Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee

Inquiry into the progress and future direction of life-long learning

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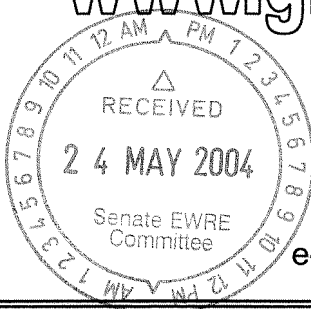**Submitter:**   Mr Raymond Lewis
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Senate Enquiry in to the Progress and Future of life Long Learning

Submitted by Mr R V Lewis CEO Greypath Pty Ltd, and covering the following issues:

A Policies and Strategies

B Technology Development Impacts

C Adequacy of responses to B by Governments

D Technological Barriers and Remedies

E The Learning Industry's level of keeping pace with changes

F Retraining Strategies (esp. Remote)

This submission is based on my background of developing and running a seniors website that has a world reach, (and is now in the top 5% of world internet sites by traffic with 12 000+ seniors visitors per month), through membership and/or formation of seniors interests on line forums and through various aged industry involvements.

This submission is directed to some issues surrounding ongoing education and technology for people over 55 years of age with special emphasis on ICT.

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A Policies and Strategies

A1. As a general rule, government level policies, if any, are not readily apparent to anyone outside the immediate 'vested interest' groups, and are therefore not visible for follow up or effective application by potential beneficiaries and/or many other education stakeholders. It is likely that policy input comes from a limited number of external entities such as COTA, and is not widespread enough.

A2. It is difficult to get 'Government' to take notice of any organisation outside the fold, particularly a private rather than Institutional one . By way of personal example, I was unable to get any hearing or useful direction or anything other than a bland meaningless response from NOIE, during an early 2003 approach where I sought some direction and/or support, [and as such I was not at all disappointed with its recent demise.]

A3. Consequently not being 'up to speed' on the policies etc no useful comment can be made.

B Technology Development Impacts

B1. Technology impacts are substantial and growing. If a senior is not on line, they are becoming progressively 'out of the loop'. People no longer write letters, and increasingly most forms of non physical communications are effected via email and more. Difficulty with technologies such as on line banking, bill paying, (mostly due to lack of familiarity), ticket purchasing, combined with limited peer group support, relatively disempowers seniors. E.g. 86% of seniors find hole in the wall banking easy, but 71% find on line banking too hard

B2. Being on line has the capacity to 'empower' seniors and others (especially the remote lonely and disabled) who for example can pay bills and access essential information without the onerous and sometimes expensive necessity to travel. They can study on line at home (e.g. 375 seniors so far, and increasing by at least one per day, register for our seniors creative writing course.)

B3 80% of seniors are on Centrelink pensions or part thereof and have limited disposable incomes. The costs of Internet connection are significant for them, as is the cost of updating machines and software that often begin as hand me downs and soon can not cope with routine capability demands.

B5 On line access brings lonely people into the world of communication with others, leads to better mental health and enables them to remain in their homes for much longer. This is a very desirable outcome in terms of public care costs and personal 'well being'. I guesstimate that a cost of $1500 could save $30 000 a year in premature care.

B6 Greypath has about 20 surveys on seniors attitudes generally associated with seniors and technology, and they may be viewed via http://www.greypath.com/Portal/Communities/Polls/pollresults.asp

B7. Technology has enabled Greypath to create an on line Creative Writing Course for seniors that has been taken up by 380 seniors so far, over a period of 6 months.

B8. The impact of technology at tertiary level is also to increasingly distance the student from his peers and hence essential social skill building and healthy ideas interaction that university campus's offer

C Adequacy of responses by Governments

C1 Governments to date, appear overly conservative and unable to seriously trial new innovative concepts. For example:

C1.1 Government run or sponsored ISP's' for the needy,

C1.2 The use of schools and politicians offices for local technology awareness training,

C1.3 The creation of nation spanning video conferencing+ systems, to bring country and remoter people into the seminars, educational etc loop,

C1.4 The establishment of a National Expert or AI system on line, to capture knowledge and be able to spread it on demand

C1.5 "Thin client' solutions towards lowering the cost of getting the underprivileged on line

(I suspect that – excepting Tasmania - any such development would be concentrated in the iron triangle of Melb/ Syd/Canberra to the disadvantage of the 'peripheral' states who are probably in greater need for them)

C2. In response to evinced interest by seniors, I have spent two fruitless years seeking any level of state departmental support for the development of some free volunteer level environmental courses for seniors. The idea being to create a pool of already part trained volunteers in the areas of marine and land environmental activities and also native animal recovery. The apathy to involvement even peripherally in this concept surprises me.

