

## Exemplar 16

### Course area: Horse Industry Studies and Supervision

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This Exemplar illustrates the careful thought that can go into designing an online module, not only in terms of the 'look', but in terms of achieving a balance between flexibility and structure.

Three years ago, funds for online course development became available in TAFE. We saw a window of opportunity, and we jumped in, applying for funding to develop online courses for the horse industry ('the Equine Online project'). In all, we've received a total of three lots of funding.

The result is that by the end of this year, all of our equine courses up to Cert IV level will be available as online modules. So far, there are 18 modules being offered online, including two that are basically learning contracts.

Before we developed the first module, we spent almost six months working out a template. We made a mockup, and showed it to people like storemen who have similar backgrounds to our students. Right from that early period, our focus has been on students, on how the modules would work for them in practice.

While the online modules themselves are delivered completely online, the Certificate also involves regular residentials. Depending on what they're studying, students might attend three or four times per year.

They like meeting other students. We usually throw a barbecue to help them relax. Until they meet for the first time, they are somewhat reluctant to email each other or share their views online. But once they've met, it gets easier.

Our students need a fair degree of flexibility, because of the type of work they do and their location. Flexibility needs to be part of the module design. Some modules we've seen from other areas are very rigid, with everything fixed. But our modules have scope for each teacher to insert assessment tasks, biography, and timetable, as well as to contextualise the material (for example, by including information relating to the local area and the particular student group).

But you can take flexibility too far. We've avoided the 'anywhere, anytime' approach—it can become a nightmare. For example, we run a timetable, because most of our students asked for one. They need to know clearly when things are due, and they need limits.

<sup>11</sup> Kim Billingham, who teaches in the area of agribusiness, also participated in parts of the discussion.

We don't encourage our students to go off searching through the internet for information. Even though there is a lot of good information out there, there is also a lot of rubbish. An important skill is distinguishing the good stuff from the rubbish. Ideally, all students should do a module that deals with how to locate, use and assess the value of information. It is something our students are not very good at.

Student characteristics have a big impact on what you can do as an online facilitator. For example, our students can't type, so chats don't work. It takes too long for anyone to reply! Another thing we've discovered about our students is that they are terrified of doing something wrong on the computer. Remember, only a small minority have used computers before. They fear that if they try out something, they'll break it.

It is important to manage expectations about email, to limit turnaround expectations to perhaps 48 hrs. That means that we expect part-timers to check their email every two days. We also try to cut down on the amount of individual emailing. For example, if someone emails us a question, we would often reply by forum, on the assumption that others will have the same query. It also gives the opportunity for our students to discuss whatever has been raised. If it is a sensitive topic, you need to ask the student first before posting their query.

One of our concerns, as a development team, is that there seems to be too little emphasis placed on implementation and logistical issues. A module may look good, but it also needs to work in practice. It is essential to trial all new modules. It takes a little longer, but it means people end up with a product that has been tested. All of our modules have gone through at least one pilot, and usually two, before they are released.

### Comments on our own learning...

Almost all of our learning has been from experience, although some of us have done things like workshops in instructional design. Even though courses like *Introduction to Teaching Online* are worthwhile, you still need to be taught how to run your particular course by someone more experienced. They're the only ones who can tell you about basic things like how to keep records and how many students can you manage.

One of the main sources of our learning was what they called a 'showcase server'. Any development team could have a look at other modules online, to see how they were progressing. It meant you could go and say: "I like this, but I don't think that will work" It was great! But it has since been stopped, perhaps because some people felt their work might be being criticised, or that they didn't like people seeing an unfinished product. The environment for developing online modules has also become more competitive since then, and people are less willing to reveal the approach they're taking.

