



## Knowledge nation omits ACE

by Tony Brown

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Adult and community education (ACE) – the largest area of organised education in Australia outside the compulsory school sector – is ignored in Labor’s Knowledge Nation report. Each year 1.4 million adults enrol in a community-based education course to learn about computers and business skills, improve their literacy and numeracy, learn a language, study photography, music, literature or take one of hundreds of other courses on offer.

Community education organisations also convene informal learning circles for active citizenship on reconciliation, salinity, safer communities and so on and are creating new locally-based partnerships through the emerging Learning Cities. Yet Labor’s report makes no mention of these innovations.

The Knowledge Nation report has either failed to recognise community adult education or ignored it. Either way adult educators and learners will wonder why such a large and vital area of education and knowledge has been omitted.

ACE was the subject of two Senate reports in the 1990s when it was deemed the Cinderella of Australian education. The 1997 report, which was unanimously supported by Senators from all parties, called for the Commonwealth to make an unequivocal commitment to promoting a learning society, to integrating community and vocational education, and to establishing a national authority to support lifelong learning. These recommendations seem to have also been forgotten.

Too little attention is also given to the learning needs of those who have missed out. The target of achieving 90% school retention – the same as proposed by the Finn and Carmichael committees of the early 1990s is welcome. However, it remains a big task as current retention levels are falling and are now just 70% and in some states below that.

The negative consequences in terms of lifetime earnings, health, housing and employment of not completing Year 12 are serious and often pass onto future generations. Today there are around four million adults without the equivalent of Year 12 qualifications.

Similarly, 44% of adults do not have adequate literacy and numeracy levels to fully function in today’s Australia, according to Australian and international surveys.

Community education organisations play a unique role in supporting hesitant or discouraged learners. People who found their initial education dissatisfying or who lack confidence in returning to education look to organisations that offer a non-threatening environment and an adult-focused approach. They look for practical and convenient opportunities for inclusion.

A knowledge nation will not materialise until we recognise the breadth and depth of the learning divide and take action to close it. A knowledge nation cannot be built on a divided foundation.

The report does identify a number of very welcome commitments. Recommendations for the Prime Minister to personally take the lead on learning, to adopt a whole of government approach, to call a National Summit, and to establish a Knowledge Nation Council and policy unit within the Prime Minister’s department indicate that education and learning will have a much higher government priority than currently exists.

Labor’s task of transforming Australia’s educational culture is a vital challenge and the report’s 20 recommendations show that Labor is on the right track. Making education and learning a centrepiece of future policy is in line with the aspirations of millions of Australians.

But if political parties want to win broad support for a knowledge society they must look beyond the elite areas of education. They must look to re-engage discouraged learners, to foster learning where people want to access it in clubs, hotels, community centres, trade unions, workplaces and social settings as well as in the classroom.

To ignore adult and community education is to miss a keystone of a knowledge nation.