

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 Peter Kearns
Managing Director

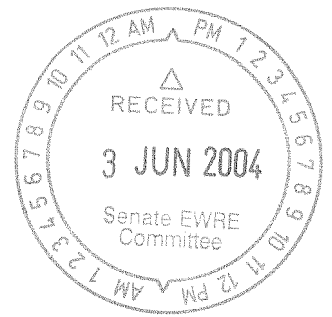
Organisation: Global Learning Services Pty Ltd

Address: 10 Fiskin Crescent
KAMBAH ACT 2902

Phone: 02 6231 4125

Fax: 02 6231 4125

Email: p.kearns@netspeed.com.au



**SENATE COMMITTEE INQUIRY
INTO PROGRESS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS
OF LIFELONG LEARNING**

A Submission by Global Learning Services

**Global Learning Services
10 Fiskens Crescent
KAMBAH ACT 2902**

**May 2004
Tel : 02-62314125
p.kearns@netspeed.com.au**



Executive Summary

The current inquiry into lifelong learning is particularly timely and significant in drawing attention to major issues for the future social, economic, and cultural development of Australia which have not been sufficiently addressed, and which will adversely impact on Australia's future unless a strategic national response is developed.

The key facts are :

1. Australia lags leading OECD countries in not having a national policy framework for lifelong learning;
2. adult learning is the weak link in current arrangements for learning throughout life;
3. people in rural and remote areas and older people (including older workers) are particularly disadvantaged by the absence of a comprehensive national strategy;
4. while there are interesting innovations across Australia, the great potential of information and communication technology to extend learning opportunities for all has not been taken up in a strategic way;
5. the current scene of fragmented development argues strongly for a more co-ordinated whole-of-government approach guided by an appropriate national body;
6. the international scene has changed dramatically since the last Senate report on adult education, with a paradigm shift "from the concept of adult education towards that of adult learning as a more systemic adult-centred view (OECD, 2001);
7. Australia lags leading OECD countries in not making this paradigm shift with a national framework for lifelong learning;
 - This will effect Australia's economic performance in the context of the global knowledge economy, as well as having adverse social effects (including social justice);
8. a national response is required supported by Commonwealth, States, local government, business, community organisations, and other stakeholders.

This situation reflects a state of neglect at the level of national policy. Despite the efforts of past Senate committees to draw attention to the Cinderella status of adult education, adult education retains a subordinate status in policy and funding terms in most states and Territories.¹

¹ Although not in all States. Victoria has been notable for its enlightened adult education policies and programs.

However, the game has changed dramatically in the context of the global knowledge society and economy. The issues is no longer adult education, but rather providing lifelong learning opportunities for all through more systemic and co-ordinated arrangements. Australia has not yet made this adjustment, but continues with fragmented sectoral policies, and with an absence of joined-up policies and strategies.

In working towards a whole-of-government approach, the local and regional levels are especially important arenas where policy can be integrated. Australia is presently disadvantaged in this area, and lacks local bodies with a broad role such as British local Learning and Skill Councils.

Current initiatives such as learning communities (towns/regions), wired communities and online communities of various types could be drawn into a national system of co-ordinated arrangements to build lifelong learning opportunities for the whole community.

The key requirements are :

1. a comprehensive national policy framework and vision for lifelong learning;
2. a whole-of-government approach underpinned by a paradigm shift from a concept of adult education to a concept of adult learning in many contexts;
3. local infrastructure to foster partnership and collaboration, and local strategies;
4. arrangements and strategies to foster a convergence of technology, community building, and learning strategies to underpin lifelong learning opportunities for all in sustainable communities;
5. initial priority for the learning needs of small rural and remote communities and older people, including older workers;
6. provision of some funding to foster innovation in the development of good practice models and strategies;
7. a central focal point, including a national portal, to disseminate information, research findings, and to foster an on-going dialogue with links to relevant Australian and international sites;
8. setting benchmarks to be achieved by 2010, possibly including National Learning Targets as in Britain.

