



The Definite Article

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LIFELONG LEARNING AND NATIONAL POLICY IMPERATIVES

A Policy Statement on Adult and
Community Education

Adult Learning Australia

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Position Paper on Lifelong Learning and National Policy Imperatives

PREAMBLE

For several decades, the merits of and necessity for lifelong learning¹ have been dutifully intoned by policy makers in Australia and elsewhere. In practice, and sadly more so in Australia than in many comparable countries, the pursuit of lifelong learning has been honoured more in the breach than the observance.

Providing citizens with strong educational foundations through quality schooling is of fundamental importance. Enabling skill development to provide a competent workforce for a technologically-sophisticated, globally-engaged economy is an obvious necessity. Encouraging innovation and building creative capacity through world-class research and teaching in our universities is vital to our future. But while Australia has much to be proud of in these endeavours, the task of building a learning society characterised by the optimal engagement of all our citizens in ways that maximise their individual wellbeing and strengthen Australian society as a whole falls well short of what is required.

This position paper seeks to re-assess the nature of that task, to examine the policy imperatives that require lifelong learning responses, and to propose a framework for implementation that will maximise the social and economic benefits available to Australia through a properly resourced and coordinated adult and community education sector.

LIFELONG LEARNING – THE ROLE, CAPACITY AND IMPACT OF ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Lifelong learning is not about constant recurrent training, but rather a constant relationship with education that begins in the early years and persists through the years of employment into old age. While formal education – through school, college, university – is a vital dimension of that relationship, the less formal learning settings of the workplace, home, library and other community settings are integral parts of the lifelong learning environment.

In both institutional, but more usually in community settings, adult and community education (ACE) providers have been creating learning opportunities for, and delivering both accredited and non-accredited educational programs to, generations of Australians. The ACE sector's philosophy – with its focus on the learner as an individual, responsiveness to identified personal, social or economic needs, flexible delivery and strong ethic of social justice and equity – has given real effect to the concept of lifelong learning for many citizens across a wide spectrum of Australian society.

There are multiple reasons why the ACE sector can make a significant contribution to delivering the lifelong learning opportunities required in order to realise the Australian government's major national policy initiatives around productivity, social inclusion, health and environmental sustainability. These reasons are:

- the distribution of 1200 plus providers nationally, providing optimal community coverage, particularly in rural communities
- the sector's reach with segments of the adult population that do not use, or avoid, the formal training system, including adults from postcodes that identify them as likely to be significantly disadvantaged
- the proven capacity of community-based providers to maximise access, to respond flexibly, to link both vocational and social inclusion elements of learning, and to build bridges and establish platforms for disengaged adults to re-enter the labour market

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- value for money, through low cost community infrastructure, flat administrative structures, cost-effective staffing arrangements, and a thoroughly embedded culture of community capacity-building.

These features of adult and community education - that underpin its capacity to engage individual citizens in personal development, skills training and citizenship - are essential if major government policies are to have any real chance of producing genuine and lasting change. To the extent that the success of such policies is predicated on citizens acquiring the relevant information, abilities and dispositions, governments cannot afford to neglect the ACE sector's track record in community education and lifelong learning.

That track record is significant. Its economic and social impacts have been cogently documented in a series of detailed reports – by parliamentary committees, consultants and researchers. A recent PriceWaterhouseCoopers economic evaluationⁱⁱ of the impact of the ACE sector in New Zealand revealed a gross economic benefit of \$4.8 and \$6.3 billion annually, corresponding to a return on investment of \$54 and \$72 for each dollar of funding. A partnership between the Australian government and Australian ACE providers could reasonably be expected to deliver comparable benefits. For this and all the above reasons, the Australian government would be well-advised to involve and support adult and community education providers in responding to major national policy imperatives.

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL POLICY IMPERATIVES

Australia has evolved into a mature, sophisticated economy, a culturally-diverse society, and a well-functioning democratic polity. But within this broad characterisation of our condition as a nation-state lies another, marginalised Australia. It comprises citizens who are poorly educated, disconnected from the labour market, alienated from the broader community or denied opportunity and recognition because of language or cultural barriers. They lack the financial resources, personal support, security of accommodation and standard of health that are fundamental to their participation in society and economic activity. This less palatable account of how many Australians live poses a myriad of challenges that require the serious attention of all who value the attributes that we are keen to claim as typically Australian - equity, tolerance, justice, resilience, and a 'fair go'.

In the light of these challenges - and at the urging of citizens, corporations, civil society groups and others - governments are trying to discern how best to set priorities, formulate policy responses, and achieve coordinated and effective action within a federalist constitutional structure. Increasingly, challenges are being assessed and responses formulated from a national perspective. The Rudd government's promotion of COAG mechanisms, the establishment of National Partnerships and the broad acceptance of a strong central leadership role by the Australian government, are all manifestations of the necessarily new way of doing business.

