

## **Lifelong learning: An organising principle for reform**

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### **Introduction**

Lifelong learning (LLL) is not a new concept. The idea of learning throughout life has been present in educational thinking since Plato. However, as a guiding principle for integrating educational efforts, it is a much more recent development.

For much of the twentieth century, education systems in the West remained fairly stable, generally providing compulsory schooling for most and maintaining small higher education systems as the preserve of the few.

Lifelong learning returned to the international educational policy stage in the early 1970s when the OECD commissioned Edgar Faure to lead an investigation into the type of education needed for a future oriented society. The end of the long economic boom following World War II was commencing and questions were being asked about the long-term sustainability of the world's natural resources. Faure's report *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow* was followed twenty years later by a second landmark report *Learning: The treasure within* by Jacques Delors. By the 1990s, there was a growing consensus around the

need for a new overarching policy framework for education. In 1996, the European Union (EU) created the Year of Learning, and the newly elected Blair Government in the UK introduced its 'Learning Revolution'.

However, by the early 21st century, much of the original, humanist lifelong learning optimism that saw a future-oriented education as about serving something much broader than a narrow economic outcome, had been gradually replaced by emphases on the 'knowledge economy', national productivity and innovation agendas (see Rizvi, 2017). The slide in focus supports Dehmel's argument (2006, p. 49) that lifelong learning policy has been 'an elastic concept tailorable to any needs'.

In Australia, initial interest in a lifelong learning policy agenda quickly receded and little development occurred through the 2000s. While major reviews of early childhood education, schools, universities and vocational education were undertaken; lifelong learning was put in the 'too hard' basket of national education policy.

In 2018, Adult Learning Australia (ALA) promoted a Year of Lifelong Learning (YOLL) and renewed calls for a national approach to coordinating the breadth of Australia's educational efforts in the formal, non-formal and informal sectors to help equip individuals and communities to respond to the pressing challenges of the 21st century.

This paper canvasses the rise of interest in lifelong learning internationally as a policy initiative, an umbrella under which other learning policies can be accommodated; examines how interest ebbed in recent years; before considering why and how it should be reconceptualised in Australia. It looks at the experience of other similar countries, noting how some governments withdrew support for lifelong learning, resulting in a decline in adult participation, while in others the process of introducing policy change has been maintained and continues even under the strains imposed by the global financial crisis.

What are the arguments for developing an integrated national lifelong learning policy in Australia? Is this still a policy initiative worth pursuing? Who benefits from expanding educational opportunities and what are the costs of missing out? Is Australia's existing educational framework fit for the purpose of addressing today's and future challenges?

## **Lifelong learning: Beginning of the modern view**

Before examining the situation today, it is worth casting our attention back to remind ourselves of some context. 2019 will be the centenary of the landmark 1919 British Ministry of Reconstruction Report, the first major government report advocating adult / lifelong education.

The British report was conducted in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Now, a century later, it is hard to imagine the extent of the war's destruction and the scale of the loss of life. In Great Britain, two per cent of the entire population were killed, another four per cent wounded, and twelve per cent of the total population were 'mobilised'. The question looming over the country was how to rebuild a society in the aftermath of such devastation, especially with the loss of such a large number of its young and most productive adults. It would have been understandable for the Reconstruction Report to concentrate its attention on what technical skills were needed to rebuild the country. However, it advocated a broader view.

The Report concluded that '[a]dult education must not be regarded as a luxury for a few exceptional persons here and there, nor as a thing which concerns only a short span of early manhood, but that adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship, and therefore should be both universal and lifelong'. The authors went on to say that they did not 'wish to underrate the value of increased technical efficiency or the desirability of increasing productivity'. But that they believed 'a short-sighted insistence upon these things [would] defeat its object.' They wanted to 'emphasise the need for a great development in non-technical studies, partly because [they thought] that it would assist the growth of a truer conception of technical education but, more especially, because it is ... vital to provide the fullest opportunities for personal development and for realisation of a higher standard of citizenship' (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, p. 55).

