NEGOTIATING THE AGENDAS: DEVELOPING AN OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK THROUGH THE EXPLORATION OF LEARNING NETWORK MODELS AND PRACTICES

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Leone Kay Wheeler
BCA, Dip Teaching, MBIT

School of Education
Design and Social Context Portfolio
RMIT University

July 2004
STK THR 374.994 W562
Negotiating the agendas
Swanston Library
Theses Collection
Bib ID: 145609
B/C: 31259008553401
DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program.

I acknowledge Desi Giannoulas who redrew the graphics and Sharon Rockman who undertook editorial work on this thesis.

Leone Wheeler

29 January 2005
I thank my supervisor, Associate Professor Ern Reeders, for guiding me through this process. I also thank my second supervisor, Mike Brown, for giving me further advice on finishing the thesis. I also thank all the key stakeholders in RMIT LearnLinks, especially the community partners, RMIT staff (especially Jane Stewart) including my team within RMIT Learning Networks, the staff at NMR ACFE and my two key informants, Jan McGannon and Ian Hughes. I also acknowledge the wealth of information I obtained from practitioners, consultants and academics based in the United Kingdom and Canada, in particular Martin Yarnit and Dr Ron Faris.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner Lindsay and children James and Georgina for their support and patience throughout this process.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One - Introduction .................................................. 14
  1.0 Background to the Investigation .................................. 14
  1.1 Significance of the Study ........................................... 16
  1.2 Limitations and Boundaries of the Study ...................... 17
  1.3 Definition of Terms ................................................. 22

Chapter Two - Methods ..................................................... 23
  2.0 Introduction to Research Design ................................. 23
  2.1 Research Methodology .............................................. 25
  2.2 Methods for Collecting and Analysing Data .................. 39
  2.3 Techniques for Analysing Qualitative Data ................. 57

Chapter Three - Setting the Scene ...................................... 62
  3.0 Introduction .......................................................... 62
  3.0 Technological Change .............................................. 63
  3.1 International Environment ....................................... 68
  3.2 Australia's Education System ................................... 72
  3.3 Understanding Frameworks for Learning Networks .......... 80
  3.4 Sustainable Networks .............................................. 93
  3.5 Victorian Flexible Learning Networks ......................... 97
  3.6 Summary ............................................................... 105

Chapter Four - Working the Agendas .................................... 108
  4.1 Planning ............................................................... 109
  4.2 Actions ................................................................. 114
  4.3 Observations ........................................................ 120
  4.4 Reflections .......................................................... 134
  4.5 Findings ............................................................... 136
  4.6 Summary ............................................................... 145

Chapter Five - Charting a Direction .................................... 147
  5.0 Introduction - Cycle Two (2000-2001) ......................... 147
  5.1 Planning ............................................................... 149
  5.2 Actions ................................................................. 151
  5.3 Observations ........................................................ 159
  5.4 Reflection ............................................................ 177
  5.5 Findings ............................................................... 180
  5.6 Summary ............................................................... 187

Chapter Six - Towards an Operational Framework ..................... 188
  6.0 Introduction - Cycle Three (2001-2002) ....................... 188
  6.1 Planning ............................................................... 189
  6.2 Action ................................................................. 190
  6.3 Observations ........................................................ 194
  6.4 Reflection ............................................................ 217
  6.5 Findings ............................................................... 220
  6.6 Summary ............................................................... 230

Chapter Seven - Developing an Operational Framework ............. 231
Conclusions and Implications ............................................. 231
  7.0 Introduction .......................................................... 231
  7.1 Major Findings ...................................................... 232
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.1</td>
<td>Structure of the Research</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.2</td>
<td>Action Research Spiral</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.3</td>
<td>Research Design Features of this Investigation</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.4</td>
<td>Analysis of RMIT LearnLinks as a Case Study</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.1</td>
<td>Diffusion of Innovation Over Time</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.2</td>
<td>Adoption of an Innovation Over Time</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.3</td>
<td>Centralised, Decentralised and Distributed Networks</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.4</td>
<td>The Faris Lifelong Learning Community Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.5</td>
<td>Funding Sources for Community Networks</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.1</td>
<td>Analysis of RMIT LearnLinks as a Case Study</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.2</td>
<td>Learning Network Value Chain</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.3</td>
<td>Model of RMIT Learning Network</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.4</td>
<td>The Future of RMIT Learning Network (2000)</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.1</td>
<td>Development of a Learning City – ACE/RMIT Learning Communities Project</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.2</td>
<td>ACE/RMIT Learning Communities Project (1999-2002) Development</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.3</td>
<td>Structure of an e-learning Business – LearnLinks</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.1</td>
<td>Consolidation and Enhancement Phases of an Operational Framework</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7.1</td>
<td>Life Cycle of an Operational Framework of a Sustainable Learning Network based on Partnerships</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7.2</td>
<td>RMIT Learning Networks Action Learning/Action Research Cycle</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.1</td>
<td>Criteria for Selection of International Experts Interviewed in this Study</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.2</td>
<td>Local Interviewees</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.3</td>
<td>Data Sources Used in this Research</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.4</td>
<td>Key to Data Source Referencing</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.5</td>
<td>Colour Coding for Organisation of Key Information in NVivo</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.6</td>
<td>Summary of the Action Research Cycle</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.7</td>
<td>Summary of the Findings</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>Summary of Guiding Principles that Formed the Basis of the First Learning Network (Commlink)</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.2</td>
<td>Main Actions in Cycle One</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.3</td>
<td>Findings from Cycle One (Mid 1998 – December 1999)</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.4</td>
<td>Interpretation of Success Factors from Online Network in VET Project Applied to RMIT LearnLinks</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.1</td>
<td>Relationship of Stakeholders Involved in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.2</td>
<td>LearnLinks Strategy Map</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.3</td>
<td>Findings from Cycle Two (2000/2001)</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.4</td>
<td>Interpretation of Success Factors from Online Network in VET Project Applied to RMIT LearnLinks</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.1</td>
<td>Features of Structural Models</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.2</td>
<td>Purposes and Nature of Partnerships</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.3</td>
<td>Findings Cycle Three (2001/2002)</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.4</td>
<td>Interpretation of Success Factors from Online Network in VET Project Applied to RMIT LearnLinks</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.1</td>
<td>Innovation Cycle of a Learning Network</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8.1</td>
<td>RMIT LearnLinks Review Day - 2003 Success Factors</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1, Table 1</td>
<td>Overseas Interviewees</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1, Table 2</td>
<td>Local Interviewees</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1, Table 3</td>
<td>Annual Review Days</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1, Table 4</td>
<td>Interview Schedule</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4, Table 1</td>
<td>Victorian Flexible Learning Networks – Comparison of Tender Documents (1998-2002)</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 5, Table 1</td>
<td>Timelines for ANTA Flexible Learning Leaders Program</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 6, Table 1</td>
<td>Flexible Learning Networks of Victoria (2001/2002)</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

This study examines the elements necessary to enable an operational framework for a learning network. It highlights those factors most likely to lead to long-term sustainability. An Action Learning and Action Research (ALAR) methodology was used to investigate the development of a Victorian Flexible Learning Network (RMIT LearnLinks) as an instrumental case study over three funding cycles.

For the purpose of this investigation, the learning network under examination, RMIT LearnLinks, was defined as a cooperative of education providers working together to provide Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) programs accessible via the Internet.

Data was gathered from interview transcripts with international experts and local stakeholders, past research (Wheeler, 1997), literature reviews, records, documents, artefacts, archives (built up over five years), notes from two key informants and notes from annual review days held with key stakeholders.

As a practitioner researcher, I found that the project passed through lifecycle phases from establishment through to consolidation. By using ALAR methodology, I was able to turn tacit knowledge into a useable knowledge base that could be applied in other larger projects, both within my team, the broader University community and other organisations and communities we deal with. I also found common elements of an operational framework that were more likely to lead to sustainability, and that the importance of these factors depended upon the goals and the maturity of the network, and the organisational and political context in which it operated.
This project had been my inner journey - what Cherry (1998) refers to as the learning strand; this journey was about developing individual and collective practice and enhancing my capability of doing the same or different — possibly harder — things in the future. From time to time, I have reflected on my role during the project and asked myself a number of questions:

- What was this project? The concept kept changing and the process was iterative — the meaning was very hard to define.
- Why was it difficult to explain this project to university colleagues?
- Where was this project going?
- How did I intuitively know that this project would be successful?
- Why didn’t the partners take more of an interest in this project?
- Could it be made into a sustainable business?
- How was this project justified within the university context?
- Why did I persist with this project instead of utilising my specialisation of online education and flexible delivery systems in a more lucrative arena?

I know that for this research that I was a research instrument and this thesis tells the story. I have come to realise that the journey is the process, not necessarily the arrival. In many ways I could now start to answer those questions, such as “why did I start this project” and “what was it that intuitively made me believe that this project would be successful?” Personal growth, the journey towards self-knowledge, the search for your ‘white stone’, has no limits (Handy, 1998). Projects will come and go but the journey towards self-knowledge will not end. I want to acknowledge two key
life events that occurred at the end of 1998 (at the same time that the learning network project began) and influenced me to stay with the project regardless of current thinking and better employment offers. These events were the death of my father, Michael, and shortly afterwards, the unexpected death of my sister-in-law, Janet. Michael suffered from a mental illness from time to time and, in his mid 40s, was left to raise six children following my mother's death from cancer. I admired Michael, as he was a great thinker and environmentalist even though he left the formal schooling system at 12 years of age. Michael gave me a quest for knowledge and learning and my Aunty Frances, who looked after me during my teenage years, nurtured the attribute. This was consistent with the principles of lifelong learning as being grounded in the earliest experiences of learning. "What happens in families and schools from the earliest years will dramatically shape the cognitive and affective skills and attitudes that individuals then take with them into work and the wider community" (ANTA, 1999).

Janet's death reinforced the idea that this was a worthwhile project. Janet worked tirelessly as a nursing manager of a large aged-care hospital. She proudly looked after children, burn victims and the aged. However, every member of our family regrets that we did not know the pain she was going through and that we were not there for her when she needed us most.

I believe that to work with adult and community education providers was a privilege. The ACE providers dedication to the principles of lifelong learning and to so call 'non-traditional' learners is inspiring. The ACE managers work on low profit margins and are well used to cobbling together funds to ensure their centre remains open from one
year to the next. The network also has some of the most low-paid over-qualified teachers in the profession. At one stage it was calculated that the partners in our network employed 200 culturally diverse sessional teachers who spoke 35 different languages between them. It would be wonderful for the network to be able to fully tap into this talent. This belief was reinforced when I visited Dr Ron Faris and learnt of his work and writing on the development of learning communities with First Nation people in British Columbia.

In Cycle One of this project (from December 1998 until December 1999), the learning network was not much more than what was referred to by Handy as a ‘box of contracts’, that is, it was formed out of a successful government tender (Handy, 1999). However, if it were only run as a ‘box of contracts’, it would not be in existence today. During this phase, there were major problems in accessing the technology, in finding suitable online content for the target audience and in the reliability of both online platforms used (TAFE VC and RMIT’s Distributed Learning System). However, all 3 evaluation reports completed for the first cycle noted that, despite the difficulties, there were benefits in remaining in the network. These benefits were based on the relationships that developed and the willingness of RMIT to listen and adapt to community provider needs (Circit, 1999; Phillips, 2000)(RLN State 3 Report 1998/1999).

Therefore, I dedicate this work to my father Michael Joseph Sugrue, my sister-in-law, Janet Mary Wheeler and to the faculty members, consultants, community partners and teachers in the learning network. I also dedicate this work to my Aunty Frances McManus, who in her 90th year has been waiting a long time for me to complete it!
Finally, it is also dedicated to Dr Ron Faris for so generously sharing his expertise and knowledge. Thank you for inspiring me to carry on.
Academic Management System (RMIT University). A computer system that handles RMIT University student enrolments for both Higher Education and TAFE.

Access Points. A variety of locations where the general public can access the Internet for the purpose of communication and searching for information. Examples of these locations include, libraries, learning centres, YWCAs and telecentres. See also Online Access Centres.

ACFE Learning Towns. Nine Learning Towns were established across Victoria in May 2000. A key objective was the formation of a coalition in each learning town, which supported, promoted and valued lifelong learning. The Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Division of the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET) oversees of the Learning Towns Network Program.

Australian Recognition Framework. The ARF comprises the quality assurance and recognition arrangements underpinning the National Training Framework. The main quality assurance mechanism for the VET sector under the ARF is registration, which involves recognition for organisations to provide particular products and services primarily related to the Training Packages. The key elements of the ARF are nationally recognised competency standards, nationally recognised qualifications and nationally Registered Training Organisations (Commonwealth of Australia 1997).

Bridging Social Capital. This refers to ties across heterogeneous groups such as a partnership across people in different types of organisations, for example, an ACE organisation and a university.

Bonding Social Capital. This refers to relations between homogenous groups such as families and ethnic groups.

Collaborative Learning Environments. These are online learning environments that encourage the development of collaborative online learning and the development of online communities.

Commlink Learning Network. This was the first name given to the OTFE funded Victorian learning network at RMIT. The tender team saw as linking the community with training and education via CiVic, NMR ACFE and RMIT University.

Community. An area of common interest, which may or may not be geographically bounded. It usually includes common language, values and norms.
Community Access Program, Canada. Industry Canada funds thousands of affordable Internet access centres in schools, community centres and libraries etc. It is aimed at those people who might not have computers or Internet access in their homes or workplaces (Industry Canada, 2004).

Community Development. This refers to action by people locally to enhance the social, cultural, environmental and economic conditions of their community. The six major purposes of community development, which are increasingly recognized as being inter-related are:

- Citizenship/civic education
- Health promotion
- Economic development
- Environmental/ecological sustainability
- Rural/urban development
- Social development/planning

All six purposes of community development can be informed and infused by a learning-based approach (Faris, 2001, p. 17).

Community Engagement. This is an increasingly common term used by Australian universities to describe teaching, research and service activities that are more responsive to the needs of industry and communities. It can cover discourses about social capital, sustainability, community development, community partnerships and networks, regional engagement and so forth.

Community Informatics. This is the adoption and study of how new information and communications technologies (ICTs) can facilitate the social, economic, political and cultural development of communities (Graham, 1996).

Community Information Victoria (CIVic). This not-for-profit organisation provides community information across Victoria, has 54 community information centre members and 20 associate members.

Community Jobs Program. The Community Jobs Program (CJP) is a Victorian Government funded initiative which, over 4 years, has provided $38.6 million to fund community organisations and government agencies to employ disadvantaged job seekers on community projects.

Community Learning Network. CLN consists of community-controlled structures and systems aimed at furthering community development and enhancing the lives of their constituencies by supporting and encouraging lifelong learning (OLT, 2001).

Community Network. This network is run by the not-for-profit sector and provides free or very low cost access to electronic public space for all the citizens of the community. A community network is usually concerned with:

- building a community which intersects the virtual and geographical community
- provision of universal access to electronic public space known as a ‘commons’
creation of content through dialogue
a common carrier for access to a network (Graham, 1996)

FirstClass. This trade name refers to computer groupware application designed for online collaboration and conferences.

Formal Learning. Formal learning is the systematic, purposeful acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values through educational or training providers for credit or certification (Faris & Peterson, 2000).

Free Nets. Free Nets are community networks that were originally established by the now defunct National Public Telecomputing Network (NPTN) in the US to provide low cost online services to citizens and non-profit organisations.

Further Education. Further Education is oriented toward more specific occupational or life skills rather than academic degrees. It takes place in many non-campus environments such as industry, trade unions, the military, proprietary vocational schools etc (Carnegie, 1973).

Governance: For the purpose of this investigation, governance is defined as the process of decision-making, and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented).

Human Capital. Human capital includes the capacity of people to contribute to the community. It is dependent on their motivation and ability to do so as measured by their skills, knowledge, capacity to adjust to changing circumstances (sometimes by acquiring new skills and knowledge) and the management of health and disability (Black & Hughes, 2001).

Hub. The physical location where marketing, managing and supporting the programs delivered across a learning network takes place. This is where the coordination of the human and physical resources for the network occurs and it may also be the location for shared network facilities (OTFE, 1998b).

Informal Learning. Informal learning is unsystematic, unplanned or serendipitous. It is frequently acquired via the mass media or through social conditioning (Faris & Peterson, 2000).

Job Network. This is an Australian Commonwealth funded initiative and it is part of the government's employment services. It is a national network of private and community organisations dedicated to finding jobs for unemployed people, particularly the long term unemployed.

Learning Community. A learning community addresses the learning needs of its locality through partnership. It uses the strengths of social and institutional relationships to bring about cultural shifts in perceptions of the value of learning.
Learning communities explicitly use learning as a way of promoting social cohesion, regeneration and economic development that involves all parts of the community (Cara & Ranson, 1998).

Learning Network. A learning network is cooperative of education providers working together to provide Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) programs via the Internet (OTTE, 2002). People within the network use computer mediated communication to work and learn together at the time, place, and pace that best suits them and that is appropriate for achieving predetermined learning outcomes and targets.

Learning Organization. This is a metaphor for any human collective, whether in the formal or non-formal sector, in which the lifelong learning of its members is systematically appreciated, encouraged, invested in and used as a central organizational strategy (Faris & Peterson, 2000).

Learning Service Provider (LSP). An LSP designs, hosts, and manages secure collaborative learning environments for higher education, business, state and local government, and non-profit organisations.

Lifelong Learning. Lifelong learning is the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process that stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge; values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances, and environments (Longworth, 1996).

Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs). A Victorian Government initiative, which brings together education providers, industry, community organisations and individual and government organisations to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people in communities across Victoria.

Networking the Nation. This program was established to assist the economic and social development of rural Australia through a range of access and telecommunication infrastructures including IT services (DCITA, 2003b).

Non-Formal Learning. Non-formal learning is the systematic, purposeful learning gained in the workplace, home, community or voluntary organization, which is not for credit or certification (Faris & Peterson, 2000).

Northern Metropolitan Regional Council of Adult, Community and Further Education (NMR ACFE). One of 9 ACFE regional councils across Victoria, this one is responsible for the growth and development of ACFE in the Northern Metropolitan region and provides funding and advocacy to over 40 ACE providers in the region.

OPCETE. OPCETE was the Office of Post Compulsory Education, Training and Employment, Department of Education, Victoria, Australia (also known as OTFE, PETE, ETTE and OTTE as a result of restructuring during the life of the project).
Operational Framework for a Learning Network – is the partnerships developed, the participation of people within communities and the management, systems, and processes required to run a sustainable network of learning centres.

OTFE. OTFE was the Office of Training and Further Education, Department of Education, Victoria, Australia (also known as OPCETE, PETE, ETTE and OTTE as a result of restructuring during the life of this project).

OTTE. OTTE is the Office of Training and Tertiary Education, Department of Education, Victoria, Australia (also known as OPCETE, OTFE, PETE, ETTE as a result of restructuring during the life of this project).

Online Access Centres. In Australia these are government-funded telecentres and public Internet access terminals, including centres with full and part-time staff, unstaffed Internet kiosks, computers in public libraries with Internet access and Rural Transaction Centres.

Pathway. This pathway allows students to move between and among a variety of study programs, awards, education and training.

Partnerships. These partnerships comprise of representatives from a number of different types of agencies or organisations, who come together to oversee or manage a joint activity.

Postmodernism: This body of theory challenges the notions of truth and objectivity upon which the traditional scientific methods rely. Postmodernists argue that truth is relative, conditional and situational, and that knowledge is always an outgrowth of previous experience (Mills, 2003, p. 6).

Regional, Rural and Remote Australia. This is a geographic categorisation used by ABS and others to define a population where:
- urban >10,000
- major rural 2,500-9999
- minor rural 200-2499
- remote <200
Non-urban (regional) Australia is considered to be areas of less than 10,000.

RMIT LearnLinks Hub (also known as the Hub in this document). The paid RMIT University staff who ran the day-to-day operations on behalf of the network, which consisted of a manager, coordinator and technical officer.

RMIT LearnLinks. The final name of the OTTE funded Victorian Flexible Learning Network is now a registered business name.

RMIT Learning Networks Hub. See Hub
Service-learning. Service learning refers to the practice of students (from prep to university) undertaking projects in the community (generally in the not-for-profit, voluntary sector) for academic credit. They apply the concepts of the classroom to their work. It is a partnership between the student and their school and the community [NIVO.Ron Faris.S8].

Shire Councils. Shire councils are local government boundaries within rural and regional Australia.

Social Dialogue. The ILO defines social dialogue to include all types of negotiation, consultation or information exchange between or among representatives of government, employers and workers on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy.

Social/Intellectual Capital. This is a way of describing the intangible assets of a community; the intellectual capacity, talent, know-how, trust, networks and shared values of its members (Faris & Peterson, 2000).

Sustainability. Sustainability refers to the long-term ability of a program to maintain or improve its capacity to deliver services.

TAFE Virtual Campus (TAFE VC): This is an online learning environment, which uses WebCT, and can be accessed free-of-charge by organisations within the State Training System in the State of Victoria, Australia.

User Choice. Users negotiate their publicly funded training needs.
ABBREVIATIONS

ACE. Adult Community Education
ACFE. Adult, Community and Further Education
AMES. Adult Migrant Education Services
AMS. Academic Management System at RMIT University
ANTA. Australian National Training Authority
AQTF. Australian Quality Training Framework
ARF. Australian Recognition Framework
CAP. Community Access Program, Canada
CBOs. Community Based Organisations
CEOs. Chief Executive Officers
CJP. Community Jobs Program
CI. Community Informatics
CLN. Community Learning Network, Canada
CIVic. Community Information Victoria

CTCs. Community Technology Centres, a term commonly used in the USA and also adopted as a name for a network of technology centres in New South Wales (see also OACs)

DHS. Department of Human Services, Victorian State Government, Australia
DfEE. Department for Education and Employment, United Kingdom
DLS. RMIT University's Distributed Learning System
DVC. Department for Victorian Communities
FE. Further Education
**FELCS.** Pre 2004 - Faculty of Education, Language and Community Service (now an RMIT University school within the Design and Social Context Portfolio)

**FLNs.** Flexible Learning Networks (an abbreviation I use throughout this study as shorthand for the Victorian Flexible Learning Network project), also known as Victorian Learning Networks in the first year of operation.

**ITAP.** Information Technology Alignment Project, RMIT University

**ICT.** Information and communication technology

**LCN.** The Network for Learning Communities and the Local Government Association, United Kingdom

**LSP.** Learning Service Provider

**LLEN.** Local Learning and Employment Networks

**NIACE:** National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, England

**NMR ACFE.** Northern Metropolitan Regional Council of Adult Community and Further Education

**NTF.** National Training Framework

**NTN.** Networking the Nation

**OAC.** Online Access Centres

**OPCETE.** Office of Post Compulsory Education, Training and Employment, Department of Education, Victoria, Australia (also known as OTFE, PETE, ETTE and OTTE as a result of restructuring during the life of the project)

**OTFE.** Office of Training and Further Education, Department of Education, Victoria, Australia (also known as OPCETE, PETE, ETTE and OTTE as a result of restructuring during the life of this project)

**OTTE.** Office of Training and Tertiary Education, Department of Education, Victoria, Australia (also known as OPCETE, OTFE, PETE, ETTE as a result of restructuring during the life of this project)

**P Profile.** Recurrent funding for training students in Victoria, Australia. Often quoted at a dollar value per student contact hour (SCH)

**PD.** Professional Development

**RICE.** RMIT Intercultural Community Exchange Program
RMIT. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

RTI. Regional Telecommunications Inquiry

RTO. Registered Training Organisation

SCH. Student Contact Hours

S&RD. Department of State and Regional Development, Victoria, Australia

STS. State Training System, Victoria, Australia

TAFE. Technical and Further Education

TAFE VC. Technical and Further Education Virtual Campus (www.tafevc.com.au)

VET. Vocational Education and Training

VET/FE. Vocational Education and Training and Further Education
1.0 Background to the Investigation

The economic and environmental context over the period of this study (1998-2004) continued to be one of transition from an industrial to a knowledge based or learning economy and society (Edgar, 2001; Faris, 2001; Sheed & Bottrell, 2001). This was happening at a time when there was more pressure than ever for universities to become entrepreneurial and to engage with their communities to build partnerships and networks, thereby building local communities (Duke, 2002b; Marginson & Considine, 2000).

This research was conducted as a case study using an Action Learning and Action Research (ALAR) approach to examine the implementation of a Victorian State Government funded Flexible learning network (FLN) - now known as the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) LearnLinks - over three funding cycles from the period of mid-1998 until 2002. This thesis concludes with an epilogue reviewing 2003, the first year RMIT LearnLinks ran without government funding. It investigated through actions and reflections how RMIT LearnLinks evolved and adapted in line with changing government policy and funding priorities to become integrated as an access and equity programme at RMIT University. The study sought to identify elements common to an operational framework for a learning network project and highlighted those factors more likely to lead to long-term sustainability, especially when government funding ceased. This was felt to be important because of the considerable investment of both university and State Government resources in
the project and my need to understand how to ensure that a community engagement project could become sustainable.

For the purpose of this investigation, the learning network under examination, RMIT LearnLinks, was defined as a cooperative of education providers working together to provide Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) programs via the Internet (OTTE, 2002). People within the network use computer mediated communication to work and learn together at the time, place, and pace that best suites them and is appropriate to achieving pre-determined learning outcomes and targets.

RMIT LearnLinks was one of the original learning networks that was first funded at the end of 1998 by the Victorian State Government in Australia. In Victoria, Australia, the learning network concept was originally discussed in the Ministerial Review of Melbourne TAFEs (OTFE, 1997a). In 1998, the Victorian State Government through the Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE), commissioned a trial year of 10 learning networks to implement online learning programs in various community locations. The aim was to trial immediate options for increasing the State Training Service’s (STS) capacity to provide responsive quality training through flexible delivery arrangements that included the use of the TAFE Virtual Campus (TAFE VC) and online technologies (OTFE, 1998b). The TAFE VC is the state’s online learning platform.
Key Research Question:

The study focused on the following question:

**What is the operational framework required for a sustainable learning network?**

To answer this key question, it was also of interest and relevance to examine the policy context in which the project operated and relate this to relevant theoretical perspectives. I also experimented with the notion that the integration of an online community into a learning network would contribute to the sustainability of the project in the long-term.

1.1 Significance of the Study

This study is important because, both locally and internationally, there has been an explosion in projects and initiatives that involving partnerships, community development and information and communication technology. Furthermore, considerable sums of money have been invested in these projects (Davies, Pinkett, Servon, & Wiley-Schwartz, 2003). The projects are identified by a number of terms such as 'community learning networks', 'flexible learning networks', 'community networks', 'learning towns', 'community information networks' and 'learning communities' but are often, they are not well defined (Denison, Hardy, Johanson, Stillman, & Schauder, 2002). Many of the projects are reliant on short-term funding and when the government money runs out, sustainability becomes an issue (Crowe, 2003). Long-term sustainability of these types of projects and justification in terms of intangible benefits to the community have been identified as two of the biggest challenges faced by the support organisations, the people who run them and governments who fund them (Cisler, Breeden, Guilfoy, Roberts, & Stone, 1999; DCITA, 2003a; Kirby, 2001; Sellar, 2002).
The introduction of a new technology is complex. New knowledge involving technology must be introduced into a social context. The political, social and cultural contexts surrounding the introduction of the technology must be accounted for (Green, 2002). The study of how a technology, such as a learning network system, is introduced and communicated over time to key players in a social system is referred to as the diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 1995). While this investigation is not a diffusion study, I borrow from diffusion research, especially in investigating the role of opinion leaders and change agents and the contexts in which the learning network projects are introduced, including the confines of an organisational setting.

Through interpreting the events of RMIT LearnLinks over a 4 ½ year period, gathering some data in Canada and the United Kingdom and interviewing stakeholders in RMIT LearnLinks, this research identified the barriers that work against the formation of learning networks, the factors that may lead to increased sustainability of these projects in the longer term and the contribution made by FLNs to building the capacity of communities to engage with education and learning. The latter will in turn, contribute to the knowledge, skills and attributes required for economic growth and social inclusion.

1.2 Limitations and Boundaries of the Study

I used RMIT LearnLinks as a case study because I could learn about the operational elements of a learning network and produce an operational framework for a sustainable learning network, which could be used within my business unit. ‘As a form of research, case study is defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used (Stake, 2000, p. 435).’
Stake (1995) also recognises that the issues within a case are "not simple and clean, but intricately wired to political, social, historical – especially personal – contexts" (Stake, 1995, p. 17). Thus a limitation of using the case study was its inherent complexity and the time consuming process of observing and teasing out the issues of a case that lasted 4 ½ years. As Stake (1995) identifies there have been 'conflictual outpourings', a massive amount of documentation that are the 'complex backgrounds of human concern' and through analysis and interpretation make for a rich study.

In social science, a case study "has working parts; it is purposive; it often has a self. It is an integrated system. Functional or dysfunctional, rational or irrational, the case is a system" (Stake, 2000, p. 436). RMIT LearnLinks was a bounded case and the individual elements of the network, that is, stakeholders, systems and procedures, made up the whole case. But I interpreted this case in the context of other learning networks in the state of Victoria, throughout Australia an internationally. This ensured that I understood the general phenomenon, however, in doing so the research became more complex and time consuming.

There is generally no agreed definition of case study, and it is not independent of an interpretive paradigm, as "seen from different world views in different situations the 'same' case is different" (Stake, 2000, p. 449). A limitation of RMIT LearnLinks as a case study was that it was mainly seen from my perspective and, as Stake (2000) maintains it is typical that this view changes over time. However, this case study was enriched by the views of two research informants and other stakeholders who took part in the project.
My role as practitioner researcher was central to the interpretation of the case study. Stake (1995, p. 100) claims, “of all the roles, the role of interpreter and gatherer of interpretations, is central” and it grants the opportunity for qualitative researchers to construct new knowledge. I used an ALAR approach to interpret the knowledge. In this way, Coghlan & Brannick (2001) defined my role as an ‘insider action researcher’. I was an actor in the setting of the organisation. In contrast to traditional research approaches, I was not neutral but an active intervener making and helping things happen. I had a duality of roles on the project - the first was that of project manager and the second was that of researcher. Coghlan & Brannick (2001) noted that this was one of the most complex roles for a researcher. This investigation has been a learning journey for me wherein I have had to make a conscious decision to separate the two.

Reflection comes easily to some people, less easily to others and, in Dick’s experience, action research often attracts practitioners who value its contribution to change (Dick, 2001, p. 26). Having achieved the desired change they are then sometimes impatient to move on to the next project. I have found reflection challenging and I have had to learn to move between what Cherry (1998) refers to as first, second and third thinking positions. Positions vary from just taking action, or doing what comes naturally, to stopping and thinking because someone had challenged me to do that – ‘we stop and not only think, but think about the way we are thinking - we start questioning why we are doing what we are doing’ (Cherry, 1998, p. 17). In third position thinking, Cherry explains that the person becomes self-reflective, literally applying the action learning cycle to themselves. They will notice
aspects of their internal and external behaviour, evaluating aspects of that behaviour's impact upon themselves and others. I found it difficult to move to third position thinking until after facing some personal and political difficulties that moved me to write the preface in March 2000. Other than that, I have written critical incident journals that mostly reflect second stage thinking.

However, Coghlan & Brannick (2001) note that reflection is critical to both the action research cycle and to meta-learning, and that researchers and the systems/organisations that support these could be on a continuum from an absence of intended self-study in action to full engagement of self-study in action leading large-scale transformational change. Furthermore, Zuber-Skerritt (2001) notes that a researcher using an ALAR approach will bring to a project, consciously or unconsciously, life experiences and a personal theoretical framework or lens through which they see the world. Thus reflection on practice and personal and organisational learning determine and guide strategies and behaviour.

Dick (2001) recognises that an action research approach offers more rigor in fluid situations than do many other methodologies. This approach falls into the same tradition as community activism and organisational development. Zuber-Skerritt (2001, p. 12) notes that with ALAR, a person knows and learns from their actions/experiences and this leads to further 'action, improvement, development or change'. “There is no learning/research without action to follow, and no action without a knowledge foundation based on prior learning/research”. Elden (1993, p. 127) notes that action research is "change oriented and seeks to bring about change that had a positive social value (e.g.
healthy communities, responsible organisations, etc.)". Also, there should be some form of participation in the research process (Dick, 2001; Elden & Chisholm, 1993). For these reasons, it was appropriate to use ALAR approach in the development of RMIT LearnLinks. However, Dick (2001) also understands that participation is less easily achieved, especially in large organisations and communities where it was difficult to involve everyone. This factor usually constrains time and budgets. Cherry (1998) claims that in practice, the collaboration might be focussed on all or only some phases of the action research cycle. In this research, due to time and budget constraints, collaboration was mainly conducted with two key informants, paid business consultants on the project who have since become significant friends. Collaboration with other stakeholders was also limited to particular phases in the action cycle. In fact, the annual review process when participants reviewed the past funding round and set directions for the forthcoming year was in keeping with the main research question, that is, it provided the operational framework required for a sustainable learning network.

Reason (2001) outlines a strategy for interpreting the findings of an action research study under three broad categories, namely, first, second and third person research. I followed the recommendations of Brown (2003) who believes that these categories could be combined with Noffke's (1997) views on personal, professional and the political outcomes of a study. This was a useful way for me, a practitioner researcher, to describe the results of the investigation, to my professional practice, immediate colleagues and clients, and thereby determine the influence of the project on the wider organisation as a whole.
1.3 Definition of Terms
The term, 'learning networks', could be used in many ways, as could such terms as 'community', 'social capital' and 'community networks'. In this study the operational framework for a learning network means the partnerships developed, the participation of people within communities and the management, systems, and processes required to run a sustainable network of learning centres.

Vocational education also has many acronyms and terms known only to those involved in the industry. In an attempt to define the scope of this study, an extensive glossary and list of abbreviations appears at the beginning of this document.
Chapter Two – Methods

2.0 Introduction to Research Design

This research focused on describing the experiences of the stakeholders in a learning network known as RMIT LearnLinks from my perspective as project manager and practitioner researcher. Through the use of cyclical inquiry in each of three funding rounds, problems were diagnosed, action steps were planned and implemented and the outcomes of each round were evaluated. This represents typical ALAR approaches (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). Stakeholders were actively involved in evaluating the progress of the network at facilitated annual review meetings held in each of the cycles. The meetings involved the description of shared experiences and took into account the different attitudes, values and knowledge sets of the participants. In this manner, a framework for moving towards a sustainable learning network for the following cycle was constructed. Thus, the research component could be described as a constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RMIT LearnLinks involved a complex range of stakeholders, including the Victorian Government (especially the Office of Training and Tertiary Education (OTTE)), community partners (Adult, Community and Further Education providers mainly located in Northern Metropolitan Melbourne), RMIT TAFE Schools, RMIT senior managers, the RMIT Learning Network Hub staff (the Community & Regional Partnerships group within RMIT University charged with managing RMIT LearnLinks in combination with myself and other staff). Each stakeholder contributed in various ways to the development of RMIT LearnLinks over the 4 ½ year period, but it was really myself, as a practitioner
researcher, and two colleagues, key informants who were paid business consultants for the duration of the project, who evaluated and implemented the operational framework. This was a pragmatic solution to meeting the requirements of a government contract within restricted timeframes, while at the same time trying to achieve collaboration and shared understandings with other stakeholders.

Through holding annual review days and also special task workshops, community partners contributed directly to the overall vision and mission for the project, including the direction of the annual business plan and the communication and marketing strategy. During each year, community partners also attended operations meetings every two months where any issue regarding the day-to-day operations of the network could be raised and discussed with RMIT partners. This was in line with the construction of a case as outlined by Schwandt (1994) and based on (Guba & Lincoln, 1989):

The act of inquiry begins with issues and/or concerns of participants and unfolds through a "dialectic" of iteration, analysis, critique, reiteration, reanalysis, and so on that leads eventually to a joint (among inquirer and respondents) construction of a case (i.e. findings or outcomes) (Schwandt, 1994, pp127-128).

Lincon & Guba, (1985) find that there is a construction in the mind of individuals, in fact there are multiple, often conflicting constructions but all are potentially meaningful. While, as project manager, I was able to take different views into account, I also had the role of fulfilling the contractual requirements of this project and, at times, this involved tensions that worked against participation and collaboration.
The knowledge formation for RMIT LearnLinks was iterative and spiral over the 4 ½ year period and it was appropriate to use an ALAR approach (Cherry, 1998; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). Cherry (1998) argues that in action research, the role of researcher is often combined with that of agent-actor (manager, consultant or any other form of 'change-agent') who cannot achieve results by working alone but must work with others. This was certainly the case for me as a practitioner researcher.

2.1 Research Methodology

This research uses a combination of case study and ALAR approach. RMIT LearnLinks is an instrumental case study:

A particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else. The case still is looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps the researcher to pursue the external interest. The case may be seen as typical of other cases or not (Stake, 2000, p. 437).

