The spirit and energy of teacher professional associations is built by the activities of members. Within this ethos, a significant goal for any contemporary association is to build a sense of belonging, as members learn to actively build their professional profile and learn to participate in the community of practice which is the association. QSITE has gradually worked towards this goal. There is however much to learn from all computer education groups in Australia about constructing an environment for contemporary teachers who are working differently now as they connect to each other in online communities and as information and communications technology alters their workplaces and classrooms. This report describes the key structures and activities of QSITE, as it learns about enabling a participatory and responsive membership.

Chapter structures
QSITE has established a range of geographical chapters, so members in local districts have opportunity to host activities, share expertise and take leadership roles. The chapter structure sprung from a realisation that planning and conducting activities was best done by locals and that it was logistically difficult to plan events for a town 1000K from the QSITE office. Local chapters have now matured from a local organisational structure to an integral part of the QSITE ethos.

There are chapters at Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton, Western Queensland (Outback chapter), Toowoomba, Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast. Each is different within a common structure. Chapters have a local management team, have financial autonomy and conduct their own kind of events. They have also constructed websites, run online communities and conducted major projects, winning contracts to host major professional development initiatives on behalf of Education Queensland. QSITE Outback and QSITE Townsville have hosted the Connecting Teachers to the Future program, an initiative which provides teachers with laptop computers, training and professional support while undertaking projects in their schools. Others have hosted a major conference or been involved in elements of the QSITE State conference. Chapter work is now sometimes complemented by teachers who host events in areas where chapters are not yet formed. There is now no reason for members to complain that there are not local events for them; they are instead encouraged to participate in making some.

An important consequence of chapters is that the management team can confidently plan activity which is inclusive of people outside of the south-east corner of the state. For example, in 1997, QSITE hosted a distributed conference, enabling a shared Keynote, local activity, synchronous communication and an online training environment in multiple sites. Sharing people and expertise across chapters is now a planned activity with many exchanges and collaborative events being hosted around the state.

Sharing professional development models, management strategies and expertise across chapters occurs more easily because of hosting an annual Chapter meeting, highlighting chapters at conferences, conducting specialist publications on chapter activities and because of an online management list which enables chapter and management teams to share news and ideas, as well as seek help and support. Building a communications system between chapters and within the management teams is the most significant contribution to building a cohesive structure and to disable the fragmentation which could result if team members were not so determined to maintain a statewide structure. The annual face-to-face meetings of chapters and management are core business of the association and budgeted for, in the same way that publications and conferences are cornerstones of association output. This local autonomous chapter activity is complementary of a statewide membership system. Members of QSITE belong to the statewide association and do not pay any fees for working with local people in a chapter structure. All chapters contribute to the value of membership by hosting local activity, providing additional services (usually online) and acting as a local support team for leading teachers and teachers needing advice.

Online activities
As soon as a public Internet access was available, QSITE established online communities for teachers to learn about participating in the new professional structures enabled by global networks. QSITE was clear in its belief that
connecting teachers first is important in helping teachers understand the potential of online spaces for hosting learning communities. From such a humble beginning, a sophisticated collection of online communities now supports many groups within the association and plays an important role for teachers.

In retrospect, QSITE can now reflect on some important decisions about its online contributions. Firstly, the email list for Queensland teachers was named QSITE-community. Thus QSITE has an amazingly high profile amongst teachers, principals and systems. It is part of the everyday lives of Queensland teachers in a way that no paper-based device could achieve. QSITE-community was built as a general teachers list before educational systems understood the potential of online environments for connecting teachers. The result was an inclusive list across systematic schools, rather than a Departmental only list. QSITE built an open-membership policy allowing members and non-members to join freely. This community service has been so important and enabled QSITE to demonstrate its leadership thinking and encourage members and non-members to work together. It is a reflection of the goals of the association which extend far beyond building a stable membership base. Further, the list is not archived, enabling free debate and open discussions. This has proved invaluable in letting teachers critique initiatives while participating in a place where people learn about communication online.