Today conditions are very different, but there are still major issues confronting modern societies and the words of the 1919 committee continue to provide wisdom.

## **Developing international policy on lifelong learning**

The first post-World War II developments of lifelong education (or

*education permanente* as the French referred to it) emerged as a response to early onset economic crises of the late 1960s, and critical assessments of rigid education systems being made by writers such as Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich. Field (2001, p. 4) traces ‘the genesis of the concept (of lifelong education) back to the intellectual crucible of the late 1960s’. It was Edgar Faure’s groundbreaking 1972 *Learning to Be* report, grounded in the critiques of the authoritarian, uniform, monolithic and unequal education systems of the time, that re-launched interest in lifelong learning. But more than just critique, it looked to the future as its sub-title, ‘The world of education today and tomorrow’ suggested. The report proposed lifelong education as an organising principle for educational reform and a means of producing the kind of ‘complete person’ needed to construct a learning society.

It took another twenty years before UNESCO’s *Learning: The treasure within*, was released. It coincided with the European Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996, and stimulated international policy developments and actions to support lifelong learning. Delors’ report argued that economic prosperity and social cohesion were both enhanced by lifelong learning, and created the image of four pillars, supporting a future society – learning to know; learning to do; learning to be and learning to live together. These pillars imagined: the mastery of learning tools (*learning to know*); education to equip people to do the work of the future, including innovation and adaptation of learning to future work environments (*learning to do*); education that contributes to a person’s complete development: mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality (*learning to be*); and education to avoid conflict or peacefully resolve it, and to discover other people and their cultures (*learning to live together*).

In response to the UNESCO report, the OECD Education Ministers set themselves a task to rethink the roles and responsibilities of all partners – including governments – in implementing and financing the organisation of lifelong learning for all. The EU’s lifelong learning policy that emerged was an ‘overarching educational reform policy intended to address a wide range of issues, including education, employment and competitiveness’ (Lee et al 2008).

In 1997 Britain’s new Labour government under Tony Blair launched a ‘Learning Revolution’, underpinned by a number of national inquiries

(see Schuller & Watson, 2009). *The Learning Age* released by the Education Minister David Blunkett, ushered in a great flowering of policy initiatives, including individual learning accounts; neighbourhood learning development and a national literacy, numeracy and ESOL strategy, which were broad and inclusive (Blunkett 1998). Places not traditionally associated with education programs such as local libraries, museums and galleries, faith centres, and community and health centres were specifically funded because they were the sites where people who had been reluctant to attend formal education institutions were more likely to go. These initiatives to extend learning beyond the formal classroom attracted positive attention in Australia.

### ***Lifelong learning in Australia***

Between 1994–1996 the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) produced a series of reports including *Lifelong learning: Key issues* (1996). It reported that the goals of lifelong learning should be to not only develop ‘a skilled and flexible workforce’ but also to enable people to realise more of their individual potential; and with ‘public learning’ to enhance societal awareness and understanding of various critical issues in public policy’ (NBEET, 1996, p. 4).

During that same period, an independent Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was established in 1992 to provide advice on and support for the emerging national training framework. Its initial focus was squarely on vocational education and training (VET) but by the end of the decade it had broadened its view to include lifelong learning. It produced a large-scale national survey and ‘marketing strategy for skills and lifelong learning’ in 2000, however, it was a short-lived approach as the federal government made clear that its policy focus was solely on VET. ANTA was eventually disbanded and merged into the Department of Education and Training.