As project manager of RMIT LearnLinks, I needed to understand the operational framework that would make this network sustainable and help me advance my understanding of the broader issue, that is, the common elements of an operational framework required to make may broader business unit – RMIT Learning Networks - viable. I was able to gain insight into the research question by using an approach that investigated RMIT LearnLinks over 3 funding cycles during the period 1998-2002 and the investigation concluded with a postscript year 2003, which was the first year of running RMIT LearnLinks by using recurrent funding from TAFE student contact hours, that is mainstream university funding rather than short-term project funding. The structure of the research is outlined in Figure 2.1. This diagram breaks down
the various components of the research that contributed to the development of an operational learning network: the past research, the 3 funding cycles, the business documents and the reflections and observations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous Research</th>
<th>Writing about Previous Research</th>
<th>Writing Tender Submissions and other Business Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online Networks in VET</td>
<td>Tiffin's Virtual University Concept</td>
<td>Australian Community Network Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 1: Working the Agendas</td>
<td>Cycle 2: Charting a Direction</td>
<td>Cycle 3: Towards an Operational Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation and Analysis</td>
<td>Evaluation of Year without Additional Funds</td>
<td>Reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Thesis:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Negotiating the Agendas: Developing an Operational Framework through exploring Learning Network Models and Practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.1 provides the reader with a map for understanding framing of this thesis.

2.1.1 Action Learning/Action Research
Zuber-Skerrit (2001, p. 1) defines action learning as "learning from action or concrete experience, as well as taking action as a result of this learning", while action research as "a cyclical iterative process of action and reflection on and in action". Neither action learning nor action research are static terms. They emerged in the 1920s and have been constantly evolving since. They have played an important role in research and development programs in small and
27
corporate businesses, communities and the public sector. "They have proven
to be appropriate methodologies and processes for (re)creating change,
innovation, leadership and personal, professional and organisational learning" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001 #269, p. 1).

While both action research and action learning include active learning,
searching, problem solving and systematic inquiry, the main difference is that
action research is "more systematic, rigorous, scrutinisable, verifiable, and is
always made public (in publications, oral or written reports)" (Zuber-Skerritt,
2001, p. 1). The first cycle was more of an action learning one. It involved
getting the project started, taking action as a result of early issues that arose
and making adjustments. The systematic, rigorous collection of data truly got
underway from Cycle Two onwards, after ethics approval for this research.

Action research (AR) was an appropriate method for this learning network
project because it combined both action and research. "Action to bring about
change in a community or organization or program, and research to increase
understanding on the part of the researcher or the client, or both (and often
some wider community)" (Dick, 1992 p. 4).

Elden (1993) argues that Lewin (1946), considered to be the founder of the
action research (AR) method, and most subsequent researchers, conceive of
AR as a cyclical inquiry process that involves diagnosing a problem situation,
planning action steps and implementing and evaluating outcomes (Kemmis &
McTaggart, 1988; Wadsworth, 1998). Evaluation leads to diagnosing the
situation based on learning from the previous action cycle. Kemmis and
McTaggart (1988) place a strong emphasis on this cyclical approach. It
enables a researcher to continually test his/her ideas. It involves engaging in a cycle of research consisting of 4 steps: plan, act, observe and reflect. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) note that one needs to break down a plan into achievable steps; individuals and members of the group then took action. At each stage evaluation is undertaken which amounts to preparation for new action. Later cycles challenge the information and interpretation from earlier cycles (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

Kemmis (1997) identifies action research as a form of participatory and collaborative research aimed at improving educational understandings, practices, and settings, and involving those affected in the research process. Kemmis (1997) describes a variety of international perspectives on educational action research, linking it to participatory action research for community development and ideas about critical social and educational science. There was a debate between two main schools of thought about how action research was understood - one (more collaborative) based on the idea of a critical educational science and the other (more individualistic) based on ideas about practical reasoning and ‘the reflective practitioner’ (Kemmis, 1997). This study is not participatory action research for community development, but rather it uses both ALAR approaches so that I, as a reflective practitioner managing stakeholders and leading a team, was able to learn from my actions and experiences. This in turn led to further action, improvement and further change. This is more in line with a professional development role of action research, which uses the principles of adult learning (McNiff, 1988; Mills, 2003; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992).
Common Attributes for Action Learning and Action Research
There is a range of variation amongst action research approaches. Mine incorporates what Zuber-Skerritt (2001) refers to as ALAR as there is a range of activities, practical trials and explorations in each cycle. This led to learning and research that in turn increased understanding and created new knowledge through reflection and critical evaluation. The investigation also contains what Coughlan and Brannick (2001) identify as common attributes of all action research projects; the research is an agent of change. There was some form of collaboration, and the data and evidence are systematically collected.

Agent for Change
Cherry (1998) claims that in the role of the researcher is often combined with that of agent-actor (a manager, consultant or other form of change-agent) who cannot achieve results by working alone but must work with others. Rogers (1995, p. 335) states, “a change agent is an individual who influences clients’ innovation-decisions in a direction deemed desirable by a change agency”. I considered myself a change agent in this project because I provided the communication link between the ‘resource system’, which was the government funding agency, the university, the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) sector and the ‘client system’, being the community partners. “One of the main roles of a change agent is to facilitate the flow of innovations from a change agency to an audience of clients” (Rogers, 1995, p. 336).

McNiff & Whitehead (2002) query the ontological issues for action researchers and ask what constitutes their belief system? Action researchers believe that people are able to create their own identities and allow other people to create theirs. They attempt to find ways of accommodating multiple values and
perspectives. This means having the courage to speak and act in ways that were often contested. They hold a vision of the future far better than the present, and characterised by creative life-affirming ways of living.

My challenge has been to cease being what McNiff & Whitehead (2002) identify as an ‘armchair philosopher’ and to turn the tacit knowledge acquired through years of managing online network projects into useable knowledge that could be adapted by the organisation. I aimed to simultaneously, accommodate other viewpoints, especially those of the community partners within a bureaucratic organisation, that being RMIT University. This was necessary for me as practitioner researcher to maintain professional and ethical integrity.

In Cycle One, 1998-1999, I played more the role of reflective practitioner than action researcher. This was prior to ethics approval and my relationship with stakeholders (community partners especially) was only just beginning to develop. Also, that time the university was going through major transformational change, especially in regard to information technology. It was the start of the Information Technology Alignment Project (ITAP) and, as noted in the preface, I was going through considerable personal difficulty that in many respects increased my passion for the project.

As project manager of RMIT LearnLinks, I played a key role in the development of the network and, thereby influenced the context and the construction of knowledge. Over time, the project encountered a change of government with an accompanying shift in policy direction and a critical change in location within the university, all of which contributed to its instability.
During the first cycle of this research, I did suffer a crisis of confidence as I dealt with personal loss and my own perceived inability to deal with internal politics as my project was shifted from the Business Faculty to Learning Technology Services (LTS). Cherry (1998) identifies that it could be very disconcerting for an investigator who thinks he/she is investigating and implementing a particular strategy to improve the organisation, only to discover that one became engaged in the management of internal politics and a personal fight for survival. Although I experienced some of that, I also realised that at my level of management within a large bureaucratic organisation many of the changes were outside my control. Therefore it became important for me to focus on those things I was able to influence and thus I settled into the role of action researcher.

**Collaboration**

Elden (1993) notes that action research would be impossible without some form of participation. At one end this involves the participation of research sponsors. At most, they can play the role of part-time research assistants in sanctioning the research helping to define the problems that should be addressed and validating the results.

As already discussed, RMIT LearnLinks involved a complex range of stakeholders and by necessity collaboration with key stakeholders was limited to annual review days and special task workshops. In addition, the day-to-day operations of the network were reviewed at by-monthly operations meetings. Importantly, two informants worked on various aspects of the operational framework. This included everything from business planning, evaluation, the development of a funding model, marketing and web-site design.
Patton (2002) acknowledges informants as one of the mainstays in fieldwork. They are key sources of information about what the researcher had not or cannot experience and bring forth a different perspective. During the third round of funding, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with community partners and a range of other stakeholders in order to gain insight into their perspective of how the learning network had developed over 4 ½ years.

**Systematic Collection of Data**

Case study research involves the systematic collection of data and rigorous analysis in order to arrive at agreed interpretations of the data (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 32). Action researchers (Cherry, 1998; Dick, 1992; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002) place great emphasis on multiple information sources that are preferably independent of one another and ensure that other people engaged with and check the researcher's thinking and action.

The main method of ensuring this analytical rigor was triangulation, that is using at least three data sources. McNiff & Whitehead (2002, p. 32, cited in Bell 1993, p. 64) present the Open University course definition of triangulation as:

> Cross-checking the existence of certain phenomena and the veracity of individual accounts by gathering data from a number of informants and a number of sources and subsequently comparing and contrasting one account with another in order to produce as full and balanced a study as possible (Bell, 1993).

It is important to use a number of different information sources in an action research approach (Dick, 1992; Mountney, 1996). These can range from document analysis, diaries, log books, questionnaires and interviews to
anecdotal records and field notes. The systematic collection and recording of data for this project is covered in detail in section 2.2 of this chapter.

**Action Research Cycle**

In terms of an action research cycle, this study of RMIT LearnLinks was organised into 3 cycles which match the 3 tendered funding cycles of 1998/1999, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. The cycles were divided up as follows:

- **Cycle One** spans from mid 1998 until December 1999. This period preceded the ethics approval of the project as research. At this stage, the project was located within Learning Technology Services at RMIT University.

- **Cycle Two** spans the period of January 2000 until June 2001. During this time, the project was relocated within Community & Regional Partnerships Group within RMIT University.

- **Cycle Three** spans the period of December 2001 until December 2002 (the final year of additional government funding). It concludes with an epilogue describing RMIT LearnLinks in 2003 – the first year of operations without additional government funding.

For each of the 3 funding cycles, a response to a government tender was written as a group process and an implementation plan was agreed upon. This group consisted of 2 key informants and myself, with consultation as required from the Director of NMR ACFE and the VET Strategic Consultant. Due to the time constraints involved in writing a tender, community partners were only consulted during annual review workshops to ensure that we were
heading in the right direction. Monitoring of the project by all stakeholders took place during bi-monthly operation group meetings, which were minuted. Evaluating the past year and planning for the following year was conducted on annual review days. I reviewed the results in collaboration with a key informant who specialised in business planning. We conducted internal evaluations on areas of most concern. The results of these internal evaluations, together with guidance from our government funding body, informed the cycle of action for the next funding round. This was how we interpreted an action research spiral as shown in Figure 2.2.

![Figure 2.2: Action Research Spiral](image)

Action research allowed for the initial investigation to be ill-defined (Cherry, 1998; Dick, 2001). However, the plan, act, reflect and observe approach allowed for the refinement of the research question during the different cycles.
and it was therefore possible and advisable to modify the research question during the research process. The research aim in this project changed from one very focussed on RMIT LearnLinks, that is 'to work with community partners to adapt an international model of a learning network in a local context and to test this model for sustainability' to one much more practical for the broader business unit – RMIT Learning Networks that is 'to determine the operational framework required for a sustainable learning network'. The latter aim enabled me to use RMIT LearnLinks to provide insight into a much broader issue, which affected a number of learning networks, community networks, or clusters of learning centres, and therefore increase the political significance of the findings.

2.1.2 Incorporation of a Case Study Approach

As an instrumental case study, RMIT LearnLinks was used to inform my work and that of other projects within the RMIT Learning Networks team. Stake (1995) postulates that the first criterion for case selection is to maximize what can be learnt. RMIT LearnLinks was a case where I, as the researcher practitioner, had access to all the primary business data, and where the actors, the people in the network, were easy to identify and had input into the formation of the network and the business planning documents. In this instance, there was also an organisational imperative to understand the learning network process and see how it could be adapted and modified for other projects.

Also, as a practitioner researcher, this project enabled me to build on the work of other projects, in particular, Online Networks in VET (Wheeler, 1997). By
repeatedly encountering certain situations types, a professional practitioner develops a repertoire of expectations, images and techniques (Schön, 1983, p. 60). The practitioner learns what to look for and how to respond to what he/she finds. Reflection-in-action is a means for a practitioner to frame a problem they are attempting to solve. This is thinking-in-action about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of actions of everyday life. Reflection-in-action is central to the 'art' by which practitioners sometimes dealt with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict. Schön (1983) also argues that reflection-in-action hinges upon the element of surprise and discovering what is new and different about each project. This was certainly my experience.

Stake (1995) argues that a case is worth studying. In this instance it was the RMIT LearnLinks program. It entailed problems and relationships and the case report theme centred upon an operational framework required for a sustainable network. However, RMIT LearnLinks as an entity had a unique life. It was something that I did not sufficiently understand and wanted to and, therefore, it was appropriate to undertake a case study.

Stake (1995) believes that researchers do not step outside their ordinary lives when they observe, interpret and write up the workings of a case. Qualitative case study is highly personal research. This is consistent with an action research approach (Cherry, 1998). Researchers are encouraged to include their personal perspectives in the interpretation. As project manager of RMIT LearnLinks, I was in a unique position to study this project in depth and to interpret and act on those interpretations. This was a very privileged position.
also recognised that I worked for an area within the university that encouraged responsiveness and experimentation and that my project was seen as a way of building capability within other areas of the university.

This investigation, a combination of an ALAR and case study approach, interpreted what happened through the narration of a good story. As a practitioner researcher, I reflected on that story in an attempt to make sense of what happened, and in reflecting on that story generated useable knowledge that could be adapted to other situations (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001, p.116).

The research design features are based on Fehring’s (2002) framework for a constructivist research paradigm. These are summarised in Figure 2.3.
Figure 2.3: Research Design Features of this Investigation (Fehring, 2002)

The main research question is: What is the operational framework required for a sustainable learning network?

**Constructivist Paradigm**

To investigate, describe, construct and act upon an interpretation of an operational framework required for a sustainable learning network.

**Action Learning, Action Research and Case Study Approach**

The ALAR and case study Design incorporates:
- Background data
- A historical perspective
- Chronological development of the case
- Participant observations
- Vignettes of stories/issues/problems
- Observing oneself through Critical Incidents journal

**Qualitative Methods**

The qualitative techniques incorporated in the research design include:
- In-depth interviews with international experts
- Key informant fieldwork
- In-depth interviews with community partners
- Content analysis of government policy documents regarding Victorian FLNs and RMIT Learning Network policy and business documents
- Critical incidence analysis
- Use of NVivo content analysis program
2.2 Methods for Collecting and Analysing Data

In keeping with the development of a case study using an ALAR approach, a range of methods was used to collect and analyse the data for this study. Patton (2002) lists a number of fieldwork strategies for collecting and analysing data that I followed and these are outlined below.

2.2.1 Purposeful Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used in this qualitative research because it enabled me to select information-rich respondents for study. This allowed for insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations (Patton, 2002).

Patton (2002) suggests a combination of strategies because each approach serves a somewhat different purpose. This is the case for long-term fieldwork. The underlying principle common to all the strategies listed was to select information-rich areas, that is, cases from which one can learn a great deal about matters of importance and therefore worthy of in-depth study. I chose cases using criterion sampling; all people interviewed were selected by predetermined criteria and this is discussed in more detail in the interview section.

The sampling undertaken on this inquiry was naturalistic; based on informational, not statistical considerations. Its purpose was to achieve maximum information, not facilitate generalisation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Thus, the unit of analysis for this case study is a project known as RMIT LearnLinks. The study focuses on the operational framework required for a sustainable learning network. The following strategies were used to gather information-rich data:

**2.2.2 Preliminary Review of Literature**

Regarding the development of online and community networks, I used early ideas from a range of my own projects (Wheeler, 1996, 1997, 2000b), scholarly and practitioner literature (Graham, 1996; Handy, 1999; Schuler, 1995, 1996; Tiffin & Rajasingham, 1995) and stakeholder reports (OTFE, 1997b) to develop an early framework for a learning network. In the early part of the fieldwork, the researcher is exploring, gathering data and investigating patterns. In this manner a researcher can gather examples that identify elements of sustainable operational frameworks or other operational frameworks that will not fit or are not sustainable (Patton, 2002).

A preliminary literature review identifies learning network models and strong 'grass roots' community networking initiatives already in operation in Canada and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, their governments were funding both learning network and learning community developments (Faris & Peterson, 2000; Graham, 1996; Gurstein, 2001; Schuler, 1995, 1996; Shearman, 1999). Success in obtaining an ANTA Flexible Learning Leaders Scholarship in 2000 enabled me to conduct the first series of interviews in the United Kingdom and Canada in September and October 2000 as a follow up on the literature that I had read.
2.2.3 Interviews

Patton (2002) notes the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to allow us to enter the other person’s perspective because we cannot know how others have organised the world and meanings they attach to what goes on in it.

Interviews were used on 2 occasions during this research. Near the beginning of Cycle Two (September and October 2000), as a way of gaining an international perspective on learning network/community network frameworks, I interviewed practitioners and experts based in the United Kingdom and Canada. Towards the end of Cycle Two (February - June 2002), I interviewed stakeholders in the RMIT project to gain a local understanding of their perspective of the case, RMIT LearnLinks and, in particular, after implementing some of the ideas I gained from my international findings, I wanted to know what had worked and what were the barriers to creating a sustainable learning network.

International Interviews:
A list of criteria for selection was based around the research question and the findings from the literature review. This is illustrated in Table 2.1. Two groups of experts were identified; those who had extensive experience managing a learning network or community network and those who had researched in the area of learning communities, community networking or learning networks.
Table 2.1:

Criteria for Selection of International Experts Interviewed for this Study

**Practitioners**
- based in either the United Kingdom or Canada and involved in the community networking movement in either country
- ran a community or learning network
- had a particular focus that aligned with my own within RMIT Learning Networks (RLN), for example, non-traditional learners, community experienced some form of disadvantage, located in a rural location.

**Consultants/Academics**
- based in either the United Kingdom or Canada and involved in the community networking movement in either country
- wrote about community networking/learning networks or learning communities
- focussed on connecting socially marginalised people.

The issue questions listed in Appendix Two were constructed on the basis of the research question about framing a sustainable learning network. The term 'community network' was used in these interviews because it was more commonly used in the literature (Graham, 1996; Schuler, 1996). RMIT LearnLinks was based upon Australian community networking movement values which were written into the original successful tender submission (RMIT, 1998). Furthermore, for the phenomenon I was describing, 'community network' was considered a common international term (Denison et al., 2002; Graham, 1996; Gurstein, 2001; Mulquin, 2000; OLT, 2001; Royce, 2000; Schuler, 1996).
I used what Patton (2002) refers to as snowball or chain sampling. He identifies this as an approach for locating information-rich key informants and critical cases. The process begins by asking well-situated people: “Who knows a lot about _____? Whom should I talk to?” In most programs or systems, a few key names are mentioned repeatedly. I asked 2 acknowledged experts in the field of community networking, one located in England and one in British Columbia, Canada, to assist in the identification of people with expertise in this emerging field. As a result of these contacts, I was invited to present a paper at UK Communities Online annual conference in Manchester (Nadarajah & Wheeler, 2000) and to connect with practitioners, policy makers and consultants involved with information and communication technology (ICT) initiatives in community settings. This conference enabled me to undertake opportunistic sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 240) of conference delegates and presented a wonderful chance to gain a broader insight into the nature of learning networks, community networking and learning communities. Patton (2002) identifies that emergent qualitative designs can include the option of adding to a sample to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities after fieldwork has begun. This was certainly the case with the Communities Online conference in Manchester and also with the contacts I made in British Columbia.

The literature review and taped interviews obtained from this preliminary research were immediately applied to the planning stages of Cycle Two of RMIT LearnLinks. Details of the interviews are described in detail in Chapter Five.
Local Interviews:
I selected cases using what Patton (2002) refers to as criterion sampling. Thus all subjects interviewed met a predetermined criterion – all stakeholders interviewed belonging to RMIT LearnLinks were included at some point in this study. Those interviewed are listed in Table 2.2 and Appendix Two. The people interviewed included all community partners, the RMIT senior manager who consulted on the project, two key informants as business consultants and a representative from an RMIT TAFE School. These people were rich sources of information because they had been involved in the project from the beginning and were able to reveal major system weaknesses and opportunities for improvement.
Table 2.2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Interviewees</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Partners</td>
<td>1. Community Partner A in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Community Partner B in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Community Partner C in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Community Partner D in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Community Partner E in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Community Partner F in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Community Partner G in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMIT Staff</td>
<td>8. Senior Strategic Planner for VET at RMIT University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Learning Networks Coordinator, TAFE Department, RMIT University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Informants</td>
<td>10. Key Informant A – Business Consultant to RMIT Learning Networks and NMR ACFE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Key Informant B and Web, ICT and Marketing Consultant to RMIT Learning Networks and NMR ACFE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through a process of holding annual review days and special task workshops, stakeholders contributed directly to the overall direction of the project. The material from these contributed to the annual business plan, the communication and marketing strategy and the day-to-day operations of the network. It also contributed to the direction of the research. Stakeholders were also interviewed between February and June 2002, which was during Cycle Three of this research and the last year of government project funding. The results of these interviews are analyzed in Chapter Six, which discusses the results of Cycle Three.

**Qualitative Approach To Interviews**

Patton (2002) identifies 3 basic approaches to qualitative interviewing: an informal conversational interview, a general interview guide approach and the standardized open-ended interview. I chose a general interview guide approach. This was also known as a semi-structured approach (Fontana & Frey, 2000). It allowed me to compile a short list of issue-orientated questions
that were based around the research questions (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). These issues were explored with each respondent before the interview began. Patton (2002) argues that the guide serves as a basic checklist during the interview to make sure that all relevant issues are covered.

Refer to Appendices 1-3 for further information on the interviewees, the number and timing of interviews, the plain language letter provided for each group and a list of issue orientated questions prepared for each group.

I approached each series of interviews differently. I allowed the international interviews to be much more free-flowing than the local stakeholder interviews. The international interviews were exploratory and enabled me to explore the territory. Although the questions were pre-set and interviews taped, informants were encouraged to make comments and identify trends, thus allowing the informants to describe an episode or linkage or to further explore the topic (Stake, 1995).

It was necessary to be much more structured with the local stakeholder interviews because I really needed to know their views on RMIT LearnLinks; what had been successful and what were the barriers? Interviewees were given an outline of the issues at the commencement of the interview, and were encouraged to add their own views through a closing question that asked for additional information (Patton, 2002, p. 379).

Interviews are not neutral, they are 'interactional encounters' and the quality of the interviewer and the nature and shape of the interview can mould the nature of the information generated (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Patton, 2002). The
interviews provided me with information rich data, which presented an opportunity to construct and reconstruct the previous 4 ½ years of involvement in the learning network project to identify common themes and patterns. The themes and patterns that emerged are explored in detail in the analysis and discussion chapters (4-6) of this thesis.

2.2.4 Other Fieldwork Strategies

Key Informant/Collaborator

Patton (2002) defines a key informant as the person or persons with whom the researcher or evaluator is likely to spend considerable time.

One of the mainstays of much fieldwork is the use of key informants as sources of information about what the observer has not or cannot experience, as well as sources of explanation for events the observer has actually witnessed (Patton, 2002, p. 321).

For the duration of this project, I had 2 key informants/collaborators who were particularly articulate and knowledgeable about key areas critical to the formation of a learning network model within the university setting. At the start of the project, both informants were employed by Northern Metropolitan Regional Council of Adult Community and Further Education (NMR ACFE), a key partner in the early phase of the project. NMR ACFE is the peak body responsible for 40 community providers across Northern Metropolitan Melbourne. The extensive knowledge that the informants had of the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) sector proved invaluable throughout the project.

In addition, the role of Education Officer at NMR ACFE was crucial in brokering issues that arose from time to time between the community partners and myself as project manager.
For the duration of the project, I met with the informants to discuss issues of planning and business development, evaluation, marketing, website development and funding. Notes of these meetings were kept and various key documents were produced, which have since become critical planning documents for future projects.

**Critical Incident Analysis**

Cherry (1998) claims that critical incident analysis is a technique designed to help individuals learn from experience. It requires a researcher to document and reflect upon a specific incident or encounter that occurred during the course of everyday experience. She maintains that the incident would usually be one that created some discomfort, challenge, difficulty or surprise – something that has not worked out as expected.

Cherry (1988) indicates that one must reflect systematically on such experience from a number of view points by asking questions such as: “What exactly happened”? “What did I do”? “What did I say”? “What did others do or say”? “How did I feel about what was happening”? “Do I have any idea of how they felt”? “What was the impact of what I – and they – did”? “What would I do differently next time”?

This is the application of the action learning cycle to a particular event. It refers to a researcher’s deliberate reflection on his/her actions. Cherry (1998, p. 16) argues that when this reframing led to significant shifts in the way we viewed the world and in the way we acted in the world, we tapped the full potential of the action research process.
During the course of this investigation I kept a critical incident journal. Entries were triggered by key events, such as negotiation of the next funding round, the annual review day meetings and international investigation. Information from this was used in Chapters 4-6.

2.2.5 Systematic Data Collection

The data sources used for each cycle in this investigation are summarised in Table 2.3. This follows an ALAR cycle, where, I, as a reflective practitioner, have come to know and learn from previous projects and research work. I conceptualised the first framework for a learning network based on previous work and then developed and changed the framework over 3 cycles. Table 2.3 summarises the concepts I was thinking about at the time and the data sources I was using.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>As suggested by</th>
<th>Documentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before Ethics Approval</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle One (June 1998 – December 2000) - Setting the Agenda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The original learning network concept was based on principles of good practice for the development of online community network as written in the ANTA Online Networks in VET project. The major themes were:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a clear goal</td>
<td>I project managed the ANTA project and was responsible for mentoring 3 online groups. My general observations, results of questionnaires, diaries and interviews led me to the principles of good practice.</td>
<td>• Online Networks in VET Research Report (Wheeler, 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• professional development</td>
<td></td>
<td>• ‘Principles of Good Practice for Developing Online Communities in Learning Partnerships’, Global Readings in Online Education (Wheeler, 2000b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• adequate technical support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a community of emoderators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• critical mass.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The development of the first conceptual model of an education system would (Tiffin & Rajasingham, 1995) | |
a learning network was based on the work of Tiffin & Rajasingham (1995), the OTFE Tender document, the conceptual work undertaken by tender writing project team and Circit Evaluation Report (2000).  

become a communication system based on the linking of social networks to technological networks.  

The unpublished evaluation report (Circit, 1999) highlighted:  
- instructional design  
- content development  
- professional development  
- product distribution, using a value chain approach  

The project team discussed:  
- learning hosts  
- case management  
- online platform  
- hub  

| Barriers to sustainability of the network | • That both the TAFE VC and the Distributed Learning Systems were in the early stages of development.  
• Many technical and administrative issues identified by learners and partners.  
| Factors, which contribute to sustainability | • building of partnership and relationships  
• goodwill and trust  
• opening educational opportunities  
• cross fertilization  
• building staff skill base  
| | • Stage 3 Report to OTFE [RLN Stage 3 Report 1999/1999]  
• general minutes of Operation Meeting  
• evaluation report on all learning networks (Phillips, 2000)  
| | • notes from review workshop [RLN Review Day 2000]  
• critical incident journal of researcher  
• RLN Stages 1-4 reports to OTFE  

**After Ethics Approval**

**Cycle Two (June 2000 – December 2001) – Charting a Direction**

| partnership and trust emerging as key concepts that were more important than the technology | • community partners confirmed they wanted to stay in the partnership  
| | • internal evaluation report (2000)  
• annual review day notes [RLN Review Day 2000/2001]  
• report on brokering model for funding profile hours to community settings (2000)  
| learning network models existed in the UK and Canada based on lifelong learning, community networking and learning communities. | • practitioners attending UK Communities Online Conference (2000) in Manchester  
• visits to various learning networks in the UK and Canada via an ANTA Flexible Learning Leaders Scholarship  
| | • analysis of structured interviews and personal journal kept while I was overseas  
| Reformulate model of a learning network based on a community | (Falk, Golding, & Balatti, 2000; Faris & Peterson, 2000; Yarnit, 2000)  
| Internal documents: | • communication strategy  
• marketing strategy
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table: Cycle Three (December 2001 – December 2002) – Towards an Operational Framework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The community partners did not share the view that a learning network model had been developed.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A learning network as a learning community</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Successes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How to achieve ongoing sustainability of RMIT LearnLinks?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barriers to learning network sustainability</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Development model

- business plans
- stage 1-4 reports to OCPETE

Conference papers:
- LearnLinks, a Framework for a Flexible Learning Network (Wheeler, 2001b)
- Learning Network Models – A Practitioner’s View (Wheeler, 2001)
- critical incidents journal
- response to tender document for 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to learning network sustainability</th>
<th>administrative and technical problems that continue to hamper the project</th>
<th>review day notes [RLN Review Day 2000/2001]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Cycle Three (December 2001 – December 2002) – Towards an Operational Framework**

- review day notes and subsequent online discussions suggested disagreement regarding the direction of the learning network (Faris, 2002) conceptual framework of a learning network as an outcome of the development of a learning community

- the professional development award
- the learning network was still in existence
- the stakeholders wanted to keep it going
- the additional government funding was coming to an end, so all that kept the network going financially was the brokering of student contact hours between partners and RMIT Schools.
- community partners and RMIT Heads of Schools indicated a desire to keep the network going
- RMIT LearnLinks contracted to become narrowly focussed on delivery of student contact hours in community locations

- semi-structured interviews with community partners (February to June 2002)
- critical incident journal
- operations group minutes trial test of evaluation instruments developed for the Faris conceptual framework was abandoned for this research – more appropriate for other RLN work
- award ceremony
- transcripts from the interviews
- review day notes [RLN Review Day 2002]
- Stage 1-4 reports to OTTE
- Service Agreement between Community Partners and the University was more formal
- review day notes for 2002/2003 identified a wish to continue the network [RLN Review Day 2002/2003]
- operational procedures manual developed for community partners and RMIT staff to ensure its
RMIT Learning Networks took a broader focus.

- revised vision statement which indicated the operational project would feed into research projects
- continuation with minimal staffing
- success in winning funding for further learning network projects, e.g. The Smith Family Community Learning Network (2003/2004) and, therefore, another chance to develop the network
- success in winning a project to develop a clearinghouse on community building for Department for Victorian Communities
- RLN is project managing another clearinghouse (PASCAL) for RMIT University and a number of other partners on place management, social capital and learning regions.

Patton (2002, p. 293) claims that records, documents, artefacts and archives constitute a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs. As a practitioner researcher, I had access to routine records, correspondence, financial and budget records, organizational rules and a range of official and unofficial documents generated by the project. The RMIT learning network project was government funded and, as such, had strict reporting requirements. It was one of a number of learning network projects funded over the period. The researcher also has access to a number of key external evaluation documents (Circit, 1999; Phillips, 2000; SuccessWorks, 2002). The range of information sources for this study include the following:

- records, documents, artefacts, and archives built up over the 5 year period that included tender submissions for each round of funding (3), 4 progress reports x 3 (12), 3 external and 3 internal evaluation reports, 2 marketing and 3 business plans, annual service agreements with
community partners (at least 7 per year), minutes of operation meetings (at least 6 per year), 4 annual review day notes and various products (report case management and the use of the TAFE VC for people with disabilities) and online content - a Book club, Online Facilitation, Yoga Online and the WebCT as a Communication Hub

- notes from 2 key informants who worked with me on business planning, evaluation, marketing, financial planning and marketing and communication over a 4 year period (1999-2002)

- critical incidents journals (4 per year)

- conference papers written by me at key points in the project

- my earlier work in a different research setting

- interview transcripts with overseas experts in different research settings

- interview transcripts with RMIT LearnLinks stakeholders

Patton (2002) notes that these kinds of documents provide a researcher with information about many things that cannot be observed. By having access to the records, the researcher is able to provide a behind-the-scene account of project processes, how the project came into being and progressed.

A key challenge for me as a researcher was learning to use, study and understand documents as part of the skills needed for qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002).

2.2.6 Organising the Data

Patton (2002) believes a key part of this work is taking an inventory of the information sources one had access to, i.e. a notation system to make data
retrieval manageable. For those studies employing extensive interviews, or for case studies with multiple information types, computer programs provide invaluable research aid (Creswell, 1997).

The majority of the information for the learning network project was stored electronically. Electronic folders were created for each funding cycle.

I recorded the dates and places for each interview as well as all the identifying information for each respondent interviewed. I transcribed the interviews verbatim. Patton (2002) explains that doing all or some of your own interview transcriptions provides an opportunity to become immersed in the data and thus allows the researcher to produce evolving insights.

I used the abbreviations outlined in Table 2.4 to code the data and reference the documents. This key is relevant throughout the discussion and analysis chapters (4-6).
Table 2.4:

**Key to Data Source Referencing:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N.0S1.22</td>
<td>NVivo. Overseas Interview Number, segment 26.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.Community Partner 2.10</td>
<td>NVivo. Local Interviewee Number, segment 10.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The transcribed interviews, critical incident journals, review day notes and a selection of other documents were then put into a computer-assisted qualitative data management and analysis system, QSR NVivo. Patton (2002) notes that analysis programs speed up the processes of locating coded themes, grouping data together in categories and comparing passages in transcripts or incidents from field notes. However, the researcher doing content analysis must still decide what factors fit together to form a pattern, what constitutes a theme, what to name it and what meanings to extract from case studies. This is how I used QSR NVivo. I colour coded the different type of information sources as follows:
Table 2.5:

Colour Coding for Organisation of Key Information in NVivo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>No. of Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Critical Incident Journal</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>LearnLink Stakeholder interviews</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magenta</td>
<td>Overseas Interviews</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyan</td>
<td>A Selection of News Bulletins</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Annual Review Day Notes</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I also created separate data sets for each document type. The method of describing, classifying and interpretation according to a data analysis spiral as described by Creswell (1997) is outlined further in the next section of this chapter.
2.3 Techniques for Analysing Qualitative Data

2.3.1 Bringing Together Multiple Perspectives

The challenge in this qualitative research was what Patton (2002) refers to as making sense of a massive amount of data. The key was to mould the observations, interviews and critical incident journals into findings amenable to reflection. I followed an approach whereby first I organised my computer files and loaded my documents into QSR NVivo. Second, I reviewed all the information - key project documents, interview transcriptions, news bulletins and critical incident journals - and read through everything to gain a sense of the overall data (Creswell, 1997, p. 140). Thirdly, within QSR NVivo, I broke my documents down into segments, read the transcripts and looked for patterns in the data from both the documents, my journals and the transcripts of the interviews. Finally, I entered into what Creswell describes as the reading and memoing loop, wherein I made myself very familiar with the content.

Creswell (1997) believes that researchers who ends up with 100 or 200 categories struggle to reduce the picture to 5 or 6 themes, which they must present for most publications. This is what I did at first and I spent considerable hours cutting and merging in order to achieve 6 key themes as Creswell recommends for case study analysis. Some themes were very obvious because they derived from the research question and the interview structure; while others originated from the data itself. I interpreted these themes further throughout the analysis and discussion chapters (4-6). Figure
2.4 demonstrates how Creswell (1997) recommends structuring the data analysis of a case study.

Figure 2.4: Analysis of RMIT LearnLinks as a Case Study

The case context describes the policy environment, the Victorian FLN program, RMIT LearnLinks (the case), the people involved and where these types of projects are situated nationally and internationally. The themes helped to build the case analysis. The findings are summarised at the end of the discussion and analysis chapters (4-6).
2.3.2 Organising, Writing and Presenting the Findings

Chapter 3 describes the case context in accordance with Figure 2.3. It sets the scene for the introduction of the case. Before a detailed description of the case, it is necessary to provide an overview to describe the international and local contexts. It is not a traditional literature review as such, but sets the scene for the case and covers the following topics:

- the international environment in transition to becoming a networked learning society
- an overview of the Australian education environment and policy context
- different frameworks for learning networks with Australian and International vignettes
- an overview of the Victorian Flexible Learning Networks (FLNs) project in detail (the case - RMIT LearnLinks - was a Victorian Flexible learning network)

Chapters 4-6 describe the 3 funding cycles chronologically. I use action research cycles to organise discussions of the process, the data generated and the analysis and interpretations. Table 2.6, which follows the AR cycle described by Kemmis & McTaggart (2000). The table was used as a planning tool to provide a systematic overview and summary of the analysis and interpretation for each chapter.
Table 2.6:

Summary of the Action Research Cycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle No.</th>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Act</th>
<th>Observe</th>
<th>Reflect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables in the form of Table 2.7 are an equally useful way of presenting findings (Brown, 2003). Table 2.7 follows Reason's (2001) 3 layers of findings which relate to first, second and third person research and Noffe's (1997) ideas about the professional, the personal and the political. This table is used to present a stocktake after each cycle.

Table 2.7:

Summary of the Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle No.</th>
<th>The professional (Second order)</th>
<th>The personal (First person)</th>
<th>The political (Third person)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The time periods covered by the analysis and discussion chapters are as follows:
• Chapter Four is labelled 'Working the Agendas' because it describes the very first funding cycle of the project. The stakeholders went into the project with different intentions. Everything had to be established, even its base location, which was originally in the Faculty of Business, was moved to Learning Technology Services. The period covers June 1998 until December 1999.

• Chapter Five is labelled 'Charting a Direction'. This was the second funding cycle, the period when all stakeholders undertook an enormous amount of planning. This included the setting of a vision and mission. It was also the period when the project relocated into Community & Regional Partnerships group and when I went to England and Canada to interview a number of international experts and practitioners in community networking and learning communities. The period covers January 2000 until the end of the funding cycle in September 2001.

• Chapter Six is labelled 'Towards an Operational Framework'. This covers the final year of additional government funding. It was the year when the network was the most productive and when stakeholders voted to keep the network going without additional funding. I also interviewed local stakeholders to gain their perspectives of the project. I came to realise what I could and could not achieve in terms of this project and now have a better understanding of how to run these types of projects in the future.

• Chapter Seven outlines the major findings, the implications of the findings and recommendations for areas of further research.
Chapter Three - Setting the Scene

3.0 Introduction

This chapter sets the context for the discussion and analysis of the case study, RMIT LearnLinks. It begins by arguing that technological change is not neutral, because it happens in a social, political and cultural context. It takes place in a policy and regulatory environment, which is conducive to its implementation.

