



CHAPTER 3

THE QUEENSLAND OPEN LEARNING NETWORK, AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

The Queensland Open Learning Network (QOLN) (www.qoln.net) was established in late 1989 by the Queensland State Government. Its purpose is to expand the scope and range of educational opportunities available to regional, rural and remote locations through a statewide network of Open Learning Centres supported by a sophisticated information and communications technologies (ICT) infrastructure.

The Network facilitates the provision to communities of formal accredited programmes from universities, colleges and other educational and training providers. It also offers its own programmes and support services in response to specific community needs. The network aims to foster lifelong learning; motivate and empower people to acquire new knowledge, skills and understandings so that they may lead fuller and more productive lives; and support the development of learning communities capable of adapting and responding collectively to new circumstances and environments.

Traditionally, Australians have looked upon their land as being part of a “lucky country,” rich in natural resources. Queensland gains great benefit from its agricultural, mining, tourism and other industries. However, world markets are changing, and falling commodity prices have particularly affected the regional areas. Now the call is for Australia to become a “knowledge nation,” upgrading its knowledge and skills, adding value to its traditional industries and developing new technology-based and service industries. Historically, however, the participation in post-secondary education in remote and rural areas has been roughly half that in urban areas. This has been due partly to the “tyranny of distance” and partly to socio-economic and cultural factors, especially in the case of Aboriginal peoples.

Such political and social issues demand entrepreneurial flair, inter-sector collaboration, community action and imaginative applications of ICTs. Australia has always been an early adopter of new technology and, with its remoteness and huge internal distances, it is clearly heavily dependent on internal and external communications. The infrastructure for ICT services is rapidly developing. In August 2000, 97% of the population and

HISTORY

The Queensland Open Learning Network was really ahead of its time in recognising, in the late 1980s, that educational institutions needed to be far more responsive to the forces of change reshaping the processes and circumstances of learning and the expectations of the learners. The Network was the first statewide system set up in regional Australia to harness the new learning technologies and be a driving force behind access to lifelong learning by people in outback Australia (or, in local parlance, “beyond the black stump”).

The precursor to the QOLN initiative was the small number of Study Centres established along the coast of Queensland in the early 1980s by the University of Queensland (UQ). The University had been a major provider of distance education for many decades and was actually Australia’s very first “dual-mode” university. These Study Centres, which were typically situated in local council buildings or TAFE Institutes, were established for the use of UQ’s distance education students who, at that time, studied mainly through print and correspondence. Later, the state’s two other distance teaching universities, the University of Central Queensland and University of Southern Queensland, decided to share in the cost of these facilities in return for their students having access to these Study Centres’ libraries, quiet study areas and computers for assignment typing.

The centres were certainly well used and they met the needs of the distance learners of that time. However, in the late 1980s, UQ decided to discontinue being a distance education provider and it closed down the Study Centres. A number of leading educators then approached the state government for funding to establish ICT-based Open Learning Centres to encourage innovative delivery to rural and remote communities. Funding was also sought for the development and delivery of bridging programmes for those lacking the required entry qualifications for post-secondary education.

Following state government endorsement and funding approval, the Queensland Open Learning Project was established in late 1989. The initial funding period was only one year and the project was commissioned to conduct two pilot programmes: one on establishing the Centres, and the other designing and delivering educational programmes that would test the potential of the project’s delivery system. Approximately Aus\$1 million was allocated to establish and equip a statewide network of Open Learning Centres, provide the ICT infrastructure, fund the head office staff and Centre Co-ordinators’ salaries, and meet all of the telecommunications and running costs — a modest sum indeed for such a large and challenging project! No provision was made for the purchase or rental of buildings for the centres, and the communities themselves were made responsible for this, something they responded to generously.

The project was officially launched in Bundaberg in July 1990, by which time 15 centres had already been established, ranging from Badu Island at the tip of Cape York Peninsula in the north, to the Gold Coast in the south and Mount Isa in the west. A commissioned report on the project’s first year declared that it was meeting a great need, doing great work, and should be supported. From that time on, QOLN (as it came to be called) has been partially funded by the state government.