Also in the 1990s, the Senate held two national inquiries into Australian adult and community education (ACE). ACE’s standing as the (educational) sister left behind was reflected in the title of the 1991 report *Come in Cinderella: The emergence of adult and community education*. A second senate inquiry, *Beyond Cinderella: Towards a learning society*, followed six years later. ACE experienced a short-lived boost in recognition and state government funding, notably in NSW and Victoria,

through the later 1990s, which also contributed to the development of a national education and training market. Initiatives such as the Ministerial Council Statement on ACE (DEEWR, 2008), support for Adult Learners Week (ALW) and ALA's 1999 national seminar on lifelong learning were examples of this 'time in the sun'. Local initiatives such as the 'learning towns' spread, research centres in lifelong learning were established at a small number of Universities (e.g. University of South Australia, University of Canberra, University of Ballarat) and individual researchers progressed ideas on how these initiatives could be integrated in a stronger policy framework (see Kearns, 2005).

Following this rise in interest in lifelong learning in Australia, which occurred on the heels of the European and then UK initiatives, policy momentum stalled at both the national and state level. One of Australia's leading researchers in the field concluded that 'in the absence of major structural change, lifelong learning is likely to remain in the "too hard" basket of national education policy and the needs of individual learners across their lifespan will not be addressed' (Watson, 2004). Policy was becalmed.

By the beginning of this century, federal and state governments' attention was primarily concentrated on creating an education market for VET and in increasing student numbers in higher education. Between 1989 and 2016, the number of students at university trebled from 0.44m to 1.46m (Department of Education and Training, 2016). In the VET area, the introduction of market mechanisms through the contestability funding framework has seen a number of private providers collapse and shaken the faith in the integrity of the vocational system, leaving the public TAFE system under-funded and at risk. At the same time state governments have largely withdrawn from funding community-based adult education providers other than through a narrow range of specific, targeted programs.

The ebb and flow over the past four decades can be broken into four periods. Dehmel (2006) identifies the first three as a peak phase from the early to mid-1970s, followed by a 'valley of decreasing interest (mid-1970s to early 1990s), and then a second peak phase of lifelong learning (early 1990s to early 2000s).

The fourth period, which started in the mid-2000s, has generally been one of policy stasis, and in the adult education field, policy retreat.

The result has been mismatches between policy rhetoric and funding commitments, and secondly, between rhetorical support for but neglect of adult education provision (see Field, 2006, p. 29).

### ***Lifelong learning in Europe***

In Europe, work moved from advocating for lifelong learning to working on how to bring it to life. In 2000, the European Council of Ministers adopted the Lisbon Strategy (European Parliament, 2000), which was succeeded by the Europe 2020 strategy. In early 2008, the European Parliament passed a resolution on adult learning: *It is never too late to learn*, and subsequently passed a ‘renewed European agenda for adult learning’ in 2011<sup>1</sup>. The updated resolution was part of the policy commitment to ‘the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (which) acknowledges lifelong learning and skills development as key elements in response to the current economic crisis, to demographic ageing and to the broader economic and social strategy of the European Union’. It understands adult learning as a broad, inclusive area comprising ‘formal, non-formal, and informal learning; it can be for employing basics, for obtaining new qualifications, for up-skilling or re-skilling for employment, for personal growth, or just for pleasure’ ... ‘It is essential for employability and competitiveness, social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development. The challenge is to provide learning opportunities for all adults, throughout their whole life, especially disadvantaged groups who need them most’ (European Commission, 2010).

The European strategy was framed by the ongoing economic and social impacts of the global financial crisis. It highlights the major role that adult learning could play in achieving the *Europe 2020* goals, by ‘enabling adults – in particular low-skilled and older workers – to improve their ability to adapt to changes in the labour market and society.’ It builds on earlier foundations that see adult learning as providing ‘a means of up-skilling or reskilling those affected by unemployment, restructuring and career transitions, as well as makes an important contribution to social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development’ (European Union, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup>The Europe 2020 Strategy uses the term adult learning to cover ‘the entire range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities – both general and vocational – undertaken by adults after leaving initial education and training’

Drawing on a survey of scholarly literature, Vargas (2017, p. 4) summarised the four main purposes of lifelong learning developed over the past forty years as promoting economic development and employment; social inclusion, cohesion and democratic participation; personal growth and self-fulfilment; and cultural development and enrichment.