It is therefore timely to refocus on the question of how to implement lifelong learning. It is beyond dispute (and possibly at risk of being under-appreciated because it has been for so long a commonplace of political rhetoric) that education is the single most important contributor to individual and social wellbeing and to a country's economic success. Lifelong learning must therefore assume its fundamental role in helping to deliver the economic, cultural, social, health and environmental outcomes that Australian governments are seeking to achieve.

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All our major national policy imperatives express a lifelong learning requirement, and enjoin all citizens and institutions to cooperate in their realisation. The Australian government must act to support and resource adult and community education providers because they have a proven capacity to enable people of all ages and abilities to acquire new knowledge, develop new skills and to grow in their civic responsibilities.

The Productivity Imperative

At its meeting in February 2006 to develop a National Reform Agenda, COAG agreed that:

A healthy, skilled and motivated population is critical to workforce participation and productivity, and hence Australia's future living standards.

Increased workforce participation and productivity levels are key goals of COAG's National Reform Agenda. These, and the government's *Skilling Australia for the future* program, explicitly require a more responsive education and training system that engages people marginally attached to the workforce, removes barriers to further education and employment, and motivates people to acquire and utilise new skills.

Available evidence clearly indicates that ACE providers are addressing key economic and social priorities of Australian governments.ⁱⁱⁱ In particular, the research^{iv} shows that ACE providers:

- are becoming increasingly significant players in economic and community development
- are successfully re-engaging adults with learning, especially those welfare recipients for whom COAG is seeking assistance to raise workforce participation rates
- are providers of first choice for second-chance (and third-chance) learners
- build platforms of basic skills in literacy and numeracy and other general employability skills for the full range of disadvantaged Australians
- are connecting learners to further study in TAFE colleges and elsewhere
- are assisting in skills shortages areas that are affecting the immediate growth of the Australian economy.

Moreover, the research confirms that ACE providers excel in employment advocacy, referral and careers advice,^v and in the full range of student support services.^{vi} These are critical success factors when it comes to re-engaging with learning those adults who are disengaged from the labour market or education and training systems. The latest 2008 research on employers' views on developing workers' literacy, numeracy and employability, further reinforces the strengths of the ACE sector's capacity to deliver in this key area of human capital development.^{vii}

Within its sphere of activity, especially in the service of disadvantaged communities, marginalised individuals, local business enterprises and as a bridge to accredited training, the ACE sector has demonstrated remarkable success across all three themes – capacity building, overcoming barriers, and connecting through collaboration. The sector is ideally placed to support the COAG Productivity Agenda and the equitable growth of human capital.

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The Social Inclusion Imperative

The Australian government has declared a commitment to :

a new era of governance to mainstream the task of building social inclusion so that all Australians can share in our nation's prosperity. Promoting social inclusion requires a new way of governing. Australia must rethink how policy and programs across portfolios and levels of government can work together to combat economic and social disadvantage in Australia.

By 'social inclusion' the government means that citizens must be given the opportunity to:

- secure a job;
- access services;
- connect with family, friends, work, personal interests and local community;
- deal with personal crises, and
- have their voices heard.

Adult and community education has a proven track record in nurturing and developing these capabilities. Its flexibility, its genuinely learner-centred educational philosophy where learning is embedded in the personal, cultural and socio-economic realities of its students, its holistic approach to the learner as citizen as well as worker, have all contributed to the sector's tradition of success in what is now being articulated as the 'social inclusion agenda'.

Social inclusion necessarily entails citizenship. This invokes the idea that lifelong learning should be about *learning for living* as a participant in a society, and not be limited just to *learning for a living* as a participant in an economy. The ACE sector has traditionally cherished a holistic conception of learning and citizenship, often referred to as a 'social purpose tradition'. It encourages and develops a model of citizenship that is inclusive, reflective and active. It provides the necessary balance and complement to those aspects of lifelong learning that address economic imperatives and the requirements of human capital.

The Health Imperative

In 2008, the Australian government established the National Preventative Health Taskforce. Its first Discussion Paper has just been released (October 2008). It prioritises three areas for action – obesity, smoking and harmful drinking, and calls for 'urgent, comprehensive and sustained action' built on broadly-based public education.

The answer does not lie in short-term projects... [We] need highly effective public education We need every kindergarten, school and university, every workplace and business, and every community and neighbourhood in Australia involved and committed to improving and maintaining their health and productivity.

There are over 1200 diverse and decentralised ACE providers scattered across urban, regional and rural Australia. They have 'unparalleled community linkages that should be leveraged'.^{viii} NCVER statistics show that graduates from ACE providers have their needs met at least as well as graduates from TAFE and private providers, and importantly 'have the highest satisfaction levels of the three provider types'.^{ix} Adult and community education is ideally suited, in terms of geographic spread, learning culture and effectiveness, to make a major contribution to preventative health initiatives.

