

LIFELONG LEARNING: GREAT SLOGAN BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

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The challenge every country faces is how to become a learning society and to ensure that its citizens are equipped with the knowledge, skills and qualifications they will need in the next century. Economies and societies are increasingly knowledge-based. Education and skills are indispensable to achieving economic success, civic responsibility and social cohesion.¹

Introduction

Australia does not have a comprehensive policy on lifelong learning. This is despite our poor ratings compared with other OECD countries in terms of early childhood education, upper secondary school attainment, adult participation in training and adult literacy and numeracy. The concept of lifelong learning challenges governments and enterprises because to work it requires a focus first and foremost on the needs of the learner. Starting from the learner's perspective highlights the barriers to learning including the lack of motivation of many Australians. This starting point, however, will make little difference to how policy and practice operates unless learners have some collective capacity to make their needs known and acted on.

This paper proposes one way an empowered learner approach could be implemented by the Commonwealth government: an independently funded agency to represent the interests of and be an advocate for learners. Three proposed functions of the agency are spelt out below in more detail after a discussion of why a comprehensive lifelong learning policy is important, what it refers to and how Australia rates at present.

Why lifelong learning is important

Widespread fears about job security in the face of pressures wrought through globalisation can have a debilitating effect on large sections of the workforce in terms of health and general perception of the capacity to cope with the unexpected. Surveys show that fears about job security are growing over time despite the fact that there is little evidence of shorter job tenure.²

The resort in the past to social safety nets in the form of social security payments is clearly not sufficient to help individual's learn to manage risk in their lives in a more precarious world. A greater emphasis on encouraging greater personal responsibility

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and initiative is needed to make it easier for individuals to act on their own best assessment of their capabilities matched against the opportunities available to them. This applies not merely in relation to employment but also in terms of a range of other features of modern living such as environmental hazards and health risks. Lifelong learning, broadly understood, can offer a framework for enabling individuals to better manage risk in their lives and for governments and employers to support them in doing this.

A comprehensive lifelong learning strategy that maximises learning opportunities can be justified in terms of the benefits to the economy, enterprises as well as to the individual. Research just published shows that in OECD countries one extra year of education leads, on average and in the long run, to an increase in economic output per capita of between 4 and 7 per cent. Other benefits of higher levels of a population's education attainment to the economy and society include improved health, improved chances of children receiving higher levels of education and higher levels of civic participation, volunteering and charity giving, and a lower risk of criminal activity.³

Need for appropriate performance indicators and targets

Lifelong learning first needs to be defined. This requires spelling out what the expected learning outcomes are, and who is accountable for delivering them. It involves setting up targets in terms of population coverage and the quality of the learning received. For it all to work, it also requires a transparent process for reporting on the outcomes as close as possible to where the service is being delivered. This is to provide learners or potential learners with the necessary information to decide to invest their time and money in learning.

Foundation learning

The best expression of a broader understanding of what lifelong learning entails is the G8 Governments' Cologne Charter on Lifelong Learning issued in 1999. The six essential elements of Cologne Charter cover foundation learning, post compulsory education and adult skills upgrading. According to the Charter, foundation learning needs to start with high quality early childhood. In Australia, the average time spent in pre primary education is 8 months compared with at least 30 months in France, Germany, Japan and Sweden.² No measures of quality outcomes related to how well children's learning needs are being met are available.³

Primary education, according to the Charter, needs to be made accountable for how well it enables all children to achieve good competence in reading, writing, arithmetic and information and communications technology, and to develop basic social skills. After a 1996 national survey showed that over a quarter (27 per cent) of Year 3 primary students failed to meet a minimum acceptable standard of literacy, the Australian Government set a national goal for primary students to attain the skills of

² OECD, 1999, Education Policy Analysis, p 39 cited by Mark Latham, 2001, *What Did You Learn Today? Creating an Education Revolution*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

³ Frances Press & Alan Hayes, 2001, Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: Australian Background Report. <http://www.detya.gov.au/schools/publications/reports/oecd/oecd.htm>

numeracy and English literacy, such that “every student should be numerate, able to read, write, spell and communicate at an appropriate level”.

However, in 1999, only two-thirds of indigenous students (66 per cent) had reached the agreed minimum standard for year 3 primary students compared with an 87 per cent rating for all students.⁴ The reporting process is itself limited. While an individual student’s assessment results are reported to parents, only some schools and education authorities have agreed to report assessment results against the national benchmarks.⁵ Nor are there benchmarks set in relation to information and communications technology and basic social skills.

The Cologne Charter states that secondary education need to develop the aptitudes and abilities of all students, not only those bound for higher education and professional careers. At least a fifth of 1999 school leavers five months after leaving school have not entered a clear pathway to full-time work or further education.⁶ However, in Australia no systematic information is available from education authorities at state, regional let alone school level on what happens to students once they leave secondary school.

