

# **Achieving Australia as an Inclusive Learning Society**

## **A Report on Future Directions for Lifelong Learning in Australia**

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## Foreword

I am grateful to Adult Learning Australia for providing me with the opportunity to spend several months researching and reflecting on lifelong learning in Australia and overseas, and sharing ideas with Australians in all States of the Commonwealth. I am particularly grateful to the Executive Director of ALA, Ron Anderson, for the strong support he has given to this project throughout all stages and to all those who sent me their views on the questions raised in the discussion paper circulated last December.

Learning throughout life in contemporary Australian society is a complex and pervasive subject. In order to make this project manageable, I decided to focus on four key aspects: learners, communities, technology, and the workplace. This orientation is reflected in the five pillars of a learning society discussed in this report. Several other subjects flow out of this framework.

In adopting this approach I recognise that I have not done justice to the roles of other important stakeholders, in particular schools, VET institutions, and universities. Their key roles in a 21st century learning society merits a separate study - preferably one that looks across the education sectors in a systemic and learner-centred way.

I believe that a serious national discussion now on lifelong learning and building Australia as an inclusive learning society would be particularly timely. While lifelong learning, with a few exceptions, has not received the attention in Australia that this concept warrants, there are splendid examples of initiatives across Australia that could benefit other communities and their citizens if ways existed to build on this growing foundation of ideas and experience.

The challenge for Australian society is to promote awareness and understanding of the relevance and value of learning throughout life for key national social, cultural, and economic objectives, and then to forge a national framework to encourage collaboration and partnership across many sectors in progressing this key 21st century competence.

Other leading OECD countries are doing this, and Australia will fall behind at our peril. As Deming observed: learning is not compulsory, but neither is survival.

Peter Kearns

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## **Executive Summary**

### **The Challenge**

Australia in the first decade of the 21st century faces the challenge of a new era marked by the radical impact of global forces, rampant technologies, an exponential pace of change, and considerable discontinuity with the overturning of established paradigms – including those for human resource development.

In the post-industrial, post-modern society, providing opportunities for learning throughout life for all has become an imperative need – for social, economic, civic, and cultural reasons – and a challenge for all stakeholders in Australian society requiring fresh thinking and new approaches.

In this context Adult Learning Australia (ALA) commissioned the author of this report to direct a project on future directions for lifelong learning in Australia. This project involved a discussion paper released in December 2004, consultations in all States during March/April 2005, and a National Conversation on Lifelong Learning conducted through the ALA website.

### **The Key Finding**

**The key finding from the consultations and research was that lifelong learning is poorly understood in Australia, and that this acts as a barrier to concerted partnership action by all stakeholders in progressing opportunities for learning throughout life for all Australians, in many contexts. This results in deleterious social, cultural, and economic effects, and will be a barrier to Australia's development under 21st century conditions as an inclusive and successful society unless addressed in a strategic and collaborative way.**

### **The Contemporary 21st Century View of Lifelong Learning**

The contemporary 21st century concept of lifelong learning adopted by OECD, the European Union, World Bank, and leading OECD countries is that lifelong learning involves all forms of learning and occurs in many contexts in society. It therefore spans formal, non-formal and informal modes of learning with the home and workplace increasingly important as contexts for learning. The impact of technology is increasing the influence of informal and self-directed learning and providing new ways to extend learning opportunities. Learning to learn is the key 21st century competence. How to connect the various forms of learning in coherent strategies is a central challenge.

## **The Context and Drivers**

The discussion paper identified a set of six key drivers which are impacting on Australian society and making learning throughout life for all an imperative requirement.

These drivers are:

globalisation, knowledge economy, demography, technology, changes in work and labour markets, and sustaining communities.

There was broad agreement in the consultations on the centrality of these drivers. Social imperatives flowing from these drivers were raised in consultations, including the impact of diversity, shifts in lifestyle and work/life balance, and the implications of “big picture” global issues.

The implications of demographic shifts with the ageing of the population and workforce was seen as especially important. There was substantial agreement that the impact of these drivers makes lifelong learning for all an imperative requirement and challenge for Australian society.