During the early stages of QOLN, the communication infrastructure was neither robust nor reliable and the communication costs were high. As a result, the use of ICT for teletutorials and other applications was relatively modest. Nevertheless, the Open Learning Centres proved their worth in enabling students to interact with their lecturers

and fellow students at other sites, find a quiet place for study, type assignments and organise their own tutorials.

Since that time, QOLN has had to respond to a rapidly changing environment. Globalisation, the more knowledge-based economy, and a loss of jobs in traditional areas have created new requirements for education and training. Experiencing decline or loss of such essential services as rail links, banking and postal services, the regions are lobbying their politicians for “a fair go.” Governments, seeing the potential of ICTs and distance learning, have started to provide more funding for technology infrastructure for rural communities. Sectoral, state and indeed national boundaries are becoming increasingly irrelevant as providers compete or form strategic alliances to gain market advantage. Within such a context, QOLN has had to be responsive to its members and clients to ensure that it is a full-spectrum provider of services relevant to their changing needs and circumstances.

AFFILIATES AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

The Network is committed to the concept of “one service – two clients.” On the one hand, its role is to stimulate and provide quality education and training in all communities, regardless of location or population base. To achieve this, QOLN needs to develop alliances with a wide range of local government, industrial, business and community organisations to gain support in establishing, maintaining and managing the facilities and services within the local communities. On the other hand, as a conduit for learning delivery and support, QOLN also needs to develop strong alliances and partnerships with universities, Institutes of TAFE, private training providers, commercial organisations and government departments — not exclusively in Queensland.

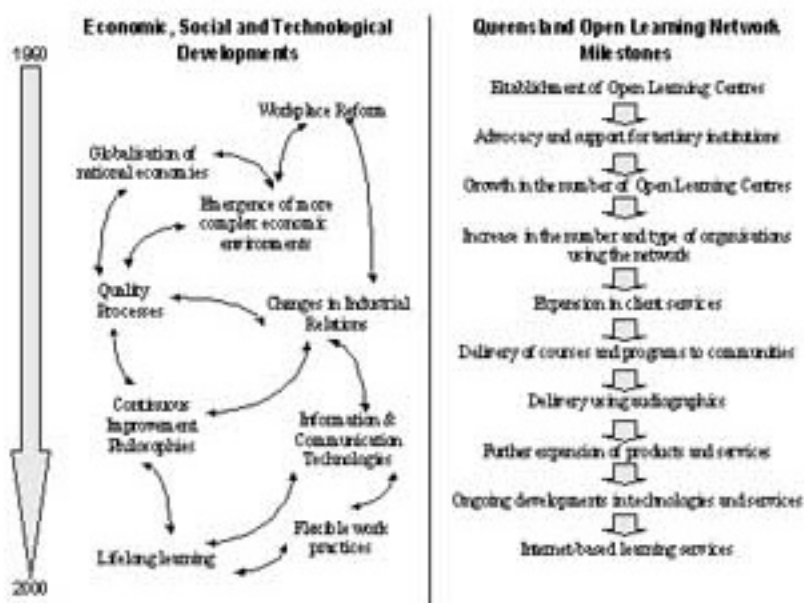
AFFILIATIONS AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

The Network has grown and had many successes over the past 10 years, and for all of that time its primary goal has remained unchanged: to expand the scope and range of education opportunities available to communities. However, while this goal may have remained constant, the Network’s products and services have evolved and diversified in response to the significant economic, social and technological developments that have occurred, as well as to shifts that have taken place from once-off, classroom-based learning or training to ongoing flexible learning in the workplace, home or Open Learning Centre (Figure 3.2).

The Network’s initial focus on tertiary education has broadened and its advocacy, support and delivery services are now provided on behalf of many organisations, including private education and training providers, industrial organisations, large businesses, small to medium enterprises, government departments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The Open Learning Centres have always been invaluable for those seeking career information. It is estimated that people now need to contemplate changing their careers up to six or seven times during their working lifetimes. Thus, an initial qualification or grounding in any field is no longer a guarantee of employment, but only the beginning of a journey of lifelong learning. These demands mean that the Network must provide timely and up-to-the-minute career information and advice.

Figure 3.2: The growth and evolution of the Queensland Open Learning Network.



