

BUILDING NETWORKS FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT: THE EDUCATION NETWORK AUSTRALIA AND THE PURSUIT OF ADDED VALUE

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Introduction

In much the same way as the 'Commonwealth' draws its strength from continuing activities of mutual cooperation, consultation and coordination between its member countries, EdNA has been built on a model of mutual cooperation, consultation and coordination between government and non-government members of Australia's education and training community.

EdNA is defined in its charter as 'an educational network based on collaboration and cooperation between key education stakeholders in Australia, involving standards, protocols, agreements and services, and which manifests itself in an online presence'.

EdNA's collaborative processes have two levels of integration: governmental, covering all Australian States and Territories and the Commonwealth of Australia; and sectoral, covering government and non-government schooling, vocational education and training (including adult and community education) and higher education.

As with the 'Commonwealth', the collaboration and cooperation has proved to be EdNA's enduring strength. Maximising the benefits of information and communications technologies (particularly Internet-related) for the whole education sector remains EdNA's focus.

While collaboration and cooperation are defining features of EdNA, coordination is also critical to its success. The most important coordinating body is MCEETYA (the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs) which includes all the Ministers of Education and Training from the six States, two Territories and Commonwealth. Education.Au Limited, a small company owned by MCEETYA and based in Adelaide, South Australia, and the Federal Government's education and training department, based in Canberra, have prime coordinating responsibility for EdNA's collaborative activities. Representative sectoral and cross-sectoral collaborative committees play a major role in informing EdNA's agenda.

By using EdNA as a case study, this paper aims to illustrate how, through the use of information and communications technologies, Australia is bringing diverse educational communities together to add value in the delivery of education in Australia.. Although EdNA's collaborative committees include a strong policy advisory role to government in areas such as copyright, telecommunications, and the information economy, the main focus of this present case-study is to address the development of EdNA's collaborative model including its Web-based gateway, *EdNA Online*.

Building the EdNA collaborative model

Australia, a continent approximately the size of Europe, has a relatively small population of around 18 million people, the vast majority of whom live in six major cities located around its coastal edges. The remaining population is thinly dispersed throughout the rest of the country. As a result, distance education, open learning, flexible delivery and correspondence courses have been long established as methods of providing educational opportunities, particularly for people in rural and remote areas.

EdNA had its beginnings in 1995 when the World Wide Web was just starting to gather mainstream momentum in Australia. It was a time when the Australian Government had launched initiatives to capture the potential of the 'digital revolution', including initiatives that developed the potential of the Internet for the delivery of education in Australia.

As in many other countries, issues of concern to governments included: how to ensure equity of access to information and communications technologies, particularly for people in regional and remote

communities; how to leverage lower prices for computers and connectivity; reducing duplication of effort and adding value to initiatives already underway. Following consultation with education and training systems and sectors, EdNA was born.

Initially, the name 'Australian Education Network' was suggested. However, this name had already been registered by a commercial enterprise. Some lateral thinking took place and the name EdNA emerged. For Australians, this has a particular sense of Australian identity about it: the infamous acting personality, Dame Edna Everidge, has been a household icon for nearly thirty years! Thus, such a name, while not really aimed at the connotations just mentioned, has been particularly apt.

In its first year one of EdNA's main activities was to coordinate a physical infrastructure project aimed at providing cost-effective connectivity for Australian educational institutions. At the time, the Australian Academic Research Network (AARNet) was well-established for the universities and had been acting for some years earlier as the primary Internet gateway for Australia. Schools and the vocational education and training sectors throughout Australia were, in general, poorly provided for.

To achieve market leverage in the resultant tendering processes, State and Territory education and training departments supported the Commonwealth's approach of aggregating the combined purchasing power of Australia's 'whole-of-education' community through EdNA. Built into tendering processes were mechanisms aimed at redressing equity of access and cost issues. Australia's education and training Ministers strongly supported the notion of a 'bottom-up' collaborative model. Committees with representatives from all education and training sectors from each of the States and Territories and the Commonwealth were established to drive the EdNA tendering processes.

