

TOWARDS A LEARNING REVOLUTION IN AUSTRALIA

Overview of the Adult Learning Australia Consultation Paper On Future Directions for Lifelong Learning in Australia

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is taking an initiative to promote a national dialogue on future directions for lifelong learning in Australia. This project will involve the release of a consultation paper with a set of questions on 7 December, discussions across Australia in early 2005, with the report from this project available by 30 June 2005. A leading Australian expert on lifelong learning, Peter Kearns, is directing this study on an ALA Visiting Research Fellowship.

The consultation paper is in two parts with Part I providing background information and Part II built around four alternative scenarios for the future development of lifelong learning in Australia.

PART I BACKGROUND

Part I outlines the case for the imperative need for lifelong learning for all as a necessary national objective in the conditions of the global knowledge society and economy. This context with its exponential pace of change, blurring of traditional boundaries, and overturning of long established paradigms poses a critical challenge for all stakeholders in Australian social, economic, and cultural development requiring new ways to assist people, firms, and communities to continue learning throughout life.

Learning occurs in many contexts, and takes a range of forms. It needs to be both lifelong and lifewide, with informal and tacit forms of learning recognised as increasingly important. The impact of information and communication technology is opening new ways of fostering learning in a wide range of social and economic contexts. Research in Britain has shown the importance of the family and workplace as contexts for learning.

The paper comments on the lifelong learning approach identified by OECD from its extensive work on this subject, with a systemic view of learning especially important. This approach requires that a connected system should be developed covering the whole lifecycle and comprising all forms of formal and informal learning.

A feature of the paper is that it draws on research undertaken by the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning at London University which demonstrates the wider social and economic benefits of learning across a range of sectors. These include assisting people to adapt to change, mental and psychological health, ageing, better parenting, maintaining employability, sustaining communities, and enabling people, enterprises, and communities to be creative and innovative.

While there are many examples across Australia of imaginative innovations that extend learning opportunities throughout life, Australia overall has not adapted to the challenge of achieving a learning revolution and building a learning society. OECD in a 2001 assessment of progress placed Australia in the second bottom category of four categories of Member countries.

PART II SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE

Part II of the consultation paper is built around six drivers which condition the requirement for learning throughout life, a set of key themes, and four scenarios which could propel Australia on the path to becoming an inclusive learning society with a high capability for innovation and adapting to change.

The Drivers

The set of six drivers are: globalisation, the knowledge society and economy, demography, technology, changes in work and labour market, sustaining communities.

The Scenarios

The following scenarios have been constructed as a basis for discussion.

- 1. Civil society and local government in the driving seat**
This scenario emphasises local initiatives and grassroots action with local government becoming increasingly active. Current examples include the Hume Global Learning Village and Capricornia Online.
- 2. Government support for selected local and regional initiatives**
This scenario builds on scenario 1 but with stronger State, Territory, and Commonwealth government support for selected aspects of local initiatives.
- 3. Comprehensive and integrated State and Territory strategies**
This scenario progresses beyond scenario 2 in the development of comprehensive State and Territory strategies which integrate lifelong learning strategies for the social, economic, cultural, and civic development of the State or Territory. Tasmania is given as an example of a State which has progressed towards this objective.
- 4. Development of a national framework to build Australia as an inclusive and innovative learning society**
This is the most comprehensive and integrated of the scenarios with a national framework developed to foster collaboration and partnership across sectors and levels of government in progressing a shared vision.

Choices

The paper concludes with a focus on choices derived from the scenarios with the question posed as to what might be achieved by 2010, and then by 2020.