Another way of viewing technological change is to use the Diffusion of Innovation theory, especially from a marketing viewpoint (Rogers, 1995). The discussion identifies the factors that determine how fast an innovation spreads through a particular market segment and the role performed by various stakeholders. In particular, the role that change agents and opinion leaders play in relation to the adoption of the learning network as a new learning system.

The international environment is discussed next. The learning network project took place in an international context of economic globalisation and the transformation in technology and explosions of knowledge.

It is also necessary to explore the Australian education environment during the time of the project and, in particular, the vocational education and adult, community education sectors. Of particular relevance is the concept of networked learning systems as a way of linking different sectors of the economy together for the purpose of learning, economic development and social transformation, which is a way of progressing the knowledge economy in the 21st century.
Vignettes of national and regional learning networks are also presented and investigated from the viewpoint of operational elements and sustainability.

Finally, a background of the wider project – Victorian Flexible Learning Networks – is described as an introduction to a more detailed investigation of the case – RMIT LearnLinks.

3.0 Technological Change
Green (2002) argues that technological change is not neutral, it does not happen in isolation from society, policy and culture. One way of viewing the introduction of a technology is to see that it is the features of technology that determines its use. Society's role is to adapt to (and benefit from) technological change. This is referred to as 'technological determinism'. On the other hand a more recent view is one of 'social determinism', which recognises that society is responsible for the development and implementation of particular technologies. The social and cultural circumstances in which a technology is developed and introduced cannot be ignored. The policy and regulatory environments under which the technology is implemented must also be taken into account as there are different social groups with competing priorities.

Technological advance was the result of years of investment research and development. Also, "the knowledge of how to create and enhance technology, and of how to use technology, was socially bound knowledge. Each society operated to determine who would acquire this knowledge and in what circumstances" (Green, 2002, p. 6). Choices are made about which technologies to develop and those choices are often made by the power brokers in society, that is, the armed forces, bureaucracy or corporate power.
Green (2002) argues that the current notions of progress are often contradictory. For example, the penetration of the latest computer technology is much greater in large corporations than it is in low socio-economic status communities.

The theory of the Diffusion of Innovation offers an alternative perspective to that of social, cultural, policy and technology viewpoints. This theory is also relevant to this study because the introduction of a FLN into a community is a diffusion process and acceptance by the participants follows a particular pattern of adoption. The diffusion process for RMIT LearnLinks will be discussed in chapters 4-6 when analysing the implementation of the learning network over a 4 ½ year period.

This is a theory concerning the “process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (Rogers, 1995, p. 10). It is applied in a range of discipline areas, for example marketing, communications, education, management and economics, but the marketing perspective is the one relevant to this investigation.

The marketing perspective looks at the different stages in which innovations and products spread through a consumer population and is known as the diffusion and adoption process of innovations.

No matter which innovation is being studied or which social group is involved, the diffusion process appears to follow a similar pattern over time: a period of relatively slow growth, followed by a period of rapid growth, followed by a final period of slower growth.... (Neal, 1999 #262, p. 16.15)
There are a number of factors that determine how fast a particular innovation spreads through a particular market segment. Neal et al (1999) lists up to 10 with the following 5 being the ones most frequently quoted in the literature:

- **Compatibility:** The more the purchase and use of the innovation is consistent with the individual's and group's values or beliefs, the more rapid the diffusion.

- **Relative Advantage:** The more completely the innovation is perceived to meet the relative need relative to earlier products, the more rapid the diffusion.

- **Complexity:** The more difficult the innovation is to understand and use, the slower the diffusion.
- **Observability:** The more easily consumers can observe the positive effects of adopting an innovation, the more rapid its diffusion is.

- **Trialability:** The easier it is to have a low-cost or low-risk trial of the innovation, the more rapid its diffusion.

Other factors include the type of group (based on age, income etc), the type of decision (individual versus collective), the marketing effort involved, the fulfilment of felt need and perceived risk.

Rogers (1995), Neal et al (1999) and Green (2002) also discuss the classification of members of a social system based on the relative time they took to adopt the innovation. They are:

- **Innovators:** These are the first 2.5 % to adopt. They are generally characterised as risk takers, better educated and more socially mobile than their peers (Neal, Quester, & Hawkins, 1999). They are information-seekers about new ideas (Rogers, 2001).

- **Early Adopters:** There are the next 13.5 % to adopt. They tend to be opinion leaders in local reference groups. They share many of the same features as innovators, but they are more likely to perceive the riskiness inherent in technology adoption.

- **Early Majority:** The next 34 % to adopt. “The desire of ‘proof’ of benefits and the underpinning of claims by verifiable experience” (Green, 2002, p. 32).
- *Late Majority:* These are the next 34% to adopt. This group is often sceptical about innovations but respond to social pressures. They are usually not as socially upwardly mobile as innovators or early adopters.

- *Laggards:* These are the final 16% to adopt. They are often classified as 'non-adopters'. The innovation might not fit with their value systems, they may be orientated towards the past and more resistant to change.
The classic bell shaped curve is reproduced in Figure 3.2:

Figure 3.2: Adoption of an Innovation over time

![Diagram of adoption curves showing Fast Diffusion and Slow Diffusion with stages of Early Adopters, Innovators, Late Majority, and Laggards.]

Source: Neal, Quester, Hawkins (1999, p.16.9, Figure 16.9)

The beginning of the learning network project (1998) saw an explosion in projects that involved teaching with technology. Many of the people who were involved in FLNs in Victoria were seen as innovators at that time. It was an exciting time to be involved because the project took place during a period of rapid technological change that was also a characteristic of the changing international environment.

3.1 International Environment

We are in a period of transition from an industrial to a knowledge-based or learning economy and society. The key drivers of this are economic globalisation, the transformations in technology and the explosion in knowledge, especially science and technology (Faris, 2001). Technology as a tool throughout the ages has always played a role in societal change but it alone does not determine the course of the change. Many other factors
including individual inventiveness, entrepreneurialism and government intervention also contribute to the process of scientific discovery, thus creating a complex pattern of interaction (Castells, 1996). However, the current consequences of the rapid growth in technology and the use of the Internet are that the network age is rapidly replacing the industrial age (Fukuda-Parr & Hill, 2002). Some authors talk of this in terms of a complex web of interrelationships and dependencies where the technology is inextricably linked to societal and even environmental change (Capra, 1996; Faris, 2002; Schuler, 2000).

However, each nation and state/provincial government, local government and geographic community within that nation responds differently to these changes. There is no ‘one size fits all’ response and it is widely recognised that a top-down approach from the various ‘silos’ of government departments will not necessarily meet the needs of individual communities (Edgar, 2001; Faris, 2003; Schuler, 2000). This does represent great opportunity to develop capacity locally at an individual, institutional and societal level (Fukuda-Parr, Lopes, & Malik, 2002).

Fukuda-Parr, Lopes & Malik (2002) also believes that technology can be used as a tool for societal change and capacity development. However, in order to do this we have to start with the motto, ‘scan globally, reinvent locally’ and we should try new methods to overcome the well-known institutional barriers. The authors suggest that new methods such as networks make the best use of new types of learning.
The investigation reported here is about a very local response to the development of a learning network and it tracks, through an ALAR approach, how a group of teachers, learners, managers, and other stakeholders built capacity, that is, skills and connections. While it was on a very small scale, it was a practical attempt at developing new ways of learning through a networked approach.

3.1.1 Australia's Response
In the past 20 years the Australian economy and the world of work have become increasingly complex. Intricate technological processes are needed to generate economic output while a greater proportion of work is oriented towards service industries. Australia had to extend its markets into the international area, and with a reduction in the demand for, and price of, minerals and farm products, Australia has made an effort to move towards value-added manufacturing. The skills now needed for work have become more sophisticated and there is a diminished availability of unskilled work opportunities (Harris, Guthrie, Hobart, & Lundberg, 1995).

The general government policy response to these shifts, which have been labelled as post-fordist, postmodernist and postsocialist was to try and stimulate export production by cutting government expenditure, reducing real wages, providing incentives for private investment, production and consumption, devaluing currencies, reducing government regulation of business activity and encouraging foreign investment (Foley, Crombie, Hawke, & Morris, 2000, p. 118).
Edgar (2001) claims there was an excess of greed in the business dealings of the 1980s; where there was an elevation of efficiency over effectiveness and profit over social responsibility. During this time, Australian business downsized more dramatically than in any other country and close to $\frac{1}{3}$ of Australian families experienced the retrenchment of a family member. There was also a resistance to the funding of innovative research and new venture development that probably left Australia well behind in the race for leadership in the new knowledge economy.

He believed (ibid) that Australia was in some ways complacent regarding the new knowledge economy. The average Australian did not fully understand the jargon used to describe the importance of the shift. Terms such as 'knowledge economy', 'service economy', 'information age' and the 'post-modern' society mean nothing to the everyday citizen affected by obvious changes in the workplace.

At the simplest level, this is what the 'knowledge economy' means: brains replace brawn; freed from the long hours of agricultural and manufacturing work, people must now use their knowledge in applied problem-solving and more innovative ways if they are to progress. We can produce more using machines than with hands and backs; value is added by creating new and more effective ways to enhance productivity. Applied knowledge is now the most central service of all (Edgar, 2001, p. 15).

The implementation of FLNs in Victoria, which involved a range of partnerships with different organisations across sectors within education, and with business and local government, was a practical way participants could come to grips with the skills required to participate in a knowledge economy.
3.2 Australia’s Education System

Edgar (2001) notes that while there is much talk about the need for lifelong learning, retraining and upgrading our skills, our education system is ill prepared to skill people for the knowledge economy. In particular, he refers to the under utilised stock of school buildings that are only open at certain times of the year to certain age groups. While education is the key to the social and economic viability of Australia, we have to start thinking about it in a broader sense. This is a similar view to Faris & Peterson (2000) who believe that the learning resources of all sectors - civic, public (e.g. health, libraries, recreation and arts councils), economic (private and cooperative), educational and voluntary/community - should be used, not just those of the education system. Faris & Peterson (2000) and Edgar (2001) believe that better utilisation of education resources will happen through the effective use of partnerships. However, each sector of education has responded in a particular way.

RMIT LearnLinks, as a Victorian FLN, involves a partnership between organisations from 2 educational sectors – vocational, education and training (VET) and adult and community education (ACE). Community learners could access RMIT certified training at 7 community locations and did not have to come into the central university campus. In a small way, it did attempt better utilisation of education resources (ACE Providers).

3.2.1 Vocational Education and Training

Harris et al. (2000) notes, however, that economic factors are increasingly becoming the rationale for VET policy decisions and the means for measuring their success. This means vocational preparation and education are increasingly focused on work preparation to meet the ‘standards needed for
competitive output from work' (Harris et al., 1995, p. 11). There has been a concentration on:

- the development of nationally recognised competencies in order to provide a national training system that enables mobility of qualifications across state jurisdictions

- the establishment of a national training market, ‘a system based on large state vocational education providers is replaced by one comprising multiple competing providers’ (Foley et al., 2000, p.122).

The establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) in the 1980s that oversaw overarching policy development, the distribution of funds, quality assurance and the establishment of a National Training Framework drove this transformation.

The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and an extensive system of competency-based Training Packages and workplace assessment underpinned the provision of VET.

However, ANTA spent much of 2003 consulting key business, community and education leaders about the national vision for vocational education and training from 2004-2010 and also the future of flexible learning (ANTA, 2003a, 2003b). Building inclusive and sustainable communities is a key strategy of the future direction of ANTA. The flexible learning futures strategy poses the question: "How can flexible learning help build inclusive and sustainable communities"? It recognizes that there has been a renewed interest in the quality of community life and in community development. It also maintains that
the development of skills must be built around other things and names the "rapid deployment of telecommunications, community leadership, entrepreneurship, competitive small businesses, strong civic institutions and collaboration" (ANTA, 2003b).

3.2.2 Higher Education

At the same time that the national training market came into being, there was major transformation in the higher education sector. The 1988 Dawkins White Paper (Dawkins, 1998) signalled significant changes in government policy in requiring universities to become more market-oriented, semi-public enterprises. Marginson and Considine (2000) note that between 1987 and 1998, student numbers in publicly funded universities increased by 70%; advanced colleges of education and universities were amalgamated; public funding of universities was cut from 84 to 54% and international students attending Australian universities rose by approximately 300%.

Furthermore, there has been critical debate about the role of universities and as Coady (2001) notes, in making such radical changes in such a short time there was inevitably loss. In the essay entitled 'Universities and the ideal of inquiry,' Coady (2001) discusses Newman's idea of a university 147 years ago, which was that universities should first and foremost be centres of a certain type of learning. Newman's picture is one of a community of learning devoted to the pursuit of significant truth, which as an end in itself fulfilled a significant central, cultural and ethical role for society at large. His concept of the educated person invoked an idea of intellectual cultivation and of knowledge. Newman applauds the development of the Mechanics' Institute and the public lectures they sponsored. A picture was painted of an ideal
pursuit of a liberal education with unlimited time to contemplate new knowledge. However, this is not the current reality (Coady, 2001).

The Higher Education sector is again under review. This commenced with the publication of a Ministerial discussion paper, *Higher Education at the Crossroads* (Nelson, 2002a), which raised a number of issues and challenges facing Higher Education including the need for universities to become more entrepreneurial. However, the *Varieties of Excellence* paper (Nelson, 2002b) foreshadows strong support for regional engagement and encourages partnership with communities and business. However, details of the kind of support have not been published at this stage. The ACE sector, known as the third sector of education by some (Duke, 2002) and the fourth sector by others (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991), is very responsive to community needs.

### 3.2.3 Adult, Community Education

At a policy level this sector is recognised for its dynamism, diversity and responsiveness and its contribution to community capacity building through community ownership. ACE is recognised as a pathway to further education and training for ‘second chance’ learners (MCEETYA, 2002).

In a review of access to lifelong learning in 5 countries, including the greater use of ICT by teachers in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, Duke (2003) discusses the role of adult, community and continuing education. He claims it raises issues about ACE – what to do about this third sector of education that covers formal, non-formal and informal learning. “One response is to exclude and ignore it. Another is to seek to *capture* it through recognition of prior and experiential learning, and by embracing community,
work-based and workplace learning" (Duke, 2002, p. 6). The learning network concept is one practical attempt to capture learning through partnership. However, in reality, the ACE community has had a chequered history in Australia. Compared to its English counterpart, NIACE, Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is a very small organisation with a very small research team and yet the sector has been recognised for being at the ‘cutting edge of educational endeavour’, being very responsive to the needs of adult learners in their community (Commonwealth-Australia, 1991). It has also been recognised as having an important function in strengthening community links and making communities more self-reliant.

3.2.4 Partnerships
Edgar (2001) sees that social and human capital and investments in people and social infrastructure are the key to the development of Australia as a knowledge economy. However, our education and training systems might not be able to respond. The current withdrawal of government funding is not being replaced by private money. There is also a failure of businesses to articulate what sort of skills are really required if Australia is to compete in a knowledge economy.

Edgar (2001) indicates that Australia has been slow to realise that education, higher-skills training and value adding through the creative use of knowledge is the way of the future and that the solution lies in a genuine partnership between government, business and community.

The way forward is to develop new structures that recognise and reinforce such a culture of interdependence, by getting business leaders to interact with others in the community - teachers, local government, family support service providers - whose work creates a
viable economic and social environment in which business can thrive (Edgar, 2001, p. 72).

Edgar (2001), like Fukuda-Parr et al. (2002) believes that a key way of moving forward is an understanding of how to work with complex networks. "Business in the global age enters a new era of complex networks and partnerships from which innovation and profitability will grow" (Edgar, 2001, p. 72). We were now part of complex family networks and social networks, and these should not be isolated from our work networks.

Our work lives are also increasingly dependent on complex networks and work itself becomes a patchwork, stitched together over a lifetime of varied tasks. All the trends we are seeing now will expand. Team-based work, with group membership changing to suit the project, will demand not just individual communication, negotiation and team problem-solving skills; it will also require efficient networks of suitable contacts in order to pull together the best just-in-time team. The better your contacts, the better the team you can bring to the job (Edgar, 2001, p. 73).

Tiffin & Rajasingham (1995) foresaw this need for the education system to cater for the needs of complex networks. They view education as a communication system that must be transformed in order to prepare people for a society where information systems are the norm. In this view of education the key players are the teachers and learners in a range of settings (work, home, community). Information and communication technology (via networks) could be used to transmit the knowledge and problems to the nodes (teachers and learners) that interact to create new knowledge. The nodes in a network where learning takes place could be networks themselves at different levels. For example, a workbased learner on his/her own, the interaction between a workplace supervisor and a workbased learner, the level of a small work group, the level of the organisation and the level of the trade and profession.
There could also be cross over in the networks, for example, the individual work-based learner could be part of a family and could also be involved in community activity and at the same time belong to what Edgar (2001) refers to as a tribal group (for example, a member of a particular ethnic group or a football team).

So, the concept of an education system as a communication system, with the interlinking of social networks (people, family, schools and community) and technological networks (telecommunications and roads) that underpinned the workings of a learning network.

Bentley (2003) argues that networks are the key to mass personalisation of the education system. In a keynote address at Net*Working 2003, Bentley said:

- networks enable diversity and coordination
- information networks are gateways for learner navigation
- networks of suppliers and providers offer flexible pathways
- employer networks provide demand-led information about skills specifications and learning opportunities, and
- community networks provide informal support for learning and participation

Bentley (2003) identifies 3 network types that are centralised, decentralized and distributed as shown in Figure 3.3.
Bentley (2003) identifies current examples of network use in England. These include:

- networked learning communities
- National Health Service (NHS) Collaboratives
- National Health Service (NHS) Direct – networked user interface
- Learn Direct (Bentley, 2003).

Bentley (2003) categorises network types and reinforces the importance of the growth of networks as a key method of working, gaining access to information and learning. The relevance to this study demonstrates the importance of trailing network partnerships as participants experience working across different organisations (Metes, Gundry, & Bradish, 1998).
Partnerships should range across the sectors (Edgar, 2001; Faris, 2001; Faris, 2003). The learning could be formal, non-formal or informal. It should be based on networks and adaptable to changing demand (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2002).

Vignettes of various types of networks from Australia, England, Scotland and British Columbia in Canada are further explored later in this chapter.

3.3 Understanding Frameworks for Learning Networks
3.3.1 Defining the Field
The concept ‘learning network’ is used in many ways. A search of online catalogues showed that in practice the term, ‘learning network’, covers a variety of learning activities in a range of situations. It could cover anything from redefining how an institution operates as a ‘campus community’ in a global way, such as MIT Learning Networks (Larson, 1997), through to a micro level group of learners using computer and communication technologies to work with remote learning resources, including coaches and other learners, not online simultaneously (Mayadas, 2000). It could also involve Learning Networks as a Learning Service Provider (LSP) that designs, hosts and manages secure collaborative learning environments for a range of partners across various sectors (LearningNetworks.net, 2003). As a policy approach, it is a way of connecting more people to computers for the purpose of learning and/or community development, as is the case with the nationally funded learning networks such as the Canadian Community Learning Networks or the state funded Flexible learning networks of Victoria, Australia (Gurstein, 2001; OTTE, 2002).
3.3.2 Overview of Learning Network Frameworks
This study focuses on the development of one Victorian Flexible Learning Network, RMIT LearnLinks. In developing an understanding of RMIT LearnLinks as a case study, it was also important to examine the range of learning network projects (both local and international) that connected information and learning with community, workplace, schools or the home using technology to achieve outcomes for learners and for the community. This involved a scan of the many examples of networks of learning/access centres (both nationally and internationally) connecting people to computers for the purpose of learning and community development. Two particular frameworks that influenced my thinking at various times during the action research cycles of the RMIT LearnLinks case study were the community networking movement and the conceptual framework of a learning community. The practical example section highlights both types.

3.2.3 Community Networks
Community networking is an international movement that promotes the idea that all members of a local community should have access to low cost electronic public space to communicate and form communities of practice or interest that may or may not represent a local geographic area. Access and technical issues should not present a barrier to this. The community networking movement is based in the not-for-profit sector (Graham, 1996; Royce, 2000).

Before computers took centre stage, the term "community network" was a sociological concept that described the pattern of communications and relationships in a community. This was the web of community that helped us better understand how news travelled and how social problems were addressed in the community. New
computer-based "community networks" are a recent innovation that are intended to help revitalize, strengthen, and expand existing people-based community networks much in the same way that previous civic innovations (such as the print-media inspired publish library) have helped communities historically (Schuler, 2000, p. 179).

Historically, the movement was founded in the early 1990s before the widespread availability of access to the Web. In the United States and Canada they were generally known as Free-Nets and were based on Unix computer networks. People who formed these groups were generally social activists, librarians and concerned computer scientists who wanted to ensure that citizens had free or low cost access to community computing resources. Today, community networks are not the primary point of access to the Internet any more but they still provide a valuable suite of services, most of them without charge. They also provide a community voice in an increasingly commercial environment (Royce, 2000). Some are funded by social service agencies, others by foundations or local government.

From a UK perspective, Mulquin (2000) prefers to describe community networks as the means by which a local community can use the new information and communication technologies so that folk within that community can socialise and work together. Mulquin (2000) identifies four defining characteristics:

- community networks provide public space in cyberspace
- community networks recognise that communication is more important than information provision, that is, community networks must form newsgroups and email discussion lists if they really want to meet met public needs
- community networks are locally focused and reflect the location in which we live and work

- community networks work best when they are comprehensive, covering all aspects of life, i.e. public bodies, businesses, schools and educational establishments as well as voluntary and community groups

Schuler (2000) notes that community networks can offer a range of services and are usually based on partnerships:

Currently, community members and activists all over the world are developing these new community-oriented computer services, often in conjunction with other local institutions including colleges and universities, K-12 schools, local governmental agencies, libraries, or non profit organisations (Schuler, 2000, p. 179).

The more I found out about community networks the more I discovered these could also be referred to by a number of terms and that these concepts are often not well defined (Denison et al., 2002). However, the exciting discovery for me was that this is an emerging academic field known as Community Informatics (CI), which focuses on how ICT could also be used to support communities in their efforts for social and economic development. Community Informatics is defined as:

a technology strategy or discipline which links economic and social development efforts at the community level with emerging opportunities in such areas as electronic commerce, community and civic networks and telecentres, electronic democracy and on-line participation, self-help and virtual health communities, advocacy, cultural enhancement, and others (Gurstein, 2000, p. 1)

This is a very broad area and the learning network framework is a subset of this emerging field of knowledge. The discipline of Community Informatics has
arisen as the consequence of a general consensus that while the 'technology juggernaut' was making significant inroads into the business sector, significant segments of society were increasingly being left behind (Gurstein, 2000).

3.2.4 Learning Communities
The other work that influenced my thinking about learning networks was the learning community framework developed by Faris (2001). The Faris evaluative framework is based on over 30 years of research by both UNESCO and the OECD into the application of learning community models. This framework draws from the fields of human development, ecological models, political economy and communitarian values. The basis of this framework is the key to lifelong learning as an organizing principle and social/cultural goal. In particular, Faris (2001) claims that the scaffolding for the framework enhances human and social capital and their contribution to human well-being, sustainable economic growth and social development. Faris (2003) believes the framework “can also serve as a basis for a possible national strategy to strengthen community life across the nation through active partnerships of all 5 sectors at local, provincial and federal levels” (Faris, 2003). The model (see Figure 3.4) promotes a multidisciplinary approach and challenges the silos of government departments as well as the traditional disciplinary solitudes of many university faculties.
As well as promoting 6 historic purposes of learning-based community development, the framework also encouraged the appropriate use of learning technologies for networking and the notion of social learning and change. Based on British research (Cara & Ranson, 1998) and experience in British Columbia, Faris believes it is important to:

- build partnerships among all 5 community sectors;
- foster participation of all, and
- assess performance.

Much of Faris's (2003) theoretical work arose from practitioner-based evidence of learning community development in rural and remote areas of British
Columbia. People in those communities used a learning community model to address local issues such as a decline in traditional industries, i.e. forestry and a growth in unemployment (Ministry of Community Development Cooperatives and Volunteers, 2000). In using this framework, Faris advises communities to establish learning objectives and targets at the beginning of a project and as acta as a baseline for measuring the development of the learning community for the duration of a project. Through the collection of this data, local people could see how this framework was making a difference to their community. This is one way of achieving the necessary cultural change in a community that has a long-term commitment. In terms of this investigation, the learning network framework, based on partnerships across two educational sectors, is a small-scale way that a community can achieve an identified learning objective. Technology is definitely used to achieve that objective. The learning network is part of the patchwork of programmatic outcomes to build capacity within a geographic community.

At one stage, I thought that I might be able to apply this conceptual framework as an evaluative tool to assess the development of a learning community (Wheeler, 2001b). However, I realised that I was mixing a conceptual framework of a learning community with the operational framework of a sustainable learning network. Many practical examples of learning community and community network projects are described in the next section. I came to understand that RMIT LearnLinks was but a subset of a learning community.

### 3.2.5 Practical International Examples

All of the projects that I reviewed started with some form of government funding. The projects were generally networks of technology centres
established in a local geographic community providing IT training and access to groups of people who would not otherwise have this facility.

There were many examples of international networks of learning/access centres connecting people to computers for the purpose of learning and community development. Those described on the following pages represent a small sample of these and were largely the networks I investigated as part of my Flexible Learning Leaders Project (Wheeler, 2000a). This ranged from national programmes that incorporated both workplace and community learning through to networks of learning centres based in rural locations for the purpose of developing a learning community.
Example 3.1. Community Learning Networks (CLN), Canada

The Office of Learning Technologies (OLT), Human Resource Development Canada, runs The Community Learning Networks (CLN).

The program started in 1996. Communities apply for funding to the OLT but must demonstrate innovative and sustainable uses of existing network technologies that upgrade Canadians' skills and knowledge. Project funding is accorded in two phases. Firstly, initial funding of C$20,000 is distributed for a development phase and then $300,000 for a funding phase.

Gurnstein (2001) identifies many different examples of projects across Canada. Examples of projects I observed were POVNET - a searchable website for people on welfare, advocates and community groups who were involved in anti-poverty work - and the Vancouver Community Network - one of the original Free-Nets that provides a range of services including a community web portal service so that low-income groups can go online. Both of these examples also received Community Access Program (CAPs) funding as well.

Other projects, for example, Upper Skeena, do not focus on technology at all, but rather were formed to respond to incredibly difficult economic conditions in particular those experienced by First Nations people. Dr Ron Faris, a consultant on this project, used a learning community framework to evaluate the development of this community.

Example 3.2. UK University for Industry

The United Kingdom University for Industry (Ufi) is a national distributed learning network model. It was a programmatic response to the Government's green paper, *The Learning Age* had a vision for 'a learning society in which everyone, from whatever background, routinely expects to learn and upgrade their skills throughout life'.

The model involved a network of learning centres across the country controlled by regional hubs (the decentralised model in Figure. 3.3). It consisted of both a physical and virtual network. The physical network involved hooking into networks of learning centres within a region, for example, CITINET in Sheffield. The learning centres might be attached to a college of further education, near a railway station or a swimming pool. Learners within the centres could get access to a range of material, for example, the product *learndirect* had a range of online course content for the development of generic skills. Learners could also access the material at home and in the workplace.

It was also extended into Learning Through Work whereby a number of universities provided access to degrees delivered in a flexible mode.
Example 3.3.
Direct Support – UK

Direct Support is also a national system. It is based on a collaborative learning environment – FirstClass. It provides free advice and mentoring services for community and voluntary organisations throughout the United Kingdom. It used a combination of face-to-face workshops and online mentoring and advice as backup.

It is funded by a consortium of 5 organisations all focused on various aspects of ICT and community development: Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), Community Action Network (CAN), Community Development Foundation (CDF), Partnerships Online and Ruralnet UK. As illustrated in Figure 3.3, it was a centralised network model.

The 3 examples provided are national variations of learning networks. The University for Industry focuses on providing generic skills training through online centres throughout the United Kingdom and, as such, is similar to FLNs but on a much larger scale. Direct Support is the smallest national initiative of the 3, but the most focussed. It uses an online platform to provide free advice and mentoring to community and voluntary sector. Face-to-face workshops are available to back up the online support. It is funded by a consortium of partners and had no more than 2 staff running it. In contrast, the Community Learning Networks (CLN) of Canada uses technology as an enabler for social and economic development. Each CLN is different, some have a learning community focus and others focus on economic development. The programme allows for regional variations. These examples demonstrate that learning networks can have a range of applications from pure skills development through to building social capital and community capacity.
There are also regional variations of learning networks and one of the most comprehensive examples is CITINET in Sheffield.

### Example 3.4.
CITINET, Sheffield

CITINET is a regional hub for the University for Industry (Ufi). It was formed before the establishment of Ufi in 1998 as a partnership between a college of further education, the city council and a private training company.

Its main aim was to increase participation in education by providing learning opportunities to adults at a time, place and in a way that suited their needs. The partners also wanted to maximise funding opportunities that came into the city.

The CITINET model featured:

- a method of governance through partnerships
- a network of 60 learning centres located in neighbourhoods, libraries or workplaces
- a common online learning platform and access to leamdirect content
- a coordinating Hub, which provided a range of services to the cluster of learning centres
- an extensive website listing the range of learning opportunities in various modes, not only online
- access to national marketing and funding through UK Ufi
- emphasis on lifelong learning, not just vocational outcomes

CITINET has a very similar operational model to that offered by Victorian FLNs, however, FLNs had more networks (11 Victorian FLNs covering less population), and a greater diversity of geographic regions.

### 3.2.6 Australian Learning Networks

Each state in Australia has approached the question of access to information and communication technology, learning and community development differently. Most use the approach of a network of technology centres to
provide access (also known as online access centres (OACs) and telecentres) to a combination of various programs, i.e. content (both non-formal and formal) to increase the ICT skills of the general community. Many of the networks in regional Australia are funded using a combination of Networking the Nation (NTN) and state government funds. Various governments within Australia identify non-profit organisations as 'valuable mechanisms for enhancing overall levels of community ICT access and skills through their social networks and their position as established social focal point within local communities' (OIE & DCITA, 2004). The following examples illustrate this idea.
Example 3.5

Australia

The **Australian Capital Territory** provides Digital Divide Grants for Public IT Access Centres and Digital Divide Grants for Community Based Programs. This is aimed at enticing disadvantaged groups online and to use existing infrastructure.

The **New South Wales** government established approximately 80 Community Technology Centres (CTCs) across rural NSW. Their purpose is to provide resources so that various sectors of the community can get online.

**Queensland** offers a Community Skills Development Program in ICT and links in to existing infrastructure through a community-housing program.

The **South Australian** government uses a similar approach, for example, *Networks for You*, a program to develop the use of the internet. It achieves this by partnering with schools, libraries, telecentres and neighbourhood centres.

**Tasmania** calls its project *Tasmanian Communities Online*. It also operates through a network of 64 Online Access Centres and aims to increase the uptake of information technology for people living in rural and regional Tasmania.

**Western Australia**’s First Click program is designed to increase computer literacy and a network of Telecentres to support the program.

The **Victorian government** runs a range of programs. For example, *Sills.net* is a program aimed at providing free or affordable Internet training to those who would not otherwise have access. *My Connected Community* is aimed at encouraging community groups located in Victoria (Australia) to create their own online communities. The ACFE Division has also recently created ACE Community Building Hubs where ACE organisations will be trained, resourced and supported to act as a focal point or ‘hub’ for local community based organisations.

Source: (OIE & DCITA, 2004)

The examples described are all either state/provincial or national/federal government funded initiatives. Governments in the 3 countries spent
considerable amounts of money to ensure their citizens had the necessary
to connect to the digital world (DCITA, 2003a) (Davies et al., 2003;
Gurstein, 2001). Most of the examples given were also responses to ensuring
technology for social inclusion’ and attempted to address the ‘ABCs of the
digital divide – Access, Basic Training and Content’ (Muir, 2004; Zappala &
McLaren, 2003). Some examples are learning centre networks located in
neighbourhoods, others provide learning programs (mainly non-formal) and
use existing facilities others, especially those in rural locations are tied to local
economic development. This work influenced my thinking in the development
of RMIT LearnLinks and enabled me to situate this practical work in an
international movement and academic knowledge base, that is, Community
Informatics.

3.4 Sustainable Networks
When examining the definition of sustainability at a program level, I eventually
found it useful to refer to a study on the sustainability of community technology
centres (CTC) in Seattle, which defined sustainability of the CTC program as
“the long-term ability of CTCs to maintain or improve their capacity to deliver
services” (O’Malley & Liebow, 2002, p. ii).

Currently, the funding of networks of learning centres/OACs and telecentres at
both state and federal government level is under review in Australia. One of
the issues, especially for the networks of OACs, is sustainability (DCITA,
2003a). The argument is about the need to maintain OACs especially in
remote areas of Australia. These centres are more than technology centres,
they are community resources. However, the following vignettes illustrate
networks of learning centres or telecentres integrally based in geographic communities which enables them to address sustainability in a broader sense.

Example 3.6

The Western Australian Telecentre:

The Western Australian Telecentre Network has a much broader mandate than just access to computer technology. When established in 1992, it was seen as a way of improving access and support for those wishing to pursue post-compulsory studies in remote and rural Western Australia. The early pilots were very successful and within months, it became evident that a network of telecentres could be used for a wide range of government and community services and programmes in regional Western Australia (Short, 2001). The funding for the network came from a range of sources, both state and federal departments. The network now provides a range of services that some or all of the telecentres are able to provide and includes, web access, computer training, resource centre services, social activities, government services, labour market programmes, community programmes, local enterprise, post compulsory education and lifelong learning (Short, 2001). The network also has the advantage of a sophisticated management structure for local, regional and state-wide governance. At a local level the telecentres are community owned and managed by a committee of management. The telecentres also operate on a regional basis, allowing for the development of regionally focussed programmes.
Example 3.7
Learning Network Queensland

The Queensland state government established the Queensland Open Learning Network (QOLN) in 1989. Its purpose was to expand the scope and range of educational opportunities available to regional, rural and remote locations through a state-wide network of open learning centres supported by a sophisticated information and communications technologies (ICT) infrastructure (Gooley, 2001).

The network offered the communities a range of formal accredited programmes from universities, colleges and other educational and training providers. It was also able to be responsive to specific community needs.

The network changed its name to Learning Network Queensland (LNQ) and nationally and internationally recognised as a best practice example of education and training service delivery for regional, rural and remote communities.

Its business is ‘primarily to foster lifelong learning so that individuals may discover the joy of learning throughout their lives and rediscover and reinvent themselves as they face new challenges’ (Learning Network Queensland, 2002).

Learning Network Queensland (2002) notes that 2 of its greatest strengths are its long-term active involvement at a local level and its adoption of a ‘learning community’ approach to community capacity building.

An interesting observation about both the WA Telecentre Network and Learning Network Queensland was that both had embedded the use of technology in a community development/learning community approach. They did not see their networks of learning centres as being only about accessing technology. A recent study of Community Technology Centres (CTCs) in the US identified this as a key requirement for any future networks of CTCs and for existing ones. The study found that those CTCs that had viewed their role in a...
broader community development framework were more likely to be sustainable because they were able to:

- forge partnerships with a wide range of partners, which enabled them to strengthen the impact of their program
- enable economic development through technology (Davies et al., 2003).

I was also influenced by the views of Schuler (Schuler, 1996, p. 366) who claims that "developing an adequate, equitable, and sustainable funding stream is one of the major challenges facing community networks". Community networks look for their funding in two basic ways – funding by direct users or through indirect users (see Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5: Funding Sources for Community Networks
Direct users are those who use the community networks services, by paying for information and services, including advertising. Indirect users are foundations, government agencies, or businesses that benefit when other people use the network.

I went on to apply the Schuler (1996) funding framework to RMIT LearnLinks. I realised that on this basis, it was very vulnerable as it only had one source of funding and in order to achieve sustainability, I would have to work to broaden the funding base.

This study investigated the operational framework required for a sustainable learning network. RMIT LearnLinks was a very small-scale project in relation to the broader issues of sustainability that are discussed by Davies (2003), Schuler (1996), Faris (2001) and Gurnstein (2002). However, I thought if it could be sustainable at a micro level and connected to other networks and to geographic communities in which those networks were located, it would also contribute to the broader community development/learning community concept of sustainability as well (Faris, 2003; Ife, 2002).

3.5 Victorian Flexible Learning Networks

3.5.1 Project Context

RMIT LearnLinks, developed in the period - mid 1998 until 2002 is the focus of this research. It was therefore important for me to understand the government policy context over that period and the broader funding project, which was first referred to as Victorian Learning Networks and came to be known in subsequent rounds as the Victorian Flexible Learning Networks project (FLN/s).
3.5.2 Victorian Government Policy Context 1996-2002

The Victorian state government policy context for the duration of the FLN projects changed considerably, particularly the policy for flexible learning in TAFE. The foundation document for the establishment of the Victorian Learning Networks was The Ministerial Review of Melbourne TAFEs (OTFE, 1997b). At about the same time, a multi-media strategy (OTFE, 1996) was introduced with an emphasis on building technological infrastructure. With a change in government, the emphasis shifted from technology to connecting communities (S&RD, 1999). The policy aimed to position Victoria as the nation's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) leader and to build Victoria as a knowledge economy. A key strategy within this was the building of a learning society.