The Boston Consulting Group, in its recent analysis of groups at risk in the labour market for the Business Council of Australia, concluded that “given the importance of the school to work transition, its success rate should be measured” but then noted that “there is no routine measurement of success rates or tracking of what happens to young people after they leave school, especially if they do so before Year 12”.⁷ No one agency reports information on the destinations of school leavers or indeed is accountable for ensuring that the needs of ‘youth at risk’ are addressed.

Also important is an assessment of the quality of the secondary education received. OECD data show that the average cognitive performance of people Australian upper-secondary education in Australia is similar to New Zealand, Canada and Belgium but rates lower than the literacy performance ratings of secondary school completers in Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden.⁸

Opportunities for post foundation learning

The Cologne Charter also highlights the need for vocational education and training providers to show that they are imparting skills attuned to the needs of the labour market. This involves using the most up-to-date technology as well as having in place easily accessible pathways to higher qualifications. While information is available on the outcomes achieved by some elements of the post compulsory school options

⁴ Frances Press & Alan Hayes, 2001 Appendix Table 2: Percentage of Year 3 Students Achieving the Reading Benchmark.

⁵ DETYA, 2001, *Your child's future - Literacy and Numeracy in Australia's schools*, p 3
www.detya.gov.au

⁶ ABS, 2000, Transition from Education to Work, May 2000, Cat 6227.0, derived from Table 12.

⁷ The Boston Consulting Group, 2000, “Early intervention to reduce long-term unemployment”, Business Council Papers, p 74.

⁸ Kirby, P, Chair, 2000, *Interim Report of the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria*, p 8.

available to young people, no measures are available based on the young people themselves and the pathways and outcomes they achieve.⁹

The number of Australians who have post-school qualifications has not improved markedly over time. The proportion of the population with post-school qualifications only increased from 46 per cent to 50 per cent between 1993 and 1999. Australians with degrees have increased from 12 to 18 per cent of the population over this period. However, persons with sub-degree (including skilled and basic vocational) qualifications declined from 33 per cent to 31 per cent over the same time period.¹⁰

The Cologne Charter proposes as a minimum benchmark that tertiary education be open to everyone capable of profiting from degree-level work, with financial support as necessary to ensure access for everyone who can benefit. Australian universities do report information on outcomes in terms of graduate satisfaction with teaching, goals and standards, workload, assessment, generic skills and overall satisfaction as well as graduate destinations (employment, starting salaries or further study).¹¹

However, measures are also needed on course completion rates and the satisfaction ratings of non-completers. Only 9 of the thirty-nine higher education institutions report on completion rates.¹² Only two Universities, Murdoch and Flinders, report on their performance in relation to access rates for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.¹³ Only five universities refer to credit transfer arrangements with the TAFE sector and only two specify recognition of prior learning as elements of their Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans for the 2000–2002 Triennium.¹⁴

Continuing learning

Finally, the Charter proposes that opportunities for adult skill acquisition be based on appropriate public or employer support, accommodate family needs and afford ready opportunities for re-skilling throughout life. This is taken to include high-quality work-based learning systems which also equip people with the skills needed for self-generated learning. Australia has no regular measures of training participation rate of employed adults. There are some now out of date OECD comparative data which show that Australia ranks behind the UK, New Zealand and the USA.¹⁵

⁹ Curtain, R, 2000, *How young people are faring*. Dusseldorp Skills Forum, November, p 13. www.dsf.org.au

¹⁰ Kirby, 2000, p 7-8.

¹¹ DETYA, 2001, Quality of Australian Higher Education Institutional Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans for the 2000-2002 Triennium Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans 1999, Overview. http://www.detya.gov.au/highered/pubs/quality00_02/overview.htm

¹² DETYA, 2001, *Quality of Australian Higher Education Institutional Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans for the 2000–2002 Triennium*. http://www.detya.gov.au/highered/pubs/quality00_02/default.htm

¹³ DETYA, 2001, pp 140 & 215.

¹⁴ DETYA, 2001. pp 48, 106, 124, 146, 252 for credit transfer arrangements and pp 146 and 252 for mentions of policies related to prior learning.

¹⁵ O'Connell PJ. "Adults in training: an international comparison of continuing education and training", OECD, Paris, 1999. see also Cully, M; et al, 2000, "Participation in, and barriers to, training: the experience of older adults", *Australasian Journal on Ageing* Vol 19, No 4, November, 2000, p176

In terms of adult literacy and numeracy, OECD data show that Australia has near to half its population aged 16 to 65 years (between 43 and 45 per cent depending on the actual measure used) with literacy and numeracy levels below that widely regarded as necessary to cope with the demands of modern life and work.¹⁶ Despite this poor rating, no official measures are available concerning adult literacy and numeracy.

