

# The New Medicis

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## E-Learning Advances in Australia \*

### Context

Australia has a 100-year history in distance learning to develop worker skills across a big country with a small population. Today the rising new economy of China and Australia is placing big demands on traditional schools and technical colleges to provide enough new smart-workers. Enterprises are starting to take over some training functions also. With less workers to support a population growing older, it makes sense to the Australian government and business to invest in eLearning.

From the USA and Australia, recent surveys show that even with MOOCs, and Coursera, the university sector is not graduating enough workers with skills that employers need. However teachers and professors at schools and universities already have high workloads, and some are resistant to developing extra on-line courses as well as traditional face-to-face delivery.

The eLearning solutions that developed from world-leading work in the UK and Australia in the 1990s were a good start, but not standardized. So a student moving from school to work may experience different interfaces, and content delivery methods. This duplication did not help learning efficiency.

### Flexible Learning Framework – a national solution

To overcome this the Australian government has in the last few years developed a **Flexible Learning Framework** for the whole country. It aims to provide national standards to eLearning, and some funds for business and educators to build content and delivery systems that deliver better learning for less money.

We can already see some big steps forward. Teachers are more comfortable with designing their material for eLearning. Student scores and retention are going up as better teaching and assessment methods are shared between providers.

Competing universities use eLearning to attract the best students, in ways that sometimes prevents cooperation between them to modernize and standardise the whole system methodically and provide a seamless education process between school and work, wherever students study.

### **Are Universities Finished?**

Some radical voices suggest that there will be a big change to the number of universities in the Western countries in ten years. The evidence of history does not support this though. We can see a healthy future for both universities and technical education, if they cooperate with employers to help graduates get jobs.

So in Australia, we see most advances in the technical training area for eLearning, with more discussion with employers to find out what they need. Government surveys predict our workforce needs retraining often in their career to cope with increased industry restructuring and movement from low value-add primary production and simple service delivery to higher value-add knowledge creation sectors. In China and Australia the challenge now is to not to convince the world that eLearning is useful. The job is to make eLearning content do its job better.

The Flexible Learning Framework is having special success in doing this through improving delivery methods, combined with much greater reach and speeds through Australia's National Broadband Network (NBN) that is being constructed now, and is currently the largest infrastructure program in the country costing around USD\$45 billion.

To achieve wide success, every student taking an eLearning course needs to see the clear economic benefit for themselves. If only one student complains on social media that their eLearning course is not productive, everyone will know, and that is not helpful. Through careful listening to our students who in some ways are also our employers, we can provide the materials they need.

### **Latest Trends**

Generally the trends from government surveys to inform the Flexible Learning Framework show:

- Students want more individual feedback from teachers to improve scores.
- Students want to use mobile learning for phone so the interface should be fast and simple.
- Students want to develop an "eLearning portfolio" of their results from all education courses, so that employers can see exactly what the student has achieved.
- Employers and students want eLearning systems that are being continuously updated to reflect latest sources, case-studies, and government policies.

What are the eLearning platforms that big Australian universities use?

- The University of Melbourne: MOOCS/Coursera.
- The University of Western Australia (UWA): Stanford's Class2Go software to offer courses.
- University of Southern Queensland (USQ): OERUniversity (virtual consortium).
- Macquarie University: Learning Activity Management Systems already being used in China and Japan.

- The University of New South Wales: Smart Sparrow spin-off, uses Adaptive eLearning Platform in science and medical education.
- University of New England: UNE Open initiative.
- Deakin University: Set to launch a MOOC next month.
- The University of New South Wales (UNSW): Introductory computing course via its OpenLearning platform.

Already around a third of university students do some eLearning in their degrees, especially in the sciences, languages, engineering and business. The statistics vary widely between universities.

Traditional Tier One providers tend to rely on traditional teaching more, but are starting to use eLearning techniques for innovative research.

New Tier-Two universities in regional areas like USQ are better at providing integrated eLearning into standard teaching.

### **Technical Education Leads Modernisation**

Perhaps the most advances happen in technical training for vocational education (VET- Vocational Education and Training).