In 2001, the Victorian government introduced its key strategy document, 'Growing Victoria Together'. It expressed the government’s broad vision for the future and was an attempt at balancing economic, social and environmental goals and actions (DPC, 2001). A key plank of this is valuing and investing in lifelong education and many education policies are based on the broad visions of this document.

3.5.3 Vocational Education and Training Policy Context in Victoria 1996-2002

The Ministerial Review of Melbourne TAFEs was the key Victorian government policy that gave impetus to the introduction of Victorian Learning Networks. While the review was principally about restructuring and merging the ‘ageing’ stock of TAFE facilities, the report also identifies the need for a longer-term commitment by government to increase investment significantly in new
learning technologies in order to better position Victoria to respond to competition nationally and internationally, and to expand participation rates in training. It saw a technology-based option for VET delivery as a way of providing a flexible and more efficient delivery of education and training services. Policy initiatives to achieve this included the development of the STS Electronic Services Platform (TAFE VC), the development of online content, upgrading of IT infrastructure and the tendering of learning network projects (OTFE, 1997a).

3.5.4 Vocational Education and Training Flexible Learning Strategy
The period 1996-2000 saw an evolution in the development of a flexible learning strategy for the state. The Communications and Multimedia Strategy (OTFE, 1996) prepared the groundwork. In that regard the emphasis was on a technological approach – that is, infrastructure such as physical hardware and human resource requirements. The 3 key strategies were about capital infrastructure development, content development and developing leadership. Great emphasis was placed on the fact that this was in line with the then Victorian government's interactive multimedia policy. In this Communications and Multimedia Strategy document the term ‘flexible delivery’ had a broad meaning and was used to denote “the use of a range of technologies including print, graphics, telephone, facsimile, audio and video, often in conjunction with other physical arrangements (training at workplaces, by distance mode, at convenient times) to meet client and enterprise needs” (OTFE, 1996, p. 10).

In the TAFE Online 2001 policy report, the next policy direction was an emphasis on making it happen, (OTFE, 1998a). Although the report did not
explicitly define flexible delivery, it was implied through a much greater emphasis on online delivery, even in the Learning for Life category:

A major aim of TAFE Online 2001 is to provide access to training, through online programs and services, by people who might otherwise be unable to participate in training and further education, due to work commitments, life commitments, geography or special needs (OTFE 1998a, p. 4).

It was implemented using a number of enabling strategies, all with a heavy emphasis on technology, that is online programs, staff development, online information and delivery platform, technology infrastructure and information and marketing. The establishment and evaluation of learning network trials was a key STS strategy for research and continuous improvement.

The next iteration of the flexible learning strategy for TAFE, 'Towards a Learning Society', placed the focus on individual and community outcomes (OPCETE, 2000b). The goals for achieving these were to:

- develop widespread technological literacy and encourage lifelong learning;
- provide effective, relevant and accessible vocational learning options to all Victorians; and
- ensure Victorian TAFE and ACE personnel are in the best position to realise the potential of online learning.

Emphasis was placed on the use of online programs using the TAFE VC to act as enabling strategies via a TAFE VC Portal. The strategy placed FLNs as part of the research and continuous improvement.
3.5.5 Victorian Flexible Learning Networks

In 1998, the Victorian state government, through the Office of Technical and Further Education, commissioned a year trial of 10 learning networks to implement online technology in learning centres in various community locations. The aim was to trial immediate options for increasing the State Training Service’s capacity to provide responsive quality training through flexible delivery arrangements that included the use of the TAFE VC and online technologies (OTFE, 1998b; OTTE, 2002).

The model for the Victorian Learning Networks for Vocational Education and Training was outlined in the 1998 tender document. It described a vision for a learning network as:

- supporting vocational education and training (VET) and further education (FE) learning through single or multiple learning sites, eg, workplaces, community settings, the home
- providing a strong customer-focus to service delivery
- supporting learning through a range of providers
- delivering learning away from the traditional campus
- giving clients a greater choice in when, where and how they learn
- integrating where possible with existing community facilities, and increasing the community presence of education and training programs (OTFE, 1998b).

Policy directions that were used as guiding principles for the implementation of the Learning Networks were user choice, where users were able to negotiate
their publicly funded training needs; the Australian Recognition Framework (that is nationally recognised competency standards for training, nationally recognised qualifications and nationally Registered Training Organisations), Training Packages (units of competency standards packaged into qualifications relevant for particular industries), and Learning Throughout Life, which in particular focussed on the idea that disadvantaged groups should have access to both further education and vocational education and training.

The development of an online learning platform, the TAFE Virtual Campus was seen as a way to guarantee universal statewide coverage of VET/FE online services. The first tender document stated that TAFE Institutes and other Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) could devolve their regional presence through the establishment of “many and diverse networked customer service points coordinated through a network supported by a hub” (OTFE, 1998b).

An evaluation of the first trial noted that it had provoked an overwhelmingly positive response from all stakeholder groups and, even though a number of barriers were identified, stakeholders wanted to consolidate the experience. They recognised that the question was not IF online learning should be pursued, but WHEN and HOW (Phillips, 2000).

Since then the learning networks were funded on annual cycles, were referred to as Victorian Flexible Learning Networks (FLNs) and defined as “cooperatives of education providers working together to provide TAFE and ACE programs via the Internet. Learning networks used the TAFE VC (a WebCT environment) as their main delivery platform” (OTTE, 2002).
The 11 FLNs in the final funding round built on the learning network trials described in the Learning Network Trial Evaluation (Phillips, 2000). Client groups varied from TAFE and industry based learners to low literacy groups and those learners with special needs. Furthermore, the learning could take place in a variety of settings, for example, a community learning centre, at home, in a TAFE college, or industry and workplace setting.

The common elements that made up the networks were:

- the linking of various educational organizations to individual learners via a central administration hub
- a network of ‘access points’ in the community such as ACE (Adult and Community Education) centres, community houses, libraries and TAFE institutes)
- delivery of learning programs that are TAFE accredited, user-friendly, interactive, teacher-supported and flexible, and
- provision of learner support so that learners are able to study in their own time and at their own pace.

The range of modules taught via the networks ranged from language and literacy, ICT, occupational health and safety through to grape growing.

Appendix 6 (Appendix 6, Table 1) is a summary of FLNs from the final funding round in 2001/2002. It highlights the diversity of partners that could make up a network – usually with a TAFE Institute as a lead agency linked to Adult and Community Education (ACE) Providers, Local Learning and Employment
Networks (LLEN), industry, Shire Councils, or ACFE Learning Towns. Each network had developed its own unique identity.

I argued that throughout the time of the project, FLNs provided a unique collaboration between diverse partners that had traditionally competed. The partners in each network worked together on a number of project outcomes:

- implementation of a learner-centred approach in TAFE delivery models
- an instructional strategy that incorporated learning guidelines and also allowed learners to pursue their own learning and employment goals
- delivery of at least 30,000 student contact hours per network (Youth Gateway FLN and Malcolm Creek FLN had a lower SCH target)
- creation of an organization centre (learning network hub)
- business plan, and
- marketing and communication strategy (Wheeler, 2002).

Each network has its own story about how they achieved these project outcomes and my thesis looks at one in particular, RMIT LearnLinks, and investigates how these elements were incorporated into an operational framework for a sustainable learning network.

Victorian Flexible Learning Networks has been very adaptable to changing policy contexts and government directions. For the duration of the project OTTE, viewed the initiative as a research and continuous improvement
strategy (OPCETE, 2000b). They were used as a test bed for different ideas. For example, at first they were seen as a change strategy, part of a technology-driven solution to ensure that Victoria was internationally competitive and then became part of connecting Victorians with the “learning society”. At different times FLNs were asked to partner with LLENs, Learning Towns, individuals and community groups as well as industry. Tight (2002) claims that while broader visions of the learning society could be seen as an improvement on strict vocationalism, they do represent something of an unhappy and unstable compromise as is the case with FLNs. The 2003 evaluation discussed the evolution of the FLNs into two main variations; those focussed on community engagement and those more commercially orientated. In many respects, the decision on which focus to take depends on the partners in the network and the view of the lead agency (Hughes, McGannon, & Wheeler, 2003). However, when the latest policy on the future directions for the Victorian VET system was published, ‘Victoria’s Innovation Economy’, no mention was made of FLNs as such (Kosky, 2002). The FLNs now had to negotiate with TAFE institutions to participate in new innovative projects. It left those networks that focussed on capacity building within their local community in a very vulnerable position as they had to find other creative ways of keeping the networks going and many were not able to do so. This is discussed further in Chapter Six.

3.6 Summary
This chapter has set the context for the discussion and analysis of the case study, RMIT LearnLinks. It argues that the application of technology across society was not even and was often dependent on the social, cultural and
political context (Green, 2002). The government policy and regulatory environment may or may not be favourable to its implementation. Paradoxically, a technologically advanced corporate sector can flourish, while many people in low socio economic status communities miss out.

Another perspective on viewing the introduction of technology was using the Diffusion of Innovation theory. Rogers (1995, p. 10) states “diffusion is a process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system”. Of particular interest are the factors that determine how fast a particular innovation spreads through a particular market segment and the role played by various stakeholders that make up a social system in the spread of the innovation. For example, innovators, early adopters, early majority, the late majority and the laggards.

This leads to an investigation of the international environment. The learning network project was executed in an international context of economic globalisation and the transformation in technology and explosions in knowledge. It was more important than ever to ‘scan globally, reinvent locally’.

Further, the Australian education environment during the time of the project was explored with a focus on VET and ACE.

The concept of learning networks was defined and explored. In particular, the concepts of networked learning, new learning systems, community networks, learning communities and community informatics were considered. Vignettes of national and regional learning networks were presented from the viewpoint of operational elements and sustainability.
Finally, a background of the wider project – Victorian Flexible Learning Networks – was presented as an introduction to a more detailed investigation of the case – RMIT LearnLinks. The discussion illustrates that the stakeholders in the project had to adapt to the changing policy environment throughout the project. At first, the focus was on setting up an online network and then it shifted to connecting to community. This was also against a background of significant objectives of the funding body in terms of the project outcomes that the network had to achieve with different partners and a diversified learner base. The particular challenge for RMIT LearnLinks was how to offer a 24/7 customer focussed online service, which was integrated into existing community facilities, and make the program sustainable within a short time frame. This challenge is presented in the rest of the discussion in Chapters 4-6.
Chapter Four – Working the Agendas

4.0 Introduction – Cycle One (1998 – 1999)

This chapter takes you through the first cycle of the project, from mid 1998 when a response to a competitive tender was written, to planning, actions, observations and reflections that occurred during 1999 and until the end of the first cycle in December 1999.

The planning discussion answers questions about what plans were made to put the framework in place and the intentions and agendas of the various stakeholders. The action discussion summarises how we met the requirements of the government contract. The observation section breaks the discussion into the following 6 themes:

- Learning Network Models
- Success Factors
- Barriers
- Sustainability
- Partnerships
- Capacity Building

These themes are used in each cycle (Chapter 4-6) to synthesise the observations.
The reflection section summarises my critical incident journals. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings for the cycle presented using Reason's (2001) categories of first (personal), second (the professional) and third (the political) person research.


4.1 Planning
The planning to build a sustainable operational learning network was based on a response to the first tender. The tender stated that the expected long-term impact on the State Training System (STS) of the outputs of the learning networks project was a major shift to client-focused flexible learning systems of VET/FE management and delivery. This meant increased access to VET/FE courses in our workplaces, libraries and homes, new 24/7 training services, new roles for teachers and flexibility in the use of local access points. There was to be a shift in capital investment from buildings to new training support infrastructure (OTFE, 1998b). A key way of achieving this responsive quality training was to use the "Virtual Campus environment in a variety of locations" (OTFE, 1998b). It was expected that a network would target one or more of the following VET/FE client groups: industry/enterprise; individuals and community groups; rurally isolated partners and those with special needs. The challenge was that the network had one year to become established and financially viable!
However, the stakeholders in the RMIT LearnLinks network had differing intentions in meeting the expectations of the tender and sometimes these were incompatible. For example, OTFE wanted to implement responsive quality training through flexible delivery using online technologies, which would be sustainable in one year. RMIT University wanted to focus on access and equity learners.

RMIT University's focus on individual/community groups and access and equity learners made the Northern Metropolitan Regional Council of Adult Community and Further Education (NMR ACFE) an important partner. NMR ACFE had access to 40 ACE learning centres, which focused on adult learners who wanted a second chance at education. The learning centres also had networked computers.

The other interested party was Community Information Victoria Inc (CIVic). CIVic was interested because the manager could see the possibility of connecting to the international community networking movement. NMR ACFE saw this as a way of funding selected community providers to trial online education. It was also a way of building capability of the teaching staff within that sector.

I was interested in investigating how an online community could contribute to the sustainability of a learning network by creating a vibrant online community that would share ideas. I wrote an article for *Reading and Resources in Global Online Education* titled, "Principles of Good Practice in Developing Online Communities for Learning Partnerships" (Wheeler, 2000b). This was based on the findings of a previous project, Online Networks in VET (Wheeler, 1997).
Based on observations and empirical evidence, I concluded that the following were key success factors in the establishment and maintenance of an online community:

- a goal/purpose for an online community;
- a plan to deal with technical and access issues;
- a planned programme of professional development;
- the importance of the role of the moderator; and
- the need to establish a 'critical mass' to populate the online environment (Wheeler, 2000b, p. 144).

I also noted that the greatest challenge in the development of this learning network project was financial sustainability and I outlined a number of options, which I proposed to investigate. These included broadening the base of our government funding, expanding fee for service and internal marketing within the university (Wheeler, 2000b). This dissertation outlines how I went about building on these factors to form an operational framework for a sustainable learning network.

In the writing of that research report (Wheeler, 1997), I also became aware of the Australian community networking movement and I thought that the values that were identified as important in a community networking setting would also apply to this project. The manager of CLVic became a link to that movement internationally.
I was also greatly influenced by the work of Tiffin & Rajasingham (1995) who argue that an education system is a communication system made up of 4 key parts: learners, teachers, knowledge and problems to be solved. This project did not rely on the establishment of expensive infrastructure, which led me to believe that these components were important to a successful Learning Network. This was to play an important role later in the project.

The combination of influences on me - the community networking movement and Tiffin and Rajasingham (1995) - led me to write guiding principles for the tender document as shown in Table 4.1.

The intentions of each of the early stakeholders, the university, NMR ACFE and CIVic, were written into the first tender submission. We saw it as a partnership project and even gave it an appropriate name:

**CommLink Learning Network –**
*Linking the community with training and education*
*Via CIVic, NMR ACFE and RMIT University (RMIT, 1998)*

I noted that the community partners never accepted 'CommLink' and as soon as they came on board, one of the first things they voted to do was to change the name back to 'RMIT Learning Networks' because the RMIT brand was important to them.
Table 4.1

Summary of Guiding Principles that Formed the Basis of the First Learning Network – (Commlink)

Guiding Principles and Values of RMIT Learning Network (RMIT, 1998)

The following guiding principles should set the direction of the network:

- it should be grounded in the activity and everyday life of local communities, and seen as an adjunct to the communication that happens between people
- it should have local focus, local content and local membership
- it should be a vehicle for empowerment and learning, opening new doors for people and offering them the opportunity to learn new skills
- it should provide access and equity in service provision, training and support by providing opportunities for people to function online who may otherwise never have the chance
- it should be a collaboration of all parties involved
- it should provide a case management model for learners' support
- it should value the work of volunteers.

The teaching and learning model was based on Tiffin & Rajasingham's (1995) view of an education system as a communication system; the interlinking of social networks (people, family, schools and community) and technological networks (telecommunications and roads) underpinned the workings of the network. The key players in the Tiffin and Rajasingham's (1995) network are learners, teachers, knowledge and problems to be solved. In this model, the RMIT network focussed on:

- learning as a group activity
- universalisation of access to education
- teaching as a team activity
- an IT network based on the TAFE VC
- professional development as a key activity

The tender claimed we would:
- provide immediate access to off-campus and on-line education and training resources through RMIT VET courses in business and engineering
- develop a case management kit to document recommendations and strategies for the provision of educational services using a case management/brokerage model
- implement procedures and mechanisms to track and document pathways for learners using the TAFE VC
- evaluate the suitability of the TAFE VC for learners with disabilities

On reflection, even at this stage, our response to the tender showed that we were very ambitious when it came to an operational framework and quite naive about what could be achieved while working within a large university.

4.2 Actions
The main actions in this cycle were based around meeting the contractual obligations of the funding body, OTFE.

The deliverables for the first year were divided into 4 stages, which were completed by myself as a part-time project manager together with the assistance of a part-time project officer. The 4 stages were:

- research and development
- establishment
- delivery and development
- project completion
This work was documented in 4 reports to OTFE during the term of the cycle [RLN Stages 1-4 Reports 1998/1999]. The main work completed is listed in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Actions in Cycle One</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Development of a selection process for ACE partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Expression of interest sent to a wide range of ACE partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 ACE partners selected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Assessment made of technical readiness of ACE partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Identification of potential learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Negotiation with relevant RMIT schools on how to become involved in the network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Match available online content to learner needs and source online learning material to deliver through the TAFE VC and RMIT’s Distributed Learning System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Commence delivery ensuring learning materials, communication strategies, student monitoring and support and appropriate assessment strategies, including the TAFE VC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Complete 2 major reports:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• learning mentor kit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• report on accessibility issues regarding the TAFE VC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Organise professional development of teachers in the network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Evaluation of student satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Writing of a business plan and marketing strategy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This was a heavy workload. It involved a key informant who worked as a consultant for NMR ACFE at the time and myself visiting possible community providers, drawing up an expression of interest, selecting providers, visiting each centre with an RMIT technical project officer to provide advice, investigating possible markets for the delivery of the programs, negotiating with heads of schools at RMIT to become involved in the project, identifying fee-for-service projects and writing about it in the first report to the funding body OTFE. In terms of Roger’s (1995) Diffusion of Innovation Theory, my key
informant was well respected and considered to be an opinion leader. He is familiar with the ACFE sector and unlike non-opinion leaders, has long term previous experience in working with ICT. His opinion is respected in the sector. In the TAFE sector at the time, I was considered an Innovator, in terms of innovation diffusion, one of the first 2.5% to adopt online education. So, in many respects, it was about how we as opinion leaders and innovators communicated the innovation of the learning network over time to stakeholders within the network.

There was also an imperative from OTFE to ensure that online delivery via the TAFE VC would happen early in the project. We were also told that bigger institutions with learning networks had to deliver at least 10,000 student contact hours using the TAFE VC during the first year, although this was not written into the contract. In order to meet this challenge, we ran office management models for administration students in the business faculty as these were already on the TAFE VC. As staff in the school of management had developed much of the material, they were willing to use it with their students. This was the easiest way of meeting the 10,000-hour target because we were in the early stages of our relationships with community providers. It would have been an impossible target to meet without the support structures in place.

4.2.1 Outcomes
The outcomes of this work were to develop an understanding of operational partners (community partners and RMIT TAFE schools); the potential market; and the complex web of relationships. These are described below:
Example 1
Community Partners
The network would not exist without the community providers who became our community partners. They joined the network because they had responded to an expression of interest that went out to all providers and they met predetermined selection criteria, which included adequate IT training facilities, connections to the internet, well qualified trainers and an understanding of accredited training. The majority wanted to join for the experience of partnering with a large university and they also saw the project as providing an additional source of funding for centres that were often short of resources. Four of the community partners came from the ACFE Northern Metropolitan Region and 2 were outside the region, but still located in metropolitan Melbourne.

In Victoria, Australia, the community partners are known as Adult, Community and Education (ACE) providers. They could also be categorised using the framework provided by Davies, Pinkette, Servon & Wiley-Schwartz, (2003). The centres are not-for-profit, they target mostly low-income, urban people (in Northern Metropolitan Melbourne). The centres are located in their community in non-threatening environments (a neighbourhood house, community centre, the back of a library, a shop front, an old school). They could operate as stand alone centres but generally prefer to work collaboratively in what the sector refers to as ‘clusters’ as this enables them to pool resources. They run a range of training programmes based on the needs of their community but a large proportion of their training involves meeting demand for language and literacy and generic information technology in their community. The size and the range
of centres varies, and training is tailored towards the need of that location. For example:

- one community partner has over 20 years experience in managing training and employment services;
- another is a major provider of quality education, training services and community development opportunities in a rural location;
- a third, located in the bottom of a public high-rise housing estate, focuses only on language and literacy programmes for non-English speaking residents in inner city Melbourne;
- another caters for the needs of a very diverse multicultural population, in particular for disadvantaged groups, people with disabilities and long-term unemployed.

They all have computer training laboratories but, as a rule, run limited open access services. They are funded from a variety of sources. Generally, the community partners in RMIT LearnLinks obtained the majority of their funding from the Adult, Community and Further Education Division (the branch of the Department of Education that was charged with looking after adult education in the state of Victoria) and this may be in the form of student contact hours, funding for projects and funding for capital works. Other funders may have included the Department of Human Services, a local government in the particular area where a centre was located or other employment programmes such as Job Networks or Community Jobs Programme. The community partners see the network as value adding to services they already offer.
expanding opportunities through partnerships and adding expertise in online learning using the TAFE VC.

Example 2
Potential Markets
I conducted market research to determine what community partners thought their clients would want to learn through the network. I discovered that because the partners were ACE Providers, the most likely demand for online content was in basic computer literacy, language and literacy, small business management and the return to work market and traineeships, in particular hospitality and hobbies [RLN Stage 1 Report 1998/1999]. This also helped me determine which RMIT TAFE schools to approach regarding involvement in the project.

Example 3
RMIT Schools
Schools within RMIT were approached based on the market research findings. The largest component was derived from the business faculty from which 4 RMIT schools became involved. They were RMIT Information Technology, RMIT Management, RMIT Accounting and Law and RMIT Marketing. Two other schools outside the business faculty also participated, Applied Science and Access and Preparatory Studies. All schools provided student contact hours and accredited training for the entire project.
The community partners and the RMIT schools were part of an increasingly complex web of relationships that included the funding body, peak bodies (NMR ACFE), teachers, learners and the project team.

It was very important to communicate with each of these stakeholders. At the start of this project, I was not very knowledgeable in the workings of RMIT systems or the State Training System and this project enabled me to gain knowledge in this area.

4.3 Observations
The observations of the operational framework were analyzed using various themes. Figure 4.1 is based on Creswell’s (1997) recommendations for structuring data analysis of case studies. Themes 1-4 arose out of the research question and the material that came from the internal evaluation report completed in the first cycle [RLN Stage 3 Report 1998/1999]. I also based interview questions on these topics and this formed the basis for the interview analysis for Cycles 2 and 3. Capacity building (also referred to as professional development) was seen to be a key success factor to the building of a network over time (Wheeler, 1997). Partnerships were a major theme that occurred in all 3 cycles and the term appeared on 152 occasions in the interview documents that were loaded into QSR NVivo. Interpretation is incorporated into the analysis of the themes and summarized as findings at the end of each analysis and discussion chapter (Chapters 4-6).
4.3.1 Theme One: Learning Networks Models

The early models of operational learning networks were really linked to the unrealistic tender submission document. The distributed learning models were ideal for winning tenders but had very little to do with the reality of myself (on 0.4 time fraction) and another project officer running a network with 6 community partners, flying literally by the seat of our pants trying to figure out what to do next.

Figure 4.1: Analysis of RMIT LearnLinks as a Case Study
The first adaptation was based on Circit@RMIT’s view of a learning network based on a value chain model, a process-oriented representation of the operation of a network (Circit, 1999).

At a micro level, Circit@RMIT identifies operational elements that acknowledge the uniqueness of each Victorian learning network. These are:

- relationships to host organisation
- structure of the network
- location of clients
- revenue/expenditure structures
• delivery models

• communication

• content delivery/access

• assessment

• instructional management and other content forms (e.g. print), formats (face-to-face) etc.

Figure 4.3 was our first model based on Circit@RMIT and attempted to address our uniqueness. However, it turned out to be a ‘whole of organisation’ approach and, on paper, looked exactly like what OTFE required, while it would really have been more appropriate for RMIT’s distributed learning system.
Figure 4.3: Model of RMIT Learning Network

Urban Regional Model of Learning Network

Process Coordinated by HUB in Partnerships with Community Learning Centres, and RMIT Services

Administrative & Monitoring

PD Support for Development Teams
Content Customisation & Development
Content Distribution
Teacher Support
Learner Support

Educational Alliances

Community Learning Centres
Focus on Learners
Community Access
Technological Infrastructure
Registered Training Organisation
Qualified staff
Can Meet PETE Audit Requirements
Approved by RMIT Faculty
Can deliver RMIT SCH's in Flexible Manner
Can offer its Own Learning Opportunities in Flexible Manner
Offers a Range of Services to Community, including ESL
Training, Apprenticeships, Job Network

RMIT University
Hub Staff to Coordinate the Network
Audit of Learning Centres
Accreditation of subjects
Moderation of Assessment
Access to Full Qualified Academic Staff
RMIT University Presence (Induction, Visits)
Student Contact Hours
Access to Co-op HE Students (Business, Engineering and FELCS)
Extensive Online Database of Information Through RMIT Libraries
Access to TAFE VC Through the Learning Partnerships
Access to a Catalogue of Short Courses (RMIT Training)
Career Connections

Catalogue of Learning Opportunities
Website

TAFE VC
DLS
The first major business plan charted a future direction for extending the Learning Network "to build on the OTFE funded project and establish a distributed learning system responsive to client needs in defined regional locations" [RLN Business Plan, 1998/1999].

I interviewed community partners during the third cycle and asked them for their interpretation at the beginning of the project. They did not talk about a model as such but rather saw value in the set of relationships and an opportunity to work with a large organisation like RMIT. This was much the same view that was upheld by RMIT senior management and is discussed further in Chapter 6.
4.3.2 Theme Two: Learning Network Success Factors

At the end of the first year of funding I & J Management Services was commissioned to evaluate the success of the 10 Victorian FLNs in meeting the required outcomes of the first trial. The results were predictable because of the challenges each network faced and no network achieved financial viability after 1 year. However, the following quote from this evaluation sums up the success of the RMIT network in this first cycle:

RMIT Learning Network demonstrates that large institutions and small community providers can work together to deliver online training. Although it took some time for the Network partners to recognise and accept the different objectives and values of one another, they were able to develop respect for their respective skills and capabilities and deliver online training that realised mutual benefits (Phillips, 2000, p. 23).

Phillips also recognises that another strength was the network’s enjoyment of top-level executive support. While Circit (1999, p. 50) notes that the manager of CIVic, claimed the strength of the network lay in the “willingness of RMIT to listen to community providers needs, and those of their learners”. Phillips also thought that the ability to transfer student contact hours (SCH) to community partners has been an “essential and positive step in the process”.

The internal evaluation found that all centres expressed the opinion that they benefited from involvement in the network. “The general feeling was that, while it had its problems, 1999 was seen as a year in which the concept and processes were being developed, and they all look forward to continued involvement next year” [RLN Stage 3 Report 1998/1999, p. 9].

In summary, the main success factor was our ability to build relationships and maintain trust with the wide range of stakeholders in the network.
4.3.3 Theme Three: Learning Network Barriers

It was just as well that we had built trust because in the first year, we faced considerable problems in the establishment and implementation of the network, and also in maintaining our optimism and determination. In fact, an evaluation report [RLN Stage 3 Report, 1998/1999] demonstrated that the systems were not in place to fulfil the vision that we had for an operational learning network model.

Technology Barrier
Phillips (2000) argues that in an ideal scenario, a learning network has fast reliable access to technological infrastructure. This technology includes the speed of the connections, widely spread access points and a reliable online platform, such as, the TAFE VC. He believes that fast reliable technology should be a hurdle condition for any learning network, and no network should start teaching without it. He notes that:

Learning networks found that an inadequate technological infrastructure can prevent a student even reaching the point of learning, or damage that learning process so significantly that previously enthusiastic students are discouraged from not only using technology but more importantly from learning as well (Phillips, 2000, p. 7).

One of the main concerns of our network was that of technology. This is well illustrated in the following news bulletin issued to community partners after some of the students were not able to access material because the DLS ran to a semester system, which was undergoing renovations at a time when we had students learning online.
Example Four
Apologies ☺

I am going to start with apologies in this Bulletin and thank you for bearing with us. This Distributed Learning System (i.e. Online@RMIT) was part of a benchmarking process last semester that involved 1900 students at RMIT and 50 subjects. The team did some “renovation” over the semester break, which meant that my learning network learners (some of whom were just starting) were not able to access materials. I am documenting these issues so that we have a smoother run in the future. Hopefully, everything is sorted out now. xxx is amending the registration and enrolment notes and sending this out to those centres who are using our Distributed Learning System. I have been getting some feedback from you that the range of self-paced and online materials from various sources (some from a CD ROM, some from a Faculty Website, some run through Online@RMIT) are causing confusion (and no wonder!!!!). I can only say that hopefully the more you use these systems the easier they become. I am documenting these issues for our evaluation. We are working on more standardisation in the longer term!!!!

Leone Wheeler

[RLN News Bulletin, 7 August, 1999]

The use of the two platforms - the TAFE VC and RMIT’s Distributed Learning System - was a problem. The following are some of the quotes taken from an internal evaluation report that illustrates some of the problems encountered in the first cycle.

Example Five
Barriers to the Development of the Learning Network

Difficulty with enrolment and registration processes

I would appreciate it if you could check that their ... logins are set up correctly and advise me of their default passwords as a matter of urgency. They are fee-paying students and have not been able to access their online modules for nearly three weeks now and they are getting quite annoyed - Project Officer

Extra burden placed on staff in the community centre to support the students and liaise with RMIT when problems occur

Time spent reassuring, contacting and emailing about a student’s
inability to access the course – needed RMIT technical staff’s assistance, but had to bypass the usual access method - Community Centre Coordinator

Maintenance and upgrade of servers during a semester break when we were still teaching students

my password and user name was changed on several occasions while I was unaware of the information change - Community Centre Student

The version of the TAFE Virtual Campus was not very user friendly

I disliked the fact that you had to go through numerous screens to access the information required. It was time consuming. - Student comment on TAFE VC

Online subject design not suitable for non-traditional learners with literacy problems

The new environment suits some learners. They feel more in control of their learning, can work at their own pace and are acquiring new and useful IT skills and knowledge as they work through their materials. The students who tackled the online learning materials tended to be those with good literacy skills. Not all low literacy students were suited to this type of learning - Learning Centre Coordinator

[RLN Stage 3 Report, 1998/1999]

Martin Fathers, Manager of the Disability Liaison Unit at RMIT University, carried out a separate evaluation specifically on the suitability of the TAFE VC for learners with disabilities (Fathers, 1999). Fathers tested the TAFE VC using two internationally recognised tests, Bobby, a web-based public service that analyses web pages for accessibility to people with disabilities and TOM, a program that advises on how to make web pages more accessible. The conclusions of the report were that the TAFE VC lacked the fundamental aspects of disability access and, although the first version was artistically beautiful, the designers did not include an appropriate level of disability access
and as a result may be liable under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) for treating people with disabilities in a less favourable manner.

After wide consultation, the in-house platform used by TAFE VC was dumped in favour of WebCT.

**Administration**

There were also considerable problems in administering the network. The project was new and systems had to be developed from scratch. Although I did get regular news bulletins out to community partners and held meetings, the Stage 3 report noted communication as a major problem:

Three of the smaller centres rated the communication level to be "Poor". One centre manager said that the reliance on email did not suit her and often notice of meetings was too short. The lack of resources and the multiple demands on the coordinator of the small centres meant that they often had to juggle competing priorities. As a result, they tended to miss meetings and fell "out of the loop" [RLN Stage 3 Report 1998/1999, p. 12].

From the perspective of the community partners, there were a number of problems with the network operations. These ranged from technological problems to administrative problems with management and student enrolment. The significant problems with enrolment were one of the major issues highlighted by the Stage 3 report. It was noted in the report that, "as the enrolment process is the first encounter which many of the students have with the RMIT Learning Network, it can seriously affect their confidence in the system".

The Stage 3 report detailed a litany of problems with the administration and technology, but at the end of the section notes that "despite these criticisms, all
the community centres except one said that the learning network had been responsive to their needs”.

4.3.4 Theme Four: Sustainability
In the early days of the project, I did not have an understanding of what sustainability meant apart from the fact that I knew I had to meet a project outcome in the tender, our business plan had to demonstrate the ongoing financial viability of the learning network beyond the trial period (OTFE, 1998b). However, the then deputy vice chancellor, Ruth Dunkin, gave approval to go ahead because it did have the government funding and it could be a way of testing methods of partnering with community groups. The main factor was that the network was targeting disadvantaged learners in community settings – not a great revenue earner but certainly making a difference to those learners who would not otherwise be able to access a university education.

RMIT’s network was not alone in struggling to come to terms with sustainability. The external evaluation of all FLNs was completed at the end of the first cycle. Phillips (2000, pp. 28-29) made the following case:

- no learning network involved in the trial would be ‘independently self-sustaining at the conclusion of the trials’
- financial viability was defined differently by different networks
- in the ACE sector financial viability was more frequently about reaching a break-even point where income covers expenditure
• the ACE sector identified that the true cost of operating would be understated because of the various forms of goodwill, and that income stream was heavily reliant on government funding

• for those learning networks hosted by TAFE Institutes, viability was generally about financial autonomy where income covers expenditure within the context of the Institute’s financial structure

• generally, networks hosted by institutes were more commercially focussed where fee-for-service would be expected to contribute to revenue stream - within the Institute context there could be elements of goodwill while a network sought to become more commercially orientated, using fee-for-service as a major revenue stream

In terms of the RMIT network, while the government grant covered the expenditure, the university was supportive in maintaining it. However, because the main partners in the network were from the ACE sector, this became a major limiting factor when it came to growing commercial activity that would contribute to revenue and financial sustainability.

In terms of Roger’s (1995) Diffusion of Innovation Theory, Ruth Dunkin was an ‘innovation champion’ at a senior level and the conditions in the organisation at the time aided the experimentation with an operational model.

4.3.5 Theme Five: Partnerships
The first stage of the RMIT learning network project was about building relationships among stakeholders and developing a model for the delivery of learning.
At this early stage, we did not have much of an understanding of what we meant by partnerships but we knew it was important and had even thought about it in the original tender. The original name and statement on the tender submission, “Commlink Learning Network – linking the community with training and education via CIVic, NMR ACFE and RMIT University”, identified that this was a partnership project (RMIT, 1998).

The partners in the project at the tender writing and establishment stage were not the community partners themselves but rather the overarching organisations that worked with NMR ACFE. As the network evolved, the community partners and the RMIT schools became more active in its development.

4.3.6 Theme Six: Capacity Building

Based on previous experience of running professional development programs for teachers who were implementing online learning and the work involved in the Online Network in VET project, I believed the implementation of planned professional development was important for the development and sustainability of the network (Wheeler, 2000b). I used the term, 'professional development' rather than 'capacity building', but based on more recent work, I knew it was important to build the skill base (now referred to as ‘human capital’) of the people in the network through professional development (Hughes et al., 2003). I also believed that it was important to network and share ideas among community members who were from different groups, that is the university culture versus an adult education culture. This is referred to as ‘bridging social capital’.
The external evaluation emphasized the importance of professional development and both OTFE and the learning networks invested significantly in this area:

Learning networks would opt for a top quality teacher over top quality resources every time, stressing that a good teacher’s capacity to communicate and respond to a student’s need invariably creates a more effective and engaging learning environment for the vast majority of students (Phillips, 2000, p. 8).

The RMIT LearnLinks project invested heavily in the professional development of teachers. We paid for 10 teachers to undertake the Teaching and Learning Online (TALON) subject at RMIT University. While it afforded the opportunity for teachers with community partners to gain an accredited qualification as part of a Graduate Certificate, it did not contribute to the capacity of the network itself to develop professional development programs and the cost was significant ($600 per student). This was not sustainable in the long term. In the end only 2 of the 10 teachers gained the qualification, thus it was not cost effective and obviously pitched at an inappropriate level.

The lesson learnt was to rethink our approach to professional development and this will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

4.4 Reflections
When I reflect back now, I am in awe of the challenges we faced at the start of this network, which was to supposedly provide 24/7 online training to a network of learning centres in Northern Metropolitan Melbourne and across Victoria. We also had the challenge of making this financially viable within one year! But we had high hopes, passion and an innovative spirit that goes a long way a pioneering a path!
In my critical incident journal, I noted in August 1999, that we were too ambitious in trying out a range of processes and models. Our operational model would now change to focus on high volume, low-level IT training. I hoped that as we established that my role would change from day-to-day trouble shooting to brokering the learning. I noted that it was important to gain support from the RMIT schools and to continue to have the support from the top levels of university administration. I believed that with this support and that of the community partners, we could make this work.

There were many times when I noted how exhausted I felt and that the project overwhelmed me. Considerable restructuring was necessary within the organisation as we tried to redefine the flexible learning services and this did not help my motivation. In 1997 I was originally working in the flexible learning development unit and during the period of transition, in 1998, went back to my substantive position in the faculty of business only to be seconded again to ITAP, once I had won the FLN project in 1999. The TAFE leadership saw this as a very important project and assigned a senior TAFE consultant to mentor me throughout the FLN project. However, the director of ITAP did not share this view and saw it as a ‘nuisance’ - especially in comparison to the other projects that were at the commencement stage, such as the start of the Academic Management System (AMS) and the Distributed Learning System (DLS) projects.

