

Research readings

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Australian *Flexible Learning* Framework

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

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Background

In August 1999, the Australian National Training Authority chief executive officers endorsed the *Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2000–2004*. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework has been developed by the Flexible Learning Advisory Group and represents a strategic plan for the five-year national project allocation for flexible learning. It is designed to support both accelerated take-up of flexible learning modes and to position Australian vocational education and training as a world leader in applying new technologies to vocational education products and services.

An initiative of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2000–2004.

Managed by the Flexible Learning Advisory Group on behalf of the Commonwealth, all states and territories in conjunction with ANTA.



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Learner expectations and experiences

Student views of support in online learning

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This chapter* recognises the importance of provision of services designed to support online students in every aspect of the online experience, including pre-enrolment, teaching and learning and technical support. The respondents in the study indicated that flexibility was their key reason for choosing online study—flexibility of time, place and pace. In terms of the support they considered necessary to accomplish online study successfully, students are looking for information to assist them enrol in the program, including information about the institution, reliable and ongoing support from teachers and co-ordinators, and quick responses from staff for their queries.

Introduction

THE INTEGRATION OF information technology into vocational education and training (VET) programs has dramatically enhanced its flexible delivery by expanding and modernising the information technology capabilities to include those related to online learning. In doing so, learning services have been extended to meet the needs of a more diverse client group, producing a rapid growth in online innovations. However, the research into the support expected by students has been limited. Due to this, our study was commissioned to explore the expectations and experiences of online students in the VET sector. The findings of this study are the subject of this chapter.

The need for supporting students has been highlighted by a number of authors including Brookfield (1984), Candy (1991), Mitchell and Bluer (1997), Warner, Christie and Choy (1998), van Stavaren, Beverley and Bloch (1999) and McNickle (1999). The need for intervention strategies and support for students

* A summary of the report, *Learner expectations and experiences: An examination of student views of support in online learning* (Choy, McNickle & Clayton 2002).

have also been emphasised in studies investigating non-completions in VET programs (for example, Baron, Thiele & Hintz 1995; James 1998; McNickle 1999; Misko 1999). Research on the quality of online learning has been undertaken in the past; however, much of this has been inconclusive. To this effect, how the use of technology enhances learning also remains unclear (Phipps & Merisotis 1999).

The aims of the study were to:

- ❖ explore the theoretical frameworks/models underpinning student support and intervention strategies in online learning
- ❖ examine the current assumptions and practices in the delivery of online VET programs
- ❖ investigate student expectations and experiences of current practices at various stages in their programs of study
- ❖ develop guidelines for online support for both practitioners and students.

This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Separate surveys with students and online course co-ordinators and teachers provided quantitative data. Interviews with students, course co-ordinators and teachers, and case studies provided qualitative data. The purpose of the interviews was to expand on critical services expected by online students, the most beneficial services, best examples of current services and those most in need for improvement. A review of websites and other databases of online providers was conducted and the literature was reviewed.

Profile of the students sampled

Two hundred and one responses to the survey were received from students who represented 23 private and public institutions across New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and South Australia.

The great majority of respondents were aged over 26 years, with 43% aged between 26 and 40 years while a further 40% were aged over 40 years. The remainder was aged between 21 and 25 years (12%), or below 20 years of age (5%). The sample was predominantly female (68% female, 32% male).

The majority of respondents (73%) did not belong to any of the targeted access and equity groups. Of the total sample, 2% were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, 6% were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background while 19% were from rural or regionally isolated areas.

A majority of online students (64%) intend to complete the whole course using the online mode. About 17% of the sample expects to complete some modules/subjects online and the rest by other modes. Nineteen per cent of students were undecided about future online learning.

A large proportion of students (94%) were employed while studying online. Of these, 13% were in part-time employment while 87% held full-time jobs.

What they studied online

Online students who participated in this study were studying at a range of courses at certificate and diploma levels. Most (48%) of the sample undertaking online courses were studying for a certificate III qualification. Approximately 26% were pursuing a certificate IV course while 14% were completing courses for a certificate I or II (7% each), and 5% were undertaking studies for a diploma, with 7% undertaking advanced diploma qualifications.

Among those pursuing studies through the online mode, about 65% said they were completing their first module at the time of the survey. Approximately 31% had already completed between one and five modules through the online mode and 4% had completed over five modules using this medium. While 12% of the sample had been doing online courses for less than six months (indicating they were beginners), a majority (83%) said they had been studying online courses for 6 to 12 months. Only 5% said they had been studying online courses for more than 12 months. The most experienced online student had been studying for 3.5 years through the online mode.

