Recently came across an extraordinary finding – there already exists a cross-sectoral committee that includes the schools, VET and higher education sectors, and its purpose is to provide advice to Australian education and training ministers on the effective utilisation of information and communications technologies in education and training.

It is called the Australian Information and Communications Technology in Education Committee (AICTEC), and it has been in existence since 2001.

Why is it extraordinary? Because it is one of only two cross-sectoral bodies advising government on education and training, and second, it is premised on the idea that there must be coherence in developing policy across the three sectors.

Also, it actually seems to be addressing some difficult questions. It has, for example, a subcommittee that is working on national interoperability and digital architecture. Some of what it is doing is far too schools focused, but that is another story.

I am very impressed. Educational technologies cannot play an important role in supporting pathways and collaboration between the sectors unless and until we have a shared digital architecture and interoperability.

This is a necessary, but not sufficient, requirement for the effective use of ICTs to support student learning and pathways. I am thinking here of the role of ICTs in broad terms. First, there is the potential of educational technologies as pedagogic tools that can enhance student learning. This tends to be the focus of those who work and research in this area, and it is important. It is also the most interesting.

Then there is the much more prosaic level which I find fascinating, but not many others do, and that is the capacity of student management systems to talk to each other across institutions and sectors so that they can manage student learning and share information about students and track their progress.

We need the capacity to construct single enrolments that incorporate courses from both sectors so that students do not have to enrol in two separate institutions, pay two sets of fees, and manage two sets of timetabling requirements. We need to be able to have cross-sectoral enrolments, but still be able to report separately to government.

Of course, it would help if the sectors had consistent requirements and processes. Those of us involved in pathways swoon over the idea of single student ID which students would use in every institution in which they enrol. This would provide the data we need to make sound education policy, particularly cross-sectoral policy.

Finally, it would help if students who are enrolled in dual-sector awards were supported by one learning management system. Most of the dual-sector universities have solved, or at least potentially solved, this particular problem, so this particular issue is not so much different sectors as different institutions.

I was asked to look at the policy perspectives of realising the educational opportunities offered through emerging technologies and the national broadband network (NBN). I’d probably put the question another way — how can emerging technologies and the NBN help us improve educational opportunities and achieve national...
**Web of intrigue**

By Beverley Head

Developing tools that will help academics and students transform the way they teach and learn has been a focus for Mat Wall-Smith, a lecturer in the School of English, Media Culture and Technology at the University of NSW. He has been working to develop the literacies, core skills and strategies needed to deal with the internet, network media and network communications.

Wall-Smith and his colleagues have been exploring how web 2.0 tools can be harnessed by educators.

“At the moment, the program uses a blog platform and social bookmarking, Twitter and wikis. We teach students how to get a blog and take responsibility for their own identity. The goal of the project is to establish a culture that transcends any one unit of learning. This system values the student output, and gets a more active and involved student body.

“Getting staff to move to the new modes and experiment is the hardest step, but once over that hurdle, you will get the benefit of a distributed culture.”

Just as proponents of virtual worlds rarely advocate it as a replacement for more traditional forms of learning, Wall-Smith believes that web 2.0 technologies are not replacing other approaches but should augment a mixed mode of learning.

“We battle against the notion that these technologies are replacing traditional communications – that is not the case but there is more opportunity for engagement.”

This is the first year that UNSW has offered the program, which includes an introductory session and two lectures in orientation week to impart important meta skills – such as how to get a blog, the protocols involved, how tagging works and so forth.

“After O week, the course takes life in each course. Some courses have a Twitter feed, some have content delivered in blog form. You get incremental engagement, but there is the option to take advantage of the connection – for example, to use social networks to bookmark useful content. In my case there are 450 students feeding content to the site.

“These are very early days, but we are seeing terrific outcomes. We have had reading blogs – one student’s blog has been picked up by a major forum in Singapore – it was a lovely moment when she realised that her work was valued.

“There is a cumulative effect, a real outcome and real benefit. Students who may be quiet in class can be more confident in blogs,” he says.

