

Presentation of Findings
2001 Flexible Learning Leaders
Professional Development Activity

Cultural Diversity
and
Flexible Learning

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Glossary

AFL	Australian Flexible Learning (Framework)
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
EdNA	Education Network Australia
ETTE	(Office of) Employment Training and Tertiary Education
EVAG	Education Network Australian VET Advisory Group
FLAG	Flexible Learning Advisory Group
FLM	Flexible learning model(s) that provide client-centered programs and services, typically supported by the use of information and communication technologies. *
FLN	Flexible Learning Networks. A Victorian State Government initiative to promote flexible learning.
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
Strategic Management	Management that is focused on the achievement of pre-determined goals and objectives, the establishment of appropriate structures and the development of new systems. *
VET	Includes any organisation involved in the provision of vocational education and training, such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institutes, private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), Adult and Community Education (ACE) providers or Flexible Learning Networks (FLNs). *
www	World Wide Web
<p>* <i>These definitions have been extracted from the Building flexAbility: Focus on Leadership series, TAFE frontiers</i></p>	

Introduction

Australia's vocational education and training systems have identified flexible learning as a major vehicle for providing convenient and customised training. In recent years VET has sought to exploit to the fullest potential, the opportunities afforded by the information and communication technologies through the medium of the World Wide Web. The EdNA VET Advisory group has identified 'knowledge' as an international currency of trade, predicting that the international market for online learning is set to expand considerably.

The primary focus of this paper is to explore the preparedness of the Australian VET sector to participate in the growing 'international currency of trade' by considering:

1. The opportunity to grow Australia's share of the global e-learning economy through the creation of culturally sensitive flexible learning models
2. Strategies that ensure compliance to quality educational standards that will assist in protecting the cultural integrity of the learner in the race to claim a share of this growing market
3. Issues requiring further research.

Methodologies

With the opportunity afforded by the Flexible Learning Leaders' scholarship, this paper seeks to add to the body of knowledge in the area of cultural diversity and online technologies in VET.

The methodologies used include Internet searches, literature reviews and interviews with Australian and international experts from Canada, the United Kingdom and America. The opportunity was taken to attend relevant conferences in the area of distance/online learning and cultural diversity.

The key research questions used in this professional development activity are located in Attachment A.

Background

Despite the proliferation of online materials in recent years, the debate as to the effectiveness of the online learning is still in progress. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the influence of online learning on VET has been both positive and negative.

On a positive note, the Internet has blurred the borders and made time zones disappear, creating seemingly unlimited opportunities for internationalisation. Many Australian educational groups are already actively participating in the global e-learning economy.

Further to this, the www has provided us with an opportunity to gain a greater appreciation of the culturally diverse fabric of our global village. In light of events such as the World Trade Centre tragedy, education may be the most effective strategy in seeking to eradicate ignorance and promote understanding. The online learning medium has been shown to have the potential to address large social issues (Mitchell 2000).

But ICT represents pervasive technologies that have the potential to fundamentally change societies, economies and markets, acting as an agent of conformity and cultural imperialism (Thomas 2001).

This is the United Nation's decade of the Indigenous (1995 – 2004), and yet the deliberate creation of a global www induced culture, may have the effect of neutralising the cultural richness of our global fabric. Individual citizens appear to be developing conflicting loyalties. One to their own unique traditions and institutions, the other to the characteristics of a rapidly evolving international culture (Ireland & Hitt 1999). What we see is a contradictory phenomenon for the individual—standardisation versus diversification (Pincas 2001).

While the creation of a deliberate third culture or third space that purposely seeks to create a culturally neutral environment may be an appropriate strategy for addressing cross-cultural differences in a business setting (Pennycook 1999), this notion is inappropriate in an educational setting.

The sanitising of cultural differences has the potential to limit the educational opportunities that can be found in culturally diverse learning environments. The creation of hybrid learning models, devoid of cultural affiliations (Ziegahn 2001) ignores the fact that learning is essentially a social process that occurs in a cultural context. Attention to cultural background can no longer be a luxury (Martsulf 1999).

Globalisation: Opportunities for Australian VET

Diversity has created significant business opportunities. If we use product volume and sales figures as indicators, the US suppliers of online learning are proving to be the most advanced in the world. Their approach is largely characterised by extensive investments and a multitude of strategic alliances between educational organisations, technology companies and media companies (Mitchell 2000).

Because of the conscious and proactive response by our national and state policy makers in the area of flexible learning, there appears to be significant opportunity for Australia to participate in, and capture a share of this growing market.

Predictions that suggest our need to actively seek out these opportunities include:

- “Education is Australia’s fourth most important export” — *Australian Trade Commission*
- “There is insatiable demand for high quality cost-effectively delivered tertiary education in English” — *The Age, March 2000*
- “E-learning has a compound annual growth rate of approximately 111% reaching \$18 billion by 2003” — *Merrill Lynch 2001*
- “Online education is one of the world’s most rapidly expanding lines of business” — *The Age, April 1999*
- “Online training market is expected to nearly double in size, reaching approximately \$11.5 billion by 2003” — *WR Hambrecht Research 2001*
- “Potential online learning market is being estimated to reach 160 million students by 2025” — *Guardian Education, November 2000*
- “The size of the market for online products and services is estimated to be worth US\$2.5b in Asia-Pacific by 2004” — *Mitchell 2000*
- “Education over the Internet is going to be so big it is going to make email look like a rounding error” — *JT Chambers, President, Cisco*

Consistent with these projections, the EdNA VET advisory group has appropriately identified the following goals/strategies as part of the *Framework for National Collaboration in Vocational Education and Training 2000 – 2004*:

1. to establish VET as a world leader in applying new technologies to vocational education products and services

2. to offer convenient and customised products and services to an expanded national and international customer base and
3. to become the world leader in designing and facilitating flexible vocational learning.

Within the VET sector, we have an opportunity to become world leaders in designing and facilitating flexible vocational training that is sensitive to the cultural needs of the growing global e-learning market.

Globalisation: Issues for Australian VET

Our ability to respond to these opportunities depends on our capacity to understand the international online VET marketplace and the capacity of Australian VET providers to respond (Australian Flexible Learning Framework – Strategy 2001). In seeking to maximise these opportunities, this paper will look at some of the issues to be considered.

Redefining cultural diversity

If education is about facilitating transformation and change in society, then the time has come to be culturally vigilant (Hedge and Hayward). Positioning ourselves to take advantage of the growing e-learning opportunities requires us to move from the position of seeing diversity as problem, to seeing it as an asset. From there we need to identify ways to maximise the diversity dividend (Neville Roach 2001).

In order to achieve this, we need to expand our traditional perception of what cultural diversity encompasses in the context of today's borderless global village. To assist in this process, we need to move away from the often subtle belief that the ways of the majority are superior (Martsulf 1999).

The traditional approach to inclusivity has often viewed it as 'deficit driven', believing international students can be brought up to a 'normal' standard by redressing their 'deficits' (McLoughlin 2001). To meet the current international marketplace demands, we need to focus on inclusivity which seeks to acknowledge and value differences.