The Queensland Open Learning Network is unique among Australia's telecentre networks in providing the following comprehensive suite of programme-related services to its members and external clients:

- Programme design:
 - conducting needs assessment and designing organisational impact plans
 - developing curricula
 - developing processes for national accreditation
 - identifying options and strategies for programme development and delivery
 - developing programme specifications
- Programme development:
 - sourcing and evaluating existing materials
 - providing access to online and off-line communication and information technologies
 - matching training aims with cost-effective open learning strategies
- Programme delivery and support:
 - training teachers and trainers to develop and deliver programmes using communications and information technologies
 - training administrative staff to support teachers and trainers
 - providing local expert assistance to communities throughout Queensland
 - providing access to state-of-the-art communications and information technologies
 - providing learning materials and resources

- Programme management and administration:
 - developing appropriate systems and processes
 - developing innovation management strategies
 - identifying financial and human resource requirements

Three recent projects and programmes illustrate the Network’s approach to lifelong learning: the Plan Your Career initiative, the Tablelands Online Project and Clinical Legal Education.

Plan Your Career

Plan Your Career is an accredited (Certificate II) training programme developed as a stepping stone for women wishing to re-enter the workforce. It is an intervention designed to give women in remote and rural Queensland equal opportunity to develop workplace skills and a greater sense of self-esteem. This programme was designed by QOLN and draws upon two earlier programmes designed to improve access and equity and address the need for empathetic and responsive material for training women.

Planning Your Career has proved so successful that it has been offered in most of the Open Learning Centres over the last three years. It is delivered through a mix of face-to-face meetings, audiographic conferencing, and self-paced computer-based learning modules.

The impact of the programme is captured in the following remarks by students:

The benefits from undertaking the course were more than I ever expected. My self-esteem improved dramatically, even to the point where I decided to join several community organisations.... [T]hrough this decision I have made several wonderful friends.

The course has not only given me the opportunity to undertake university studies, but has given me the self-esteem and confidence to achieve my goals....

Before I started this course, my self-esteem was really down, I was overweight and I thought because of this issue alone I was unemployable back in the type of career I wanted. That was six months ago, now where am I? I am a Sales Executive for a local newspaper and yes, I am still overweight, and I realise that it is not even an issue. The issue is to believe in yourself and your ability and together with the skills you have acquired during your course, you can do anything you put your mind.... [S]tep outside that “comfort barrier” and have a go.



Participants in the Plan Your Career programme.

Tablelands Online Project

The Tablelands Online project helps rural and remote communities to develop knowledge and skills in ICTs and participate in the digital economy. It is characterised by community ownership and involvement, community-based training and support, involvement of government agencies, an action-research development framework, and online training and support. It offers basic education for new users and advanced programmes for those with experience, and it is based on the premise that the advanced learners can support and guide the newcomers in their learning.

Clinical Legal Education

This pilot programme gave Brisbane-based law students opportunities to provide advice on family law to people in rural communities via QOLN's audiographic conferencing system. The initiative gave the students first-hand experience in discussing legal matters with country people, enabled the audience to gain useful information on matters that were of direct concern to them, and facilitated the provision of legal advice in areas under-represented by legal practitioners.

FUNDING

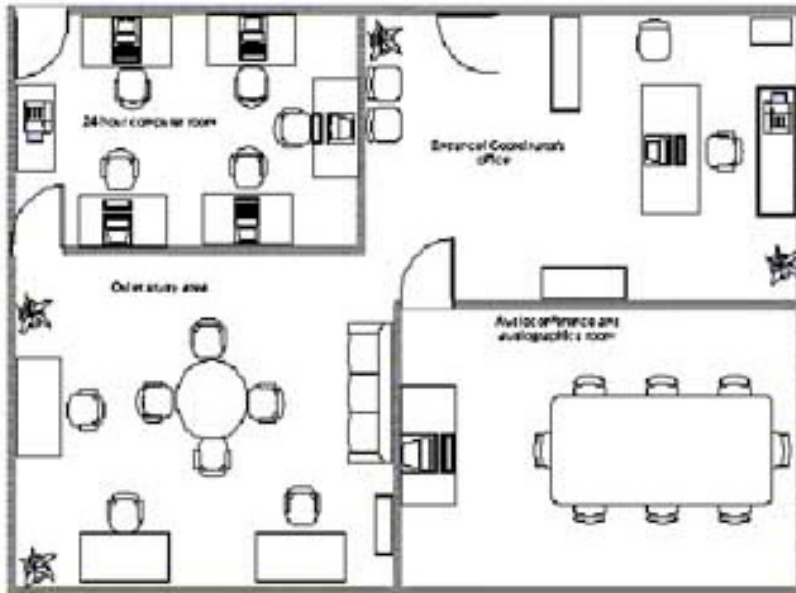
The Queensland state government provides annual, recurrent base-level funding towards the maintenance of the Network. The universities, colleges, businesses, government departments and other organisations and agencies using the Network pay an annual membership fee in return for certain entitlements. The Network contributes significantly to its own operations and improvement through a range of revenue-generating projects. All three funding approaches are essential to ensure that the students can continue to gain free access to learning resources through the Open Learning Centres, that such services as have to be charged out to the communities are done so at the lowest possible price, and that QOLN's products and services are continually enhanced and adapted to changing needs and circumstances.