By the end of 1995, decisions by some of Australia's nine governments (from the States, Territories and Commonwealth) to adopt 'whole-of-government' approaches for aggregated purchasing power for information and communications technologies had both complemented and confused the specific 'whole-of-education' agenda developed through EdNA. In addition, Internet Service Providers had started to proliferate throughout the country. As a consequence the national physical infrastructure project for education did not proceed. .

Given the introduction of 'whole-of-government' tendering approaches a question that has been pondered since, is the extent to which the early EdNA 'whole-of-education' tendering activities benefited Australia's education and training community. In fact, it is argued here that there have been a number of positive outcomes.

One such outcome was that during this period, the education sector, particularly the schooling component, with over 10,000 schools throughout the country, established itself as having huge market-place potential especially from the point of view of the telecommunications and computing industries. In addition, the momentum created through EdNA collaborative processes raised awareness within the whole education sector of the effect of its combined strength in negotiating prices and exercising choice.

An example of this was the EdNA-initiated national computer purchasing contract, which drove down the purchasing price of a wide range of computers for the education sector. In turn, some individual States and Territories in using local 'whole-of-government' purchasing arrangements were able to use EdNA computer prices as a benchmark against which to leverage still lower prices.

Perhaps most significant was the extent of the collaborative activity and cooperation which had been manifested in EdNA's committees. Through the sharing of information and the development of strong sectoral and cross-sectoral networks, traditional barriers were being broken down and in their place developed commitments to sharing knowledge and identifying projects and initiatives where mutual advantage could be achieved.

An important spin-off, as the committees gained wider recognition, has been their ability to provide the education community with a stronger voice in influencing government policy direction.

There are a range of factors, which over time have ensured the success of the EdNA collaboration and coordination. These have included: a growing concern throughout the broader community for mechanisms and policy responses to ensure children's safety on the Internet; an enduring interest in minimising duplication of effort and in adding value through networked linkages; and, a significant strengthening of commitment from State governments to information technology in education, particularly schools.

Other factors such as the de-regulation of telecommunications law, opening up a new marketplace in Internet services provision, and the 'globalisation' or 'internationalisation' of the educational marketplace have also been significant.

EdNA Online

Since early 1996 much of this collaboration has become visible in the 'EdNA Directory Service', a website designed as an information storehouse about education and training in Australia, as well as a gateway to quality (evaluated) online resources covering all sectors: higher education, schools, vocational education and training and adult community education.

The website resource has brought together educational sites and services chosen for their quality and relevance to Australian education. This service gained interest and momentum throughout 1997 and was formally launched by respective education and training Ministers between November 1997 and February 1998 – see: <<http://www.edna.edu.au/>>.

On November 27th 1998, EdNA celebrated its first birthday of the official launch of the Directory Service and to mark the occasion the website's name was changed to 'EdNA Online' to reflect more accurately that the service is more than an online directory of information.

EdNA Online functions as an educational gateway to quality online educational content and services. As at November 1998, *EdNA Online* had links to over 47,000 quality sites accessible through searching its database. 7,500 of these sites had been evaluated by Australian educators and were classified in a relevant category structure for browsing purposes. Together with this evaluation is an enrichment of these resources with metadata (such as well considered descriptions, keywords, publisher details, and category linkage). These processes build value to the resources beyond their own content.

Complementing these resources were a range of interactive services such as email-based discussion groups (archived on *EdNA Online*), Noticeboards (currently dominated by conference announcements and collaborative projects but also customisable for any purpose) and Suggest Items (allowing for inclusion of metadata enrichment). There were also over 100 discussion groups hosted for the education community, 45 archived discussion groups, a weekly 'What's New' Email Alert service, and a monthly 'New in Early Childhood' Email alert service.

Responsibility for the management and development of *EdNA Online* rests with Education.Au Limited in collaboration and consultation with Australia's education and training stakeholders. The company is comprised of only eight staff. Expert consultants are also hired to assist staff on certain projects. The Board of Education.Au Limited provides direction for the company's activities and policy advice to MCEETYA.