While a comprehensive reform agenda is required, much can be achieved by improved co-ordination of existing fragmented development efforts, supported by funding to stimulate innovation in the development of comprehensive local strategies built on a convergence of learning, technology, and community building strategies.

Introduction

Global learning services welcomes this Senate inquiry which is timely in addressing major unresolved issues which are important for Australia's future. While most leading OECD countries have developed national policy frameworks to promote lifelong learning (including the European Union and its Member countries), Australia has not done so, and education policy continues to be developed on a fragmented sectoral basis, with insufficient links to related policy areas such as policy for information and communication technology in communities, health policy, and policy for building sustainable inclusive communities.

This fragmented approach inhibits the necessary comprehensive whole-of-government approach with joined-up policies and strategies, so that lifelong learning in Australia continues to languish despite some valuable individual initiatives.

At the same time, there has been a paradigm shift internationally from the concept of adult education, with its traditional course connotations, to a broader concept of adult learning in many contexts – including the home, workplace, clubs, and institutions such as libraries and museums. This paradigm shift is reflected in the work of international agencies, including the work of OECD with their recent 2003 report titled *Beyond Rhetoric: Adult Learning Policies and Practices*.

The impact of information and communication technology (ICT) is one of the influences driving this paradigm shift, but as yet there has not been in Australia sufficient convergence and alignment of strategies for technology, community learning, and community building, and development remains largely silo driven

These shifts reflect the imperatives of the global knowledge society and economy, and involve global forces that Australia must adapt to in creative ways, with a vision of the future to be achieved rather than the legacy of the past, as is the present situation.

This context reflects both a challenge and an opportunity to find more creative and innovative ways to provide learning opportunities for all Australians throughout life.

Our Perspective

The views and perspectives set out in this submission reflect the experience of Global Learning Services in our consultancy work across Australia, including our work in several international studies.

This experience has included :

- our studies on lifelong learning including our 1999 report for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research *VET in the Learning Age*²
- our work in advising 16 learning community initiatives across Australia, including managing the 2001 National Learning Community Project for the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA);

² Peter Kearns et al, *VET in the Learning Age*, NCVER, Adelaide, 1999.

- our work on the role of ICT including national and international studies of policy for ICT in education, and a current study for DOCITA involving 10 case studies on innovations in the role of ICT in building social capital in communities;
- an international overview of current trends in vocational education and training prepared as a “think-piece” paper for ANTA³;
- the work of our Managing Director, Peter Kearns, as a member of the ACT Adult and Community Education Council, Chair of the Canberra Lifelong Learning Task Force, member of the NOIE Virtual Reference Group, and as a member of the Board of the Global learning Village in Melbourne.

This experience, combined with our on-going monitoring of international developments, leads us to the views set out in this submission. We believe that the situation is now critical with an urgent need existing for a national strategic approach based on collaboration and partnership within an agreed framework.

The Key Issues

In the context outlined above, we see the key issues being the following:

1. the current fragmentation of effort and absence of a whole-of-government approach;
2. the absence of a national policy framework and vision for lifelong learning to provide necessary linkages between sectoral policies and strategies, and as a basis for partnership action;
3. the failure to recognise the significant paradigm shifts occurring in leading OECD countries from a concept of adult education to a more comprehensive concept of adult learning in many contexts and forms;
4. a failure to use ICT in a strategic way as an instrument for lifelong learning in many contexts – including an active fostering of convergence of strategies for technology, learning, and community building⁴;
5. a failure to promote the need for lifelong learning throughout the community, including to key stakeholder groups such as industry;
6. insufficient support for innovation directed at needs in particular contexts currently disadvantaged, including small rural and remote communities, older people, and those with particular barriers such as literacy barriers.

While a broad spectrum of issues have been identified in research, the list set out above reflects the central issues, and also points to possible responses.

Responses

Addressing the current barriers fully will require a sustained effort over a considerable period of time, as is happening in Britain with the policies and strategies which have been developed and implemented since 1998.

