



Response to request for comment on the National VET Equity Advisory Council Equity Blueprint

By Adult Learning Australia Inc

Definitions of Equity and Disadvantage

ALA welcomes the overall approach of the Council and concurs with its belief that equity principals should underpin the fundamentals of the VET system rather than being dealt with as small, extraneous and highly specific problems. We agree that the nature of disadvantage in Australia is complex with multiple factors impacting on each other and that systemic change is needed.

We welcome the commitment later in the paper to research into participation in entry level programs. For that reason we are cautious about the inclusion here of “over-representation of disadvantaged groups in certain types of programs (for example, lower qualifications)” as an indicator or inequity. While we believe that the clustering of disadvantaged learners in lower level qualifications can, in some circumstances, be a result of low expectations on behalf of providers, lack of concurrent support in higher level qualifications, and lack of career guidance, there are also very sound reasons why learners enrol in lower level qualifications. We would not like to see a situation where enrolment in higher level qualifications is automatically seen as an equity outcome, particularly in the light of the results of the 2007 ALLS Survey into Literacy and Lifeskills. The area needs to be handled carefully to avoid unintended consequences like credentialism, short term job churn and disadvantaged learners dropping out of the system altogether. These issues are addressed later in the document but could do with some clarification here.

We value the inclusion in the Blueprint of the Adult and Community Education sector as an agent of increasing equity in the system. We believe it differs and exceeds the capability of other parts of the VET system in that it:

- currently delivers in remote rural areas where thin markets make participation by private providers economically unviable and by TAFE logistically difficult.
- is committed to place based community development, which means it remains in a disadvantaged community over the long period of time required to build trust with hard to reach learners.
- sits at the nexus between the education and social and community services fields which means that individual ACE providers offer a broad range of social and welfare support services eg. childcare, financial counselling, provision of food vouchers, non-formal learning opportunities through participatory democracy etc

- has commitments to social inclusion and social justice as part of its core mission.

We value the inclusion in item 6 *Embedding good practice* of the recognition of the value of Cert 1 and 2 and preparatory programs. We would like to see the specific inclusion of short non-formal, taster programs in this section in addition to the more general “preparatory programs”. These have a proven track record in the ACE sector of being a useful means of engaging people who would not otherwise participate in formal learning (see Haukka 2010, Walstaff, Volkoff and Teece 2006). The ALLS data indicated a correlation between higher literacy levels and higher participation in non-formal learning. There is also research indicating that the bulk of non-formal learning opportunities occur in the workplace with those who display the highest literacy levels. (Eaton, 2010) Therefore, we would like to see opportunities to participate in short, non-formal community based learning activities for the unemployed and for those in low skill and highly casualised work included as an important equity provision.

Reform Area 1 – Sustainable Investment

We support the actions outlined in this section, however, in section 1.3 we would like to see contestability specifically defined as “price based competitive tendering” as the term “contestable funding” is used in some jurisdictions to describe funding following the learner, (eg in the Victorian VET system) which is described later in the document as a potential equity lever.

We strongly support the notion of “place based” funding particularly if it favours delivery that contributes to the economy of local disadvantaged communities; as opposed to “fly in, fly out” centrally controlled models which rob disadvantaged communities of high skill, high wage jobs. We believe that the impact of “fly in fly out” or “drive in, drive out” on local, often fragile economies is never adequately considered in evaluations of the costs of various forms of VET delivery and draw your attention to research work on the economic impact of ACE on local communities conducted both in Australia and in New Zealand. (see Allen Consultation Group 2008, PriceWaterhouse Coopers 2008)

Reform Area 2 - Measuring and Reporting Performance

We would like to see an additional suggested measure around literacy. ALA’s position is that Australia should be aiming to halve the amount of adults at Levels 1 and 2 of the ALLS scale by 2015 in line with the goals of the Education for All Campaign organised by UNESCO, Unicef and the World Bank. We would also like to see measurement of improvement in the amount of people with less than Year 9 equivalent achievement. We believe that a lack of measurement at the bottom of the system makes it difficult to identify the achievements of those providers working with the most disadvantaged learners, whose progress, the blueprint rightly identifies as often slow, incremental and related to community and family as well as employment achievement.

Reform Area 3 – Building the Capability of the VET Workforce

We welcome the initiatives in this area.

Reform Area 4 – Embedding support for foundations skills development

We welcome the proposal to identify successful approaches to delivering foundations skills programs. We would like to see this investigation including short, pre-accredited pathway programs as well as formal accredited foundation skills programs.

Reform Area 5 – Pathways and partnerships to achieve positive learning, life and work outcomes for learners

ALA welcomes 5.2 “recommendation to MCTEE of giving formal recognition to the role of ACE”. While a Commonwealth Ministerial Declaration on ACE exists and has lead to Statements on ACE in most jurisdictions, this has not lead to a consistent national definition of ACE, or to funding for ACE in all states and territories. ALA believes that Commonwealth leadership through direct funding and through partnership arrangements with the states and territories is necessary to “kick start” ACE in those states and territories where it is not strong.

There are currently as many definitions of ACE as there are states and territories. ALA believes that the key features that define ACE providers are:

- not for profit
- place - based community development amongst their core aims
- providing non-formal learning programs in addition to formal VET programs

In addition to organisations that fit the criteria above, there are a range of community based organisations which are skilled at engaging socially excluded adults in informal learning eg, Mens Sheds, Country Fire Authorities, libraries and sporting clubs etc. While these are not primary deliverers of VET, there are some excellent examples around the country of partnership programs between VET providers and these sorts of community organisations. The DEEWR Foundational Skills Taster Program funds these innovative programs; however the program is in its infancy and is yet to be evaluated. We would welcome the inclusion of these types of partnership programs in any analysis by NVEAC.

Reform Area 6 – Listening to the voice of the learners when designing the VET system

ALA has been a long term supporter of Community Wide Study Circles as practiced extensively in Sweden and more recently in the US, as a highly effective form of non-formal learning as well as an excellent means of community engagement and empowerment. There is potential here for Study Circles to be used as a means of supporting and giving voice to current and potential VET learners who experience disadvantage. (see Hall, 2003)

Better Coordination of Policy between Levels of Government

NVEAC indicates a desire for better coordination of policy between different levels of government. Included in this analysis, we would like NVEAC to investigate the

practice and implications of Job Network Providers referring clients to VET programs that they run themselves. Our members report that this practice amongst some Job Network Providers, can result in disadvantaged clients making VET choices that are not in their best interests based on limited advice, under fear that their benefits will be impacted by not taking up the suggestion of the Job Network provider. While there are mechanisms in each state and territory for reporting abuses of the VET system, our experience is that many disadvantaged clients, particularly immigrants from countries with less sophisticated civic structures, feel unable to use them. We would like NVEAC to unpack and advise on ways that the conflict of interest in being both a referrer for services and a provider of those services can be better managed.

References

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