Gunawardena (2001) suggests that there are two sources of cultural difference: detectable attributes and underlying attributes. Detectable attributes are those that can be easily recognised in a person, such as age, gender or national/ethnic origin. Underlying attributes are divided into two categories:

- cultural values, perspectives, attitudes, values and beliefs, and conflict resolution styles.
- socio-economic and personal status, education, functional specialisation, human capital assets, past work experiences, and personal expectations.

Through the understanding and application of these expanded definitions, we will move closer towards our goal of discovering how to bring new ideas and technologies together in a way that celebrates our differences—but at the same time, respects old traditions.

Cultural diversity—strictly an international issue?

While economic opportunities have ensured a high profile of prospective international markets for Australian VET, cultural diversity has relevance between countries and between individuals within those countries.

It is important to look at cultural issues closer to home and the benefits cultural sensitivity might bring. Anecdotal evidence from Canada and the US suggest enriched, culturally sensitive learning opportunities can be used to revitalise native cultures through the language and learning process (Ross 2001).

While there is very little research on ways native communities can engage new learning technologies, there is some evidence to suggest that within our own Indigenous communities, education can contribute in redefining and rebuilding a relationship with non-Indigenous Australia into one that is stronger and more respectful of Indigenous peoples and their rights. (Treaty – let's get it right!, 2001). Access and Equity in Online Learning (Strategy 2000) made significant inroads into the identification of good practices in relation to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participating in flexible learning.

In addition to our Indigenous population, diversity issues exist between our rural and regional communities (Palmieri et al 2001). This too has the potential to be better serviced through more cultural sensitivity flexible learning models.

Cultural diversity is also becoming more apparent within and across our own learning organisations. In relation to cross-sectoral diversity between VET and Higher Education, cultural difference is not surprising given that the two sectors have different roots, philosophies and histories (NCVER 2001).

Finally, there also appears to be emerging subsets of diversity in relation to people's receptiveness to the technological wave that is impacting on education today. Of significant concern is the subculture that appears to be intolerant of the intrusion of technology. Within each of our organisations, there are still VET practitioners who are yet to appreciate the positive effects of flexible learning, encompassing ICT. This may be a product of the demographic of our VET staff profiles that are increasingly reflecting an aging workforce. Irrespective of this, we must continue to promote the benefits that flexible learning can bring to the VET arena in response to market driven demand. Effort must continue through professional development to ensure that we gain wide commitment to the changing face of education.

Ultimately cultural diversity will arise simply because people think differently—irrespective of their location or background. Failure to consider cultural diversity, whether it is at a societal, organisational or individual level, will impact directly upon our ability to fulfil our national agenda to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all Australians. Our insensitivity may well contribute to the already significant ‘digital divide’ and see the loss of opportunity for Australia to participate in the growing e-learning economy at both a local, national and international level.

Economics versus education

There is evidence to suggest that people and economics shape the exploitation of technological innovation (Simon Carlile 2001). Within the Australian VET sector there continues to be a lingering doubt as to whether VET has chosen the phrase ‘information economy’, rather than choosing ‘information society’ because we think we are made more politically relevant by aligning ourselves with economic rather than social issues (Schofield 1999).

In the rush to ‘get online’, the Australian VET sector has seen a proliferation of web-based learning resources and delivery platforms. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of courses available coupled with an increase in the expectation of educators to adopt and adapt to the new delivery methodologies.

It is important that we eliminate any belief that web-based learning automatically delivers better educational options for our students, while at the same time, producing cost efficiencies. The research and anecdotal evidence suggests that the achievement of quality online learning resources and supported flexible learning environments is a complex process requiring specialist skills and support at both the development and delivery stages. Zastrocky’s research, in conjunction with Gartner (an international firm that specialises in analysing trends and technologies) has suggested that distance learning is, on average, 50% more expensive than traditional classroom based instruction.

In pursuing the AFL framework, these presumptions must be eliminated. If we continue to operate in this manner, the quality of the products and the delivery environment will be jeopardised, thereby restricting our capacity to fulfil the national agenda.

The role technology can play

Online learning is not inherently flexible and as a result, there has been much criticism of the inappropriate focus on the medium versus the message in relation to flexible/online learning models. However I agree with Ziegahn (2001) when she states that the online environment offers a unique medium through which to reflect upon individual cultural position and on intercultural communication.

It is now clearly recognised that innovations in information technology and telecommunications—now extended exponentially to embrace the Internet, have enormous intrinsic interest and potential educational value to contribute in vocational training (Strategy 2000: Access and Equity in Online Learning).

When seeking to understand the role technology can play, it is important to reflect on our progress to date. This includes the consideration as to whether many of our existing Flexible Learning Models (FLM) are currently disenfranchising culturally diverse students. There are many examples where students from different backgrounds are expected to assimilate and conform to the dominant Anglo-Australian culture (McInerney 2000). Many of today's FLMS appear to be built using a largely Anglo-Saxon/Western European paradigm, often equating to "pedagogical imperialism" (Goodfellow 2001) by incorporating Western features such as verbal assertiveness, active participation and competition.

Our goal should be to identify ways in which we can 'build in' flexibility within our FLMS to encourage cultural sensitivity. In doing so, we will be better positioned to maximise our opportunities for participation in the e-learning economy while at the same time, providing positive learning environments for our local, national and international students.

Student-centered learning is a key element in the VET system's commitment to access and equity (Strategy 2000: Access and Equity in Online Learning). According to Chen (1999), the essential foundation of student-centered learning environments is cultural inclusivity where the focus is on enabling learners to access learning resources in a manner that is congruent with their values, beliefs and styles of learning (McLoughlin 2001).

The primary objective of this professional development activity was to identify ways in which the technology can be used to create more culturally sensitive learning environments. The multi-dimensional nature of web-based technologies offers the potential to meet the wide range of learning needs in a culturally diverse learning environment well beyond traditional delivery methods.

The challenge is to match this potential with the outcome.

To assist in this process, a Framework of Review has been developed (Attachment B) comprising a series of statements and questions that seek to challenge the theories upon which FLMs are developed. It is the outcome of extensive reading and consultation with experts delivering and working with cultural diversity during the time of my scholarship.

Several attempts have been made to create benchmarks to ensure quality distance education, but the question arises as to whether they are applicable to Internet-based distance education (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2000). The Commonwealth Higher Education Management Services has developed a set of guidelines for remote delivery of distance courses and programs (www.col.org/guideli.htm). Within Australia, Strategy 2000: Access and Equity in Online Learning set about to provide broad guidelines to facilitate consideration of cultural differences in the application of online technologies to VET learning. Its findings were considered as part of this research process.

The desired outcome of this Framework is to encourage the development of more culturally sensitive FLMs that will assist in preparing Australian VET for the global e-learning marketplace. Specifically the Framework looks at the areas of development (design and content), delivery (preparation and practice) and maintenance.