Where they studied online

The responses showed that 42% of students completed all of their online learning from home. About 22% said all of their online learning took place at work. About 17% completed their learning mostly at home with the remainder at work, while 16% said they completed most of their online learning at work and the rest at home. Only 2% of the sample said they completed their online learning at the computer centre of their institute and 1% indicated their learning took place at a friend's house because they did not own a computer.

Why they studied online

The students were asked to state their reasons for undertaking online courses. The statements provided by the sample were grouped under three main broad reasons: flexibility, change and lack of choice.

Of the total sample, 68% undertook online learning because of flexibility in terms of pace, time and place. Some examples of statements were:

Freedom—I can work at my own pace.

No time constraints, can work whenever I have time.

Due to geographical constraint. I live in the [sic] rural area.

About 12% said they enrolled in online courses to experience a change from traditional delivery systems.

Just wanted a change.

I have an interest in the internet systems.

I enrolled in a pilot course and wanted to test out the online system.

About 20% of the sample said they did not have a choice in the course they were studying online because it was offered only through this mode. Among them, a few commented that their employer requested they complete this course online to participate in a pilot study.

Overall, the results show that the flexibility in time, place and pace are the key reasons why students enrol in online courses.

Student support: What it is and where it is needed

Students learning online require similar support to those studying by more traditional means (Carroll & McNickle 2000). These services are provided to enable students to access learning support and other assistance to maximise their chances of successful completion. Traditionally such support is seen in terms of that required prior to enrolment and during the teaching and learning process. However, in online and flexible approaches, learners also need a measure of technical support.

In the context of online learning:

- ❖ Pre-enrolment support includes career advice/counselling, course advice, course information, information on enrolment procedures and payment of fees.
- ❖ Teaching and learning support includes induction and orientation to the course and to online learning, communication strategies (including processes to keep students in touch with each other and with staff), access to study and research skills (time management, learning-to-learn skills/independent learning skills), information literacy, and using the web to access information, general learning support, and providing access to learning resources (for example, the institution's library).
- ❖ Technical support relates to the information technology support that provides students with a range of options to access assistance, including phone, fax, email, frequently asked questions and helpdesk. It includes providing hardware and software support for students as well as ensuring that the systems function well, are easy to use and are reliable.

Support prior to enrolment: What it involves

Services and support for pre-enrolment/enrolment are crucial for online learning. Students have highlighted this area as being the primary concern for providers, together with learning and teaching and technical assistance.

Enrolment requires user-friendly procedures and simple steps to enable students to enrol without problems. Therefore, pre-enrolment support needs to be accessible. One interviewee demonstrated the importance of this:

I am very disappointed in the lack of support I have been getting from the start. The course was supposed to start in July and I am still waiting for some learning material ... please tell me where to go to get started on this course.

The five services with the highest expectations for pre-enrolment/enrolment were:

- ❖ detailed information about what is required to complete the module/course
- ❖ detailed information about the courses
- ❖ security of personal details on the institute's database
- ❖ instructions on whom to approach for help
- ❖ information on how to enrol.

Other highly regarded services included:

- ❖ instructions on how to seek help
- ❖ the software and hardware requirements needed to do the course/module
- ❖ recommended library resources to support learning.

Findings indicated that there was no significant difference in responses by age. However, there was a significant difference in responses to four items by gender. Females had a higher mean than males for:

- ❖ detailed information about what is required to complete the module/course
- ❖ enrolment via the internet
- ❖ security of personal details on the institute's database.

There was a significant difference between the means of females and males for the option *to complete RPL [recognition of prior learning] via the internet*.

There was also a significant difference in responses by online students who were employed and those who were not in paid employment. In the latter case, however, the sample is quite small.

Those who were not employed were more concerned about the cost of completing modules or courses, the software and hardware requirements

needed to do the course/module, the security of their personal details on the institute's database and their access to their institute's student services. Those in part-time employment had higher expectations for the software and hardware requirements needed, detailed information about what is required to complete the module/course and an assessment of their readiness for online learning. Thus employment status (intuitively at least) and gender issues are likely to affect the nature of the online program offered, particularly in relation to information needs, security of personal information, the costs and the technologies needed.

Support during study: What it involves

Learning and teaching are the backbones of what constitutes online delivery. The major theme amongst the responses to the interview questions focussed on the importance of total support through the entire learning and teaching process. This should be provided in numerous forms and be continuously accessible, and without presenting any difficulties.