### **Facing the educational challenges in contemporary Australia.**

Australia is currently facing a number of changes and challenges. With them comes the question as to whether the existing post-school policy framework is fit for purpose, and ready to assist in equipping people to meet them.

These changes and challenges include:

- A changing demographic profile including an ageing society.
- Changing world of work.
- The environment and climate change.
- Increasing inequality.
- Physical and mental health and well-being.
- Reconciliation of outstanding issues between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians.
- Imbalance between capital city and regional development.
- Disengagement and disillusionment with the political process, and the need to continually support civic awareness and engagement.

In August 2018, Australia's population reached 25 million people (ABC, 2018; ABS, 2018a). Half of these people, 12.5 million, are in the labour force and another 0.71 million are registered as unemployed (ABS, 2018b). Pre-school children account for 1.5 million Australians, another 4 million are in compulsory schooling, and 1 million domestic students are in higher education, meaning that almost 25 per cent of Australians are engaged in formal education. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples made up 2.8 per cent, or 650,000, of Australia's population, a steady increase over the previous two censuses of 2011 (2.5 per cent) and 2006 (2.3 per cent) (ABS, 2016). And almost 5 million, or one in every five, Australians are over the age of 60 (ID, 2016; Universities Australia, 2018).



These statistics reveal that education and learning policies that solely focus on the formal education sectors mean that significant numbers, and a growing proportion of the population, are not being included in the nation's education attention.

Participation in education is sharply differentiated by age group, falling with each decade's demographic group. In *Learning through life*, Schuller and Watson (2009) highlight four distinct, if overlapping phases of lifelong learning. Firstly, up to age 25, where people are undertaking more and more complex routes to labour market participation; between 25–50, where a combination of job, family and social obligations make time for learning hard to find for many; between 50–75, where adults begin disengagement from their main working lives, take on many of the responsibilities for maintaining civil society, and often have caring responsibilities for younger and older family members; and at age 75 plus, where later life brings its own distinct learning challenges. It is striking how little current provision differentiates between the different aspirations and interests of these cohorts.

Dramatic change is also occurring in the world of work. Work today is less stable and predictable, and workers, especially the young, are changing jobs more often. The impact of artificial intelligence (AI), automation and the gig economy, and questions about whether they will have positive or negative impacts on work, employment, welfare and wider society, add to concerns about whether existing education policies are adequate. Impacts on welfare and incomes pose questions such as the whether the existing income support system is capable of meeting future change or whether there is a need for some new form of guaranteed minimum income. Due to changing demographics, there will likely be an increase in both paid and unpaid care work.

In 2017, the Senate established the 'Future of Work' inquiry specifically to examine and 'report on the impact of technological and other change on the future of work and workers in Australia'. This followed a commitment by the Labor opposition to hold a national inquiry into post-secondary education if elected in 2019. Its intention is to make sure 'Australians have access to the best post-secondary opportunities in the world', with the party arguing that '[i]t's time to rethink how we do things' (Plibersek, 2018). The announced scope of the Inquiry remains limited; however, as there is no reference to adult education

outside of TAFE or universities. Business groups have also taken up the argument that more needs to be done to address today's learning needs. The Business Council of Australia (2017) has advocated for the need to develop a 'culture of lifelong learning', and the Ai Group on the need to address digital issues for the workforce of the future (AiG, 2017).

Similar work and education issues were addressed by a recent UK report *Solving future skills challenges* (Universities UK, 2018). The background for that report was how to respond to the 'onset of the Fourth Industrial Revolution – automation, robotics, artificial intelligence and digital technology' together with the challenges of 'an ageing population and the rapid pace of change and increasing complexity of work'. It highlighted the need for continual upgrading of skills, lifelong learning and study of post-school qualifications at all levels, noting that by 2020 more than one-third of desired core skill sets of most occupations will be comprised of skills that are not considered crucial to the job today. This places educators in a difficult position where they have to prepare learners for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that have not yet been invented.