Development

While learning from experience may be a catalyst, learning in experience, that is, the physical and social experiences in which learners find themselves, is ultimately more powerful (Wilson 1992). At the core of any online flexible learning development, is the need to ensure that these experiences are not inhibited by the technology. At all times, we should seek to ensure that the technology be intuitive and that the complexities of any development be transparent to the user. In this way we will ensure that the technology doesn't interfere with the learning.

Built upon this presumption, the Framework of Review seeks to ensure that every opportunity is taken to transcend boundaries and to view the development as an opportunity to introduce education and instructional change that focuses on inclusivity.

It is an admirable ambition to offer web-based courses to global learners with different social, cultural, economic, linguistic and religious backgrounds.

However, in designing web-based learning environments, we have to use as our starting point the diversity of culture and learning styles in order to enable diverse learners to enhance their learning (Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998).

A cornerstone of any development must be the consultation of participants to ensure a rich and purposeful model is being developed. The development of a culturally sensitive learning environment should be viewed as a shared responsibility amongst teachers, developers, administrators and learners.

There has been considerable research demonstrating the need to make content as 'culturally appropriate' as possible. This includes avoiding the use of language, colloquialisms, humour or jargon that may be specific to the developer's cultural context. In his book *Intercultural Communications* (1990), Edward Hall talks about the importance of distinguishing between high and low context cultures when considering cross-cultural learning/business situations. He believes that high and low context refers to the amount of information that a person can comfortably manage. This can vary from a high context culture where background information is implicit, to a low context culture where much of the background information must be made explicit in an interaction.

This consideration should also extend to providing alternatives in assessment and communication strategies. Assessment mechanisms need to be able to measure the student's learning on their own terms, without culture-bound blockages (Strategy 2000: Access and Equity in Online Learning). Some caution should be taken however, to ensure that content or competencies are not comprised in any attempt to be culturally sensitive.

FLM developers should seek to optimise the benefits that technology provides by including a wide range of learning technologies and design styles. Collis and Remmers (1997) suggest that language is the most obvious barrier to global access and is not easily amenable to technological fixes. Technology however, is constantly changing, giving developers the opportunity to enhance their FLMS as part of a maintenance and re-development schedule.

When developing FLMS, it is important to consider the inclusion of learning tools from the wider range of elements that make up flexible learning. This can include traditional forms of learning such as face-to-face and paper based support. In this way, the FLM will provide a mix of learning opportunities to satisfy the mix of learning styles by providing greater choice in the areas of presentation, content and assessment.

One of the benefits of FLMs is their ability to incorporate available adaptive technologies to facilitate geographic and cultural diversity thus ensuring accessibility and equality. These adaptive learning technologies can directly assist in diagnosing and adapting to individual learning styles and needs (Lambe 2001).

Technological tools can be designed to encourage 'multi-vocality', for example: visual, aural (sub vocalising, reading out loud), verbal, sensing tactile/kinaesthetic, inductive, deductive, global, sequential, etc. Machine translators, international keyboards and virtual teachers are all examples of how technology can directly support a culturally diverse learning environment.

The primary goal of developers should be to provide an alternate dimension to the learning experience that is both enriching and empowering while seeking to minimise cultural restriction and/or alienation.

Delivery

Much of the focus traditionally is on the technical specifications of flexible learning models. However, it is just as important to give consideration to the 'people specifications' in terms of the skills they bring to the flexible learning environment (Gundry 2001).

This consideration should include the cultural context of the learners, while at the same time avoiding superficial access and cultural parochialism (Collis and Remmers, 1997). It may be necessary to consider an orientation program where the objectives are to offer an opportunity to communicate by asking questions and offering opinions (London 1999).

From a delivery perspective is important to create sufficient opportunities for the cultural diversity of the participants to be exposed. The creation of 'online personalities' may be a way to give all participants the opportunity to have equal voice without verbal or physical inhibitors. To achieve this, it is important to accommodate differences by taking advantage of both the synchronous and asynchronous features of FLMs.

The teacher in the online environment has responsibility for setting guidelines and providing a 'safe space' for respectful dialogue in which cross-cultural experience is valued, but not privileged (Ziegahn 2001). The FLM should encourage two-way communication between teachers and learners, and learners and learners that allows voices to be heard that may not normally be heard. The priority should be to encourage the participants to 'express and harmonise' versus homogenise (Gundry 2001), ensuring visibility of all participants within the FLM.

Within a FLM, the teacher takes on the role of facilitator, moderator and nurturer. In a multi-cultural setting, they also become the managers of the learning environment—learning to be a guest in the cultural diverse setting.

My research has led me to believe that ‘local cultural representation’ will make a significant contribution to both development and delivery. It is to the developer’s and deliverer’s advantage to use the knowledge base of the countries participating in the learning so as to avoid the perception of outsiders customising for insiders. The opportunity to work in conjunction with an educational partner who is immersed in the local culture (be it indigenous, rural or national) can provide a much needed ‘go-between’. Bates (2001) suggests that this person can provide assistance with cultural adaptation, student recruitment, tutoring, and assessment, local accreditation/qualifications, contributions to content and program design to ensure relevance. Mitchell (2000) suggests that we need to partner with local organisations to customise learning materials to suit local cultures and maintain the quality of our VET online products and services.

As well as focusing on offering individuality, it is also important to maximise the opportunity to create cross cultural partnerships and online communities. Given this ambition, it is important to appreciate that we all see the world through our subjective culture, and so intercultural differences may arise through conflicting individual interpretations of reality (Kelly 1996). In response to this, we need to provide guidelines for the ‘netiquette’ required for community members encompassing opportunities to seek support for the resolution of conflict.

In relation to communications as a feature of delivery, Hall (1990) suggests that low cultures (such as the European societies) see the message itself as containing all the meaning they need. High context cultures (such as the Asian societies) see the message as only part of the meaning they need, thus impacting directly on their interpretation. Hall has identified that low context cultures are monochronic, that is, they view time as linear and see things as happening in a sequential manner. High context cultures tend to be polychronic, perceiving things as happening simultaneously and in a more circular manner. All of these issues need to be considered by those responsible for delivery within FLMs in culturally diverse settings.

Maintenance

A significant advantage of technologically based FLMs is the opportunity to customise and re-represent information whether it be part of a maintenance

program, or a development phase. In this instance, the opportunity for maintenance that accommodates the individual cultural (learning) needs of the students should be considered.

My review of the current research suggests that flexibility offered by technologically based FLMs is unparalleled by traditional learning environments. The opportunity for review/maintenance enables the developer to 'get the FLM product right' by incorporating waves of iteration.

Maintenance procedures need to make allowance for new technological innovations. In addition, there needs to be scope within the maintenance procedures to accommodate the maturity of the learners by providing migratory processes that support changing learning styles. We need to also ensure that maintenance procedures are in place that can accommodate changes within the virtual community membership as they occur overtime.

Flexible learning environment have the advantage of being 'fluid'. Maintenance procedures need to be implemented to prevent this advantage from becoming a disadvantage. Flexible learning environments can easily become 'untidy' and chaotic unless housekeeping procedures are regularly applied.