³ Peter Kearns, VET in the 21st Century Global Knowledge Economy, ANTA, Brisbane. This paper is available on the ANTA web site and from Global Learning Services (tel 02-62314125)

⁴ There are interesting innovations across Australia using ICT to build social capital in communities, as our current case studies have shown, but learning strategies are seldom integrated with these initiatives and learning community initiatives seldom use ICT in strategic ways.

However, much can be achieved in the short-term through actively fostering a shared vision and national policy framework to promote collaboration and partnership.

This will require :

1. a catalyst to initiate a national process of development;
2. a national focal point to drive partnership building and information exchange;
3. substantial active promotion of lifelong learning; and
4. agreed funding arrangements.

1. The Catalyst

In our recent international overview of trends in VET, we observed a number of mechanisms adopted by leading OECD countries to drive a paradigm shift in the national approach to 21st century skill needs.⁵

These included the device of holding a national summit adopted in Canada and the United States to give a high national profile to desired directions of change.

These summits were :

- **Canada's National Summit on Innovation and Learning** held in November 2002 with 500 national leaders present to validate a list of strategic recommendations from the innovation and learning engagement process that was undertaken across Canada from May to October 2002. The Summit led to a Five Point Action Plan on Innovation.
- **The United States 21st Century Workforce Summit** convened by the new Office of the 21st Century Workforce to give national profile and support for a new approach to meeting 21st century skill needs.

While the national summit mechanism can be very effective in initiating a national change process, other mechanisms for a catalytic kick-start are available.

2. A National Focal Point

A national collaborative effort will be required with a national focal point to stimulate and co-ordinate action. This role might be met by

- A national portal with a title such as **Australia Learns** with links to other relevant web sites in Australia and overseas
 - this portal would highlight current initiatives, information, current news, research studies, and international developments etc

⁵ Peter Kearns, VET in the 21st Century Global Knowledge Economy, op cit.

- a national body (eg Australia Learns Council) to associate partners in this national development effort (industry, community bodies, government, education)

3. Sustained Promotion of Lifelong Learning

The mechanism suggested in (2) could undertake this role. In Britain there has been substantial promotion of lifelong learning by a private body called *Campaign for Learning* which has had significant corporate support. Business and industry should be active partners in whatever mechanism might be set up.

4. Agreed Funding Arrangements

While governments are stakeholders and should contribute to a national collaborative effort, business and industry are also stakeholders and should be encouraged to contribute as happens with the British *Campaign for Learning*. Corporate sponsorship of particular initiatives might be sought if an agreed national vision and policy framework were to exist.

A National Development Strategy is Required

Past efforts to upgrade adult education as the weak link in a national approach to lifelong learning have not succeeded because of the absence of an agreed national development effort, and a national mechanism to drive the necessary partnership action. Consequently, the development of lifelong learning in Australia remains fragmented with some good individual initiatives, but without systemic and strategic development.

The need is now critical if Australia is to adapt to the conditions and imperatives of the global knowledge society and economy. The focus should now be on lifelong learning, rather than adult education, with a recognition that adult learning occurs in many contexts, and in many forms. Consequently, a new approach is now required.

The potential of information and Communication to transform the way we learn has not yet been realised. However, ICT offers a powerful tool to extend learning opportunities in many contexts, if aligned with learning and community building strategies – and appropriate partnership arrangements.

The key requirement is for a comprehensive, holistic approach built around a convergence and alignment of learning, technology, and community building strategies in ways that empower communities and their citizens, and which build social and human capital in communities to both sustain communities and drive economic development.

Such a national approach will require vision, leadership, and arrangements to foster partnership and collaboration at the national, local, regional, and State levels. Australia lags leading OECD countries in making this transition to a contemporary 21st century approach to opening learning opportunities throughout life for all citizens so as to support social, cultural, and economic development. The challenge is critical, but the opportunity now exists to take a large step forward.