Like Australia, the UK has had a single-minded commitment to competency based training (CBT) and assessment over the past decades. However, reviews of vocational and technical education for post-16 education in the UK (DBIS/DfE 2016) point to findings that are worth close consideration in Australia as they question the policy foundations that have become orthodoxies, and question their ability in meeting 21st century learning needs. Two recommendations stand out, firstly, to move away from competency based assessment where a 'functional analysis of job roles' has dominated, often leading to an 'atomistic view of education' and a 'tick-box approach to assessment', and secondly, to stop publically funding private for-profit providers, and to instead prioritise organisations that re-invest any surpluses into education infrastructure (Moodie, 2016).

As identified above there are additional pressing challenges. Not all can be canvassed here, but all should be considered as part of a wider approach to learning.

## **Re-conceptualising adult education and learning**

Old frames of thinking shape the way we understand broad areas of

social practice, such as education, as well as how we think they continue into the future. Yet the challenges of the contemporary world require us to continually ask ourselves if those frames still help us understand the present and whether they assist us in conceiving the future.

A frame that is often used in educational metaphors is that of the journey, or the pathway. This metaphor often has two versions and both are linear progressions. Firstly there is the biological view, which sees learning as being a series of life stages – infancy, youth and adolescence, adulthood and onto senior life – where we make progress through these stages.

Another linear perspective sees learning as being a series of educational stages – early childhood education and pre-school, compulsory school years, vocational and/or higher education, on-the-job training and professional development, and then possibly third age learning. Here education is understood to be formal and primarily organised via institutions. Historically this has generated a hierarchy of educational importance, rendering some sectors, and elements within sectors, more important, and therefore deserving of funds and attention. This pyramid approach sees individuals progressing through pre-school to primary and secondary school where they then arrive at a fork in their path and, if they choose to continue institutional learning, are faced with the choice of university, TAFE or a private vocational provider. If they become a professional, they will likely undertake further study with a post-graduate qualification, supplemented by professional development and/or industry or professional association courses, and on-the-job training. Those who are non-professionals might also pursue some industry or on-the-job training. Outside of those options people may undertake some courses out of individual interest like language learning, sport coaching, crafts and so on. There are others who, once they finish school, might not undertake any further organised education or learning.

The problem is, however, that few people actually follow such orderly linear paths<sup>2</sup>. Australian and international research shows that the uni-linear educational ‘journey’ is less common than often suggested. In fact, individual learning is much more complex and ‘messy’ than this neat schema. The pressures of everyday life intervene, as work and careers change, individual need and motivations change and so on. Rather than

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<sup>2</sup>Deloitte’s survey of 4000 Australians provides detail about the way those workers see the changing needs of work in their futures (Deloitte 2018).

a set of 'upward' progressions, many students move back and forth between university, vocational education, on-the-job learning and adult community provision, as they seek to meet specific work and life needs that they understand can be better met through specialist providers at particular times (see Wheelahan, Leahy, Fredman, Moodie, Arkoudis & Bexley, 2012; Yu, Bretherton, & Schutz, 2012). Simultaneously other learning needs associated with personal health, language acquisition, technology, cultural awareness and so on are sought out and add to individual development while also benefiting the wider community. Yet others take time to recover from unsatisfying or negative school experiences and re-enter education through non-formal opportunities offered by community based providers.

Another way of conceiving of education and learning is as an ecological arrangement. This ecosystem metaphor, borrowed from biology, sees dynamically interacting systems of organisms (i.e. individuals and organisations) and the communities they make up. It is a perspective now applied beyond the natural sciences to fields such as urban ecology, community health and human ecology, and is pertinent to the broad educational environment incorporating early childhood, school-age, vocational and tertiary provision as well as formal, non-formal and informal delivery.

