

ACCESSING GLOBAL INFORMATION: LOCATING THE RIGHT INFORMATION IN AN INFORMATION ABUNDANT SOCIETY

Workshop:

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Background

The Australian vocational education and training sector has undergone major restructuring since the early 1990s as a result of the implementation of the Commonwealth Government's National Training Reform Agenda in response to structural reform of the Australian economy. Initiatives adopted to support the achievement of the government's goals have been strongly linked to the provision of more flexible/open learning methodologies. While these have led to increased opportunities and choice for students, they have had a profound impact on the knowledge and skills expected of staff. Teaching staff, instructional designers and writers of learning materials alike are faced with new structures and processes, new teaching and learning methodologies and new delivery systems.

OLIMCH (Open Learning Information and Materials Clearing House)

The Open Learning Information and Materials Clearing House (OLIMCH) was established in 1990 as a response to the perceived staff development needs within South Australian TAFE (technical and further education) institutes associated with the move to open/flexible learning.

The existing system of individual TAFE college libraries was primarily a service to students, providing resources to support curriculum delivered through mainly conventional means. The focus of the new service was to be the professional development of teachers and instructional designers.

OLIMCH is located at Adelaide Institute of TAFE but offers a service to all TAFE Institutes in SA.

The service is provided as part of the LEARN network (the network of TAFE SA Learning Resource Centres and associated services) and cooperates closely with that network.

Aims

Initially the aim of the Clearing House was to help staff members who were developing open learning courses and writing open learning materials by finding existing courses and materials and thus helping to prevent duplication of effort, and also by providing resources dealing with the philosophy and methodology of open learning - the "why", "what" and "how".

To achieve this aim, the Clearing House identified three primary strategies :

- The provision of an information search service
- The acquisition of relevant materials such as handbooks from educational institutions involved in open/distance learning; catalogues from producers of learning materials; professional development literature about open learning
- The development of a specialised bibliographic database which would provide detailed information about the contents of the Clearing House.

Since its establishment the development of the Clearing House collection and service has closely reflected the progressive initiatives of training reform:

- competency-based training
- the introduction of national competency standards and national curricula
- workplace training

- increasing use of communications and information technology for delivery of education and training.

The mission of the Clearing House is to provide professional development information which facilitates the increasing flexibility of the education and training opportunities provided by TAFE SA.

Development of the OLEARN database

The development of a specialised bibliographic database reflecting the collection of the Clearing House was a priority from the outset. The OLEARN database was modelled on the National Vocational Education Database, VOCED, produced by the National Vocational Education and Training Clearinghouse and uses the same CDS/ISIS software. OLIMCH has developed very close links with the National VET Clearinghouse over the years, to the benefit of both services, and has been fortunate to be able to draw on the expertise of the National Clearing House staff for assistance in the maintenance and development of the database.

Initially the database was made available to all TAFE SA learning resource centres and to a number of interstate subscribers in disk format updated four times a year but since 1997 has been accessible via the Internet. The World Wide Web version of the OLEARN database (<http://www.ncver.edu.au/olearn.htm>) was developed for OLIMCH by the National Vocational Education and Training Clearinghouse following the successful translation of the VOCED database to web format (<http://www.ncver.edu.au/voced.htm>).

The OLEARN database comprises detailed bibliographic data (author, title, publisher, date of publication, extent of item) for reports (both published and unpublished), monographs and serials held in the OLIMCH collection and also for selected journal articles and documents available on the web. Each entry includes a comprehensive abstract which provides users with content information for the item described.

Documents are generally available for loan to TAFE SA staff and students and also nationally via inter-library loan. There is a policy of ensuring that information on the database is kept relevant to current initiatives in vocational education and training and some older items are weeded from the collection and their records deleted from the database.

OLIMCH Search Services

The Open Learning Information and Materials Clearing House provides a reference service to TAFE SA staff, and also to non-TAFE organisations and interstate TAFE institutes on a fee-for-service basis.

The objective of the search service is that information can be provided to clients on a “just-in-time” basis, by Clearing House staff who have developed expertise in locating relevant information and presenting it in a form appropriate to the inquirers needs.

Clearing House staff make use of the OLEARN database and OLIMCH collection, the VOCED database, other electronic databases including the Australian Bibliographic Network and, increasingly, the World Wide Web to answer such questions as:

- I’m developing flexible learning materials - what do I need to know about open learning and flexible delivery?
- Has anyone produced flexible student learning materials on this subject, either within Australia or overseas?
- Are there any online courses already available in this area?
- Could I have some background information about the use of innovative delivery systems?
- How can key competencies (core competencies) best be incorporated into learning materials?
- Is anyone else currently doing a project in this area?

Finding out exactly what information clients need, and in what format, is an important part of the search process and staff of the Clearing House need to be aware of what is happening in terms of open/flexible learning both within South Australia and nationally. The Clearing House has been involved in a number of National and State projects dealing with staff development for flexible delivery and more recently, in the specific area of online delivery which is a major growth area in

Australian vocational education. Inquiries to OLIMCH come by phone, email, and in person. A large number of inquiries are now received and answered by email and it is planned that an enquiry form will be included on the OLIMCH World Wide Web home page.

UNEVOC Clearing House and Electronic Network

The UNEVOC Clearing House and Electronic Network was set up in 1995 with the aim of supporting the development and improvement of all aspects of technical and vocational education in the Asia Pacific Region through:

- establishing a mechanism for enriching the flow of information between member states
- fostering and encouraging cooperation across the network
- developing national capabilities for networking within each country.

The Clearing House is located at UNEVOC centres with a joint regional clearing house in South Australia at Adelaide Institute of TAFE, Open Learning Information and Materials Clearing House (OLIMCH), and at the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). Materials collected and held by OLIMCH are those dealing directly with curricula and learning materials, while NCVER has responsibility for research materials, although in practice there is some blurring of boundaries. Information about the materials informs the Curriculum Development and Research Database which is a subset of the VOCED database.

The involvement of OLIMCH in the UNEVOC Clearing House Network has strengthened its relationship with the National Vocational Education and Training Clearinghouse and adds to the unique service offered by OLIMCH within the vocational education and training sector in Australia.

Workshop

The purpose of this workshop is to demonstrate to participants the nature and use of a specialised information service in the field of open learning, the development of a subject specific bibliographic database, and the types of tools used to locate appropriate information. Participants will be shown how to use the OLEARN and VOCED databases and other Australian and overseas sources to access information on aspects of open/flexible learning.

The workshop will conclude with a discussion of the Australian, and particularly the South Australian, experience in the dissemination of and access to information relating to open learning/flexible delivery for vocational education and training practitioners. Participants will be encouraged to comment on experiences in their own countries and it is hoped that some recommendations may be made which will assist the development of the UNEVOC and OLIMCH clearing house services. Key issues include problems and benefits associated with electronic publication of information, "ownership" of learning materials, and the sheer volume of information which is available.