ACCOMMODATION

Every community wishing to establish an Open Learning Centre must accept responsibility for providing accommodation that is located and set up to be a focal point, easily accessed. In setting up new centres, there is always extensive consultation with the Chief Executive Officers and members of town or shire councils, chairpersons of local organisations, heads of educational institutions, and students within the community to gauge the expectations and requirements of the centre.

The Open Learning Centres are as diverse as the communities they serve. They come in various forms and sizes and are variously located in schools, community halls, ex-service clubs, libraries, courthouses and government offices. The number and size of the rooms also vary considerably, but a typical Open Learning Centre features space for face-to-face learning activities, quiet study, and computing and communications (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Plan of a typical QOLN Open Learning Centre.



MANAGEMENT

While the Network as a whole is co-ordinated through the head office in Brisbane, the individual centres are managed locally by their Co-ordinators who are responsible for:

- local promotion of network products and services;
- liaison with community groups and individuals to identify and report on learning needs;
- management and maintenance of equipment, resources and services; and
- local bookings and timetabling.

Statewide co-ordination by the head office achieves significant economies of scale and includes such responsibilities as:

- strategic planning;
- promotion of the Network statewide and nationally;
- liaison with government and other funding agencies to guarantee appropriate levels of revenue;
- management of strategic alliances and partnerships;
- management of the growth and expansion of the Network;
- financial management of the Network (including the management of special grants and programmes);
- human resource management for the Network;
- co-ordination of research and development activities;
- management of statewide training programmes and services; and
- management and maintenance of the statewide technology infrastructure.

STAFFING

The headquarters staff in Brisbane comprise a Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Corporate and Business Services, Director of Learning Services, Director of Technology Services, and Network Co-ordinator, as well as general staff for handling administration and enquiries. Learning Services is considered to be the “engine” that drives QOLN, and consists of instructional designers and other staff who design and develop courses to be delivered throughout the Network. Staff there also work closely with universities and TAFE Institutes to convert face-to-face courses for flexible delivery. Technology Services engages in action research in the design and delivery of appropriate interactive communication technology for use by QOLN’s clients and in training QOLN’s members in uses of ICT. There are 22 staff in the head office and approximately 48 staff in the Open Learning Centres. The Network also draws on the occasional services of academics and open and distance learning providers across the state.

Each Open Learning Centre is managed by a Co-ordinator from within the local community. The Co-ordinators are expected to be “community learning leaders,” providing information on courses, entry requirements, enrolment procedures, study support and technology use. They also arrange teleconferences and social events for the local students, organising graduation ceremonies, encourage local involvement and generally build up local support for their centre within the community. Six “Group Co-ordinators” assist the Co-ordinators with their day-to-day operations and concerns and liaise between the Co-ordinators and the relevant officers at the head office.

TRAINING MANAGERS, STAFF AND USERS

On appointment, the Co-ordinators are involved in an intensive two-day, face-to-face training programme that covers:

- the Network’s philosophy;
- the Network’s products and services;
- the Network’s members and users;
- client service;
- administrative processes and procedures; and
- managing, using and maintaining the technology.