Two developments online have contributed to teachers’ understanding of the potential for online spaces. Firstly QSITE has hosted events on its online communities. Guest speakers, online debates and online workshops complement the usual metaphors which reside in online communities (helpdesk, a place to seek partners, announcements, vendor sitting, newsletter and soapbox and a place to enable lobby groups). Secondly, QSITE has increased the number of its online specialist communities. Lists exist for local chapter work and special interest groups. Online communities for computer studies teachers, computer coordinators and network managers complement the general community. The QSITE-Lan list for network managers has achieved amazing results in lobbying for computing initiatives, raising the profile of the work of computer coordinators and in persuading unions and systems to think differently about the lobby potential of online communities of teachers. More than this QSITE-Lan has become an essential toolbox for surviving the job of being a network manager. Most computer coordinators in the state are members and rely heavily on the expertise in this community. Its strength is its membership and the knowledge and experience which resides in peers, a concept very familiar to the ethos of professional associations.

The QSITE Netsite complements the online activity. The web site acts as a place to gather contacts, extend links between pockets of expertise and collect the wisdom of the association. It also acts as a management tool for members and a device for organising events and activities. The web site is not a postcard or brochure of the association for tourists and outsiders. It is an integral tool for the membership and for people who participate in QSITE’s activities.

**Professional development models**

QSITE is exploring alternative professional development structures to the usual training workshop model. Although there is much to learn, there are some important new ideas been tried and tested. A “Tinkering with Technology” model is helping new computer users become more confident in a just-in-time model for gaining knowledge and skills. The model involves a team of people meeting with participants. In a round table session, participants decide what kinds of things they want to learn. Groups of people then wander in and out of work spaces learning skills and find out “how” with the team of workshop leaders. The day is quite informal, based on individual needs and enables people to gain access to expertise and further help. Leaders enjoy the day too and can participate without the large burden of preparing long-term presentations and workshops. It is a simple model for sharing existing expertise while catering for individual needs.

Within conferences, QSITE is extending it’s models for conducting professional development programs. Each conference pushes the boundaries. Distributed conferences began in 1997. The National Computer Studies Conference took teachers to industry for a day and enabled industry to work with teachers in a case study model. The 1998 conference deviated from the standard model with round tables as a model to share expertise and to enable teachers to share classroom experiences in a collaborative fashion learning from the audience as well as sharing the speakers experiences. The 1998 conference also dedicated a day to management issues, recognising formally, the importance of computer coordinators in the membership base.

QSITE has begun extending its expertise to other professional associations working in 1998 with the Natcom project and the National Joint Council of Teacher Professional Associations, DEETYA funded projects to help professional associations learn about building online activity. This has helped shape the thinking of the association and helped us document online models and our web development. This will be important continuing work in 1998-99.

QSITE is expanding its activities constantly learning from peers in other CEGs. QSITE has borrowed the ‘Flying Numbat’ model from ECAWA and QSITE ONSITE is available to schools to ask for help. It is hoped that closer links to CEGs in the next few years will extend QSITE’s understanding of how to build professional support communities for members and take leadership roles in national and state initiatives.

**Publications**

Apart from online publications and CD Rom collections of resources, QSITE hosts two paper-based publications, a 12-page monthly newsletter and a quarterly journal. Although this is normal activity for a CEG, the relationship between online activity and paper-based publications is interesting. One tells the story of the other, sharing the connected communities stories with those not yet able to connect. It has been deliberate planning to merge the publications and to consider how online communities make use of paper-based and online information. There is much to develop in this area and we look forward to learning from other CEGs as they embrace the issues of online publications, duplicating publications online and using each version of publication to develop the other.

In short, QSITE is growing. It is growing in membership and growing in its energy and output. However it is important to grow in sophistication too and to work with our peer CEGs as we learn more about the role of professional communities in the changing educational landscape.