



Adult Learning Australia

Lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians

Response to Industry Skills Fund Discussion Paper

Adult Learning Australia is the peak body for Adult and Community Education in Australia with members in each state and territory of Australia. Our mission is for equitable access to lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians. As a result, our particular interest in is adults who are missing out on opportunities for education.

In the context of the workplace this means workers with the lowest literacy and numeracy skills, those with the least education and those who are least likely to be afforded access to training in the workplace. We would like to see any government funding intervention in education structured so that it actively includes these groups.

Older workers

Australia's workforce participation rate amongst older Australians is increasing, with most of the increase occurring in the last decade. However, it is still low compared to many other nations. In 2008, 57 per cent of Australia's 55–64 year olds were employed. This placed Australia 13th, close to the average across the OECD, but behind countries like New Zealand (72%), Japan (66%) and the USA (62%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

The ABS Workplace Training and Adult Learning survey (2013) found that participation in both formal workplace related training and non-formal workplace learning drops off for workers 45 and above and declines even more dramatically for workers 55 and above (ABS, 2013). Put simply, if left with no intervention, workplace training favours adults in the 25 – 45 age group.

In Australia the retirement age is currently 65 years, and due to rise to 67 years by 2023. A recent report by the Productivity Commission has suggested increasing the retirement age to 70 (Productivity Commission, 2013, p. 15). Without policy levers favoring the inclusion of older workers in training, there is nothing to suggest this program won't continue the training disparity between older and younger workers, making it difficult for older workers to remain in the workplace.

Part time and Casual Workers

Part time and casual workers are the backbone of a flexible industry policy. The Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey (2013) found that full time workers had higher literacy and numeracy than part time workers across all indicators. This is perhaps exacerbated by lack of access

to workplace training. The ABS Workplace Training and Adult Learning survey (2013) found that work related training was more likely to be offered to full time than part time workers (38% and 27%).

There are obvious practical reasons why part time workers might attract less workplace based training. It could also be argued that the return on investment from a part time worker falls to a number of industries and to the general community and that therefore, an individual employer should be expected to carry a lesser percentage of the cost of training for these workers.

Without a lever favoring the inclusion of part time and casual workers, there is nothing to suggest that this program won't continue this disparity and expand the literacy and numeracy gap between these two groups.

Language, Literacy and Numeracy

It is pleasing to see LLN training included as a priority in this program. The PIAAC survey indicated that around one in seven Australians (14%) have 'very poor' literacy skills (ABS, 2013). An additional almost one in three (30%) Australians have literacy skills at levels below that required by industry in a modern knowledge-based economy. Many of these adults are in the workplace, however they can quickly become unemployed and unemployable if they are not given support to develop their skills.

The ABS Workplace Training and Adult Learning survey (2013) also found that workplace training was heavily skewed towards workers who already have higher education qualifications. (16% of surveyed workers with no non-school qualifications indicated that they had taken part in workplace related training in the previous 12 months compared to 45% of those with a Degree or higher qualification).

We would like to see the program take serious account of the length of time required for a worker with low literacy and numeracy to develop those skills in the workplace. We would like to see the program designed in such a way so that LLN programs targeted at workers with low skills and qualifications are not held to the same expectations as short skills sets programs aimed at workers who already have a strong base of literacy, numeracy and generic skills on which to build.

Conclusion

Short skills sets for full time workers in the prime working years (arguable 25 – 45) is the "low hanging fruit" of industry based training. It is already appealing to individual employers because the ROI is high. The ABS Workplace Training and Adult Learning survey (2013) suggests that these workers are already well served by the training system. We would question the need for increased government investment in these particular workers.

We would like to see some provision in the form of weightings in the selection processes, separate allocations, or balances between employer and government for workers over 45, those without qualifications, and for part time and casual staff.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010). Cat. No. 4102.0, Australian social trends, Sept 2010.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) 4234.0 - Work-Related Training and Adult Learning, Australia, Apr 2013

Productivity Commission (2013). An ageing Australia: Preparing for the future, Commission Research Paper, Canberra.