



TITLE: Flexible learning in the neoliberal Australian political economy—Grassroots perspectives on educational policy and praxis

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Serving over 70,000 students a year, flexible learning options (FLOs) for young people at risk of high school disengagement are an important component of Australia's educational system. In addition to promoting accredited learning outcomes such as high school matriculation and vocational certification, FLOs also foster the health, security and empowerment among Australia's disenfranchised youth. Notwithstanding FLOs' broader contributions to society, contemporary neoliberal trends would recast flexible learning alongside 'mainstream' schooling as a technology of the marketplace. Concordantly, policymakers increasingly regard FLOs in light of their contribution to national economic competitiveness.

This study investigates the ways in which Australia's neoliberal economic paradigm serves to inform the grassroots praxis of flexible learning. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with service providers at three structurally distinct FLOs in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Victoria. Educators were asked to reflect on how they conceptualize, internalize, operationalize and contest prevailing neoliberal constructs relating to the role and 'value' of education. Findings expose disparate power relations embedded in educational policymaking and suggest that FLO practitioners' agency in these processes is strongly mediated at the corporate-institutional level. Securing policy traction and public resources for FLOs' holistic programmatic objectives may thus require particular organizational capacities and capital to navigate entrenched neoliberal policy environments.