



## Key Issues for Roundtable Discussion

### Introduction

In November 2003, Dr Brendan Nelson, Minister for Education, Science and Training released a discussion paper entitled *you can too: Adult Learning in Australia*.

The discussion paper's release followed the Treasurer's Intergenerational report released with the 2002-2003 Budget in May 2002. The report detailed Australia's rapidly changing demography – noting that over the next 40 years the growth in the population of traditional workforce age – 15 to 64 – is expected to slow to almost zero while the proportion of those aged over 65 will almost double to around 25% of the population.

It was in this context that the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) embarked on a national consultation process on adult learning, which was defined in the paper as “learning for vocational, civic and personal purposes for people aged over 25”. Discussions focussed on seven key issues:

- Understanding the needs of adult learners;
- Building relationships between service providers, employers, government and the community;
- Promoting the value of adult learning;
- Assisting mature age transitions;
- Supporting learning in the workplace;
- Ensuring access to opportunities; and
- Engaging communities.

The paper itself received 90 written submissions from a range of stakeholders, including individual adult learners, training providers, local and State Governments and peak bodies such as Adult Learning Australia and the Regional Women's Advisory Council.

Consultations were held in 28 places around Australia, including all capital cities and a number of regional centres. Consultations commenced in Melbourne, Victoria on 24 February and concluded in Charleville, Queensland on 19 May.



This issues paper brings together the five **key** issues which were raised repeatedly as a high priority of those engaged in adult learning from both the written and face-to-face consultation process.

This brief summary is provided as background information for the Roundtable Discussion to be held with the Minister on 22 June 2004 at Parliament House.

## **A national policy on adult learning**

Many participants in the consultations and written submissions expressed a concern that adult learning is, at present, insufficiently recognised and valued by governments, employers, and even by potential adult learners themselves.

Participants expressed the view that a national policy or statement on adult learning would be desirable. It is not surprising that there were a variety of views on what a national policy or statement might encompass and how it should be developed.

While the views varied on what a national policy should include, there was a general consensus among those in favour of a national policy that leadership in the area of adult learning should come from the Australian Government, in co-operation with the States and Territories.

There were a range of suggestions on the content of a national policy which included:

- Recognition of the roles played by different levels of government, training and education providers, industry and individuals.
- Recognition of the importance of community driven solutions – supported by flexible government policy.
- Recognition of the importance of recognising both formal and informal learning – particularly where informal learning leads to a reintegration for the adult learner into formal vocational learning.
- Recognition that adult learning was an important element in developing a lifelong learning culture.
- Recognition of the needs of the disadvantaged.
- Recognition that a national policy would provide a rationale for allocation of resources.



### **Australian Learning Communities Network**

*Current practitioners spend a lot of time in explanation of the concept. ... A national policy/framework, in which a learning community concept sits, would give an imprimatur to the work in the field and assist in the alleviation of the currently required self justification. ... [A framework could include]: ... context, rationale, policy objectives, governing principles, entitlements, widening participation, funding learning, community empowerment, flexibility, learning at work, sharing responsibility, quality and accountability.*

The call for a national policy on adult learning reflected, in part, the great diversity in the adult learning sector. Today, adult learners attend university, TAFE, private training and education providers, centres of adult learning and public facilities such as libraries and museums. They undertake learning in not only formal, but also informal environments.

For many, informal learning in non-vocational areas is a necessary step towards formal vocational learning. It helps to overcome feelings of insecurity, particularly for adult learners who have had many years of full-time work following early school leaving.

The diversity of adult learning is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength in so far as different training and education providers offer a variety of expertise which can accommodate local needs in ways that large systemic providers might not be able to do as well.

However, the diversity is also a weakness because it may lead learners to conclude the market is fragmented and many adult learners, as such, feel that they do not know 'where to start'.

Proponents of a national policy suggested that such a policy could provide an inclusive framework where all stakeholders could see the contribution they made to adult learning across Australia. A national policy could provide some national objectives that would bring together all levels of government, education and training providers and the community.



### **Adult Learning Australia**

*Institute an overarching policy framework for adult learning, aimed at creating linkages between industry, training, employment and communities which will work towards a knowledge economy and a learning society and establish a secretariat to encourage joined up government responses and more coherent funding solutions. ... There is a role for Government to play in creating the enabling environment for a flourishing learning society. This role would be facilitated by introducing a national policy framework to guide whole-of-government approaches to meeting community and individual demands for learning.*

Those calling for a national policy also saw it as a way of ensuring genuine government commitment at all levels to improving opportunities for adult learners.

