Flexible learning at Victoria University TAFE

A report on the support needs of students using flexible learning options

School of Further Education, Arts and Employment Services
Victoria University TAFE Division
2004
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Executive summary

Vocational education and training (VET) in Australia is increasingly flexible and increasingly online—Victoria University TAFE’s educational provision reflects this trend. As the trend continues, support needs of students using flexible learning options and questions on its effectiveness need to be addressed.

Flexible learning is increasingly likely to mean that learners have less contact with teachers and other learners, and there is evidence that without such contact, learners are more likely to withdraw from study or, if they persist, to achieve lower marks. In light of this, the role of learner support systems becomes particularly significant.

This study particularly examines learner support needs in flexible learning—in this particular context, ‘learner support’ is taken to mean all aspects of the learning process that help learners to persist with, and achieve success in, their studies. This includes those things traditionally associated with learner support such as study skills and administrative support, but also incorporates communicative strategies and materials design.

Purpose of the study

The key purpose of this study was to explore the issue of learner support needs for flexible learning in the particular VET context of Victoria University TAFE. To achieve this, the project sought VU TAFE students’ and teachers’ perceptions of student needs and performance in VU TAFE flexible learning modes.

Methodology

Surveys were made available online and in print to students and teachers. It was advertised to staff via global unimail and to students via targeted email to students identified by VU Enrolment Management Branch as enrolled in courses by ‘flexible delivery’. Nominated flexible delivery teachers were also interviewed to provide follow up information and comments.

Key findings and possible strategies

Respondents were generally satisfied with the delivery of flexible learning options within VU TAFE. However, a number of issues requiring further analysis could be inferred from the survey findings. Some of the more obvious are presented below.

Communication

A need to develop communication strategies in off-campus/online learning mode—this could include:

- developing/extending professional development in communication strategies to establish more effective social support in learning groups
- establishing guidelines for managing online communication

Learning materials

Possible strategies needed to improve learning materials include:

- reviewing existing materials for pedagogy/instructional design
• ensuring development takes account of accessibility issues
• building regular maintenance into the materials development cycle
• building in interactive tasks
• providing opportunities for teachers and instructional designers to work collaboratively to develop high quality flexible learning materials.

Technical (and admin) support

Technical and administrative support was generally considered to be acceptable.

Comments were largely to do with the need for more technical resources—a more detailed review of current technical access issues might be required.

Orientation/Study skills support

Students want it and teachers see it as necessary. Possible strategies include:

• making induction to the demands of flexible learning compulsory
• making assessment of learner readiness compulsory
• developing workshops/units to introduce skills (computer, time/stress management, etc.), and expectations—it could be possible to offer some credit for completion of the workshop/unit
• building in tasks to the general course program that require learning the technology
• developing Concurrent Assistance’s role—incorporate/extend online support function
• scheduling in face-to-face and/or online study days.

Statistical records

There was difficulty tracking and getting a quantitative/objective measure of VU performance in flexible learning.

It could be useful to monitor, track and keep a record of students’ performance in flexible learning mode to provide a quantitative and objective measure of flexible learning at VU TAFE.
1 Introduction

1.1 The context

Victoria University TAFE division has been actively involved in the implementation of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework by participating in a number of national and state projects aimed at promoting flexible teaching and learning. During 2002-03 it undertook a project to develop a framework for marginalised learners using flexible learning to study at Victoria University. The project produced a three year change-management plan and identified key projects with the aim of developing support resources and strategies for marginalised learners at Victoria University.

The current research project has been funded as one of the key projects resulting from this three-year change-management plan being implemented by VU Flexible Learning Action Plan Implementation Group with funding under the Australian Flexible Learning Framework.

This research project aims to explore and identify particular support strategies needed to optimise success in flexible learning. The project sought to gain information from both on-campus and off-campus courses that used flexible learning but may or may not be using online learning to support flexible learning.

The need for this research emerges as a consequence of initiatives undertaken nationally in the VET sector and within Victoria University to promote and implement flexible learning approaches as a part of learning and teaching strategy. The OTTE sponsored TAFE Virtual Campus, an online learning and content development platform developed at a cost of more than one million dollars provides more than 1000 TAFE modules to Victorian VET providers. Although nearly 100 training providers are using TAFE VC, Victoria University has a relatively limited use of TAFE VC with only 48 active modules.

In recent past a number of significant professional development initiatives for enhancing ICT skills of VET teachers are expected to result in more VET teachers using flexible online learning. Both Learnscope and Laptop for TAFE teachers initiatives have been widely reported to be successful in building ICT skills of Victoria University TAFE teachers. Learnscope projects have enabled teachers to produce a number of online to support flexible learning within selected programs. At the same time anecdotal evidence is also emerging that many of these initiatives have not resulted in sustained use of flexible and online learning. It is therefore important to find out what support strategies are necessary to promote sustained and successful use of flexible and online learning.

As noted in Flexible Learning at Victoria University policy outline flexible learning is not synonymous with online learning but the policy points out that the increased use of technology is an obvious way of increasing the flexibility of learning and teaching. The policy also identified three modes of online learning – supplementary mode, mixed mode and fully online mode to support uptake of flexible learning at Victoria University and set a target that at least 50% of all TAFE courses or modules will be delivered in supplementary mode by the end of year 2003. It is now evident that the actual uptake of flexible learning in online mode has not been as projected and a total of only 54 TAFE modules were available in an online mode (as reported by Learning Needs and Flexible Learning Task Force, 2003).