The people factor

While the technology can be constructed in a culturally sensitive way, it is clear that this benefit is, in part, reliant on the cultural sensitivity and awareness of the people who are working within that technological environment. This includes the learners, developers, teachers and administrators.

Learners

Preceding all development and delivery, consideration needs to be given to the appropriateness of the flexible learning environment. In a study conducted by Warner (1999), it was found that 95% of VET students did not have the skills to cope with independent learning. Strategy 2000: Access and Equity in Online Learning, suggests that online works best for mature students who have already developed independent learning styles, self-awareness and good time-management skills.

It is critical to identify whether the FLM is an appropriate medium for the learners, irrespective of the obvious geographical and economical benefits it offers. In Campus Review (August 2001), recent studies showed that more than four in every five TAFE students prefer to study on campus in formal classes – especially among 15-24 age group. This is further substantiated by research suggesting that online learning will only prove beneficial if the learner has a real and meaningful purpose that can be achieved in the online setting (Crawford 2001). Just because it is available online, doesn't necessarily guarantee a positive learning opportunity for all learners.

Once online learning has been identified as appropriate for the learner, assistance is required to help learners match their technical facilities to their individual learning/cultural needs. This includes identification of individual learning styles and ensuring that the FLM offers an appropriate mix of methods and techniques (Felder 1993).

When developing FLMs, focusing on the client/learner is critical. The reality is that the medium will undoubtedly change, maybe not tomorrow, but within a few years. What must remain constant over time is the quality of delivery and consideration of the learner's needs (Burge 2001). In cross-cultural settings, it is important to maximise the opportunity to create cross cultural partnerships and online communities. To nurture this process, it is important to establish clear guidelines for the 'netiquette' required within the flexible learning environment.

Teachers

When we speak of diversity in a classroom, we are often considering only the diversity of the students in the room. Teaching for Inclusion (2001) highlights how important it is to identify the teacher's cultural sensitivity in terms of visible differences (eg, race and ethnicity) and invisible differences (eg, political opinion, sexual orientation, teaching and learning styles, regionalism, class, family history and religion). In recognising that sometimes our cultural assumptions are so close as to be invisible (Gundry, 2001), Teaching for Inclusion recommends that teachers working in culturally diverse settings should reflect on the following questions:

1. Recall the incident in which you first became aware of differences. What was your reaction? Were you the focus of attention or were others? How did that affect how you reacted to the situation?
2. What are the 'messages' that you learned about various minorities or majorities when you were a child? At home? In school? Have your views changed considerably since then? Why or why not?
3. Recall an experience in which your own differences put you in an uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the people directly around you. What was the difference? How did it affect you?
4. How do your memories of differences affect you today? How do they (or might they) affect your teaching?

There has been much research and development in the area of e-moderation and online teaching. Excellent resources exist that provide support to teachers in the transition to online delivery. For example, Gilly Salmon, Open University, UK and Stephen Downes, University of Alberta, Canada.

Adesso (2001) has identified six advanced facilitation skills that teachers in an online learning environment must develop to ensure cultural inclusivity. These skills include:

1. demonstrating an open and accepting attitude
2. clarifying meanings
3. connecting ideas to expertise
4. integrating materials over time
5. empowering and motivating others
6. maintaining a group learning environment.

The implications for Australian VET teachers are that our professional development needs to go well beyond the technical skills acquisition associated with flexible learning.

Developers

The vision has been set by ANTA for Australia to be the global leader in applying new technologies to vocational education products and services by 2004. In working towards this vision we must accept the fact that technological platforms, and skilled online teachers, will not in their own right see the achievement of this goal. Administrators within the VET sector need to recognise and respect (both in terms of human resources and financial expenditure) the specialist skills that are required to facilitate the development and delivery of effective, culturally sensitive flexible learning models.

In relation to development, Wilson (2001) has identified that there is an absence of a clear picture of how instructional intervention needs to be shaped in order to help cross-cultural learners navigate the teaching/learning interface and that cultural discontinuities occur when the schemata of a learner and instructional designer do not correspond.

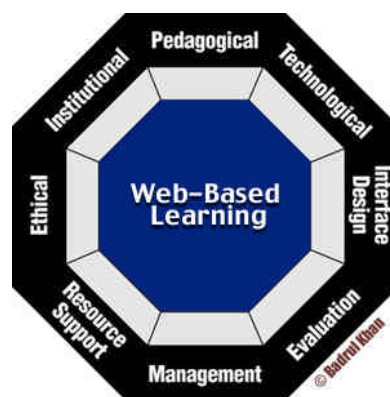
From July 2002, the Australian Quality Training Framework requires training and assessment to be equitable for all persons, taking account of cultural and linguistic needs (AQTF, Section 8.1-viii). While praising the efforts occurring at both a national and state level in supporting staff in making the transition to ICT enriched delivery models, this effort must be sustained. This target needs to be supported by further research and ongoing recognition of the specialist role of developers and deliverers within a technological setting.

Traditional models of instructional design are often restricted to assessing the appropriate relationship between content, design and technological platform. Allen and Boykin (1992) refer to these obstacles in cross-cultural educational interfaces as cultural discontinuities – a lack of contextual match between the conditions of learning and a learner's socio-cultural experiences.

Within the Australian VET sector, it is important to ensure that we are extending the definition of instructional design to be more inclusive and sensitive to the 'people' participating in the model. FLMS must be built to suit the needs of their target audience and recognise that one model doesn't fit all. A good example of cultural sensitivity in relation to learning styles is South West TAFE's Life Online. It was

developed by specialist instructional designers who sought to use the complexities of ICT to meet the culturally distinct group of learners with learning difficulties.

Khan (2001) believes today's generation of instructional designers need to respond to the challenge of designing open, flexible and distributed learning environments for diverse learners through the creation of dimension and sub dimensions of the web based learning framework. He encourages development to consider a range of dimensions including: pedagogical, technological, interface design, institutional, ethical, resource support, management and evaluation. His model encourages consideration of social and cultural diversity, geographical diversity, learner diversity and etiquette and is worthy of consideration for Australian FLMs.



The creation of the Framework of Review (Attachment B) seeks to challenge developers of FLM and to encourage the development of culturally sensitive FLMs. It both recognises and seeks to respect the art of instructional design as a complex mix of cognitive, affective and psychosocial skills (Dede 2001).

Administrators and policy developers

It is the responsibility of the policy developers to ensure that there is a clearly articulated mandate to support those developers and deliverers of flexible (online learning). This mandate must guide the participants by making the distinction between the often-conflicting goals of trying to reach more students and markets, while at the same time providing better quality learning resources (not to mention making a profit!).

Strategies, predicated on policy, have to offer direction and the opportunity for flexibility to meet local needs. On an encouraging note, Dench McClean (2001) suggests that TAFE providers are beginning to implement their own human resource development programs to address the challenges that globalisation, internationalisation and constant change present.

Are we on track?

The answer is a resounding YES!

When ANTA contracted J Mitchell & Associates to explore the international marketplace for online products and services in the VET area, they determined it was set to expand. In terms of national preparedness, the Sunday Age, 19 August 2001, reported that Australia was number two (behind the US) among the world's 60 largest economies in terms of electronic business readiness, and effectiveness in harnessing the Internet.

