

RESEARCH ON FLEXIBLE LEARNING/DELIVERY: UNDERSTANDING TERMS

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ABSTRACT

The authors are undertaking research into a number of aspects of flexible delivery and flexible learning in the Vocational Education and Training and higher education sectors. This research leads the authors to question some of the understandings about the nature and practices of flexible delivery and flexible learning that are held both across and within these sectors. It is clear that there are some similarities of policy and practice, but also some sharp, and some not so sharp, distinctions to be found.

This paper reviews recent literature on flexible delivery and flexible learning, and compares this with current conceptualisations and interpretations in the field as revealed in the authors' research projects. The authors argue a case that researchers of flexible learning and flexible delivery in VET need to be clear about their conceptualisations of flexible learning and flexible delivery which underpin the design, analysis and implementation of their research. Such differences in conceptualisation make the comparison of findings between research projects problematic.

Introduction

In the 1990s, the terms 'flexible learning' and 'flexible delivery' roll off the tongues of many people in education and training circles. Although there is talk about how to do it, how to enhance it, whether or not it is suitable to different applications, and whether or not it is effective, there have been few attempts to say what is meant by these terms. Peoples, Robinson and Calvert (1997, 6) have reviewed a number of definitions and have observed "The term flexible delivery is being asked to carry too many notions". Indeed, in the course of different activities in which we have been involved together it has become clear to us that we may not understand these terms in the same way. Over the past decade, Evans has principally worked in universities and Smith has principally worked in vocational education and training (VET). Our contrasting experiences, linked to the different histories, ideologies and policies in the respective educational sectors, contributes to our different, taken-for-granted understandings of these terms; indeed, of our particular selection and use of these terms.

In this paper we chart some of the similarities and differences between the two sectors with respect to their use of the terms 'flexible learning' and 'flexible delivery'. We do so, not just to illustrate these similarities and differences, but also to illuminate the purposes and orientations of the two sectors when they practice flexible delivery or flexible (teaching and) learning.

Context

In its publication, *Flexible Teaching and Learning at Deakin University* (Deakin University, 1997), the University explicitly recognises the varied understandings and practices that surround the terms flexible learning, flexible teaching and flexible delivery. The Deakin publication observes:

'Flexible teaching and learning' can mean different things to different people both within and outside the university. ... However, the vision is fundamentally about making the University's course offerings more accessible in a broader range of educational settings (on-campus, cross-campus, off-campus, workplace, home, international) to a more diverse range of student groups studying at undergraduate, postgraduate and advanced professional levels (Deakin University, 1997, 7)

It can be concluded in this instance, that flexible approaches to teaching and learning require some relaxing or removal of place and time constraints in the educational experience. Technologically

mediated forms of education facilitate greater flexibility in the time and/or the place of teaching and learning and in the provision of resource-based forms of teaching suitable for different contexts and student groups.

Captured in this set of observations about flexible teaching and learning are what appear to be the cornerstones of the concept: flexibility in time of learning and place of learning. However, unstated and unexplored in the Deakin description are: flexibility of entry, of progress and pace of learning, of assessment, or of content, each of which has been associated—at various times and to varying degrees—with the notions of flexible teaching or flexible delivery. Elsewhere in the Deakin publication, which was produced as a guide to assist teaching staff in moving towards flexible teaching, these issues are addressed with argument and advice.

In the vocational education and training sector, the Flexible Delivery Working Party's publication, *Flexible Delivery: a National Framework for Implementation in TAFE*, proposed the definition of flexible delivery as:

Flexible delivery is an approach to vocational education and training which allows for the adoption of a range of learning strategies in a variety of learning environments to cater for differences in learning styles, learning interests and needs, and variations in learning opportunities (Flexible Delivery Working Party, 1992, 2).

In contrast to Deakin, the Working Party's statement is more individualist, and is focused on learning rather than teaching. However, the use of the term 'delivery' instead of 'teaching' (as in Deakin's 'flexible teaching and learning' may be significant here and is a matter we shall pursue later. A difficulty with the Working Party definition of flexible delivery is that it fails to identify any features that are not present in the competent teaching of any group in any situation. Indeed, it implies that all delivery (teaching?) which is not 'flexible delivery' is rigid in method, content and expectation. Thus, without flexible delivery being valued and deployed by teachers and trainers, they would behave in an automatic and rigid way, taking no account of learners' needs or circumstances, and making no variations.