The project includes an exploration of recent literature to identify best practice in flexible learning support, a survey of student and staff perceptions of students experience of flexible learning and their support needs, and where problems are identified, recommendations for strategies to support learners who experience difficulties in flexible learning mode.
1.2 Definitions

1.2.1 Flexible learning

In various definitions proposed for flexible learning in recent literature we found it difficult to make a clear distinction between flexible learning and online learning. The term flexible learning is referred broadly to mean increased learner choice in content, sequence, method, time and place of learning. In addition it is also associated with increased flexibility in administrative and course management processes. However it is interesting to note that most literature refers to online learning as only a form of flexible learning, but there is a clear emphasis on the use of online technologies to achieve flexible learning goals. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework, while defining flexible learning as an approach rather than a system or technique, notes that flexible learning makes use of the delivery methods most useful for the clients - especially e-learning.

In our research project we have acknowledged this apparent paradox in definitions and have accepted the notion of online learning as a dominant theme for flexible learning. Our conception of flexible learning is based on the understanding that online learning and online technologies play a key role in flexible learning provision, but traditional print based distance education and other non-online flexible learning modes are equally valid and prevalent forms of flexible learning.

The general definition of Flexible learning we have used is taken from the VU Flexible Learning Policy—i.e. learning that ‘provides learners with greater flexibility in their preparation for tertiary study, teaching and learning approaches’ and that increases ‘learner choice in content, sequence, method, time and place of learning’. This is ‘often associated with the increased use of communication and information technologies but do not depend on technology and are unlikely to rely on online learning exclusively.’

The survey used three key ‘modes’ of online learning as representative forms of flexible learning but applied them more broadly to include traditional off campus and distance modes:

- **supplementary mode**—mainly face-to-face with optional flexible component
- **mixed mode**—integrated face-to-face and flexible components
- **fully online/off-campus mode**—distance learning using totally online and/or print-based distance learning components with no face to face contact with learners

More specifically, we were particularly interested in examining student experience of online/off-campus education modes—i.e. where students are physically distanced from teachers and other students—which most commonly includes posted, print-based materials and/or online mode. While the idea of flexible learning used within the VU Flexible Learning Policy incorporates a broad range of possible experiences and structures, our initial readings indicated that it is the notion of ‘distance’ that seems to be the most significant factor in student success, or otherwise, in flexible study mode.

1.2.2 Learning support

The survey was generally limited to post enrolment support—i.e. support after being accepted and enrolled in a course. However, where comments were offered about pre-course administration procedures, these are discussed.

1.2.3 Marginalised learner
The VU Flexible Learning Implementation group’s focus on the potential marginalisation of all flexible learning students led to a focus on what makes for successful learning in general rather than to an examination of the performance of those equity groups traditionally identified as marginalised.

1.3 Limitations of the Study

The modest budget for the survey limited the time and extent of the survey. Data collection and interviews for the project were conducted between September–December 2003. The survey was targeted at only those students enrolled in recognised flexible learning modules. It is also important to note that students who may have dropped out from Victoria University (this may be due to any number of reasons) were not able to access and participate in this survey. There were 22 student and 29 staff responses with a further six staff interviews.
2 Readings

As previously mentioned, the study considered what makes for successful flexible learning—or more specifically, what support do learners need for successful flexible learning. This included looking at established benchmarks and then, in the context of those benchmarks, considering the learning, teaching and administrative practices at VU TAFE and how current practices provide a successful learning environment for VU TAFE learners.

Benchmarks for online learning might be quantitative—e.g. they might compare learner completion rates or learner assessments with other modes of learning—or they could be qualitative—e.g. they might be based on ‘best design principles’ or learner satisfaction ratings.

In quantitative terms, the readings confirmed that while self-paced, flexible learning can facilitate the development of higher order learning skills (Garrison and Anderson 2003), there is evidence of greater withdrawal and failure rates from flexible learning options (Misko 2000; Grace 2001; Tresman 2002; ANTA 2002).

Grace’s 2001 study, ‘Barriers to learners’ successful completions of VET flexible delivery programs’, identifies reasons commonly provided by students in Australian VET courses for withdrawal:

- lack of readiness for self-directed learning
- difficulties balancing competing time demands
- lack of adequate literacy levels to succeed in resource-based learning (‘literacy’ here might include literacy in a particular field of knowledge)
- inability to understand and deal with assessment requirements
- inadequate motivation
- in some cases, previously negative educational experiences.

Because of such generally noted difficulties, there been considerable research into how students might be supported in flexible education to ameliorate student retention and success rates.

An overview of a number of studies into online learning in the Australian VET sector suggests that there is general agreement about what best practice in online learning includes. Two representative studies (Cashion and Palmieri 2002; Brennan 2003) list commonly accepted measures.

Brennan, and Cashion and Palmieri discuss the critical importance of the teacher’s role in effective flexible learning. Brennan (2003), writing about effective online pedagogy lists a number of skills effective online teachers have: ‘These include technical, facilitation and management skills that need to be combined in particular ways to suit the student, the content and the medium.’ Clearly, good teachers have these skills in any teaching medium and it would be a mistake to think that flexible learning can be any more effective without active teacher input. While online delivery offers learners flexibility and access to engage with course content, ‘there is nothing intrinsic to the medium that encourages the broad range of students to take advantage of these features’ (Brennan 2003) and teacher facilitation can be a key means to achieve this.