The high profiled commitment to developing a supportive technological infrastructure within VET is important. The most positive indicator of Australia's future potential however, is its renewed focus on the people within the VET sector. It is this characteristic that will distinguish us in the global marketplace.

The financial investments made by ANTA in recent years, have provided significant support to its number one goal of developing creative, capable people. This commitment is reflected in initiatives such as Flexible Learning Leaders/Fellowships and most notably, LearnScope. The long term, recurrent approach to these initiatives has already seen significant returns to the VET sector, particularly in the area of flexible learning. The opportunity to allow individuals and organisations within VET to take leadership roles, will continue to contribute to the building of the vision for VET in Australia.

Within the state of Victoria, ETTE has shown commitment to the flexible learning through initiatives such as Flexible Learning Networks. These locally based networks have exposed opportunities and encouraged the uptake of flexible learning that meets unique regional needs. Initiatives such as the Acer Notebook Program and Online Education Program have assisted the implementation of flexible learning. Funding for coordination and leadership roles at Institute level has been supported through the Flexible Learning Manager initiative proving to be very beneficial.

Other peak groups within Victoria such as TAFE frontiers, have identified people as a major priority, with professional development gaining considerable funding.

However, the ability to translate national and state agendas to individual Institute level is critical. Jones & Young (1996) suggest that many institutions lack clear, coherent strategies for connecting their diversity-supporting goals and their goals for expanding technology applications.

South West TAFE's holistic approach to flexible learning has led to significant achievements. Commitment to flexible learning is a cornerstone of our charter and is documented in our Institute's Triennial Plan. From this plan, a working document called "Meeting the Challenge (2001-2003)", has ensured that the goals and objectives of the Institute will be implemented.

A primary implementation strategy was the creation of our Flexible Learning Unit. The goals of this unit include:

1. providing leadership and ongoing support for the promotion and inclusion of flexible learning strategies for South West TAFE
2. increasing technological awareness and productivity potential of Institute staff through the coordination, development and delivery of ICT related professional development activities
3. providing and maintaining quality controlled online environment(s) to support existing flexible learning and encourage new development
4. increasing the profile (local, national and international) of South West TAFE as a leader in flexible learning development and delivery
5. providing project management for flexible learning projects both within TAFE and for its external clients as required.

Coordinating flexible learning activities through a single point within the Institute provides an opportunity to leverage individual initiatives, whether they are state or national. This produces significant economies of scale, providing exponential benefit to our Institute. It also provides a high profiled, single point of contact for management and staff to seek consultation and support in the area of flexible learning.

Curriculum development is another major indicator of our progress. Our curriculum is largely industry driven and is underpinned by training packages. These packages provide a comprehensive; competency based approach to learning and are now more fully supported by resources such as the Toolboxes. This approach to curriculum provides consistency across the training sector benefiting teachers, learners and employers. Of interest is that fact that in the US, there appears to be a fundamental misunderstanding as to what competencies standards are, and their relationship between learning and work (Keogh 2001).

Within Australia, competency based training provides a structure that is more suitable to the development of technologically based FLMs. Competencies can be

viewed as unique learning objects, thus facilitating a logical operating base that accommodates a non-linear approach to development. While the brokering of learning objects on the open market may be a thing of the distant future, the development of taxonomy that supports this idea should be encouraged.

For our major competitor in the international arena of e-learning, the opportunity to provide strong national leadership in the area of VET training is likely to never be achieved. The American educational market continues to operate in an openly entrepreneurial manner. US higher education quality assurance and accreditation systems are diverse and poorly coordinated in comparison to those in Australia (Mitchell 2000).

With a nationally driven agenda focused on technology, curriculum and people, Australia has the benefit of consistency of both product and policy. We must position ourselves to maximise this clear advantage. We have created this opportunity as a result of taking a coordinated approach to flexible learning, while at the same time building in opportunities for customisation and creativity at a state and local level. This strategy has provided us with the much needed leverage to ensure that our impact on the global e-learning marketplace will continue to defy our size.

Areas requiring review and further research

The primary focus of this paper has been on the need for developers and deliverers of FLMs to 'act locally, but think globally'. With this as the agenda, we are more likely to see the development of culturally sensitive flexible learning models with the capacity to meet the local and international demand for quality online learning in vocational education.

While this professional development activity/research has not been subject to empirical enquiry, it has revealed that there are several other areas within the VET sector that require attention by policy makers if we are to increase both our quality and capacity to participate in the global e-learning marketplace. These areas have been noted as opportunities for further research and review.

Coordination of initiatives

Because of its demographics, Australia needs to ensure that state, national and local agendas are aligned. Without the benefit of this leveraging, our opportunity to impact upon the global e-learning environment is limited.

While there are examples of successful coordination, there are still many initiatives that seem to overlap or be mis-timed. This places a major, and entirely unnecessary restriction, on the potential of these initiatives to make a significant contribution to the national agenda.

Further research needs to be undertaken to ensure that we not only share a common vision, but we have coordination of the implementation strategies that support this vision at a state and national level. In addition to this, maximum benefit will be achieved when, within these agendas, there is the opportunity for local discretion in meeting local needs.

Articulation between sectors (VET and University)

In recognising that the VET and Higher Education sectors of the Australian education environment are somewhat estranged in their roots, philosophies and histories (Insight 2001), it is critical that stronger relationships and articulation continue to be explored if we are to meet the full needs of the global e-learning market. Undertakings such as the current discussions between ANTA and the Vice Chancellors needs to be encouraged as the basis for future action in this area.

Because of the identified lower profile and status of vocational training in other countries (Mitchell 2000), stronger partnerships between the two sectors will increase our overall marketability.

Funding flexibility

Flexible delivery is currently politically driven in Australia and offers few economies of scale to those Institutes providing this service. Keogh (2001) has challenged the Australian VET sector to seek opportunities to establish private funding, moving outside the political and social sources of traditional funding in Australian VET.

While these are issues worthy of further consideration by policy makers and Institutes, one of the most significant inhibitors to furthering the national commitment to flexible learning appears to be the current 'fixed formulae' approach to funding. The 'fixed' nature of these funding models is in direct contrast to the flexible nature of the learning environment we are encouraged to create and support.

Anecdotal evidence from the US and Canada suggests that market demand is driving their administrator's approach to funding flexible learning. In some instances, academics are being paid double loading for delivery in a flexible manner in recognition of the increased demand on their time and skills. Already we have sufficient evidence in Australia to substantiate not only the changing roles of teachers in a flexible learning environment, but the increased workload due largely to the 'flexible' nature of the delivery.

While this area is 'politically sensitive', failure to confront it head on will greatly inhibit our progress in the area of flexible learning. Flexible learning in Australia has progressed to its current level largely due to significant Government investment combined with the goodwill of enthusiasts within the VET sector.

If our goal is for flexible delivery to become mainstream within our teaching methodologies in VET, we need to research and give due consideration to the changing nature of the teachers workloads.

