



## **Submission to:**

Department of Education National consultation: Australia's progress against Sustainable Development Goal 4 "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".

The Department of Education is seeking stakeholder views on Australia's National Statement of Commitment to Transform Education, as part of a national consultation on Australia's progress against the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). ACED welcomes the opportunity for comment and also acknowledges the potential (and need) for transforming education nationally at this important moment in time. We are pleased to provide this written response that reviews the draft National Statement of Commitment to Transform Education and responds to the questions posed.

In so doing, we note that SDG4 takes an holistic rather than sectoral approach to the Institution of Education, utilising the concept of 'leave no-one behind' within a framework of lifelong learning (LLL). Similarly we accept and support the basic premise of the inter-relationship and interdependence between all 17 SDGs. This then is the positioning that underpins the work of ACED.

## **Australian Coalition for Education and Development**

The Australian Coalition for Education and Development (ACED) was established in 2008 and brought together 15 civil society organisations in Australia working in education and development in Australia and overseas, with a particular focus on contributing to the then Education for All movement. The purposes of ACED are:

- to develop a common advocacy agenda amongst members for education as a human right and as a tool for international development
- to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially as related to education and lifelong learning, and equity and access, and in particular SDGs 4 and 5
- to affiliate with the Global Campaign for Education (GCE).

All ACED members are committed to increasing Australian aid to education and training and supporting the education of disadvantaged children and adults in Australia and around the world. ACED member organisations are non-government and not for profit. ACED has been an active participant in a range of national, regional, and global consultations with the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic Adult Education (ASPBAE) as well as both the Global Partnership for Education and the Global Campaign for Education on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In previous statements to the Australian Government, ACED has called for Lifelong Learning (LLL) to be recognised as a central component of Sustainable Development Goal 4 and that

the Australian Government is responsible for ensuring lifelong learning opportunities for all. ACED therefore calls on the government to:

1. Formalise Lifelong learning as a coherent overarching framework within Australia's institution of education, to enhance integration and articulation of the various education and training sectors and so flexible accessible learning pathways for all Australians.
2. Develop a National Lifelong Learning Policy that highlights the need for all Australians to learn and continue learning throughout life to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.
3. Develop and implement nationally consistent policies and guidelines that embed equity, inclusiveness and diversity in each and all sectors of education and training, including gender equity.
4. Ensure that the formal policy clearly outlines economic and social goals; integrates efficiency and equity; and sets out roles and responsibilities for community, business, and all levels of government. It must emphasise the life-skills required and the inter-connected pathways between learning opportunities.
5. Renew the Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education, and outline strategies to support Adult and Community Education organisations as they continue to deliver opportunities to many Australians, including disadvantaged learners.

ACED would also like to declare our support for the submission made to this consultation by Adult Learning Australia. We specifically would like to highlight the key recommendations ALA makes:

1. Ensure an integrated government response
2. Recognise adult learning and community education.
3. Commit to developing and resourcing a national adult literacy strategy.
4. Build the capacity of adult educators and the LLND workforce.
5. Prioritise Lifelong learning for all

## Draft National Statement of Commitment to Transform Education.

The language of commitment to and support of SDG4 in its entirety both nationally and elsewhere in the Key Themes of the draft National Statement of commitment is encouraging. ACED supports the strong commitment to lifelong learning in the National Statement and the intentions of the following commitments:

- Commitment to the SDG 4 through “continuous improvement to meet and exceed all targets” That said, we also note that in the section relating to reporting and measurement on SDG4, comment about intentions does not extend beyond secondary schooling, thus substantially limiting the scope.
- Commitment to working with all domestic stakeholders.
- Acknowledgment of the need to address teacher workforce challenges.
- Commitment to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Continued engagement with UNESCO and member states. Similarly, we urge continuing engagement with UNESCO's International centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (UNEVOC) and UNESCO Institute for Lifelong learning (UIL).
- A particular focus on closing the gap between the educational outcomes of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations and the non-Indigenous population.

ACED would like to express our concern with the strong emphasis in the statement on digital learning as a solution for access to education. As referred to in the statement digital transformation can exacerbate existing inequalities.

ACED supports the recognition of *"vulnerable and disadvantaged learners at all levels of our education and training systems"*, however we ask that that statement be more explicit in terms of the following:

- In the statement there is no mention of adult learners including older adults. Children, young people and disadvantaged groups are important but if we are committed to Lifelong Learning then this statement must include the whole spectrum of learners, including adults *and therefor all sectors of education*.
- Specific mention of women needs also to be included *"Australia's development investments are strongly committed to learning for all, particularly for women, girls and children with disability within the Indo-Pacific region."*
- We propose that when referring to the education and training system the statement includes reference to the extensive non-formal learning and education system that complements this formal system - especially community-based organisations such as local neighborhood houses, U3A, community colleges, et al.
- OECD PIAAC and Australia's recent commitment to the Marrakesh Framework for Action (MFA) should also be included with NAPLAN as mechanisms for the Australian government to monitor progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The MFA also details commitments to professionalise the education workforce and teacher training continues to be an issue for the ALE sector in Australia.
- We recommend that the statement be updated to align with the Action Tracks developed from the Marrakesh CONFINTEA by the United Nations for example United Nations Transforming Education Summit Action Track 2 on Learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development.

