



# The Business of Education

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What is this the Business of Education? And, should education be a business? Just unpack some of the language that follows in an Internet marketing spin that came my way recently.

"As the digital economy evolves and technology redefines the economic playing field, companies' most important and strategic investments no longer take the form of fixed assets. Instead, human capital has become the foundation of the New Economy. This trend is driving the need for more effective education at all levels, including a dramatic increase in the need for continued re-training at the corporate level"

Is this how Life Long Learning will be incorporated into the new speak of 2001? None of the above statement seems to be embedded with the celebration of what learning is all about. Is this the kind of education business we as ACE providers want to be in? Is our charter to help supply fully franked human capital to the corporate world?

When I came to my current position at Sydney Community College, one of the things that excited and drove me, was that of the fantastically empowering and liberating aspect of education. All education has the potential of this little surprise. We as educators often use the metaphorical terms for it such as 'keys' 'doors' and 'to unlock'. Each of these terms is used within a deeper context of liberation. We are all prisoners of our own limited experience and learning opens doors we did not know existed. Yet the statement above says nothing to me of liberation. In fact it implies the opposite. That of a store-hold of resources that can be moved about, added to, taken from, bought, sold or discarded. The statement also is silent in implication about the fundamental worth of education. Education is a good in itself as it contributes to the fabric of society making its attainment a worthwhile life long pursuit. It should not be pursued for narrow corporate utility alone.

Recently, Vice Chancellor of the University of Canberra, Professor Don Aitkin asserted that the business of education was to invest in our nation's people and that if institutions such as universities were to act as businesses, then their balance sheets must be read quite unlike those of the corporate world. I am not at all questioning Professor Aitkin's argument. Indeed, I support it, but there is a danger in utilising the discourse of the corporate world. Arguments couched with such language inevitably add to the importance of that discourse. Fiscal measures become appropriate in settings that were previously inappropriate.

Should education be viewed with the same gaze as any other business?. Education is (to employ a term from economics) a 'public good', like roads, hospitals & defence. If the market is left to its own devices, we would have few, if any, public goods. Economists have developed 'cost -benefit' analysis to deal with situations where applying the balance sheet approach is wrong headed as is the case with public goods & services such as education.

Of course the management of an educational organisation should be in line with accepted principles of good governance. We are by now all aware of the value of Mission Statements, Strategic Plans, Business Plans, Management Plans and Budgets. But these are devices used only to support the real activity of the organisation. The difficulty to be dealt with, is in the tension created by the appropriation of the management device into the discourse of the educational activity. Example; implicit in the term Business Plan is the idea of profit. It is particularly difficult to explain a business plan that does not have a black bottom line. It becomes more difficult when the outcome of the business activity is not to be measured in dollars at all, but rather in social well being. Much simpler to ask how much the program cost against how much it made.

In NSW, the trend towards the measure of success of an ACE organisation is by way of factors such as turn over, size and bottom line (preferably a black one). The tighter an organisation is managed the better the overall outcome. Clearly, the tension here will be in the delivery equity or in socially beneficial programs. To deliver such activities will always be costly and the long-term benefits will not be readily measured. Outcomes such as lower hospitalisation rates, lower crime rates, healthier neighbourhoods, community well being are not easily traceable to an educational activity. Yet most policy makers understand that good social policy is enhanced by educational programs.

Once wholly the language of Adult Education, Life Long Learning as a term is being appropriated by many differing sectors. K to 12, TAFE and Universities and of course the corporate sector. The challenge for us as educators is to ensure that the discourse, in which this terms is used, does not sully the term itself. Life Long Learning is about social well being and not corporate bottom line. This statement should also remain true for education itself. Education is not business.