

Creating a future direction for Australian vocational education and training – Discussion paper

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Submission information

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Creating a future direction for Australian vocational education and training

Context of Response

Adult Learning Australia is the peak organization for Adult and Community Education (ACE) with both individual and organizational members in every state and territory of Australia. Our mission is to achieve access to Lifelong and Lifewide Learning for All Australians; that is, learning that allows Australians to develop and contribute to industry, but also learning that allows individuals to actively participate as citizens in a vibrant democracy, to build families and communities and to manage their own health and wellbeing.

Our interest in the VET sector is twofold. Firstly, not for profit community based ACE providers, already contribute significantly to the delivery of VET programs, particularly pathway programs for disadvantaged learners and have the potential to contribute more extensively. Secondly, we believe that VET is most effective in countries and contexts where it is positioned within a broader framework of adult lifelong learning including into the senior years.

We have confined our response to those consultation questions which most align with our expertise. Our paper uses the OECD definitions of formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning. These are:

- Formal learning is always organised and structured, and has learning objectives. From the learner's standpoint, it is always intentional: i.e. the learner's explicit objective is to gain knowledge, skills and/or competences.
- Informal learning is never organised, has no set objective in terms of learning outcomes and is never intentional from the learner's standpoint. Often it is referred to as learning by experience or just as experience.
- Non-formal learning is rather organised and can have learning objectives. The advantage of the intermediate concept lies in the fact that such learning may occur at the initiative of the individual but also happens as a by-product of more organised activities, whether or not the activities themselves have learning objectives. ¹

¹ Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Outcomes, Policies and Practices, 2010, OECD

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Improving the VET experience

Workforce development – a new mandate for the sector

<p><i>If VET is to help industry and enterprises make the most of the skills of their employees how can training providers be encouraged to take on this workforce development role</i></p>	<p>Perhaps a better question would be; “what does industry demand of the Australian adult population? And how can VET meet that demand?”</p> <p>Each Australian enterprise has its own specific training demands; however, industry as a whole demands a workforce that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - willing to move through casual and short term as well as part time and full time employment during their working lives. - able to cope with shifts in status in the workplace as individuals move between high status full time roles and lower status part time and casual roles, - able to live and work comfortably alongside new skilled migrant populations, - willing to move location to secure work, - willing and able to work longer into the senior years, - able to manage their own health and wellbeing to do all of the above. <p>ALA would suggest that the role of government funded educational provision is to provide industry with a pool of workers with high levels of literacy, wellbeing and generic skills. From this strong foundation, the task of developing skills specific to any one industry or enterprise becomes significantly less onerous.</p> <p>The task is a big one, particularly in the context of the levels of adult literacy and workforce participation cited in the discussion paper. It will not be achieved within the current adult education system or with the current levels of investment. However as the discussion paper rightly points out, investment that targets adult literacy and the generic skills cited above has a significant impact on productivity.</p>
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	<p>In addition, literacy and social engagement are increasingly being recognized by research as social determinants of good health. The maintenance of a healthy population is essential to workplace productivity and participation.</p> <p>Workforce development implies a more holistic relationship with an employer than simply entering the workplace in response to training requests. This more holistic relationship might include assessment of employee skills and wellbeing, gap analysis, longer term planning etc.</p>
<p><i>how can this be funded</i></p>	<p>It has become almost clichéd to call for a “whole of government response”, however, a commitment to lifelong learning would impact positively across government priorities and agendas, including productivity, workforce participation, social inclusion, active aging, preventative health, and Closing the Gap between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians. Industry, like all parts of Australian society, requires action on all of these fronts. In the same way that the Social Inclusion Board monitors social inclusion across policy areas, Skills Australia should be empowered to develop a Lifelong Learning Policy and Framework and monitor its implementation across policy areas. The VET system alone cannot grow a healthy, highly literate, high participation workforce even with significantly increased funding.</p>
<p><i>and how should this investment be measured?</i></p>	<p>If measurement is short term and narrow in focus, it will measure and privilege the least complex skills. In order to deliver strong literacy, communication and generic skills, there is a need to research, monitor and support good practice delivery and to invest in this delivery over the long term. Australia’s experiment with leaving quality of delivery to a very open market, and measuring at the end of the process needs to be rethought. Our regulatory systems are based on notions of Quality that privilege process and administration above educational principles of excellence.</p> <p>We need a research driven approach to good practice, including investment in longitudinal studies. We also need to accept that the most significant shifts won’t be measurable in a single unit, in a single competency or in any other short term measurement. Longer term shifts in the adult literacy and wellbeing levels of particular communities should be measured and used as a guide to good practice.</p> <p>Embedded evaluation processes that show development over time, return on investment, etc are important. So too, is knowing</p>