## ACED response to the questions posed by the consultation.

### Ensuring full recovery from COVID-19 educational disruption

#### **What has been the impact of COVID-19 related disruptions to education delivery in Australia on learning loss, student disengagement and drop out?**

- The Australian Government's response to COVID-19 had an immediate impact on domestic education and training, international students, and educational aid through lock outs and lock downs over an extended period. This has led to learning losses for adults who were participating or intending to participate in the wide spectrum of learning opportunities such as ACE, VET, Higher Education, workplace and professional learning and non-formal learning opportunities.
- The pandemic also highlighted flaws in our existing education and training systems. These have the potential for valuable learning & correction.
- The pandemic also highlighted the extra strain and so burden on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable Australians in relation to education services.
- Inequalities in access to online communication opportunities, including the Internet, prevented many adults from continuing to learn throughout the lockdowns and highlighted the lack of skills many adults had in using this technology.
- Once interrupted many learners, both youth and adults, have dropped away and may never return to their learning pathway. This will continue to have an impact on

educational providers, skill shortages for the workforce and the ability of many adults to manage the changes meet the needs of future work and active citizenship.

- The pandemic continues across Australia and the world strengthening the existing reluctance to make plans, especially for travel interstate or internationally, in case they will be disrupted.

### **What has been the impact of the COVID-19 educational disruption on the wellbeing of both learners and teachers, including Australia's vulnerable and disadvantaged populations?**

- UNESCO has acknowledged that the "COVID-19 crisis has disrupted education provision all over the world, including adult learning and education (ALE). In August 2020, a United Nations Policy Brief, Education during COVID-19 and beyond, indicated that an estimated 40 per cent of the poorest countries failed to support learners at risk during the COVID-19 crisis.
- " For many young people and adults, the cumulative impact of the closing down of schools, universities, TAFE colleges or adult and community learning centres that impacted on their on-going learning was compounded by the financial hardship caused by shutdowns and subsequent loss of jobs, income, and economic and social support. For women, the double care burden aggravated this even further.
- We note in particular the heavy impact of the pandemic on youth and on women, with the latter also impacted by increased care burdens, home schooling of children, increased safety issues and loss of employment. Many Australians employed in casualised, temporary &/or insecure work including the gig economy fell through the emergency safety nets established by the Government/s. COVID-19 has highlighted the flaws in existing education and training systems, including links between welfare, work and training, apprenticeships and traineeships, and training pathways in the caring and feminised industries (many of which include frontline workers).
- As stated by ALA in their submission to this consultation, Australia is suffering from a national skills shortage of educators that are qualified to support adults with low language, literacy numeracy, and digital (LLND) skills. The adult LLND workforce is largely casualised; therefore, adult educators need access to free high-quality professional development that provides them with opportunities to learn in ways that apply to their work settings.
- The OECD in March 2021 estimated the loss in on-the-job learning by adults due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "Participation in informal learning due to widespread shutdowns of economic activities is estimated to have decreased by 25%. In the case of non-formal learning the estimate corresponds to 18%. This represents a notable amount of lost learning, and one which may not be easily recovered."

### **What progress has been made to date to recover pandemic-related losses?**

- The pandemic continues with many adults and their families in a cycle of illness, isolation and sometimes a long recovery.
- The impact of the pandemic on mental health is emerging as a major issue, including that connected with social isolation, loss of work and education/learning routines and income.
- This has led to a persistent lack of workforce across industries, and this has direct impact on workplace learning and development. This has been exacerbated by the recognised 'crisis' in the VET sector, well overdue for reform.

- The continued “crisis mode” we’ve all become accustomed to has reduced our capacity for life broad learning, not only in the healthcare sector.
- Adaptations during the pandemic were introduced at pace and they may not be optimised for ongoing delivery.
- COVID-19 set the precedent for adaptable, flexible programs which focused on the essential learning graduates required. It should be clear that this was a threshold minimum standard.
- Students have a right to expect enhanced learning and teaching in the post-pandemic environment. That said, there are indications that students want to maintain the flexibility of choosing to study parts of their program virtually. Institutions face the challenge of delivering this alongside standard and fully online provision.

**Do you propose additional measures to support further recovery in the short or medium term?**

- ACED does support the skills agenda, but it is important to situate this not solely on narrow skills and competencies, but also to link this to broader and more cross-cutting reflection and analytical skills to help to ensure that all adults can engage with the debates around vaccination, etc.
- Ongoing staffing issues and uncertainty over availability to attend the workplace continue to create an unstable and uncertain environment. Institutions must build resilience into their education delivery plans. This might be in the form of planning for under-study or backup cover for teaching staff, staff making lesson plans well in advance and sharing them with colleagues so they can be used if the staff member is unexpectedly absent or automated processes to shift learners to alternative delivery modes at short notice.