Significant 'in-kind' support is received from stakeholders, who, through partnership arrangements with Education.Au, have committed to contributing content from their own databases to EdNA Online. Bulk uploading of resources over the past year has helped to reduce the workload for contributors. Collaboration is proceeding on devising automated ways of collecting relevant resources from stakeholder sites. Resources contributed in this process, as well as through individually suggested items, are enriched by metadata based on the EdNA metadata standard. This standard was publicly released on August 31, 1998, after 18 months consultation and research.

It is important to reiterate that collaboration and cooperation across and within all Australian education and training sectors is also facilitated in the distributed administrative model developed by *EdNA Online*. For many users of the service this would not be apparent because it is a behind-the-

scenes activity. It is important, however, to the overall EdNA process – a process concerned with building an appropriate online infrastructure consistent with an open networking environment. Some would argue that as a means for spreading ‘ownership’ of the process, distributed administration is one of the successful drivers.

There is a key point in this. As a website *EdNA Online* is clearly a ‘central’ point of focus in the EdNA endeavour and it is where an aggregation of goodwill is made explicit. But, as such, EdNA is a *network* and EdNA Online also operates as a conduit, as a networking facilitator.

The evolution of *EdNA Online* is part of a framework for the provision of easy access to lifelong learning. In 1999, as a key project funded under the Australian Government’s Framework for Open Learning Program, will be promotion of appropriate pathways to information via EdNA for the ‘University of the Third Age’, a community-based initiative which has gathered momentum in the last decade and is aimed at enriching the learning opportunities of members of the community retired from work.

Other ‘online community’ activity is already evident within EdNA’s constituencies, particularly among, though not exclusive to, professional associations. It could also be argued that many of the participants of *EdNA Online* constitute an online community. Each week the number of subscribers to EdNA’s *What’s New* email bulletin swells – it is currently around 850. This figure is also understating the actual number of recipients, as many schools and other subscribers forward copies on through their own networks. Subscribers include the whole gamut of the education and training community.

EdNA Online – strategic considerations

During 1998 a number of strategic projects were initiated which focused on bringing about ongoing enhancements to the service. Key challenges for the coming period which have been prioritised by stakeholders are to improve the search and browse facility, automate the harvesting of resources from stakeholder websites, further develop the EdNA noticeboard facility and interactive services, and extend distributed administration of *EdNA Online* resources.

In broad terms, it is a shared wish of EdNA stakeholders to achieve and maintain a ‘best fit’ between the national collaborative framework and the continued system implementation of *EdNA Online*. Key technical principles of scalability, open component-ware and interoperability are the main reference points. If this is achieved then it will translate into broadening the current services available through *EdNA Online* to include easy publishing as well as the sharing of information resources not originally prepared for Web consumption. Examples of this might include sharing of strategic planning documents prepared in schools of similar size and resources. Already, a sophisticated distributed publishing service is provided to schools and TAFEs in New South Wales through the Department of Education and Training.

Specifically, some of this best-fit will mean developing further interactivity at the design level of *EdNA Online* as well as in extending the services provided such as introducing Web-based forums hosting. This approach recognises that ‘interactivity’, apart from being an over-worked ‘buzzword’, is a means as well as an end in itself. Seen in these terms, interactivity is also about engagement. Networks flourish by engaging interfaces that beckon participation.

There are other opportunities for delivering EdNA content to remote regions in Australia currently being explored. While the detail is not discussed here, underpinning such initiatives is the concept of implementing a range of ‘push’ technologies to assist in the distribution of quality content.

Internationally, initiatives such as IMS (Instructional Management Systems) under the direction of EDUCAUSE in the USA, are gaining closer attention in Australia. This is particularly true for the higher education sector where there is an intention to influence the evolution international standards for online education.

These and other strategies currently being considered by EdNA point to exploiting opportunities intrinsic to an infrastructure that properly supports a ‘network society’. Such an infrastructure is dependent on communication processes which provide opportunity for mutual benefit.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while many exciting challenges and opportunities loom, EdNA's collaborative model has proven its durability and is exercising considerable leverage by successfully integrating the interests and activities of all Australian education sectors and systems.

Key challenges for the future will be to extend partnership arrangements and continue to involve new groups of educators, both national and international.

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