staff. In short staff needed to be on leave or dead not to have heard of flexible delivery. But did it make any real difference? In some cases yes, in others, definitely not.

We then examined the barriers to more flexible approaches within the educational programs themselves. For some it was lack of skills, so we offered programs in instructional design and the differing learning and teaching styles. For others it was lack of technical expertise, so we provided opportunities for those staff to have developmental programs within the Flexible Delivery Unit or access to the expertise they required. For others it was release time, so we sought funding from anywhere we could to ensure that the time factor would not inhibit essential activity.

We also analysed where most interest was being shown in developing new initiatives and learning materials. To our surprise we found that it was our Assistant Lecturers who were moving most rapidly to alternative approaches to educational delivery. These are the staff members who hold responsibility for materials development and the management of resources within educational work teams. While we had been concentrating our energies largely on our Managers and Advanced Skills Lecturers, it was the resource developers in the teams who were influencing the directions most significantly. This finding influenced the direction and emphasis of our marketing and promotional activities.

Without question, however, the most important factor in establishing a commitment to flexible delivery was gained by rewarding initiatives and supporting champions. Within our organisational culture it is difficult for an individual lecturer to make change without causing friction within the work team. The rewards and support offered by the Unit had to counter this discomfort if the outcomes were to be achieved. On numerous occasions, we relocated staff into the Flexible Delivery Unit to assist with the transition, to strengthen their resolve and provide additional technical and moral support for their project. At the same time, staff from the Unit would provide mentoring and guidance to the team to promote the development and encourage their acceptance of the changes. Other initiatives involved arranging specialist support or programs to build the resolve of the lecturer involved or bring in an outside expert to assist with the development.

In the early days, it was vital that staff undertaking development and implementing change were given access to people, facilities, equipment and knowledge to support them. This incorporated a wider network across the state and nation than many individuals would have normally accessed. It involved specialist equipment and the technical expertise to operate it including video capturing and editing, sound recording, programming, desktop publishing and graphic design capability. The underlying intention was always to maximise the transfer of skills and knowledge.

We frequently discussed the changing role of Lecturers and the need for some to move into materials development given the reforms we were experiencing. We also promoted the change in skill profile required to meet the changing demands on the organisation. This bred fear for some and excitement for others. Our understanding of the age profile of the staff provided some short term opportunities, but overall there was a significant change required in behaviour, attitudes and skills.

The many levels of awareness

The most important aspect of awareness is that of providing the vision. Many people can be enthused and excited by a vision of a future, regardless of the benefits, as long as they see a place for themselves. The real power of a vision is that it can draw people in and engage them in a way that reveals the regularity and mundane nature of their current daily operations. Not everyone is capable of generating a vision. Nor is everyone capable of sharing a vision. It is essential that the right people promote this focus on the future. Ideally, it is best coming from people at every level within the organisation. A team of committed visionaries will impact more significantly than a lone ranger. However a vision has to be grounded in reality and the practical nature of many of our technical staff had to be convinced of this reality.

Within Onkaparinga, the developments were occurring at such rates that in no time superior products were overtaking our first generation materials. The expertise of staff was growing and the impact on the quality and professionalism of learning materials was surpassing our greatest hopes and expectations. It was important to keep the changing form of our products before staff. This occurred through many launches of new products. Hospitality was a key feature of the Flexible Delivery Unit. We invited staff to come and see the new developments or explore options for projects. Many conversations over a cup of coffee fuelled enthusiasm to try something different.

At this time we also needed to keep abreast of international trends, the changing technology and other initiatives happening beyond our Institute. Research and development was a critical factor along with networking. Attendance at workshops, conferences and through videoconferencing all assisted in keeping staff alert and current. The ongoing development of specialist skills was essential to enable us to maintain our edge. The number of staff within the Flexible Delivery Unit was growing with the increased demand from the teams. The developmental need of these staff were a high priority as the range of skills continued to grow, however this provided the opportunity for some specialisation to occur.

While the Institute had made a commitment to both flexible delivery and its staff through the establishment of the Unit and change management strategies, there was still not enough dollars to meet the demands for development. Therefore another level of awareness was required at this time and involved possible sources of additional funding. Staff were engaged in the preparation of submissions for innovative projects that would embrace our developments and further our own learning. The attraction of additional resources involved partnerships, networking and required a global perspective. We found that international contacts proved to be extremely valuable in this aspect of our work, with ideas being generated equally quickly from the other side of the world or in a colleagues office only a few steps down the hall.