A 2011 survey by the Australian Government's Flexible Learning Framework found that two thirds of VET students used interactive learning resources on site (at their training provider) as well as offsite (at home, at work, away from training provider's premises)

Around 40% of students have experienced eLearning through the use of web-based seminars/presentations (e.g. Elluminate), virtual classroom environments (e.g. Moodle) or web 2.0 technologies (e.g. blogs, wikis).

Use of other technologies is less common, with a third to a quarter of students using voice (e.g. podcasting, recording) or mobile phones, eportfolios (e.g. Mahara) or social networking (e.g. Facebook, Twitter).

The VET student feedback is improving for eLearning. The impact of eLearning on employment outcomes is at its highest recorded level.

Around sixty per cent of VET students report that their eLearning experience has increased their skills and confidence in using technology.

Fifty-five per cent of students said eLearning helps them to do their current job better. Forty-two per cent said it helped them to get a better job, and sixty-six per cent said that they expected improved employment outcomes in the future as a result of the eLearning in their course.

To help explain these results, the President of The University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Shirley Alexander, says in a 2011 report in The Australian newspaper by John Ross, that:

“One of the major roles of a teacher now is to design learning experiences. You can have e-learning experiences that are engaging and attractive, and students learn a lot from them. And you can have very poor e-learning experiences where [they're] just put in front of an automated face-to-face system – lectures and textbooks on screen, and so on.”

Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) that provide commercial training but are not formal universities, are developing a stronger role under the Flexible Training

Framework. They show willingness to share new Learning Management Systems (LMS) and content delivery platforms cooperatively, and are faster to respond to employer demands for graduate standards.

In some ways, we can say that in eLearning, Australia's biggest advance may be in producing higher quality graduates. This is the first objective. To standardise the eLearning platforms is just the tool to do this.

Smaller eLearning providers and RTOs can be more flexible sometimes than big providers.

### **Small and Medium Advantages**

One company I work with, Reality Learning for example, specialises in working with Chinese hospitals for health training in twenty-four provinces. It uses experience from developing online courses for Australian hospitals and not-for-profits, to build interactive scenarios to create greater learner motivation and more feedback.

The innovation feature is updating real-life feedback into the scenario so it is always fresh – an example of formative evaluation that does not rely simply on quizzes and tutors.

Sydney University is also providing successful eLearning programs for the Guangdong Womens and Childrens Hospital.

Both Reality Learning and Sydney University demonstrate specialised skills in cross-cultural applications, developed from working with people who come from many countries to live in Australia.

To help RTOs and VET education providers use eLearning better, the Flexible Learning Framework recommends the use of a S.M.A.R.T. approach. This makes sense in English better than Chinese, but the main thing is to be precise in writing down the learning outcomes so they can be measured.

### **SMART**

- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Relevant
- Time-framed

#### *Bad example*

*"The hospital team will reduce the waiting time of patients".*  
This is too general, too big and impossible to measure.

#### *Good example*

*"The hospital team will reduce the waiting time of patients in the emergency room at Central Hospital by 15% by 30th June 2013."*

This is precise, and helps managers, content makers and learners know what to do by a certain date.

### **Assessment**

RTOs are also developing better ways to assess eLearning.

This includes three different methods used in each learning package.

- -Diagnostic assessment: immediate feedback to help learner
- -Formative assessment: feedback to help course designer
- -Summative assessment: evidence of learner achievement for employers

In Australia, these approaches and other reforms aim to help the VET sector in Australia:

"to improve teacher quality (including altering the teacher classification structure to recognise the demands placed on VET teachers), guaranteed funding for the duration of the plan at 4% of GDP, construction of a digital education system and improved online teaching resources, and improved accountability for the administration of the education system."

[202.205.177.9/edoas/en/index.jsp](http://202.205.177.9/edoas/en/index.jsp)

This sort of approach is useful to China's National Outline for Medium and Long Term Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020) to build model schools and field training bases - 50 demonstration technician colleges, 200 demonstration senior secondary technical schools, 500 demonstration regular technical schools and 100 demonstration public training bases.

Through shared communication between content makers and clients, there are many ways that the long partnership between China and Australia can help both countries develop prosperous smart economies with better lives for all workers, not just students.

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#### **Useful Links and References**

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