

FROM THE EDITOR

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Redefining our purpose

Reviewing and redefining an organisation's purpose is essential if it is to meet the new challenges that are constantly emerging.

Two years ago ALA adopted a new name to indicate a clearer purpose about its orientation and work. And last year the Executive re-focused on identifying the key values, purpose and goals of a national adult learning association at the start of the 21st century.

Over its 40 years, the Association has had different emphases. Today it still combines different roles – it is a mix of a professional association and a network of practitioners and researchers. It has a lobbying and representative role and provides information services, and it draws in a broad range of individual and organisational members. For some this diversity leads to misunderstanding.

Recently I had dinner with a good friend who told me that ALA was too academic. At other times people have said ALA is too focused on neighbourhood houses, too dominated by NSW (or Victoria), or still reflecting 1970s community-style education. In the membership survey last year one respondent said ALA is too dominated by left-wing environmental and Aboriginal issues while another said ALA is just a mouthpiece for government departments.

It is possible to see all of these things in ALA's activities but none seem to present an accurate portrayal of the Association's work. The composition of the current

Executive reflects the breadth of the Association's membership. There are five members from ACE centres, three from university adult education centres, two consultants working in the community sector, one from TAFE, one from a business education centre, one from a community centre and one from a continuing education languages centre. There are members from every State and Territory, eight women and six men. And it could still be more representative.

In this context it is important for the Association to state clearly what it stands for, what values it promotes and to indicate how it intends to achieve those goals. In this issue we reproduce the Directions Statement which was considered by the National Conference last November and approved by the Executive in February this year.

Our major activity in 2001 is to promote the importance of lifelong learning and to ensure that it is understood as more than re-funding universities, resourcing innovation and scientific research. It is equally about redressing the learning divide, opening access to information and communication technologies, to making sure that adults have increased control over their learning.

The key to this activity is to involve as many organisations and interests as possible in developing a national lifelong learning policy. The potential of a national policy is to integrate the array of individual initiatives and

needs that are currently being worked on or proposed.

A national policy can incorporate the separate innovations going on – scientific research, citizen education, learning circles, learning communities, learning accounts and other tax proposals, vocational education, internet access and information literacy, bridging the learning divide, new approaches to informal learning, the learning needs of the ageing, connecting public education campaigns, special education needs for the disabled, sector specific initiatives such as Farm Bis, and more.

Clearly, a wide range of organisations and individuals support new initiatives for lifelong learning in Australia. In this issue we reproduce part of a recent paper from the Business Higher Education Roundtable on this topic.

What is missing is the necessary policy authorisation and facilitation that only the national government can provide. While there are a number of important and exciting initiatives being developed by some companies, some State Governments, some community organisations, they remain one-offs until there is the supporting framework of a national policy and commitment.

Ignoring the need for that framework means that the work needed to coordinate existing initiatives will be delayed at a growing cost to Australia. ■