



## Engaging our communities in ongoing learning

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Adult education is in the box seat to pick up some of the many challenges facing the Australian economy and to make 'the knowledge nation' a fact rather than political rhetoric, but first we have to do some rethinking about engaging our communities in ongoing learning.

With our dollar in dire straits and 'recession' on every economist's lips, we need to rethink our notions of what constitutes a healthy, buoyant and growing economy to look hard at the possible contribution of the education sector.

As every adult education provider will know only too well, recent ABS surveys of adult literacy figures have shown that as many as 34 per cent of Australians are alleged not to have minimum literacy and numeracy skills. Three in ten people do not complete high school and the proportion of people on the lowest literacy level is reported to be twice that of Scandinavia.

We know from our own experience that too many students are 'falling out rather than fitting in' to the education system. It is those of us who deal with the end product – the ones who didn't reach proficiency in reading, writing and arithmetic – who know that the system isn't doing the job for approximately one third of the population.

Australia simply cannot afford this, either in a monetary sense or because of the waste of social capital that such outcomes represent. Our challenge is to use the abundant experience, skills and passion that adult educators possess to develop solutions to these problems.

Yet as a nation, we are remarkably sanguine about our education system and generally appear to believe that 'it's as good as it gets'. As adult educators, the question we need to ask ourselves is: "Are we providing what our customers want?"

The challenge facing us is how to engage our community in the ongoing educational process. In far too many ways we are still locked into a rigid educational system that has its origins in the very distant past.

At a time when so many of us are 'time poor', why do educational institutions offer learning in semesters, often with months passing with no product available at all? Why can't a man or woman who needs a qualification study all year and get to his or her goal faster? A three or four year time frame for a course of study may be inaccessible to many in today's world due to their existing commitments.

How *do* people want the educational product delivered? Perhaps we ought to start asking our customers some hard questions, the answers to which may well make our working lives more difficult, but which may also, perhaps, lead to a remodelling of the education delivery system.

How do we engage our potential students? What alternatives can we offer them? What sort of services do they need to reach their goals as efficiently as possible? How should we structure the time frame of courses? Should we have a variety of options for students to construct their own time frames?

The delivery of adult education is student-driven which, in this day and age, is only good business. This provision is based on business acumen, not on pure economics. Campuses are open all year round, 24 hours a day, seven days a week to deliver to overseas markets online.

I believe Australian education and career training needs a rethink – a revitalisation – that will help bring about the outcomes that we need to achieve, to stay competitive in the global market. What is happening both in school classrooms, in universities and TAFE colleges will effect our economic growth potential in the next decade.