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Australia's *Productivity Commission* has identified people's lack of information and knowledge about health and treatment as the fundamental 'market failure' on the demand side that underlies many of the problematic features of the public health system. According to the Commission there is scope for policy to promote better informed consumers and a stronger focus on prevention, education and early intervention with effort focussed on those with the greatest need. These are precisely the citizens for whom ACE providers are the most accessible, compatible and effective source of learning.

The Environmental and Sustainable Development Imperative

Education for sustainable development is about developing the knowledge, skills, understanding and values to participate in decisions about the way we do things individually and collectively, both locally and globally, that will improve the quality of life now without damaging the planet irreparably. Current policy imperatives require that people are brought to a condition whereby they understand and take responsibility for the impact they have on the environment, and on the quality of life of other people, locally and globally. This requires the development of a skilled population who can make environmentally judicious, well-informed decisions in their home, community and working lives and in their leisure activities.

But the kind of education required goes beyond merely providing people with the skills for living sustainably. It needs to promote an understanding of the interconnectedness of the environmental, social and economic contexts and the connections between local and global events and scales. It must promote opportunities for creative and critical thinking and debates that can be empowering and supportive. Empowerment and support of learners are hallmarks of adult and community education.

Education for sustainable development is not going to go away. The challenge is therefore to make it broadly effective. Adult learning through ACE is effective because it starts from the needs of the learner. ACE providers know how to engage and support citizens to pursue the kinds of learning journeys that environment policy demands.

The Active Ageing Imperative

About 13 per cent of our population - some 2.8 million people - is aged 65 years or older. This is expected to rise to 18 per cent by 2021 and to 26 per cent (around 7 million people) in 2051. The economic and social impact of an ageing Australia is one of the most significant policy challenges confronting the government. Participation, preventative health and productivity can all be promoted through lifelong learning.

In response to this ageing demographic, the Australian Government has committed to a *Positive and Active Ageing Plan*. The Minister for Ageing has convened high level meetings to expand the Government's agenda for ageing in Australia, with a focus on social inclusion, labour force and community participation, and physical and mental wellbeing.

The *Plan* recognises the benefits associated with participating in community life, regular exercise and recreational activities, and seeks to remove the barriers that prevent older Australians from healthy ageing. The adult and community education sector has a long and proud tradition of success in delivering these benefits.

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On the labour market front, research by NCVER supports the role of lifelong learning in maintaining and increasing employment rates. It has found that qualifications acquired later in life have as good, and in some cases, better, pay-off in employment-to-population rates for older age groups as do those obtained at a young age. Findings also show that older people who have undertaken training are more likely to retain their employment status relative to their employed peers not receiving training.

ENABLING THE ACE SECTOR TO RESPOND TO AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL POLICY IMPERATIVES

The economic and social impact of the adult and community education sector in Australia is significant. This has been cogently documented over the past two decades and continues to be revealed in the most recent research conducted in Australia, and most strikingly in the 2008 New Zealand study^x on the economic benefits of adult and community education.

As well, Australia has consistently demonstrated attributes of a learning society that policymakers should consider valuable in terms of encouraging citizens to respond to the nation's economic, social and environmental challenges. Despite policy neglect and chronic under-funding, local adult and community education providers have persisted in their efforts to respond to the needs of diverse communities, businesses and individuals.

Furthermore, the most recent ABS survey of adult learning reveals that Australians generally welcome, and to a surprising degree actively pursue, learning opportunities. That survey found that in 2006-07 almost three-quarters (74%) of 25-64 year olds did some type of informal learning (using a library, accessing the internet, radio, television etc.), with 30% participating in non-formal (but structured) learning activity, and 12% in formal learning (typically to acquire a work-related qualification). On this account, the conditions potentially exist in Australia for a thriving culture of lifelong learning that can be tapped to meet the expectations of policymakers and to serve powerfully the nation's interests.

That governments have consistently failed to deliver the policy and funding frameworks to reap the ACE sector's benefits and to maximise its effectiveness has been particularly unfortunate for those who have stood to gain the most from its vibrancy – namely, Australians who are marginally attached to education, training and the workforce. The substantial value created by the adult and community education sector has been allowed to dissipate through meagre and ad hoc funding support, poor articulation of educational pathways and the complete absence of national leadership by previous Australian governments. All this must change if the current government wishes to realise its goals for social inclusion, skills training and productivity, and its health, ageing and environmental objectives.

What is currently lacking that needs to be remedied ?

There has never been a forceful, clearly articulated statement by any Australian government that declares lifelong learning to be the fundamental educational premise upon which social and economic development will be built. There is no express recognition by the current Australian government of the role and capacity of adult and community education to contribute to the goals of the *Education Revolution*. Nor is there a coherent account of the funding, infrastructure and policy advice arrangements that is required to give effect to that role and capacity.