Internal and external marketing

Morgan Keegan (2000) suggests that the winners in the global e-learning marketplace will be those who successfully establish or leverage brand names and become leaders in their respective segments.

One of the primary problems Australian VET has to overcome is that lower profile and status of vocational training in countries other than Australia (Mitchell 2000). This is due in part to the needs and perceptions of international markets, but may also be due to our inability to self promote.

Culturally, we are often prone to go about our business in a quiet, understated manner. This is in contrast to many of our competitors who often promote themselves with great confidence and assertiveness. Through the experience of this scholarship, I was able to observe first hand that at times the rhetoric, particularly in relation to the US, appears to far out way the reality. Australia has much to be proud of in the area of flexible learning.

While some research has been commissioned by ANTA to identify market opportunities, we need to identify strategies that more effectively leverage and build alliances that will support the promotion of our activities on a global scale. Bates (2001) suggests a number of models that would be appropriate for Australian VET, including:

- Franchise arrangements — where programs are designed by one institution, but delivered by another under licence or a contract agreement. One of the benefits of this arrangement is that it can provide cultural adaptation at both the development and delivery stage of the program as well as local promotion. The Commonwealth Higher Education Management Services is in the process of developing guidelines for franchising education programmes and their results will be posted at www.col.org/models/fran_guid.htm.
- Joint programs — equal partnership between two or more institutions and/or industry (in two or more countries) where each focuses on their individual strengths of development, delivery and marketing.

It is a seller's market as far as e-learning is concerned and within the Australian VET sector, we need to learn how to become sellers. We need to be considering the concept of 'time to market', which would more clearly identify the real costs associated with Australia not being ready and prepared for the predicted growth in global e-learning market. The research clearly indicates that we need to seek out and continue to develop strategic alliances with industry if we are to become internationally competitive.

Change management – getting the balance right.

Long-term success in Australian VET is dependant on getting the balance right – as developers, teachers and administrators. At an organisational level, leadership in the area of flexible delivery must be based on a well-conceived strategy that considers the complex, yet delicate mix of people, technology and processes.

Failure to consider all three variables when preparing for flexible learning will minimise the return on any investment made in this area.

The people variable is without doubt, the most critical variable in the equation and almost as temperamental as the technology! Any approach taken to support this variable must be evolutionary and all encompassing so as to ensure that all the people are continually moving forward. One of the greatest challenges in bringing all the people with you is the determination of individual starting lines, both in terms of skills and technology tools. Training and development needs to be customised to take into consideration the individual needs of the learners.

As part of the change management process, there needs to be opportunities for shared success. Focusing on the 'whole' creates a strong sense of belonging, ensuring that any success experienced by the organisation, is shared by all.

There are always leaders and enthusiasts for new initiatives, and flexible learning has proven to be no different. However it is inappropriate and inefficient for individuals to take on the sole responsibility for stimulating broad based enthusiasm for these broad based organisational strategies. Latchem & Hanna (2001) suggest that innovation cannot depend upon the 'heroic individual innovator' and that we need to establish realistic timelines and workload for our teachers.

In relation to the technology variable in the change management equation, long-term success is dependant on the ability of the organisation to take the national agenda and apply it at an institutional level. A key factor in the achievement of this goal is the commitment to access. This includes access to hardware, software and, most importantly, training.

When introducing technological change, it is important to take the time to 'prove the productivity'. The use of technology for technology sake has seen too many people be the victims of technological change, where the only outcome has been frustration. Strategic implementation of new learning technologies can produce efficiencies and benefits. Once perceived by the users, it is likely to encourage further exploration and create a capacity for self-perpetuation.

The final variable in the change management equation that needs to be considered is process—the missing link. As reported in the Age IT Section (Nov 2001) the IT industry has only just started to look at how we apply technology to the process side and it will be another 10-15 years before we learn how to best use technology to support process efficiencies.

During the mid to late 90's, the primary focus in flexible learning was on the technology. In the late 90's, we observed increased consideration being given to the people involved in flexible learning. ANTA's LearnScope programs are excellent examples of this shift. However to truly reap the benefits of ICT, consideration needs to be given to the third variable in the equation: the processes. The tools and the skills must be brought together to modify the way in which an individual approaches their work in light of their new technology tools and skills. In the area of flexible learning this is particularly relevant. While the technological platforms may be relatively easy to master, the way in which individuals must now approach delivery has been completely transformed.

Continued effort into supporting all three elements of the change management process is critical to our journey forward in flexible learning. We must continue to seek a true understanding of what the real productivity dividend associated with flexible learning is, for the students, Institutes and practitioners.

Knowledge management

The final issue that I believe demands immediate consideration is the area of knowledge management. While there has been considerable research and strategic planning at a macro level, I believe there is an urgent need to address knowledge management at a micro level.

In recognising that Information and Communications Technologies are the key tools for the information age (Skilling Victoria 2000), the time and information management skills of the 20th century are insufficient for today's data intensive world. ICT has exponentially increased the volume and rate at which data can be transferred today. With a natural inclination to share information within VET, we continue to exacerbate the problem, pushing the limits of individual knowledge management.

At a national and state level, every opportunity to undertake research to identify a range of strategies to assist VET practitioners in managing knowledge at an individual level should be taken.

Conclusion

In the 21st century, we have the responsibility to prepare our students for an increasingly global economy. We can do this in part by raising their cultural competence and ensuring an enlightened citizenship both technologically and internationally. At the same time, we need to create strategies for increasing our share of the rapidly expanding global e-learning economy.

It is generally agreed that online learning is an efficient way to address these responsibilities as long as it is not perceived as an all-consuming panacea for the future. It should be viewed as an opportunity to support existing flexible learning strategies, rather than supplanting them. In developing flexible online learning environments, we must recognise and support both the complexity and potential of the process.

One of the major findings of this professional development activity has been the recognition of the substantial benefit diversity brings to the learning environment.

Students who learn in an environment where multiple and diverse perspectives are fostered and appreciated, become better critical thinkers, communicators, problem-solvers and team players (Sugar & Bonk 1998)

Two of the most valuable benefits of diversity are innovation and creativity. (Neville Roach 2001)

It is these characteristics that industry and Government are demanding of our VET graduates.

Recognising and then maximising diversity is critical to our journey forward. We must avoid the creation of 'culturally neutral' flexible learning environments. Our goal should be to create 'cultural synergy' within our flexible learning models that facilitates reciprocal learning and views diversity as a catalyst for intellectual and emotional growth. Our flexible learning models need to have the capacity to acknowledge, respect and respond to human diversity, thereby creating an environment that facilitates interpretation and acceptability between cultures.

In recognising that globalisation does not automatically lead to inclusion, the Framework of Review was designed to assist in creating more culturally sensitive flexible learning products. The focus has been on the creation of FLMS that move from the position of deliberately seeking to exclude individuals, to acknowledging the need and value of diversity in learning environment. The Framework seeks to provide some insight into the designing of qualitatively different flexible learning

experiences. It also gives due consideration to quality standards that will distinguish our products in the marketplace, while at the same time assist in protecting the rights of the learner in the race to claim a share of this growing market.