The specific policies that the government wants to achieve as milestones on the way to this goal are to increase the percentage of the population with degrees and high-level VET qualifications, to increase participation in higher education by students from low socio-economic backgrounds, to increase participation in higher education by people from regional and remote areas, and to increase student articulation from one sector to another.

If we are to achieve these goals, we will have to engage students from disadvantaged backgrounds in successful learning, and to do that, we need to understand how educational technologies can support students to learn.

This is the first question, and only then can we ask other questions about the role of educational technologies in supporting pathways, and how they can support government objectives for social inclusion.

VET research on online learning tells us that we have to differentiate between student groups. Online learning is often suitable for those who are already in work and are studying for a specific purpose. However, fully online learning is not suitable for many student groups, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds, young students and apprentices.

Ros Brennan’s research shows that online courses often assume that students are “motivated, literate, well organised and have high order cognitive skills”. This may be not the case, particularly for students who have not experienced prior success in learning, and those who have low literacy skills. She says that many online courses are based on an underlying cultural homogeneity that does not take into account “fundamental issues such as the cultural appropriateness of questioning, conversational conventions, language acuity”, and different attitudes towards interacting with those in authority.

Brennan says: “In face-to-face classrooms, diversity is an asset. In an online environment it may be a distinct disadvantage.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds enjoy and benefit from direct classroom engagement – it provides them with an opportunity to socialise with other students and with teachers, and this helps them to develop positive student identities. However, they also have a right to learn to use technologies, and helping students to do so must be an important part of all formal learning.

Blended learning environments that include online, face-to-face and print materials are most appropriate for many groups of students. Moreover, we must not make assumptions about students’ access to computers and the internet. While most people have computers and internet access at home, there are still some who don’t, and their hardware or internet access may not be of a high quality.

These understandings have implications for the way that educational technologies can support increased participation of students in higher education from regional and remote areas, who are also often from a low SES background. Students must have access to some online learning from their home computer, but they also need access to high-level and bandwidth-hungry equipment if they are to benefit from the latest innovations, and they also need access to face-to-face learning environments.

There are only 39 public universities and they can’t be everywhere. But there is a TAFE campus in most towns – and both will need to work together to provide students with access to online learning, such as that between Riverina TAFE and Charles Sturt University which have established a university centre in the town of Griffith.

Teachers need to be supported to develop the necessary skills to integrate online and blended learning as part of good pedagogic practice. This is a truism that has approached the status of a mantra, but it is often considered at a too-high level – that is, how to help teachers learn the most recent innovations.

We will always have early adopters, and we need them. However, we also need to help teachers learn to use learning platforms such as Blackboard in the most rudimentary of ways – that is, how to place learning resources online, how to communicate with students, and how to use Blackboard to facilitate discussion between teachers and students, and between students.

We have to demonstrate to teachers how online learning platforms can save them time, improve their communication with students, and improve student interaction and learning outcomes without them having to become tech-heads.

What does all this mean? It means that we need the cutting-edge research on educational technologies, as this is what makes the future possible. It will open new possibilities that we haven’t yet considered, and will lead to thinking about how to make these technologies accessible. But it also means that we have to be concerned with embedding online support for learning as an intrinsic part of all teachers’ practices, and as an intrinsic part of all students’ learning experiences.

This is an issue about social justice as much as anything else. Students must be able to use these technologies if they are to participate as full, contributing citizens in their communities and in their workplaces. So policy must be concerned with the mass roll online learning that embeds these basic features, as well as imagining the future through supporting the cutting edge.

And, to return to my preoccupation, it means we also have to develop the enabling administrative technologies and management systems to support educational technologies on the scale that you envisage. There is no point having bells and whistles if they cannot be used.

Dr Leesa Wheelahan is a senior lecturer in adult and vocational education at Griffith University.

This is an edited version of a presentation she gave to the emerging technologies and education symposium at Griffith University on 25 September. Go to www.griffith.edu.au/conference/emerging-technologies-education-symposium
For a generation of students more comfortable with the keyboard than the ballpoint pen, online assessment is the way forward, writes Beverley Head.