Student support is important, so that students studying online have the same support and facilities as 'on- and off-campus' students. Initially, the online student group was seen as not requiring the same support as undergraduate or VET students because they were assumed to be more mature, more independent and more self-sufficient. This is true to some degree, as the majority of online students in this study at least do seem to possess these characteristics. However, these assumptions ignore that a student is learning and therefore requires help like any other student.

In relation to teaching and learning support needs, the services that were most highly regarded were:

- ❖ clear statements of what I [the learner] was expected to learn
- ❖ helpful feedback from teachers
- ❖ requirements for assessment
- ❖ communication with teachers using a variety of ways, for example, email, online chat, face to face
- ❖ timely feedback from teachers.

Other highly regarded services included:

- ❖ course outline and learning outcomes
- ❖ due dates for the different tasks
- ❖ the return time for assignments
- ❖ strategies for approaching assessment tasks
- ❖ the way feedback is to be provided to me.

There was no significant difference in the responses to the items by the different age groups, indicating services for learning and teaching; however, some significant differences were noted, with females having a higher mean than males, particularly in relation to the ways in which communication and feedback are provided. There was a significant difference in the expectations (for this service) by online students who were employed and those not in employment. The unemployed online students had a slightly higher mean, or level of expectation, than employed students.

Technical support: What it involves

All students of online education have experienced technical difficulties. Whether it was infrequent login access, slow-moving technology, or expensive hardware, technical difficulties were experienced regularly.

Technical support expectations focussed on prompt technical service, as were the results indicated by the interview sample.

The most expected services for technical support were:

- ❖ quick response to technical problems
- ❖ easy access to technical assistance
- ❖ provision of technical (information technology) assistance throughout the course
- ❖ strategies for checking the accuracy/quality of information on the internet
- ❖ access to frequently asked questions and responses relating to technical issues.

There was no significant difference in the mean responses for the technical support services by age, gender or employed status.

Support: What learners say they want

Essentially students are looking for:

- ❖ information to help them succeed in the program
- ❖ regional support contact with teachers and tutors
- ❖ quick responses from staff to their queries.

Box 1 shows the top ten services expected by online students drawn from across the three major areas of student support studied.

On the whole, female students had higher expectations of support services than males at pre-enrolment and during the teaching and learning process.

In addition, students who were unemployed generally had greater expectations in relation to such issues as the costs, hardware and software

requirements, access to student services and security of personal details than students who were in employment.

Box 1: The top ten online student services

- 1 Detailed information about what is required to complete the module/course
- 2 Detailed information about the courses
- 3 Security of personal details on the institute's database
- 4 Clear statements of what they are expected to learn
- 5 Helpful feedback from teachers
- 6 Requirements for assessment
- 7 Communication with teachers using a variety of ways, for example, email, online chat, face to face
- 8 Timely feedback from teachers with agreed response times being met
- 9 Instructions on whom to approach for help
- 10 Information on how to enrol

Those employed part time were more concerned about hardware and software requirements, requirements to complete the module/course and assessment of their readiness for online approaches than their colleagues who were fully employed.

However, there were no differences in mean responses related to expectations of technical services on the basis of age, gender or employment status. Finally, there were no significant differences on the basis of age in relation to expectations for either pre-enrolment or teaching and learning support services.

Interviewees were asked to state the most essential services for the completion of their online learning programs. There were three key services that online students perceived as essential. These are listed in order from most discussed to least.

Detailed information on students

Students believed information was important, and the more of it the better. They needed information about courses and how to enrol prior to enrolment, and detailed information to help them to complete the course or module in which they were enrolled. This also included clear information about what they were expected to learn and the requirement for assessment. The security of their own information and personal details were also important to them. Therefore staff need to be very clear, and make it clear to learners, what information concerning them (assessment feedback etc.) will be public and what will remain confidential.

Finally, the learners needed information about who to approach for help and how and when they could be approached. This support and contact is particularly important to learners. It is also important that it is both quick and timely.

Regular contact with the teachers/tutors

Students believed that it was most essential to have regular contact with teachers and tutors as well as with other students. Many said they were able to contact teachers/tutors and peers mainly through emails. The following statements are examples of responses from the interviewees. Two students reported that they required:

Teachers who are present on a regular and continuing basis through email contact.

Personal and frequent contact with course supervisor/tutor.

Another student commented that:

Emails were not always answered and when they were took days to weeks to get a reply. When you are doing a course online you need to be able to have access to a tutor pretty much on the spot if you have any questions etc.