### **Learning Network Queensland**

*Bland statements of encouragement and weak policy frameworks let state and territory governments ... off the hook.*

*There is an urgent imperative to bring about a whole-of-government, joined up approach to support adult learning across Australia. All sectors – individuals, business, governments and community based organisations – need to be mobilised to create a true lifelong learning society. ... Governments must take a leadership role in this endeavour.*

## **Recognising the value of adult learning**

Consultations revealed a strong perception that adult learning is not highly valued by governments or by industry.

Many of those attending the consultations argued that only formal vocational education such as university or TAFE education was seen as a priority by governments, and that the benefits which may flow from less formal learning such as learning in local community centres, and some adult learning centres, particularly in encouraging adult learners to undertake more formal vocational learning, was overlooked.

It was further argued that this was compounded by terminology used in adult learning which can be ambiguous and confusing.



The informality of many forms of adult learning was seen as being very important.

For many people, particularly those over 45 who had not been involved in formal education or training since their school days, informal learning environments were essential. Many people are fearful of education and training and are reluctant to participate in formal learning. Informal adult education type programs can provide a very important first step.

The benefits of informal learning were highlighted in the *Securing Success* report prepared by the Workplace Education Research Consortium at the University of New England. See [www.dest.gov.au/train/train\\_pub.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/train/train_pub.htm) for further details.

#### **Australian Network of Practice Firms**

*Potential and current learners, particularly those who do not see themselves as learners, need to see the direct outcomes of learning to be convinced of its value. This may be easier access to a job, the opportunity to look for a better job, or a different type of job. But it is often the self-assurance and confidence that accompanies the acquisition of skills that highlights the change from unemployed person to work-seeker.*

Many participants highlighted the value of informal learning that does not necessarily lead to a vocational outcome. For many adult learners, the first experience of learning as an adult does not always form part of a clear vocational pathway. There were many examples cited of people who needed to develop their confidence and self esteem by undertaking programs that were of a recreational nature before they were ready to embark on something more directly vocational, or in order to apply their skills in other areas, such as volunteering.

#### **National Advisory Committee on Ageing**

*Education has a social and economic dimension for individuals and the community. Improvements in the capacity and opportunity to learn will create a larger knowledge base to achieve productive ageing of the population. The take up of adult learning will be influenced by individual life experience. Continued workforce participation by older people will require relevant training and skills. There is a broader education benefit for older people which if embraced can stimulate their mental capacity, improve literacy to cope with the pressure of modern life and add to their overall well being.*



### **Regional Women's Advisory Council**

*Attention also needs to be paid to the importance of adult learning that leads to social participation (eg volunteering). While economic participation is a desirable outcome from engaging in further learning it is sometimes not a practical outcome in regional [areas] where economic participation opportunities may be limited. Social participation is sometimes a pathway to economic participation – a useful outcome in its own right. Social participation however is important in building community capacity and sense of purpose – a very important contributor to helping regional communities meet the challenges that often confront them.*

Employers were regarded as a key ingredient to developing a culture which promotes and implements greater levels of adult learning.

In particular, those attending the consultations focused on the need for sophisticated methods of recognising prior learning – particularly skills gained 'on the job'.

Recognition of Prior Learning and Recognition of Current Competencies (RPL/RCC) was raised in many of the consultations as:

- too difficult and too time consuming; and
- too much information to be gathered and just as expensive as doing the training.

In the regulated VET system, RPL is provided by Registered Training Organisations (which includes public and private providers). The processes for conduct of RPL assessments are the responsibility of the individual provider. In Higher Education, RPL policies and procedures are typically included in each University's admissions rules and may also be prescribed in course rules which set out the requirements for progression within courses of study.

It was argued that the recognition process would need to be made much simpler if adults were going to undertake accredited learning.



### **Australian National Training Authority**

*Learning on the job is a strong tradition in Australia. While learning for and at work is the context for ANTA's work with adults, our recent National Strategy consultations and research strongly indicated that this learning cannot be separated from life wide or lifelong learning. The National Strategy reinforces this idea by identifying the purpose of VET as 'providing skills and knowledge for work, enhancing employability and assisting learning throughout life'.*

## **The need to communicate and promote adult learning to both to prospective adult learners and employers**

The consultations and submissions revealed a strong concern that the benefits of learning throughout life are not recognised by the community at large. Many respondents felt that education and training is treated as something 'for young people' and generally undertaken in institutions targeting young people's needs.

We know that for the majority of Australians, formal learning finished after 10 or 12 years of schooling, with more than half of 25 to 64 year olds today having not done any further study beyond school. In 2001, Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicated that 47% of people aged 45 to 64 did not complete Year 12.