Within the first few days of being issued with government-sponsored laptops, NSW schoolchildren were muttering darkly about the fact that while lessons would be online, their exams would not. University students meanwhile report of having to visit physiotherapists after the now unusual practice of handwriting for three hours in an exam.

For a generation of students more familiar with the keyboard than the ballpoint pen, it’s no surprise that interest in online assessment is on the rise. Students are not alone in their concerns about the appropriateness of traditional assessment techniques in the digital age.

“Assessment determines what we teach and how we teach,” says Dr Andrew Fluck, a lecturer in IT at the University of Technology, Sydney. Fluck has been working on technologies to make online assessment possible for students and acceptable to invigilators, who would need to be assured that the right person was sitting the right exam at the right time – also that there were no aides-memoires or essay drafts preloaded onto the computer.

Later this year, the University of Tasmania’s exam board is about to allow for the first time some computer-based assessment in exam halls. It’s had to grapple with several issues, including access to powerpoints for the laptops and the provision of technical support if needed. Every computer will show a unique identifier, and the invigilator will look for that before starting the exam.

“We tend to make marks the arbiter of how good you are as an individual – the right person was sitting the right exam at the right time – also that there were no aides-memoires or essay drafts preloaded onto the computer,” says Thompson.

“The biggest challenge is to get the teaching academics to make explicit the criteria by which they assess students, and also provide feedback to a student about their performance. “We tend to make marks the arbiter of how good you are as an individual – they are the prevalent method of assessment.” And yet most academics would agree that marks alone are rarely an accurate assessor of the range of attributes a student might need to develop in order to be an attractive employment candidate on graduation.

“For about 20 years, academic research has said that assessment drives learning. But this has been misinterpreted to mean more assessment rather than different assessment. Employers want universities to produce people, not exam-passing machines. But ultimately, the hurdle that everyone has to clear is the exam – so you end up teaching to the test.

“It is not learning that is driving the teaching. There has been a huge push to try and open the assessment process, but there is so much inertia against it because exams are easy.”

Over the past three years, Thompson has been developing software and a web-based approach that allows academics to articulate a range of criteria, then assess students against those criteria – for example, critical thinking and research, communications and interpersonal skills, attitudes and values, creativity and innovation, practical and professional skills. While students were still provided a mark, this could be deconstructed in terms of performance against individual criteria.

Thomson says the University of Sydney’s Economics and Business Faculty implemented this system, with students marked against the criteria.

“Students loved this – they could log on and look at feedback without it being a mark. Then the cry was that they also wanted a mark. Sydney decided to publish the review and then three days later they get the mark.”

While Thompson acknowledges the need for some conventional examination, he argues that universities have become too exam-skewed.

“The exam is an athletic event, not an educational practice – but the worst thing is that you don’t get a second chance,” says Thompson.

He says his approach will allow academics to fine-tune their teaching methods and content, but also encourages students to take a more developmental approach to their own learning by understanding what skills and attributes they need to hone.

The Australian Learning and Teaching Council has funded the research project, and besides the project at Sydney University there are now 120 students at the School of Design at UTS using the system which will be available to all UTS faculties next year. Other universities, led by New Zealand’s Massey University, have also started to buy evaluation licences.

“The biggest challenge is to get the teaching academics to make explicit the criteria they are judging by, then students can self-assess and learn from that,” says Thompson.

In schools he believes the bigger hurdle will be parental acceptance. A pilot in a Sydney girls’ school had gone well, with both staff and students happy with the system, but parents demanded to know their children’s marks.

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Embrace the revolution

New research claims educators are still not using technology in their teaching, and urges a new wave of professional learning, writes Linda Belardi.

Traditional approaches to teaching practice remain largely unchanged, with a new report claiming just a third of teachers use technology effectively in their teaching practice.

"Teacher professional learning: planning for change" from education.au, the government body that promotes IT use among educators, claims only 27 per cent of teachers are using technology to "a significant degree" in their teaching.

According to the online and focus group survey of 1124 respondents across Australia, a lack of confidence in using modern technology and the frequency with which new technologies emerge are cited as significant barriers.