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General Declarations on Education by Australian ministers, and the Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education that emerged in 2002, have signally failed to provide the direction, leadership and energy necessary to gather up the limited and poorly-resourced efforts of the states and territories and steer them into a nationally-coherent ACE venture. In March 2008, an extensive, formal review^{xi} of the 2002 Ministerial Declaration highlighted the shortcomings in the following terms:

- there has been no nationally consistent systematic reporting against the four goals set out in the 2002 Declaration
- none of the consistent, two decades-long, research effort on the impacts and benefits of adult and community education has been translated into nationally coordinated action
- progress towards growing the value, organisational capacity and sustainability of the ACE sector is likely to have been impeded by a lack of ongoing and secure funding for community education and training providers
- failure to adequately acknowledge the role of non-accredited training in encouraging subsequent participation in accredited training and employment may lead to a narrow perspective of what ACE can achieve

The evaluation - while identifying the policy, reporting and funding weaknesses that have impeded the flourishing of the ACE sector – was, throughout the document, unequivocal in its recognition of ACE's crucial education and training role. It concluded:

In summary, ACE has the capacity to play a much larger role in responding to the challenges associated with the COAG Agenda. It is well-placed to assist in engaging target groups of this Agenda, and has enormous potential to expand provision of ... education and training. Expanding on these roles would significantly strengthen the capacity of the sector to provide the skills, qualifications and strong employment and social outcomes that will be required for Australia to maintain its economic prosperity into the future.

To some extent, it is the genuinely community-based, learner-centred, civic-oriented culture of the ACE sector that has allowed governments to get away with directing their policy and funding efforts elsewhere, secure in the knowledge that the ACE sector will not give up on its values-driven commitments and activities despite official neglect. Such neglect in fact represents a huge opportunity cost, inefficiency, loss of productivity, reduced capacity and is in important respects a notable failure by government to fulfil its obligations to its citizens.

Forthcoming opportunities for action

- The anticipated (November 2008) revised Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education presents a timely opportunity to recommit all governments to placing the ACE sector on a secure footing in terms of both policy and funding.
- The proposed development of a National Compact between the Australian government and non-government or community-based organisations will create a stable environment for the support of adult and community education providers.
- The UNESCO global meeting on adult learning, CONFINTEA VI, will take place from 19 to 22 May 2009 in Brazil. It will be addressing the relation and contribution of adult learning and education to sustainable development; issues relevant to inclusion and participation; quality criteria of adult learning and education; and

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literacy and other key competencies. It will also examine policies, structures and financing for adult learning and education.

Australia has submitted a National Report^{xii} as part of the international preparations for CONFINTEA VI. However, Australia remains the only country in the OECD without a formal lifelong learning policy. Given that the CONFINTEA VI agenda addresses challenges that Australia has placed at the centre of its own national policy agenda, and given that countries will be expected to demonstrate to CONFINTEA VI their commitment to - and track record in - adult and community education, Australia should act quickly to shore up its CONFINTEA credentials.

- From 1 July 2009, the Australian government is implementing a new employment services system emphasising tailored assistance to disadvantaged job seekers and requiring a greater focus on developing skills needed by local employers to fill vacancies. Research confirms that ACE providers excel in employment advocacy, referral and careers advice,^{xiii} and in the full range of student support services.^{xiv} These are critical success factors when it comes to re-engaging with learning those adults who are disengaged from the labour market or education and training systems. The latest 2008 research on employers' views on developing workers' literacy, numeracy and employability, further reinforces the strengths of the ACE sector's capacity to deliver in this key area of human capital development.^{xv} Action is needed now to ensure that the necessary training infrastructure and educational service arrangements are in place to deliver the revised employment support system.
- In November 2008, the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education (MCVTE) agreed to seek COAG agreement to re-align the responsibilities of the Council, with MCVTE taking on all post-school education issues, including adult education, and employment. It was agreed that an expanded role for the Council would provide for better coordination and linkages for articulation between education and training sectors.

Ministers also agreed to the establishment of a National VET Equity Advisory Council to raise the profile of equity issues to increase participation in VET and ultimately employment. This is an area of intervention and support where ACE providers have been particularly effective. A 2007 DEEWR report on the 'participation imperative' for the VET system confirmed that VET success depends on adults first developing those qualities that enable them to participate successfully in formal training—qualities that adults have consistently developed through ACE, which has served as a bridge for their enrolment in TAFE or workplace training.

- The first meeting in November 2008 of the Council of Australian Local Governments symbolised, along with the COAG reforms, a reframing of effort towards national responses to Australia's challenges. It also laid the groundwork for a major impetus in activity and enterprise at the local neighbourhood, shire and regional level. This is home territory for adult and community education providers. It is its natural and familiar sphere of operations and influence. A strategic choice by the Australian government to enable and support the ACE sector with national policy and stable resourcing would enable providers to respond effectively to the mission of the new Council of Australian Local Governments, and to support the education, engagement, training and bridges to employment that will be needed by local initiatives if they are to meet the economic and infrastructure goals that have been set.