A few students were able to make regular contact by telephone. Others said they would have liked more contact by telephone.

Online students believed that regular support for learning was also essential. Teachers were expected to provide advice, directions and feedback on a regular basis. Online students expected teachers to provide new information or resources such as web pages, references and networks to support online learning.

Other elements of services that were suggested as essential included access to peers (through email, phone and online chats), accurate record-keeping by teachers, and clear navigation for self-help. A range of communication strategies is available to students to communicate with teachers but not peers. One student suggested that teachers should initiate the establishment of chat rooms and facilitate scheduled discussions on a regular basis:

Design chat rooms for the students to support each other and for the teacher to organise regular chats with his/her students.

One student suggested the establishment of noticeboards:

Forums/noticeboards are useful for asynchronous discussions—so that I can participate even though I'm not available at the right times.

These elements of good practice and support reinforce the key features of a high-quality online learning experience.

Quick responses from teachers/tutors

Some interviewees expressed disappointment with late or slow responses from their teachers/tutors, particularly when they perceive technology as being able

to enhance the return rate and timeframes. The statement from one interviewee represents similar experiences by others.

Having access to course teacher/tutors is essential; in my experience it has taken me two or three days to get an answer for my questions and I have forgotten or lost interest by this stage.

Quick responses from teachers are essential to maintain momentum with study. Long delays with responses and marking of assignments by teachers hinder and handicap study and course completion.

One student suggested:

Feedback between students/teachers to be no longer than two days—frustration and lack of enthusiasm seeps in after that.

It appears that online students recognise the capacity and ability of online technology to provide quick responses and are expecting teachers/tutors to operate quickly.

Student support: What needs to be improved?

When asked which areas of online services were most in need of improvement, comments from students focussed mostly on facilitation by teachers and technical systems.

Facilitation

The interviewees identified several shortcomings in teachers and their practices which required improvement. The most frequent among their comments related to the delay in response from teachers. They suggested that teachers should mark assignments quickly and provide feedback to students within a reasonable timeframe (two days was suggested by one student). Many added that teachers should inform their students if they plan to take a vacation. One interviewee suggested that teachers should not be changed during the period of the course and wrote:

Treat like face-to-face course and not rotate teachers and confuse students.

It was also suggested that teachers give a clearer explanation of what is expected of online students.

One interviewee highlighted the importance of writing the content specifically for online delivery:

Writer—very important that writers write to the appropriate audience. They need to realise that writing to online students is different to writing for a class that will be face to face and things can be explained.

Two comments from the interview participants indicated that students did not think their teachers/tutors were trained well for online delivery.

Staff induction to online learning. They don't seem very well trained.

Tutors don't know what they are doing. Do the tutors know exactly what is expected of themselves?

Technical systems

A common problem encountered by many students related to attempts to refer to content materials when completing assessments. The following statements illustrate this problem and highlight an area which needs improvement:

When you are doing your assessments, it is handy to look back over the section you studied ... Not to get the answers, but to make sure you have included what you intended. I found I had to hit the back button more often than not and lost track of where I was going. There was a lot of switching between areas that I found time-wasting.

Some online students suggested improvement to the log-in access.

Improve log-in access—how can a student contemplate doing the courses in lunch breaks etc. if it can take an hour to log in.

Comments from online student illustrate their extensive level of knowledge and understanding about interactive online materials. They have explored other materials on the world wide web and experienced the capacities for interactivensess, hence expect similar attributes in their learning materials.

Student support: What the teachers think

Due to the limited response from the teacher/co-ordinator group (N = 12), the results can only be deemed an 'indicator' of the group perspective.

The teachers/co-ordinators were asked to list three support services for online learning that they considered to be most useful to students. They were asked to also list their perceptions of why this was so. The responses were as follows:

- ❖ high-quality information technology helpdesk or call centre: students need prompt resolution of difficulties or they lose confidence in the validity of the online learning experience. A forum or bulletin board is also needed for frequently asked questions
- ❖ easy/convenient access to other learning resources and links (books, software and hardware) that complement the online program: not all resources can be provided online in a convenient and easy-to-use format. There is still a need for print/paper resources and hardware
- ❖ prompt (timely) communication to resolve issues arising from the online program including feedback on assignments, responding to questions, re-assessments and general and specialist concerns: this could be accomplished by email, phone or by other means. Delays in this area are especially significant online, where students should be (need to be) in

control of their rate of progress. Continuing without essential correction of misinterpretations, misinformation, incorrect assumptions and perceptions can lead to having to 'undo incorrect learning', which places a high demand on time for everyone. This includes tutorial support in relation to content and learning activities that students undertake

- ❖ face-to-face or online induction: there needs to be some kind of intensive induction program that includes a range of the staff involved in supporting learners, such as the content person, the lecturer, the resource developer and information technology support staff.