"Many teachers just use whiteboards, for example, as a glorified projection screen, with the teacher at the centre of learning," says Dr Ruth Greer, program director with the School of Education at the University of South Australia.

The survey canvassed the views of a range of educators from schools, universities and the VET sector – the majority of whom had been teaching for more than 10 years.

The report calls for more allocated time and funding for intense IT professional learning, which, it says, is key to truly embedding digital education in schools.

Collaborative teacher teams based around key learning areas provide the most effective method for professional learning, compared to one-off workshops which are less successful at changing practice.

Workshops, often external to the school, are frequently delivered by IT experts who have a sound understanding of how to use the particular technology, but little knowledge of the curriculum applications of the tool.

Garry Putland, general manager of business development at education.au, says the mentoring system where teachers can learn from their peers is the most successful sustainable activity.

The report also suggests the establishment of a national repository of exemplars and curriculum guides, supported by an online community focusing discussion and trialling of new tools.

Online professional networking sites such as Oz-Teachernet and the groups set up by the Education Network Australia (www.groups.edna.edu.au) offer important opportunities to collaboratively plan and share strategies, resources and model work samples.

This level of collaboration and information exchange is critical to changing cultural practice, says Putland.

"We need to move beyond the idea of teachers being islands, to teachers being connected islands, connected to others in the state, nationally and on a global scale."

Greer is positive about this approach, saying teaching training needs to be integrated at the point of learning.

Methodist Ladies College (MLC) in Sydney is highlighted in the report as an example of a school that has successfully implemented ICT, with students from kindergarten to Year 12 using tools such as i-chat, i-movie and blogs in their learning.

"The use of ICT in teaching and learning allows a student to become a publisher, a researcher, a filmmaker. It unleashes the creativity of students in a variety of ways," says Barbara Stone, MLC’s principal.

"The example of students from non-English speaking backgrounds who can tend to be quiet in class but have become much more "vocal" in expressing their views and opinions when blogging and online discussion has been used in web-based units. Facebook networks have also been established among international students, who feel more confident asking questions in an online forum.

"Through repeat plays of podcasts or webcasts, students can also engage in deeper learning. Indeed, she says one of the greatest advantages of using technology is its capacity to globalise classroom learning. At MLC, students use a virtual learning space called Skolaborate to interact with peers in 80 partner schools in a range of countries.

"It is a mind-expanding experience to establish a discussion where you realise that you think quite differently to others. Students can discuss a range of topics, such as how you feel about your parents, to ethical concerns and global issues," says Stone.

While acknowledging the numerous benefits technology is bringing to student learning, Schuck cautions against a blanket view that justifies its use simply because it is available. "Teachers need to think deeply about their practice and choose carefully what enhances student learning according to the curriculum," she says.

"Some learning activities will provide real benefits and others won’t be appropriate for the particular learning that is required," she says.

Strong leadership and access to robust and reliable equipment is also essential for the digital take-up to ensure students are equipped with the necessary 21st century skills.

"When reviewed in 100 years time, the digital education revolution will have as much impact as the original printing press, and we are only beginning to understand how," says Stone.
Real experience in an unreal world

By Beverley Head

Last month, users of Second Life clocked up their one billionth hour spent in the virtual online world.

Alert to the opportunities offered by virtual environments, education has been one of the fastest sectors to embrace the concept, with hundreds of universities and schools either setting up their own islands in Second Life, or delivering course content in the virtual environment.

While Second Life, created by Linden Lab in 2003, is the best known, educators are exploring alternative environments, and starting to develop tools and guidelines to help teachers keen to harness the power of virtual worlds.

While virtual worlds for educational purposes has been around for some time for purposes such as flight simulators, Dr Alan Ellis, director of research and research training in commerce and management at Southern Cross University, says virtual worlds are now gaining traction in other subject areas.

“We are getting to the point with connectivity, processing power and screens that we can create virtual worlds. Students learn the theory and concepts – but then have to function in real-world environments. This lets them put the thinking, reading and power and screens that we can create virtual worlds. Students learn the theory and concepts – but then have to function in real-world environments. This lets them put the thinking, reading and conceptual understanding into practice. They could be a lawyer in court or an accountant doing a business audit,” says Ellis. Ellis has created a space in Second Life called Interaction Island – a kind of virtual world boot camp for staff and small groups of students. The project, launched in August, took a year to create, and brings together a mix of people in cross-disciplinary environments.

