In this chapter, we consider the political, social, and technological features contributing to the rise of distance education in twentieth-century Australia and to its dissolution in the early twenty-first century. Our discussion considers international trends and influences, and particularly the Australian experiences that created the foggy mélange: external studies, extension studies, off-campus studies, open campus, open learning, flexible learning, flexible delivery, distance education, correspondence learning, online learning, e-learning, and so on. The fogginess of the terminology reflects the “buzzword” politics of the turn-of-the-century governments, their bureaucracies and bureaucratese, and of the commercial world, its marketers and advertising slogans (Watson 2003).

A TIME OF COMMON CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES

In Australia, distance education began, as Bolton (1986) describes, to provide education to rural and remote communities across a large but sparsely populated land. Correspondence studies in higher education commenced at the Universities of Queensland (1910) and Western Australia (1911). For a brief period after World War II, all Australian universities enrolled external students to assist with the postwar reconstruction: for example, the largest, the Universities of Melbourne and Sydney, enrolled 872 and 1,072 external students, respectively. Much of this provision was for schoolteachers as part of their on-the-job training or professional development (Evans and Nation 1993). Australian school-level correspondence
education began in Victoria in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1951, distance schooling introduced the first electronically mediated distance education in Australia through the Alice Springs School of the Air. Using the radio network of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, this and subsequent Schools of the Air supported children studying through correspondence schools, although public radio broadcasting to schools had begun decades earlier, in the 1920s.

At the post-secondary education level, the 1960s and 1970s saw the development of a network of colleges of advanced education (caes) that provided higher education to bachelor-degree level in the capital and major regional cities. About a dozen regional caes emerged, most of which sustained their viability partly through distance-education enrolments. The caes offered vocational degrees but were distinguished from the universities by having no postgraduate courses beyond postgraduate diplomas, nor any commitment to research. By the late 1970s, each of the Australian states (apart from Tasmania) also had at least one university that offered distance education. By the 1990s, the caes and universities merged into a higher-education system consisting of universities and a few small specialist colleges. Each state and territory provided distance education through at least one university, although, as we argue below, the rise of online education ensured that distance education now forms part of every university’s practices and every student’s life. The other major component of post-secondary provision in Australia is vocational education and training (vET), provided through Technical and Further Education (taFE) institutes. By the 1950s, each Australian state had a centralized distance-education provider of vET.

Initially, most Australian distance education was called correspondence education. Later the term external studies or extension studies (especially in agriculture) become popular in post-secondary education. This signified that the college or university was offering (extending) its courses (externally) beyond its classrooms. Australian post-secondary distance education was and remains dual mode in the sense that no distance-education provider operates, as the Open University of the UK does, independently of a traditional university. Correspondence education was an accurate description for practices that were substantially based on written pedagogical exchanges. (Typically, some face-to-face meetings,
summer schools, and so on were also provided.) Eventually, external studies became the preferred descriptor, as the use of face-to-face provision, including study centres in regional cities, made it clear that more than correspondence was required. This became even more apparent as communications media such as teletutorials, radio, and television were used more frequently (Bewley 2008; Smith 1984).

Until the 1970s, the terminology of distance education, especially the terms correspondence education and external studies, had a conceptual and practical utility, although that is oversimplifying the situation. In most cases, courses taught by a college or university on campus were simply replicated in a written and printed form, and posted to external students. Students sent back completed assignments for assessment and comments, and grades were returned to the students. Usually other forms of support were available for students, and gradually other media were used, too. From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, it looks clear and simple!

THE INCOMING FOG: DISSOLVING THE COMMON CONCEPTS

The early history of distance education in Australia was strongly shaped by governments’ concerns to provide education for children (especially since they were legally required to “attend” school) and for adults. By the 1970s, there was a rising political debate and concern about achieving educational equality for those who were disadvantaged by being poor, female, and/or disabled. The election of a Labor government in 1972, after years of Conservative rule, energized distance education, especially at the post-secondary level. Women—who were expected, as girls, to leave school at age fifteen to work and then marry—enrolled to complete their secondary schooling or went directly into universities that had an open undergraduate entry policy. Distance education was about access and equity; it was about reducing the educational and social inequalities in the population. This was the period when some universities and colleges changed to the terms off-campus or open campus to refer to study that did not fundamentally require regular on-campus attendance at lectures.
and/or that was open in terms of entry requirements and accessibility. In summary, the period between the end of World War II and the early 1980s was characterized by a fairly common conception of distance education and a fairly common set of practices. Additionally, statistics showed that distance-education students were no longer always geographically distant from their institution (Smith 1987); rather, growth had been driven by the participation of metropolitan-based enrollees who were “distant” because of time, work commitments, or transportation difficulties.