What support services do students access most?

According to the teachers/co-ordinators the five services that were accessed most frequently by students, included:

- ❖ *support*: diverse offline flexible learning mechanisms in support of the online program with facilitators being available 12 hours per day (0900–2100)
- ❖ *access to variety of communication tools*: phone/email contact to be made available as part of the support mechanism and tutors to be in frequent contact with most students
- ❖ *resources*: external access to simulators and specialist resources including links to state networks using WebCT (a learning management system) and lending services for learning resources
- ❖ *helpdesk for general assistance*
- ❖ *induction processes*: this needs to include improving students' literacy skills in general, and information technology literacy in particular, prior to beginning the online course and self-assessment on readiness for using the mode, the particular learning system and software.

What needs improving?

The teachers/co-ordinators believe that services to students are limited in the following areas:

- ❖ information technology and internet services
- ❖ pre-enrolment services, including pre-enrolment counselling
- ❖ readiness and suitability assessment
- ❖ administrative services, including the ability to make changes to personal details through access by password, the option to complete recognition of prior learning processes via the internet
- ❖ requirements for assessment and quick, easy responses to technical assistance.

Table 1: Guidelines for online support and intervention strategies

Area	Student expectations	Guidelines for support and strategies for intervention
Pre-enrolment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ information on what is required to complete the course ❖ information about the course ❖ security of personal details ❖ who to approach for help ❖ information on how to enrol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ comprehensive accessible information available on enrolment, course content, the institution, and career options ❖ information to be presented clearly and easy to navigate ❖ information to be made available in a range of modes ❖ constant and ready access to the course ❖ contact persons to be available for clarification of enrolment and course queries by email/phone/face to face ❖ an enrolling online webmaster to assist ❖ information on who to ask for help and how to seek help ❖ information on costs, what is required to complete the course, enrolment and security of personal details ❖ an enrolling online webmaster to assist or contacts to be available in a range of modes to provide guidance and assistance ❖ course information to be presented clearly and accurately with access to course advisor
	<i>Strategies for intervention</i>	
Teaching/learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ clear instructions on what they are expected to learn ❖ helpful feedback from teachers ❖ requirements for assessment ❖ communication with teachers using a variety of media ❖ timely feedback from teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ comprehensive induction/orientation programs ❖ induction/orientation skills to include study skills, self-awareness of learning styles etc. and application of the study skills for these styles ❖ induction/orientation to be available in a variety of modes ❖ clear statements of what students are to learn in the course ❖ students to be allocated a mentor/contact for the duration of the course ❖ resources built into the learning material and also available in hard copy ❖ learning materials to be presented clearly and comprehensively ❖ references to other resources and learning materials within learning materials ❖ information to be presented in manageable amounts ❖ online exams and resource/course material mode available ❖ timely and helpful feedback from teachers

Area	Student expectations	Guidelines for support and strategies for intervention
Teaching/learning cont.	<i>Strategies for intervention</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ consistency—same tutor, same contact details, consistent access ❖ notice boards, frequently asked questions boards, chat rooms ❖ reliability—of material, teachers ❖ communication with teachers using a variety of ways e.g. email, online chat, face to face ❖ requirements for assessment to be clearly presented ❖ provision of communication with teachers and other students ❖ opportunities to practise skills ❖ provision of bulletin boards, telephone, fax and assessment strategies ❖ strategies for working in groups and independently ❖ comprehensive induction/orientation program ❖ comprehensive resources and learning materials and information ❖ allocation of a mentor ❖ teachers/mentors easily accessed ❖ frequent communication between students and teachers especially in the early stages
Technical support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ quick response to technical problems ❖ easy access to technical assistance ❖ provision of technical assistance throughout course ❖ strategies for checking accuracy/quality of information on the internet ❖ access to frequently asked questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ provision of technical (information technology) assistance throughout the course to be available in a number of forms i.e. telephone, fax and email ❖ helpdesk ❖ response times to be stipulated for addressing technical problems ❖ easy access to technical assistance ❖ strategies for checking the accuracy/quality of information on the internet ❖ access to frequently asked questions ❖ tips on downloading information, participating in discussion groups and a technical glossary ❖ guide to using email ❖ provision of net etiquette and referencing ❖ students to participate in an induction/orientation program that has an introductory information technology and internet component ❖ provision of technical (information technology) assistance throughout the course to be available in a number of forms i.e. telephone, fax and email and 24 hours a day, seven days a week
	<i>Strategies for intervention</i>	