Studies have consistently found that learners’ and teachers have quite clear ideas about what makes effective online learning—these might be considered under four key headings:

1. effective communication
2. effective materials
3. effective development of learner skills needed for flexible learning
4. effective technical/administrative support.

These areas are important in any learning mode, but require different practices depending on the particular learning mode. This brief discussion will look at each off these key areas in turn.

2.1 Effective communication

Many studies identify the importance for successful learning of learners having a sense of being connected to a ‘learning community’—i.e. a group which provides learners with a sense of a valued, learning ‘self’ and a sense of purpose and progress in learning. This sense of ‘self’ is generally achieved through having points of view respected and valued by teacher/s and other students—in in-class and out-of-class discussions. Studies have found this in both higher education (e.g. in the work of people such as Garrison and Anderson (2003) and Salmon (2000))—and, more particular to this study, in VET courses (see Jasinski 1998, Guthrie 2001, Cashion and Palmieri 2002 and Grace 2001 for Australian VET studies).

Cashion and Palmieri’s study suggests that this need to be part of a ‘community of peers’ might not be as high a priority for flexible students as for teachers, but effective communication with teachers remains integral to students’ perceptions of quality flexible learning—specifically students want clear, regular communication and prompt responses to their queries and feedback on their submitted work. Lack of such a connection can lead to social isolation and/or a lack of access to teacher and student discussion and feedback.

In successful face-to-face classes, this support is realised through: teacher-student/student-student class discussions; immediate teacher feedback to questions; out of class social chats with other students and teachers. Such immediate, face-to-face interaction has the benefit of including non-verbal cues to add to meaning.

In learning modes more distanced from such face-to-face interaction, alternative means of achieving this sense of connectedness need to be found—Cashion and Palmieri, Salmon and Garrison and Anderson all maintain that the reduction of more informal, interpersonal interactions mean that interaction has to be consciously facilitated by teachers (certainly in the first instance at least) through:

- regular teacher-led communication being built into the course
- having communicative activities built in to the course—including introductory online or workshop activities
- prompt teacher response to student queries/assignments.

2.2 Effective materials

Effective materials design is obviously important in any learning mode to provide learners with a clear understanding of key learning points and a clear sense of direction through the course.

In more face-to-face classes, lack of clarity in resources, while clearly not good practice, can be handled ‘on the spot’ in class. Where such immediate face-to-face feedback is not available, even where regular communication is built into the course, there is a greater focus on stand-alone materials and a consequent need for adherence to sound instructional design principles that provide ‘teacher guidance’ through the text. Oliver (2000 and 2001) provides an overview of these design principles and they are referred to in other readings (see Jasinski 1998 and Cashion and Palmieri 2002). Key materials design principles discussed include the need for:
• clear, explicit purpose, outcomes and timelines
• a clear structure for effective navigation of learning points
• a range of activities that allow for a range of different learning styles (and learning situations—
e.g. solo learner cf. group)
• opportunities to apply the ideas in the course to real life situations/problems.
• regular assessment (informal and/or formal) to provide feedback to learners on their progress

The materials development process needs to include regular maintenance to ensure that errors are
corrected and materials remain current.

2.3 Effective development of learner skills

A number of studies (see Brennan 2000; Cashion and Palmieri 2002; Grace 2001) outline the types
of skills necessary for successful tertiary study. These skills are important in any study mode, but
become particularly important where learners are distanced from immediate, ongoing face-to-face
support.

Study skills identified as particularly important to more flexible education are:
• high levels of independence
• motivation
• persistence
• literacy
• computer skills and experience
• time management.

To optimise the likelihood of learner success, a number of studies (Cashion and Palmieri 2002;
Choy, McNickle and Clayton 2001) hold that there is a need for induction programs to identify and
address any potential difficulties learners might face in distance/online courses and, once enrolled,
there is the need for ongoing study skills support.

2.4 Effective technical and administrative support

This refers to the non-teaching services necessary for students to participate effectively in learning.
Services include such things as making sure resources are available on time and maintaining
smooth enrolment procedures.

In a face-to-face classroom, teacher will provide many resources as necessary. Where resources are
made available in CDs, booklets and/or online, the development of materials needs to be on time
and the delivery systems (e.g. post, internet etc.) need to be reliable and accessible.

When delivery systems malfunction, there is a need for prompt and effective support procedures.
One of the biggest problems for online learners is technology and access through the internet
(Cashion and Palmieri 2002), so any online study requires helpdesks and other support to ensure
that learning is the focus of their online experience—not wrestling with technology and access
issues.
3 Research questions

The key purpose of this study was to explore the issue of learner support needs for flexible learning in the particular VET context of Victoria University TAFE. To achieve this, the project sought VU TAFE students’ and teachers’ perceptions of student needs and performance in VU TAFE flexible learning modes. The study focussed on the following questions:

What are the key support strategies for providing successful experience of flexible learning?

What are teachers’ and students’ perceptions of flexible learning support at Victoria University TAFE?

4 Methodology

4.1 The surveys

Surveys were made available online and in print to students and teachers. It was advertised to staff via global unimail and to students via targeted email to students identified by VU Enrolment Management Branch as enrolled in courses by ‘flexible delivery’. Flyers advertising the survey website were also place around VU TAFE campuses.

The survey consisted of sections A, B and C.

4.1.1 Section A Background information

This section comprised two parts—questions aiming to identify participants’ personal characteristics and questions to ascertain participants’ flexible learning experience.