The *Securing Success* report released in 2003 found that 'many older learners are uncomfortable about returning to education and training, particularly those who have negative prior experiences of schooling or low self-esteem'. This issue was clearly identified again in the consultation process as leading to an ongoing resistance to formal education, and a failure to recognise that continued learning can help improve quality of life.

### **University of Ballarat**

*Adult learning must be seen to be relevant to the person learning and more particularly to employers.*

### **Barrie Brennan**

*Adult learning in its widest, lifelong and life wide, sense must be promoted, not just the learning associated with teaching and education. ... adult learning should be promoted in its broadest sense to more effectively identify its value.*



Many participants in the consultations argued that communicating the value of learning was seen as a very important step in encouraging mature aged people to engage in learning. This communication needs to come from government, employers, and more generally from those organisations with a role in adult learning.

There was a strong call for a public awareness campaign to promote the benefits and accessibility of adult learning.

Those who argued for a public awareness campaign suggested that it be both multi-faceted and sustained. Comparisons were drawn with other campaigns that aimed to change entrenched behaviours and attitudes like anti-smoking and 'Life Be In It'.

**The Centre for Continuing Education Inc**

*There should be a national campaign that highlights the benefits and enjoyment of learning, stimulating people to want to learn. Local adult learning organisations would be able to “hook into” the national campaign with a localised campaign which more reflects the availability and likely demand of learning in that community.*

The public awareness campaign, as proposed by participants, would:

- Make people aware of the diverse range of adult learning opportunities available to them;
- inform people where these opportunities could lead in terms of employment, social, civic and personal benefits;
- provide 'user friendly' information on how training opportunities can be accessed; and
- encourage employers to recognise the value to their business of training, and to provide opportunities and support to their older staff.

There was a strong view put that a national database of available courses, services and support was needed.

**Regional Women's Advisory Council**

*Changing the attitudes of employers towards valuing older workers provides a difficult challenge – which will continue to grow as the population ages. Governments need to take the lead in educating employer groups of the valuable resource pool that older workers constitute. Practical demonstration case studies are a useful tool that would provide real life examples of the benefits of employers engaging older workers. Financial incentives could also be useful to encourage employers to consider older workers.*



## Coordination arrangements

Participants noted that many prospective adult learners do not know where to go in their community to get information on what education and training opportunities were available locally.

For those prospective adult learners who are eligible for Job Network, there was a clear entry point and the assistance that was available seemed to be well understood.

However, for those not eligible for Job Network support, there was no clear pathway or entry point for obtaining advice on options available to them for learning opportunities.

### **Charles Darwin University**

*The simplest and most effective strategy to achieve [the aim of creating better linkages between service providers, industry and the community] would be to resource a program of 'link personnel'. These people would dedicate their work effort to building the networks, and encouraging educators, industry and community to interact in a manner that is outside the current 'silo culture'.*

One solution suggested by a number of participants was for an adviser or coordinator to be located in communities to facilitate linkages between adult learners, employers, training providers and local governments. Coordination of services at the local level was generally non-existent but where there were local coordinators they were seen to work well. They provided a focal point for people to go for advice and information on their options.

An adviser's role would be to make sure these linkages were made and adult learners had a clearly identified person who could help them plan their training needs and walk through the process with them. The adviser role would not be one of training delivery, but rather one of linking adult learners with appropriate community contacts. They would provide a similar role to careers advisers for younger people. This issue was raised particularly during the public consultation process.



### **Comments from the public consultations**

#### **Lismore**

*Provide funding for a community-based liaison officer who can provide advice on the courses, assistance and options available within the local area.*

#### **Dubbo**

*Fund a full time 'learning broker' to forge links between key community stakeholders, adult learners and training providers.*

#### **Hobart**

*Funding should be provided to employ and support regional adult learning coordinators. Individual case management and active promotion of Recognition of Prior Learning across sectors and for individuals could form part of their role.*

#### **Charleville**

*Provide funding for a community liaison officer who can update the community on the options available and point people in the right direction. Look at the Queensland Department of Health's model. The model has been working well and has entered its fourth year.*

Some participants expressed disappointment about the poor linkages between the Australian Government, State/Territory and Local Governments in adult learning.

At the same time it was also recognised that co-ordination and communication between providers of adult learning was often not good. The potential for duplication was high and the opportunity for sharing benefits through optimising outcomes was reduced.