The main ‘nuisance’ for ITAP was that I was meant to be running a learning network project on the TAFE VC, which was a platform that at the time did not even meet RMIT’s minimum selection criteria for suitable online learning
platforms. I faced significant opposition from within ITAP to even undertake the learning network project. For example, in a memo dated 1st of April 1999, the then director of the ITAP claimed that it was important that RMIT did not enter into any undertakings in respect of the TAFE VC until the relationship had been clarified, and that I was to clear any proposal for using the TAFE VC through the appropriate authority. This memo clearly placed me in an unenviable position as the director of TAFE at the time had signed a performance agreement with OTFE, accepting that the learning network project would go ahead and that we would identify TAFE VC programs to run through the network. So one of my main tasks became to work around the bureaucracy in order to achieve the outcomes of the externally funded project - the commonly known term for this in RMIT folklore is “workarounds”.

The restructuring I was dealing with at RMIT, combined my personal difficulties in coming to terms with the deaths of my father and sister-in-law, contributed to this feeling of exhaustion. However, I was very pleased to read comments that all stakeholders wanted to continue in the network, giving me the push to continue.

4.5 Findings
The findings from this cycle are described in terms of first (the personal), second (the professional) and third (the political) person research (Reason, 2001) and depicted in Table 4.3. Reason (2001) explains these as representing the ‘I’, the ‘we’ and the ‘us’ in the research. It is a useful way of summarising the findings and is also used by others (Noffke, 1997).
### Table 4.3

**Findings from Cycle One (Mid 1998 – December 1999)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Professional</th>
<th>The Personal</th>
<th>The Political</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- A complex web of relationships made the network difficult to co-ordinate but also meant we were able to apply a range of perspectives to contribute to an operational framework.</td>
<td>- I found that the key success factors identified in the Online Networks in VET project were still relevant. We lacked a clear vision and direction. I added building relationships and trust.</td>
<td>- In terms of an IT project, this network was seen as a nuisance because it used a platform that was not part of the enterprise system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- As a team, the NMR ACFE Consultants (my informants) and myself were able to build on stakeholder strengths to develop the operational framework.</td>
<td>- The practical experience of working with such a complex project and a number of online platforms frustrated me.</td>
<td>- It was a small-scale strategy to get some TAFE Schools to think about how to engage with community learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The business planning exercise, completed towards the end of the first cycle, was very useful in terms of gaining an understanding of the complexity of the project and the eventual operational framework for RMIT Learning Networks as a whole.</td>
<td>- The journals I kept at the time showed that I did consider better design for online content.</td>
<td>- RMIT University demonstrated an inability to absorb views of innovators back into the thinking of the organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The diagrams that we drew to demonstrate the operational framework were unrealistic and over-simplified in comparison to the actual reality of the project at this time.</td>
<td>- The workload and issues I had to solve at times hindered my creativity.</td>
<td>- As a small-scale project, it continued to test the enrolment and financial systems, and kept why the organisation was not more flexible in the services it provided to community-based learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The amount of time I spent in 'stakeholder management' was critical to building the necessary trust and relationships necessary to carry such a complex project forward.</td>
<td>- At the start of the project, I thought that case management was important and in fact, the team spent a lot of time writing a case management report. OTFE were also very keen on this. The reality showed me that the community partners already handled this well - the learning mentor's kit, while a useful reference, was not really needed.</td>
<td>- The market was identified as 'non-traditional' learners in community settings, which hampered our ability to become financially viable in the long-term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- At the start of the project, I thought that case management was important and in fact, the team spent a lot of time writing a case management report. OTFE were also very keen on this. The reality showed me that the community partners already handled this well - the learning mentor's kit, while a useful reference, was not really needed.</td>
<td>- The organisation was not ready to pursue flexible approaches to delivery, it did not have appropriate materials and the TAFE teachers did not pursue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- The journals demonstrate that my workload in bringing this network together, talking to the stakeholders and trying to achieve the reporting requirements overwhelmed me.
- The RMIT VET Strategic Consultant gave me an understanding of RMIT processes and how to negotiate student issues within a university environment.
- RMIT heads of department taught me about the implications of what we were trying to do from their perspective.
- By managing the OTFE project, I gained a better understanding of the State Training System and how to manage large projects.
- I had high level networks in ANTA and the STS, which was not necessarily recognised or valued by RMIT University.

- the professional development offered.
- The TAFE Departments were not prepared to use the publicly available resources.
- The establishment of partnerships with peak bodies such as ACFE-NMR was important at this stage in planning a workable operational framework.
4.5.1 Professional

From a professional perspective, the important findings in the first cycle that contributed to a sustainable operational framework were:

The Stakeholders. The network of stakeholders made a significant contribution to the building of an eventual operational framework. They contributed time and fed back honest opinions when there were problems. This happened because a lot of time was spent building relationships and trust. Cara & Ranson (1998) also identifies this as important work in the early phase of partnerships between different sectors -

A fragmented education and training sector with inadequate connections between sectors and competition between providers – particularly in the post-school phase – does not facilitate the participation needed for the learning age. An early phase of the Learning City work is to build the partnerships between sectors and institutions, which encourage participation and progression in the learning of all members of the community (Cara & Ranson, 1998, p. 2).

Team Approach to Planning. The key informants and myself took a team approach to planning the operational framework. In the early stages, this involved selecting the partners and identifying each community partner’s capability. In the latter stages of the cycle, it involved identifying the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats in a business planning exercise. Advice from stakeholder groups and the VET strategic consultant were valuable input for the project.

Reflective Practice. We, as a team, had an opportunity to run a major externally funded project for the university, which included NMR ACFE as a key partner. Also, OTFE provided professional development to all learning
network managers. By reviewing business and financial planning and marketing, as well the components of good online content, this developed our expertise in establishing learning network projects, which also contributed to planning the eventual operational framework.

NMR ACFE played an active role right throughout the duration of the network. This role was critical in the establishment phase. They brokered the relationship with the community partners and a key informant, a consultant with them at the time, assisted me in selecting the Adult Community Further Education (ACFE) providers who would take part in the network. Once the selection process was completed, NMR ACFE continued to play the role of adviser on ACFE matters and advocate, especially when the community partners had issues with the service provided by the Hub. As community partners became more confident in dealing with people at RMIT University, the role of NMR ACFE lessened considerably, leaving the Council to continue an interest in the development of the network.

These points are really summed up in the following quote:

RMIT Learning Network demonstrates that large institutions and small community providers can work together to deliver online training. A significant part of the initial work of the trial was to build relationships and create partnerships and confidence between RMIT and the ACE sector. Although it took time for partners to recognise and accept the different objectives and values of one another, they were able to develop respect for their respective skills and capabilities and deliver online training that realised mutual benefits. Stakeholders were united in having achieved benefits and seeking to continue their involvement in the Network (Phillips, 2000, p. 102).

4.5.2 Personal

From a personal perspective, I found the development of an operational framework much more complex than I anticipated and the workload enormous.
My early journal entries show that I was very optimistic and really wanted to try out what I had learnt from other projects. I also wanted to ensure that I used the online material that was developed as part of the project.

As noted in my journal entry of August 1999, I realised I had tried out too many different processes and models; the educational alliance model (Figure 4.3), which I adapted from the work of Circit (1999), the simultaneous use of the TAFE VC and the DLS and the case management kit we spent a lot of time developing were not useful to community partners because they already had systems in place in the community to deal with these issues.

My journal at the end of the year, demonstrated that I was still enthusiastic about new ideas and that new knowledge was coming from a range of quarters, such as from the university senior manager, OTTE and the external evaluators. However, the community partners wanted simple instructions, processes and learning material (whether online or in paper form), which was suitable for their learners. They needed to know what to do next.

My findings were that I did not have enough experience to match an operational framework to the available resources and this was why I did not have systems and processes in the first cycle to make it sustainable. Also the resources were not enough to develop it into a large distributed learning model. At the same time, the business planning material produced by Circitt (1999) for OTFE nourished managers' expectations that we had to produce something systematised. However, despite this and despite being shifted around within the university, I somehow managed to maintain the trust of all
stakeholders, keep the network going and try for another round of funding. I found this personally satisfying.

I was interested in using this research to build on my earlier work regarding establishing online networks (Wheeler, 1997). Instead of looking after 6 online networks over a period of a year, this project was more in the form of a learning partnership. However, I still considered the factors that I identified in my previous study as important and Table 4.4 is my interpretation of how successful I was.

Table 4.4
Interpretation of Success Factors from Online Network in VET Project Applied to RMIT LearnLinks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Framework</th>
<th>Additional Elements</th>
<th>Cycle One</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal/Purpose</td>
<td>Not clearly defined and too ambitious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Issues</td>
<td>In this phase the technology was unreliable. We used 2 systems - TAFE VC and RMIT DLS. Great confusion ensued about when to use each.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Outsourced to an RMIT TAFE Department. Only 2 out of 10 teachers completed the course and it was a very expensive use of project funds, which did not build capacity within the network.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of E-Moderator</td>
<td>Very adhoc and, as noted in evaluation report confusing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Mass</td>
<td>Six community partners and 6 TAFE schools.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>We were reliant on one source of funding from OTTE and so we were not sustainable.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>This was very important and the reason partners wanted to continue [RLN Stage 3 Report 1998/1999]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation and Review</td>
<td>Internal and external evaluations were carried out and significantly helped planning. Our major strength was in building relationships.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>RMIT was the lead agent but the governance structure was very ad hoc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5.3 Political

In many respects this project was an irritant to some sections of RMIT University, especially the information technology team, the student administration and financial services. It kept testing their systems but was not big enough to make it worth their while changing. However, people did attempt to change and adapt systems because I had support from the top of the organisation.

The RMIT strategic consultant in VET saw this as one of many change strategies to get the TAFE Schools to think about teaching and learning in different ways. This project in particular focused on how to engage with community learners. In the past, in some areas of TAFE within RMIT University, the focus was on Diploma level students and above.

In reality, the first period was critical and established the way we ran the network over the next 2 - 3 years. Our main market was the 'non-traditional' learner in community settings who wanted to learn things that were going to improve their life skills (i.e. computer literacy, language and literacy, hobbies) and maybe lead to employment opportunities. It was obvious on reflection that this was not a niche market, that there were plenty of competitors and that, therefore, it would not be a big money spinner. It hampered our ability to become sustainable. The fact that the market was at the basic generic skills end meant that we had to start thinking of creative ways of sustaining the program in the longer term. This was when the project started to be hooked into the student contact hour funding.
However, the 2003 evaluation of all FLNs in Victoria identified others as focussing on the same market and it has become known as a community engagement model (Hughes et al., 2003).

Rogers (1995) identifies structural characteristics that contribute to organisational innovativeness and the ability to develop new models. I argue that the following applied to RMIT University at that time:

- There was some organisational slack, i.e. there were uncommitted resources available to the organization to commit to trailing the project, in particular in the form of staffing costs. Rogers (1995) argues this variable is positively related to organizational innovativeness.

- There was less focus on centralisation because I was able to work outside the system to try out new technologies not endorsed by the university. Rogers (1995, p. 380) defines centralisation as ‘the degree to which power and control in a system are concentrated in the hands of relatively few individuals. Centralisation has usually been found to be negatively associated with innovativeness’.

- There was not such an emphasis on formalisation. Rogers (1995, p. 380) defines this as ‘the degree to which an organization emphasizes the following of rules and procedures in the role performance of its members. Such formalisation acts to inhibit the consideration of innovations by organisation members’.
• A level of complexity was maintained by the people who conducted the RMIT Learning Network project and who had a high level of knowledge in the areas required to establish the network, such as, online education, RMIT administrative and financial procedures, the ACFE system, the State Training System. The grouping of those key stakeholders established the foundation for the sustainable operational model.

Rogers (1995) cites numerous studies that demonstrate how feature such as low centralisation, high complexity and low formalisation provide the right environment to initiate the innovation process. However, at the same time, these structural characteristics make it difficult for an organisation to implement an innovation on an ongoing and sustainable basis. So my challenge was how to make this innovation sustainable in the long term and this is the discussion of the following two chapters.

4.6 Summary
Cycle One, from mid 1998 until December 1999, was a period of establishment. Each stakeholder had a different agenda for participating in the network. Much of the work of this cycle involved understanding the requirements of different stakeholders. The results were mixed but all stakeholders were prepared to enter into another round of tendering so that we could build on the work of this cycle. There was a lot of experimentation with different technologies, systems and processes and, in the next cycle, I wanted to put in place more systems and broaden the range of flexible learning options to include the ability to use paper-based products, CD-ROMs and the TAFE VC and DLS. I wanted to use the online learning only as appropriate.
also wanted to revisit the planning, especially the business plan and professional development strategy. The next cycle, which describes this planning and charts a direction for the network, is discussed in Chapter 5.
Chapter Five - Charting a Direction

5.0 Introduction – Cycle Two (2000-2001)
This chapter continues the story of the development of an operational framework for a sustainable learning network. It describes the second cycle which begins in January 2000 (the extension period when existing networks were paid $40,000 by OTFE\(^1\) to keep going), the start of the next contract (September 2000) and continued on through to the end of the second official contract, June 2001. I describe the plans, actions, observations and reflections that happened during this cycle. My focus is on those actions that build the operational framework, especially the development of an organisational structure, the consolidation of funding arrangements, mechanisms to ensure stakeholders are part of the planning process and the development of key planning documents, especially business plans, a marketing and communications strategy and professional development.

This cycle was an intense period of learning for me and this is reflected in the observation section. After I obtained ethics approval, I interviewed practitioners and academics in Canada and the United Kingdom to gain insight into the development of community networks and learning networks internationally. The results of the findings of these interviews are discussed under the 6 themes: learning network models, success factors, barriers, sustainability, partnerships and capacity building.

\(^1\) known in this cycle as the Office of Post Compulsory Education, Training and Employment (OPCETE)
Finally, after reflecting on what I learnt in this cycle, I summarised the findings using Reason's (2001) first (personal), second (the professional) and third (the political) person research categories.
5.1 Planning

RMIT intended to continue the network and planning commenced in November 1999, when the RMIT strategic consultant for VET allocated some recurrent funding for 2000. She matched market demand to appropriate TAFE programs. It was also the start of a more formal agreement that documented the rights and responsibilities of each party (community partners, TAFE schools and RMIT learning networks office) in the delivery of training in community settings.

OPCETE wanted successful delivery on the TAFE VC so an extension grant of $40,000 helped us plan some activities to use TAFE VC, in particular an online book club was developed together with a community partner.

With the change in the Victorian state government from Liberal/National to the Australian Labor Party, the political environment changed. The focus was no longer IT and multimedia, but Information and Communication Technology (ICT). ICT was viewed as a vehicle to meet the government's social and economic agenda for universal access to information and communication technologies (ICT) via the Connecting Victoria policy (S&RD, 1999). In the first cycle, the emphasis was on a "world class vocational educational and training (VET) system that met the needs of students, business and industry into the next century" (OTFE, 1998b).

The 2000 learning network tender reflected this change in policy. The learning networks were now viewed as a vehicle for three of the strategic aims of the 'Connecting Victoria' policy: building a learning society, connecting communities and improving infrastructure and access to ICT (OPCETE,
The name of the project had also changed from ‘Victorian Learning Networks’ to ‘Victorian Flexible Learning Networks’.

The networks were also required to address other government policy commitments - Pathways and Standards; Employment and Skills, (for addressing skill shortages) and, very importantly, Reviving Rural and Regional Victoria (OPCETE, 2000a).

The RMIT tender writing team adapted to this changing policy context. The conceptual framework was the RMIT/ACE Learning Community leading the long-term development of an ACE/RMIT Learning City. The long term aim of the project became to develop a ‘strategic model that provided access to a wide range of learners in a community setting and supported the growth of online learning communities in accessing existing online learning environments such as the TAFE VC and RMIT’s Distributed Learning System’ (RMIT, 2000). This conceptual framework was discussed in terms of connections, connecting to people both nationally and internationally. This is reflected in a diagram used in the tender – Figure 5.1.

It was also expected that learning networks, which had been funded before would increase the number of partners. I thought the easiest way to do this was to address the Revive Rural and Regional Victoria policy and add 2 rural and regional partners. At the time I was working on the Hamilton Flexible Learning Centre project and with an adult education centre in Wangaratta.
Our team - myself, two consultants who also worked for NMR ACFE, the regional director of NMR ACFE, the RMIT strategic consultant in VET - wrote the second tender. There was little time to consult with community partners, the TAFE schools or our regional partners and, therefore, we had to adapt our actions as their intentions became known during the course of the project.

5.2 Actions

With a 'business as usual' philosophy, actions were not just determined by the government contract but rather by items that would contribute to the long-term operational sustainability of the network. Key actions were:

- the commencement of annual review days for all stakeholders
• the clarification of different funding arrangements for the distribution of the recurrent (SCH) funding the university allocated to the network

• the writing of key business documents, especially the business plan and marketing plan

• the development of a professional development strategy aimed at increasing the skills of our teachers and learners to use technology

• the overseas study tour to learn about community networking and learning networks and how others made them sustainable

These actions were incorporated into other requirements and into the 4 reports necessary for the government contract between the September 2000 and June 2001.

5.2.1 Review Days
The commencement of annual planning days during this cycle was an important avenue for involving the wider stakeholder group, especially community partners and TAFE schools. It enabled all stakeholder groups to contribute to planning the direction of the network in a way that responding to a tender did not. It also gave all stakeholders an opportunity to clarify why they remained in the network.

Two review days were held during this cycle in June 2000 and June 2001. A facilitator was employed to ensure the day was recorded and, as a result, the days proved to be a very important consultation and planning mechanism. Stakeholders were able to discuss the successes and barriers of the previous
year, articulate why they remained in the network, develop goals for the network and also contribute to key planning for the forthcoming year.

My early work (Wheeler, 1997) suggests that establishing a purpose for an online network is important, so over the course of two review days the stakeholders developed the following vision and mission for the network:

**Vision:**

To provide our diverse community with access to dynamic learning in a changing world [RLN Review Day, 2000].

**Mission:**

LearnLinks, through the innovative use of technology mediated learning, seeks to build the capacity of people in its communities. By working in partnerships, we seek to enable equitable access and ensure sustainability [RLN Review Day, 2001].

This work was important in developing the first part of the operational framework. The discussions in the first cycle highlighted that every stakeholder has different intentions, and the coming together of all major stakeholders for planning was the first attempt at seeking a common direction. This is illustrated by the following paragraph that depicts how stakeholders described the network at the first review day:

The learning network is a single entity comprising of a set of relationships based on a common vision and values of teaching and learning resulting (evolving/synergising) in a learning community [RLN Review Day, 2000].

The results of the review days are discussed further in section 5.3 of Observations.
5.2.2 Funding Arrangements

It was obvious that without gaining access to a long-term revenue stream, the network would not be sustainable beyond government funding. The work that was done by the strategic consultant in VET in negotiating with RMIT TAFE schools to access state government funding for training delivery through student contact hour funding, was critical in ensuring this revenue stream.

The identification of RMIT profile hours (SCH) for delivery through the learning network and a process for supporting this delivery in 2000, occurred in the latter half of 1999. Through special permission of the PVC Resources, an agreement was reached in November 1999 for up to 50,000 SCH to be brokered through the project. This involved permission to vary according with the profile hour funding distribution; thus, reducing the infrastructure cost of central administration (instead of the usual 39% it was that 10% would be taken off the top); the usual student amenity fees were waived; the community partners kept half the minimum enrolment fee for concession learners and the actual student contact hour (SCH) funding of approximately $7.00 per SCH was distributed according to a formula where $2.50 went to Community Providers, $2.70 to the RMIT Learning Network Hub and the remainder to the faculty.

Devising the formula happened to be the easiest part! The difficult part was convincing the various RMIT areas, Student Services and Financial Services, that we had permission to change the rules slightly! It was also the start of more formal agreements to document the rights and responsibilities of each party involved in the delivery of the hours and payment of the fees. This was the beginning of centralisation.
An evaluation of the brokering model developed for the funding of profile hours into community settings was completed in August 2000 and the findings are reported in section 5.3.4 on Sustainability.

5.2.3 Key Business Planning Documents
Planning the future operational framework became a major focus of this cycle. In particular, as a result of the feedback that was obtained from the review days and during the year at Operation Meetings, the following key documents charted the future direction of the project and also my business unit within Community & Regional Partnerships:

- Communications and Marketing Strategies Report, 2001
- Business Plan, 2001-2003, using a Balanced Scorecard Approach

The Communications and Marketing Strategies Report identified key issues regarding the complexity of the project, the need to incorporate the new business name, RMIT LearnLinks, a logo and mission statement into a website and marketing kit and the further development of a communications strategy.

The strategy outlined 4 levels of relationships that could be drawn from these stakeholders [RLN Communications and Marketing Strategies Report 2000/2001]:

- Learners as the end user
- Practitioner level between the learning network partners and project team
- Organisational relationships in a client/purchasing relationship
Community recognition from external organisations, funding bodies etc. for business opportunities and sustainability.

Table 5.1: Relationship of Stakeholders Involved in RMIT LearnLinks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Learners</td>
<td>Learners are our primary stakeholder and the end users of our products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner</td>
<td>Community partners</td>
<td>The owners of the learning network, the partners and the project team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning network</td>
<td>need to communicate amongst the group more effectively to promote their uniqueness and strengths so the group operates more cohesively and can be sustainable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>project team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational</td>
<td>RMIT</td>
<td>The client/purchasing relationship needs to be refined and developed to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RMIT departments</td>
<td>ensure streamlined services. The issues of quality are of paramount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other purchasers of services</td>
<td>importance to the relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Recognition</td>
<td>Funding bodies, eg OPCETE and NMR</td>
<td>Innovative ways to develop new partnerships and products that will be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACFE</td>
<td>income producing and have long term benefits must be identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New community members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New business partners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In fact, the community partners saw the potential of the network and, as part of a marketing project, came up with the following statement:

Enjoy the full resources and expertise of RMIT University - the leading technology focussed educational institution in Victoria. This is linked to the existing specialist services of 7 community-learning centres. These centres bring to the partnership over 200 staff speaking 35 languages and with an in-depth knowledge, understanding and contact with the communities and markets they service [RLN Marketing Pamphlet, 2000/2001].

At this stage of the project, I was gaining an understanding of its complexity of the but had no idea how to capitalise on the potential of these relationships.
We also approached business planning in an innovative way. In line with the view that we were developing a learning community, we decided to write our business plan using a balanced score card approach.

The results are discussed in section 5.3.1, Learning Network Models and 5.3.4, Sustainability.

5.2.4 Professional Development Strategy
After outsourcing professional development in the first cycle, I was determined to find a way of building capacity within the network. A couple of the community partners had very talented teachers who knew a lot about teaching with technology and one in particular was an expert on the use of the TAFE VC. I decided to tap into this talent and commissioned a community partner to write a professional development strategy for the network. We saw the aims of the professional development project as "sustaining the capacity building of teachers and managers" and integrating the "development of an online community which supports the PD into the Web site project" [RLN Professional Development Strategy, 2000/2001]. We saw the role of professional development as important for building a critical team with the skills to share in and contribute to our online community, strengthen relationships within the partnership, and to assist with the development of online teaching materials and skills for marketing and income generation. This strategy built on the work of the Online Networks in VET project. I identified that one of its main success factors was the development of a critical group of teachers who had the necessary skills to use the technology in their teaching and learning practices (Wheeler, 2000b).
A number of programs were implemented. I tendered for extra money to create an online learning community and ensured that the community partner who wrote the professional development strategy led that project and received payment: I also paid a well qualified ACE teacher to carry out professional development and linked into other professional development opportunities both internally within RMIT and through OPCETE and TAFE frontiers. I paid for an e-moderator to undertake some online discussion; I made an arrangement with Smartforce (a company the University had an agreement with for the use of self-paced computer based training materials as professional development tools for teachers) to burn learning materials onto CD ROM for use in learning centres in order to save download costs and I started to link with other FLNs to investigate joint opportunities.

5.2.5 Overseas Study Tour
I finalised my thesis research proposal at the beginning of this cycle and obtained ethics approval to conduct interviews with international experts and local stakeholders. The 8 interviews with international experts were conducted in the United Kingdom and Canada during September and October 2000. This helped me to gain an international perspective of learning network and community network frameworks. I also presented a paper at the annual UK Communities Online Conference in Manchester from 10-14 July 2000. This enabled me to connect with a range of practitioners, policy makers and academics involved in community networking. From my perspective, this time was the most intense period of learning and reflection of the entire study.

A Gantt chart and Itinerary in Appendix Five lists the visits made, people interviewed and conferences attended. The criteria for choosing interviewees
are listed in Table 2.1, Chapter Two. Also refer to Appendix Two and Three for further information about the interviewees and a copy of the plain language letter. The results of the interviews are described at the beginning of each theme in section 5.3.

5.3 Observations
This is a continuation of the operational framework based on an ALAR approach which is analysed using themes. The observations made for each theme are divided into 2 categories. The first records the observations of the international interviewees and the second, those of the local case study, RMIT LearnLinks.

5.3.1 Theme One: Learning Networks Models
As in Cycle One, I continued to experiment with different learning network models. I was keen to see if there were international models that I could adapt and this is described in the following section.

International Models
Throughout the interviews and site visits, it became apparent that the term 'learning network' was not really used as such except in Canada on one particular project, the Community Learning Network project. When I asked interviewees about learning network models, the reply I received was generally dependent on context. In particular, 2 practitioners discussed networks of learning centres. One talked in terms of the network connecting to a broader national distributed learning system - this described the network he was involved in. The other talked in terms of the network of learning centres operating within the context of a broader learning community, which also happened to be a project he was working on. The director of distributed
learning for Ufi took a macro view of learning network as a national distributed learning system, while the 4 interviewees involved in the community networking movement talked about community information networks. Dr Ron Faris, who worked as a consultant to the Canadian government, discussed the concept in terms of learning communities.

Below are a range of quotes from the international practitioners and experts that reflect this range of perspectives on learning network models:

**Learning Community/Learning Networks Perspective**

I was commissioned by [name of city in the UK] to develop a plan for a community learning and a network of learning centres and I suppose you could say that the plan overall is in essence a plan for a learning community and within it one element of it is a network of learning centres, so we don't actually use the term, 'learning network' within that but I suppose you could argue that the learning centres ... when they start to operate together as a network will be a learning network [N.OS8.S10].

It is part of a multi-faceted approach to enable sustainability in the community and it is related to the notion of diversifying the economic base within the community [N.OS7.S1].

**Community Information Network Perspective:**

I use community information networks. By that I refer to networks of electronically distributed information providing access for community agencies, groups and activists to get online to network, and that is about creating infrastructure and letting agencies, activists and groups develop the content. That really is what community information networks are all about but it is really about the fact that it is value adding by individuals, perhaps being able to email each other on specific topics and information that are relevant to them [N.OS6.S23].

Librarians, computer scientists and community activists came together to address their shared concern that the rapid growth of new information and communication technologies could further exaggerate social and economic stratification. Two cornerstones encompassed the foundation of our vision. First universal access that since democracy depends on an informed public: As information moves online, only those with access to the information will be able to participate fully. So, it's essential for democracy that access is
universal. And second, public space that the rapidly developing
corporate and state controlled online resources don't necessarily
represent the interests and concerns of civil society [N.OS4.S22].

Certainly, part of the model of the original Freenet we were following
was that there would be an online community and you would create
usenet discussion groups that would enable an online community to
talk about issues and certainly the experience in Cleveland was that
these were more or less successful because they all knew who was
moderating them and what the topics were and so on [N.OS5.S10].

A National Perspective

I kind of think of it as being a soft franchise where they are responsible
for the management and supervision and delivery of [name of
product...] across a network a virtual network and a physical network
of learning centres and access points... so the Hub is the
management and administration and also the strategy behind it as well
as where they need to go. Where are the new learners? How do we
target them? So we then... we currently have 79 operating Hubs. In
the end, we will probably have around 90 operating Hubs and it is
likely to go up and down [N.OS1.S15].

There was no universally agreed upon definition of a learning network. In fact,
the closest was that a learning network was seen as a network of learning
centres but as such was a subset of a wider phenomenon, a learning
community development. However, in terms of the case, RMIT LearnLinks,
we continued to chart the direction for the operational framework of the
network.

RMIT LearnLinks

The review day and the tender writing process gave us an opportunity to think
about the operational framework for a learning network in terms of project
phases. The 2 key informants and myself worked on the diagram in Figure
5.2. We thought about it in terms of 3 phases:

- Phase One – Establishment: The actions of Cycle One were listed
  with the emphasis being on relationship development.
- **Phase Two – Consolidation**: This built on the actions of Cycle One with an emphasis on further planning and the establishment of systems and procedures.

- **Phase Three – Enhancement**: We foreshadowed the need to build business and fee-for-service through business partnerships in order to move toward sustainability.

The phased approach was then translated into a strategy map as part of our business planning process. Key actions were listed against each focus area using a scorecard approach. Further on in the document, Key Performance Indicators were identified and we worked towards meeting them. A sample is shown in Table 5.2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Table 5.2: Learnlinks Strategy Map</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>[RLN Business Plan 2000/2001]</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MISSION**
LearnLinks, through the innovative use of technology mediated learning, seeks to build the capacity of people in its communities. By working in partnerships, we seek to enable equitable access and ensure sustainability.

**VISION**
Linking our diverse community with access to dynamic learning in a changing world.

**FOCUS AREAS**
- Communities of Practice
- Teaching and learning
- Organisational development
- Market development

**LEARNLINK SCORECARD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>CUSTOMER PERSPECTIVE</strong></th>
<th><strong>FINANCIAL PERSPECTIVE</strong></th>
<th><strong>INTERNAL PERSPECTIVE</strong></th>
<th><strong>LEARNING AND GROWTH</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Streamline learner</td>
<td>Secure alliances</td>
<td>Development of</td>
<td>Building capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interactions</td>
<td>and consultancies</td>
<td>effective performance</td>
<td>through professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>management system</td>
<td>development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve product</td>
<td>Product distribution</td>
<td>Improve access to</td>
<td>Succession planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>options and</td>
<td>and licensing</td>
<td>information through</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td>technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure current</td>
<td>Secure current</td>
<td>Strengthen</td>
<td>Contents/ material/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMIT profile</td>
<td>RMIT profile</td>
<td>marketing and</td>
<td>product development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>promotion skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Develop effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>market opportunities</td>
<td>evaluation methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Change management and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 5.2, Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 demonstrate the complexity of this project. With the help of my very experienced key informants, I felt for the first time that the operational framework was really starting to take shape.

However, as a result of my overseas experience and the Victorian state governments’ move towards connecting communities, I also started to define the RMIT LearnLinks operational framework in terms of a learning community. I saw that because it was based on learning partnerships and required community participation, it could be classified under the umbrella term of ‘learning community’ (Wheeler, 2001b).

I described RMIT LearnLinks as being based on learning partnerships that required community participation, especially the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector. Therefore, I concluded that it could be classified under the umbrella term of a learning city/community. The definition, which encapsulated my thinking was the following:

A learning city addresses the learning needs of its locality through partnership. It uses the strengths of social and institutional relationships to bring about cultural shifts in perceptions of the value of learning. Learning cities explicitly use learning as a way of promoting social cohesion, regeneration and economic development, which involves all parts of the community (Cara & Ranson, 1998, p. IV).

Further, I discovered the term, ‘learning city’ could also encompass terms such as ‘learning communities’, ‘learning towns’ and ‘learning regions’ (Faris & Peterson, 2000; Henderson, Castles, McGrath, & Brown, 2000; Yarnit, 2000).

I also came up with an adaptation of the previous distributed learning approach (see Figure 4.3. This time it incorporated learning partnerships through educational alliances and added Faris’s concept of lifelong learning as
an organising principle and social goal in the development of a learning community (see Figure 5.3). However, this was not the reality of the day-to-day operations of RMIT LearnLinks but it has since proved useful in conceptualising other projects.

So, the main difference between Figure 4.3 and Figure 5.3 is that the model is named an “e-learning” business in line with the Hambrecht report, which defines e-learning as “the delivery of content via all electronic media, including the Internet, intranets, extranets, satellite broadcast, audio/video tape, interactive TV, and CD-ROM” (Urdan & Weggen, 2000, p. 8). I also incorporated the concepts of lifelong learning and learning communities into the model. This was as a result of the work Faris’s work (Faris, 2001).
The work that we undertook in identifying the phases of the project and breaking those down into actions was moving towards a realistic operational framework. However, the extension of Figure 5.3 shows that in this cycle again I introduced too many ideas and confused the operational framework with a conceptual framework of a learning community — again good for winning tenders but not the operational framework of a sustainable learning network.

5.3.2 Theme Two: Learning Network Success Factors

In the last chapter, I argued that the relationships and trust that developed became our greatest success. This was despite the apparent problems in the operations of the network.

A comparison of the review day notes of June 2000 and June 2001 show that there were more success factors as the project progressed and fewer barriers. In June 2000, stakeholders observed that the university was "coming out of its ivory tower", opening up educational options, adding new life, direction and interest and an opportunity to examine risk taking and the trial of flexible approaches. Community partners were optimistic that the worst was over, relationships were developing between partners and that a common understanding was developing. By 2001, stakeholders were starting to see some real benefits in the network, in particular the professional development, which in this cycle was more tailored to the needs of community teachers because talented ACE teachers with high levels of technical expertise led the program. There was also an acknowledgment that we had moved from "being suspicious of each other to trusting each other [RLN Review Day, 2000]."
The brokering report, also highlighted some very tangible gains that community partners gleaned from the network. These were listed below:

- Learning Network Extension 1999 – an additional $20,000 was paid for IT infrastructure, of which $14,000 was redistributed to community partners.

- Learning Network Extension 2000 - $40,000 was paid to the Network, of which $28,000 was directed to the community in order to build the network and subsidise teaching.

- The announcement of a Capital Development Grant to the university which included $110,000 of IT infrastructure funding for distribution to partners in 2002.

- Professional development was carried out through Adult Migrant Education Services (AMES), Teaching and Learning Online and the Carlton Library. Three coordinators from our community partners were sponsored by RMIT to complete a Masters in Education [RLN Report on Brokering Model for Funding Profile Hours into Community Settings, 2000].

The community partners also documented intangible benefits:

- Access to learning strategies and new learning technologies

- Opportunities to expand skill base

- Expansion of technology resources

- Awareness of the latest developments in on-line education
• Ties with RMIT having encouraged a number of businesses to approach one community partner with suggested opportunities and these can also be passed on to other network members.

• Flexible delivery style allows each community partner to meet the needs of their local community more effectively [RLN Report on Brokering Model for Funding Profile Hours into Community Settings, 2000].

In this cycle, community partners were starting to see the significant benefits – both tangible and intangible - of belonging to the network and thus wanted to remain in the partnership.

5.3.3 Theme Three: Learning Network Barriers
The barriers to the development were clearly identified by stakeholders in the summaries of the review days held in June 2000 and June 2001. The notes continued to reflect optimism but in 2000, there was more discussion about barriers than in 2001. This was understandable considering the difficulties, faced in Cycle One.

In 2000, people talked about the network disappearing down a hole of administrivia - this was in relation to the continual frustrations over enrolment and administration. Other issues identified were the low funding of the student contact hours; the persisting lack of quality online content; the overwhelming pressure on me as project manager and the lack of commitment by some community partners – probably due to time commitments. There was also a recognition of a cultural difference between ACE and RMIT and sometimes
this lead to frustrations as community providers did not always understand what they perceived as the shifting agenda of the university.

The June 2001 review did not discuss barriers in any great detail, apart from noting 3 remaining concerns, the future funding by OPCETE of the network, administration and enrolment issues and the questionable reliability of the TAFE VC.

I saw the lesser emphasis on discussion of barriers in 2001 as an indication that working with complex organisation such as RMIT always entails barriers which can nevertheless be overcome by open communication.

5.3.4 Theme Four: Sustainability
In this cycle, I was developing more of an understanding of sustainability. Within my own project, I tried different strategies, such as implementing fee-for-service programs and investigating other funding options. I hoped also, that by interviewing experts and practitioners from Canada and the United Kingdom, I might learn about some ‘magic formula’. I describe my findings in the next section.

International Perspective
The views of the interviewees about financial viability and sustainability again depended upon the context in which they worked. Three interviewees who were involved in networks of learning centres talked about the need to form partnerships and collaborate when it came to competitively tendering for money, to pool resources in order to gain advantages from the bulk buying of computer equipment, and to share community owned learning centres in order to maximize the time of usage.
Two interviewees, both working at reducing poverty through advocacy and learning, viewed the work that they were doing as being the government’s civic responsibility to fund. As the following quote illustrates, this creates a tension.

We are mainly grant led. I think there is a tension. Do you want to be a private sector company or do you want to be a community development agency and an area like [name of location] where there is not a lot of disposable income and there is a lot of unemployment and so on and so for me there is a tension. If you want to earn money then go and work for the private sector, if you want to work in a down trodden community, hell on earth ... shame and suffering where people have very little money, then I am afraid you have to subsidize that and that is a political issue. Do you believe in civic networking or do you believe in making money and for me there is a tension there and I have often ruled against yes we want to make some money to subsidize our core aims and objectives but increasingly you are being forced down the line of no feather bedding, value for money and yes don’t have 100% subsidy but on the other hand, you know, why don’t we just become a private sector company, jettison our laudable charitable intentions and join the private sector? I think eventually you have to sell your wares and that is kind of the opposite of what in an area like [name of location] we are supposed to be. [N.OS6,S40]

An interviewee who ran a community network viewed financial viability in terms of seeking funds from wherever possible, for example, donations, lottery funding, government grants, fee-for-service and the use of volunteers to run programs.