Personal background

Students were asked to identify their: age, gender, main language spoken at home, level of education completed prior to flexible study at VU TAFE and whether they were you studying full-time or part-time. It was thought that such personal information could have allowed for some analysis of the flexible learning experiences of key equity groups.

As the survey’s focus was on perceptions of student experiences of flexible learning, teachers’ personal backgrounds were not considered as significant as students’ and questions were limited to age and gender.

Experience of flexible learning

To be included in the survey, it was essential that participants had experience of flexible learning modes at VU. Questions sought to establish: which mode of flexible learning participants had most experience of, which VU course and modules they had studied/taught using flexible learning mode, how many of those courses students had successfully completed and which flexible learning system/s had been used.
4.1.2 Section B Key support areas

Section B addressed the four key areas identified in the readings. It comprised five parts:

Section B1 sought participants’ general responses to flexible learning

Section B2 sought participants’ experience of communication within flexible learning

Section B3 sought participants’ opinions on flexible learning materials

Section B4 sought participants’ comments on the technical support available

Section B5 sought participants’ ideas orientation and ongoing study skills support available.

Each section was made up of a varying number of statements which participants were asked to rate according to the scale: ‘strongly disagree’, ‘disagree’, ‘undecided’, ‘agree’, ‘strongly agree’, ‘not applicable’.

As the survey was seeking perceptions of student experience only, the survey wordings differed for students and teachers. Where student survey statements asked participants for their personal experience of flexible learning, teacher survey statements asked for teachers’ perceptions of student experience.

4.1.3 Section C Open-ended questions

Section C also addressed the four key areas identified in the readings. It comprised three parts which each asked an open question to allow participants to comment more fully on any aspect of flexible learning:

Section C1 asked participants what they saw as the advantages of flexible learning.

Section C2 asked what they saw as the disadvantages of flexible learning.

Section C3 asked them to make suggestions for how flexible learning might be improved at VU.

4.2 How the survey was analysed

Raw data from section B were converted to rounded-off percentages and then compared for any apparent significant variation. There were three key comparisons made:

1. a comparison of student perceptions of their flexible learning experience and staff perceptions of student performance

2. a comparison of the perceptions of students selecting ‘off-campus’ as their mode of flexible learning (56%) and students selecting other modes with more face-to-face support (44%).

3. a comparison of the perceptions of teachers selecting ‘off-campus’ as their mode of flexible delivery (38%) and teachers selecting other modes with more face-to-face support (62%).

Responses to Section C open-ended survey questions were cross-referenced to quantitative data where there were indications of significant dissatisfaction with flexible learning.

(Copies of the surveys are attached as appendices.)
4.3 Requested statistics

To try and put the survey in the context of existing statistical knowledge, the following background statistical data was requested from the University Department of Planning:

• the names of VU TAFE modules/subjects having some online component
• the percentage of modules within each of the different modes of online delivery
• a comparison of completion rates for students enrolled in online modules/subjects with those in ‘traditional’ face-to-face classes (where possible, with a breakdown of online modules into various modes)
• a comparison of completion results for students enrolled in online modules/subjects with those in ‘traditional’ face-to-face (where possible, with a breakdown of online modules into various modes)
• (if at all possible) any student evaluations of those modules.

Unfortunately, we were advised that such information was held by neither the University’s Quality & Strategic Support Branch nor the TAFE’s Centre for Curriculum Innovation and Development (CCID). We were advised that such information would only be known at the Department level, but time constraints meant further inquiries at Departmental level were not followed up.

This made it impossible to draw any objective comparisons between student and teacher perceptions as represented in the survey and the actual performance as measured by module completion rates and/or results of students engaged in different learning modes.

The development of such statistical records at TAFE level could make future analysis of flexible learning performance more effective.
5 Findings and discussion

As previously mentioned, there were 22 student and 29 staff responses to the survey. The findings cannot therefore be considered conclusive—although, as discussed later, the findings certainly resonate with those from other studies.

As the focus of the study was to identify perceived shortcomings in the supports in place for VU students studying in flexible learning mode, the following discussion will be concerned with pointing out these perceived shortcomings rather than developing a complete overview of the survey results. Perceived shortcomings will only be pointed out where they are seen to be significant.

Where potentially significant perceived shortcomings are found, they are cross-referenced to more detailed open-ended comments from Section C of the survey. While these comments are not necessarily representative of all respondents’ reasons for dissatisfaction with the particular identified aspect of the flexible learning experience, they might provide a starting point for a more detailed future study.

5.1 Background information

5.1.1 Personal information

The comparable personal information from the survey was that to do with age and gender. Understandably, teaching staff were older than students. However, it is interesting to note that women were more likely than men to respond to the survey—this is particularly marked amongst students with 82% of the respondents being women. It is difficult to say whether this reflects a greater participation in flexible learning modes or simply a greater willingness to respond to surveys.

Throughout the following tables, percentages are rounded off and do not include ‘non-answers’—this results in some percentage totals of less than 100%.

Percentage figures are based on the following number of respondents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study mode</th>
<th>Off campus</th>
<th>Face-to-face*</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>12—55%</td>
<td>10—45%</td>
<td>22—100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>11—38%</td>
<td>18—62%</td>
<td>29—100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*’Face-to-face’ respondents include those studying or teaching in ‘supplementary’ or ‘mixed’ modes—i.e. modes which include face-to-face contact between students and teachers.