	what the required outcomes are and, importantly seeing those outcomes as larger than a list of economic factors.
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<p>If we are to get better results for learners do training providers need new or better ways of doing business? What aspects of VET delivery need to change and how? For example, work-based delivery; use of ICT; student support; qualifications offered; income support; employment services? Other changes?</p>	<p>The 1991 Senate Inquiry into Adult and Community Education in Australia, <i>Come in Cinderella</i>², called on the government to “recognise that commitments to the ‘clever country’ and ‘lifelong learning for all’ requires a willingness to embrace a larger vision of how people get their education and training in Australia”.</p> <p>Community learning opportunities which develop and support a culture of lifelong learning should be the foundation of the post compulsory education and training system. One of the benefits of the not for profit ACE sector is that providers remain in communities for the long haul, whether or not there is a market case for delivery. This long term commitment and the combination of formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities make them uniquely placed to attract new entrants into the VET system.</p> <p>The relationship between employment services and learning needs to alter. There is currently only a narrow range of programs that employment agencies will recognize as meeting training obligations for recipients of government benefits. This can result in learners who are participating in local learning opportunities that they have sought themselves, being removed from these programs to take part in more narrowly defined programs further from home. In addition, the conflict of interest in Job Network providers being able to refer learners to their own RTO arms and you have a system that can work against the best interests of adult learners.</p> <p>One of the strengths of the ACE sector is its ability to attract learners from disadvantaged backgrounds; however, one of its weaknesses is providing career advice to these learners. For the socially excluded, the staff of their local ACE provider may be their only link to the world of work. The integration of publicly funded career advice services with other community education services would be a powerful innovation for the most disadvantaged adults.</p>
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² *Come In Cinderella: towards a learning society / a report of the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee*

<p>Are current reforms, such as training package improvements, sufficient for developing skills for the future? Should there be more emphasis on skills sets? How can competency based training evolve further, building on the broad based skills and knowledge needed for contemporary careers? What role might VET degrees play?</p>	<p>“adults have to be educated for change...New inventions are likely to render the old skills redundant.” W.G.K. Duncan, 1944³</p> <p>Training Package improvements are not sufficient for developing skills for the future. The Training Package approach is ill suited to producing the literacy skills and generic skills and attitudes required to drive 21st century industries and enterprises, and more importantly, to build a multi-skilled, self managing and resilient populace, able to cope with moving in and out of the workforce in different capacities over their lifetimes.</p> <p>The process of industry forming like groups, gaining consensus across these groupings about its requirements, mapping this in the language of training, and rolling it out across a complex, training system, requires layers of complex administration and room for political manipulation that is bound to leave the end product considerably removed from its original intentions. The process will never be fast enough to ensure that the skills of the most innovative of organizations make their way into training and then into application in the workplace in time for industry to use them effectively. In addition, the system is entirely reactive, bypassing research into future needs of the Australian workforce including skills for industries that don't yet exist and those that have not yet been imagined.</p> <p>Competency based training has always been a poor fit for the development of complex literacy or generic abilities and attitudes. However, in traditional VET curriculum documents, literacy and communication units were at least visible, and likely to be taught by a trained adult literacy professional working as part of a team with industry specialists. The move to training packages saw essential literacy and numeracy skills removed as stand alone units, and positioned as “underpinning knowledge.” In practice, this has reduced their status, made them less visible and decreased the likelihood of expertise being employed in their delivery.</p> <p>The VET system needs to be rebuilt from the ground up. Instead of essential literacy skills appearing as “underpinning knowledge”:</p>
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³ Duncan (cited in Whitelock, 1973, p 141) 1944 Universities Commission Report

