The Le@rning Federation: Sustainability and Growth

Issues and Expectations[1]

1. Background

1.1 Ministers initiated The Le@rning Federation Phase One in 2000 to get significant change outcomes as well as substantial content output.

1.2 Phase Two delivered both outputs and outcomes, producing, as a consequence, an adaptable model for collaborative national change work.

1.3 The MCEETYA Ministerial company model for effective management of large-scale national projects was tested, transformed and strengthened by the Initiative.

1.4 Phase Three has requirements for further output, but more significantly further change outcomes, as digital content use is linked not just to assessment information but to national reform agenda expectations for education, the economy and our future society.

1.5 A major challenge for AESOC/MCEETYA is to move The Le@rning Federation, by 2009, to a cost-efficient system of agreements, licences, and technical infrastructure, constituting a national curriculum content supply and content clearing house supporting schooling for the next century.

2. The Le@rning Federation 2001–2006: Desired Outcomes

From its conception The Le@rning Federation was more than an initiative to produce or procure content for schools. While the production and procurement of digital content for use in schools is core, and without cost-effective procurement there would be no investment, digital content acquisition and distribution was not sufficient, nor even the most significant outcome expected. Digital content is the output, but the outcomes were expected to be much greater and were what attracted, clinched and sustained government investment.

Therefore, while the outputs must be delivered, the AESOC Le@rning Federation Policy Sub-group, on behalf of AESOC, pays attention to the strategic intentions of the investing governments and seeks ways to further the broader outcomes to which MCEETYA expected the Initiative to contribute. All involved in both governance and delivery must understand that content alone will not satisfy Ministers' expectations. As the Initiative is a tool for improving future schooling delivery in Australia and New Zealand, there are strategic problems to be solved, and new territory to be opened up. The collaborative nature of the venture reduces content costs, models a twenty-first century way of innovation and, importantly, reduces the risk to any jurisdiction.

The Initiative was a 'kick-start' for a different way of conceptualising schools and delivering schooling in a 'new' economy or society[2]. It was designed to get a major change ball rolling:

- providing quality ANZ digital resources in sufficient numbers to remove a 'lack of suitable material' argument for failing to use technology in schools
- engaging the ANZ multimedia industry more closely with educational requirement and supporting a start-up industry
- forcing issues of interoperability, standards and specifications within jurisdictions, across jurisdictions and across education sectors
- providing a concrete 'flagship' initiative for working through increasingly difficult, costly and threatening intellectual property issues

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[1] This paper was developed by The Le@rning Federation Secretariat at the request of, and in discussion with, the chair of the AESOC Le@rning Federation Policy Sub-group to outline the key strategic issues confronting the Initiative. It has been distributed to Curriculum Corporation Board.

[2] There is evidence of this in: the original *Trinitas Report (2000);* minutes of MCEETYA, CESCEO and AESOC meetings as well as in the source of the original Australian Government funding – the Backing Australia's Ability Initiative.

- testing and proving models of national (and inevitably international) collaborative, interactive technology application that will flow through to all areas of agreed national work in schooling to bring us closer to a twenty-first century provision.

3. The Le@rning Federation 2001–2006: Beyond Prediction

While these outcomes were, in general terms, predicted and hoped for, inevitably in a change initiative there were issues and technological developments that went well beyond what was predicted at the start.

Some of these were:

- the nature and extent of the difficulties states and territories, the Independent and the Catholic sectors would encounter in delivering digital content to schools
- slowness of broadband distribution and affordability in Australia compared to the rest of the world
- the nature and impact of rapid growth and distribution of private use of devices and technologies such as tablets, personal digital assistants, mobile phones, SMS messaging and video distribution and the challenge this would present to many schools
- the dissonance between the embracing of technologies by the general public and by teachers as a group
- emergence of Web 2.0 technologies with the capacity to bypass existing hierarchies of authority and supply
- the governance sophistication and expertise that would be required to succeed in such a large and complex collaboration of governments at the time when there is a global shift to partnership and collaboration within and between governments.

Throughout the last six years, The Le@rning Federation has delivered the output required, but more importantly has done so adaptably, with a view to maximising the change advantage for the schooling sector as a whole, scanning for both the anticipated and unanticipated changes inherent in such an initiative and has acted as a focal point, in a very practical way, for schooling sector consideration of some of the main issues and for collaborative strategy development.