Dr Ron Faris viewed sustainability in terms of a learning community model based on lifelong learning as an investment strategy, which is preventative and, very often, the benefits are not demonstrated for 10 or 20 years. He was very critical of what he sees as short-termism or ‘drive-by’ funding which is the nature of many government led initiatives.

The major event of my study trip was presenting a paper at the Communities Online National Conference 2000, A Global Community Networking (CN) 2000
Event. This was an opportunity to connect with the people who thought about and practised community networking in the UK. I was able to meet and listen to grass-roots community people, academics and government representatives. In particular, Steve Fox, a very experienced community network practitioner, presented an operational framework for a community network, which had many of the same ingredients that I identified as success factors in the 'Online Networks in VET' project. In particular, he talked about the need for a vision and to develop trust (especially in relation to funding bodies and practitioners); to build capacity within the local community; and to give the local people the ownership and skills to develop the project. He identified that this should be backed up by adequate resources, for example local teachers, a locally-owned training centre, good ICT provision and good Internet access, mentoring systems and local capacity builders. Most importantly, all this lets people (the young especially) sustain hope for the future (Fox, 2000).

When I went back to examining sustainability for RMIT LearnLinks, I saw that there was no magic formula that the practitioners faced the same issues that we did.

RMIT LearnLinks
As discussed in section 5.2.2, sustainability efforts focussed on ensuring a revenue stream by identifying how the network could secure recurrent or profile funding. An evaluation report on the brokering model was completed at the end of 2000 [RLN Report on Brokering Model for Funding Profile Hours into Community Settings, 2000]. A key informant on business planning completed the report and it gave, for the first time, a real understanding of the financial issues involved in running this network.
The smaller community partners particularly feel that they are struggling with the administrative costs because they have either no, or very limited, support personnel and this means they have virtually no capacity to juggle extra administrative tasks where the SCH rate paid often does not even cover the cost of face to face teaching. Managers who are already committing considerable time and expertise to the business and educational growth strategies of the learning network are concerned about their capacity to continue to manage such a significant administrative workload. ACFE providers are usually developing partnerships and funding relationships with a range of bodies (eg. ACFE, DHS, employment programs) and the question, “How long is a piece of string”? is often asked [RLN Report on Brokering Model for Funding Profile Hours into Community Settings, 2000, p. 7].

In recognition of the difficulties faced by community partners, the report made recommendations that ensured the community partners were paid more per student contract hour ($2.50 to $2.70); that they were able to retain the minimum enrolment payment in recognition that RMIT was using community partners' infrastructure; that the amount the Hub was paid was reduced from $2.70 cents to $1.50 cents. These changes were immediately implemented in the 2001 calendar year.

As recommended by OPCETE, we also attempted to implement a fee-for-service program. We did this in partnership with a community partner who had an idea that an online book club might have a market. The exercise in completing the project and putting it on the TAFE VC was excellent in terms of developing teacher skills as part of the professional development strategy. However, whilst piloting the project, we soon realised that an ACE community partner located in a high rise housing estate in North Melbourne was not going to attract enough fee paying clients to make it worthwhile, so the learning centre focussed on changing it into a book club for a VCE class they were
running within their centre. Fee for service was also outside their core mission to provide language and literacy classes to disadvantaged groups.

Again, towards the end of the cycle, OPCETE commissioned Success Works to conduct an external evaluation of all FLNs. It found:

That the value, which the Flexible Learning Networks provide as incubators for change, goes hand in hand with coordinated state-wide effort to produce high quality interactive learning resources, and is backed by strong central policy positions on funding and infrastructure matters. However, the evaluation found that while infrastructure, learning environments, management and financial viability are stronger since the Phillips Report, no FLN is viable based on these criteria at the end of the second round of funding (SuccessWorks, 2002, p. iii).

In conclusion, it was becoming apparent that RMIT LearnLinks would not achieve the financial viability necessary to become the large online network envisioned at outset. Our best hope of survival was to ensure that we hooked into the internal university funding processes. However, I still had hopes that we might supplement this with fee-for-service activity and, while I attempted some work in this cycle, it became a major focus of the next funding round.

5.3.5 Theme Five: Partnerships

At the local level, the development of partnerships continued to be an important theme in this cycle and, as illustrated by the interviews, is also of international importance.

International Perspective

The term, partnership was used by 6 out of the 8 interviewees. However, all interviewees referred to the necessity of collaboration in the development of these types of projects. The term was mentioned a total of 26 times. In particular, 1 interviewee running a network of learning centres referred to the
term 14 times. He discussed the importance of partnerships, the lifecycle of partnerships and the necessity of key partnerships when it came to bidding for funds in order to make the network more sustainable.

in the sense that at last count the steering group met 23 times in the last couple of years and the retention of membership, we still get 12 out of 16 turning up.. and it is the same people they are properly engaged and it goes back to that thing about the life cycle and partnerships, usually after 2 years the fanfare has definitely died away and people are thinking, “Do I really have to go to this meeting again”? [N.OS2.55].

We are just doing a bid on the ICT Learning Centres fund...which is a Department of Education fund aimed at creating a network of 700-1000 learning centres nationally and the idea is that what we are attempting to do is put together a coordinated bid. That is when the partnership issue does come out. Someone once described partnership as being “the suspension of mutual loathing, for the reason for getting cash”… and I am not so sure about that because I think this partnership works very well, but it is certainly when it comes down to somebody agreeing not to go for some money for their centre, backing out to allow somebody else to go forward, that is when it gets tested and not all members of the partnership are as committed to the collaboration as others. It is a kind of inevitable stage in development that is a test thrown in front of people and so the benefits are just enormous. [N.OS2.96].

One interviewee from a community networking background talked in terms of the power relationship of the partnership, even though one partner may be a large corporate the equality of various parties in the partnership is important.

If I was negotiating with any private sector company, I would make it quite clear that we are there as an equal partner and we may not be in reality 50:50 equal. Equal could be 90:10 it could be 70:30, it could be 60:40 but there has to be an understanding that we are seen in terms of developmental policy, that when we are at that table, we are not just a poor community group there to be patronised and I think that is quite a sophisticated model of partnership [N.OS6.S15].

While, from the perspective of a learning community world view, Dr Faris argues that it is important to form partnerships with at least 2 of 5 community sectors, which he identifies as civic, public (health, social services, libraries,
museums), economic, education and voluntary/community. His view is that the more sectors are involved in learning-based community development work, the more likely that a more sustainable model will be developed in the long term.

The American phrase, build it and they will come, is not necessarily so and you need to build bridges across the various sectors. There are 5 sectors we use for our analysis in terms of the model we are looking at. In terms of sustainability, you are harnessing the learning resources and the energy of all 5 sectors, whereas the traditional education model is only one sector. The educational experts, so called, are responsible for education and learning and which community is going to be more competitive and robust etc in terms of sustainability? One that uses one-fifth of its capacity or the one that recognises that learning is carried on in all sectors, that all people have knowledge and skills worth sharing [N.Ron Faris.S18].

The importance of building partnerships, trust and sound relationships is also a recurring theme in the literature on learning communities and community networking (Cara & Ranson, 1998; Handy, 1999; Mannion, 1996; Wilcox, 2000; Yarnit, 2000). It also continued to be important in the development of RMIT LearnLinks.

**RMIT LearnLinks**

It has already been stated in Chapter Four that the first stage of the learning network project was about building relationships among stakeholders. It was documented that our network did this well (Phillips, 2000).

The openness of the manner in which we conducted our dialogue with the community partners and the fact that RMIT University was willing to listen to small community partners has already been referred to [RLN Review Day Notes, 2000].

One of the key partnership issues during this cycle was the decision about the eventual network name. The community partners made a decision to change
the name to ‘RMIT Learning Partnerships’. However, after returning from my overseas tour, and fresh from a Marketing your Online Community seminar at a conference I attended, I decided that this was too cumbersome for a web address. The business planning group came up with the name, LearnLinks, and the community partners agreed but asked that the name RMIT be included, hence the final name RMIT LearnLinks. The reaction from the community partners was mixed and at least one still uses the name RMIT Learning Partnerships!

5.3.6 Theme Six: Capacity Building
As identified in section 5.2.4, a number of professional development programs were developed. The evaluation of these programs was done on an individual basis. The main capacity building program for teachers in the network was the development of an online community using the TAFE VC. Although the evaluation does highlight problems, my decision to use an ACE teacher who understood the technology to work with other ACE teachers to increase their understanding of the technology was well founded.

The most consistent praise was for ..., the program mentor. Comments such as “[name of teacher] has been fantastic”, “[name of teacher] is very patient, helpful”, “I have appreciated [name of teacher] constant good will and relevant help” were consistent for all participants [RLN Online Professional Development Program Report, 2000/2001].

Based on this work, I decided to continue this model in the next cycle, and to look for additional funding opportunities to develop an e-moderation course.
5.4 Reflection
There was a lot to reflect upon in term of this period and the funding provided by the ANTA Flexible Learning Leaders scholarship enabled this to happen, as discussed in this section.

International Perspective
The international study was the most intense period of learning for me. I was able to apply much of the learning directly to my work. I made 47 different journal entries of findings there. I reflect only on those that were most relevant to an operational framework for a sustainable learning network.

In a journal entry of 5 October 2000, I noted that the presentation given by 3 seasoned community networkers at Communities Online National Conference 2000, A Global Community Networking (CN) 2000 Event in Manchester, was very heartening. As a practitioner, I had experienced many of their frustrations and passions. All 3 were very passionate about their work, however, being seasoned campaigners, they were battle weary and suspicious of government initiatives. However, they were very successful in the work they did.

Two community network practitioners from British Columbia also introduced me to the concept of using a community development approach in the work of introducing ICT programs into communities. I learnt about an asset based approach to community development where a community begins the “process of locating and making inventories of the gifts and capacities of individuals, of citizen’s associations and of local institutions” (Kretzman & McKnight, 1997). This approach can also be applied to the ICT assets of a community.
I also learnt of the existence of conceptual frameworks, which I thought could be adapted to learning network projects. In particular, Martin Yarnit's presentation at Communities Online National Conference 2000, A Global Community Networking (CN) 2000 Event, referred to a comparison of old learning systems with new learning systems. I could immediately see how the RMIT LearnLinks project was part of the new learning system. In particular, he discussed how the new learning systems were small scale, integrated, based on project funding, organised through collaboration and partnerships, connected to communities and focussed on lifelong learning opportunities. He also related this to a development within a learning community and drew on the work of Faris to compare a learning community with a conventional community (Faris & Peterson, 2000). I was highly influenced by this thinking and went on to write a couple of papers wherein I attempted to categorise the Victorian FLNs and RMIT LearnLinks as new learning systems within a learning community framework (Wheeler, 2001a, 2001b). However, a review of the discussion in 5.3.1 on learning network models shows that at this stage I was mixing the conceptual frameworks of Yarnit's new learning systems and Faris's learning communities with the day-to-day operational framework required to make RMIT LearnLinks sustainable. Figure 5.2 illustrates the operation phases of the project, which were much more realistic at that level. However, in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of a learning community, the operational network should also link to the conceptual framework.
RMIT LearnLinks

I was really pleased that we had developed a vision and mission. I noted in my critical incident journal of June 2000 that I particularly liked the vision statement because it did not include the word, technology. The word access, was seen as very important to the group as was the term dynamic learning opportunities. I thought the fact that the change of emphasis from technology to learning a key success factor had achieved in this cycle.

I noted in my September 2000 journal entry that I thought the community partners were really starting to take ownership of this project, in particular, the fact that one of the community partners was writing a collaborative tender to develop an online professional development program, while another was willing to develop an online book club. However, I realised the amount of work involved to keep the network going and my greatest wish was that the network would be maintained while I was away.

In November 2000 I noted that one community partner in particular had done a tremendous amount of thinking about future directions while I was away, especially in relation to defining the market. This proved very useful material for the business planning team to utilise in the development of a marketing kit and website.

The major change during this cycle was the shift of my project officer and myself from Learning Technology Services to Community & Regional Partnerships group (C & RP) within the then Research and Development area. I became Manager Regional Learning Networks and was given the opportunity to develop a business based on what was essentially a government-funded
project. I now had an opportunity to implement the broader conceptual framework into this work.

5.5 Findings
The findings from this cycle are summarised in Table 5.3 under headings relating to second person (the professional), first person (the personal), and third person (the political) research (Reason, 2001).
Table 5.3

Findings Cycle Two (2000/2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Professional</th>
<th>The Personal</th>
<th>The Political</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The services of key informants became very important in the development of the operational framework. As a team, we developed key thinking about project phases, balanced scorecard business planning, marketing and funding. All of these issues were important to the development of RMIT LearnLinks and eventually the broader business unit.</td>
<td>My framework of thinking changed. I found that in the first round I had placed too much emphasis on the technology, and in this cycle I deliberately took a different approach based on needs.</td>
<td>The project continued to be a nuisance in its attempt to test the flexibility of the administrative and financial systems to cope with community learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The advice of a VET strategic consultant was critical, especially in the development of a funding model to ensure the continuation of the project beyond the government funding.</td>
<td>I continued to test the success factors developed in the Online Network in VET project and found I had variable success. I was particularly disappointed in my ability to develop an online community.</td>
<td>Concepts developed during project planning were adapted to other university projects, eg, Hamilton Learning Community and the recognition of the community sector as important in the Pathway Domain within the new structure of RMIT university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a group, we planned as though we were continuing, we did not wait for confirmation that we had funding.</td>
<td>By travelling overseas and talking to experts, I found that there was another way of approaching the introduction of technology into community settings. This was a community development approach - technology as an enabler to achieve community goals.</td>
<td>The shift of the project from LTS into Community &amp; Regional Partnerships appropriately reflected the changing nature of the project, which was now about connecting with communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations meetings became an important vehicle for working through day-to-day issues and were well attended by stakeholder groups.</td>
<td>I derived some comfort from the fact that practitioners were facing similar issues to me - the pressure of work, the need to be on the constant lookout for new funding opportunities and the short term funding - this seemed to be an international issue.</td>
<td>The role played by independent peak body NMR ACFE was important in maintaining relationships during some difficult funding negotiations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The two annual review days held during this period were important planning forums for the broader stakeholder group.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Testing protocols for partnership agreements that were more formalised led the way for Third Party Agreements on the AMS system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.5.1 Professional
The business planning team, which consisted of 2 key informants and myself, assisted from time to time by the VET strategic consultant, did a tremendous amount of work towards defining an operational framework. In particular, Figure 5.2 identifies this project in terms of phases the particular work relating to each phase, for example, in the establishment phase, most time was spent on developing relations and managing partners. In this phase, which was referred to as Consolidation, most work was spent on developing a vision and mission and formulating key strategy documents around business planning, funding, marketing and professional development. These documents were critical in the future development of RMIT LearnLinks and the broader RMIT Learning Networks team.

With advice from the strategic consultant in VET, we tackled the hard issue of developing a funding model linked to university recurrent funding. It was important to ensure a revenue stream beyond Government funding. This work was done even though we had no assurance of second round funding.

We also put in place operational structures, namely the review day and operations meetings. The review days enabled the community partners and RMIT schools to contribute to planning the network, while the operations meetings provided a vehicle for raising issues of concern.

Again during this period, the university left our team alone to experiment. We were not scrutinised too closely and there was no real requirement for us to follow standardised systems – we were not centralised. We were able to play around with different learning network models, for example, the learning city.
the phased model and the distributed learning model. We could trial different kinds of learning technology, for example, the TAFE VC, the RMIT DLS, CD ROM and other software. However, by being able to do so, we were also getting closer to developing a standardised operational model.

5.5.2 Personal

There is no doubt that my overseas experience influenced my thinking a great deal. At the conceptual level, I found that learning networks, or networks of learning centres, could be identified as new learning systems and that they contributed to the development of a broader learning community.

I was heartened to find that many practitioners faced the same issues as we did - short term funding, incredible workloads - but sustained a passion for what they were doing.

At the operational level, I did identify the building blocks of a learning network:

- a method of governance through a partnership

- a network of learning centres located in neighbourhoods

- community participation

- continuous evaluation of the partnership's performance

- reliance on project funding

- a coordinating hub providing a range of services to a cluster of learning centres. Services include

  - catalogue of learning opportunities
- quality checks and focus on learners
- provision of technical support
- help desk support to learners (Wheeler, 2001).

I was still very interested in testing the success factors, which I had identified in the Online Networks in VET project (Wheeler, 2000b). Table 5.4 depicts a comparison of Cycle One and Cycle Two in relation to the success factors.

---

**Table 5.4:**

Success Factors from Online Network in VET Project Applied to RMIT LearnLinks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Framework</th>
<th>Additional Elements</th>
<th>Cycle One</th>
<th>Cycle Two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal/Purpose</td>
<td>Not clearly defined and too ambitious</td>
<td>Vision and mission statement charts direction but too broad for the reality at that time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Issues</td>
<td>In this phase, the technology was unreliable. We used 2 systems - TAFE VC and RMIT DLS. Great confusion ensued about when to use each.</td>
<td>We decided to use the TAFE VC for development of short courses with partners (e.g. Online Bookclub) and for the development of an online community. DLS was used with one TAFE school. Otherwise, we used CD ROM solutions and paid for access to the AMES site on language and literacy. So, we became more knowledgeable about using technology appropriately to suit the learner and the situation. We also provided technical support via the provider administrator position.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Outsourced to an RMIT TAFE department. Only 2 out of 10 teachers completed the course and it was a very expensive use of project funds, which did not build capacity within the network.</td>
<td>Professional development strategy written and online community developed and run by community partner. A number of other strategies were developed, for example, an online book club, the hiring of an e-moderator for a short time. Three community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of E-Moderator</td>
<td>Very adhoc and, as noted in evaluation report confusing.</td>
<td>An e-moderator was appointed for a short time to promote discussion, but had minimal success. The main form of communication became a periodic newsletter.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Mass</td>
<td>Six community partners and 6 TAFE schools.</td>
<td>Six foundation partners, 6 TAFE schools and 2 new rural partners were added to the team. This was not a large number in terms of developing an online community. However, in the end, we were not able to run in Hamilton as there was already a learning network in that area.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>We were reliant on one source of funding from OTTE, so we were not sustainable.</td>
<td>While we were still reliant on funding from OPCETE, we started to develop a brokering model using student contact hour funding.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>This was very important and the reason partners wanted to continue [RLN Stage 3 Report 1998/1999].</td>
<td>Continued to be important.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation and Review</td>
<td>Internal and external evaluations were carried out and significantly helped planning. Our major strength was in building relationships.</td>
<td>Internal evaluations focussed on particular programs. Through community partners became involved in planning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>RMIT was the lead agent but the governance structure was very ad hoc.</td>
<td>RMIT was the lead agent in the contract. Smaller projects were subcontracted out to community partners. The governance became more structured and agreements were started but not thoroughly vetted by RMIT Legal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems and Processes</td>
<td>Pre AMS we started to work with Student Administration and RMIT Financial Services Group on systems for accounting for the student contact hours. We thought we had a system but then the AMS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
was introduced and our system did not work – it was too complex for the small number of students because it worked across 6 TAFE schools who each had their own way of doing things.

Table 5.4 demonstrates that, at an operational level, we were more organised in this cycle, and that we were starting to build the foundations necessary for sustainability, especially by hooking into recurrent funding.

5.5.3 Political
The project continued to be a way of testing the flexibility of administrative and financial systems to cope with community learners. Procedures were implemented to make the system easier, however, the problems did not go away. The project therefore continued to be an irritant to student administration and financial services.

Concepts that were developed during this project were adapted to other projects. The idea of the learning community and connections to various regions was used in the development of the RMIT Hamilton project. The idea of a learning community and connectivity of community and industry were also used in the development of the Pathways Domain within the new structure of RMIT University.

Conceptually, the move of the project from Learning Technology Services into Community & Regional Partnerships was appropriate because it reflected the change from a technology driven project to one based on capacity building, where technology was used to fulfil identified needs. The reality was that the
move was very difficult because the Community & Regional Partnerships Group had no concept of the learning network project and could offer minimal technical support.

The independent third party peak body – NMR ACFE - played an important role in maintaining the relationships with the community partners during what at times could be very difficult negotiations. Often, if an issue was difficult, the education officer from NMR ACFE would call an independent meeting of community partners so that they could work out their negotiating position. At this stage of the project, this role was critical in solving issues as they arose and in maintaining relationships.

5.6 Summary
Cycle Two is a consolidation of the learning from the previous cycle and charts a direction for future sustainability. We were able to define a mission and vision for the project, develop a business plan and marketing strategy, decide on the appropriate use of technology and develop a professional development strategy. We also became much clearer about how to achieve sustainability - not through reliance on government funding but by linking the project to university strategy thus we moved towards an operational framework that is more fully investigated in Chapter Six.

In addition, Cycle Two was a period gathering a range of ideas from the literature, from the interviews I conducted and from the conferences I attended and the other people I met along the way. These ideas were to form the basis of the broader unit – RMIT Learning Networks - and have influenced a range of other projects within the university.
Chapter Six –
Towards an Operational Framework

This chapter describes the final cycle in the development of an operational framework for a sustainable learning network. It covers the period of the third funding cycle, from December 2001 until December 2002. Again I describe the plans, actions, observations and reflections of this period, which is characterised as our most productive. This is because it built on the intensive activity of Cycle Two, the extensive business, marketing and professional development planning. It was also the most productive because I was able to employ a full-time learning network coordinator with considerable expertise in the use of the TAFE VC and this helped in significantly increasing the amount of online delivery that we achieved through RMIT Learning Networks.

The observation section is again broken into the 6 key themes and is very rich in its descriptions as it contains the views of our stakeholders. In this cycle, I conducted 11 interviews, which included coordinators from all our community partners, 2 RMIT staff and my 2 key informants.

I was also part of a team that conducted the external evaluation on all 11 FLNs across the State and I include those findings as well (Hughes et al., 2003).

In conclusion, I use Reason's (2001) framework to discuss my findings and this leads into a discussion of conclusions and implications in Chapter Seven.
6.1 Planning

FLN submission guidelines for 2001 reflected the latest policy plank of the Victorian government, which is Growing Victoria Together (DPC, 2001). This policy expressed the government's broad vision for the future and was an attempt at balancing economic, social and environmental goals and actions through valuing and investing in lifelong education. It also incorporated the notion of building a learning society. It was also a key plank of the flexible learning strategy for TAFE in Victoria and was labelled, Towards a Learning Society (OPCETE, 2000b; OTTE, 2001). The 2001 tender states:

Flexible Learning Networks provide the focus for implementing many of the Government's policy commitments central to the creation of a Learning Society through providing the flexible options for life-long learning, improving teaching-learning interaction, increasing participation including access to disadvantaged groups and assuring quality through more informed choice (OTTE, 2001, p. 1).

The tender team responded to the government priorities. For example, the following statement formed the opening paragraph of the tender:

The growth of an e-learning business based on collaborative partnerships and the development of learning communities with life-long learning as an organising principle and social goal (RMIT, 2001, p. 1).

This is in recognition of the definition in the Hambrecht report (Urdan & Weggen, 2000, p. 8). The talk of collaborative partnerships, learning communities, and lifelong learning came directly from the work of Faris & Peterson (2001), the language of the Victorian government's tender document and from the review day held in June 2000.
We linked to our previous submission by building on the phases of the operational framework of the network, as described in section 6.3.1, Learning Network Models.

It became harder to write these submissions because the diminished funds for existing learning networks. In fact, OTTE (the Office of Training and Tertiary Education, known as OPCETE in Cycle Two) had increased expectations. We were expected to take on more partners; deliver a minimum of 30,000 SCH; offer online short courses to the public via the TAFE VC catalogue; determine a succession plan and continue with our plans to become sustainable. We also had to mentor a new learning network. We never fully understood the role of mentor in this context and it created tensions as the purpose was to speed up outcomes and outputs from new networks that were also in competition with existing networks. Our action plan was very ambitious and unsustainable in the long term without extra funding.

6.2 Action
The main focus was to build on the planning and actions that had taken place in previous cycles. A key action was the appointment of a full-time learning network coordinator whose function was to take over the day-to-day running of the network. This freed up my time to concentrate on business planning for the broader RMIT Learning Network unit: I could work on investigating new directions and other funding opportunities. In particular, the main actions were:

- A full-scale professional development program implemented to substantially increase the number of short course offered by the network.
- $110,000 worth of Commonwealth capital development funding was distributed to 6 foundation community partners. This was in addition to the funding community partners received for undertaking a range of projects.

The focus of the workshops and review day of this cycle was on new business ideas and what we might do to keep the network going after the additional funding from OTTE was no longer available.

I also conducted extensive interviews with stakeholders as part of this research and as a way of thinking about the way forward.

6.2.1 Professional Development Strategy
The first major achievement was to negotiate agreement on the use of the TAFE VC versus the use of RMIT's enterprise system, the DLS. This officially sanctioned what was happening in the second cycle anyway. We agreed that the RMIT Learning Network Hub would work with community partners to develop their skills in the use of the TAFE VC and that we would develop and run short courses using the TAFE VC as professional development opportunities. However, if the TAFE schools wanted to use an online platform to deliver courses to community providers, they would use the DLS. It was important to negotiate this agreement in order to avoid the tensions of Cycle One and Two.

In this round, I had increased staff to implement the strategy. The newly appointed learning network coordinator had skills in e-moderation and the use of the TAFE VC. I was also able to retain the skills of a TAFE VC provider administrator to supervise student administration on the TAFE VC and post
content online. We developed and ran short courses in e-moderation and managed a communications hub on the TAFE VC. We also continued our partnership with a community representative to train community teachers to use basic HTML and Dreamweaver and the TAFE VC communication hub so that they could incorporate these programs into their own teaching and learning.

These strategies were very successful and, in recognition, we won an RMIT Community Engagement Award in 2002 for professional development with a community partner.

6.2.2 Review Day/Business Planning
The focus of the 2002 review day was to determine how we were going to keep the network going after the OTTE funding had ceased. The stakeholders came up with a range of ideas which included continuing professional development, ensuring the network linked to the new RMIT Pathways Domain as an access and equity program and collaborating on other initiatives such as Training Credits – a new Commonwealth government program for the long term unemployed to access training.

The review day was followed up by two half-day business-planning workshops. For me, the main result of the workshops was to confirm that the network was partnered with community providers and would not easily develop into a commercially focused network that would make us financially viable. The main threats to the survival of the network were funding vulnerability and an increase in competition for flexible delivery products from more commercially orientated providers. The current level of staffing at the RMIT Learning
Network Hub was unsustainable without additional government support and would not be matched by fees from short courses. However, all community partners wanted the network to continue in some form and to keep their relationship with the TAFE schools in 2003, and the only way this could happen was to continue to develop the brokering of university student contact hours to deliver accredited training into community settings. This could be linked directly into the university's access and equity program through the Pathways Domain. The Hughes, McGannon and Wheeler (2003) evaluation of all FLNs across Victoria reaches a similar conclusion. The networks that developed a commercial orientation from the start were far more likely to be sustainable than those that had a community engagement orientation. This is discussed further in section 6.3.4, which highlights the issue of sustainability.

6.2.3 Interviews with Key Stakeholders
It was critical to capture the voices of stakeholders who had been involved in the network development. During the period of March 2002 – June 2002, I held interviews with all community providers, 2 key informants, the strategic consultant in VET and a representative from RMIT schools – in total 11 interviews. I used what Patton (2002) refers to as criterion sampling to decide whom to interview. The interviewees represented a cross sample of stakeholders and belonged to the network at some point in the project. I held semi-structured interviews and the questions were based on the research topic. The topics included the learning network model, the barriers in developing a sustainable learning network, the successes, the impact on learners and the development of an online community.
Refer to Appendix 1 and 3 for further information about the interviewees and a copy of the plain language letter. The results of the interviews are explained in Section 6.3.

6.3 Observations
The observations in this cycle build on the work of previous cycles. They are thick descriptions because they contain the views of interviews with our key stakeholders. The analysis and discussion of the themes is divided into 2 sections. The first describes the views of the stakeholders and the second is a summary of other documentation and focuses on the case study, RMIT LearnLinks.

6.3.1 Theme One: Learning Networks Models
Stakeholder Interviews
When asked about what they perceived as a learning network model, the majority of interviewees did not talk in terms of a model. They talked about a set of relationships, both with the university and among other ACE partners. Four interviewees discussed the opportunity to partner with a large university, 6 saw it as a way of experimenting with flexible and online delivery and one talked of the important role of NMR ACFE in bringing the partners together. One interviewee had no idea what a learning network was but was interested in collaborating to use RMIT as a brand. The following quotes illustrates the range of views:

I have to be truthful ..., I did not have much idea about what a learning network was or could be [N.Community Partner E, S1].

In the beginning a lot of it was unknown territory for us but it felt really good to be coming involved with other organizations, to feel like we had that support so it felt like it was a good supporting way of us getting involved in online learning and the whole IT area and certainly
it has been an opportunity to expand our programme. [N.Community Partner G, S1].

I think we said initially it was an opportunity to play with the big boys because ACE organizations have not got a lot of credibility even though we think we are doing quite a good job, external perceptions of it are that we are very warm and fuzzy, we do really lovely things with people but we do not go very far with them and we thought that working with RMIT would give us more credibility educationally [N.Community Partner A, S1].

The value of the learning network was in the relationships, the focus on developing relationships among all of the stakeholders rather than on outcome based focus on developing learning tools and delivering online [N.Community Partner D, S1].

Three years ago I think it was an idea, I don't think it was a model at all, I think it was an idea inspired by a desire to have better relationships with organizations outside the University and I think it was pretty much powered along by a sense of access and equity kind of principles so that was the first part of it and I also think there was a dimension around the technology and having partners that were beyond the University walls who were interested in doing technology or underpinning their learning with community learners with technology and I don't think anybody imagined anything sophisticated [N. Senior Strategic Planner for VET.S1].

The interviewee from the RMIT TAFE school thought it was about getting the university's name out into the community and providing pathways for community learners. At an operational level, this interviewee was the only one to specifically mention that we were now more organised than when the network commenced and that we had pathways in place.

Only one interviewee thought in terms of a distributed learning model based on online learning, wherein the community partners would become mini outposts of RMIT.

Originally, I actually saw the focus very much being on online learning, the partnership was important but that where we would be heading fairly quickly would be a lot more online delivery than actually occurred. I actual also saw it as presenting a different opportunity for partners....the community partners than it actually did and in the
sense that I saw the possibility that they would seriously become, the potential to become mini outposts in the community for RMIT, a whole range of RMIT programmes so that was kind of my agenda I suppose when it first started, that is how I saw the model with RMIT in the centre... and a really distributed learning happening through them with the added potential for it to grow not only through the northern region but then to hopefully expand into some of the other regions [N.Key Informant B, S1]

In summary, only one person talked in terms of a model and that was a distributed learning model. The money that was provided by OTTE opened up opportunities for all parties. NMR ACFE ensured that some of its community providers could experiment with flexible delivery and online learning, community providers had the opportunity of working with a large university and the RMIT had an opportunity of partnering with community organisations as an attempt to provide more access and equity opportunities.

RMIT LearnLinks
During the interviews, the stakeholders did not talk in terms of an operational framework or a model. This was of most interest to me, a practitioner researcher, in my attempt to make the project sustainable within the context of a large university that was undergoing major organisational change and with the knowledge that OTTE was not likely to provide further funding for the project.

In the first instance the business planning built on the work of Cycle Two. Figure 6.1 illustrates the next iteration of our phased planning approach. It demonstrates what we were aiming for in this enhancement phase.
A comparison of Figure 5.2 and 6.1 tracks the development. In the establishment phase, we spent a lot of time developing the partnerships. The consolidation phase was where most of the operational planning took place. A vision and mission was developed, a professional development strategy, the business plan, a brokering model for funding, a communications strategy and a marketing strategy were also developed. We undertook evaluation. Figure 6.1 expands on the enhancement phase. This is when I employed additional staff and was able to increase the professional development and other business planning.

Other points to note about the diagrams are:

- Between Cycle Two and Cycle Three, the terminology changed – 'communities and partnerships' became 'communities of practice', (COP) probably in line with a growing interest in COPs but not due to any real understanding – that came later.
The concepts of 'quality assurance' and 'business development' were broadened to become 'organisational development' and 'market development'.

The diagrams and the business documents were now starting to come close to an operational framework for a learning network. The main issue that I now had to consider was how much of this was relevant to RMIT LearnLinks and how much was relevant to the development of my broader business unit – RMIT Learning Networks. In reality I was finding that RMIT LearnLinks was moving towards a simplified brokering model using recurrent funding. However, the planning I was doing was critical in framing a business strategy for RMIT Learning Networks and is currently being used in the broader development of the unit.

6.3.2 Theme Two: Learning Network Success Factors

Stakeholder Interviews
The majority of interviewees (6 – with 4 being community partners) thought the professional development opportunities provided by the network were its greatest mark of success. Two community providers stated that the opportunity had directly helped them tender and win their own flexible learning projects. Three people talked about the opportunity for the sharing of resources among community partners. One person acknowledged the advantage of receiving $13,000 worth of capital IT equipment in this cycle. Another discussed the importance of using the RMIT brand while one talked of the fact that partnering with RMIT gave them increased respectability educationally. Two people said the greatest success factor was its continuing existence after 3 funding rounds. Two interviewees talked of RMIT's
willingness to listen and respond to problems – especially at the beginning of the project - while 2 also talked of RMIT’s increasing arrogance as the network moved away from the OTTE funding to a service delivery model. The following quotes illustrate the range of views:

Certainly getting our name out there in the community ... The fact that people who would not normally attend a university are now understanding that it is not so scary to undertake further studies and I think that has been one of the biggest pluses of the learning network, to get out there into communities particularly to disadvantaged people financially and perhaps people who have not had any education, just to make it more available to them [N.TAFE Coordinator, S14].

I think from the community organizations point of view it would have to be the branding. The use the brand of RMIT has been a success factor. You look at it as a joint relationship, the providers are getting access to RMIT branding and RMIT is getting very cheap infrastructure because you are buying into somebody else’s systems, infrastructures, goodwill reputations at a very, very cheap cost [N.Key Informant B, S36].

Definitely the fact that we are getting some new computers through a joint funding grant that we got... that is a big success factor. I think the other success factor would be the confidence that staff feel as a result of positive feedback that comes from the network about the things that we do. I think the involvement in the attendance at the classes that we have is ever growing, the RMIT classes that we are able to offer, there are more and more people wanting to do them so word has gone out that these are really good quality classes and we just would not have been able to do them without the partnerships so ...my knowledge and understanding of where flexible delivery fits in the whole learning environment [N.Community Provider G, S29].

The fact that it has survived is a key indicator of success and that success has come about because of the commitment of individual members and stakeholders and in particular the commitment of RMIT and the amount of energy and time it has put into work with the partners in order to build the relationship necessary for the network to function in any form [N.Community Provider D, S17].

I think it is being able to link up a TAFE institution with a learning environment. I think people really enjoy the fact that they have done courses that are associated with RMIT. I guess we have accredited courses anyway but I think that a lot of them that have done it have really loved the fact that they can say they have actually been to an RMIT course. They like the fact that they can do some online learning;
they can actually use it for getting an insight into what it is all about and what other options are available. There is a range of different courses they can do online, which they probably didn’t even know existed [N.Community Provider, F.14].

Overall, the project has been very successful in a number of ways. It has been an outreach project; it has placed the RMIT brand into community settings; and it has built capacity in the centres through professional development programs through the upgrading of IT equipment, and through building confidence and reputation within the local community about their service providers.

**RMIT LearnLinks**
The successes in the final year of funding for this network were significant and helped along because I was able to employ a full time coordinator which freed me to take on more of a business development role for RMIT Learning Networks within the Community & Regional Partnership group. Our successes during the 2001/2002 funding round included:

- Significantly improved service agreements between our community partners and RMIT schools and departments for which we were commended in a formal 2002 audit of teaching and learning. The audit commented on our processes for liasing with business partners to identify community needs, matching businesses to appropriate faculties, providing professional development and resources to business partners, and developing models of learning networks. It concluded that this area was a pleasure to audit. This contrasts greatly with our concerns regarding quality control in the first cycle.
• An increase in the volume and quality of online content included the development of 2 short courses for the TAFE VC and online courses run by community partners, e.g. Yoga Online and VCE books online.

• The student contact hour delivery was the highest of any FLN in the state. For RMIT LearnLinks, it represented a significant increase from 14,000 reported student contact hours (SCHs) in 1999 to 124,866 SCH in 2002. This was counted as the SCH we brokered through the network (approximately 30,000 and other hours that the community partners taught using flexible delivery).

• In addition, the university, through a higher education Commonwealth equipment grant was successful in winning funding to buy IT equipment to the value of $110,000.

• Each community partner was able to select IT equipment ranging from computers and computer screens to data projectors.


The successes in this period were a result of the significant planning that had taken place in previous cycles and the increase in staffing that occurred.
6.3.3 Theme Three: Learning Network Barriers

The barriers of previous cycles still remained, those being the enrolment, the financial and administrative barriers as well as RMIT’s apparent lack of interest in the project.

Stakeholder Interviews

The network, in my view, is like an organism that in and of itself has grown to take shape in its own right built on the relationships that we have developed. We have a very clear focus as an agency as to what our mission is in the local community as does RMIT itself, but the hub is a creation of a contract with the state government, it has relatively new staff, and while it has job descriptions, while it has a function to fulfil itself, it does not have an identity and a clear purpose and I think that in part reflects perhaps the ambivalence within RMIT itself as to what the function of the learning network is and it is merely reflecting that so that it does not have the statute and will to lead, it is a service office that services a contract and is also subject to the different pressures from within the bureaucracy of RMIT plus all the pressures that we put on them and it is just torn asunder but it does not have its own focus and I think that is a handicap [N.Community Provider, D.S31].