Next year, there are plans to introduce the technology for hospitality management, for a unit on most law and another on auditing a company.

Faculty uptake has varied, but Ellis says that change is taking place at an intergenerational rate.

“If you teach now, you can’t expect to teach the same way for 10 years,” he says.

In theory, web 2.0 tools and virtual worlds should make education more accessible to different student cohorts. Ensuring equity of access is a focus of a project being led by the University of South Australia.

Dr Denise Wood is a senior lecturer in media arts at the School of Communication, International Studies and Languages. Along with Associate Professor Gerry Bloustien, she is a project leader of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council-funded project to develop an accessible 3D virtual learning environment and pedagogical guidelines for academics wishing to teach in such environments.

“We were conscious of the interest from educators to use Second Life, but it was not accessible to certain cohorts of students. Universities need to be prepared in terms of access and equity, and if they use high end simulated environments, make sure they don’t exclude people.”

Wood has been conducting research with disability groups in Second Life, and her students are also working with people from these groups.

“We have been delivering some courses in Second Life and I have students working with people with disabilities online”. Longer term, the project aims to develop an accessible open source-based 3D virtual learning environment that accommodates the needs of diverse student groups.

“By 2010 we will have developed a series of pedagogical guidelines to support teachers who are using these environments for teaching and learning, and together with our partner institutions in Australia and the UK, we will be developing a large number of case studies available via the project website. The project team is working in parallel with the developer, who is adapting an open source viewer to embed accessibility features to support visually impaired learners,” says Wood.

Wood presented at a virtual worlds workshop hosted by AARNet at the University of Wollongong in September to outline the accessibility challenges and solutions for open source 3D virtual world programs, and UniSA’s experience using Second Life. She has recently been using UniSA’s island in Second Life as a platform for experiential learning. Students interact online with disability and health-related support groups to provide access to real people and problems.

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Waverley College has always wanted to keep pace with technology as part of the school’s curriculum and, in concert with the government’s digital education revolution, the school was recently able to increase the number of laptop computers available for students.

Rather than deploying these into technology laboratories with hard-wired computers tied to one spot, the school’s IT team determined that a wireless networking solution would give the college the greatest flexibility in providing access. It would enable the school to take technology into the classroom, rather than having to take classes into the technology labs.

The school offers a diverse range of technology, running both PCs and Apple Macs for example, with six laboratories of 30 computers located around the school. The college had already made a significant investment in its hard-wired networking infrastructure, so integration into this was an important consideration.

After drawing up a shortlist of three suppliers and evaluating their competing mobile computing solutions, Waverley College determined that D-Link’s proposal provided the best combination of value for money, functionality, reliability and technical support.

“From my perspective it was essential that we worked with a vendor and reseller combination which understood the requirements of an education customer,” says Simon Potter, IT manager for Waverley College. “The needs of a school like ours are very different from what you see in the commercial sector.

“It was important for the new system to strike a balance between affordability and providing a robust, reliable business-grade solution,” says Jamie Carter, corporate business manager for D-Link Australia and New Zealand. “Any new mobile solution that we proposed would have to ensure that Waverley College’s students, teachers and other staff would feel confident that network connectivity was available as and when required.”

The new solution is based on D-Link’s DWS-3024 Gigabit Wireless Switch, which provides a centralised point for the management and security of the entire wireless network.

It was important for the new system to strike a balance between affordability and providing a robust, reliable business-grade solution.

The new wireless solution is greatly appreciated by students and teachers, enabling laptop computers to be used in conjunction with interactive whiteboards and data projectors, for example, to improve the teaching environment.

The move to mobile computing has been completely trouble-free, with no disruption to students or teachers, and has not imposed any additional support burden or other overheads on the school.

“From an IT perspective, in terms of support overheads, the D-Link solution has simply worked from day one and we have not had to touch it since it was installed,” says Potter.