Whatever its limitations, the MCEETYA model of Ministerial companies as a vehicle for practical collaboration – to make things happen in the interests of all – has proved a useful tool for education in Australia's federation. Ministers were aware of the limits of the historical model when, in 2000, they insisted on two companies being involved in project management. The difficulties created for a Chief Operating Officer in reporting to two company CEOs resulted in a Curriculum Corporation Chief Executive (and therefore a Curriculum Corporation[3]) with expertise in and understanding of:

- delivering output for ten governments within the context of rapidly evolving economic, cultural, social and technological policy
- the spiral created by digital product as both a response to change and a catalyst of further change in an environment that is itself continually changing
- business transformation driven by ICT application.

Thus the Ministerial company model proved it was capable of adaptation to a world in which governments must collaborate to survive. While not perfect, the model is functional and adaptable.

4. The Le@rning Federation 2006–2008

The practical focus of the Initiative and its outputs has led to the Phase Three Plan in which some key areas of the broad MCEETYA agenda are identified for linking and development, namely:

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[3] Comment on the evolving role of *education.au limited* is outside the brief of this paper.

- inclusion of formative assessment in learning objects
- development of content based on mining of assessment data
- application of digital content within Indigenous and remote communities
- application of digital content to support teachers
- further research in the impact and best usage of digital content to improve learning.

These are the routine challenges for the Initiative that Ministers agreed are within both the brief and the capability of Curriculum Corporation.

There are, and will continue to be, some routine agreements reached through the now well-established collaborative and consultative networks of The Le@rning Federation that will need to be ratified by The Le@rning Federation Policy Sub-group in order to maintain governance integrity. While the Curriculum Corporation Board has oversight of the deliverables, it cannot make decisions that properly belong to the funding governments, however minor those decisions may appear. Agreements for curriculum area content priorities, intellectual property sharing, principles for overseas distribution of content or any changes to the positions already agreed (documented in the Phase Two Plan, the Phase Three Plan and in minutes of MCEETYA, AESOC, CESCEO and the AESOC Le@rning Federation Steering Group) require ratification by the AESOC Le@rning Federation Policy Sub-group and, in some cases, AESOC. This carefully constructed audit trail of shareholder policy agreements protects and strengthens the Initiative and will be continued.

In 2006, the twentieth MCEETYA meeting agreed that in 2006–2008 Curriculum Corporation would focus on:

- *a sustainable Le@rning Federation – ensuring the infrastructure, agreements, exchanges and protocols to procure and share quality content in the future without the need for large scale development by MCEETYA*
- *ubiquitous, sustained access for Australian and New Zealand schools to a range of high quality content, including that residing in cultural organisations, jurisdictions and overseas governments*
- *national policy agreements on Intellectual Property sharing and standards*
- *MCEETYA's agreed priorities, including National Curriculum Consistency agreements, assessment and content for teachers and Indigenous community use*
- *networks and communities of teacher practice to share adaptations, uses, pedagogies, assessments and developments*
- *infrastructure adaptation to support increased access to content through:*
  - *expanding networks – including overseas networks*
  - *access to public and private assets*
  - *work with jurisdictions to build capacity of teachers to use and propagate online content.*

The make-or-break challenge for 2006–2008 is the sustainability expectation that goes well beyond the maintenance of versions of existing content.

Sustainability was a major topic of discussion in 2001–2006. Appendix A tracks this discussion through AESOC and MCEETYA.

5. The Sustainability Challenge

The big sustainability challenge for The Le@rning Federation is to shift, by 2009, to a national repository of high quality curriculum content, with identified, continuing and renewable sources of content supply, accessible, not only by all schools in Australia and New Zealand, but, as the nature of schooling changes, by all students, parents and those who work in schooling. By 2009 The Le@rning Federation needs to be, not content, but a system of gathering, quality assuring, licensing,

maintaining, accessing, measuring the effect of, sharing the application of and responding to demand for digital curriculum content.

By 2009 the supply of digital content needs to be guaranteed within the recurrent expenditure of governments on priorities and services. This is likely to include:

- rigorous agreements to share all publicly owned digital curriculum materials for use in schools, regardless of which jurisdiction procured or developed them
- commitment by the Australian Government to include shared digital content (whether for students or teachers) in every funding initiative directed at schools, students or teachers (this includes not only education funding, but 'student awareness' funding in areas such as water management, safety, health, careers, finance)
- creative commons licensing and/or reciprocal arrangements with other countries for the use of high quality digital content
- nationally negotiated licences for key commercial resources
- all priority reform commitments of MCEETYA having digital delivery components that build:
  - the repository of shared digital resources
  - our capacity to link data and the evidentiary base on which educational professionals operate (most obviously, consideration needs to be given to connections between the content investment and assessment commitments)
- commitment to rigorous longitudinal studies and dissemination of research findings in relation to the use of digital content
- support for communities of practice in the use of digital content
- agreements with cultural organisations for the use of digitised resources for students in schools
- partnerships with libraries to access the increasingly sophisticated searching technologies employed to share large and varied collections.

