Senate Enquiry On Life-long Learning
Submission from
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One approach for examining some of the issues raised in the Committee's brief on *life-long learning* is to focus on a target group. The target group selected for this discussion is mature aged job seekers.

The issues examined include: definitions, the use of technology, research, training of staff and regional Australia. The focus group will be explored as they are in regional Australia and consists of adults in three categories: those who have been made redundant, re-entrants to the workforce and those whose engagement in the workforce is a new experience.

On definitions: The concept of life-long learning may not be perceived as being highly relevant to this group. They may not identify of the concept or how it relates to their lives. However, because of their extensive life experience the concept is focused on them. They will have played a wide range of roles : they are likely to have moved with varying degrees of success through a number of life transitions. If the concept is defined broadly, beyond the focus on formal education and work related activities, then experience with the target group has demonstrated that it is a relevant concept. If to the concept of 'life-long' is added the feature of 'life-wide', then the concept may have more relevance to the target group. The broadening of the definition is important for this group as they tend to view learning and education in terms of awards and 'bits of paper'. The value of this broad definition has been evident in discussions with all three categories of persons noted above within the target group.
Also this broader definition of life-long learning has implications for policy and practice in areas of government activity other than education. eg in employment and social services. The relevance of the 'all of government' approach is evident with regard to the broad defining of life-long learning in policy and practice.

On technology: A popular view is that new technologies that relate to life-long learning are more acceptable to younger persons. While many persons, men and women, in the target group are aware of their lack of ability with new educational and other technologies, there are also many who have embraced the technologies and are very competent, as evidenced by U3A online. There have been problems of access and exposure for the target group and these will continue. However, there are two factors that appear to be under-utilised in relation to this group and contemporary technology. The first is that these mature aged adults will have experienced significant changes in technology over their life times. They will have coped with the introduction of new gadgets, new methods of completing all sorts of everyday tasks. In addressing their inadequacies with new educational technologies for example, an initial approach may be to work through with

them and their experience of other technologies, noting both their good and bad experiences in the past in relation to work and non-work related activities - that approach recognises the importance of life-long and life-wide learning. In addition, there may be a need for more careful consideration being given to the means by which 'instruction' is provided for the individuals in the target group in new technologies. The U3A example was successful because the 'old' were teaching the 'old'. Placing target group members in a class full of young, technically aware younger persons may not be a recipe for success.

On research: From the comments made to this point it is evident that there are research areas that need to be explored in relation to life-long learning and this target group. One contextual area that relates to the likely success of members of this group gaining employment is that of degree of understanding of employers of the need to have a balanced workforce in terms of experience and of the potential contribution of mature workers within an organisation. There is also the need to have a greater understanding of what life-long learning means to older adults such as those in the target group. An instrument called the Individual Learning Audit Process (ILAP) has been developed to help those of this target group and those who advise them to discover and describe the learning of individuals in this group. The instrument has been used with a small population but now requires a more extensive testing. The experience in developing the instrument has provided the background information noted in this submission. One of the outcomes of the trials of ILAP has been the discovery that the instrument and the interviewing/conversational procedure that is central to the Process provides an opportunity for 'couples', and especially mutually supportive couples, to gain extensive understandings and make useful plans. The practice of dealing with couples rather than individuals offers possibilities for further research.

On training: The research associated with the development of the ILAP indicated that there is the need for training for those who service this target group. Those whose task it is to serve this group have become accustomed to dealing with the 'younger' job seekers. As one of the professionals given the task of dealing with the target group commented: "I am being asked to deal with people who are the same age as my parents". The plans developed for younger job seekers and the assumptions on which they are based will need to be changed for this older group. The directing of them to a multi-aged computing class at TAFE or towards the 'hospitality industry' may need to be re-thought. For example, the style of learning for computers may be by use of a tutor and manual and the type of role in hospitality may need to be focused on jobs other than bar service. Training in the use of the ILAP instrument would provide a more relevant perspective on likely outcomes and means to achieve them.