This quote sums up one community partner’s view of the RMIT Learning Network team. We were the creation of a government contract and, other than that, we did not have our own reason for being within RMIT. This quote hit home for me and made me realise that this was the biggest barrier for me it made sense of my frustration as I tried to find a place first within the Learning Technologies Group and then within Community & Regional Partnerships within RMIT. It also made me realise that I had to differentiate between the broader work that I was interested in – investigating learning communities and the community networking movement - and growing other projects within my team that would link to the broader vision of community engagement within the university.
Two other interviewees reinforced this view but also saw that much had been achieved in running the project. However, now was the time to reassess where we were headed.

I think RMIT is not clear about why it wants it. I think some of the providers are not clear because they thought it would be a cash cow and being involved with RMIT would give them enormous opportunities for financial benefits that they have not seen. I think some of them feel they are more stable with their own technology and their understanding of ICT in a way that they don’t need the support that they really needed 3 years ago because one of the things the network has done very well is build capacity and that is probably one of the things that it has really succeeded at in a way that generally has not been threatening to people. It has been very successful and very supportive so I don’t know that the providers need RMIT as much as they did [N.Key Informant A, S29].

I think the other barrier has probably been RMIT itself and I don’t mean the people involved directly. In fact, I think if it had not been for some of the key people involved, I am not doing this to boost you up but it is true, I think you, I think people like [……], if it hadn’t been for you people this project would have died 3 years ago. It would have had a very short life but I actually don’t think centrally RMIT has really progressed [N. Key Informant B, S18].

However, the representative from RMIT senior management emphasized that after 3 funding cycles, both community partners and the RMIT hub team were getting tired and had to rethink where we were going. Her view was that “if there was a withdrawal of government support, the network would not function”.

The other barriers were at the operational level. Three community partners identified the financial strain and the administrative burden of running the network. Two people singled out the AMS for special mention, which was understandable given the well-publicized difficulties and inefficiencies of the system. Five people identified that the technology could still be a barrier, especially in terms of download costs of online learning and the community
resistance to use online as learning method. One staff member from an RMIT school mentioned the completion rates of community learners, which for her were only 40%, and wanted to find out why. The following quotes illustrate the range of comments:

My only bugbear with AMS at the moment is the speed of it. I believe that is going to be improved with more servers and so on but at the moment I timed myself, it takes half an hour to enrol one student. Now I have four hundred students come through the learning networks, that is 200 hours of administrative data entry before I even start the confirmations [N.TAFE Coordinator, S56].

The AMS is a huge problem driven by RMIT and no one seems to have any control of it and it makes the relationship with external delivery service people like community organizations difficult. It does nothing for RMIT's reputation if you can't get this right and it is quite reasonable for community organizations to be pipped that they are putting time into something they were promised would deliver to them reduced administration, more streamlined client management and it has not happened so that is a real factor because if you want to have a good relationship with the learners, you also have a good relationship with the service providers and that is at risk I think [N.Key Informant A, S52].

I actually think a lot of it was the state of the technology itself and I think we were naive that I think people sat at that point and said yes I think there are problems but they will be overcome in a very short space of time and it is a bit like the broadband issue. We are still waiting for broadband and the reality I think for broadband is that it is still a few years away and those are the sorts of technology barriers that have actually restricted the development and I keep thinking that the tools we have got to support online learning now are the same ones we had 3 years ago - really we are still looking at chats forums and video conferencing and so the technology has not moved [N.Key Informant B, S14].

Just say finances, always finances with us. It is always about money because we don't have a full time admin worker and there is no money and I suppose because we only deliver a 1000 hours in IT and 1000 hours in access it does not really pay [N.Community Provider A, S93].

For me, these views summed up the last three cycles. Enrolment and administration have remained issues for the entire time. IT issues were not as overwhelming in this cycle but the AMS was a great disappointment. I had
been relying on this to simplify administration and enrolment. I realised that if we were to go ahead with a simple brokering model, we would have to get systems and procedures in place to minimise administrative disruption. Ultimately, this affected the success of the operational framework because we could not control our administration. A successful administrative process from Cycle One may have provided quite different outcomes.

6.3.4 Theme Four: Sustainability

Interviews

Sustainability became the “hot topic” for stakeholders in the interview process. At a macro level, the 2 key informants and the representative from RMIT senior management shared the view that this particular network, which engaged with community partners, could never be self-sustaining. They came at this view from different perspectives. One key informant said it was ‘a crock of garbage’ that OTTE had given networks guaranteed funding for a year and for this they expected the networks to do some business planning, carry out delivery, develop online content and become sustainable by the end of the year. The other key informant said the word, ‘sustainability’ had not been clearly defined by RMIT.

The use of the word, ‘sustainability’... is not clearly defined in my mind by RMIT and indeed by the partners. What they think sustainability in this environment is and I think that if RMIT wants this to continue they have to be able to say sustainable means that in this case we will guarantee you a base funding of $100,000 a year but we will assume you will be able to generate this much and therefore the return for us will be this. There is no way that this sort of environment can be sustainable in that it does not have a user pay basis, it does not have a huge corporate basis and you could say well go and get them but why are you going to get them if what you are doing is actually confusing the vision you have for what you are trying to do? I think until RMIT is clear about what it wants, you potentially are trying to be sustainable for something that is not sustainable if sustainability is
generating enough income to cover your costs and move forward
[N.Key Informant A,S52].

The representative from RMIT senior management indicated that the type of network that had been established would never be self sustaining.

Assuming learning networks had to be a self-sustaining business was erroneous ... because it could never be. If you partnered with Eriksson and helped support their in house intranet based learning that would be a different proposition all together but it is not like apples and pears, you could never mix those two. You could never mix a full on industrial consulting approach with access learners. These partners are too small to be able to carry what I think are essentially quite different philosophies and methodologies and in some ways if you think about someone like [name of community provider] she is so very heavily involved with her learners and steeped in their circumstances and so incredibly supportive I don't think she would ever want to do industry training so if you think about our learning networks you could almost say that there were 3 categories of them. One of them will never do that sort of commercial activity, which would be your sort of [name of 3 small providers in the network] and I think another [name of a larger provider] can see some commercial activity but it is not industrial. It is in the sector and in the teaching and then you have got [name of another large provider] who can see who has an eye on the dollars but he is in a local environment, the demography of his local government area has got money. [N. Senior Strategic Planner for VET, S104]

Two of these interviewees also talked about the funding vulnerability of relying on one main source of government funding.

The other 8 interviewees talked about sustainability from an operational point of view. The majority talked about why it could not be sustainable. Three talked about this in terms of the technology. It would not be sustainable if you relied only on the TAFE VC. It was not flexible enough and community learners did not want to learn solely this way. Two could not see how they could contribute to building fee-for-service programs as this was outside the mission of their particular centres. The interviewee from the RMIT department said she had a hard time convincing her managers that this program was worthwhile as they
only saw it in terms of the bottom line and it certainly was not worth it in these terms. Three interviewees suggested ways of contributing to sustainability. Two talked about linking to new opportunities, for example, the new Global Learning Village in the City of Hume and getting together to win big government contracts around employment. The other said that she would remain in the network as long as it was adding value to her programs and her centre, for example, providing the money for capital equipment and professional development were significant for her centre.

Sustainability now became quite a challenge for me. How was I to move this project forward?

**RMIT LearnLinks**

I was now thinking about sustainability on a number of levels, on the one hand it was the sustainability of RMIT LearnLinks as a programme within RMIT University. Could I work with our community partners and RMIT faculty people to maintain this network into the future? On the next level I had to consider whether RMIT Learning Networks (RLN) as a business unit within Community & Regional Partnership (C & RP) group within RMIT University. How could RLN be a sustainable business unit within C & RP? On the final level, could RLN, as part of the C & RP group, contribute in a positive way to the creation of sustainable community learning networks in communities that work with us strategically?

I thought at the project level and decided that sustaining RLN within C & RP was an appropriate definition of sustainability, similar to that used to investigate the sustainability of community technology centres in Seattle.
(O'Malley & Liebow, 2002). This definition was adapted to be the long-term ability of RMIT Learning Networks to maintain or improve its capacity to deliver services.

Financial sustainability will come from our ability to provide the services that community builders and practitioners want, and the management capacity of RLN to respond to the market need by the delivery of quality services.

**Sustainability of Victorian Flexible Learning Networks**

The final evaluation of FLNs found that for the 11 networks examined, different configurations, expectations and decision-making models were adopted during the 3 rounds of funding (Hughes et al., 2003). Even though each network identified its partners, mechanisms, structures, markets, delivery modes and desired outcomes, the structural models fit into 2 broad categories:

- Community engagement
- Commercial orientation

The community engagement model focussed on developing longer-term relationships with a range of other service providers, and the success of the network existed within the strength of the relationships and the capacity of the network members to make decisions collaboratively and for the common good.

A commercially orientated model focussed on a lead agent, usually a TAFE institution, identifying a range of service delivery providers, which could meet the needs of the lead agent, and a service provision structure was developed to support delivery. Arrangements with service providers could be changed as
required without significant impact on the functioning of the network or the relationships.

The evaluation team determined that each of these models had attractions and advantages – see Table 6.1. A commercially orientated model required a focussed commitment from other service providers, as their main goal was on meeting performance targets. Other relationship building and other growth was incidental rather than fundamental to the sustainability of the network. However, the community engagement model developed success through building strong relationships and critical mass, often amongst a range of smaller providers who would be unable or unwilling to enter into higher risk projects on their own. It should be no surprise that the commercially orientated network was the more sustainable of the 2. However, this was at the expense of true community engagement. So in reality, there is a trade-off and if you are working on a community engagement model, you must be clear about why you are doing it and how you are going to fund it in the long term (Hughes et al., 2003).
Table 6.1

Features of Structural Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODEL TYPE</th>
<th>DECISION MAKING MODEL</th>
<th>CAPACITY TO ALTER MEMBERSHIP OF FLN TO MEET CHANGING NEEDS</th>
<th>RELIANCE ON FLN FUNDING FOR SUSTAINABILITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT</td>
<td>PARTNERSHIP FOCUSED</td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>HIGH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMERCIAL ORIENTATION</td>
<td>PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENTFOCUSED</td>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
<td>LOW TO MEDIUM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hughes, McGannon & Wheeler (2003, p. 29)

When you entered these types of partnerships, you should be very clear about why you are going into them and how you are going to sustain them.

6.3.5 Theme Five: Partnerships

The concept of partnerships continued to be important. The voice of the interviewees, - the seven community providers, two RMIT staff and two key informants confirm – was already established by the international interviews conducted in Cycle Two. At the same time, Community & Regional Partnerships Group was also undertaking an analysis of the importance of its partnerships from a university engagement perspective. Both of these views are covered in this discussion.

Interviewees

When the interviewees talked about partnerships, they talked about it in different ways. The majority talked about it in terms of collaboration and the building of relationships. They also talked about how the partnership had
changed over time. One community partner defined this change. At first she believed there was a genuine attempt to build a collaborative partnership based on mutual trust, the ACE Cluster model. However, after attending a recent business-planning workshop she came to realise it was now becoming a business arrangement based on a service agreement. Another community partner talked about it in terms of a partnership with a TAFE school to extend what they could offer in terms of the It delivery. The community partner did not want to become a mini TAFE so they needed the partnership in order to offer existing clients more than basic language and literacy classes. The interviewee from the TAFE school saw that the partnership gave TAFE teachers an understanding of how to get the training out to disadvantaged people and shared this view.

Key informants and the representative from senior RMIT management all referred to the network as a partnership. One informant saw the partnership in terms of developing online learning and talked in terms of a cross sectorial partnership between the ACFE sector and the TAFE sector. The representative from senior RMIT management saw both sides of the partnership, the University and the community partners had learnt a lot, especially around professional development. The university was able to test out its philosophy on flexible delivery. While there had been some disillusionment on the nature of the partnership, by working together over a period of time that issues was clarified to some extent, especially the notion of servicing community learners. If the network were to discontinue, some relationships between community partners and TAFE schools would survive. The following quotes illustrate this range of views:
I guess mine was about using it as a professional development tool in the sense that here was a good partnership that could stand the test of a few mistakes and I always saw it as an opportunity to test out some of the university's philosophies on flexible delivery and to pick up more of an understanding around the human dimension. I think that is what learning networks did particularly in that first 12 months - it was almost defining what the needs were for professional development in IT and the incredibly critical point of a service desk for simple things that ran from how do I get a computer and a printer to talk to each other through to how do I pick up an enrolment form off the net [N. Senior Strategic Planner for VET, S16].

Initially, we thought a partnership would be just a group of us all with equal status and I thought that was the model based on our other models but it has actually been easier since we clarified that because we don't have the same expectations of .... quality... I know quality sounds incorrect but that is what I mean in a way. With RMIT we see them now as the lead agency and us as satellites, rather that having expectations. [N.Community Provider A,S20].

We have to stick with our mission as well as our core clientele... you can't be everything to everybody, most of our clientele have access and equity issues, low socio economic group ... look where we are - in a high rise housing estate. You can't spread yourselves too thinly and we found that out with the book club too, we had to come back to our clientele. So we keep trying to make little forays into - taping into - experimentation but really there is only so much capacity for us to do stuff with our current clientele that it is better to stick with that. When I was trying to expand the building they said to us what are you trying to do - turn into a mini TAFE or something... We can't get too big too quickly and we learnt that the hard way so I think the direction we have got at the moment and the relationship with the network is working for us ... I keep saying the network.... It is actually the partnership isn't it [N.Community Provider G, S57].

**RMIT LearnLinks**
Community & Regional Partnerships is using a framework developed by VicHealth (2003) for categorising the purposes and nature of partnerships. They see partnerships as a continuum from networking through to collaboration. This work was adapted from Himmelman (2001) and is outlined in Table 6.2.
Table 6.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purposes and Nature of Partnerships</th>
<th>Networking</th>
<th>Coordinating</th>
<th>Cooperating</th>
<th>Collaborating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It involves the exchange of information for mutual benefit. This requires little time and trust between partners. For example, work experience coordinators at secondary schools in a local government area meet on a monthly basis to provide an update on their work and discuss issues that affect their learners.</td>
<td>This involves exchanging information and altering activities for a common purpose. For example, ACFE regional councils may meet and plan a coordinated campaign to lobby the board for more funding to run youth-specific services.</td>
<td>This involves exchanging information, altering activities and sharing resources. It requires a significant amount of time, a high level of trust between partners and sharing the ground between agencies. For example, cross-sectorial learning organisations in local government areas pool some resources to run a learning festival as part of Adult Learners Week as a way of promoting the benefits of learning and contributing to the social and economic well being of a community.</td>
<td>In addition to the other activities described, collaboration includes enhancing the capacity of the other partner for mutual benefit and a common purpose. Collaborating requires each partner to give up part of their ground to another agency to create a better or more seamless service system. For example, a TAFE college, a local small business, a university and a secondary school might fund an adult community provider to establish a full-time position to coordinate Adult Learning Week (VicHealth, 2003).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It seems to me that the **Collaboration** framework best fitted RMIT LearnLinks especially for the period when we received the government funding (1999-2002). We came up with a common mission and vision and each partner contributed resources. RMIT University contributed a fraction of my salary, office space in the CBD and a special funding arrangement for recurrent funding delivered through RMIT LearnLinks. The community partners
contributed the use of training rooms in their learning centres and generally incurred additional administrative costs in setting up the network.

However, when it was recognised that the government funding was coming to an end, the continuing nature of the partnership was discussed at length – particularly at a business-planning meeting of key stakeholders in May, 2002. While the development of the partnership was seen as being collaborative, the continuation of the program into 2003 and beyond was to be based on a service agreement between RMIT University and a particular community partner, RMIT would deliver x amount of student contact hours for a dollar rate per hour – a very legalistic view of partnerships.

The reality of the current partnership hit home. While we had the extra government money we were able to maintain a collaborative partnership where we experimented with different learning network models, investigated different online learning platforms and flexible learning methods. We were able to be innovative. This was not the reality post funding. In order to survive, it would have to become an access and equity program providing pathways for community learners into further learning. After a series of meetings, which the learning coordinator and myself held with community partners and TAFE heads of schools, all voted to keep this model without additional funding for 2003. This would involve the TAFE heads of schools sacrificing some of their SCH funding in order to sustain it.

To my mind, this was a recognition of the trust and relationship that had been built over a 4 year period.
6.3.6 Theme Six: Capacity Building
The following interviews and discussions of activities demonstrate that Cycle Three was the most productive in terms of building capacity in the teaching staff of the network.

Interviews
Extensive professional development has been conducted throughout the life of the network. The majority of the people interviewed identified the opportunities provided by RMIT LearnLinks as one of the most successful parts of belonging to the network. Again, people held different views about what this meant for them. Two community partners talked about the growing skill levels of their staff and the other opportunities that had developed as a result. Three community providers talked of the opportunities of linking into online teaching and learning via the TAFE VC. One community partner talked about the opportunity of tapping into broader networks and specifically referred to hearing Dr Ron Faris speak about the development of learning communities in Canada when he was in Melbourne as a guest of RMIT Learning Networks, part of the RMIT International Fellow programme in 2002. A community partner who had taken a leadership role in professional development in the network talked about the fact that this opportunity led to a greater interest being taken by staff and the whole organisation became involved in online projects. One of the key informants talked about the 'very functional healthy people network' that we had developed. The other key informant claimed the development of an online community was not important because most of the community partners were in the same geographic locality. The senior strategic VET consultant said that I had created a learning community and it was not
necessarily an online one. She felt the project was about exploration — a kind of a star trekky thing and we were fortunate in that we were on an exploratory mission. The following quote really reflects the above comments — that each stakeholder got something from the network.

I think it is a project about exploration. I think it is almost like a star trekky thing that you go where no one else has gone before and you ask the difficult questions and you push the frontier. ... We want our learners to be online what does that mean at RMIT? Oh by golly that is 10 steps before they even look at anything like a learning activity and in some respects it is like the support money from government, it is almost like we have been using it on their behalf to explore those difficult questions. May be they could have asked those questions in a much cheaper form and got the information more cheaply but I think that has been one of the purposes with this project, so what is it about linking with community providers to make online learning a reality [N. Senior Strategic Planner for VET, S96].

In summary, during the course of the three funding cycles, we provided a range of professional development opportunities. This varied from linking our partners up to other external activities, for example, HECs-free Masters programmes, a Graduate Certificate subject - Teaching and Learning Online run by RMIT for OTTE and AMES. We partnered with one community provider in particular to provide a range of activities aimed at building capacity in the teaching staff within the network and the RMIT Learning Network Hub developed a range of professional development short courses aimed at increasing e-moderation and online communication skills both within our network and as revenue earners for the Hub. The comments from the interviewees reinforced the notion that the majority got something out of the professional development program that would help them carry on well after the additional government funding had ended. For me it reinforced the fact that my team had a critical role in linking our partners to a number of opportunities
be it a short course on how to use the TAFE VC or opportunities to hear international guest speakers of the calibre of Dr Ron Faris. This function should continue within the broader RLN team.

6.4 Reflection
This cycle was a time of intense reflection for me. I noted in my journal in May 2002, after the business-planning meeting, that this was a critical time in the network. I envisaged that after the government funding had run out, if the community partners and TAFE schools wished to carry on, RMIT would have to broker SCH out to concession learners at community access points. The facilitator at the workshop believed that this option would purely be a service delivery model with RMIT as the lead agent and the community partners as services providers. I noted that I could have taken this view when we started, but had done so, I doubt whether we would have lasted 4 years. I also felt that the energy and enthusiasm of a lot of passionate people had gone into the project and it was now time to critically reshape it and to make use of the lessons learnt.

In my journal of March 2002, I noted the momentous occasion, when after much negotiation and many meetings with RMIT Financial Services Group and the AMS team, we finally got a box labelled ‘LN’ for learning networks programmed into the AMS and achieved a category for learning network students on the TAFE concession form. I commented that I turned up to a senior management team very excited by this – the others looked at me as though I needed to get out more!!!!
At times, I thought that the greatest barrier that RMIT LearnLinks suffered from was a lack of recognition for the work the project was doing from within the university, especially in the professional development area. The network was delivering the most of any other area within the university on the TAFE VC. Because this platform was not supported within the university, I could not get any support to maintain delivery on the platform and, in 2003, I was unable to renew the contracts of either the learning network coordinator or the provider administrator. To me this seemed to be a waste of the capacity that I had built up in the unit and a loss of knowledge for the TAFE VC system, which now is reportedly very reliable (Hughes et al., 2003). However, I also recognised that the university was undergoing huge budget issues as a result of the highly publicised AMS issues.

To top it off, in my capacity as a regional councillor for NMR ACFE (a voluntary position separate from my RMIT role). I asked why the ACFE Division did not link in more with the learning network projects. The chair publicly accused my university of brokering out cheap hours to the community sector. This was a reference to RMIT LearnLinks and I had to go on the defensive as he had not been given the full facts. In my journal entry of 25 August, 2002, I noted that I had very mixed feelings. After all the hard work of the last three years, I feared it would be ended by the ACFE Division's claims that RMIT University was sub-contracting hours out cheaply into the community. I was concerned that they were not taking into account the substantial funding and professional development community partners had received and I found this very disheartening.
The other major issue was probably that I, the project manager got too close to the project and did not see that every project has a lifecycle and is a learning experience to be taken into the next one. I noted in my journal entry of January 2003, that I probably suffered from what Coghlan & Brannick (2001) label as cognitive distortions, whereby a person may become aware of how they might be prone to distorting reality, particularly when under pressure (i.e. overgeneralization, all-or-nothing thinking, mental filtering, jumping to conclusions, emotional reasoning, fortune telling etc). Distortions such as these impair one’s ability to engage in inquiry in action. Emotions as well as thoughts are part of the reflective process. One must be able to recognize and acknowledge the role that feelings play in the formation of judgement and in taking action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). I noted that this was not at all surprising. At the end of 2001, I had such optimism, especially after the new vice chancellor named me as a leader in this particular area for the university. I was the only person she actually named in her speech that year!!!! The following year became very difficult for me. On several occasions during the year, I was told that I could be difficult to deal with, I was bossy, a problem, a maverick and I worked with “ferals” – I think this meant community people, some of whom are social activists. By the end I came to realise that maybe this is a back-handed compliment and, in a way, I was a very strong project manager who focused on getting the project on hand done within budget and on time. At the end of the day, this was probably a good thing considering the climate of RMIT university as it underwent its budget crisis. The university needed people like me who could tender for funds, raise money and run projects, people who are not afraid of taking on new, exploratory projects.
After all, the project had raised in excess of $700,000 including three competitive funding rounds and one capital development grant, not to mention a number of other small grants that came as a result of this work.

6.5 Findings
The findings from this cycle are summarised in Table 6.3, again analysed under headings relating to first (the personal), second (the professional) and third (the political) person research (Reason, 2001). This cycle clarified what RMIT LearnLinks could become with appropriate resourcing but also explored how it could continue without this resourcing.
Table 6.3:


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Professional</th>
<th>The Personal</th>
<th>The Political</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• We found that a team approach to business planning worked well in the formation and development of the plan and operational framework.</td>
<td>• By the end of this project, I had a very realistic understanding of what I could achieve. I was not able to create a large network of learning centres based on educational alliances. However, university support and willingness on all sides I could establish a sustainable model to provide accredited training in community settings.</td>
<td>• Capacity building projects, which may or may not involve a focus on technology, have a series of phases that must be planned for and worked through with stakeholders. This is comparable to the life-cycle approach of community building projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In this cycle, there were 4 RLN staff working on the project, a learning network coordinator (full time), a provider administrator for the TAFE VC (0.6), a student administrator (0.6) and myself (.3). This contributed directly to the greatly increased output of the cycle.</td>
<td>• As a practitioner researcher also managing the project, I finally learnt to detached myself from the project and was quite prepared to take the next decision to either close the project or maintain it at a level that matched the reduced resources.</td>
<td>• The government kept changing focus and expected more while providing less.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We were left alone within C &amp; RP to explore and experiment – this greatly aided our innovation.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Key stakeholders should build in a fourth phase, when the government funding is no longer available, and that is an exit strategy or a way of sustaining the project within existing resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To sustain the program following the cessation of government funding, I had to reduce the staff to a student administration person (0.5) with myself supervising. We closed the TAFE VC service.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• By hooking into university funding processes, the network has been able to sustain itself beyond government funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Each stakeholder came to the project with different intentions but</td>
<td></td>
<td>• The final evaluation report on all FLNs reported that the market focus of a network should be either on access/equity or commercial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
over time was able to adapt to changing political contexts and funding opportunities that were necessary in order to make the network sustainable.

- It is important to have the support of key decision-makers at the top who are able to clear organisational barriers as required.

- It was also important for OTTE to develop a strategic partnership with ACFE to create synergies and efficiencies in projects that involved both sectors.

orientation. The funding model for each type of network should be different. It is unrealistic for a government to expect that an access/equity project will be sustainable.
6.5.1 Professional

The business planning team, this time consisting of 2 key informants, and myself, continued to define the operational framework. In the tender document we refined the phases.

- Establishment phase - the development of the relationships was of utmost importance,

- Consolidation phase - the mission and vision of the network were defined and detailed planning in the areas of funding, marketing and professional development were undertaken.

- Enhancement phase - the delivery of e-learning on the TAFE VC was increased.

During each of these phases the university left us alone to a certain extent. We were allowed to be innovative, to experiment and to respond to changing government policy. We were not scrutinized too closely and there was no real requirement for us to be mainstreamed or standardised during the funding period. This only happened when the government funding ran out – we then had to make some serious decisions about how to continue and this did mean linking it into a mainstream pathway programme. This was when it became very advantageous to have the VET strategic advisor on our team - without me realising, she had been steering us down that path all along. For example, in each cycle we planned on continuation, even though we did not know whether we would get the additional government funding. She was always in the background negotiating hours with the TAFE schools and ensuring that we had an income stream independent of government funding.
The increased staffing during this cycle really enabled me to develop the online content and TAFE VC delivery, but when the government money ran out there was no way I could sustain this level of activity and I had to close the TAFE VC service down.

While each stakeholder came into the network with different intentions, at the end of the cycle, both community partners and TAFE schools wanted to continue the network in some form, at least to provide community learners with access to RMIT accredited programs in community locations.

6.5.2 Personal Findings
I continued to be interested in testing the success factors that I talked about during the Online Network in VET project, and I expanded the table to include the additional findings from Cycle Three. This is illustrated in Table 6.4. I found that there was a lot more to running a network than could be evidenced by the categories used at the beginning of this project. For this particular network, I found that the development of e-moderation skills among its stakeholders, the development of an online community, or building a critical mass were not as important as other factors. In the final analysis, the real successes were: the development of the partnerships and relationships; the establishment of a vision for the network; the provision of a range of professional development opportunities that people could take benefit from; the establishment of processes (especially for the best use of technology in learning); the easy enrolment of community learners through to the certification of those learners; linking the project into the appropriate mainstream program within the university for sustainability; and establishing annual evaluation and review and appropriate governance structures.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Framework</th>
<th>Additional Elements</th>
<th>Cycle One</th>
<th>Cycle Two</th>
<th>Cycle Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal/Purpose</td>
<td>Not clearly defined and too ambitious.</td>
<td>Vision and mission statement chart direction but too broad for the reality at that time.</td>
<td>As the government funding ceased the vision was revised in line with a more sustainable program.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Issues</td>
<td>In this phase the technology was unreliable. We used 2 systems - TAFE VC and RMIT DLS. Great confusion ensued about when to use each.</td>
<td>We decided to use the TAFE VC for development of short courses with partners (e.g. Online Bookclub) and for the development of an online community. DLS was used with one TAFE school. Otherwise, we used CD ROM solutions and paid for access to the AMES site on language and literacy. So, we became more knowledgeable about using technology appropriately to suit the learner and the situation. We also provided technical support via the provider administrator position.</td>
<td>We obtained general agreement from the director of TAFE at RMIT and OTTE about the appropriate use of DLS and the TAFE VC. This legitimised what happened in round 2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Outsourced to an RMIT TAFE department. Only 2 out of 10 teachers completed the course and it was a very expensive use of project funds, which did not build capacity within the</td>
<td>Professional development strategy written and online community developed and run by community partner. A number of other strategies were developed, for example, an online book club, the</td>
<td>Professional development strategy was fully implemented in this cycle and very successful. It included the continuation of the relationship with the community partner and the development of e-moderation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of E-Moderator</td>
<td>Very ad hoc, as the evaluation report noted, confusing.</td>
<td>An e-moderator was appointed for a short time to promote discussion, but had minimal success. The main form of communication became a periodic newsletter.</td>
<td>A limited online community developed – mainly pushing out monthly newsletters to partners. However, we ran 2 e-moderation short courses, which taught others in the system how to be e-moderators.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Mass</td>
<td>Six community partners and 6 TAFE schools</td>
<td>Six foundation partners, 6 TAFE schools and 2 new rural partners were added to the team. This was not a large number in terms of developing an online community. However, in the end, we were not able to run in Hamilton as there was already a learning network in that area.</td>
<td>The long-term sustainable network consisted of 6 community partners and 6 TAFE schools brokering 30,000 SCH into community settings. While this critical mass was supported by a website and monthly e-newsletter, it was enough. It will not grow.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>We were reliant on one source of funding from OTTE, so and were not sustainable</td>
<td>While we were still reliant on funding from OPCETE, we started to develop a brokering model using student contact hour funding.</td>
<td>Sustainability means the long-term ability of RMIT LearnLinks to maintain or improve its capacity to deliver services while covering its costs. Post government funding (2003 on), the project is reliant on 30,000 SCH. The RLN team can run this on 0.5 of a staff member as opposed to the EFT 2.5 staff in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trust</strong></td>
<td><strong>This was very important and the reason partners wanted to continue [RLN Stage 3 Report 1998/1999].</strong></td>
<td><strong>Continued to be important.</strong></td>
<td><strong>RMIT LearnLinks is a people network built on trust – it continues to be important, but post-government funding, it became more of a service agreement arrangement.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation and Review</strong></td>
<td><strong>Internal and external evaluations were carried out and significantly helped planning. Our major strength lay in building relationships.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Internal evaluations focussed on particular programs. Through review days, community partners became involved in planning.</strong></td>
<td><strong>I conducted 11 stakeholder interviews, which were important for setting the future direction of the project. A review day and business-planning workshop focussed on what to do after the end of the additional government funding. An external evaluation was also conducted 6 months after the end of the project.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Governance</strong></td>
<td><strong>RMIT was the lead agent but the governance structure was very ad hoc.</strong></td>
<td><strong>RMIT was the lead agent in the contract. Smaller projects were subcontracted out to community partners. The governance became more structured and agreements were started but not thoroughly vetted by RMIT Legal.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Governance of the project was spelled out very clearly in service agreements that had been cleared by RMIT Legal and the RMIT Quality Unit. This was highly commended in a teaching quality audit.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Systems and Processes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pre AMS, we started to work with Student Administration and RMIT Financial Services Group on systems for accounting for the student contact hours. We thought we had a system and then the AMS was introduced and our</strong></td>
<td><strong>On the introduction of the AMS, the systems and process developed in Cycle Two did not work. The enrolment and invoicing problems were confirmed in 2002. However, we eventually got an LN category on the AMS.</strong></td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
system did not work – it was too complex for the small number of students because it worked across 6 TAFE Schools, each of which had their own way of doing things.

In order to become sustainable, I set a project officer a 6 month task in 2003 to establish department packs and community partner packs, which now explain everything you need to know about enrolling and invoicing community learners through the LearnLinks program.
6.5.3 Political Findings

What are the implications of this relatively small-scale action learning/action research project for the broader organisation?

Firstly, this type of network or partnership project provided a relatively easy opportunity for the organisation to experiment with ideas about flexible learning and to extend learning into community settings with government funding. However, the lifecycle of this innovation project was identified in 3 phases: establishment, consolidation and enhancement. At a certain point, towards the end of the second stage, the team had to plan the project's long-term direction - either an exit strategy or a way to link the project into the mainstream operations of the organisation. This is also fairly typical of community development/capacity building projects that are often described in terms of a lifecycle process or a series of processes that have to be worked through (Beilharz, 2002; Sheil, 2000).

Secondly, the value of the project lay in its ability to test systems for their flexibility. Throughout the three cycles, this project continued to test the student administration and financial systems and continually raised questions about why it was not easier to enrol community learners and why particular groups of students receive invoices in a fully subsidized program. From this perspective, the project was an irritant because these problems have not gone away and it took real determination on the part of staff within RLN to negotiate with RMIT Student Services and RMIT AMS team to get an official LN box printed on the TAFE concession form, and for an LN category to be programmed into the AMS system.

However, the organisation has a number of action learning projects taking place across the university and the learning from these projects are fed into the university in a very ad hoc manner.
6.6 Summary

Cycle Three was very successful in terms of building on the work of previous cycles and in terms of achievements. I was able to employ extra staff to run the network, RMIT LearnLinks delivered the most hours of any FLN in Victoria, we developed and delivered short courses on the TAFE VC, we showcased our work at a range of face to face and online conferences (Net*Working 2003 and an online conference of community colleges in Hawaii). It was disappointing to have to close the TAFE VC services down but on the other hand very heartening to find that both community partners and RMIT TAFE schools wanted to continue with the brokering of hours through several community locations.

The learning from this project is being used to develop the broader business unit as discussed in Chapter Seven.
Chapter Seven - Developing an Operational Framework

Conclusions and Implications

7.0 Introduction

Through this study, I examined the elements required to produce an operational framework for a learning network project and highlighted those factors most likely to lead to sustainability in the long term. I did this by using an ALAR approach, investigating the development of a Victorian Flexible Learning Network - RMIT LearnLinks - as an instrumental case study. In this way, RMIT LearnLinks was used to inform my work and that of other projects within the RMIT Learning Networks team, the broader Community & Regional Partnerships Group within RMIT University, and also for others who engage in similar projects.

The external policy environment, locally, nationally and internationally, was set against a background, that partly called for the lifelong learning of all adults and the creation of a ‘learning society’ (especially after the 1997 UNESCO world congress on adult education in Hamburg) (UNESCO, 1997). In Victoria, Australia, this was interpreted through a policy of Connecting Victoria and Growing Victoria Together, (DPC, 2001; S&RD, 1999) which were firstly about, making the state a leader in the use of ICT in order to build a learning society and secondly, balancing economic, social and environmental goals and actions. A key part of this initiative involved valuing and investing in lifelong education.

Over the last 10 years, there has been a plethora of projects and initiatives, both nationally and internationally, which have involved partnerships with organisations from different sectors (e.g. business, education, and the non-profit), and which have focussed on building the capacity of communities to engage with education and
learning. Such projects used ICT as a tool to contribute to the knowledge, skills and attributes required for economic growth and social inclusion of the communities in which the projects are located.

Data was gathered from interview transcripts with international experts and local stakeholders, notes from two key informants, notes from annual review days held with key stakeholders, previous research (Wheeler, 1997), literature reviews, records, documents, artefacts and archives built up over five years. Through my role as a manager of the RMIT Learning Networks team within the Community & Regional Partnership Group, I was responsible for managing the RMIT LearnLinks project. I was a practitioner researcher and central to the interpretation of the case study. I documented the development of the case study over 3 funding cycles to illustrate how an operational framework for a learning network, based on partnerships with external organisations, played out within the university context.

7.1 Major Findings

7.1.1 Operational Framework

The major finding of this study is that although there are common elements in an operational framework, which can lead to its sustainability, the importance of these are dependant upon the goals of the network, its maturity and the organisational and political context in which the network operates. For example, I was able to plan an expansion of RMIT LearnLinks when the policy environment was suitable and when the extra funding was available and contract when the extra funding was not. I could do so because of the support I received from the senior TAFE leadership within the university, which ensured that the project aligned with mainstream university activity and its strategic directions in the long-term.
Based on observations and evidence of the *Online Networks in VET* project, and my experience of running the learning network within the university context for three funding cycles, I concluded that the following key elements contribute to an operational framework of a sustainable learning network:

- a goal/purpose for the learning network
- a method of governance for running the network operations based on partnerships - this could assist informal networks through to fully developed collaborations based on a service agreements
- a method of business planning that is appropriate to the type of network being developed, for example, a community engagement network versus a purely commercial orientation
- a plan to address technical and access issues
- a planned programme of professional development to build and retain capacity in the teachers and managers working within the network
- systems and processes for dealing with counselling, enrolling, invoicing and certification of learners in an appropriate and timely manner
- assessment of the type and function of an online community so that it concurs with the needs of the partners in that community
- evaluation to ensure that issues are dealt with and tacit knowledge and learning is recorded for future planning

This study found that the development of an online community was not crucial for this network as it has been for *Online Network in VET* study. The partners in the network were mostly located in northern metropolitan Melbourne and preferred to meet face to
face. The periodic newsletters and the odd online discussion were sufficient to meet community needs. I concluded from this that the importance of establishing and online community and developing a 'critical mass' was dependent on the geographic spread of the community, the skills of its members and their need for online discussion.

7.1.2 Lifecycle Approach
In line with community building studies (Beilharz, 2002, Ife, 2002, Sheil, 2000), the implementation and development of an innovation project such as a learning network follows a life cycle approach.