By 1996, the Australian National Training Authority's National Flexible Delivery Taskforce had adopted a somewhat different definition:

Flexible delivery is an approach rather than a system or technique; it is based on the skill needs and delivery requirements of clients, not the interests of trainers or providers; it gives clients as much control as possible over what and when and where and how they learn; it commonly uses the delivery methods of distance education and the facilities of technology; it changes the role of trainer from a source of knowledge to a manager of learning and a facilitator. (ANTA, 1996, 11).

Ironically, this description is precisely that proposed by Johnson (1990, 4) to define 'open learning', and captures the two elements most commonly associated with flexible delivery: extended access to learning through the removal of barriers; and learner-centred provision where learner choice is the key.

Clearly, between 1992 and 1996 there was a shift in the conceptualisation of flexible delivery in the VET sector as expressed in national policy. The 1996 definition is clear that an important feature of flexible delivery is *client control*, including control over *what* is learned. We suggest that the nub of the difference between the term as used in the university sector and as conceptualised in VET is this idea of *client control*, not just over the time and place of learning, but over *what* is learned, and the *pace* at which it is learned.

While the notion of client control comes through clearly in the ANTA description, Peoples, Robinson and Calvert (1997) note that there is ambiguous use of the term 'client'. It is unclear whether the 'client' is the enterprise requiring the provision of training, or the individual learner, or even whether the intention is to include both parties. Such ambiguity in identifying the client in VET is by no means restricted to flexible delivery (see King, 1996).

The origins of the terms

DISTANCE EDUCATION ROOTS

A definition of distance education and its key characteristics was addressed by Keegan (1980) before the newer terms of flexible learning and flexible delivery emerged in the language of educators. Keegan's work was driven from a similar issue in that there had developed confusion between the newer term distance education, and the older commonly used terms such as home study, external studies and correspondence study. Keegan reviewed a number of definitions of distance education and concluded that the main elements any definition needs to include are:

- the separation of teacher and learner (to distinguish from face to face instruction)
- the influence of an educational organisation (to distinguish from private study)
- the use of technical media (including print) to unite the teacher and learner, and to carry the educational content
- the provision of two-way communication between teacher and learner
- the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation reasons
- the participation in an industrialised form of education where there is division of labour such as instructional design, graphics, word processing and typography, teaching etc. (Keegan, 1980, 33).

The Keegan formulation provides an insight into the distinction that may be made between distance education and flexible learning in that Keegan does not include any notions of flexible entry or exit, or learner control over content, sequence and pace of progress. The features of distance education proposed by Keegan are preserved in a provision of education or training that has a set syllabus which learners must cover, and determined periods of study such as semesters, and expected progression rates to meet provider requirements for assessment and receipt of accredited awards. The characteristics of flexible learning can be met, however, in a system of educational provision which provides for substantial learner control over content, sequence, and progression. However, if external controls are imposed, they are not imposed by the training provider but rather by another party such as the learner's employer or industry body. Ellington supports the contention that the key characteristics of flexible learning lie within the notion of learner control when he writes:

...I would suggest that we all try to promote the general adoption of this wider interpretation, and start using the term 'flexible delivery' as a generic term that covers all those situations where the learners have some say in how, where or when learning takes place—whether within the context of traditional institution-centred courses or in non-traditional contexts such as open learning, distance learning, CAT schemes, wider access courses or continuing professional development (Ellington, 1997, 4).

Ellington (1997) has traced the origins of the term flexible learning to the 1970s, when the Flexible Learning System (FLS) was developed in the United States for use in schools. The FLS was a package designed for teachers to assist children to develop problem-solving attitudes and skills, and with a focus on shifting problem solving in the classroom from teachers to pupils (Yinger and Eckland, 1975). In Britain, Ellington has traced the term to the early 1980s and observes that, by 1986, there was sufficient activity for the Association for Educational and Training Technology to make Flexible Learning Systems the theme for its Edinburgh conference.

HIGHER EDUCATION ROOTS

In the university sector, the term has emerged from the rapid and major changes that were made during the 1980s to the way in which distance education was provided. Evans (1999 in press) has analysed the changes to flexible delivery in Australian higher education in the context of the prevailing ideological forces at work in Australia and internationally. We shall draw on this work to make our case here.