#### **City of Salisbury**

*As a provider of adult learning, local government can act as a role model, or perhaps more so as a promoter of the values of the community, such as the value of lifelong learning and the role of learning in contributing to the fabric of the community. Local government can also use adult learning to strengthen links with social partners in identifying and meeting the needs of the community in a collaborative way.*



On a more practical level, it was suggested that existing infrastructure such as schools, TAFEs and other public facilities such as council chambers could be used to support adult learning more than was currently the case.

#### **Rural Education Forum Australia**

*Consideration needs to be given to conducting a national audit of under-utilised capacity of school sites and training institutions in rural, regional and remote Australia with the intention of using the findings to implement a network of Rural Learning Centres for Viable Rural Futures.*

### **The learning needs of rural and regional Australia**

There are marked differences in the needs of rural and regional Australians for adult learning opportunities when contrasted to metropolitan centres.

#### **Open Learning Australia**

*Promoting the value of adult learning is a nationwide challenge and the need is particularly acute in rural and regional areas where take-up, particularly of formal adult learning is significantly lower. This adversely affects the take-up and consequent offering of specialisations as well as restricting the range, and knowledge of the initial learning experiences that adult learners may wish to access.*

Critical issues here relate to the distances providers need to travel and the challenges that providers face in achieving a reasonable number of participants in order to run a training course. These factors often result in too many learners gaining clusters of skills in which tuition is easily accessible, whereas many other skill needs were not met at all.

While there was some suggestion that an increase in the availability of information technology including broadband, would provide some assistance to rural adult learners, feedback from the consultation process was that such improvements would constitute a partial solution at best.

#### **Rural Education Forum Australia**

*Consideration needs to be given to improving the viability and sustainability of training programs in rural and remote locations by providing support to enable people living in large regional and metropolitan cities to access them ie take steps to reverse the usual county to city enrolment flow.*



Critical to the success of adult learning programs was the need for 'bottom up' solutions led by local communities in rural and regional areas.

Decisions about programs to be offered in smaller communities need to be based on real community and business needs.

Most rural and regional providers are small. There was a view that the regulation of training providers resulted in many such providers spending disproportionately high amounts of time on compliance and accountability processes – sometimes at the expense of directing resources to meeting the needs of adult learners.

In some situations larger metropolitan based training organisations were providing services in regional areas but their services were seen as costly and there was a view that they did not understand the local needs as well as the local providers.

#### **Regional Women's Advisory Council**

*Governments need access to information that provides them with a clear picture of where the demand is for further adult learning opportunities, what type of learning opportunities are required and how the demand can be satisfied.*

There were particular issues faced by Indigenous communities and it was widely recognised that solutions for them would need to be developed in a holistic manner and be culturally appropriate. Remote communities faced particular problems in relation to access to opportunities.

### **Other important issues raised during the consultations**

#### **Funding**

While funding regularly arose as an important issue in relation to adult learning, there was no real consensus on possible solutions or how issues of funding could be addressed systemically.

Some participants were of the view that overall levels of funding were inadequate, whereas others expressed the view that levels of education and training provision were generally adequate and that if any additional funding was required, it should be directed to enhance coordination arrangements.



## The Use of information Technology in Adult Learning

Access to information technology (IT) was raised regularly as an important tool in providing access to learning; most particularly in rural and remote areas where access to training is often difficult and expensive.

There were a range of issues raised under this banner:

- IT literacy was seen to be growing in status to have a similar value to reading, writing and arithmetic.
- The need for access to broadband, particularly in rural and regional areas, to facilitate more responsive and better quality IT usage.
- Recent initiatives in providing infrastructure had been well received in the first instance but in some cases there was a lack of ongoing support that meant these ventures were not sustainable.
- Many older people lack the confidence to use IT; and care needs to be taken that increased IT access does not present another barrier to these people.
- IT was regarded as not just a valuable learning tool, but also a vehicle for marketing the value of learning.
- The IT area in particular would both serve and benefit from the establishment of a national database on adult learning opportunities and source material.

### **The Smith Family**

*The inherent value of information technology skills in today's economy is well established. More broadly, access to information and communication technologies is becoming central to people's ability to fully participate in the economic, social, political and cultural spheres of our society. The Smith Family's own research has further explored how a lack of access and experience with computers and other technology can socially exclude disadvantaged people, and exacerbate their financial position.*



## APPENDIX 1

### Current DEST initiatives which assist adult learners

There are a number of DEST strategies and programmes that play a key role in the development of lifelong learning for adult Australians, including key initiatives relating to participation in learning by mature aged workers and rural/regional and Indigenous learners.

Some of these include:

#### IT skills for older workers

##### *Basic IT Enabling Skills (BITES) for Older Workers Programme*

BITES targets low income earners aged 45 or over with limited or non-existent IT skills, with a view to increasing their competitiveness in the job market. In the first 17 months of operation, 18,927 people have received training in over 650 locations across Australia.