Most of this sustainability work will be progressed by Curriculum Corporation as part of the current contract. Therefore, some effort must be put into ensuring the strategic purposes are more widely understood; otherwise expectations will focus on content alone and impede the achievement of Ministers' intent.

By June 2009 we need to be in a position where MCEETYA only invests in further content if Council initiates a curriculum change or program. What MCEETYA will, however, need to invest in is a cost-efficient system that manages the agreements, licences, and technical infrastructure that constitutes a national content supply and clearing house linked directly to ANZ curricula.

Options for such a system need to be developed and fully costed taking into account the assumption that such a system would link to and be informed by collaborative work on assessment and nationally agreed curriculum. While Curriculum Corporation will need to do this work in the next twelve months, it is not a contractual requirement for sign-off by its Board, but a discussion for the AESOC Le@rning Federation Policy Sub-group, then AESOC and finally MCEETYA. It is the policy work of AESOC, in conjunction with The Le@rning Federation Secretariat on behalf of AESOC and serviced by Curriculum Corporation within the current Le@rning Federation work, rather than a deliverable of the contract.

6. Further Policy Considerations

In the final year of the AESOC Le@rning Federation Steering Group, the minutes record comments from AESOC members that a strength of the Initiative has been its capacity, while meeting deliverables, to work with the *intent* of Ministers, rather than meet a defined and restricted brief. The evaluators also made a similar point. This is a characteristic of a successful change initiative.

In order to fully realise the Ministers' asset in The Le@rning Federation, the Initiative must continue to analyse and adapt to the emerging MCEETYA policy agenda. The need to continue this analysis

was a major reason for adopting a governance model that retained an AESOC Policy Sub-group. One of the terms of reference for that group is to *provide a channel for AESOC to accelerate and ensure consistency in the broader MCEETYA agenda.*

Curriculum Corporation is in a position to manage the significant change and connection issues outlined above and anticipated by the Investment Agreement and its preceding discussion papers as well as the Phase Three Plan.

The Policy Sub-group, on behalf of AESOC, is charged with seeking opportunities to further exploit the Initiative to accelerate the MCEETYA agenda. The policy question is how The Le@rning Federation asset can be used in creating an appropriate and sustainable education system for the future. Finding possible answers to this question for AESOC consideration is a major role of The Le@rning Federation Secretariat.

Some current key questions relate to how the content pool relates, both now and post-2009, to the MCEETYA assessment agenda, the national reform agenda and schooling concepts and models for the next century. The question of what models of governance might best serve Ministers in the next century is also relevant.

7. Next Steps
- The message that there are, and have been from the beginning, strategic outcomes, beyond the important digital content outputs required of the Initiative, will be a key part of The Le@rning Federation marketing and presentation in 2006–2008.
- The Le@rning Federation Secretariat has asked Curriculum Corporation, as part of its Le@rning Federation planning, to prepare an initial paper on options for a sustainable system of content procurement and management beyond June 2009, with implications and preliminary costings, for discussion by the AESOC Le@rning Federation Policy Sub-group.
- The Le@rning Federation Secretariat is investigating opportunities to use The Le@rning Federation content, infrastructure and services within the emerging national reform agenda to help sustain schooling for the next century. This work will be reported to AESOC through the AESOC Le@rning Federation Policy Sub-group.

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Appendix A

Emergence of Sustainability as a MCEETYA Focus for The Le@rning Federation

1. In 2003, 2004, 2005 the AESOC Le@rning Federation Steering Group discussed a number of iterations of papers relating to sustainability.

2. These discussions culminated in *The Readiness Is All: Implementing The Le@rning Federation* (May 2003) which progressed to AESOC and then to MCEETYA with the result that the fifteenth meeting of Council agreed:

    a. that in setting MCEETYA's strategic agenda, account be taken of the action areas identified as necessary to complement the investment made in The Le@rning Federation[4];

    b. to the development, by The Le@rning Federation Steering Committee, of a further paper on the sustainable and cost-effective development of online curriculum content for Australian and New Zealand schools.