While our achievements have been significant in the area of flexible learning, we cannot become complacent. Our goal must be to identify ways to continue to turn our obvious competencies into capabilities. This paper has sought to raise issues and expose research that will hopefully form the basis of further discussion, reflection and debate on the issue of cultural diversity in flexible learning models.

There are no easy answers and the research and trialing of good practice must be perpetual. This is particularly true in relation to cultural diversity—as culture is not static—it is constantly changing. When we combine this with the dynamic nature of the technological environment, any strategies that we develop should be seen as iterative and open-ended, thereby offering VET in Australia the greatest opportunity for continuous improvement.

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I agree with Chambers (2001) when he identified that the literature on online learning is relatively silent on cross-cultural issues. This Flexible Learning Leaders' scholarship has provided the opportunity to add value to the knowledge highlighted in the literature, by overlaying it with the experience of many practitioners in the field.

One of the benefits of the Scholarship has been the opportunity to grow my personal network to encompass the knowledge, experience and dedication to flexible learning, of a wide range of people. I have been impressed by their passion for quality learning, and humbled by their depth of experience and knowledge.

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Attachment A: Research Question

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Research Project

The purpose of this research project is to identify and assess the most effective ways in which flexible delivery models (in particular online learning models) can address the cultural diversity of our global community. In particular, the researcher is interested in identifying ways in which the technology can be used to create more 'culturally sensitive' learning environments.

The methodology for exploring this topic will include interviewing a range of educational experts to seek their opinion and views. The questions asked will include:

- In an educational setting, what do you think of when we talk about the concept of 'cultural diversity'?
- Do you believe it is necessary to differentiate our flexible delivery models, specifically those online learning models, to recognise 'cultural diversity'?
- Do you have examples of how you have addressed the issue of 'cultural diversity' within your flexible learning models?
- What specific recommendations/modifications did/would you make in relation to:
 - Content – the specific learning and assessment materials
 - Pedagogy – the educational philosophy that underpins the content
 - Linguistics – the language and references used within the content
 - Delivery models- the strategies and methodology for delivery.
- In relation to the delivery model, what ways do you believe the technology can contribute to and address the need to be more culturally sensitive?

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project. I look forward to learning and sharing new ideas and strategies with you.

Lyn Goodear

Research Participation Consent form

Research Focus: the development and subsequent measurement of the 'cultural sensitivity' of flexible delivery models.

-
1. I agree to participate in phase one of the research process that incorporates an interview to seek opinions and ideas in relation to the research topic.
 2. I agree to allow the researcher to tape this interview. Yes No
 3. I agree that any data collected may be published, or viewed by other parties.
 4. I agree that my name can be used. Yes No
 5. I am entitled to withdraw consent at any point in time.
 6. I would be interested in participating in phase two of the research process that will involve the evaluation of phase one research findings.
Yes No
-

Participant

Researcher

Name (in block letters)

LYN GOODEAR
Name (in block letters)

Signature

Signature

Date

Date

Attachment B: Framework of Review

Cultural Sensitivity in Flexible Learning

Globalisation has increased the competitive pressure on organisations and individuals to become better, faster, cheaper—with no loss in quality or capacity. As a response to these pressures, many countries around the world have placed increased emphasis on the development of vocational skills focused on the information economy, with Australia being no exception. Clearly the World Wide Web is a logical medium for accessing these opportunities. However while undoubtedly efficient in responding to the urgent needs of industry, the debate as to the effectiveness of the online learning from an educational perspective, is still in progress.

With the rapid growth of the global e-learning market, one area of concern is the ability of the technology to facilitate knowledge acquisition, while at the same time acknowledging and nurturing those unique cultural aspects of the learners. The process of developing effective flexible learning models (FLM) is challenging. Developing FLMs that are culturally sensitive is an even greater challenge. Cultural diversity is broad in its reference and can include aspects such as age, gender, ethnicity, learning styles, etc. This Framework of Review encompasses findings from professional development activity conducted during 2001 as part of an ANTA Flexible Learning Leaders Scholarship. It seeks to recognise the role technology has to play in meeting the global demand while at the same time highlighting and encouraging sensitivity to the cultural needs of the learners in the pursuit of creating quality educational learning environments.

Because of the innate qualities of diversity and flexibility, there can be no single model. As such, this Framework is designed to challenge the traditional approaches to development and delivery, raising both the problems and the potential for cross-cultural delivery within a technologically setting. The research process that led to the development of this Framework was iterative. Feedback and comments about this framework are invited (goodearl@swtafe.vic.edu.au).

Framework of Review

Issues To Consider In Developing Culturally Sensitive Flexible Learning Models (FLM)	Evaluation 0.....3.....5
<p>Instructions: Review the questions in this table and then total your score to see how your organisation is progressing in the area of cultural sensitivity in flexible learning. A score of 5 would indicate outstanding achievement in this area, a score of 0 would suggest no progress. Total your score and then refer to the assessment on the final page to determine your overall progress towards the goal of cultural sensitivity in flexible learning.</p>	
<p>1. The www is just that—worldwide. In designing your FLM, are you taking full advantage of the opportunity to transcend boundaries?</p>	
<p>2. In some instances, FLMs are often just online versions of our traditional learning frameworks, often having resorted to the ‘shoe horn’ methodology as required. Have you maximised the opportunity to introduce educational instructional change through the creation of your FLM?</p>	
<p>3. In all learning situations, we are expected to cater for a diverse range of learning styles. Classroom based learning is often prohibitive in enabling access to a variety of learning techniques. Are you optimising the benefits that technology provides by including a wide range of learning technologies and design styles? For example, visual, aural (sub vocalising, reading out loud), verbal, sensing tactile/kinaesthetic, inductive, deductive, global, sequential, etc.</p>	
<p>4. It is widely recognised that no single teacher can fulfil all of a student’s learning needs. Technologically based FLMs offer the benefit of being non linear and have the capacity to be multi-faceted, multi layered, multi-dimensional. Are you fully utilising the benefits of the technological setting to ensure a mix of learning opportunities to satisfy the mix of learning styles, by providing greater choice in the areas of presentation, content and assessment?</p>	
<p>5. One of the benefits web based technologies has to offer is the opportunity to create complex FLM that are simple in design. Is your model masking the complexities of its structure for the user?</p>	
<p>6. Technologically based learning models aren’t just about opportunity for distance learners. Does your FLM provide an alternate dimension to the learning experience that is both enriching and empowering?</p>	

