

Adult Learning Australia's (ALA) submission to the Business Council of Australia's (BCA) Future Proof: Protecting Australians Through Education and Skills Reform Paper

Overview

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is the national peak body for adult and community education. Our vision is for lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians.

ALA has a long history of advocacy for an integrated and equitable national policy on lifelong learning. We believe that public policy should reflect a broad understanding of lifelong learning – not one that is limited to formal education and training. ALA believes learning occurs in a range of contexts (home, community, workplaces and institutions) and settings (formal, non-formal and informal).

Research clearly shows that citizens who regularly acquire new knowledge, skills and attitudes in a wide range of contexts throughout their lives are better equipped to adapt to changes in their environment. The 'links between education and economic growth, income distribution and poverty reduction' are now well established' (UNESCO 2014)¹.

In fact, in many countries across the globe, lifelong learning is a policy priority because of its importance to national economic growth and human and social development.

Discussion

ALA welcomes the report produced by the Business Council of Australia (BCA) outlining a plan for a universal education system for Australia; particularly BCA's aspiration 'to a society with greater equality of opportunity', and for acknowledging lifelong learning beyond formal education.

ALA agrees that the adequacy of VET funding needs to be addressed. However, it's important to create equal and complementary education sectors to facilitate a culture of learning and to strengthen pathways to further learning and wellbeing through collaboration, engagement and advocacy. Adult and community education (ACE) must also be recognised as a significant provider of formal VET qualifications and non-formal pathway programs to further learning and/or work. According to National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), ACE organisations in Australia currently enrol more than 9% of total VET students, and are acknowledged for their expertise in providing accessible learning opportunities in local communities.

¹ UNESCO. (2014). UNESCO Education Strategy (2014–2021). <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002312/231288e.pdf>

The most recent NCVET data also indicates that the ACE sector has a higher level of success in graduates taking up employment after training (12.7 %) than all other providers TAFE (10%), private providers (6.1%) or Universities (2.9%).

Many of the recommendations made by BCA would benefit from wider discussion and input from all stakeholders including the ACE sector, which has strong expertise in VET and adult learning; particularly for disadvantaged cohorts.

There is work to be done in terms of ensuring we understand how adult learners move between learning programs. Learning for adult is not necessarily a linear process. Many adults move between all types of learning, at different times and at different types of learning providers.

ALA encourages BCA to recognise what a strong commitment to lifelong learning in its broadest sense by the business community, combined with a recognition of the role of ACE could achieve in terms of providing opportunities for all and equipping the nation's current and future workforce.

Opportunities for all Australians

According to the ABS, around 44% of Australian adults lack the literacy skills they need for everyday life, making daily tasks difficult.² Individuals with low literacy are at risk of not being able to participate fully in the labour market, education and training and social and civic life.³

ALA agrees with the BCA that adult Australians needs appropriate 'functional competencies to enable them to effectively communicate, interact and work' including minimum levels of language, literacy, numeracy and technology skills.

ACE plays a significant role in formal and non-formal training and reskilling, particularly with adults from disadvantaged cohorts. ACE basic education programs are designed for adults with limited formal education or English language skills. These programs cover language, literacy, numeracy, basic digital skills and other foundation skills such as communication, problem solving, self-presentation and management skills that are offered with a high level of individualised support. ACE also has expertise in delivering learning and life development programs that strengthen a person's sense of self and belonging, increases personal life skills, builds community engagement and creates pathways for skill development and employment.

ALA has been advocating for the return of the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program for some time now and is currently preparing a paper that investigates a model for the future.

² <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4228.0main+features992011-2012>

³ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4228.0Main+Features202011-12>

Lifelong Skills Account

BCA's proposal for a culture of lifelong learning through the development of a Lifelong Skills Account for all Australians requires greater investigation about how the model would work and be applied in an equitable and sustainable way. What is required is a substantial risk analysis that explores the full impact of implementing something of this nature. Inadequate planning and poor implementation could lead to the proliferation of opportunistic private education providers and a repeat of the VET FEE HELP debacle.

Lifelong learning requires a unique approach

According to UNESCO, an authentic approach to lifelong learning requires:

[A] paradigm shift away from the ideas of teaching and training towards those of learning, from knowledge-conveying instruction to learning for personal development and from the acquisition of special skills to broader discovery and the releasing and harnessing of creative potential. This shift is needed at all levels of education and types of provision, whether formal, non-formal or informal.

(UNESCO Education Strategy 2014–2021)

Given that the landscape of work in the future is largely unknown and with new media, science and technology moving rapidly, a broader more holistic approach to learning is required. A policy approach that is solely focussed on the skills required by industry fails to recognise the importance of learning in helping adults to adapt to and manage changing roles at work, in families and in their communities.

ALA fully endorses the idea of education as a lifelong journey that extends beyond formal learning and agrees that creating a culture of lifelong learning will be a big job and therefore requires a government commitment to an integrated policy framework of lifelong learning. Such a policy would provide the ideal declaration of expressed government commitment and values encouraging people to learn throughout their lives, acknowledge learning beyond employment and re-skilling, and highlight its role in social mobility, community building and health and wellbeing.

In Closing

ALA agrees with the Business Council of Australia (BCA) that education, training and skills are critical to 'future-proof' Australia against a backdrop of profound economic, industrial, demographic and social change. Lifelong learning builds resilience in and sustainability for individuals, organisations, business and nations and provides opportunities for creating new pathways and solutions.

ALA extends an invitation to Business Council of Australia to participate in our upcoming National Summit on Lifelong Learning being held on 17 April at the Australian Centre for Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne.

The Summit aims to:

- Celebrate #YOLL 2018 (Year of Lifelong Learning),
- To promote collaboration,
- To share range of views across the different sectors
- To inform a vision for the framework and to raise awareness of the importance of lifelong learning and the capacity of ACE to play a positive role in fostering a culture of lifelong learning in our communities.

ALA recommendations

1. That BCA recognise the role of ACE in the education/working landscape, particularly in relation to disadvantaged groups
2. That BCA ensure the principles of social inclusion and equity are central to their approach
3. That BCA work in collaboration with ALA to further develop ideas for policy proposals
4. That, where appropriate, BCA and ALA identify relevant collaborative research opportunities
5. That BCA consider ways in which business could actively work with ACE providers (especially in rural and remote areas), to provide job opportunities and training
6. That BCA collaborate with ALA in advocating for a National Lifelong Learning policy framework and in promoting culture of lifelong learning
7. That BCA participate in ALA's upcoming National Summit being held on Melbourne 17 April.

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