Evaluation Case Study

OnlineTraining Limited
professional learning modules

MSSD Output 5: Skills training in special education
Online professional learning modules designed by the UK based organisation OnlineTraining Ltd (OLT) (www.oltaustralia.net) played a significant part in the success of the MSSD initiative. The modules were adapted in collaboration with 15 participating authorities to support their strategies for building staff skills in special education. The OLT modules were also widely used to underpin principal and school leadership development. The case study identifies the major elements of the OLT design and delivery that were key to its success and examines the ways in which the modules were adopted and adapted to suit the diverse contexts of Australian education authorities.

Key elements and actions

The online professional learning courses, designed by the UK-based organisation OnlineTraining Ltd (OLT) (www.oltaustralia.net) were an integral component of MSSD outputs for 15 of the 24 Australian education authorities. Thirteen authorities used OLT as the major source of professional learning to build skills in special education (Output 5) selecting from six courses that had been significantly revised and customised to address the context and needs of Australian schools, that is:

- Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Motor Coordination Difficulties
- Speech, Language and Communication Needs
- Managing Behaviour
- Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading
- Understanding Hearing Loss.

The OLT Model

The design and delivery of the OLT model is based on three key assumptions about effective professional learning for educators:1

- training needs to be delivered in the context in which it is to be applied, including the support systems normally available
- training needs to have immediate practical application in the workplace
- training needs to be targeted at staff who most require support to address immediate challenges related to inclusion in the classroom.

Figure 1 shows the main elements of the course structure and administrative processes. Each course follows the same format with content organised in four sections: understanding the special needs specific to the course; assessing student needs and setting goals; interventions and selection of interventions to achieve the goals set; and case studies providing examples of

interventions. Each course is conducted over a 10-week period with learning cohorts of 10-12 participants.

The requirements for participants are also consistent for each course, with a blended learning approach using tutor-led group face-to-face sessions combined with self-paced online learning. This involves around 20 hours of engagement supported by an online tutor and ‘social area’ function of the Learning Management System (LMS). Each participant conducts a case study of assessment and intervention with a student, which they report back on after a 90-day period.

Figure 1: A schematic representation of the online training model
(Adapted from original source: Clench, H. & Smyth King, B. (2014)

The model supports planning, operations and monitoring of activity at state wide, regional and tutor levels. Tutors use the LMS to monitor and evaluate course participation and the extent to which participants are meeting course requirements. Additionally, tutors are able to access post course evaluation material as a means to self-monitor and adjust their facilitation skills.

Participants have access via the LMS to a range of resources as well as links to relevant literature and reports. They can email the course tutor via a link within the course content for clarification of any issues, and where queries are not able to be resolved locally, particularly those of a technical nature. Both tutors and participants can access a help-desk at central office.

**Role of central and regional offices**

Aside from managing the contractual arrangements with OLT, including input into content development as required, education authorities have a clear role in administering the training and quality assuring programme delivery. For example, a small central team from the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) managed the state-wide operation of the courses, including:
• systematically supporting schools
• providing technical support and advice to tutors and participants
• working with the UK designers to develop and adapt courses for local use
• developing new courses and materials
• training tutors
• implementing quality assurance processes through monitoring of online activity and site visits
• liaising with and supporting regional coordinators
• developing and providing systematic analysis of data and evaluative feedback.

As the initiator of the Australian use of OLT courses, the DEC also played a key role in supporting the start-up of OLT programmes in other jurisdictions including tutor training.

How one module was used

An example of the use of one module delivered in the New South Wales government sector—Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading—provides insights into the organisational arrangements, experience and outcomes for school staff participating in the OLT training programme. Course participants interviewed by the evaluation team cited a range of reasons for undertaking this module, the most common being preparation for their role as a Learning and Support Teacher (LaST) in their school. As one teacher explained:

_I am new to the LaST role and already know that two of the students that I am working with have dyslexia. I am happy to be doing this course so that I can obtain an understanding of the way that these children are/aren’t learning within the classroom setting at the moment and the ways in which I can assist them (and their classroom teacher). This is my first online course, and I believe that it is a great way that I can upskill myself (particularly in this new role)._?

As part of the course requirements, participants worked in groups to convert generic learning goals into SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Relevant, Timed), and design a set of interventions relevant to achieving each goal.