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Aldinga Beach R-7 School in South Australia recently installed the latest interactive whiteboards and projectors in its classrooms. And already the school is seeing the educational benefits.

A total of 20 boards with accompanying projectors have been installed at the school - one in each classroom. Hitachi Australia was selected to provide Starboard FX DUO-77 interactive whiteboards and CP-A100 ultra short throw LCD data projectors.

Aldinga Beach uses the interactive whiteboards hand-in-hand with the projectors on a daily basis. Teachers consider them to be useful tools that highlight and enhance the school’s student literacy and engagement programs.

The projector, when used in partnership with an interactive whiteboard, allows images to be projected onto the board without obstructions. This in turn reduces shadowing from interfering with the image.

Unlike conventional projectors, the CP-A100 eliminates projection glare from being beamed directly into the teacher’s eyes. This was a selling point to Aldinga Beach to prevent occupation health and safety issues arising due to daily use of the interactive whiteboards and projectors.

There is a great importance placed on the fact that both the teachers and students are able to use the interactive whiteboards. In the future it is hoped that the students will develop their own programs using the boards to support their learning.

“The teachers are absolutely sold on the equipment and software. Every teacher is using it in one shape or form,” says Kim Boothey, student engagement coordinator.

“Originally we only had 13 interactive whiteboards installed but we wanted to ensure everyone had the opportunity to have a board in their classroom for student engagement. It was a huge investment and rollout for us, but we believe it is worth it.”

About the products

**Hitachi FX-DUO 77 interactive whiteboard:**

The whiteboard offers a damage-resistant screen that can be used by multiple users simultaneously. It responds to pen or finger and its low-reflection surface is kind on the eyes.

**Key features:**
- Robust surface
- Low reflection
- Operates electronic pen or finger
- Gesture control
- Simultaneous inputs
- Field replaceable digitiser

**Hitachi CPA-100 ultra short throw LCD data projector:**

Offering a new level of versatility and performance to the education market, this model features an ultra short throw distance, eliminating the problem of presenters obstructing the projected image by standing in front of the screen.

**Key features:**
- Short-throw distance: 60 inches at 42cm
- Brightness: 2,500 ANSI lumens
- Contrast ratio 400:1
- Resolution: 1,024 x 768 colour pixels
- Number of pixels: 786,432 pixels (V768 x H1,024)
- Projection method: Mirror type
- Lens: Fixed lens, power focus
- Lamp: 220W UHB
- Audio: 7W mono

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**The teachers are absolutely sold on the equipment and software. Every teacher is using it in one shape or form.**

Organised by Boothey and Derek Newbold, IT support officer, the teachers were given the opportunity to use various boards and projectors and select the one that they preferred.

“Hitachi was the standout for a number of reasons including the versatility of the board, the hard surface, the way it integrates with Microsoft products, the large size of the board and also Leedall’s offer of training for individuals and groups,” says Boothey.

“Originally we only had 13 interactive whiteboards installed but we wanted to ensure everyone had the opportunity to have a board in their classroom for student engagement. It was a huge investment and rollout for us, but we believe it is worth it.”
Combining the touch sensitive FX-Duo 63", 77" or 88" interactive whiteboard and the CP-A100, Ultra Short Throw LCD projector into one seamless package creates the ultimate in interactive teaching solutions. The CP-A100 is fully featured and boasts a short throw distance which helps to eliminate the problem of presenters obstructing the board, removes distracting shadows and adjusts to your teaching style rather than the other way around. The FX-Duo interactive whiteboard provides the other half of the solution with its dual, finger-touch capable surface for the most simple interaction ever! The unique combination of these two products presents countless opportunities to learn and ensures that nothing will get between your lessons and your students.

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Quick and easy to set-up and use

The software is easy to install and configure, and you can be up-and-running within minutes. VM-100 can be left running in the background of the receptionist’s PC, available for use as soon as any visitor arrives. As all information is entered and displayed on one screen, entering the visitor’s information, taking their photograph (with optional webcam) and printing a visitor badge takes just moments.

*Available separately – not included in VM-100

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