#### More training places for adult Australians

##### *VET Priority Places Programme*

In 2004, this programme will purchase 7,500 new priority training places, worth \$20.5m. These places are in 12 regions around Australia and target older workers aged 45 and over, low income earners, people with a disability, and parents entering or re-entering the workforce. Participants in the programme can attain a nationally recognised qualification.

#### Language and literacy skills

##### *Workplace English Language and Literacy*

This very successful programme targets workers at risk of welfare dependency caused by job loss. It involves employer-government co-financing (employers contribute 25% for the first year and 50% in the second and third years). In 2003 /2004 \$12.4m was available to train around 18,000 workers at some 400 work sites.

##### *Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme*

This programme complements WELL in that it offers skills training to jobseekers rather than those in work. Over 19,000 places were made available under the programme in 2002-03.

##### *The Reading Writing Hotline*

The Reading Writing Hotline is a national telephone adult literacy and numeracy referral service which refers enquirers to an extensive provider network.



## **Support for mature age New Apprenticeships**

### *New Apprenticeships Access Programme (NAAP)*

The NAAP provides job seekers who experience barriers to skilled employment with pre-vocational training, support and assistance to obtain and maintain a New Apprenticeship. Alternatively, a job seeker may be supported into employment, further education or training. NAAP provides vocational training, which is nationally recognised, is based on local labour market needs and is linked to a New Apprenticeship pathway. Over the next two years it is expected that some 9,000 jobseekers will be assisted through the programme.

### *New Apprenticeships*

New Apprenticeships are available to learners of all ages. Older people and rural/regional dwellers are currently well represented among learners. 13.5% of New Apprentices are aged 45 or above, and this age group has shown strong growth since 1996. Some 39% of New Apprentices are in rural and regional areas, and this group has also shown strong growth.

Recent changes to the New Apprenticeships Incentives Programme that provides financial incentives to employers of New Apprentices reinforce the commitment to older workers. From 1 July 2003, an additional \$825 is paid both at commencement and completion for New Apprentices aged 45 and over who are welfare dependent, returning to the workforce or redundant. For rural and regional employers, an additional commencement incentive of \$1,100 is available to an employer who employs a New Apprentice in an occupation identified as suffering from skill shortages.

### *National Skills Shortages Strategy (NSSS)*

Since late 1999, the Australian Government, together with industry has spent more than \$12.5 million via the National Industry Skills Initiative – helping 11 industry sectors to explore current and future skills needs.

The success of this initiative has proven the benefits of an industry Government partnership to address skills needs and the importance of industry taking a leadership role in developing strategies to address them.

The Working Group Action Plans articulate strategies which enable industry to shape recruitment, skills recognition and training to address existing and projected skills needs.

The Government continues to address industry skills needs through a variety of mechanisms and has developed the National Skills Shortages Strategy (NSSS) to build on existing work and provide a more comprehensive approach to addressing skills needs.

The strategy includes innovative skills shortages projects – practical projects targeting alternative entrants to the skilled workforce; regional skills projects to look at building effective skills sets for regions; further work in the National Industry Skills Initiative to ensure best practice strategies are communicated across sectors; a focus



on science and technology skills ([http://www.nsss.gov.au/brilliant\\_career.htm](http://www.nsss.gov.au/brilliant_career.htm)) to attract young people to take up careers in science and technology; comprehensive national labour market projections; and a New Apprentices' Roundtable to ensure direct communication between the Australian Government and people currently involved in training.



## APPENDIX 2

### Research Projects

#### *Securing Success*

The *Securing Success* study, released last year, was commissioned by DEST and conducted by staff from the Workplace Education Research Consortium (WERC) at the University of New England. The study describes the conditions under which unemployed Australians aged 45 and over, with scant prior education, can achieve success through education and training. The project's objectives were to: (1) inform policy and programmes designed to improve the labour market participation of mature aged people; and (2) identify features of good practice in the ACE sector that encourage older learners to undertake and persist with education and training in order to gain relevant job-related skills and qualifications. The study sought survey responses from public and private training organisations throughout Australia. Providers of education for people with disabilities and for those in rehabilitation were included in the study.

#### *Furthering Success*

A subsequent study, *Furthering Success* is being funded by the Department and is designed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic forces that impact on the education, training and employment pathways for older disadvantaged workers across Australia. The project incorporates qualitative research, quantitative research and workshops to identify and evaluate the features of the education, training and employment system that work effectively to market, service and create successful employment pathways for older workers.