## **What are Other Countries Doing?**

The report provides an overview of action taken by the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, the Nordic countries, and the European Union (EU). It is EU policy that all Member countries should have coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies by 2006. These initiatives are setting evolving international benchmarks for good practice that Australia cannot afford to lag. Canada and Germany provide interesting examples of action taken in federal systems, while the Nordic countries provide the most advanced portraits of a learning society.

The approach taken by the Nordic countries is discussed in Appendix 2 where their strong performance in a range of education and knowledge economy indicators is shown.

## **Five Key Dimensions in Building Australia as an Inclusive Learning Society**

This report is focused around five key building blocks for achieving Australia as an inclusive learning society with opportunities for learning throughout life for all.

These building blocks are:

1. empowering individuals as motivated and capable lifelong learners;
2. sustaining and transforming communities through learning;

3. using technology to extend learning environments and transform the way we learn;
4. developing the workplace as a key learning environment to underpin economic objectives;
5. extending and connecting partnerships and networks to build Australia as an inclusive learning society.

While action along each of these pillars of a learning society is needed, progress will also depend critically on the extent to which connections can be made between these pillars in building comprehensive and holistic strategies for learning in many contexts. Partnerships and networks will need to work across the whole learning spectrum.

Concerted partnership action will enable the wider benefits of learning to be achieved across broad areas of social and economic activity including health, welfare, supporting families and communities, and maintaining skill in the workforce. Such concerted action will build social, identity, and human capital in Australian society, and in communities able to innovate and be creative.

### **Empowering Individuals as Lifelong Learners**

The central feature of an inclusive learning society is that all citizens will be empowered and enabled as self-directed learners to have the motivation and capability to continue learning and developing throughout life. Learning throughout life both maintains employability and adds to quality of life and personal fulfilment. Learning as a way of being is a building block of a successful 21st century society.

A range of actions is necessary to progress these objectives, including ensuring that all achieve essential 21st century literacy. While this includes traditional concepts of literacy and numeracy, it goes beyond these in including essential life and employability skills and attributes which contribute to “a successful life and a well-functioning society.”<sup>1</sup>

Innovative concepts are emerging around the world to progress this fundamental feature of a learning society. These include the phases of life approach adopted for the German Strategy for Lifelong Learning, the personalised learning concept being tested in the UK, and various aspects of school reform in Australia and overseas. These developments move in the direction of the learner-centred

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<sup>1</sup> Rychen & Salganik 2003.

foundation for lifelong learning. More research is needed on the pedagogical implications of lifelong learning in progressing this fundamental aspiration.

### **The Community Role**

Building community learning partnerships of various kinds is a key strategy for achieving Australia as an inclusive learning society. A spectrum of models for progressing this objective have been developed in Australia and overseas which now need to be extended to communities across Australia. How best to do this lies at the heart of the lifelong learning challenge for Australian society.

Local government councils are key stakeholders in collaborative community learning, and will be increasingly key players in learning community initiatives. Existing examples, such as the Hume Global Learning Village, Yarra Ranges Learning Communities, and initiatives in Marion and Salisbury demonstrate what can be achieved with vision and leadership.

Information and communication technology is opening new ways to build social capital and community, and should be harnessed with community learning strategies. It is likely that schools, universities, VET, ACE, and civil society overall will become increasingly active in progressing community learning partnerships, but concerted strategies will be needed to harness these resources for community learning.

### **The Role of Technology**

There has been a persistent theme in international discussions of the impact of information and communication technology on learning, that technology will transform the way we learn. This has not happened yet, and the full potential of technology to progress learning throughout the community has not yet been achieved.

While the focus of policy up to now has been on access objectives in addressing the digital divide so that all Australians achieve digital literacy, a new stage of development will focus on harnessing the full potential of technology for learning

### **The Workplace and Economy**

The impact of the global knowledge economy has enhanced the significance of the workplace as a key learning environment with an enhanced significance for industry in adapting to change, generating new knowledge, maintaining skill levels, and building a capacity for continuous innovation. At the same time, technology and innovative approaches to e-learning, is providing new ways to strengthen workplace learning in strategic ways with closer links to overall business strategy and objectives.

