

Response to Australia's skills and workforce development needs  
Discussion Paper  
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By Adult Learning Australia Inc

## **Context**

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. By lifelong we mean learning across the lifespan including into the senior years. By lifewide we mean learning that allows Australians to contribute to industry and the economy, and 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.

Given this mission, we are particularly interested in:

- the relationship between learning and workplace participation
- the relationship between learning and wellness (and therefore workforce participation)
- the relationship between learning and the ability of individual citizens to manage an adult life that will likely include periods of full time, and part time work, home duties, unemployment, underemployment and active retirement.
- who is learning and who is missing out on learning.

We use the term "learning" to encompass formal training in the VET and Higher Education systems, as well as non-formal and informal learning through both work and community participation.

## **Questions for discussion**

### **1 Have we got the issues right?**

*Australia's skills and workforce development needs* outlines the challenges of the future Australian workforce well, however, the balance of the discussion between higher level skills and lower level skills, like much of the current public debate, is skewed towards the former.

We would like to see future, more detailed analysis of workforce participation in collaboration with charities and civil society organisations. We would also like to see more comprehensive research on intergenerational low literacy, poor health and poverty and its relationship with workforce participation.

The paper looks almost exclusively at workplace, VET and Higher Education environments and institutions as solutions to Australia's future workforce needs. There is a brief mention of Lifelong Learning. However, the contemporary concept of lifelong learning adopted by OECD, the European Union, World Bank, and leading OECD countries i.e. that lifelong learning involves all forms of learning and occurs in many contexts in society, is largely missing from the paper (Kearns, 2005).

## **2. Where are the gaps in our analysis?**

### **Adult and Community Education**

There is not a single reference to adult and community education despite the important role played by the sector in participation and literacy development generally and as an invaluable point of access to the VET sector in small and remote communities. (see Allan Consulting Group)

### **Education and Wellbeing**

The paper states "Skills utilisation, quality of work and the wellbeing of workers are critical aspects of productivity" but the nexus between education and wellbeing is not explored.

Industry relies on a population of physically and mentally well, socially connected and mobile adults from which to draw a skilled labor pool. The paper focuses on the nexus between skills and productivity and largely overlooks the role that education plays in keeping people well, socially connected, and capable of moving to pursue work.

For example, a 2012 UK study (Fujiwara, D., Valuing the impact of adult learning, NIACE) found that:

- 57% of the \$ value of adult education is related to 'better social relationships'
- 13% to 'improvements in health'
- 11% to 'a greater likelihood that people will volunteer on a regular basis'
- 19% 'related to 'greater likelihood of finding/staying in a job'.

Research into the relationship between learning and health is limited in Australia, however, from UK research we know that:

- Learning is one of five ways to wellbeing[1]
- Participation in adult learning has positive effects in terms of smoking cessation, taking exercise and improvements in self rated health and well being[2].
- Participation in learning prolongs active life, delays dependency, and sustains independent living[3].
- The act of joining and being involved regularly in organised groups, such as learning groups, has a significant impact on health and well being[4].
- Learning slows the development of two brain lesions that are the hallmarks of Alzheimer's disease[5].

## **Adult Literacy**

The discussion of adult literacy is not comprehensive enough. The suggested responses are either status quo or minor variations of the status quo.

For example, the section on adult literacy suggests: “More places will be needed in LLNP and the WELL program, as well as incentives for employees to invest in WELL”. The assumption here is that LLNP and WELL are the best responses to building the literacy of the nation, yet Australia made almost no progress on adult literacy between the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey and the 2006/7 Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey with signature programs very similar in nature to WELL and the LLNP.