Over the past decade or more, Australian governments and policy makers of various political persuasions have been influenced by the Reagan and Thatcher ideology of new economic rationalism or market libertarianism. This influenced strongly the conditions of higher education from the late 1980s when Dawkins and his advisers, created a storm of discussion and debate with the 'Green Paper' (Dawkins, 1987) and 'White Paper' (Dawkins, 1988) on higher education. Although it formed only a small part of these documents, distance education was to be changed irrevocably as a result. Arguably the ground was prepared for flexible delivery and flexible learning in the higher education

sector during this period, although it is debatable if this was an explicit intent. Effectively the Hawke Labor Government moved simultaneously: to require higher education institutions to meet certain levels of enrolment in order to receive funding allocations; to disband the distinctions between the Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) and universities; and—crucially for our argument here—to restrict the provision of distance education to eight institutions which were declared as Distance Education Centres (DECs) (see, especially, Jakupec, 1996, 82 and also Johnson, 1996). Institutions that were not declared as DECs could only offer distance education courses in partnership with a DEC which would provide the materials development and distribution service. The government funding for such courses would be split between the two partner institutions.

It will be well-known to those in the field that such partnerships were rare. Institutions which had fought competitively for students for several years and which had now been plunged into a tussle over DEC status were not predisposed to enter into a cosy relationship between victor and vanquished. Indeed, although some of the vanquished dropped distance education provision, others opted to surreptitiously maintain theirs. It is arguable that, in part, flexible learning and flexible delivery were to become terms in the discourse of surreptitiousness. 'Distance education' dropped from their lexicon and in its place came a variety of other terms such as 'extended campus', 'open campus' and 'flexible delivery' or 'flexible learning'. Some practices were changed to avoid falsely reporting to government that the students were 'off-campus' students. Typically, some form of on-campus attendance was required but not necessarily at the main campus, rather attendance at a meeting in a regional campus, or hired room would suffice.

The DECs only retained their status for a brief period of about three years. Paradoxically, there are now a greater proportion of institutions involved in forms of distance education, usually as flexible delivery, than ever before. The reasons for this are several. There is a need for universities to find more sources of non-government income, especially in the postgraduate coursework area from which the Howard Liberal Government—which subscribes to an even more desiccated economic rationalist ideology than its previous Labor counterparts—is effectively removing its funding. The postgraduate coursework area has been expanding steadily with the largest component being in the professions and business. For example, Master of Education and Master of Business Administration courses are the most common. However, most universities would have few students if they only offered such courses as full-time and on-campus since working people generally need courses that are part-time and principally off-campus. In addition, the development of new computer and communications technologies has enabled universities to explore the creation of new educational technologies, especially those which facilitate interactive learning.

This is not to say that the terms 'distance education' and 'flexible delivery' are synonymous, or that practices in the late 1990s dual mode higher education institutions have not changed. It is difficult to say how the naming of a practice as 'flexible delivery' to make it symbolically different from distance education actually affected its practices. It is possible that it really did encourage people to think more about doing things differently or better for their students. However, any such influence would need to be assessed alongside the economic rationalist moves in education and training, together with the continuing rapid development of new educational technologies.

VET ROOTS

In the VET sector the drive towards flexible delivery has not come from a reorganisation of the provision of distance education, although that issue has been confused into it. Instead, the drive towards flexible delivery has resulted from the belief that the consumers of training can be better served with a product that is more relevant if they are viewed as *clients* of training providers, with all the privileges clients should have of professional services. Largely, those privileges have been viewed as associated with delivery of the right service in the right place, at the right time and at the right price. Flexible delivery has, therefore, been seen as a response to client requirements and not as synonymous with, or a substitute for, distance education. The tools and processes of distance education have been more clearly seen as available to flexible delivery, and part of the armoury, but certainly not as the same.

Flexible delivery has been enthusiastically embraced not only by VET authorities, but also by Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITABs), and by individual enterprises. Under the National Vocational Education and Training System Agreement, State and Territory Training Profiles are key planning tools, negotiated with the VET authorities in each State or Territory. These profiles include strategies for flexible delivery in terms of on-site delivery, communication networks, open learning centres, and the introduction of multimedia technologies. It is now commonplace for ITABs to champion flexible

delivery in the workplace in the various Industry Training Plans (ANTA, 1996, 85). Among individual enterprises Henry and Smith (1998) have shown, in a detailed survey of SMEs in the Geelong region, that flexible delivery is by far the most favoured methodology for training delivery.