In the educational environment an inter-connected and inter-dependent array of providers and opportunities co-exist, where the health and sustainability of one element is strengthened by the mutual health of the others. Thought of this way, it is easier to appreciate the link between pre-school learning and higher education, between professional development, craft courses and community health programs, between community adult literacy and job programs, and so on<sup>3</sup>. It not only applies to institutions, but to individuals as well as they move in and out, and between different educational settings and are equally reliant on the availability of quality and relevant learning opportunities. It accords more closely with how adults go about organising their own learning, which is arranged through communities of interest, through local organisations and networks and is often place-based, self-help and special interest groups, or individually motivated learning.

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<sup>3</sup>In a similar but different analogy Driese (2018) identifies lifelong learning as the 'mortar' that holds the educational 'bricks' in place.

## **Recognising the benefits of learning**

There is powerful evidence that adult learning has positive health effects and prolongs active life. In 2012, Britain's Department for Business, Innovation & Skills conducted research on the impact of adult learning on other social policy issues, and found that the benefits of lifelong learning could be measured in five areas – mental health and wellbeing; physical health; family and parenting; civic participation; and attitudes and behaviours. The findings reveal both personal benefits such as improvements in life satisfaction and self-worth and reductions in self-reported depression, as well as economic benefits such as a reduction in the number of GP visits, the desire to find a better job, and improved financial expectations (BIS, 2012).

Other studies have also recognised participation in adult education as an effective preventative health measure for people at risk of mental illness, and a safe place to rebuild relationships when recovering (HMSO, 2008, Sfarid 2008; Golding & Foley, 2011; ALA, 2016b). The broad and often unanticipated benefits of learning, ranging from reductions in medication use and overcoming isolation and loneliness, to improving racial tolerance and increased involvement in voluntary work have also been reported on (Feinstein, Hammond, Woods, Preston, & Bynner, 2013).

This is particularly relevant given the importance of mental health in Australia, as almost half of all Australians will experience a mental health disorder in their lifetime (DoH, 2018). Efforts to reduce the costs of mental health and find ways to reduce its prevalence led the Australian Government to launch a Million Minds Health Research Mission and instigate a Productivity Commission analysis in 2018 (Frydenberg & Hunt, 2018).

Adult education offers second chances to people who missed out in their earlier education, and first chances to people who never had the chance to go to school, a situation increasingly applicable with a rise in new arrivals in Australia from less developed regions. As immigration levels continue at a high rate, the need for English language provision is very important to enable full participation in work and society. And as more older people extend their working lives, public support for learning needs to be spread to those of all ages.

Adults who learn have a positive impact on their families, too. Sticht (2001) referred to this as 'double duty dollars' meaning that 'when we invest in the education of adults we may get multiple returns in terms of both improved productivity by adults at work, and improved literacy learning by the adults' children'. In other words, teach an adult, especially a mother, and children will also learn better.

### **Policy coherence and cohesion: The cost of missing out**

If learning through life is accepted as being important for individuals, the economy and society in order to allow people to fully participate, both now and in the future, then the cost of missing out is especially great.

A particular challenge for policy makers is bridging the current participation gap. For many people, returning to education as an adult can be daunting and difficult. Those who leave school without qualifications lack the entry-level skills or essential qualifications to find secure employment, and to progress into education later in life. There are even greater challenges for people for whom English is not their first language.

This education gap is closely tied to measures of equality and inequality. Participation surveys show that those adults with positive education experiences from their youth, fostered by home environments that encourage learning, and who regularly participate in learning after school intend to continue to do so. A significant portion with the opposite experience, and who have done no organised learning since school, similarly plan to continue as they are. The effects on their lifetime incomes, their ability to respond to a changing work environment and to read the world is not hard to anticipate, and has the potential to have an ongoing impact on their children (see for example ANTA, 2000; McGivney, 1989; Vester, von Oertzen, Geiling, Hermann & Müller, 1993; Watson, 2013).

There are obvious longer-term implications for learning later in life, especially for those disengaged at a young age. Educational environments need to be supportive, and provide the remedial content and methods to re-engage. Classifications of those who participate and those who do not, such as in ANTA's (2000) national survey and by Michael Vester (1993), show strong similarities. Vester refers to four groups of learners: permanent learners; traditional learners; instrumental learners; and non-learners. In both cases the first three

groups are either regular or occasional participants depending on life circumstances. Those in the fourth group, comprising around one-fifth to one-quarter of the population, are non-participants with little intention of ever taking up any organised learning in the future.