	<p>a veritable footnote to the real business of the application of atomized industrial skills, literacy and communication skills, wellbeing and resilience should form the cornerstone of VET curriculum development.</p>
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Lifting performance

Shifting the quality focus

<p>Are the current performance measures for the VET sector appropriate? Should we have greater focus on long term student outcomes in learning and work? On contribution to workforce development? On social and community outcomes? Others?</p>	<p>“Whereas devising policies to create social capital generally is problematic, governments should at least consider the scope for modifying policies that are found to damage social capital, and ways of harnessing existing social capital to deliver programs more effectively.” Productivity Commission, 2003⁴</p> <p>The VET regulatory system demands a huge amount of resources from the smallest, not for profit community based providers operating with challenging client groups yet does little to protect vulnerable learners within the education market from poorly targeted low quality training products. Stories abound of private training providers renting rooms in disadvantaged communities and advertising qualifications offered over periods of time that would be minimal for highly skilled adults in supportive job environments, let alone the long term unemployed or those with literacy difficulties or limited skills.</p> <p>The response from State Regulatory bodies is almost always that the individual learner should make their way through a labyrinthine layer of bureaucracy to trust their complaint to an agency that most have never heard of. Not surprisingly, most learners from NESB or Indigenous backgrounds or those who are in receipt of Government benefits, rarely take up this opportunity.</p> <p>We would suggest that there are flaws in the design of the VET system that damage rather than building on social capital, and we concur with the Productivity Commission that policies should</p>
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⁴ Social Capital: Reviewing the Concept and its Policy Implications, Productivity Commission, July 2003

	<p>be modified to avoid this.</p> <p>The difficulty with social capital policy approaches is that they are hard to measure. However, the Productivity Commission report, goes on to suggest that “Further research, coupled with small-scale policy experimentation, may be warranted to provide better knowledge and tools for incorporating social capital considerations in policy analysis where appropriate.”</p> <p>We would suggest that this is an excellent time for “small scale policy experimentation” around, for example, Men’s Sheds, Learning Towns Networks, Intergenerational (Family) Literacy Programs (particularly in Indigenous communities), Community Wide Learning Circles, etc</p>
<p>Should we be worried about low qualification completions rates in VET? Are qualification completions an appropriate success indicator? Should funding be linked to provider performance to improve student outcomes?</p>	<p>Qualification completion rates need to be considered in the context of a broader understanding of the relationship between formal, non-formal and informal learning. The contemporary 21st century concept of lifelong learning adopted by the OECD, the European Union, World Bank, and leading OECD countries is that lifelong learning involves all forms of learning.⁵</p> <p>The 2006 ALLS data indicated that the group of Australians with the highest literacy levels also accessed large amounts of non-formal learning. We know from the Adult Learning topic included in the 2006-07 Multi-Purpose Household Survey (MPHS) that the bulk of non-formal learning occurs in the workplace with those learners with the highest qualifications.⁶</p> <p>Short, non-formal “taster” programs stimulate demand and are an enabler of success in the formal VET and higher education systems, yet they are left almost entirely to industry to supply or for individuals to self fund. This is appropriate for those with the highest incomes, making the biggest contribution to their respective industries. However, government needs to intervene to provide non-formal learning opportunities alongside formal options for the unemployed and those with the lowest skills. We believe that qualification completions at Certificate 1, 2 and 3 levels would improve if those with the least skills were not corralled into these formal options that demand a high proportion of their limited resources of time and money with no support in the form of short, non-formal “taster” programs options or access to informal</p>

⁵ Kearns, P, Achieving Australia as an Inclusive Learning Society, Adult Learning Australia, 2005

