

## **New Directions for the Adult and Community Education (ACE) Sector**

Skills for Prosperity, a Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training (Skills Australia May 2011) includes the following recommendation:

### **Recommendation 10: The role of adult and community education in communities**

That Australian governments affirm the importance of the adult and community education (ACE) sector as a pathway for individuals undertaking pre-vocational, bridging, entry-level and foundation skills programs by formally acknowledging in the next intergovernmental resourcing agreement for the sector the role played by ACE providers in attracting previously disengaged learners.

In addition, the National Vocational Education Advisory Council Equity Blueprint 2011 – 2016 Creating Futures: Achieving Potential through VET (NVEAC, April 2011, pg 6) recommends that Australian governments:

### **5.2 Give formal recognition to the role of ACE.**

This paper outlines what Adult Learning Australia (ALA) proposes these recommendations should look like in practice, and how a national ACE sector might be developed in order to further the Australian government's Workforce Participation and Social Inclusion agendas.

### **Who are Adult and Community Education (ACE) Organisations?**

The ACE sector is made up of approx 1200 not for profit organisations, 770 of whom are Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). ACE organisations secure funding from a range of sources including all three tiers of government, philanthropy, and fee for service activity. ACE sits at the nexus between education and community development and as such, government funding for the sector comes from sources designed to fulfil both human capital and social inclusion agendas.

ACE organisations are diverse in size and focus. Providers can be described in relation to where they sit at various points along the social capital / human capital spectrum.

Towards the "social capital" end of this spectrum are small community development organisations that include mainly non-formal and non-accredited programs on a fee for service basis to their communities. These ACE organisations mostly include small neighbourhood and community houses and telecentres, and with the ageing of the population will increasingly include over-50s activity centres and community men's sheds.

On the “human capital” end of the spectrum are large Adult Education institutions like the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) in Melbourne, larger Victorian ACE providers (some of whom are also neighbourhood houses) some ex-Skillshares throughout the country and the larger Community Colleges in NSW. These ACE organisations deliver significant amounts of accredited VET alongside fee for service non-accredited programs. Many are Job Services Australia (JSA) providers either independently or in consortia. Bardon (2006) points out that these organisations are often confused in policy and reporting with private RTO’s and as a result their significant contribution to VET and to communities is often overlooked. (Bardon, 2006, pg 17)

In between these two parameters are a range of other ACE organisations including Workers Education Associations’ (WEA) in SA and NSW, some NSW Community Colleges and medium sized registered ACE organisations in Victoria.

### **Administration of ACE in States and Territories**

NSW has an ACE unit within the Department of Education and Training responsible for its approximately 60 Community Colleges and for NSW Adult Migrant Education Service (AMES). Victoria has a Board of Adult Community and Further Education which advises the Minister and provides support to its 320 registered community based ACE providers and to the two Adult Education Institutions, AMES and the CAE. SA recently developed an Advisory Board to its Training and Skills Commission for delivery of education and training programs through its network of ACE providers, mainly medium sized neighbourhood houses and a large Workers Education Association in central Adelaide.

Tasmania has a strong tradition of direct provision of non-formal adult education and literacy programs administered via the LINC Tasmania network in the Department of Education. Not for profit community based provision of adult learning exists in neighbourhood houses and men’s sheds. WA administers ACE program funding via its Department of Training and provides funding for a state based peak body LinkWest. Queensland administers an ACE program via its Education Department. All states and territories with the exception of the Northern Territory have either an ACE Policy Statement or ACE Ministerial Statement.

### **National Definition**

The 2002 and 2008 Ministerial Declarations on ACE outlined the role that ACE plays as part of the COAG Productivity Agenda, but avoided the task of providing an agreed national definition of ACE organisations. ALA defines ACE organisations as “Not for profit providers of adult learning with both Adult Education and Community Development as part of their core aims”. Bardon suggests the following definition; “Not for profit community based organisations with a local or regional focus that offer Adult Learning Programs.” (Bardon, 2006, pg 7)

In WA and Queensland, the current definition of ACE includes non-vocational adult education programs, delivered by a range of providers including TAFE and private providers. While WA and Queensland may want to continue with these arrangements, the Skills Australia roadmap is recommending that within a more market - driven VET system the specific “pathway and participation” role of ACE *organisations* needs to be identified and protected through appropriate administrative arrangements just as the specific “public good’ role of TAFE needs to be identified and protected through appropriate administrative arrangements.

