

10 February 2017

Human Services Inquiry
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2
Collins Street East
Melbourne Vic 8003

TO THE COMMISSION

RE: Reforms to Human Services – Productivity Commission Issues Paper

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is a not for profit national peak body for adult and community education (ACE). Our mission is for lifelong and life wide learning for all Australians. For more than 56 years, ALA has been working to ensure equitable access to lifelong learning, particularly with disadvantaged communities.

Our individual and organisational members are located across all states and territories of Australia and reflect a wide diversity of adult and community education in urban, rural, regional and remote areas.

ACE is a discrete fourth sector of education in Australia. It is a community based, owned and managed not for profit sector, committed to providing accessible learning opportunities for adults in local communities that meet their needs and support place-based community development.

There are at least 2500 ACE providers around Australia, often located in rural and regional areas where they provide personal interest or enrichment learning, adult basic education, foundation skills and formal vocational education and training.

ALA interest in the Productivity Commission Issues Paper is submitted on the basis that many human service users across Australia are also users of adult and community education (ACE). These take the form of Community Colleges, Neighbourhood Houses, Community Learning Centres, Aboriginal community controlled education providers, Men's Sheds, Workers Education Associations and other not for profit community based providers.

ACE providers often work with people and communities with complex needs, sometimes referring to, or liaising with, health and community services with and on

behalf of ACE users. Some ACE providers may also have facilities co located with human service agencies or provide office or outreach space for their delivery.

ROLE OF THE ACE SECTOR

Adult and community education can play an important role in assisting people to make informed decisions about the type of human services appropriate to their needs and how best to access them. For example:

Working with Users to Improve Literacy Levels

The benefits of user choice can only be implemented if users know what is available, how to access it, how to exercise their decisions and how to change their decisions if their circumstances or wants/needs change. Navigating service systems can be a daunting experience for many, including older people, people with low literacy levels, people from CALD backgrounds and people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Factors affecting consumers' use of services and facilities and their preferences may be limited by their ability to make informed decisions, with limited language, literacy or numeracy levels and low or negligible digital competency.

ACE organisations have the expertise and skills to deliver sessions in learning and life development through experiential learning that strengthens a person's sense of self and belonging, increases personal life skills, builds community engagement and creates pathways for skill development and employment.

The adult basic education programs in ACE are particularly for adults with limited formal education or English language skills. These programs cover literacy, numeracy, basic computing skills and other foundation skills such as communication skills, problem solving and self-presentation and management skills that are offered with a high level of individualised support.

ACE organisations are also well placed to provide support and skills development in using information and communications technology (ICT) and Internet based services. The ACE sector can ensure adults facing barriers to learning are given the opportunity to develop the literacy and numeracy skills they need to build their confidence and help enable them to make informed decisions in navigating human services.

Working with Providers to Ensure Accessibility to Users of Differing Levels

ACE organisations have the skills and expertise to provide low cost programs that support adults with a range of issues to participate in community life and minimise social isolation. These skills can also be utilised to work with human service providers so that they might better understand and meet user needs.

Strategic partnerships between ACE organisations and human service providers can help to ensure adults with a range of issues such as mental health or disability, CALD etc. are informed and that they have the potential to be engaged in activities that might enhance their ability to understand the what, how and why of the services available in their community or online.

ACE can empower people to make appropriate choices through relevant life education, skills development and recovery-based pathways helping people to return to full and sustainable engagement in the community.

Improving Wellbeing Through Social Opportunities of Learning

The benefits of user choice leading to improvements in quality of life and wellbeing are only as good as the diversity of opportunities that are available and accessible to them. Through the adult and community learning environment people with complex needs can be supported in other ways to build capabilities, to develop support networks and connections and to become more confident in making decisions and sharing experiences and information with others.

Adult learning opportunities can improve the wellbeing of users and the welfare of the community as a whole through the provision of both formal and informal education and training. It can build both human and social capital and provide opportunities for people to reach their best potential.

Overcoming The Challenge Of Providing User Choice In Regional and Remote Areas

The ACE sector reaches across rural and regional areas of Australia and can therefore provide a connection or contact point for human service users where they require support or information. Approximately one half of the adult and community education centres registered with ALA are in rural and regional areas. These centres vary in size from large community colleges, which offer entry level VET and pre-accredited programs through to small volunteer-run community learning and education programs.

Not-for-profit ACE organisations exist in towns whose populations couldn't justify the existence of a fully operational TAFE or university campus and where the education market is too small to attract private for profit operators. They supplement the work of TAFE and university in other communities. ACE organisations in rural and regional communities tend to offer a broad range of programs and services alone or in partnership with other agencies. Along with lifelong learning, services offered include childcare, job services, emergency relief and support for community interest groups.

An increasing number of ACE organisations operate social enterprises such as coffee shops, recycling services and second hand clothing stores. Some are also co-located in community hubs with libraries, community health services, men's sheds, maternal and child health nurses and other local community services.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Lessons From Previous Reforms

ALA believes that some services like education, should remain in public and community hands because there is too greater risk of poor quality outcomes.

The Commission would be wise to consider the lessons learnt from previous reforms of government services like the private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). The recent failure of the regulation and monitoring of RTOs is one example where lack of monitoring and regulation resulted in significant losses for the individuals enrolled, government, taxpayers and the RTO sector.

Government will need to monitor service provision on an ongoing basis to ensure the desired outcomes for user and the broader community.

Adequate Provisions For Redress And Complaints

A user-friendly system for complaints and appeals must be designed in consultation with users that enables them to seek redress or have complaints heard about the relevant services that is easy to navigate and understand. This should include diverse ways of making contact such as in person, the telephone, by post, email and the Internet, and in consideration of varying language and literacy skill levels.

Recognition of the ACE Sector

As the peak body representing the not for profit ACE sector, ALA can play a significant role in supporting communities through change via its membership and partners.

Lifelong learning is not about constant recurrent training, but rather a constant relationship with education that begins in the early years and persists through the years of employment into old age. While formal education – through school, college, university - is a vital dimension of that relationship, the less formal learning settings of the workplace, home, library and other community settings are integral parts of the lifelong learning environment.

In both institutional, but more usually in community settings, adult and community education (ACE) providers have been creating learning opportunities for, and delivering both accredited and non - accredited educational programs to, generations of Australians.

The ACE sector's philosophy – with its focus on the learner as an individual, responsiveness to identified personal, social or economic needs, flexible delivery and strong ethic of social justice and equity – has given real effect to the concept of lifelong learning for many citizens across a wide spectrum of Australian society.

Recognition of the role the ACE sector plays, its capacity to engage with citizens, its ability to work with many people and communities in need and often referring to or



liaising with health and community services with and on behalf of ACE users should be acknowledged as part of this inquiry.

ALA is happy to provide further information or participate in any further matters in regards to the issues raised in this submission.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jenny Macaffer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jenny Macaffer
CEO