Demographic change and the ageing of the workforce, shifts in community values and lifestyle, the growth of casual and part-time work, and other drivers discussed in Chapter 2 are requiring new approaches to developing the human resources of industry, and maintaining the skill levels and motivation of the workforce. In this context, industry is a key stakeholder and beneficiary in building a learning culture in Australia, and should be an active partner. While a number of good practice examples exist, industry overall is not sufficiently engaged in this vital investment in Australia's future, and appears to be mainly focused on short-term issues of skill shortages.

A wide range of issues need to be addressed, including a more strategic approach to business philanthropy.

### **Integrating Learning and Skill Strategies**

21st century conditions have brought to the fore the question of how best to integrate learning and skill strategies in a context of constant change. Implications of the learning/skill nexus are discussed in the report. Some systems have made structural changes to foster an enhanced interface. These include the roles of the UK Learning and Skills Council, Tasmania's Learning and Skills Authority, and Victoria's Learning and Employment Skills Commission. Aspects such as pedagogical implications are being addressed. These efforts need to be supported by a co-ordinated knowledge base on lifelong learning.

### **Growing Partnerships and Networks**

A learning society may be seen as a society comprising a rich web of overlapping and interacting networks and partnerships. The impact of ICT is creating new ways to build interacting networks across Australia, and a diverse range of community and virtual learning partnerships have emerged in Australia and overseas. These include social partnerships, community learning partnerships, ICT enabled networks, and learning regions.

A key issue is how best to extend community learning partnerships and networks to all communities across Australia in ways that make this process creative and value added. This will involve strengthening the learning brokerage role. Linking to international networks is another key area for development.

### **Building the Knowledge Base**

The progress of lifelong learning in Australia has hampered by the absence of a developed and co-ordinated knowledge base. Lifelong learning has not been a research priority for Australia, and existing knowledge is fragmented across a range of Commonwealth and State sites and research centres without a dedicated

national focal point existing. This contrasts with the situation in countries such as the UK and Canada. Options to address this need are discussed.

### **The Role of Adult and Community Education**

Progressing lifelong learning and building Australia as an inclusive learning society will require mainstreaming the role of adult and community education (ACE) in holistic strategies which integrate social, capital, educational, and economic objectives. This is likely to be accompanied, as OECD advocates, by a shift from the current concept of adult education to that of adult learning in many contexts and forms, in a more systemic learner-centred perspective.

Building a learning society will require better recognition of the key role of informal learning in many contexts, and the role of adult learning in building social, identity, and human capital. An integrated and holistic approach to the development of Australia's human resources will best be progressed through replacing the current sectoral divisions by an adult learning continuum which incorporates personal, community, and economic development in ways that recognises interdependencies, and which build synergies through holistic strategies. These important questions merit early discussion.

### **The Way Forward**

A critical need exists to address the key themes emerging from this study through partnerships and collaboration, and a shared vision of Australia as an inclusive learning society.

Foremost, is the low level of awareness and understanding of the significance of lifelong learning for 21st century Australia that needs to be addressed through a properly resourced national campaign for learning. The outcomes of this campaign should provide a platform for extending collaboration and partnership, involving all stakeholders, in progressing the five paths to an inclusive learning society discussed in this report.

While many examples of creative initiatives exist across Australia, these need to be supported by more comprehensive and coherent policies to support learning throughout life in many contexts. Five immediate priorities are suggested. The question of a national framework for lifelong learning was frequently raised in our consultations, posing the question of what kind of framework. Some options are suggested.

Building policies to encourage and support learning throughout life for all Australians should be seen as a necessary strategic investment in Australia's future, meriting the active support of all stakeholders. Much remains to be done.

Long-term perspectives and a shared vision will be needed to drive this process of partnership and collaboration in achieving Australia as an inclusive and successful learning society.