In addition to the readings, videos, assessment tools and intervention strategies available through the course, participants also received a range of additional resources including:

• a booklet featuring a range of visual prompts, scaffolds and graphic organisers to assist students with specific aspects of reading and sustaining engagement in learning more generally
• guidelines and resources produced by the DEC on assessing student learning and analysing the data to inform interventions
• DEC policy standards advice related to assessment and reporting to parents
• PowerPoint presentations featuring hyperlinks to a range of other DEC resources.

Participants were able to continue accessing materials post-course completion via live log-ins to the online modules.

Feedback from the final session of the dyslexia module showed that the training exceeded the expectation of participants generally, specifically with respect to gaining enhanced knowledge and skills, new insights into assessment and interventions, and the benefits of establishing SMART goals. Teachers and school paraprofessional staff reported an enhanced repertoire of
skills to assess students’ learning needs and sharpened goals of interventions in response to these assessed needs:

I am better able to create interventions that are effective and targeted to individual students. I also have a better understanding of how to simplify and target interventions so that they are achievable and not quite so overwhelming.

Some 15 months after completing the course, participants also reported a sense of being more confident and self-assured when interacting with parents:

I now confidently give reassurance to parents where learning issues emerge. I have always been supportive in the past but I can now talk about specific intervention strategies as a means to address learning needs.

Lessons learned

The OLT modules for special education needs were well received across all participating authorities. They provided a model of what is possible to achieve in accommodating diverse structures for schooling across state, regional and local contexts and in the process opened up new opportunities for authorities to rethink their approaches to professional learning. The flexibility in the design and delivery of the courses enabled sectors to adapt the modules to suit their system-wide plans for inclusive education and to work collaboratively with other authorities to maximise the benefits of the OLT model.

Key observations

Effectiveness of the model

The consistency of the course format was one of the strengths of the OLT approach since it enabled participants to navigate the modules with ease and confidence and at their own pace to fit with other demands on their time. Reports from the authorities and the evaluation materials show that the quality of the OLT materials and their relevance to Australian teachers, particularly the case studies and video clips, generated a high level of interest and commitment to inclusive education.

Participants valued the group interactions and the diversity of views and background experiences achieved via a mix of primary and secondary specialists, class teachers and school support staff from different settings. However, feedback from course facilitators, regional personnel and centrally based programme leaders also identified whole school training as the form of delivery with the potential to most profoundly influence changes in pedagogy and assessment as it relates to students with disability. For example, the Tasmanian Catholic Education Office found that the OLT approach was most effective where there was a local school group working together on issues in common. The CEO also considered that the face-to-face experience provided extra information with the benefit of an additional element of quality assurance.

Training and quality control for effective tutor roles

The role of the course tutor was critical to the success of the OLT programme, with all authorities giving priority to ensuring the quality of tutor training. In New South Wales for example, the DEC required each facilitator to have:

- completed the course they will be delivering themselves
- participated in intensive tutor training which further explores the resources related to the programme
undertaken training in facilitating professional learning for adults

worked alongside another more experienced facilitator to gain first hand insights into course facilitation.

The most effective tutors were typically characterised by participants and project leaders as good facilitators of discussions, knowledgeable, approachable and well organised in monitoring forum contributions and responding to queries online.

**Evaluating and monitoring progress**

A major lesson learned from the MSSD initiative generally is the importance of building in systematic evaluation processes from the outset. Authorities were able to ensure that teachers and school support staff fully engaged with the OLT course materials through monitoring participant input online and providing direct tutorial support for individuals via email followed by face-to-face networking sessions with a special education expert.

The UK designers tailored the model to meet Australian needs and in the process introduced a pre-evaluation form to enhance the diagnostic capacity of the data analysis. During each of the courses participants are required to formulate three goals that they would like to achieve with a child in mind. They must also determine, from what they have learned in the course, three strategies or interventions to achieve these goals. Three months after completion of the course they are asked to evaluate the success of the goals using a goal attainment scale. All evaluation through the system is available instantly to tutors and for coordinating groups for analysis and reporting purposes.