**Strategic transformations and levers for reimagining education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

In 2019 ACED called for greater attention to provide education for 21st century life skills such as critical analytical skills, problem solving, conflict resolution, communication, and community building. In the ACED Spotlight Report it was proposed that “these skills need to be incorporated into training for employment programs and that the latter need to be more realistic in relation to the actual jobs available in the market in each partner country” (ACED, 2019). ACED suggest that these learning and training programs “should be pitched to the large majority of youth and adults that are currently not enrolled in TVET programs” (ACED, 2019).

**What aspects of education in Australia are most important to continue, strengthen and/or safeguard?**

- ACED recommends that the VET Sector should not continue to gravitate to a narrow focus on skills but be broadened to include broad based learning to facilitate informed and active citizens.
- Variety in educational delivery needs to be maintained to meet the different learning styles of all youth and adults. Relying on online delivery as a cheap alternative has been shown to exacerbate inequity of both access and learning outcomes.
- The literacy divide remains and has widened as youth and adults’ lost opportunities to build their language, literacy, and numeracy skills. A national policy for LLN is

required that addresses how Australian youth and adults will be prepared for 21<sup>st</sup> Century work and life.

- Access to workplace learning for adults needs to be strengthened as this has been a casualty of the pandemic and may take some time to recover with the diminishing workforce in Australia due to illness and lack of migration.

### **Can you identify any new possibilities or directions for education that have only recently become apparent?**

- Care needs to be made in focusing solely on the economic response to the crises. ACED recommends that the Australian government consider and make explicit how they will balance emerging needs and different priorities, particularly the needs of youth and adults.
- Consideration must be given to the need to build the confidence of youth and adult learners if future educational programs are to be successful.

### **What are some innovative transformations for education that Australia should embrace?**

- It has become apparent through the pandemic is that a new set of core knowledge, skills and attitudes that need to be developed in all learners. This new set re-emphasizes skills for resilience, coping with change, confidence to adapt and to develop abilities to innovate.
- The growing role of Learning Cities (such as Hume, Melton, and Wyndham) could be a mechanism to expand the remit of learning beyond the schools across the community.

### **Can you identify any groups, bodies or forums that can be leveraged or can lead on education transformations in Australia?**

- Business and industry need to take up their responsibilities for the training and continued learning of youth and adults in our society.
- Local councils – via Learning Cities, Local Learning and Employment Networks

## **Reviewing national education targets and benchmarks**

### **What are your thoughts on Australia's progress in meeting the SDG 4 targets?**

- Measuring progress for adults in Australia to meet the SDG4 targets is difficult as there are no measures available that are relevant to adult participation and outcomes.
- Across the ACED networks education for adults was severely diminished during the COVID lockdowns and has not recovered.
- Workplaces are struggling to maintain sufficient workforce with limited ability to provide workplace learning.
- Anecdotally ACED members estimate that the possible progress towards lifelong learning targets for adults has stalled or gone backwards over the past two years.

### **Can you identify ways of accelerating progress towards meeting the targets?**

- Australia has many successful models where education provision has been developed with or by local communities. Engagement of local communities can bring more shoulders to the wheel.

### **Are there any opportunities to review, define or evaluate targets and benchmarks?**

- At the global level, engaging with the GEM (Global Education Monitoring) but also with GRALE (Global Report on ALE).
- Australia can build on PIAAC but can also lead the world in developing more robust ALE M&E as committed to in the MFA.

### **Ensuring strengthened and sustainable public financing of education**

#### **Can you identify any innovative models or mechanisms for financing education?**

- The Australian government needs to commit increased funding for adult learning both domestically but also in our aid and development projects. Aside from infrastructure development most overseas aid and development projects are about capacity building which are essentially adult learning activities.

#### **How effectively does Australia's domestic education funding address equity issues?**

- This more inclusive and equitable approach is even more relevant given that 140 countries, including Australia, attended the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Adult Education ([CONFINTEA VII](#)), and ratified the [Marrakesh Framework for Action \(MFA\)](#). According to the [UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning](#), through the MFA, *"states will work to realize a right to lifelong learning, enhancing governance and quality of adult learning and education, backed by increased investment. They committed to placing inclusion at the heart of these endeavours to ensure that those most often left behind benefit from lifelong learning."*
- Furthermore, this is also consistent with the commitment to SDG 4 of the [Transforming Education Summit \(TES\)](#) to *"mobilize political ambition, action, solutions and solidarity to transform education: to take stock of efforts to recover pandemic-related learning losses; to reimagine education systems for the world of today and tomorrow; and to revitalize national and global efforts to achieve SDG-4."*
- Regional and remote students in Higher Education. From 2021, regional and remote students will be included in the distribution of access and equity funding, alongside low SES (socio-economic status) and Indigenous students.
- There is a lack of resources available for funding the adult learning and education sector particularly regarding pathway learning in Australia. The Victorian government's Adult Community and Further Education program funds Learn Locals and provides pre- accredited or non-accredited learning opportunities for many disadvantaged adult learners - this model could provide a starting point for a national approach.

#### **Prepared by Members of the Australian Coalition of Education and Development**

- Adult Learning Australia
- Women in Adult and Vocational Education
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- Federation University
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