This investigation identified three phases to the life cycle: the establishment, consolidation and enhancement of the network. In this case, these phases coincided with the funding cycles. At each phase, a varying timeframe was spent on innovation, as identified in Table 7.1. When RMIT LearnLinks was first introduced, the innovators, or risk-takers, took the project on. The innovation was foremost at this stage. What can this technology do? After considered evaluation, in phase two the focus shifted to processes and administration, especially in regard to enrolment systems and invoicing. However, innovation which was a consolidation of phase one, was still important. Towards the end of the third cycle, however, it became evident that in order to achieve long-term sustainability, it was necessary to urgently address the administration and compliance issues. While this took place, innovation was kept at a minimum.
Table 7.1: Innovation Cycle of a Learning Network

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Innovation Risk</th>
<th>Administration &amp; Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishment Phase</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consolidation Phase</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancement/Sustainability Phase</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.1 is an interpretation of the life cycle of a learning network from a project planning perspective. While it is based on the issues that were investigated during each cycle of the case – RMIT LearnLinks (refer to Figures 5.2 and 6.1), it summarises the general elements required to frame an operational learning network. This includes an exit strategy which is necessary for unsustainable projects. This framework can be applied to a wide range of learning partnership projects.
This networked form of organisational structure based on partnerships was simple to reduce or increase as required, depending on the context, projects, staffing and available resources. It was not reliant on capital infrastructure, such as new buildings and campuses because, through alliances, it made use of facilities already available.

In conducting learning network projects new innovations can be developed and additional projects commenced, so the cycle can begin again. In fact with multiple projects, you can be at the beginning of the lifecycle with some projects and towards the end with others. With the benefit of experience, you can take on new projects, refine the various phases and take on more difficult projects that are more complex and involve a more diverse range of organisations as partners. Each new project taken on enhances the knowledge base of a unit that in turn enables a team to undertake more difficult projects which include national and international partners.

This cyclical approach can be developed further. This has been the development process within the RMIT Learning Networks team as illustrated in Figure 7.2.
By going through this process, one is able to focus on those projects worth taking on and those not. Before a broader project team can grow, it is necessary to separate a particular project from the broader unit or team. For example, at the end of Cycle Three, the team within my unit reworked the long-term mission of RMIT LearnLinks. We changed our mission statement from that which was developed with all stakeholders at the review day in 2001:

LearnLinks, through the innovative use of technology mediated learning, seeks to build the capacity of people in its communities. By working in partnerships, we seek to enable equitable access and ensure sustainability. [RLN Review Day 2001]
The mission statement became one with a much narrower strategy but reflected the actual reality of a smaller project with a stable partnership of 6 learning centres and 6 TAFE schools, none of whom wanted to expand the partnership further. We wanted:

To link diverse members of the Victorian community with RMIT learning opportunities across a range of subject areas, including lifelong learning, basic ICT and business administration skills and online facilitation. LearnLinks makes these opportunities available via flexible delivery at community-based learning centres across metropolitan Melbourne.

The team within RMIT Learning Networks created a broader vision which reflected the growing number of projects and partnerships developing within the unit:

RMIT Learning Networks is committed to develop and enhance products and services that promote and draw on practitioner research. This informs and advances RMIT University's knowledge and understanding of sustainable communications based learning communities. We work through partnerships with regions, alliances, networks and clusters. Our work contributes to an overall vision of educational, civic, economic and social transformation [RLN Business Plan, 2003].

Furthermore, the goals of a team should be linked to those of a larger unit and the strategic goals of the University, for example, the RMIT Learning Networks team linked their goals to the University strategic goals "Dissolving the Boundaries" – a key document that charted the future direction for RMIT to 2006 (RMIT, 2002). This signalled a future with no room for the 'disciplinary solitudes' of university faculties. The fact that Boyer's (1990) classification of 4 types of scholarships (teaching, integration, application and discovery) underpinned the planning within the Teaching and Learning, and Research and Innovation program areas further highlighted the direction towards assimilation. In particular, the scholarship of integration gave scholars a chance to accord meaning to isolated facts and putting them into perspective; connecting disciplines, positioning specialties within context and illuminating data in a revealing way (Boyer, 1990). The work that the university did
with regional and local communities, along with its international work, was seen as
directly contributing to teaching, learning, research and innovation.

In summary, I found that individual projects passed through lifecycle phases;
however, through an ALAR approach, I could turn tacit knowledge into a knowledge
base that was useable by a broad team and could also link into the knowledge base
of the wider organisation.

7.1.3 Sustainability
This research found that sustainability could be viewed on a number of levels. The
appropriate level for an operational framework of a sustainable learning network was
financial viability at the program level. This is defined as the long-term ability of the
program to maintain or improve its capacity to deliver services and is based on a
definition used to investigate the sustainability of community technology centres in
Seattle (O'Malley & Liebow, 2002). For example, as long as the community partners
and RMIT Schools desired and provided funding via student contact hours, the
network maintained a sustainable level.

The next level of sustainability is the business unit with a faculty group of a University.
The same definition of sustainability also applied to the business unit for all its
programs and services - it is the long-term ability of a particular unit to maintain or
improve its capacity to deliver services.

The final evaluation of all 11 Victorian FLNs found that the sustainability of the
networks to be sustainable in the long-term was dependent on the type of network.
Those with a commercial orientation were more likely to be sustainable than those
with a community engagement focus. There was a trade-off in working on
commercially orientated models with clear performance targets - the loss of
community engagement. The research found that a learning network project undertaken for community engagement reasons must be backed by clear plans and reasoning for long term funding (Hughes et al., 2003). This was exactly the issue faced by RMIT LearnLinks. It was never a commercially orientated project, it focussed on disadvantaged learners in community settings. The only option to make this project sustainable was to link it into access and equity targets for the university. Planning to do so began in Cycle One when the RMIT strategic consultant in VET isolated recurrent revenue through student contact hour funding.

Once sustainability was achieved at a program and organisation level, then for a community engagement project such as RMIT LearnLinks, the next step would be to view sustainability at the macro level. How did this partnership project contribute to the creation of a sustainable learning community in a particular geographic region, as described by Faris (2003), or the ecological systems as described by Ife (2002) that must be maintained in the long term? There are a number of ways in which the contribution of a FLN to building the capacity of communities to engage with education will, in turn, contribute to the knowledge, skills and attributes required for economic growth and social capital. This is an area for further research. Most of the studies indicate these results are best measured over a long time period. However, it was outside the scope of this investigation to use these evaluative methods for the operational level of a learning network project within a university context (Faris, 2003; Hart, 2000; Ife, 2002).

In summary, the sustainability of learning network projects focussed on community engagement can be viewed at several levels. There is sustainability at the program level, which is achieved by linking the project into broader organisational strategies, such as access and equity. Then at an organisational level, there is a requirement for
linkage to the broader community engagement role of a university. In doing so, the university is linked to the broader community and, therefore, contributing directly to the broader economic, social, political and cultural agendas within a learning community or ecological system.

7.2 Implications
A learning network project provides a tremendous opportunity for an individual to grow personally and for a university to learn about project management and partnerships with other organisations interested in community engagement. As an individual you learn to be flexible and to manage the implications of major external policy shifts and, thus, to adapt projects accordingly. This should be fed into organisational learning in a systematic way. In terms of the learning organisation, I recommend that if an organisation embarks on a learning network/partnership project a formal mechanism be established so that learning from these marginalised projects can inform the mainstream teaching, learning, research and innovation. This is much more effective than common practices such as staff rotation, which tends to be very ad hoc.

As you learn about project management, you can improve systems, establish templates, processes and service agreements, which improves efficiency for the next project. I recommend when an organisation commences these projects that a system of simple guidelines for project management be established which includes mentoring and support for those innovators who take on these new projects.

Through the various external projects I have worked on, I have established a number of networks. Through participating in these networks, I have been able to build a knowledge base and a greater capacity within my team to undertake larger projects. The implication for the organisation is that it needs to trust in its people and maintain a
capacity in organisational thinking to allow for experimentation, thus modelling a learning organisation.

### 7.3 Further Research

The following have been identified as areas for further research:

1. Identify, document and publicise pathways for community learners who are part of a learning network program, and link this to the lead organisation and key strategic policies, such as access and equity.

2. A more detailed investigation of how a learning network project can contribute to the sustainability of an identified learning community in the longer term.

3. An investigation of community engagement projects in terms of how the project outcomes can contribute to building a knowledge base for the university.

4. To undertake further investigation into the connection between community technology, community development and the use of public spaces, which will contribute to the emerging field of community informatics.
8.1 RMIT LearnLinks Post Government Funding (2003-2004)

The end of the last tender round (December 2002) signalled the end of substantial government funding for this program. This period (2003) saw the wind-down of much of the services, especially the use of the TAFE VC. The use of the TAFE VC for delivery was not supported within RMIT University because the university had its own online platform and without the additional funding this service could not keep going.

The main professional development product, e-moderation, was transferred from the TAFE VC platform to the DLS. Three community partners kept using the TAFE VC in 2003 and RLN was able to provide some support but this came to an end at the beginning of 2004 and alternative arrangements were made for these providers.

However, as described in detail in this investigation, the program had reached a level of sustainability but was very much downsized and streamlined. The continuation of the programme for 2004 was based on an annual review meeting where community partners and RMIT schools decided whether they want to keep the programme running using the current funding model or seek alternative arrangements for the following year. They made a decision to maintain it. It meant considerable changes, including a much narrower mission statement.

The key focus of 2003 had been on streamlining administrative procedures so that the programme could run with a minimum of administrative support, i.e.; 0.5 of a position as opposed to the 2.5 positions necessary to run it in Cycle Three when we used the TAFE VC.

A project officer within RMIT Learning Networks (a person who had a sound knowledge of the AMS system) identified the major issues in regards to enrolment
and invoicing and came up with a streamlined and simplified administrative system.

Hence, the following quote appeared in a LearnLinks newsletter in October 2003.

It may not be the most enticing of subjects, but both community providers and RMIT schools involved in LearnLinks will no doubt be pleased to hear that we have finally made significant progress in streamlining and simplifying LearnLinks’ administrative processes. In plain language, this means that the enrolment and invoicing difficulties and delays you have experienced over the last year are soon to come to an end! [RLN Newsletter, October 2003]

The result was a step-by-step procedures manual containing everything from AQTF issues to a glossary of RMIT terms and procedures for enrolment and withdrawal of enrolment. We still had problems but possessed a more streamlined way of dealing with them.

The major success factor in 2003 was the same as that expressed by one particular community partner quoted in Chapter Six. The fact that RMIT LearnLinks was still in existence was a major success factor and that stakeholders voted to continue the partnership in 2004. We had a positive review day in June 2003. Instead of the usual complaints about administrivia, the technology and the invoicing problems, partners talked about their achievements and were full of praise for the RMIT staff who worked with them.

At the annual review meeting in 2003, with the knowledge that there would not be any additional government funding, stakeholders were given 3 options on the continuation of the network:

- “Option #1: Continue as at present (i.e. LearnLinks program is resourced from SCH split three ways: (community providers $2.70, and Learning Network Hub $1.20, RMIT departments, residual)
• Option #2: Auspice relationships with selected community partners who will continue to deliver courses, but will also start to negotiate directly with RMIT departments for the amount of SCH and specific courses to be delivered.

• Option #3: Accept the benefits that have flowed from the LearnLinks relationships and the project but not continue in any way with delivery via the community based providers” [RLN Review Day 2003].

Both community partners and RMIT schools voted to adopt Option #1 with the proviso of allowing community partners to pursue relationships through Option #2 as well, on condition that they reported any independent relationship(s) they developed to the Hub so that they could be noted as a positive outcome for LL/RLN [RLN Review Day, 2003].

To my mind this was a recognition of the trust and relationships that had been built up over a 4 ½ year period and that are reflected in the comments made at the review day as recorded in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1
RMIT LearnLinks Review Day - 2003 Success Factors

• [Community Partner B] has also been able to develop less ambiguous, streamlined enrolment processes in the past year, which has made the enrolment process significantly less ‘painful’ than in the past.

• [Community Partner B] instructors are now well versed in the RMIT system and understand how to use routine admin tools, such as roll sheets, etc. Materials from [TAFE School and RMIT Teacher A] that [community partner] has used were excellent and well focused, and the RMIT lecturer collaborating on this was very supportive.

• Use of the materials from the RMIT TAFE school resulted in an overall improvement in the quality of delivery (and an increase in the level of student expectations as well).

• [Community Partner B] TAFE VC Book Club was still ongoing and growing. New students (including older, female first-timers who are doing very well) are enrolling every term and VCE literacy outcomes are being achieved. [ACE Teacher at A] provides and maintains the hubs (with support from RLN provider administrator).

• [Community Partner A] collaborated with [Community Partner G] (hires space from them) for the delivery of a DEST-funded language and literacy program.

• [Community Partner B] Flexible Learning Cluster (ACE cluster with ACFE funding):
currently developing materials to share among organisations (generic, consistent materials) that will further streamline processes such as enrolment, AQTF compliance, etc. Relevant courses include: MYOB, 6 computer courses, Cert II in IT, and Cert III in Accounting. Snakes Alive!

- Pageturners Online Book funded by LearnLinks, has just been launched. This is [Community Partner’s C] first attempt to use sound over the Net (still getting feedback about whether this is working).
- ACE Teacher at C is an ANTA Flexible Learning Leader (FLL).
- Seniors Computer Club (computerclub.org.au) is coming along well, but it has been a fragmented year. [Community Partner C]
- Connections to RMIT and its name has expanded [Community Partner G] clientele.
- [Community Partner G] Manager has good things to say about [RMIT TAFE Teacher B’s] assistance and conscientiousness in helping with problems.
- [Community Partner D] has been doing some professional development for staff, and this has increased their skills in IT-related areas significantly. SCH allocation of 4,000 for Certificate of Small Business/Accounting is just about used up (3,690 delivered to date), although 5,400 SCH allocations for Cert II in IT has/will not be met (only 870 hours delivered so far this year). This is because they are holding onto RMIT SCH to make them available for concession students.
- Enrolment procedures have not been a problem. Students use the DLS actively and do not seem to have any problems with it. [Community Partner D]
- [Community Partner D] was recently awarded another Flexible Learning Week grant for online learning in the workplace, involving Flexible Learning Coordinators (FLCs) and industry trainers working together.
- [Community Partner Ds] online modules have been going very well: some students are now 100% online through the DLS and have successfully completed modules without using tutorials.
- Now working on the NAC (National Apprenticeships Centre), a huge project that [Community Partner D] is managing for a Melbourne-based consortium.
- [Community Partner A] MC^2 (‘My Connected Community’) was launched and is going well: 10 active groups, including Diploma of Further Education Group will be running in a few weeks.
- [Community Partner A] is getting maximum utilisation of computers purchased with an RMIT capital equipment grant.
- [Community Partner A] has also been able to establish: a professional development program with SNAC. (ACE Teacher C is facilitating, and has been very good); computer support; Diploma of FE, ACE Cluster project to support teachers of the Diploma of Further Education.
- [Community Partner G] and [Community Partner C and F] are ACE partners with RMIT and NMIT in an Access and Prep-related AMEP tender: a fifteen million dollar, 5-year project. Without the connection to LearnLinks, these providers may not have gone in with the NMIT/RMIT consortium, and they are also indebted to their existing relationship with the RMIT TAFE coordinator at TAFE School C to get the project up and running.
- [Community Partner A] also had a lot of praise for [RMIT TAFE Teacher B] and her assistance and conscientiousness in helping with problems that arose.

The comments reflect the depth of activity that is now taking place within the network. Some of these will last beyond the life of RMIT LearnLinks and other major activity is happening without the RMIT Learning Network team. I acknowledge the work of the
team within RMIT Learning Network, the Community Partners and RMIT TAFE who all want to keep this network going.


Wheeler, L. (2000a). *Flexible Learning Leaders Application (Funding Application)*: ANTA.


Appendices
### Appendix One, Table One

**Overseas Interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senior Executive</th>
<th>1. Director of Distributed Learning for the UK University for Industry, Sheffield, England.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners</td>
<td>2. CITINET project manager. CITINET is a UK university for Industry (Ufi) hub and is based in Sheffield. It is a private sector; public sector and community based learning centres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Coordinator of PovNet. PovNet is a searchable website for people on welfare and advocates and community groups who are involved in anti-poverty work. It is the only one that is solely a virtual information network (Refer to <a href="http://www.povnet.web.net">http://www.povnet.web.net</a>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Chairperson of the British Columbia Community Networks Association (BCCNA) and the coordinator of Victoria Telecommunity Networks. The BCCNA is a non-profit society formed to support the development of community computer networks in British Columbia. Its members are the individual community networks in British Columbia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Manager of CCIS Teleport (Craigmillar Community Information Service) located in the Craigmillar Estate in Edinburgh. CCIS is a Scottish Executive, Social Inclusion Partnership funded initiative. Its mission is to encourage community based agencies, individuals and businesses to migrate to, and through, the super digital highway, thus bridging the digital divide by widening access to new computer communication networks and bringing low cost, user friendly cyber facilities to the otherwise digitally excluded. (CCIS Teleport Annual Report 1999-2000, p. 4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Academics/Consultants | 7. Dr Ron Faris is President of Golden Horizon Ventures, a consultancy focused on lifelong learning strategies, including learning community development, community service-learning, global training reform and interactive learning technologies [He has given permission to be identified]. |
|                       | 8. Learning Community Consultant based in the United Kingdom. |
### Appendix One, Table Two:

**Local Interviewees**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Partners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Community Partner A in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Community Partner B in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Community Partner C in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Community Partner D in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Community Partner E in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Community Partner F in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Community Partner G in RMIT LearnLinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMIT Staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Senior Strategic Planner for VET at RMIT University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Learning Networks Coordinator, TAFE Department, RMIT University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Informants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Key Informant A – Business Consultant to RMIT Learning Networks and NMR ACFE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Key Informant B and Web, ICT and Marketing Consultant to RMIT Learning Networks and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NMR ACFE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Annual Review Days:

The following table lists the annual review days that were held during the project and attended by community partners, RMIT learning network coordinators, key informants A and B and RMIT Learning Network staff.

### Appendix One, Table Three

**Annual Review Days**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Review of year, creating of vision statement and marketing strategy</td>
<td>14 June 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Learning’s from the project, mission statement and strategic direction</td>
<td>20 June 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>SWOT analysis, critical issues, where to next?</td>
<td>31 May 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How do we move forward after the government funding?</td>
<td>18 June 2003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix One, Table Four

Interview Schedule

### Cycle Two – Charting a Direction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Category Informant</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sept-Oct</td>
<td>Senior Executive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept-Oct</td>
<td>Community Networking</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000*</td>
<td>Practitioners</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept-Oct</td>
<td>Consultants/Academic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Canada</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Cycle Three – Towards and Operational Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January – June 2002</td>
<td>RMIT Learning Network Community Partners</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Includes all community partners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January – June 2002</td>
<td>Key Informants</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Includes two outside consultants who worked on various aspects of planning especially business planning, marketing, web development and evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January – June 2002</td>
<td>RMIT Senior Strategic Planner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Advised on the development of the learning network throughout the project and led funding and strategic decision making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January – June 2002</td>
<td>RMIT Department LN Coordinator</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Opportunistic sampling on this study tour provided the researcher with additional typewritten diary notes from either talking or listening to 19 community practitioners and 12 academics at three conferences. This also involved an additional 2 site visits in British Columbia. The three conferences attended were:

Appendix Two: Letter and Questions for Experts

Letterhead of Office of Community Services/Regional Partnerships

19 August 2000

Dear ......

Learning Network Frameworks - Models and Practice

My name is Leone Wheeler and I am undertaking a Doctor of Education. I also manage a learning network at RMIT University. The network is a community network based on a partnership between the university and community providers. Our network provides training for non-traditional learners in their community.

The topic I have chosen for my research is "Learning Network Frameworks – Models and Practice". I want to develop a business model for the implementation and sustainability of a learning network based on my experience and the theory of online learning, community development and community networking. I hope that the model I develop could be used in a range of community networking situations.

The RMIT Learning Networks is loosely based on the philosophies of the community networking movement. We try to incorporate a grass roots approach and ground our activity in the everyday life of our community. It is about the use of IT to augment community development in an economically and socially sustainable way. I am also interested in demonstrating that the development of an active virtual community is critical to the economic and social viability of the learning network. Our network is in its second year of operation and for us sustainability is of critical importance over the next 2-3 year timeframe.

On the basis of my research proposal, I was awarded an Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Flexible Learning Leaders Scholarship, which will allow me to undertake the first stage of my research. I want to interview experts in the field in order to get an overview of the community networking movement in the United Kingdom and British Columbia. I have identified you as someone who has a successfully operated a community network and I invite you to participate in an interview to share your experiences.

The interview would last about 30-40 minutes and in order to accurately record your response, I seek your permission to tape the session. Participation in this project is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent at any time. If you choose to withdraw, you may also take back any unprocessed data previously supplied. However, I hope that you will accept and view this as an opportunity to exchange ideas to our mutual benefit. As an expert in the field, I would like to ask your permission to identify you if need be.

I guarantee you that I will send you any transcripts of our interview together with any information I gain from the interview and will ensure that I seek your permission before quoting you in my research results.
If you need further clarification, please contact me. My email address is leone.wheeler@rmit.edu.au, telephone +61 3 9925 3733, Fax +61 3 9639 0439, mobile 0407 856 212. You can also contact my EdD Supervisor Professor Ern Reeders on+61 3 9925 7872 or my work supervisor, Professor Graham Mulroney, Director of the Office of the Office of Community Services/Regional Partnerships, on 61 3 9925 3542.

Yours sincerely,

Leone Wheeler, BCA, MBIT
Manager, Regional Learning Networks

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, University Secretariat, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 1745.
Broad Interview Questions for International Interviewees:

1. How would you define the term 'community network'?

2. Can you list similar terms?

3. What does the term 'learning network' mean to you?

4. Define sustainability in terms of developing a business model for a community network.

5. Identify key success factors that will contribute to the sustainability of a community network?

6. Identify factors that work against sustainability?

7. Access to IT and equity in access to IT training are key issues for a community network. How is it possible for a network to support access and equity for learners while remaining sustainable?

8. How would you define an online community? What are the key elements?

9. What are the key factors of success in the implementation and development of an online community?

10. To what extent does the integration of an online community into the network contribute to its sustainability?
Appendix Three: Letter and Questions for Local Stakeholders

Monday, 13 May 2002

Dear Learning Network Partner

Learning Network Frameworks - Models and Practice

My name is Leone Wheeler and as you know I have executive management responsibility for LearnLinks, the OTTE funded flexible learning network. The network is a community network based on a partnership between the university and community providers. It provides training for non-traditional learners in their community.

I am undertaking a Doctor of Education and the topic I have chosen for my research is "Learning Network Frameworks - Models and Practice". This research records the critical elements, which have made LearnLinks innovative. These elements of success cover online learning, community development and community networking aspects of the network. The framework that is developed could be used in a range of community networking situations.

On the basis of my research proposal, I was awarded an Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Flexible Learning Leaders Scholarship, which will, allowed me to undertake the first stage of my research. I interviewed experts in the field in order to scan the community networking movement in the United Kingdom and British Columbia. Last year I spent a considerable amount of time incorporating my findings into the LearnLinks Flexible Learning Network.

LearnLinks Flexible Learning Network is now in its fourth year of operation and as a member of the network, I seek your permission to interview you about it. The interview would last about 30-40 minutes and in order to accurately record your response, I seek your permission to tape the session. Participation in this project is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent at any time. If you choose to withdraw, you may also take back any unprocessed data previously supplied. However, I hope that you will accept and view this as an opportunity to exchange ideas to our mutual benefit. I guarantee your anonymity and confidentiality.

If you need further clarification, please contact me. My email address is leone.wheeler@rmit.edu.au, telephone +61 3 9925 3733, Fax +61 3 9925 9540, mobile 0407 856 212. You can also contact my PHD Supervisor, Associate Professor Ern Reeder, on +61 3 9925 7872 or my work supervisor, Professor Chris Duke, Director of the Office of Community Services/Regional Partnerships, on 61 3 9925 3542.

Yours sincerely,

Leone Wheeler, BCA, MBIT
Manager, Regional Learning Networks

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, University Secretariat, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 1745.
Interview questions (refined after the first interviews):

1. Three years into this project, how do you define this learning network now? What do you see as its objectives? What do you see as its values? What are your expectations of it?

2. What have been the success factors?

3. What are the factors that will work against its long-term sustainability?

4. What have the outcomes been for your learners?

5. How would you like to see the development of an online community?
Appendix Four: Victorian FLNs Tenders (1998-2001)

Appendix Four, Table One.
Victorian Flexible Learning Networks – Comparison of Tender Documents 1998-2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1998/1999</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Victorian Learning Networks for Vocational Education and Training</td>
<td>Victorian Flexible Learning Networks</td>
<td>Victorian Flexible Learning Networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding allocated to RMIT LearnLinks</td>
<td>$210,000</td>
<td>$180,000</td>
<td>$160,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Government Policy/Project Drivers</td>
<td><em>Ministerial Review into Metropolitan TAFE Provision</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>TAFE VC project</em></td>
<td><em>Connecting Victoria</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Pathways and Standards</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Employment and Skills</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Reviving Rural and Regional Victoria</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>TAFE VC Project</em></td>
<td><em>Flexible Learning Strategy Towards a Learning Society</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>TAFE VC Project</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National VET Policy</td>
<td><em>User Choice</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Australian Recognition Framework</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Introduction of Training Packages</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Learning Throughout Life</em></td>
<td><em>User Choice</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Australian Recognition Framework</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Introduction of Training Packages</em></td>
<td><em>General Australian and World Contexts (did not refer to specific policy)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of Partnerships</td>
<td><em>Consortia of Existing RTOs and/or External Training Agencies and Consultants (partnerships not mentioned)</em></td>
<td><em>TAFE Institutes</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>ACE Providers</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Local Government</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Industry</em></td>
<td><em>TAFE Institutes</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>ACE Providers</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Other Registered Training Organisations</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Local Government</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Enterprises or Industry Groups</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Local Learning and...</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix Four, Table One.
Victorian Flexible Learning Networks – Comparison of Tender Documents 1998-2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Client Groups</th>
<th>Project Outputs</th>
<th>Employment Networks (LLENS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification and Implementation of Relevant VET/FE Delivery and Resourcing</td>
<td>Identification and Implementation of Relevant TAFE Delivery and Resourcing Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business Plan</td>
<td>Business Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality Assurance Guidelines</td>
<td>Marketing Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication Strategy</td>
<td>Instructional Strategy that Imposes Structure for Learners and Allows Learners to Pursue Individual Learning Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry/Enterprise</td>
<td></td>
<td>Quality Assurance Guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals/Community Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communication Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cooperation on Evaluation, Online Resources and Other Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Needs</td>
<td></td>
<td>Succession Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry/Enterprise</td>
<td></td>
<td>Provide Significant TAFE Service to One or More of the Identified Client Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
<td></td>
<td>Managers to attend Forums and Contribute to FLN Communication Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry/Enterprises</td>
<td></td>
<td>Documentation and Implementation of a Learner-Centred Approach in TAFE Delivery Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Needs</td>
<td></td>
<td>Documented Instructional Strategy that outlines Learning Guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals/Community Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum of 30000 Student Contact Hours of Delivery in any</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Four, Table One.

**Victorian Flexible Learning Networks – Comparison of Tender Documents 1998-2001**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long Term STS Outcomes</th>
<th>Fast Reliable Accessible Technological Infrastructure</th>
<th>Networks and Partnerships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Implementation of User Choice, National Training Packages and Learning Through Life</td>
<td>Skilled Teachers</td>
<td>Skilled Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Participation</td>
<td>Partnerships</td>
<td>Sound Planning, Market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sound Planning, Market</td>
<td>Sound Planning, Market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Analysis, Productive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix Four, Table One.
### Victorian Flexible Learning Networks – Comparison of Tender Documents 1998-2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLNs with Fast Reliable Accessible Technological Infrastructure</td>
<td>Mainstream Implementation of User Choice and National Training Packages</td>
<td>Shifts in Capital Investment from Buildings to New Training Support Infrastructures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Community Presence of TAFE in Workplaces, Libraries, Neighbourhood Houses, Home.</td>
<td>Increased Participation</td>
<td>(OTFE, 1998b) New Roles for Teachers and Support Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE Service 24/7</td>
<td>Increased Community Presence of TAFE in Workplaces, Libraries, Neighbourhood Houses, Home.</td>
<td>Flexibility in Use of Physical Resources (Access Points)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift in Capital Investment from Buildings to New Training Support Infrastructures</td>
<td>Training Programs that Meet the Learning Needs of the Information Age</td>
<td>Training Programs that Meet the Learning Needs of the Information Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Opportunities for Teachers and Support Staff</td>
<td>Decreased Reliance on Expensive Specialist Training Facilities through Closer Integration with Workplace and On-the-Job Training</td>
<td>Decreased Reliance on Expensive Specialist Training Facilities through Closer Integration with Workplace and On-the-Job Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Programs that Meet the Learning Needs of the Information Age</td>
<td>Increased Community Presence of TAFE in Workplaces, Libraries, Neighbourhood Houses, Home.</td>
<td>Relationship/Strategic Decision Making and Efficient Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLNs with Fast Reliable Accessible Technological Infrastructure</td>
<td>Increased Community Presence of TAFE in Workplaces, Libraries, Neighbourhood Houses, Home.</td>
<td>TAFE Service 24/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift in Capital Investment from Buildings to New Training Support Infrastructures</td>
<td>Flexibility in Use of Physical Resources (Access Points)</td>
<td>Training Programs that Meet the Learning Needs of the Information Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Opportunities for Teachers and Support Staff</td>
<td>Training Programs that Meet the Learning Needs of the Information Age</td>
<td>Decreased Reliance on Expensive Specialist Training Facilities through Closer Integration with Workplace and On-the-Job Training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Four, Table One.

**Victorian Flexible Learning Networks – Comparison of Tender Documents 1998-2001**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On-the-Job Training</th>
<th>through Closer Integration with Workplace and On-the-Job Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Victorian TAFE Leadership in Teaching and Learning</td>
<td>• Victorian TAFE Leadership in Teaching and Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation and Integration of Technology in Delivery</td>
<td>and the Integration of Technology in Delivery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (ETTE, 2001; OPCETE, 2000a; OTFE, 1998b)
Appendix Five: Itinerary for Overseas Study

Development Plan – ANTA Flexible Learning Leaders Programme (Leone Wheeler -July 2000)

Development Aims:

- Investigate sustainable community networking models and practice in 2 international settings, specifically the United Kingdom through UK Communities Online and Canada and through British Columbia Community Networks Association
- Identify sustainable business models for the RMIT learning network project.
- Incorporate the findings into the RMIT learning network project and university regional partnership planning for 2001
- Contribute the research towards my Doctor of Education
- Contribute my findings to the state and national system

Time Fraction: Equivalent of 0.5 for 6 months will be made up as follows:

- 0.2 for August and September
- full-time on the project for 2.5 months from September 25, 2000, until December 11, 2000 inclusive

Appendix Five, Table One
Timelines for ANTA Flexible Learning Leaders Program (2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>• attend induction workshop&lt;br&gt;• finalise development plan&lt;br&gt;• finalise budget</td>
<td>• induction workshop attended&lt;br&gt;• participated in web forum&lt;br&gt;• completed budget and development plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>• literature review&lt;br&gt;• finish writing paper for UK Communities Online conference&lt;br&gt;• prepare interview instruments on issues of sustainability identifying key questions to ask Australian and overseas experts in the area&lt;br&gt;• visit NOIE, Stephen Alexander, in Canberra re working with rural communities to sustain business models&lt;br&gt;• research programme for doctorate endorsed</td>
<td>• preliminary literature review&lt;br&gt;• interview instruments finalised&lt;br&gt;• UK community online paper written&lt;br&gt;• visit to Canberra competed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Main activity&lt;br&gt;• attend workshop&lt;br&gt;• finalise overseas travel details</td>
<td>• interim report submitted&lt;br&gt;• travel overseas commenced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix Five, Table One
### Timelines for ANTA Flexible Learning Leaders Program (2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>submit interim report before travelling 18 September</td>
<td>completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 25-29</td>
<td>commence overseas travel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fusion Global Learning Summit 2000, <em>Learning without Walls—An Interactive Journey into the Future of Learning</em>, Glasgow from Tuesday 26 September through to Friday 29 September</td>
<td>completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Sep and 1 Oct</td>
<td>travel time to Edinburgh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 2</td>
<td>visit to Andy McDonald, Craig Miller Estate, Edinburgh</td>
<td>completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>purpose: Community Network Model</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 3</td>
<td>travel to Sheffield and meet with David Squire, consultant, digital media education for BBC Education</td>
<td>not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>purpose: international link to learning network project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 4</td>
<td>visit LearnDirect, Ufi in Sheffield</td>
<td>completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 5-6</td>
<td>UK community online conference, Manchester</td>
<td>completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>deliver paper and talk to other practitioners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 7 and 8</td>
<td>travel to London</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 16-20</td>
<td>reflection time, London</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write first section of report for 27 November deadline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 21-22</td>
<td>In transit to Chicago</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 23</td>
<td>Chicago to visit Professor Randy Stoker in Toledo</td>
<td>this did not happen as time was short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>deliver workshop</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>purpose: investigate sustainable community network model</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 24-25</td>
<td>Chicago to Toronto</td>
<td>confirmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>drive to Hamilton, Ontario and make contact with Mohawk College (potential sister city relationship with Hamilton, Victoria)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 26-27</td>
<td>Toronto to Vancouver</td>
<td>visit to Gareth completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Networks in British Columbia, in particular Gareth Shearman and</td>
<td>as interviews with key networkers, Dr Ron Faris, Peter Royce and Don Irvine. Mike Gurnstein unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mike Gurnstein purpose: investigation of sustainable business models and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>international partnerships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 30 – 1</td>
<td>Visit to Seattle, Doug Schuler, Seattle community networks</td>
<td>not available, spoke to Doug Schuler by telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>Investigation of sustainable business models</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 1- 4</td>
<td>Back to Melbourne</td>
<td>Finalised research report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 1 –14</td>
<td>Participate in Net*working 2000 (Nov and Oct)</td>
<td>Issues paper for use by state and national training system written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write up results for issues paper and doctorate</td>
<td>Updated literature review for doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Produce final report (Nov 27)</td>
<td>Final report to Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec</td>
<td>Open Learning Conference – Brisbane and plan some site visits in Queensland</td>
<td>Made contact with Professor Tiffin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Return to work on Monday December 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix Six, Table One:

### Flexible Learning Networks of Victoria 2001/2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lead Agent</th>
<th>Network Name</th>
<th>Range of Partners</th>
<th>Local Government Areas (LGAs)</th>
<th>Client Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Box Hill Institute of TAFE</td>
<td>YouthGateway</td>
<td>1 TAFE, Secondary School, LLEN</td>
<td>Cities of: Whitehorse, Manningham, Monash</td>
<td>15-19 Year Olds, Part of the VCAL Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE</td>
<td>GippsNet</td>
<td>TAFE, 2 ACE Providers, Credit Union</td>
<td>South Gippsland Shire, Baw Baw Shire LaTrobe City</td>
<td>Special Needs Regional Industry/Enterprise Individuals/Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chisholm Institute of TAFE</td>
<td>Southern Western Port*</td>
<td>TAFE, 11 ACE Providers</td>
<td>Greater Dandenong, Mornington, Casey, Kingston, Glen Eira, Bass Coast, Frankston</td>
<td>Special Needs Regional Individuals/Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE</td>
<td>Malcolm Creek Flexible Learning Network</td>
<td>TAFE, City Council, Industry, ACFE Regional Council as Advisor, Adult Multicultural Education Services, 5 ACE Providers</td>
<td>City of Hume</td>
<td>Special Needs Community/Individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE</td>
<td>NET Online*</td>
<td>2 Libraries, 2 ACE Providers Industry</td>
<td>Cities of: Darebin, Whittlesea, Banyule, Nillumbik, Moreland, Ararat, Yarra Ranges</td>
<td>Special Needs Industry/Enterprise Community/Individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMIT University</td>
<td>RMIT LearnLinks*</td>
<td>7 ACE Providers ACFE Regional Council as</td>
<td>Cities of: Hume, Darebin, Moreland,</td>
<td>Special Needs Community/Individuals Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Yarra, Banyule, Nillumbik, Shire of Wangaratta</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West Institute of TAFE</td>
<td>AGRI-NET*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE, 1 ACE Provider, Shire Council University, Research Institute Industry (Dairy)</td>
<td>Shires of: Moyne, Gippsland, Corangamite and the City of Warrnambool</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunraysia Institute of TAFE</td>
<td>Sunraysia Mallee Flexible Learning Network (SMFLN)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLEN, TAFE, Consultative Committee, 2 Shire Councils, Learning Town, 2 Rural City Councils, 1 ACE Provider</td>
<td>Rural Cities of: Mildura and Swan Hill, Buloke Learning Towns, Buloke Shire and Wentworth Shire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swinburne University of Technology</td>
<td>E-Learning Communities FLN</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 ACE Providers, Library TAFE Institute</td>
<td>Cities of: Yarra, Booroondara, Whitehorse, Manningham, Knox</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Werribee Community Centre</td>
<td>ACENET*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 ACE organisations + 2 ACE based private providers</td>
<td>Central Western Metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*learning networks which have operated since 1998/99

Source: Flexible Learning Network Managers Communication Hub on TAFE VC