Section A—1. Personal information (Students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. Gender?</td>
<td>Female 82%, Male 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Main language at home?</td>
<td>1 Macedonian rest English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Ed pre flex study at VU?</td>
<td>Prim. 0, Sec. 59%, TAFE 27%, Uni 14%, Other 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Full or Part time in flex mode?</td>
<td>FT 32%, PT 64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section A—1. Personal information (Teachers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Age?</td>
<td>17–25 0, 26–35 21%, 36–45 17%, 46–55 45%, &gt;55 17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Gender?</td>
<td>Female 55%, Male 31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

5.1.2 Experiences of flexible learning

This section asked participants for information about their experience of flexible learning. The student survey included questions about which mode of flexible learning they had had most experience of, which VU modules they had studied using flexible learning modes, how many of those modules they had successfully completed and which flexible learning system had been used.

Teachers questions were similar, but questions to students about their individual success were replaced by a general question asking whether or not teachers thought student performance was generally better, worse or no different to traditional face-to-face classes.

A significant finding from this section was that to do with the flexible learning system used.

Section A—2 Experience of flexible learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. Which flexible learning system/s was/were used?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>WebCT Email only Web only Post Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

The largest single selection by both students and teachers was ‘Other’ (45% for each group) which suggests that the categories provided were inadequate to describe current practice. That a number of teachers selected specific systems and then appended other systems, supports this. Many teachers clearly use a range of flexible delivery systems at the same time.

This is supported by teacher comments from the open-ended questions in Section C:

T2 -broaden the definition of flexible delivery to include customised learning paths negotiated with community and/or industry or a combination of this and on-campus delivery - -this survey still suggests that flexible equals on-line

T23 [I] would like VU to recognise On the Job training as flexible and begin to look at some of the systems to aid this...

It is interesting to note that of student respondents, 36% were studying using posted materials. This suggests that a more ‘traditional’ distance education model is still well utilised.

It is also interesting to note different teacher responses to question A2c asking teachers for their perceptions of student completion rates.

Section A—2 Experience of flexible learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>c. Were the student completion rates for flexible modules generally better or worse than for ‘traditional’ face-to-face classes?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>Better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
While most teachers’ perception was that flexible learning mode made no difference to student completion rates, those teaching in ‘off-campus’ mode were more inclined to think that student performance was worse. Indeed, whereas 28% of teachers of other flexible modes thought that student performance was better in flexible mode, no teacher of ‘off-campus’ mode modules selected this.

This is possibly a reflection of the higher withdrawal rates reported for courses without face-to-face support.

5.2 General responses to flexible learning at VU TAFE

This section sought to compare perceptions of student performance and needs in different study modes.

There was general agreement between students and teachers that students need different skills, need to be more organised in flexible learning modes—this was also apparent from comments from section C:

\[ S11 \text{ [my problems were] leaving the work uncompleted for too long—procrastination at home (watching TV etc) } \]

\[ S16 \text{ Sometimes I put [study] off to do other jobs at home. } \]

\[ S19 \text{ [I was] not organised enough. Lack of self-discipline } \]

\[ T19 \text{ The students think they can come when they want to ... The students that we get haven’t got the discipline and time management skills to make learning decisions like that. } \]

\[ T27 \text{ Students often lacked motivation to complete assignments on time. } \]

However, students were considerably more likely than teachers to think that student performance was as good in flexible learning modes as in face-to-face classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section B—1 General response to flexible learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In the following tables, ‘Disagree’ combines both survey responses ‘Strongly disagree’ and ‘Disagree’ and ‘Agree’ combines both survey responses ‘Strongly agree’ and ‘Agree’.

Teachers were considerably more likely than students to think that more support was needed in flexible learning modes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>d. I/Students need more support in flexible study than in face-to-face classes.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is perhaps the discrepancy here between student and teacher perceptions that are of as much interest as the perceived need for more support.
It is possible that the discrepancy arises because either students’ or teachers’ are unaware of the experiences of students in general, but it is also possible that it arises simply because of different perspectives arising from the survey questions. Whereas students were commenting on their personal experience, teachers were asked to make judgements about student performance in general and their comments would have been more likely to consider students who might have been struggling with a more flexible mode of delivery.

Teachers’ broader consideration of general student performance can be seen in some teachers’ comments from section C:

\[ T6 \text{ Low level students bamboozled by technical issues—Unclear whether the learning that takes place is better, worse or unchanged.} \]

\[ T18 \text{ low or slow achievers drop out of study} \]

\[ T26 \text{ Working at own pace meant some got nothing while others succeeded well. Pace of class slowed down.} \]

### 5.3 Communication

This section sought to elicit perceptions of the effectiveness of communication strategies within flexible learning modules.

In general, students were more likely than teachers to think that communication was as effective in flexible modes as in traditional classes, but a sizable minority of both students and teachers disagreed with this.

#### Section B—2. Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>a. Communication with … teacher/s was as effective in the flexible learning module as in traditional modes of learning.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 8 |

Teachers of ‘off-campus’ courses seemed more doubtful than teachers in other flexible modes about the effectiveness of communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>a. Communication with … teacher/s was as effective in the flexible learning module as in traditional modes of learning.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 9 |

Teachers’ concerns about the effectiveness of communication can also be seen in comments from the open ended questions in Section C.

Some students missed interaction with teachers and other students—this had both social and academic dimensions:

\[ S4 \text{ [I’d like] to have more contact with teachers. All of the contact I have had so far has been initiated by me.} \]
S10 I missed the interaction with other student to understand the subject from their perspective.

