NBN critical for regional vocational education

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What justifies educational technology asks John Mitchell.

The major flexible learning program in Australian VET, the Australian Flexible Learning Program, is being evaluated externally. Perhaps this is the ideal time to develop a new rationale for the use of technology within VET, looking beyond just e-learning and flexible learning.

Recently I interviewed Denise Janek, the institute director of TAFE SA Regional, an organisation that services all of South Australia outside of Adelaide. The full interview will appear in a forthcoming publication titled Innovative Regional Skilling, about how TAFE SA Regional combines technology and innovation to improve student access, participation rates and course completions.

The main question I asked Janek was what drives her organisation’s use of technology? Her responses suggested to me that a broader narrative is required to explain why technology, not just e-learning, is important for vocational education.

Janek comfortably listed six reasons why technology is important, beginning with the first driver, which for her is access, “because we’re delivering to all of regional South Australia and many remote communities as well”. This includes delivering programs at 33 campuses and 11 Aboriginal learning sites.

“As the public provider, we need to provide access for those communities. From our state strategic plan point of view, we would like to increase VET participation. The better access we ... provide, the better participation rate we can achieve. So that’s number one.”

The second reason for using technology - part of improving that access to training - is because “technology enables us to deliver in the workplace, which is another key target for the institute”.

Third, in terms of the institute in general, using technology is a matter of sustainability. “There is no way we can be a sustainable institute in a contestable VET environment if we maintain the cost per hour and footprint that we have at the moment.”

Fourth, she says, technology allows her to reduce her indirect costs.

“The Commonwealth Government’s broadband network rollout - they are talking about regional South Australia before many other areas and we’re really pleased about that - will improve our delivery and improve the access and reliability of our networks.”

Fifth, for her staff technology means: “We can have communities of practice across vast distances. We run most of our professional development programs through either video-conferencing or other technologies.”

Sixth, she doesn’t believe they could manage the institute without technology.

“Our key managers and the executives are spread across the state. I have weekly meetings with my executive by tele-conference or video-conference. We just couldn’t do it if we all had to be together: we need to keep up with each other constantly these days because things change fast.”

“We have to move fast, we have to be strategic and we have to keep monitoring where we’ve reached.”

How are her students responding to delivery via technology?

“Most of our students would prefer to be able to have face-to-face teaching. But using technology means
that existing workers out in the country don’t have to travel for hours at night on country roads, with the risk of hitting kangaroos, to get to class; they can actually participate at a distance for part of their program.

“So we have blended methodologies and that is really important: we don’t just want to deliver through one means. One means is not always right for every person. The more we can give students options and the ability to access learning from wherever, the better. Looking to the future, more learning will be done via the internet and that’s obvious.”

While media commentators are demanding a cost benefit analysis of the national broadband network, Janek has no issue with it: the NBN is vital to her work. “The NBN is critical for us in regional South Australia. At the moment you can be 40km out of Mt Gambier and you can’t have access to broadband.”

For her, technology is an essential, not a luxury.

“With the sort of budget reductions we have we’d be unable to operate without it. It is critical to our sustainability, in other words.”

As a result of this interview and the 12 case studies in the publication, a new conceptual model is proposed for the institute, to guide its continuing innovation in the use of technology. Components of the model include the interdependence of technology and staff, including the capability of staff to embrace change and entrepreneurship.

The evaluators of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework may wish to revalue e-learning within this broader framework that links technology and sustainable VET provision.


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