Ongoing professional development for the Co-ordinators is provided through print-based resources, audiographic conferencing and online training. All of the Co-ordinators also convene annually for further face-to-face training which is usually concerned with such issues as new strategic directions, the introduction of new technologies, programmes and services, and means of improving client service and learner support. This event is invaluable for networking and gaining feedback on emergent trends and issues in the various communities.

PUBLICITY

Publicity and public relations are seen as absolutely crucial to the future health and viability of the Network, encouraging community participation, keeping the key stakeholders informed and ensuring that existing and potential funding bodies are aware of the Network’s achievements.

At the local level, each Co-ordinator is expected to promote the Network and its products and services through:

- press releases to the local media;
- presentations to local government, schools and community organisations;
- flyers and brochures;
- open days; and
- induction programs.

All publicity aimed at national or international audiences is co-ordinated through the head office which:

- produces a regular newsletter;
- publishes research reports and journal articles;
- presents papers at national and international conferences;
- organises an international open learning conference in Brisbane every two years; and
- issues national press releases.

ACCESS

All Open Learning Centres provide 24-hour, seven-day-a-week access to learners and other community users. Access is available to registered learners through a key-code system. Local Co-ordinators are available to support learners at set times or by special appointment.

TECHNOLOGY

The increased use of technologies for learning, coupled with the changing needs of learners, has led to new expectations on the part of those who use the Open Learning Centres. Learners expect not only access to the latest technologies and facilities, but individualised support in using these for their studies. The Network has therefore ensured that all learners can have access to individualised and contextualised tuition and support at any time they need it, as well as access to:

- a network of Pentium computers with shared peripherals;
- software applications, including word processing, spreadsheets and databases;
- software and hardware facilities for multimedia learning;
- printing and photocopying facilities;



Clients at an Open Learning Centre.

- a VCR and monitor;
- Internet/Web; and
- phone, fax, audiographic conferencing, audioconferencing and videoconferencing facilities.

In addition, QOLN has an extensive computer conferencing network. It has found audiographics conferencing to be particularly cost-effective for education and training requiring audio and visual components. The audio is carried through the normal phone system using a conferencing service such as Telstra's Conferlink which allows multiple sites to connect simultaneously. The data are connected through the Internet, using a Web browser and a data conferencing program such as Farsite, Netmeeting or Proshare. The Network has its own data bridge, neT120, which can bridge any conferencing programme supporting the international T120 standard.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

The Network is acutely aware of the need to ensure that all its products and services continue to meet the changing requirements of its stakeholders and are delivered in timely and efficient ways through state-of-the-art ICTs. It is therefore involved in a range of research and evaluation projects, including:

- evaluating Multimedia Toolboxes that support learning in the vocational education and training sector;
- examining levels of access to, and levels of literacy in, information and communication technologies for university and vocational education and training students; and
- identifying community concerns and needs in adult and community education.

As well, QOLN engages in ongoing self-assessment cycles to improve the quality of its services, and in the continual assessment (through surveys and questionnaires) of learner perceptions of products and services. It is also a quality-assured organisation committed to implementing and maintaining the requirements of AS/NZS ISO 9001:1994. All staff are held responsible for developing, implementing and refining the quality system that is incorporated in the organisation's Business Management System. The Network is now working towards certification under the revised ISO 9001: 2000.

CONCLUSIONS

There is sometimes an underlying fear that the digital revolution will lead to the dissolution of communities and local cultures. However, one should never underestimate the capacity of communities to adapt to change and respond to challenges. The QOLN experience has been that, far from being destructive, new technologies provide a framework upon which communities can build a network of social arrangements for individual and group capacity-building, and that the Open Learning Centres are helping to create learning communities that can share ideas of mutual interest and benefit. Through the work of QOLN, women are erasing loneliness from their lives and acquiring new skills and new confidence; young people are defining their own culture by sharing ideas on music, sport and the pressures of schooling; students are advancing their knowledge and job prospects without being forced to leave their families and jobs; educators are extending their teaching and research through technology; farmers are discussing their problems and sharing solutions online; and genealogists are sharing their family histories.

Also important is the considerable commitment and investment that QOLN has made in researching efficient and effective use of ICTs for education and training. Its staff are involved in developmental projects across a whole range of technologies and applications, often collaboratively with member institutions and organisations. The Network has won much acclaim for its developmental work and services — and it is still set to grow and develop further.

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