S12 Not having a number of people to discuss the work with was the biggest disadvantage.

Some teachers saw academic disadvantages with distance communication:

T24 I think students pick up certain cues from the lecturer in face to face learning, which help them to focus on the important points in the study material. One other disadvantage is that I suspect students tend not to read each other’s postings (but on the other hand I often feel that students don’t listen to each other in classroom settings either!).

T17 It wasn’t always easy to explain or assist students with their problems over the telephone.

and there were also more specific comments about equity issues:

T28 students who needed more support became lost and reluctant to approach teacher teachers less likely to pick up on problems due to less contact with students.

One of the more striking findings about communication in flexible learning modes was the dominance of the ‘not applicable’ response to questions which referred specifically to the effectiveness of online discussion as a means of flexible communication. The responses to question B2e are representative of this.

**Table 10**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>e. Online discussions were just as effective as face-to-face classes for discussing ideas.</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, ‘off-campus’ students were more likely than others to select the ‘not applicable’ response.

**Table 11**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>e. Online discussions were just as effective as face-to-face classes for discussing ideas.</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus students</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face students</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ‘Not applicable’ option was also the most common teacher response to these questions. There was no marked difference between ‘off-campus’ and other teachers’ responses although ‘off-campus’ teachers were more likely to be ‘undecided’ about its effectiveness.

**Table 12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>e. Online discussions were just as effective as face-to-face classes for discussing ideas.</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus teachers</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face teachers</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Common selection of the ‘Not applicable’ option possibly suggests that online discussions are not yet a common means of ‘off-campus’ communication in VU TAFE courses. ‘Off-campus’
teachers’ 100% agreement with statement 2Bf that ‘email and/or telephone contact helped students participate effectively in the module’ supports the idea that this is still the most common means of communication.

Table 13 shows that there was general agreement between students and teachers that there was regular communication around assessment and activities, but there were noticeable differences between off campus and other students.

### Section B—2. Communication

**Table 13**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question g. Assessment tasks and activities generated regular communication with the teacher and other students.</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus students</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face students</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses to the following survey question (shown in Table 14) were similar. One of the key issues for students discussed in the readings was that of prompt feedback from teachers. Again, while there was general agreement between students and teachers that there was prompt feedback on work submitted, a significant minority of off campus students disagreed with this statement.

### Section B—2. Communication

**Table 14**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question h. l/Students got prompt feedback on work l/they submitted.</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus students</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to face students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was these aspects of communication that elicited the most vehement comment from students in Section C.

*S4 I … had trouble with accessing help from teachers without using the telephone. As all calls are STD I would prefer to access help via email, but sometimes this is not practical in terms of the time needed to allow for reply.*

*S8 LACK OF FEEDBACK FROM TEACHERS AND ASSISTANT. EMAILED ASSIGNMENT (1ST ASSIGNMENT) IN JULY AND STILL HAVE NOT RECEIVED ANY FEEDBACK [in November]. ASSIGNMENTS SHOULD BE MARKED AS A PRIORITY SO THAT STUDENTS ARE MOTIVATED TO CONTINUE WITH THE REST OF THE MODULE.*

*S9 … when I have tried to contact [xxxxxxx] in regard to gaining my exams or to answer other queries, it takes me at least a week to get in contact with them as I almost always get the answering machine. At first, even my emails weren’t answered.*

*S13 Last year I had a teacher who was able to provide feed back while I was doing the practice activities. The teacher I had this year told me she was not allowed to provide any assistance at all.*

*S20 Sometimes more guidance would be helpful.*
Communication is more difficult to maintain without face-to-face contact. In supplementary and mixed modes, students and teachers are less likely to find communication problematic (although there are still some concerns). However, it would appear that this is an area that requires development if the fully online flexible option to be expanded as.

5.4 Learning materials

Students were generally satisfied with the structure of learning materials, but there was a discrepancy between student and teacher perceptions as to whether or not the materials were presented in a range of interesting ways—students were much more likely to disagree with the statement. Also, off-campus teachers were slightly more inclined than other teachers to disagree with this.

**Section B—3. Learning materials**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>g. Information was presented in a range of interesting ways</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus teachers</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face teachers</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 15*

In a related question, teachers were more likely than students to agree that the materials consisted mostly of readings and questions (73% and 48% respectively).

**Section B—3. Learning materials**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>i. The materials consisted mostly of readings and questions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 16*

The intention behind these statements was to focus on design issues to do with providing materials that allow for a range of different learning styles (and which are more engaging in general). It would seem from these responses that this aspect of flexible materials requires more thought if flexible learning is to optimise learner’s satisfaction (and possibly performance).

The extended student comments from Section C were largely about issues not identified as significant in the responses in Section B, so it is difficult to know how representative they are of students’ concerns. There were issues raised to do with:

- lack of clear ‘signposting’ in the materials:

  S9 ... I am unable to tell whether I am behind in my studies or not. I have no course calender (sic), no deadlines.

  S6 I was never sure when the end of the semester was.

- lack of regular assessment and feedback:

  S8 BACK IN THE OLD DAYS EVERY SECTION OF THE MODULE HAD AN ASSIGNMENT AT THE END. I PREFERRED THIS WAY BECAUSE AT LEAST I KNEW THAT I WAS ON THE RIGHT TRACK
• inadequate customisation and editing:

S4 A number of the modules I have worked through so far have obviously been written for the use of on-campus students, so the course notes don’t apply to me working here alone. Also they often need editing and updating as the page numbers and self-help answers don’t correspond correctly. … I would like to have the study booklets read by a student or students and edited to make sure they make sense to somebody other than the person writing the materials.