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A POLICY AND FUNDING FRAMEWORK FOR ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

The foundations for a policy framework have already been laid by the Australian government's *Education Revolution 2008-09*. The government has declared the revolution to be 'for all Australians, including those who have been excluded from the full benefits of education in the past... (and) is central to the... Government's social inclusion agenda and to its aspiration to close the gap for Indigenous Australians'.

The *Education Revolution* 'begins the long-term investment in education and training necessary to support productivity and economic growth' and 'takes a life-cycle approach to policy development, program design and service delivery'. A commitment to 'long term investment' and a 'life cycle approach' will betray a bitter irony if the *Education Revolution* does not include a genuine investment in the lifelong learning vehicle that is the ACE sector.

Providing an overarching mandate for an Australian policy and funding framework is UNESCO's 1997 *Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning* which Australia helped to drive through. That Declaration includes the recognition that adult education has become:

... more than a right; it is a key to the twenty-first century. It is both a consequence of active citizenship and a condition for full participation in society ... Adult education denotes the entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society. Adult learning encompasses both formal and continuing education, non-formal learning and the spectrum of informal and incidental learning available ...

In supporting, and indeed promoting, the Hamburg Declaration, it is reasonable to expect that Australia will abide by its undertakings – Clause 26 in particular:

26. We solemnly declare that all parties will closely follow up the implementation of this Declaration ... clearly distinguishing their respective responsibilities and complementing and co-operating with one another. We are determined to ensure that lifelong learning will become a more significant reality in the early twenty-first century.

Clause 8 of the Declaration also notes that 'within governments, adult education is not confined to ministries of education; all ministries are engaged in promoting adult learning, and interministerial co-operation is essential.' Nowhere is this more applicable than in the reformed COAG processes that are now the policy and logistical engine room of Australian governance. Whole-of-government, cross-portfolio, and inter-jurisdictional strategies have become the key method of dealing with urgent reforms.

Given the breadth of national policy imperatives that call for public education programs – in skills development, environmental matters, health, ageing and so on – it is vital that a similarly coherent, national approach be taken to the mechanisms by which these programs of information and public education can be implemented.

Once it is agreed that a national perspective, national coordination and national leadership are required in order to grow our citizens' involvement in education and training and to sustain effective lifelong learning, the Australian government must fulfil its distinctive obligations to provide that necessary coordination and leadership.

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The draft of the proposed revised MCEETYA Declaration on Adult Community Education sets out the following principles for all governments to ‘work together to optimise the existing strengths of the [ACE] sector to make a greater contribution towards achieving objectives of the COAG agenda and to address potential barriers facing the sector in this regard’:

- a stewardship role, with all jurisdictions providing policy settings and practical strategies that will allow ACE to flourish
- partnership and auspicing arrangements, particularly between accredited and non-accredited ACE programs
- increased vocationally-focussed ACE programs while retaining their community and citizenship capacity building

Given the likelihood that COAG will re-align Ministerial Council responsibilities and transfer the responsibility for adult education matters to the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education (MCVTE), any Declaration on Adult Community Education should reflect COAG’s deliberations on the matter. These deliberations should include consideration of the broad requirement for lifelong learning across *all* dimensions of policy activity.

In such circumstances, an overarching statement by COAG affirming lifelong learning as a cornerstone of Australia’s policy response to deal with our national social, economic and environmental challenges would signal the high level commitment required. Once COAG’s view has been articulated, a policy framework can be developed that describes how the adult and community sector will be supported in a stable, adequately funded, strategically effective way so that it can provide, in greater quantity and with growing quality, its demonstrably effective education and training services. These services are already addressing those target groups and those policy agendas that the Australian government says must be given priority.

Principles for a policy framework

A policy framework to support the ACE sector’s role in contributing to the COAG agenda and to the national interest more broadly must be based on the following principles:

- lifelong learning is inextricably and necessarily bound up with the achievement of economic security, social inclusion, sustainable development and citizens’ personal wellbeing and is at the heart of effective responses to national policy imperatives
- the economic, social, technological, equity and organisational dimensions of lifelong learning are interdependent and must all be taken into account in developing the funding models, logistical arrangements and accountability measures that are applied to the ACE sector
- there are mutual, but differently weighted, responsibilities between individuals, employers and governments for ensuring Australia’s labour force skills can support internationally competitive commerce and industry, with the Australian government having the over-riding responsibility for getting the policy settings right
- lifelong learning is fundamentally concerned with strengthening individuals’ personal agency and self-determination, and in order to succeed in accredited training and formal education programs, individuals must first be supported to develop the personal resources, build the confidence, learn the communication skills, meet the literacy and numeracy threshold abilities and ‘learn how to learn’

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- every individual is entitled to enter educational and training pathways that suit their circumstances and are responsive to their aspirations and needs, and such entitlements should attach to each individual as a right of citizenship
- lifelong learning requires access by all citizens, regardless of their geographic location or socio-economic circumstances, to efficient and low-cost broadband communications services and to adequate hardware and peripherals
- policy should be informed by a high-level consultative body that is resourced to monitor, coordinate and provide strategic advice concerning adult and community education.

ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT A POLICY AND FUNDING FRAMEWORK

The recent *2020 Summit* Productivity Agenda working group agreed that:

... to achieve [its productivity goals] Australia needs to focus on three priority themes:

- *Equip all Australians with the capacity to contribute...through...education and training*
- *Deploy Australia's human capital efficiently and fairly including, by overcoming barriers that lock individuals and communities out of real opportunities*
- *Connect through collaborations in education, business, research and innovation.*

The actions 'equip', 'deploy' and 'connect' seem eminently suitable as guides for the work to be undertaken in the short to medium term in order to implement a lifelong learning agenda. The adult and community sector must be *equipped* - with facilities, learning resources and technologies - to perform its task. Personnel must be *deployed* – in the community, the bureaucracy and the academy – to provide the teaching, coordination and research effort to maintain a quality, integrated service to learners. Education providers, businesses and government agencies must *connect* to ensure coherence in goal-setting, accurate needs-identification and timely fulfilment of mutually agreed obligations and outcomes.

To provide leadership on the lifelong learning front the Australian government must:

- use its leadership advantage in COAG to formally declare, in a COAG communiqué, a national commitment to lifelong learning, and its intention to drive the implementation of a policy and funding framework for the ACE sector
- draw together a high-level working group of parliamentarians and officials from across the economic, social, health and environment portfolios to draft an Australian lifelong learning charter
- create an Office of Lifelong Learning within DEEWR to act as the official mechanism for engagement with the ACE sector around policy and resource issues
- establish a national system of 'lifetime learning participation accounts' for all Australians into which the government and others can make payments, and which can go into deficit with repayment being income-contingent
- enter partnerships with state jurisdictions, NGOs or businesses to build physical facilities and communications technology infrastructure that integrates services and encourages shared community use

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- establish a web-based national database, searchable by keyword and location, of all programs and courses offered by Registered Training Organisations, and by all adult and community educators who wish to provide details of their activities
- fund a suitable community-based peak organisation to manage a consultative mechanism for adult and community education providers at the national and international level, and to coordinate advice to governments, promote research, monitor the quality and range of community-based educational provision, and gather data for accountability and strategic policy purposes

THE ROLE OF ADULT LEARNING AUSTRALIA (ALA)

With Australian government funding, and funds raised from other sources, Adult Learning Australia has:

- operated as a national peak body for the ACE sector
- coordinated a national research program related to adult learning
- managed national aspects of Adult Learners Week
- convened an annual national conference
- coordinated communication and advice between the Commonwealth and the ACE sector and liaised broadly with state and territory authorities
- contributed to policy development in relevant areas
- promoted lifelong learning and educational participation by adults

In August 2007, PhillipsKPA undertook an evaluation^{xvi} of the program of government funding for ALA and for Adult Learners Week. The report made nine recommendations to clarify the Australian government's objectives for its future funding activity, and to strengthen and focus the funding program for Adult Learning Australia. The report noted the lack of a 'clearly defined Australian government policy on adult education' and a 'lack of clarity' in what it expected of ALA.

Nevertheless, the report found that ALA has managed to 'perform a range of peak body functions', has 'operated in a sustainable way', and its communications were 'valued and produced efficiently'. The organisation itself has generated an additional range of lifelong learning initiatives in response to specific challenges. Examples include the following:

- ALA has managed the *Community Engagement Project* for integrating and embedding e-learning in community based and regional development initiatives. An independent review concluded that the project was worth scaling up.
- ALA has promoted *learning circle methodology* throughout Australia - on issues as diverse as environment, cultural history and ageing - and received the Australian Award for Excellence in Educational Publishing
- ALA is working to extend the internationally-acclaimed *Men's Sheds Project* through a proposal for 8 and 4 pilot sheds respectively in all states and territories.
- ALA has produced the *Bodies Matter* kit, a video-web-helpline-pamphlet kit addressing older women's health.