By the 1990s, after about twenty years of “access and equity” policies (especially in the elementary and secondary school sector), distance education had helped to change the gendered social and educational landscape. More girls were staying in school and pursuing post-secondary educational opportunities immediately thereafter. The need for distance education to cater to women who previously had not had post-secondary educational opportunities was declining, although, for a minority, the problem of distance from educational institutions remained. Undergraduate distance education was more often attracting the mature working and/or parenting metropolitan student than the rural or remote-area student with limited access to university education. This period was also the time when postgraduate distance education grew significantly, especially for teachers undertaking MED degrees but also for students in fields such as business (MBAs, etc.). These were not “disadvantaged” students who had “missed out” on university education; these were graduate mid-career professionals looking to improve their careers. Although a few dual-mode Australian universities had offered PhDs “off campus” since the late 1970s, by the late 1990s, most (if not all) Australian universities were offering—formally or informally—off-campus, part-time PhD studies (Evans 2008).

This period was influenced by the emerging New Right agendas that took grip under Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK, but that strongly shaped political ideology in Australia, from the Hawke and Keating governments of the 1980s, to the mid-1990s under the enthusiastic New Right Howard governments. The 2008 Nobel Laureate in economics, Paul Krugman, describes the deep and profound effects of the New Right on the United States (Krugman 2009). Although the effects on Australia were less profound, they reshaped the way distance education was perceived
and funded in the university and VET sectors (elementary and secondary schooling was less markedly affected). In particular, the access and equity ideology of the 1970s was now replaced with an “economic rationalist,” user-pay ideology. Education began to be seen not as a public good but as a private good, one for which the “consumers” should pay since they would benefit through their greater economic worth. Distance education adopted the language of flexibility from this ideology, and this adoption fogged the educational discourse with terms such as flexible learning and flexible delivery. Fees and loans were introduced, especially at the postgraduate level, and services that were previously seen as justified on an access-and-equity basis now had to be justified on a cost-benefit basis. The language of commerce and bureaucracy began to replace that of education, and the terminological fog got even thicker as KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), TQI (Total Quality Improvement), QA (Quality Assurance), bottom lines, and so on added to the already dense educational lexicon.

Furthermore, toward the end of the 1980s, there was growing concern that Australia’s economic productivity was slipping behind the rest of the “developed” world. Declines in some of our previously successful exports—especially wool—meant that Australia’s economic future was unlikely to be as comfortable as before. The Hawke government saw a highly trained and flexible workforce as central to productivity improvement, which, in turn, was seen as essential to sustainable economic growth (Dawkins and Holding 1987). Consequently, there was an urgency to reform the VET sector to have a more important economic role than previously. The VET sector moved from being a service to the public in providing skills for employment and access-and-equity programs to being commercially oriented and a driver of economic change and productivity. It was these reforms that led directly to the changed conceptualization of distance education in VET and to its disappearance from the language, although not the practices, of VET.

Smith (2008) has reviewed these developments in greater detail; in summary, he drew attention to the following expectations and opportunities in VET that changed the landscape:

- The recognition of learning in workplaces as an important component of skills development
• The need for provision of VET to be broadened beyond the public providers and the encouragement of a healthy private-provider sector
• The introduction of competency-based training and assessment where certification would include major components of work-based assessment of skills and knowledge
• Technological advances in ICT that would enable distance education and other resource-based teaching practices to be integrated with on-the-job demonstrations, workplace practice, classroom learning, laboratory and group work, and so on

These expectations and opportunities combined to ensure the obsolescence of the centralized distance-education providers of VET, whose job had been the production and dispatch of largely print-based learning materials to rural and remote students. These providers ceased during the 1980s and early 1990s, and were replaced with new state-funded organizations that were principally responsible for the production of learning materials (Smith 2008). These new materials were largely electronically based, made available either as CD-ROMS or DVDs, or as Web-based material.

What is really different in these arrangements is that, not atypically across the Australian states, the central developing organization was conceptualized as a manufacturer and wholesaler selling the learning materials to retailers, who are the new VET providers. These new providers were publicly funded TAFE institutes and private providers. These “retail” providers enrol the learners, maintain their records, afford student and administrative services, and purchase the learning materials on a wholesale basis from the central organization to support the students’ courses of study. Private providers number in the thousands and are found in nearly every town and village across the nation. Accordingly, local students can enrol with a local provider and be serviced on a local basis. Indeed, the need for the old-style distance-education provider has gone. Of course, life is never quite this simple. There are some rather more traditional distance-education-like practices, in which materials are mailed, for remote students whose local providers can’t, or won’t, provide the course required.

A nearby VET provider meets the needs of local employers and local industries. Such “enterprises” can accommodate local trainers who work with students in their workplaces to develop the applied skills needed.
Competency assessment is conducted within the same workplace. Again, the previous model of distance-education provision from a central provider was not able to cope with these sorts of requirements.