Need to focus on the learner

The primary challenge for governments and enterprises is how to meet the needs of the learner. A comprehensive lifelong learning strategy is extremely difficult for governments to adopt because it involves so many entrenched institutions whose starting point is to defend their turf. It requires a high degree of policy and service delivery coordination. However, this is near impossible to achieve without an agency specifically charged to bring the range of players together to meet the needs of individual learners.

Need for an independent assessor of prior learning

One valuable way to improve the motivation to learn is to make it easier for the formal learning system to recognise the learning that takes place outside its institutional setting. But this requires addressing the limitations of existing mechanisms for assessing and recognising prior learning. Market research conducted by ANTA in 1999 confirmed that recognition of prior learning has great appeal because it affirms the value of people's own learning experiences by encouraging them and their employer to build on their existing skills.¹⁷ However, the formal system's resistance to recognition of prior learning or perhaps its inability to assess it adequately is demonstrated by data supplied by the Australian National Training Authority. These data show that skills outputs associated with the recognition of prior learning accounted for only 2.5 per cent of total training activity in 1999.¹⁸

What is required is third party independent assessment of non-formal learning. This overcomes the major potential conflicts of interest education providers may have. The less prior learning is recognised, the more formal learning must be undertaken for a qualification and the larger the fees a higher education or apprentice or trainee off-the-job training provider earns. Another benefit of a more specialised process for assessing prior learning is the greater capacity to develop and refine a set of assessment tools that can ascertain such basic 'soft' skills as capacity to learn and to problem solve.

Only a third party agency funded at least in part by learners and independent of the suppliers of education services can provide a more neutral and more supportive setting. This can be done, for example, by actively advertising and promoting this service. Such an agency would also be well placed to also promote the

¹⁶ OECD, 2000, *Literacy in the Information Age: Final Report of the Adult Literacy Survey*. Paris, pp13-15.

¹⁷ ANTA, 2000, *Annual Report of the Australian National Training Authority 1999-00: Volume 3 vocational education and training performance*. Brisbane, p 50.

¹⁸ ANTA, 2000, p 51.

complementarity of formal, non-formal and informal learning and to develop open networks of opportunity and recognition between all three learning settings.¹⁹

Need for new financial incentives

Providing a financial incentive through sharing the costs of learning is another way that governments and enterprises can encourage a greater investment in learning. Individual learning accounts is one example now being implemented in the UK of how this can be done. These accounts are a mechanism to encourage people to contribute to the cost of their own learning through special savings and deposits that attract matching or supplementary grants and benefits from public and private funding sources.

Employers and unions could also participate by funding learning accounts them through collective bargaining agreements. Contributions to the account from employers and individual employees could be negotiated as part of the collective bargaining process in a way similar to employer and employee contributions to an enterprise superannuation fund are negotiated. Alternatively, the concept can help to underpin organisational development, employee development schemes and individual career planning.

Need to set targets and a monitoring mechanism

National measures are needed to assess progress in each of the six areas outlined above against international benchmarks. Other measures at state, regional and within metropolitan areas are also needed. Eventually performance measures for individual education and training providers are required to enable learners to make informed decisions. The data have to come from each provider's administration records and a system of data collection needs to be put in place to track the destinations of students.

New targets for upper secondary school completion need to be adopted. The Finn targets set in 1991 and revised in 1995 are outdated as they endorse too low a level of formal education attainments for young people. Targets for improved literacy and numeracy levels for the adult population also need to be set. The Victorian Labor Government has recently set itself three relatively unambitious targets in relation to education and training. The first is to achieve by 2005 at or above the national average benchmark levels for reading, writing and numeracy as they apply to primary students. The second is to by 2010 for 90 per cent of young people to complete Year 12 or its equivalent. The third is to increase by 6 per cent the proportion of young people aged 15 to 19 in rural and regional Victoria engaged in education and training.²⁰ The Premier of Victoria, in announcing the targets, states that 'Governments have traditionally not liked targets. Setting them is a bold step and a sign of our determination for action'.

The Commonwealth Government and the other states or territories should set themselves similar targets, identify what levels of the formal education and training

¹⁹ Commission of the European Communities, 2000, "A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning", *Commission Staff Working Paper* 30 October, SEC 1832. p 10.

²⁰ The Hon Steve Bracks. 2000, "Education Summit – speech by the Premier of Victoria", 23 October. www.deet.vic.gov.au/postcomp/bspeech.htm p 5.

system are accountable for their delivery and establish an independent monitoring agency to provide regular feedback on performance against the targets.

¹ G8 Communiqué Köln 1999 Heads of State and Government of eight major democracies and the President of the European Commission, 25th Economic Summit, Cologne, Germany.

² Curtain, R, 1998, "The Workplace of the Future: Insights from Futures Scenarios and Today's High Performance Workplaces", *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, December. p 279.

³ OECD, 2001, *The Well-being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital*. p 4.