In today's civil society, where the fault lines of the impact of the financial crisis, globalisation and mass movements of peoples are more exposed, it is this group where those most damaged by the collapse of established social ties, traditional work patterns and who show a tendency to either withdraw into apathy from public life or to sympathise with aggressive radicalism, often of the neo-right variety, can often be found (See Field, 2006 pp. 62–64). Rising inequality has real consequences as Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) point out, more unequal societies 'suffer poorer health, higher mortality rates, increased levels of crime, higher levels of social isolation, and lower levels of trust for rich and poor alike'.

It is therefore particularly important, both from an individual and societal perspective, to provide and encourage participation in quality lifelong learning opportunities.

### **Attributes of good public policy**

The policy-making process itself is an important indicator of future success. While it requires leadership to initiate the process, progress relies on it being participatory and inclusive. Good policy builds in a developmental approach so that learning can happen on the way. It is capable of being implemented using current or existing capacities such as skills, institutions, infrastructure and finances, and works towards identified goals and deadlines with inbuilt mechanisms for review.

Through this process a coherent agenda can be set, structuring specific problems and adopting a course of action that has intra-policy coherence and which can be developed as a policy narrative to be used to explain and win support.

A national policy carrying the imprimatur of the national government has the advantage of authorising stakeholders to pursue and develop the complementary policies that make up an integrated framework. It harnesses existing disparate initiatives to come together to feed in and build a stronger framework, enabling something more to be created than is possible with fragmented policy and provision.

ALA's 1999 lifelong learning seminar posed the policy challenge of 'how to integrate the three overlapping sites of lifelong learning – learning in and for the workplace; learning in and through formal and informal education and training; and community-based learning. Integral to this challenge is developing financing mechanisms that will support such integration. What practical steps might be introduced that support the principles of lifelong learning – entitlements, cross-sectoral partnerships, informal learning opportunities and networks?' (Brown, 2000, p. 7).

The policy groundwork that commenced in the mid 1990s and continued into the 2000s provides a solid foundation for future development. The parameters and planks of what a national policy might look like already exist. For instance, seven attributes of a lifelong learning policy were set out by ANTA in 2000.

- Shared vision about the value, impact and significance of lifelong learning
- Combining a national framework (consistency) with a strong focus on local level collaboration and networks (autonomy and flexibility)
- Funding that empowers learners
- A bias towards investing in the front-end of the learning process (that is schools and families and pre-school learning)
- A business and work culture that values and contributes to learning
- A willingness to undertake significant institutional reform
- Information and feedback on performance and progress

In addition, Kearns (1999) and his colleagues' report to NCVET on VET in the Learning Age similarly identified five key dimensions of lifelong learning in a learning society –

1. Foundations for all
2. Strengthen and develop pathways, bridges and transitions
3. Foster learning organisations and institutions
4. Extend the role of information and learning technologies
5. Develop learning communities



The practical implementation steps being followed by EU member countries to develop a comprehensive and integrated policy provides an updated guide on how similar work could evolve in Australia. The Education & Training (ET) Strategic Framework sets out seven benchmarks with targets across the education and learning spectrum. In addition, six working groups have been established including an adult learning group comprising experts from member states specialising in adult learning; social partners such as employers and trade unions; and civil society organisations working in adult education (EU, 2018b; EU, 2018c).

There are significant political differences among the member states yet they, along with the various social partners, are working together to progress the overall strategy. In a similar way, Britain's 'Education Revolution' initiatives of 1998–2003 had the support of the conservative opposition and the Liberal-Democrats and were largely uncontroversial politically.