In defining ACE, a differentiation also needs to be made between local community based ACE organisations and large nationally and internationally focused not for profit charities and service providers. It is tempting for governments to want to deal with a smaller number of large service organisations with lean systems and overheads and a proven track record in the delivery of human services programs. However, such organisations differ from ACE in that they often lack the long term connections in local communities to deliver social capital as well as human capital outcomes. Education is often not their core business and can be subsumed by other agendas. In addition, they tend to withdraw from communities when contracts are lost or other factors which impact on economies of scale occur, leaving a vacuum.

The moneys lost through close down and start up of educational services particularly in regional economies is rarely accounted for. However, we do know that where consistent local ACE provision exists that the return on investment to government is high and the impact on regional economies significant. (Allen Consulting Group, Feb 2008)

### **ACE in Intergovernmental Resourcing Agreements**

Some goals to aim for in the next round of Intergovernmental Resourcing Agreements should include:

1. A commitment to the development of Ministerial Statements for those states and territories where none already exists articulating the role of ACE and goals for its development, in accordance with the 2008 Ministerial Declaration.
2. A plan for the development of appropriate advisory arrangements to state and territory governments for and on behalf of the ACE sector for those states and territories where none currently exists.
3. Administrative arrangements for the registration, quality control and approval for new ACE organisations where none already exists. These registration arrangements should ensure that the local or place based approach of ACE is encouraged.
4. A commitment to professional development for ACE organisations around the development of quality learning pathway programs and in the development of community management skills in order to survive and thrive in more competitive training environments.
5. A commitment to provision of specific funding for short pre-accredited pathway programs which provide a pathway for disengaged learners into the formal VET system. Such programs should be delivered only by registered not for profit community based ACE organisations.
6. A commitment to provision of arrangements for core funding to be used to leverage co-investment in a broad range of adult non-formal learning programs.
7. The identification of regions, towns and cities where ACE is effectively missing with plans to support local not for profit community organisations to develop their ACE capacity. (This is likely to include major non-metropolitan areas of Queensland and Western Australia where there are known skill shortages alongside high proportions of adults not in the workforce)
8. Re-articulation of the role of Adult Learning Australia and appropriate resourcing to provide policy advice, professional development and support to ACE providers, systems and structures across Australian governments.

## **ACE in Commonwealth Direct Purchasing Arrangements**

Where the Commonwealth purchases educational programs directly from providers, it becomes more complicated to include ACE organisations, particularly the smaller ones. The inclusion of ACE is highly desirable in small regional and remote communities where an ACE provider may be the only post compulsory education provider on the ground and where funding of local organisations impacts strongly on local economies. The combination of human and social capital outcomes delivered by ACE is also highly desirable for Commonwealth literacy programs, such as the Language Literacy and Numeracy program (LLNP), where research suggests that literacy is best developed through purposeful engagement with others.

There are actions that the Commonwealth can take to ensure that ACE organisations feature in the delivery of Commonwealth directly purchased programs such as LLNP.

Firstly, ALA suggests that where strong quality control and governance arrangements for ACE are in place, such as in Victoria, NSW and South Australia, that the Commonwealth consider outsourcing programs like LLNP directly to these bodies for distribution amongst their providers with strict monitoring to ensure that Commonwealth programs meet their stated aims and are not substituted for state based programs.

Selection criteria for DEEWR programs should include the provision of social capital as well as human capital outcomes. This could be evidenced through criteria like length of time the organisation has operated in a particular location, letters of support from other local community agencies and local government, registration with an appropriate state based body responsible for ACE, history of delivery of local community services programs and compliance with state and federal requirements.

Similarly FACSIA programs in the Social Inclusion policy space should recognise the legitimate role of education and training in social inclusion by including evidence of delivery of adult education as key selection criteria for community development programs.

Finally, administrative arrangements for large Commonwealth contracts should be flexible enough to ensure that large tenderers are able to sub-contract components to smaller locally- based ACE organisations.

## **References**

- Allen Consulting Group, February 2008, *The Economic Benefit of Investment in Adult Community Education in Victoria*, Report to the Department of Planning and Community Development and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board
- Bardon, Ben 2006 *Community Education and National Reform Discussion Paper* Department of Education, Science and Training
- Skills for Prosperity, a Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training*, May 2011, Skills Australia
- Equity Blueprint 2011 – 2016 Creating Futures: Achieving Potential through VET*, 2011, National Vocational Education Advisory Council (NVEAC)

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