Our approaches to educational delivery have been strongly influenced by market research. This is an area in which we have not exceeded in the past and in which we have limited experience and expertise. The development of staff skills in promoting our services and integrating customer feedback into our products has been an important aspect of our growth. It has been achieved through improved dialogue, an appreciation of the need to customise and a willingness to leave the security of the Institute and venture into various other industry sectors.

Progress

Following initial planning and activity it was important to check that the efforts and commitment being made by the Institute were providing results. At the commencement of the project we established an initial benchmark of the activity defined as flexible delivery, being undertaken within the Institute. This was invaluable and is probably the step that we would most strongly encourage others to follow. It is impossible to assess progress and outcomes without a starting point. At the beginning of the following year we repeated the same survey and the results were startling. Initially, of the 6 defined approaches to flexible delivery, teams were adopting only 5. A total of 6 out of the 16 Program areas were not using any of these approaches at all.

After just 12 months of intense promotion we reviewed the statistics and found a 57% increase in the number of students studying flexibly and a 250% increase in the number of modules available by flexible approaches to delivery. Only 4 program areas were not offering anything by flexible delivery and of those 3 had identified projects on which they would work in the following 12 months. The efforts of the staff in the Unit and the commitment by the Institute were now paying dividends.

Integration

While the changes in the educational programs were taking place, there were many other changes that needed to occur within the Institute to create the environment that would support these alternative approaches. The support systems and infrastructure needed close analysis. This involved the introduction of Learning Centres, a more customer focussed administration, changes in the role and function of Student Services and opportunities for learners to provide feedback to the Institute.

Up until this point in time it was easier for a student to write to the paper and complain then get a grievance resolved within the Institute. *The Tell Us What You Think* campaign was established to elicit student feedback, however it caused much anxiety for staff. Many had little idea that the feedback they were gaining was a gift to show us the way forward. Again an intensive program was required to gain staff acceptance of this initiative. Student Forums were also developed for off-campus learners, encouraging them to identify the shortcomings of our systems.

Access to the internet and more freedom in some facilities provide additional challenges for staff. New policies had to be developed and new challenges faced. Many staff saw these as one crisis to follow another. The whole culture of the organisation was in need of a revamp. This occurs slowly. Restructuring practices, redefining roles, changing focus and emphasis through discussion and debate have all been fundamental in ensuring the changes required are not hampered. Most importantly, the celebration of our successes and the sharing of our highlights have helped staff through some difficult phases.

The need for ongoing staff development to underpin all initiatives has resulted in the appointment of a Professional Development Officer to coordinate activity. The Professional Development Officer will endeavour to optimise the effectiveness of resource allocation to staff development activities and to capitalise on the many opportunities that already exist within the Institute. The developmental need is varied in its nature and the demands are more critical now than ever before as we rely on the intellectual capacity and skill base of our staff to successfully compete in the global marketplace.

The management and communication of information relating to the variety of developmental opportunities available is complex and the need for it to be channeled through a single source or clearing house is fundamental. This professional development function is most appropriately provided from within the Human Resources Unit but will be closely allied with other key stakeholders including the Flexible Delivery Unit to ensure a comprehensive coverage of the needs of both the staff and the organisation.

While the journey has only just begun, there are signs that the focus on intentionality, commitment, awareness and integration has resulted in outcomes that have surpassed many of our sister Institutes. It has brought recognition and praise from visiting experts and has seen us develop a skill base and resources that are being acclaimed internationally. While we recognise our need to constantly increase our efforts, further explore partnerships and capture a larger percentage of our staff's potential, we realise that a commitment to change will not be achieved without an equal commitment to the individuals who drive it. The changing of behaviour and attitudes, established over many years of practice will not occur overnight. People must be valued, encouraged, supported and nurtured throughout the process. Ultimately they will embrace the new opportunities.

References

Hampton, C. 1997. *No limits to learning. Implementing flexible delivery at the Onkaparinga Institute of TAFE*, Adelaide: DETAFE