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Multi Purpose Household Survey, 2006-07

	<p>learning through for example, libraries, Men's Sheds, Neighbourhood Learning Centres etc</p> <p>This lack of a holistic approach to learning has the worst impact on Indigenous education. Remote Indigenous communities frequently lack the basic "infrastructure" of literacy and learning such as libraries, or affordable public internet access, books and magazines. Adult education responses focus on centrally developed and administered VET curriculum for jobs that often don't exist in those communities and "bridging programs" to fill an arbitrary gap. Meanwhile, where they exist at all, local sites of adult learning practice such as youth media centres, community learning centres or men's sheds, rely on short term grants and fundraising.⁷</p> <p>The discussion paper identifies the trend within ACE away from non-formal programs providing skills related to management of home and family, health and wellbeing and civic participation in favour of accredited VET programs. We would argue that the ACE sector growing rapidly and narrowing its offerings at the same time, offers short term efficiencies, but will in the long term, reduce its traditional role of "casting a wide net" and stimulating demand amongst those people not currently participating in the workforce or seeking to participate.</p>
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Better connections across sectors

<p>What changes to credit transfer and/or</p>	<p>The 2006 Victorian Longitudinal Study of ACE Learners found that while ACE achieved strong employment and further education outcomes, the primary motivation for participating in an ACE program was to "meet other people and learn with others".⁸ In short,</p>
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⁷ Kral, The literacy question in remote Indigenous Australia, Centre for Aboriginal Economic, Policy Research, Topical Issue No. 06/2009

⁸ Walstaff, Anne, Volkoff, Veronica and Teese, Richard, 2006, ACE Longitudinal Study, ACE makes a difference: building pathways, providing opportunities & creating outcomes, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning University of Melbourne

<p>articulation arrangements need to take place to increase the number of students who move between school, ACE, VET and higher education?</p>	<p>people attend ACE programs not so that they can minimise contact and access a qualification in the shortest possible time, but so that they can engage in social interaction, communication and the development of generic skills and literacy/s. As such, credit transfer between School, ACE and TAFE is probably not a significant issue. Where participants engage in formal AQF programs in ACE, these are recognised by TAFE and by most Higher Education Institutions.</p> <p>The Longitudinal Study also identified that some learners in ACE would have preferred additional career advice and support. Innovative programs that build collegiality across the sectors and provide high quality independent career advice to learners would go a long way to enhancing pathways between school, ACE, VET and Higher Education.</p>
<p>How can the links between VET and schools and VET and the Adult Community Education sector be strengthened?</p>	<p>Where there are strong relationships between ACE and other VET providers, these often find their roots in government funded programs which encourage collegiality across program areas. For example, Reframing the Future, gave the opportunity for providers to come together in Communities of Practice around a common curriculum or program area interest. Similarly programs funded under the Flexible Learning Framework and other state based initiatives.</p> <p>In addition, professional associations have an important role to play in building expertise around areas of programming and professional identity rather than around provider type.</p>