**Supporting school staff in rural and remote settings**

Throughout the MSSD initiative education authorities placed great emphasis on ensuring local access to professional learning courses for teachers in close proximity to wherever they teach. In this respect the format of the OLT courses was particularly effective in supporting schools in rural and remote settings. For example, in the Northern Territory, with culturally diverse schools scattered across vast geographic areas, equity of access to professional learning is an ongoing challenge. To address this the DoE, in collaboration with the Association of Independent Schools and the Catholic Education Office, introduced four online professional learning courses from the OLT suite of courses to maximise coverage across the Territory. The course Introduction to Special Education was commissioned by the DoE and designed locally, the only course of its kind in Australia, featuring Northern Territory examples and case studies relating to six key disabilities.

Tasmania also presents an example of the challenges involved in delivering professional learning to geographically isolated schools. Using the OLT modules enabled Independent Schools Tasmania (IST) to provide support for isolated schools with difficulty accessing professional learning for a number of MSSD outputs, including skills training in special education. An expert consultant was engaged to provide specialist tutor support with site-specific training for the teachers to build their skills in special education along with OLT modules.

**Aligning OLT modules with system level strategies**

The value of aligning MSSD activities and programmes with existing or developing system level reforms was a major lesson more generally from the initiative. The use of the OLT model as an integral element in these strategies is a prime example of this with respect to improved approaches to professional learning.
Examples of the alignment of OLT courses with the strategic plans of systems include the Queensland DET, which was committed to strengthening the engagement of paraprofessionals in the classroom (Output 11). This was partly achieved through the creation of online interactive courses developed with OLT, specifically for teacher aides tailored to the authority and jurisdiction context. This also extended to articulation with jurisdiction registration requirements, as in the case of New South Wales, where each OLT course carries a Certificate of Online Completion and teachers are registered with the New South Wales Institute of Teachers for 20 hours of accreditation.

A number of authorities also aligned OLT training with programmes to ensure all school staff understood their obligations under the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Output 6). Most authorities used the University of Canberra DSE 2005 eLearning modules (Case study 2) for this purpose, such as the ACT Education and Training Directorate where school staff who enrolled in an OLT course were expected to also complete the DSE 2005 eLearning module.

**Sustainability**

The provision of OLT modules for teaching and support staff will continue beyond 2015 across all participating authorities with extended licence agreements. With 90 percent completion rates for modules the OLT approach clearly exceeded the expectations of authorities and indeed inspired many to explore new options for professional learning for educators. For example, Tasmanian government schools will continue to be involved in four days of professional development annually which will be aimed at generating an ongoing stream of facilitators to embed these OLT learning experiences into normal school practice.

Likewise, in the NSW Catholic system the popularity of the training programmes, and the initiative generally, provided senior leadership at the Archdiocesan level with a compelling case to justify support beyond the MSSD initiative. This included a commitment to a two-year licence to continue online training (OLT) to meet the demand. In 2015 the Diocese will offer five different modules to 12 cohorts of school staff and expects an increase in the following years as new staff are appointed in schools.

**Potential for adoption in other contexts**

Committing to continuous improvement is the first challenge for authorities contemplating adopting or adapting online professional learning such as the OLT programme. The level of significant engagement with online professional learning driven by MSSD activities across all jurisdictions, particularly the OLT and University of Canberra DSE 2005 eLearning Modules, set new standards and created high expectations for the quality and delivery of professional learning experiences.

Two other aspects to consider are the need for flexibility in the design and delivery processes and strong central leadership. The way authorities went about implementing the OLT courses was typically flexible and creative in response to their diverse contexts, including some in the smaller jurisdictions that had limited capacity to lead and manage the programme. Providing immediate access to high quality professional learning is a key to successful implementation of the OLT model. Where this occurred online training made a strong start in rapidly building capacity in schools.

In contrast to the UK where local authorities present a fragmented context for course design and delivery, Australia has the advantage of a small group of central authorities with leadership increasingly valuing collaborative cross-sector approaches to creating inclusive environments for students with disability. There are strong accountability arrangements in place that were consolidated during the MSSD initiative. Managing quality from the central
offices will be critical and that includes providing a strong organisational framework to ensure consistency and continuity of the programme.

Notes

The case study is informed by conversations with the OLT team and reports provided by them. Observations in this case study are drawn from reports from the authorities and interviews with senior officers in each jurisdiction. The example of the *Dyslexia and Significant Difficulties in Reading* course is based on interviews with a group of teachers in the Riverina Region of New South Wales in Term 2, 2013 as well as interviews with regional and central office personnel with responsibility for the organisation and structure of the professional learning programme in New South Wales government schools.