Contiguous with these changes was the displacement of the terms *distance education*, *off-campus studies*, and *technical extension* in *VET* by the term *flexible delivery*. Flexible delivery, however, was clearly acknowledged as having its roots in distance education, as the Australian National Training Authority (1996, 11) asserted:

> Flexible delivery is an approach rather than a system or technique; it is based on the skill needs and delivery requirements of clients, not the interests of trainers or providers; it gives clients as much control as possible over what and when and where and how they learn; it commonly uses the delivery methods of distance education and the facilities of technology; it changes the role of trainer from a source of knowledge to a manager of learning and a facilitator.

Observers of *VET*, such as Mitchell (2000) and Brennan (2003), have noted that online-learning initiatives have been largely led by people enthusiastic about the new technologies, or at least enthusiastic to sell them. These forces contributed to the term *flexible delivery* being hijacked by the term *online learning*. From about the end of the twentieth century, flexible delivery in Australia was commonly conceptualized and understood to be online learning. Those other face-to-face and workplace components of flexible delivery had been sidelined in the enthusiasm for online delivery. The result of the change to the meaning of the term *flexible delivery* was the adoption of another new term, *blended learning*, which meant online learning with face-to-face and other learning activities included in the mosaic of learning experience (Graham 2006).

In 2009, when we wrote this chapter, practitioners in the *VET* sector used the terms *blended learning*, *flexible delivery*, and *online learning* almost synonymously, with the term *online learning* perhaps reserved for situations in which (almost) the entire learning sequence is online. Using these terms fairly loosely and interchangeably is a clear indicator of fogginess, and the fog is not likely to clear soon. In 1997, Peoples, Robinson and Calvert pointed to the lack of precision around the term *flexible delivery* and
lamented the burden that the term had to carry. Almost simultaneously, Henry and Smith (1998) concluded from research across a wide variety of enterprises that although flexible delivery was enthusiastically embraced, no two understandings of it were the same.

CONCLUSION

Behind the terminological fog is a landscape where late twentieth-century New Right politics sought to reconfigure distance education from a public good, serving those who were geographically or socially distanced from education, to a (quasi-)private enterprise geared to the engines of industry and commerce. This reconfiguration required turning public educational services into private or public educational enterprises and moving from supplier-driven services to consumer-driven products. Distance-education institutions were required to change from government-funded courses to provide “access and equity” for “disadvantaged groups” to being educational enterprises offering flexible delivery of flexible learning, paid for in whole or in part by the “consumers.” In keeping with the times, the shift to flexibility meant that control also shifted, notionally to the consumer (the student), but often to industrial and commercial interests. The increased flexibility, choice, and “user-payment” reduced government control over some aspects of education. Releasing control over education, however, is anathema to most governments. Reducing control means increasing the risks that “undesirable” outcomes and events will occur. Therefore, various measures—usually in the name of quality assurance—are deployed to (self-)regulate the “education industry.”

The earlier distance-education institutions were often concerned with control: instructional design ruled! Some institutions micro-monitored their tutoring and assessment to regulate both employees and customers. Some also formalized the evaluation of their courses to ensure that the customers were able to comment on each and every component and service. These forms of “instructional industries” (Evans and Nation 1989) used their monitoring and controls as risk management that protected them against harm, both internal (dissatisfied students, dodgy tutors)
and external (government reviews of performance, public [media] alarm over standards). In the move to flexibility, not only does the control shift and slip; the risks also change and increase.

Adding to these new forms of intervention was the enthusiastic marketing of educational software and learning-management systems to education and training providers—systems that provided a vast range of performance statistics for provider managements to use and misuse. While these online-learning systems have arguably been responsive to contemporary learner needs and preferences, widened accessibility, and provided levels of interactivity, they have also been gleefully embraced by governments and provider managements for their capacity to generate all sorts of performance data. These performance statistics, so easily available from the software supporting online learning, are difficult (if not impossible) to achieve with other forms of delivery, either off campus or on campus. The enthusiasm for online learning as the major form of education delivery is very attractive to managements and governments wanting more control and more data. It has, simultaneously, increased the thickness of the fog around what we once more clearly and confidently called distance education.

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Peter Smith began his lifelong relationship with distance education as a young graduate in a remote mining town in Queensland, Australia, when he enrolled in a distance-education course. That was 1971 and technology was different—but Peter found the experience a complete disaster. Being sent fourteen identical audiotapes was just one mishap of many. There must be a way to do it better, he thought. Since then, he has managed distance-education organizations in higher education and flexible-delivery providers in vocational education. At the age of fifty, he became an academic, with distance education and vocational education as his foci. His doctoral thesis won the 2000–2001 Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia Award for Excellence, and he has since published many papers and two books. www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/education/staff-directory2.php?username=pjbs