## **Conclusion**

The arguments for why ongoing learning beyond formal school and immediate post-school is important are generally not in dispute. Almost everyone agrees that continued learning is good for individuals, the economy and society. And while there are detailed policy agendas and funding regimes for specific areas of education such as childcare, schools, universities and vocational education, the surrounding area of adult education activity exists largely in a policy vacuum. When the OECD Education Ministers in the 1970s and 1990s set themselves the task of rethinking the roles and responsibilities of all partners – including governments – in implementing and financing the organisation of 'lifelong learning for all', they developed an ambitious agenda that has been missing in Australian policy development for the past decade.

The history of adult education in Australia is primarily one of self-organisation and financing through community groups, voluntary and membership bodies. State support has been inconsistent and sporadic, at times rising and then falling away again. Provision has therefore needed to be self-sustaining, and, in the absence of government support, providers have found ways to be flexible, innovative and responsive to local need. In the main, governments have left the education of adults to local providers.

Adult education courses supported by government and delivered via community colleges, neighbourhood houses, WEAs and community centres have changed over the past 25 years as various government policies have changed. Many colleges and centres have fallen on hard times and a number have ceased to exist or merged with other providers. To a significant extent they have been replaced or supplemented by private provision, including self-help initiatives such as seniors groups like the U3A, book clubs, environment and walking groups, expert patient groups, single-interest bodies like the photography, architecture, and writing societies and men's sheds. In the workplace, innovative learning schemes utilising new technology and contemporary learning practices are being implemented. With the transformation that the internet provides, including online courses, new learning opportunities for the geographically remote, senior Australians, and those unable to access courses at the times on offer, are opened up. This mix of independent adult classes sits alongside the public and community provision that remains. Where adults have the confidence and the interest to come together to learn, they will create the means to do so. It is a resilient social activity.

Impressive as these voluntary efforts are, there is today a greater need for governments to provide the policy and financial support for broad lifelong learning. Public investment can help secure participation for under-represented groups, scale up effective innovations for example in adult literacy, digital technologies, and health campaigns, and support outreach work, building alliances with other community bodies, and workplaces of all sorts. Initiatives such as providing a 'learning credit' for people to use freely and not just for AQF courses has multiple benefits. They can be targeted towards lower income recipients and educationally disadvantaged adults. They can increase certainty and stability for community-based providers, and contribute to job creation among teachers to provide broad educational opportunities where people live and work and support communities' development.

Without attention and support, participation wanes, especially among those most in need, and this has proved to be the case in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Between 2009–2014, participation in UK education and training by 16–64 year olds fell from 20.1 per cent to 15.8 per cent (Eurostat, 2015). Similar falls are evident in the European member states, from 9.8 per cent of the 25–64 year-old population in

2005 to 9.1 per cent in 2010, thus making the ‘ET2020’ target of 15 per cent by 2020 more challenging.

In Australia, withdrawal of state funding means there is now a reduced ability to monitor participation in the adult-learning sector. Collecting only raw data in the national statistics means that the fine-grained detail required for evidence-based policy is missing. It limits the ability to know who is learning, what and why they are learning and where they participate, which in turn undermines high-quality research.

The policy stagnation that Watson (2004) identified does not need to stay that way. Indeed the issues facing Australians today, whether about work, the environment, inequality, health, living together in communities or engaging in civic life, make the need for an integrated broad lifelong educational policy framework more pressing. The external forces that drove the initial agenda for lifelong learning in the 1990s are still there but more intensely so, and the evidence supported benefits of adult learning remain equally compelling.

Adult Learning Australia convened a National Lifelong Learning Seminar in 2018 to once again pose the need for a broad, inclusive national learning policy framework. Its aim was to ‘put lifelong learning in the centre stage’ of Australian discussion to counter inequality, disadvantage, poverty, intergenerational unemployment, and widening disparities between rural and regional Australia (ALA, 2018).

The challenge today is to take up the work of the past twenty-five years within a national policy framework. To once again imagine a broader concept of learning, one that complements a skills strategy with one that embraces broad lifelong learning opportunities.

Meeting that challenge, is the challenge.

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