3. Consequently, the Steering Group presented an issues paper, *Sustainable Provision of Online Curriculum Content Beyond 2005* to AESOC in November 2003. As a result of their discussion AESOC asked:

that The Le@rning Federation Steering Group prepare a Strategy Paper for Sustainable and Cost-effective Online Curriculum Content for Australian and New Zealand Schools Beyond 2005, based on: (1) the directions outlined in the discussion paper for this item; (2) AESOC discussion of the issues paper; (3) a cost-effectiveness analysis currently underway; and (4) consultation with relevant Taskforces.

AESOC also requested that the consultation be *done by placing the paper on the web and inviting submissions from those interested, rather than approaching them directly for a response.*

4. The AESOC request was met and the resulting *Content Strategy* paper was discussed by AESOC in February 2004 resulting in the following resolution.

The Strategy was supported in principle but members wished to see increased emphasis on building teacher capability and further exploration of procurement models that take into account the differing economies of scale possible in jurisdictions.

5. An adjusted final document, *Learning in an Online World*: *Content Strategy*, was accepted out of session by AESOC and endorsed by Ministers in April 2004. This document is organised around sustainability and asserts that:

By collaborating, Australian State and Territory Governments, the Australian Government and the New Zealand Government can achieve five areas of sustainability: professional, economic, financial, technical and democratic.

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[4] The action areas were:
1. copyright reform (encouraging the use of digital materials in schools)
2. bandwidth availability (the area where we fall down most obviously compared to our international competitors)
3. research (taking advantage of the lessons learned through the initiative and providing the fruits of research to teachers)
4. jurisdictional readiness (technology, leadership, teacher capacity, curriculum appropriateness, etc)
5. models of schooling (schools with digital capacity have fewer limitations of space and time, and therefore look and feel different to schools of the past)
6. collaborative national policy (a significant weakness in comparison with many of our OECD competitors both within and without education) and
7. sustainability of online content beyond the end of the agreed Le@rning Federation funding period (there is no country identified where supply derives other than from the public purse).

It describes each of those five areas of sustainability and is specific about Ministerial commitments.

As an example, professional sustainability is defined as *Capacity to generate sufficient learning improvement to offset the effort of adoption* and the Ministerial commitment is:

Ministers of Education in Australia and New Zealand will build on The Le@rning Federation to achieve a teaching profession skilled in the use of online curriculum content; a shared pool of good practice documentation in the use of online content; substantial research on the wider implications of online content use; incentives for the use of online curriculum content; national and international networks of communities of practice; and integration of online curriculum content into teachers' assessment practices.

Commitments also include:

Ministers of education will:
- *Build on the pioneering work of The Le@rning Federation to ensure a financially sustainable supply of high quality content beyond 2005-2006*
- *Collaborate with counterparts internationally for the sharing of high quality educational content procured with public money.*

6. The *Online Curriculum Content Investment Proposal 2006–2009* was developed specifically to implement the sustainability requirements of the MCEETYA Content Strategy. In accepting the Investment Proposal, Ministers accepted eight strategic goals and five content targets. The goals in particular are derived directly from the Ministers' Content Strategy to achieve sustainability.

7. The agreed strategic goals of The Le@rning Federation 2006–2008 are:

- *meet raised expectations of students, parents and teachers*
- *support and accelerate the transformation of schooling*
- *realise the value of current assets*
- *ensure ongoing usability*
- *reinvest our learning*
- *support industry collaboration*
- *further the MCEETYA agenda*
- *maintain global competitiveness.*

8. The agreed content targets of The Le@rning Federation 2006–2008 are:

- *a further 4000 items of high quality, globally-recognised, online content for all Australian and New Zealand schools*
- *a workable framework, standards and structure for the sharing of online curriculum content between jurisdictions within Australia/New Zealand and with other countries*
- *an interoperable framework and support for the sharing and peer-reviewing of teacher-developed online resources*
- *brokered arrangements with vendors to support distribution and use of educational content in schools*
- *consolidated schooling sector support for a local education content industry.*

9. The broadening of scope from content development to content procurement and the recognition of the crucial role of research, the necessity of providing some support to teachers using digital content, the need to link to major MCEETYA agenda such as assessment, and specific consideration of access for disadvantaged communities, are designed to move towards sustainability.

10. In 2006 desired outcome was reported to and accepted by the twentieth MCEETYA meeting in the following terms:

a sustainable Le@rning Federation – ensuring the infrastructure, agreements, exchanges and protocols to procure and share quality content in the future without the need for large scale development by MCEETYA.