Framework of Review

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7. The concept of 'adaptive technologies' is one that we have openly embraced in relation to people with physical disabilities. Does your FLM incorporate available adaptive technologies to facilitate geographic and cultural diversity thus ensuring accessibility and equality?	
8. Cultural diversity is often considered synonymous with communication diversity. Does your FLM take advantage of technological tools designed to encourage 'multi-vocality', for example, machine translators, international keyboards, virtual teachers, etc?	
9. Face-to-face communications can often be culturally intimidating. Does your FLM take advantage of the opportunity the technological platform provides for the creation of 'online personalities' giving all participants the opportunity to have equal voice without verbal or physical inhibitors?	
10. In some instances, the development of FLMS for distinct cultural groups has lead to the comprising of the content. What quality assurances have you included in your FLM to ensure that content or competencies are not comprised in your attempts to be culturally sensitive?	
11. FLMS have one feature in common with traditional models, namely, if a teacher wants to reach their students, they have to know how. Are you maximising the benefits of the technological tools to help your teachers reach their students?	
12. Development of FLMS must be approached as a team. Does your FLM recognise the shared responsibility amongst teachers, developers, administrators and learners in striving to create a positive, culturally sensitive learning environment?	
13. The Australian VET training environment is built upon competencies. While the basis of much educational debate, the creation of distinct 'learning objects' offers many advantages in web-based instructional design. What are you doing to maximise the technological benefits of building web based FLM using distinct, competency based learning objects?	
14. Flexible learning is viewed as being synonymous to online learning? Has your FLM considered benefits of incorporating aspects from the wider range of elements that make up flexible learning, include traditional forms of learning such as face-to-face and paper based support?	

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15. Variation between high and low context cultures (Hall, 1990) is considerable. Has your FLM addressed the variation between these low and high context cultures by providing alternatives in assessment and communication strategies?	
16. Consultation with the learners is a critical success factor in creating positive learning environments. Have you made provision within your development process to ensure that your learners are consulted?	
17. There has been significant research done on the need to create content that is culturally sensitive. Have the content in your FLM avoided the use of language, colloquialisms, humour or jargon that may be specific to your cultural context?	
18. Diversity is often viewed as an opportunity for innovation. Does your FLM create sufficient opportunities for the cultural diversity of the participants to be exposed?	
19. Different cultures have different perceptions of time. Does your FLM accommodate these differences by taking advantage of both the synchronous and asynchronous features of FLMs?	
20. Learning is about being exposed to new ideas and alternative thinking on the path to discovery. Does your FLM celebrate the cultural differences of your learners to ensure a rich learning experience through the creation of authentic 'centres of truth' that nurture new thinking?	
21. Learners learn best when they are empowered. Does your FLM create an empowering and considerate learning environment that prevents cultural restriction?	
22. Alienation is a major contributor in the decision to withdraw from distance learning. Does your FLM address the issue of cultural alienation by offering opportunities for inclusion?	

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23. Research has shown that the opportunity for time independence in a FLM can create an important opportunity for reflection. This enables some learners to participate, who may previously have been excluded for social or cultural reasons (language barriers, social norms, etc.) Does your FLM allow voices to be heard that may not normally be heard?	
24. Education, whether traditional or online, should always be supportive of a 'dialectic process'. Does your FLM encourage two-way communication between teachers and learners, and learners and learners?	
25. A distinctive feature of many cultures is their varying focus on individuals versus the collective group. Does your FLM offer individuality with opportunity for community responsibility?	
26. Virtual communities have been identified as key success factors in creating successful FLMs. Does your FLM maximise the opportunity to create cross cultural partnerships and online communities?	
27. Within any community, there must be established codes of conduct. Does your FLM establish clear guidelines for the 'netiquette' required for community members?	
28. Technological responsiveness and competency of the teacher will have a major impact on the success of your FLM. Have you assessed the competencies of the staff participating in your FLM and addressed their training needs?	
29. No matter how culturally sensitive the construction of your FLM might be, it is the cultural sensitivity of the people operating within the model that will directly affect its success? What strategies have you put in place to assist in identifying and strengthening the cultural sensitivity of the participants?	
30. There are essentially two kinds of FLMs. Sites made for context for a specific cultural context, and those for cross-cultural context. Is your FLM trying to be all things to all people? Have you clearly identified who your students are?	

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31. Learning is essentially a social process which occurs in a cultural context (Gundry, 2001). Is your FLM giving due consideration to the cultural context of the learners?	
32. Cultures vary in the way in which they accommodate diversity. Does your FLM encourage the participants to 'express and harmonise' versus homogenise? (Gundry 2001)	
33. Problems and conflict can occur in all learning environments and styles of conflict resolution can vary from culture to culture. Does your FLM create sufficient opportunity and variety for participants to seek support for the resolution of conflict?	
34. The Internet has the potential to mask or expose differences. Have you identified your goals for facilitating visibility of participants within your FLM?	
35. True multi-culturalism incorporating cross culture communications, is difficult to achieve in FLMs. Is your FLM guilty of offering superficial access and cultural parochialism to the participants (Collis and Remmers, 1997)?	
36. An on-the-ground partner can make a major contribution to your FLM, particularly in the areas of culturally considerate content and support. Does your FLM team include appropriate local representation?	
37. Much focus is given to the 'technical specifications' of a FLM. Does your FLM give due consideration to the 'people specifications' in terms of the skills they bring to the flexible learning environment (Gundry 2001).	
38. When we stand up in front of class, we get one shot at 'getting it right'. Is your FLM development model taking full advantage of the opportunities for review to "get your FLM product right" by incorporating waves of iteration?	

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39. A major benefit of constructing FLMs in a technological setting is the opportunity it creates for reusability. Are you maximising this opportunity by customising and re-representing information to meet the individual cultural needs of your students?	
40. Technology is constantly changing. Does your FLM include maintenance procedures to ensure that it is able to take advantage of new innovations?	
41. Participants within a FLM undergo a maturation process, as do all learners. Does your FLM accommodate this maturity by providing migratory processes that support the changing learning styles of the learners?	
42. A familiar frustration of classroom-based teaching is the situation where you walk into a classroom and the previous teacher has left the board full of their notes. Have you created appropriate 'housekeeping' procedures to ensure that the 'boards' are kept clean in your FLM?	
43. A feature of flexible learning is the ease with which new members can join the virtual community. Does your FLM accommodate community changes?	

Framework of Review

Cultural Sensitivity Assessment	
150 – 215	You are well positioned to take advantage of the e-learning opportunities both locally and globally. Your goals and objectives in the areas of development and delivery of flexible (online) learning provide appropriate consideration of the individual cultural needs of your learners. Your efforts will be rewarded.
80 – 149	Many of today's e-learning flexible learning models will fall into this zone. You are on the right track, but need to avoid complacency and over reliance on culturally insensitive development paradigms. There is still scope to improve the ways in which you can better consider the individual cultural needs of your learners. Through improved communications, you can continue to ensure that your goal to provide culturally sensitive flexible learning models is shared with stakeholders, including learners, developers, deliverers and policy makers.
0 – 79	With your current focus, the opportunities to create enriched learning environments that consider the individual cultural needs of the learners are limited. Urgent consultation with key stakeholders needs to occur in an attempt to re-evaluate your goals and objectives in the area of flexible (online) learning. At a strategic level, you should seek to identify your areas of weakness (development, delivery or maintenance), then target the areas for change through clarification of your goals and re-training of key participants. Failure to do this will prevent your organisation in taking a leading role in the growing e-learning opportunities.