The good practice guide

As a result of the student feedback, the teacher/co-ordinator feedback and the literature search undertaken, the guidelines in table 1 have been developed. It is with some hesitation that this information is included due to the embryonic stage of online learning and the limited feedback that has been gained from online students for the study. These guidelines could be considered as minimum requirements for online support; however, those students who are less computer-literate or categorised within a disadvantaged group would possibly require additional services, for example extra academic or technical support.

Summary and conclusions

For online delivery to attain its main purpose of creating flexibility and enhancing access to learning, it is essential that providers supply the same services to support online students that are provided to traditional classroom students.

The diversity of information technology ensures an excellent tool for enhancing flexibility and delivery forums and also has the potential to cater for the needs of diverse groups of students. Accordingly, providers are using online systems in combination with other modes to meet these client needs. However, the precise nature of services offered by each provider to online students is rarely shared for reasons which mainly relate to commercial-in-confidence considerations. No minimum requirements or standards for student support seem to exist for providers for use in online delivery. What each provider has or is able to offer to support students depends on a number of factors, including staff expertise with technology, finances, types and number of students and whether the infrastructure is student-centred as opposed to the more traditional teacher-centred.

The stakeholders involved in this study have strongly reinforced the necessity for a range of support strategies which need to start from the time the student enrolls and which need to be made available for the duration of the learning cycle. What is also clear is that the support solutions need to be characterised by a more whole-of-organisation rather than a piecemeal approach.

The transition from traditional classroom to online learning has the potential to be an anxiety-inducing experience and for this reason many students fall by the wayside. However, this experience can be minimised by adequately supporting students, especially in the initial stages. Feedback from students, teachers and research indicates that students need to be well informed of the requirements of them as students, of the course requirements and of the assessment requirements. The content needs to be presented so that it is easily understood. It should be consistently presented and sufficiently detailed to

enable them to become self-directed students. Students need to have ready access to and efficient responses from information technology and academic support to alleviate frustration and to assist with time management.

Student responses indicated the need for information on course and module requirements and regular communication with teachers and tutors as the underpinning requirements for successful completion of online learning. The research found that there is a lack of opportunity for students to complete all the necessary administrative procedures online.

However, the co-ordinator/teacher feedback indicated that the participating institutions are providing online students with adequate information on the course material and administrative procedures, with the exception of enrolling online and paying online.

Respondent teachers/tutors also highlighted a deficiency in the provision of self-awareness of the students' dispositional skills and suitability, an area that is gaining greater importance and also one becoming more aligned to completion rates and success in flexible learning.

Providers have taken into account the benefits of the ongoing provision of information to support their online study and have offered students opportunities for communication, utilising a range of modes to facilitate interaction/communication between teacher and students.

Teacher/co-ordinator responses highlighted the need for self-assessment to be completed prior to enrolment along with the assessment of key competencies. One comment received by teachers confirmed this: 'We propose to recommend that our online students become computer and web literate before they undertake an online course'. These respondents also noted that students could be given tips on how to keep motivated (for example, provision of social space).

Other results of the study indicated that the key issues for registered training organisations to consider, include:

- ❖ specific professional development for teachers/tutors who are involved in online delivery
- ❖ allocation of dedicated staff to support online students so that they are able to provide rapid response to enquiries
- ❖ establishment of guidelines and directions for online students and teachers/tutors
- ❖ establishment of the roles and responsibilities of students as well as teachers/tutors.

One key issue for national governing bodies, such as the Australian National Training Authority, is the establishment of minimum standards for online delivery to ensure any specific groups of online VET students are not disadvantaged.

The stakeholders involved in this study have also emphatically expressed the necessity of provision of good communication between teachers and students, timely and informative feedback from teachers in response to issues, and timely responses to their information technology issues.

Students need to participate in a comprehensive induction/orientation program which will address many of the issues they are likely to encounter in the early stages of their course. Many assumptions have been made about the skills students possess, especially information technology skills and literacy skills, and their access to resources and to information technology. The literature focussing on online support indicates that there is a general consensus that students need to be supported with access to the same services as traditional/classroom-based students. This support needs to start from the time the student enquires about the course, and while this support requirement usually declines over the duration of the course, it needs to be available throughout the entire learning experience.

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