The ALLS statistics suggest a significant problem that requires an overarching policy, goals and broad ranging strategies for the workplace, the community, and our education systems. In the absence of the yet to be released Foundation Skills Strategy it is hard to determine whether this will be a comprehensive enough solution. However, from its preliminary papers the Foundation Skills Strategy would appear to be:

- confined to the education and training systems of the state, territory and Australian governments, despite the obvious impacts of literacy across health, welfare, justice and community policy areas and the relationship between these policy areas and workforce participation.
- targeted only to those who are age 16 – 64, ignoring the growing cohort of Australians older than 65 who are no longer required under Australian law



- to retire, and which the ALLS survey confirms have the lowest levels of literacy amongst the adult population.
- focused on competency based and Training Package approaches, when a significant body of research into adult literacy and numeracy suggests that localised, and contextualised approaches work best. (see Roberts and Wignall, 2011)

The paper deals with quality issues in the VET sector, particularly in the light of increased marketization, as a unique issue, when quality issues are integral to language, literacy and numeracy skills development. High quality VET delivery by its very nature will likely improve language, literacy and numeracy skills of participants.

### **Non-Formal Learning**

There is no discussion of the role of non-formal learning, (although lifelong learning is briefly mentioned in the context of later life work transitions). This is a significant oversight considering the significant contribution played by both industry and the adult education sector in providing the underpinning skills and knowledge of formal VET qualifications.

A related issue is that of volunteering as a means of gaining essential workplace experience for young people or new immigrants, as well as access to non-formal and informal learning opportunities. Social enterprise as a site of supported entry to the workforce is also worthy of greater attention in a future workforce policy.

### **Lifelong Learning**

The section on lifelong learning misses a number of important points:

- 1) Lifelong Learning policies are actively pursued by a number of OECD countries in part because of the realisation that governments could not afford to fund each citizens learning journey over a lifetime if it were to be fully delivered via the formal education and training system. The paper accepts the status quo of government for the most part, supporting formal learning, with non-formal learning left to industry, communities and individuals. Is this assumption the best way to manage the costs and demands of the future? We think this is worth exploring further, particularly for those with low skills, for whom Certificates 1 and 2 appear to be a poor solution.

- 2) Lifelong Learning policies have a focus on “learning to learn” as a key 21<sup>st</sup> Century competency, with a role for government in stimulating a culture of learning in all its forms, as well as funding learning in some of its forms.

### **3. What challenges face our workforce now and over the years to 2025? How should we address them?**

The paper identifies that older Australians learn differently and that retraining and remaining in the workforce or career shifting are fundamentally different to entry. However the full ramifications of what this means for the higher education and training systems needs further exploration.

### **4. What kinds of policy interventions have been producing the best results?**

The Not for Profit Adult and Community Education sector remains the unsung hero of the Australian Vocational Education and Training system. Its role will become more important to Australia’s workforce development needs in the future for the following three reasons:

1. In demand driven VET and Higher Ed systems there is a need to stimulate demand amongst groups for whom learning has previously been negative, or who, for a range of reasons, simply don’t see the return on investment of participation in post school education. The sector’s combinations of non-formal and formal learning, and emphasis on social alongside human capital development make them ideally placed to stimulate demand in areas and with groups where workplace participation is low.
2. The sector’s integration with other civil society functions and its use of volunteers makes it a cost effective option in a period when costs of participation in education are increasing in many Australian states.
3. The sectors capacity to operate in thin markets such as small remote towns make it a useful tool as the Australian population urbanises and VET systems become increasingly marketised.

### **5. How can we anticipate and avoid adverse outcomes?**

The Australian Workforce Futures plan opened up new ideas about the way in which we plan for and deliver education and training. We believe that this thinking needs to go further and needs to carefully measure and analyse:

- Who is participating in (all forms of) learning, and who is not?
- How can governments intervene to build a culture of lifelong learning, so that individuals see the benefit of investing their own time and resources in

- learning?
- In a demand driven system, how can demand be stimulated amongst groups who are not demanding further education and training, but who the economy and society cannot afford to leave behind?
  - How can we keep people well so that they can participate in the workforce and be active and independent in retirement?

There is also a strong need, in an increasingly complex post compulsory education and training system, for independent and affordable sources of career advice especially for young people and other disadvantaged groups.

## **6. What are the pressing skills and workforce issues for your region/sector?**

The most pressing workforce need for the not-for -profit ACE sector is skills and support to survive in increasingly marketised VET sectors.

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