ALA, with its national office located in Canberra, is well-placed to work with:

- Commonwealth, state and territory governments individually and collectively through the COAG process, and with the relevant portfolio agencies
- with local governments, through the new COALG, and with the policy arm of ALGA
- with Indigenous organisations and business associations, nationally and regionally

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There are four major areas of activity through which ALA could provide essential support to the Australian government in meeting national policy imperatives:

1. Coordinate and guide a strategic, national effort to engage the 1200 adult and community education providers across Australia to develop and deliver courses, programs, resources, learning circles and other activities focussed on:
 - the government's major policy initiatives in environmental sustainability, preventative health and active ageing
 - building bridges to learning to enable participation of adults, especially from COAG's target groups, to embark upon accredited vocational skills training
 - aligning local employers' skill needs with training opportunities for potential employees from within the local labour market
 - promoting social inclusion, especially through the development of peer-to-peer networking approaches to learning within local communities

2. Provide a national focal point for the promotion of, and gathering statistical and other information about, Australians' participation in lifelong learning, including through:
 - a strengthened and more effectively marketed Australian Learners Week
 - the development of a web-based, simple to use, data gathering mechanism designed with the distinctive attributes of ACE providers in mind
 - producing an annual statistical snapshot of lifelong learning activity in the ACE sector

3. Establish and run a high-level consultative group that reflects the diversity of the ACE sector to provide evidence-based and practically-oriented policy advice through:
 - convening quarterly meetings of representatives from across Australia who have significant responsibilities among a diversity of ACE providers
 - commissioning and publicising research
 - grass roots consultations and a broadly based annual conference
 - participating in relevant major international forums (CONFINTEA etc)
 - bi-annual formal consultations with officials and ministerial advisers

4. Devise and operate a quality assurance mechanism for adult and community educators to ensure that:
 - educators delivering non-accredited, bridging, basic education and life skills programs possess the relevant professional qualifications and the personal attributes suited to the learning environment and the target group involved
 - ACE organisations and employers have an independent source of advice and assistance in the selection of teaching personnel
 - professional development opportunities – online, on site, or within existing teacher PD programs – are available to adult and community educators

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CONCLUSION

The UNESCO definition of lifelong learning is:

The development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding that they will require through their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments.

As a proposer of and signatory to the *Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning* Australia has committed itself to ensuring that lifelong learning will become a more significant reality in the twenty-first century, and to the view that adult learning encompasses both formal and continuing education, non-formal learning and the spectrum of informal and incidental learning available.

Through the COAG reform processes, the commitments of the *Education Revolution* and the aspirations of the *2020 Summit*, Australia has signalled its earnest desire to build a society that is more inclusive and an economy that is both internationally competitive and environmentally sustainable. Australia is ready to re-imagine the landscape of education and training, and reconfigure the frameworks and institutions through which it will occur.

There is abundant evidence of the Australian ACE sector's capacity to engage individuals and connect them to further education and work.^{xvii} The distinctive qualities of the ACE sector are eminently suited to meeting the needs of those Australians marginally attached to the workforce, or needing to re-engage with education – that is, the cohort of Australians identified as a target resource for increased productivity.

But the task goes beyond just training people to be more productive in their existing roles, or to skill up for new ones. It is profoundly about the need to create a sense of personal agency and self-determination for all individuals, not just in their work, but in their lives as a whole.

The ACE sector has distinguished itself as an enabler of individuals' personal agency, and as a builder of social capital and genuine inclusion. It is geographically dispersed, responsive to local conditions and communities, flexible in meeting the needs of learners and employers, and efficient and cost effective in combining personal and vocational outcomes. The potential medium to long term gains of adult education and training programs in Australia will continue to be compromised if governments fail to identify and resource community life and community processes leading to increased community as well as individual capability.

As a conduit to all levels of education and training, and as a potential partner with all levels of government, the ACE sector's credentials are unsurpassed. Adult Learning Australia has the experience, the capacity and the reach to broker those relationships. It is well placed to be the Australian government's principal community-based partner in achieving those distinctive and difficult goals of bringing disengaged and marginalised Australians into education and training, connecting them with the workforce, and building the attachments to Australian society that mitigate the discontents of alienation and strengthen the reciprocities of shared citizenship and harmonious mutual endeavour.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Adult Learning Australia makes the following recommendations concerning policy, funding and actions to give effect to the substantial capacity of the ACE sector:

1. That the Australian government, drawing upon the goals and values of the 2002 MCEETYA Declaration on Adult Community Education and in accordance with its commitments to the 1997 Hamburg Declaration,
 - a. use its leadership advantage in COAG to formally declare, in a COAG communiqué, a national commitment to lifelong learning and
 - b. make explicit its expectations concerning the contribution of the adult and community education sector to meeting national policy imperatives.
2. That the COAG Working Group on the Productivity Agenda prepare a multi-jurisdictional partnership funding agreement for the support of the ACE sector that is
 - a. commensurate with its capacity and potential to contribute to the productivity and social inclusion agendas, and to the effectiveness of national policy responses to the challenges of environmental sustainability, preventative health and active ageing, and
 - b. is relevant to the distinctive structural and organisational diversity, operational scale and geographic spread of the ACE sector.
3. That the Australian government convene a high-level, broadly-based working group of parliamentarians and officials to draft an Australian lifelong learning charter.
4. That the Australian government create an Office of Lifelong Learning within DEEWR, but exercising a whole-of-government perspective, to act as the official mechanism for engagement with the ACE sector around policy and resource issues.
5. That the Australian government establish a national system of 'lifetime learning participation accounts' for all Australian citizens into which the government and others can make payments, and which can go into deficit with repayment being income-contingent
6. That the Australian government, in collaboration with the states and territories, enter into a compact with adult and community education providers that:
 - a. reflects both the policy priorities of the Australian government and the traditions and culture of the ACE sector
 - b. is fair and reasonable in its expectations of, and the standards to be observed by, both the providers and the government, particularly around issues of quality, accountability, governance and data collection.
 - c. has genuine regard for the interests of those Australians for whom the ACE sector provides a platform and bridge to re-education and workforce engagement / re-engagement / transition
 - d. provides, as a norm, for 3 year funding of ACE providers that reflects the true cost of provision (program delivery and infrastructure)

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7. That the Australian government engage Adult Learning Australia to carry out those activities necessary to support and sustain the adult and community education sector as a credible, viable and effective element of Australia's education and training system, and as a key contributor to achieving high levels of productivity and social inclusion. Its role would be to:
 - a. establish and run a high-level consultative group that reflects the diversity of the ACE sector to provide evidence-based and practically-oriented policy advice on lifelong learning and the ACE sector
 - b. commission research on adult learning, its costs, benefits and impacts
 - c. coordinate data collection on participation and prescribed outcomes and monitor the level of effort and resources applied by the ACE sector to the education, training and social inclusion priorities of the Australian government
 - d. establish processes for the articulation of ACE-delivered non-accredited and accredited education and training into, and for the sector's interaction with, the Australian Qualifications Framework
 - e. devise and operate a quality assurance mechanism for the ACE sector to protect, promote and monitor the professional capacity, integrity and effectiveness of adult and community educators
 - f. represent the ACE sector on relevant high level departmental or other government policy committees and decision-making bodies
 - g. sustain a network of professional collaboration, communication and development amongst key state and territory ACE associations / councils
 - h. market and promote the ACE sector to stakeholders – including learners, business enterprises, employer and employee organisations
 - i. monitor Australia's activity with respect to various international agreements and undertakings related to lifelong learning / adult education
 - j. manage Australia's participation in UNESCO's Sixth International Conference on Adult Education - CONFINTEA VI.

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Adult Learning Australia**

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ⁱ The UNESCO definition of Lifelong Learning is 'The development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding that they will require through their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments'

ⁱⁱ PriceWaterhouseCoopers *Economic Evaluation of Adult and Community Education Outcomes* New Zealand, June 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ Bowman, K *The value of ACE providers: A guide to the evidence base* ALA, 2006, p6

^{iv} Summarised by Bowman (2006) from work by Beddie et al (2005); Foster et al (2005); Newton (2005); Sanguinetti et al (2004); Birch et al (2003); Walstab et al (2005), Young et al (2006).

^v Beddie, F et al *Enhancing career development: the role of community based career guidance for disengaged adults* NCVER, 2005

^{vi} Harris, R et al *Private Training Providers in Australia: their characteristics and training activities* NCVER, 2006

^{vii} Townsend, R & Waterhouse P *Whose responsibility? Employers' views on developing their workers' literacy, numeracy and employability skills* NCVER, 2008

^{viii} Bardon (2006) p4

^{ix} Figures cited by Bardon (2006) p8

^x PriceWaterhouseCoopers *Economic Evaluation of Adult and Community Education Outcomes* New Zealand, June 2008

^{xi} MCEETYA Reference Group *Review of the 2002 Ministerial Declaration on Adult Community Education* March 2008

^{xii} DEEWR *The Development and State of the Art of Adult Learning and Education (ALE)* 2008

^{xiii} Beddie, F et al *Enhancing career development: the role of community based career guidance for disengaged adults* NCVER, 2005

^{xiv} Harris, R et al *Private Training Providers in Australia: their characteristics and training activities* NCVER, 2006

^{xv} Townsend, R & Waterhouse P *Whose responsibility? Employers' views on developing their workers' literacy, numeracy and employability skills* NCVER, 2008

^{xvi} Phillips KPA *Evaluation of Australian Government Funding For Adult Learning Australia and Adult Learners Week* August 2007 - for the Department of Education, Science and Training

^{xvii} For example, a recent three-year longitudinal study of learners of ACE providers in Victoria found that 60% went on to further study or full-time work (36% and 24% respectively) with 38% going on to part-time work. Course completion rates were high; unemployment rates halved (Walstab, A et al *ACE Connects: Building pathways to education, employment and community engagement* University of Melbourne, 2005)