C2.1 My surveys indicate that 59% of seniors are interested in volunteer work , and that 37% are interested in paid work.

C2.3. But, that such activity requires external facilitation for most of them.
It is such facilitation that I am seeking to provide

C2.3 Retraining for appropriate paid work is essential and it should be generally free, as distinct from optional further life education.

C2.4 The 'free' comment arises because the 'discretionary income' of those pensioners who want to work is probably $10 - $20 a week maximum.

C3. Lifelong education is often directed to income earning improvement. However for those over 65, Work Cover does not apply and so 'aware' employers will not take the risk of hiring older workers. Hence the additional education can be thwarted due to lack of Government legislation and/or Industry co-operation.

D Technological Barriers and Remedies

D1. Cost is barrier to seniors uptake of technology. Many use outdated computers and slow modems. ISP costs are far too high for people with a minimal discretionary income. This obviously extends even more so to the disadvantaged and disabled.

D2. Technology offers an intellectual lifeline to the remote, the disabled and the lonely. Forums, Chat rooms, E-pal links, general data searches, advisories, on line purchasing and more can make a crucial difference to the mental quality of life of many people, and in the case of our Greypath web site experiment, a tangible sense of alternative community.

D3. On line activity encourages further education, as people gather self confidence through their new knowledge.

D4 Regular technology training sessions [for some years to come], should be provided at all 'Government' libraries, free of charge to seniors and disadvantaged groups. Such to include e-commerce in its current 5 forms, internet and email, use of Video/DVD controllers (!), and more.

D5. Pensioners and the disabled, (the needy ones),would benefit from a $5 a month ISP service (Pension deducted at source and possibly facilitated through government funding or active participation as a *Social Justice ISP*

E The Learning Industry's level of keeping pace with changes

E1 On line learning in Australia does seem to be developing well , (For example PC based flight simulators offer great savings to young pilots requiring annual instrument ratings), and many students now do much of their courses on line, and interactively with tutors, but it is still very unadventurous.

E2. There is need for the development of a national *Video Plus* conferencing system to enable country people to participate in city based lectures, seminars and more via local centres and for the cost of a local call. Country business could well overcome the tyranny of distance with such facilities being readily and cheaply available.

E3. There is a need for a national standard, multi-system, cheap, video card camera and transmission system, that would abet the overall system above.

E4.The proper integration of sound, video, text and interaction to assist learning, is still in its very early days.

E5. There does not seem to be much depth of knowledge as yet, regarding exactly how to present on line material. E.g. To accommodate the different comprehension capacity off and on line (hard copy versus screen), coloration for retention, font size, colour blindness choices, paragraph and line lengths, best admixture of graphics, sound, interaction etc

F Retraining Strategies (esp. Remote)

F1 The use of *Video Plus* (as described in section E), could be an important element in retraining programme delivery

F2. Government television studios for retraining course development and transmission will be useful.

F3. Perhaps 100 or more short range Community TV stations (one channel nationally) could be developed to also deliver such training.

F4 Hank Jongen edited Centrelink magazine 'Senior' has the widest coverage of any such media in Australia to seniors and this publication would be an excellent medium for programme information distribution.

F5. Through life education will become increasingly significant if we are to utilize the aged sector due to future labour shortages. It is regularly stated that 60% of the jobs in 20 years time do not exist today. If this is so, the retraining will become crucial.

F6. For my demographic, the aged, we may benefit from early identification of jobs suitable for a major section of our society whose profile is:

Productivity the Same- Declines very little with age, if at all
Quality of Work - Improves with age
Corporate Memory - Real value, don't throw it away
Job Turnover - 25% less than for younger workers
Reduced Training Costs - Due to lower turnover and previous skills
Absenteeism - The same as all workers
Loyalty, Work Ethic - Usually higher
Experience - Greater
Interpersonal Skills - Much greater

And to begin appropriate retraining now.

GENERAL COMMENTS

I apologise for the piece meal approach to this matter, but hope that some of the comments may be of interest.

Through life education is of course not quite the same as retraining. 'Through life' education for the ageing is a lowly rated matter for current seniors [as my stats show], but this will continue to change as the baby boomers come through, the labour pool diminishes, and the requirement to retire later all make their impact.