The inclusion in the conceptualisation of flexible learning of the notion of learner control over content, sequence, and length of time to complete the program are crucial components in the provision of learning programs to enterprise. Behind the inclusion of those notions in flexible delivery is the fundamental idea that it is learner (or customer) controlled rather than provider controlled. However, in the context of enterprise training, this raises the question of who is the learner and who is the customer. While the learner is likely to be an individual within the enterprise, that person may not be the customer. The customer is most likely to be the enterprise and its management. King (1996) has examined the language used in ANTA reports and concludes that the principal client is seen as the enterprise, rather than the individual learner. It is the enterprise which largely determines content and sequence, along with the length of time provided to complete the learning program.

Flexible learning or flexible delivery?

Cunningham *et al* (1997, 23) addressed the distinctions between open learning, flexible learning and flexible delivery. They suggest that open learning '...is an organisational approach which permits students, irrespective of previous credentials, to enrol in programs of study characterised by an element of student choice in relation to time, place and pace of study, and ideally in relation to mode of learning'. Flexible learning, Cunningham *et al* suggest, implies the same concept as open learning '...of student choice of modes of learning within a context of conventional requirements for prior credentials, and with a higher emphasis on the use of multimedia and communications technologies. They distinguish flexible learning from flexible delivery by suggesting the former represents a focus on student learning and student choice, while the latter is an administrative term representing a focus on the modes in which content can be distributed to relieve the time, place, and space constraints of on campus education. However, the Cunningham *et al* distinction between the terms open learning and flexible learning fail to capture the idea that flexible learning provides some learner control over content to provide for a more 'customer driven' approach to what is to be learned as well as how, where, and when. That is an important component in the conceptualisation of flexible learning, particularly in its application to the requirements of enterprises. Cunningham *et al* seem to distinguish the terms largely in relation to the mix of delivery methodologies and media.

Peoples, Robinson and Calvert (1997) observed that 'flexible delivery' encompasses two separate developments in VET. First, there is the demand by industry and employers for greater flexibility in the delivery of training and, second, there is demand for a more student centred approach to learning and teaching. Peoples, Robinson and Calvert proposed a different definition for each of flexible delivery and flexible learning:

Flexible delivery is managing and organising vocational education and training programs/courses/modules in ways that meet the needs of clients - industry, enterprises and learners; and,

Flexible learning is planning, developing and facilitating a range of learning strategies that meet the needs of individual learners. Peoples, Robinson and Calvert (1997, p8).

The definition Peoples, Robinson and Calvert use for flexible learning may be better applied to the term flexible teaching. The acts of planning, developing and facilitating are not the acts of a learner, but those of a teacher. It can be argued that flexible learning is the result of flexible teaching, without suggesting that flexible learning can only occur as a result of flexible teaching. Flexible learning may be the result of a self directed study program, problem solving situation, or just the actions taken to satisfy an individual curiosity. Flexible learning may also take place in the context of a very rigid teaching paradigm, where the learner invokes a flexibility not provided for in the instruction. Adoption of the term flexible teaching enables the brief insight that flexible delivery is the application of flexible teaching to a particular teaching task or situation.

Conclusion

In this paper we have examined the origins and development of the terms *flexible delivery* and *flexible learning* in the higher education and in the VET sector. In higher education the terms are more traceable to distance education and the need to be seen to serve changes in government policy that

limited institutional involvement in distance education. In the VET sector, the methodologies of distance education have been acknowledged as part of flexible delivery, but the policies and practices of flexible delivery have developed in response to government policy shifts that have demanded greater client (largely industry and enterprises) control over training content and methods.

The different origins and developments have resulted in a fundamental difference between the two sectors in their conceptualisation of flexible delivery. The fundamental difference is that, central to the VET conceptualisation, is the notion of client control; while in the higher education sector the conceptualisation is more about the delivery of university developed and controlled courses of study to students in such a way that they can study where and when they wish. However, they continue to study within a semesterised framework, and to study content determined by the university, albeit with industry advice.

The difference between the two conceptualisations is fundamental and needs to be understood. It is unlikely that meaningful higher education/VET discourse on flexible delivery can develop without understanding the differences. Peoples, Robinson and Calvert (1997, 6) have made the point that where the concept lacks precision, implementation will be difficult.

Finally, it is one thing to explore and acknowledge the differences between the higher education and the VET sector in their respective understandings of *flexible delivery*, but another thing entirely to contemplate the many conceptualisations that must exist among the enterprises that form the client groups.

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