S6 Study booklets need to be updated with the correct years, teachers’ names and spelling mistakes corrected. A bit hard to feel motivated about achieving highly if your lecturer makes spelling mistakes (a lot of mistakes in some booklets!)

S14 The relevant study materials did not provide clear and concise explanations.

S22 If the materials were not understandable, the explanation of materials are not accessible.

• lack of consistency in the materials

S3 Some of the units had inconsistent workloads (i.e. too much compared to others).

Even if these issues have not been of general concern to students, it would be wise to have regular evaluation of materials to minimise any such problems.

Teachers acknowledged problems with the materials. Their comments generally reflected concerns with how a lack of development time affected the quality of materials:

T4 [A key disadvantage is the] time needed to develop workbooks and activities

T14 Some learners didn’t take to it with much enthusiasm, misunderstood the rationale especially at first. Lots of work for me initially to create material—later less so. Not all the materials were available from the start. I was making it as we progressed - some frustration from learners who wanted to go ahead of the group.

There was also a more specific comment on the lack of design considerations for disabled students:

T8 …a lot of information that is provided online is not formatted correctly and cannot be accessed via various adaptive technology programs that assist students with disabilities. … Often Online material is produced in technical terminology that can limit the scope of some students in fully understanding the concept of what is being required to learn. …

5.5 Technical support

Responses to statements about technical issues were mixed, with responses spread across the options.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>b. There was adequate technical help if I had a problem accessing the module.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>c. I had easy access to all the hardware and software I needed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question d. I had satisfactory access to the internet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question e. The links in the course materials were always in working order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question f. The download time for web-based materials was reasonable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 17

The relatively high number of ‘Not applicable’ responses possibly supports the earlier suggestion that many ‘off-campus’ respondents have been studying modules that are not provided online. Of those utilising technology, it would appear that the quality and reliability is at best uneven.

Students had little to say in from Section C about technological issues directly to do with their study, but there was one apparent case of considerable administrative inadequacy reported:

\[ S16 \] I’ve been waiting two months to hear if I received credits. I was hoping to get them in time to apply for a job. There was a mistake on my mid year results. I passed a module and it showed I hadn’t. I rang my tutor who said to check the results on the web site as it may have been amended. I couldn’t find the results on the site. I emailed student services to ask where it was but I never heard back so I still don’t know!

Although such frustrations are not necessarily a problem for flexible learning options alone, it is arguably more important to get administrative systems operating efficiently because of lack of teacher support for such matters (the tutor did not seem to help in this particular case however).

Teachers had more to say—mainly about equity and funding concerns:

\[ T8 \] Significant disadvantages lie with students who are unable to afford up to date computer equipment and have significant slow download times and can be costly to link up to ISP to download information.

\[ T8 \] Other disadvantages that are occurring is that a lot of information that is provided online is not formatted correctly and cannot be accessed via various adaptive technology programs that assist students with disabilities.

\[ T16 \] Not enough computers for the number of students—Old computers that are slow

\[ T20 \] ...difficulties in the classroom with lack of functioning computers to the number of students, makes it impossible to use what programs we currently have available.

### 5.6 Orientation and study skills support

This section of the survey sought to gauge perceptions about whether or not students had the particular computer and study skills necessary for successful flexible study and, if not, whether support provided was adequate.
Perhaps the first thing to be noted is that regardless of study mode, almost all support was reported as being provided by teachers. Only one reference to the use of concurrent assistance whose purpose is the support of TAFE students. This could suggest that either the service is not understood or known about (or there is some other factor at work?)

Responses were quite mixed in this section with little unambiguous consensus.

Students were more likely than teachers to say that an induction to flexible learning was ‘Not applicable’. This was more pronounced for students in off-campus modules support than those in face-to-face courses and there was also a pronounced gap between off-campus students and teachers.

**Section B—5. Orientation and study skills support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>b. A course induction before the course adequately prepared me/students for what flexible learning would be like.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus students</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to face students</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus teachers</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to face teachers</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 18**

There is a suggestion here that if teachers are providing inductions, students are either not taking advantage of them or not finding them useful—particularly in off campus mode.

Table 19 also shows discrepancies between students’ and teachers’ perceptions of the availability of study skills support—teachers being more likely to disagree that it was available when needed. This varied according to study mode however—off-campus students were more likely than off-campus teachers to disagree that support was available whereas face-to-face teachers were more likely to disagree than face-to-face students.

**Section B—5. Orientation and study skills support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>c. Study skills support was always available when students needed it.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus students</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to face students</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus teachers</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to face teachers</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 19**

Given that it is teachers apparently providing most of this support, it seems to fit with other findings about greater dissatisfaction with off-campus communication that off-campus students would be more likely to be dissatisfied with the availability of study skills support—even though
this seems to sit uncomfortably with off-campus teachers’ perception that such support is readily available.

It is more difficult to understand face-to-face teachers’ perception that such support is not readily available when they seem to identify themselves as the providers of such assistance. It might indicate that they do not feel skilled in this sort of teaching or perhaps more simply that such help should be provided elsewhere—again, this suggests either a possible under-utilisation or under-supply of existing support services provided by concurrent assistance.

Another gap between student and teacher perceptions is apparent in the responses to whether or not students have the computer skills necessary to study online effectively—students seem considerably more confident than teachers that they have the skills necessary.