Establishing strong foundations for growth

Funding sources for growth

<p>If VET is to grow how is this to be funded? What are your thoughts on - increased tuition fees with income-contingent loans;</p>	<p>If Australia is to increase its workforce participation rate, more learners need to be enticed into education and employment through adequately funded innovative programs. This means that government resources need to be redirected to these types of programs and these types of learners.</p> <p>In addition, we need to build a culture of lifelong learning in which all adults participate in learning either in the workplace, or in their local community and where those in highly casualised and low skilled work</p>
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<p>increased co-funding of programs for employers; the introduction of an industry levy?</p>	<p>access the benefits of workplace learning as well as those with the highest skills. The introduction of a training guarantee that ensured that industry invested in the training of its workforce would go along way to building a lifelong learning culture.</p> <p>We would also like to see a Community learning guarantee for those who are unemployed or unable to access learning through their work, for example, for those in highly casualised or part time work. This guarantee would ensure that community learning organisations were funded relative to the needs of their local communities.</p>
<p>What potential benefits or issues do you see if public funding to providers were to be based on outcomes such as qualification completions? Could entitlement funding be combined with outcome-based funding? If so, how would this work?</p>	<p>If funding were provided on completion of qualifications an unintended consequence of reform could be a targeting of those learners with the least barriers to completion. Such a system could only work where a full range of informal and non formal learning opportunities existed alongside the formal system and where concurrent support for those with low literacy was part of the mix.</p> <p>If VET were funded on qualification outcomes it would become even more important for non-formal courses and classes and informal learning environments such as Men's Sheds and Neighbourhood Houses were provided for those without the capacity to self fund these learning opportunities. This would include the unemployed, vulnerable workers, i.e. those without year 9 formal qualifications and those in short term or casualised work.</p> <p>Given the sheer volume of adults with inadequate literacy skills across the country a one size fits all approach to funding qualifications needs to be altered to take into account the different costs of delivering training to learners at different levels of the AQF and with different past educational experiences.</p>

Governance for the future

<p>What do you see as the top policy priorities to recommend to governments for a new intergovernmental agreement for skills and</p>	<p>Prior to the 2010 federal election, ALA worked with its diverse Australia wide membership to come up with the following policy priorities.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop a comprehensive National Policy and goals on Adult Literacy and Numeracy. 2. Commit to Goal 4 of the UNESCO Education for All Campaign to: "double adult literacy levels by 2015" for those with "poor" and "very poor" skills.
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workforce development?	<p>3. Develop a National Policy on Lifelong Learning which combines non-formal, community-based learning alongside the formal accredited VET and Higher Education systems.</p> <p>4. Ensure that all policies related to the education of Indigenous children include detailed plans for ensuring that their parents and communities are meaningfully engaged in that education.</p> <p>5. Make all predominantly Indigenous communities official "Learning Communities" with state of the art "learning infrastructure" such as public internet access, library services and fully funded community - managed learning centres.</p> <p>6. Include a participatory democracy and civics stream within the Lifelong Learning policy which funds innovative approaches to community engagement and learning.</p> <p>7. Include a strategy for building on the skills and learning of an ageing population within the National Lifelong Learning Policy.</p> <p>8. Fund selected Learning Community Pilot projects in disadvantaged urban and rural contexts to test and refine strategies to foster lifelong learning, inclusion, and social justice, leading to guidelines and tools to assist communities throughout Australia.</p> <p>9. Fund the Strategies of the 2007 Ministerial Declaration on ACE to ensure that a vibrant, not for profit community education sector exists in every state and territory of Australia.</p>
How can any weaknesses in shared government responsibility be addressed?	<p>It is one of the ironies of the ACE sector that it exists least in the states and territories that arguably need it the most. "150 years since the original Mechanics Institutes were founded, in many places across Australian beyond Victoria and parts of urban NSW, communities retain only the Mechanic Institute building and no ACE provision." (Golding 2010)⁹</p> <p>In Victoria and NSW where ACE is strongest, it attracts a higher percentage of learners who are Indigenous, have a disability, have less than year 9 education than other provider types. It is also represented more strongly in rural and regional communities. However it is barely existent in the Northern Territory and Queensland where there are large indigenous populations, high levels of learners with less than year 9 education and large rural</p>

⁹ Golding, B, 2010, All Over Red Rover? The Neglect and Potential of Australian Adult education in the Community, Paper to ALA 2010 Conference, Looking Back, Moving Forward, Adelaide, November 2010

	<p>towns without on the ground, post compulsory education options.¹⁰</p> <p>National leadership needs to be exercised to fully implement the strategies of the 2008 Ministerial Declaration on ACE, to research gaps in provision, and to ensure that all states and territories have adequate provision of both formal and informal learning opportunities for those not currently in the workforce, or vulnerable in the labour market.</p>
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Are there any other comments you would like to make?

¹⁰ Bowman, K, 2004, Equity in vocational education and training: Research findings, NCVER, Adelaide, pp 108 - 119