**Section B—5. Orientation and study skills support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>e. Students had the necessary computer skills to study online effectively.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 20

As mentioned previously, it is possible that the above discrepancy could arise because teachers are referring to students more generally than the student respondents are. If this is not the case, it is possible that teachers and students do not share perceptions of what ‘effective online study skills’ are.

### 5.7 Other issues

Some issues raised by students and teachers in section C did not fall neatly within the categories established in section B of the survey.

One student raised the broader issue of flexible enrolment procedures:

*S4 I would like to be able to enrol in two or three modules at a time and then enrol in further ones as these are finished off, regardless of whether it is mid semester or not. As an off-campus student, I pay for X amount of contact hours which are not used in comparison to my on-campus colleagues, so I feel that I should get some extra allowance in to compensate for this—i.e. being able to enrol in modules as previous ones are finished off.*

Teachers raised the issues of:

- the effect of different delivery modes on teaching loads

  *T2 The amounts of off-campus support that the student requires is not always able to be offered within teacher’s allocated hrs - travel time for teacher/supervisor - levels of support able to be offered by industry not always enough*

  *T13 We need formal acknowledgement that student access may not be in business hours.*

  *T23 No set work plan, Loads of travel, Flexible learning is often set up for online not necessarily Industry On-the-Job workplaces.*

- perceived management inflexibility
Perceived Staff Opposition to Change

T9 Some teachers rigidly sticking to exams because they believe that is the only true way to test what they have learned. Some teachers have been nasty—especially when a computer was put near me—my files thrown on the floor 3 days in a row—Being made fun of consistently (over the years and to this day...) when there are few students in my class [because of different way of structuring of classes].

Support Needed for Staff to Engage with Flexible Learning

T9 We don’t have the facilities for staff and students.... we really need one computer each as staff and less rigid timetables.

T8 [We need] training for all staff on accessibility issues relating to online teaching. This starts from the very basic planning stages of course material and also by providing online courses in basic English so that every student is clearly able to understand the concept of the tasks. Clear definition of the requirements of the course must also be stated up front to ensure that students are able fully understand what is required of them in undertaking their chosen course. Disability Services (Equity & Social Justice Branch) can also further advise and support the improvement of online courses as this is felt to be a significant area that will greatly improve the opportunities for students with disabilities in the tertiary sector. However in order to for this to be successful the initial stages need to be developed or improved to ensure that it is inclusive of all students.

T14 [We need] more encouragement and support for set up procedure, more recognition of value of mixed mode course materials as a precursor to other types of flexi mode. Seeding grants for project, case studies, a discussion forum or get together to share case studies, some sort of research help—evaluation of flexible delivery is a must to satisfy critics / doubters / management /decision makers, more recognition from timetablers re access to labs for teachers wishing to access PCs with their groups studying in support / mixed flexi mode features with their classes ...
6 Emerging issues and possible strategies

It is worthwhile saying that the survey indicated that respondents were generally satisfied with the delivery of flexible learning options within VU TAFE.

However, Victoria University is part of a world-wide trend to expand flexible/online delivery and so it is important to get it right. A number of issues requiring further analysis could be inferred from the survey findings. Some of the more obvious are presented below.

6.1 Communications

Issues relating to communication were apparently less in supplementary and mixed modes inasmuch as learners have access to teachers and administration

In fully off-campus/online mode, there could be a need to develop this aspect of the learning package.

Possible strategies to enhance fully off-campus/online delivery could include:

- developing/extending professional development in communication strategies to establish more effective social support in learning groups—Gilly Salmon’s e-moderating training is one such course referred to by a respondent, but others are provided.

- establishing guidelines for managing online communication—e.g. set standards for acceptable turnaround time for assignments and responses to student queries.

6.2 Materials

Key perceived problems with learning materials were that they lacked variety and that some were simply face-to-face materials ‘re-badged’ for flexible delivery without adaptation for the particular circumstances of flexible learners. Teachers identify lack of time and/or skill to develop materials.

Possible strategies include:

- reviewing existing materials for pedagogy/instructional design—and, where necessary, including a range of activities that allow for different learning styles.

- ensuring development takes account of accessibility issues

- building regular maintenance into the materials development cycle

- building in interactive tasks

- providing opportunities for teachers and instructional designers to work collaboratively to develop high quality flexible learning materials.

6.3 Technical and administrative support

Technical and administrative support was generally considered to be acceptable.

Comments were largely to do with the need for more technical resources—a more detailed review of current technical access issues might be required.
6.4 Orientation and Study skills support

Responses to the survey suggest that there is little use of orientation and/or study skills support at the moment.

Students want it and teachers see it as necessary. Possible strategies include:

- making induction to the demands of flexible learning compulsory
- making assessment of learner readiness compulsory
- developing of workshops/units to introduce skills (computer, time/stress management, etc.), and expectations—it could be possible to offer some credit for completion of the workshop/unit
- building in tasks to the general course program that require learning the technology
- developing Concurrent Assistance’s role—incorporate/extend online support function
- scheduling in face-to-face and/or online study days.

6.5 Statistical records

There was difficulty tracking and getting a quantitative/objective measure of VU performance in flexible learning.

It could be useful to monitor, track and keep a record of students’ performance in flexible learning mode to provide a quantitative and objective measure of flexible learning at VU TAFE.
7 Bibliography


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Appendix

The teacher and student surveys can be found at the following website:

www.staff.vu.edu.au/fmiunit4/survey

Print versions of the survey are attached.