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 Trevor Cooper Med Councillor
Organisation:	Stanthorpe Shire Council
Address:	2142 Pyramids Road WYBERBA QLD 4382
Phone:	07 4684 5158
Fax:	
Email:	tjcooper1@bigpond.com

SUBMISSION

to

THE SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

PROGRESS AND FUTURE DIRECTION OF LIFE-LONG LEARNING INQUIRY

From
Trevor Cooper M.Ed
Councillor, Stanthorpe Shire Council

1. Concerning the first Term of Reference

(a) policies and strategies aimed at addressing the life-long learning needs of an ageing population

Recommendations

1.1 The Commonwealth Government should provide financial and technological resources to Local Government (LG) authorities to facilitate the development of Learning Communities throughout Australia.

1.2 Lifelong Learning should be regarded as just one aspect of positive ageing. As LG is the service provider closest to the service recipients in rural areas, they should be supported in the development of a holistic strategic approach to positive ageing for the communities they serve.

1.3 LG should be given direct support for its role as a catalyst encouraging the culture of volunteerism and participative citizenship in its community.

1.4 Informal Learning should be given the recognition it deserves as an integral part of lifelong learning and the development of social capital. Greater local recognition to the achievements of informal learners – perhaps through local lifelong learning awards should be encouraged.

2. Concerning the second Term of Reference

(b) the ways in which technological developments, particularly the Internet, have affected the nature and delivery of life-long learning since 1997

Recommendations

2.1 ICT hardware has become much more affordable and the capacity of technology to serve lifelong learning needs has increased dramatically. However, there is still some nervousness about the reliability of technology, particularly in remote areas where the technological expertise is not available and the users have limited skills themselves. LGs, in partnership with other community bodies

should be provided with the resources to develop local ICT expertise to meet the Learning Community objectives.

3. Concerning the third Term of Reference

(c) the adequacy of any structural and policy changes at Commonwealth and state or territory level which have been made in response to these technological developments

Recommendations

3.1 In many areas, even those not generally considered as 'isolated', there are problems with accessing the internet. In particular, the availability of broadband and adequate mobile phone coverage. Again, LG is best placed to assume a central role in assuring the equitable distribution of technology, and, in partnership with internet service providers, identifying black spots. Telstra should work with LG to develop strategies to address these problem areas.

4. Concerning the fourth Term of Reference

(d) technological barriers to participation in life-long learning and adult and community education, and the ways and means by which these might be overcome;

Recommendations

4.1 There are still huge disparities in ICT skill levels within communities. Further funding should be made available to those LG areas where Learning Community strategies are in place and a digital divide is identified.

5. Concerning the fifth Term of Reference

(e) the extent to which the training, professional development and role of adult educators has kept pace with or been influenced by technological and on-line developments since 1997

Recommendations

5.1 In rural areas, there is an acute shortage of expertise available to adult educators to ensure that the potential of on-line learning is realised. There should be a program established to train a pool of ICT technicians within LG areas identified as demonstrating a need.

6. Concerning the sixth Term of Reference

(f) re-training strategies as an element in life-long learning, especially for those living in rural and regional areas

Recommendations

6.1 The sustainability of rural communities depends upon their capacity to adapt and diversify. Resources to develop programs that build entrepreneurial skills should be established in LG areas where Learning Community strategies have been adopted.

6.2 As ICT capacities are constantly changing, there needs to be an ongoing program of training and re-training established to ensure that the full potential of these technologies are available where they are needed most – in rural areas where access to more traditional learning is limited

Discussion in support of the above Recommendations

LIFELONG LEARNING

Lifelong Learning is an essential building block for sustainable communities as it:
- Increases people's work and life skills;
- Provides individual fulfilment;
- Assists those in the community who are excluded from the workplace or are isolated from their communities; and
- Provides for economic regeneration and community capacity building.

FAILURE TO DELIVER

Whilst there has been widespread recognition of the significance of lifelong learning to the sustainability of communities, the progress in its adoption has been patchy and uncoordinated. As a result, many of the communities that would reap the greatest benefit from lifelong learning remain relatively unaware of its potential. This is particularly the evident in the case of small rural communities.

One of the problems lies in the fact that the responsibility for the implementation of lifelong learning policies lies with a number of organisations and institutions whose expertise and interest is focussed on one or other sector of the population rather than on communities as holistic entities. For example, secondary schools focus upon the front end delivery of a compartmentalised, subject-based curriculum to the young. TAFE concentrates upon specialised training and skill development in young adults and some parts of the adult population. Private providers usually concentrate upon narrow segments of the population and even narrower aspects of skill development. They jealously guard their territory, finding security in their narrow expertise and resenting any perceived intrusion of 'outsiders'.

A second problem is the failure to recognise informal learning as being of any more than recreational value. This is in spite of the considerable body of research that has been built up over the past decade that identifies the importance of informal learning to the development of social capital and the centrality of social capital to the sustainability of communities. In Australia this may be exemplified through the work

of researchers from the University of Tasmania. Again, some of this blame may be attributed to learning providers who, encouraged by governments seeking identifiable value for their learning dollars, have traditionally regarded formal, accredited learning as being the only worthwhile pursuit. Informal learning is often left to individual community groups to find what expertise and resources they can afford to meet their needs.

The result is often a fragmented delivery of narrow learning experiences that develop neither an appreciation of the joy of learning nor the key competencies and skills with which to explore learning further as a lifelong pursuit.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

The foundation of our democratic society lies at the grass roots level, in the community. At that level, people are able to retain their status as individuals, families build their lives through a rich and complex series of interactions. Businesses, community organisations, and religious institutions, to survive, must become an integral part of that network. In addition to the traditional, accredited formal learning that occurs in all communities, a largely unnoticed undercurrent of informal learning takes place as part of daily life. It provides the lubricant that keeps a community vibrant, adaptive, dynamic, busy and productive.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The undercurrent of learning that pervades all communities can be elevated into the consciousness of its citizens through deliberate effort. To raise its status to a 'Learning Community' the community must:
- Promote learning at every opportunity
- Develop effective local partnerships between sectors of the community
- Support and motivate individuals to commit to lifelong learning
- Involve employers in action to extend learning
- Use learning to promote the social inclusion of disadvantaged individuals
- Deal with change as an opportunity rather than a threat
- Offer effective information, advice and guidance
- Develop the use of new technology to encourage innovative learning methods.
- Work towards a shared vision of the future.
(Adapted from Peter Kearns, Global Learning Services)

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The question remains, who should be entrusted with the task of elevating learning to assume life-long and life-wide dimensions? The following points argue the case for the pre-eminence of local government (LG):

- LG is the level of government closest to the communities they serve
- Dealing with all sectors of the community puts LG in the perfect position to act as a catalyst for ideas and projects that will generate learning opportunities
- Similarly, as an independent third party, LG is able to broker partnerships and networks

- Being elected directly by the community, councillors of LG have local credibility and knowledge
- Dealing directly with the community puts LG in an ideal position to help with the identification of sources of funding and developing successful submissions to support learning opportunities
- Adopting the characteristics of a Learning Organisation enables LG to act as role models to local businesses and community groups and to provide learning leadership
- LG is best placed to act as intermediary between state/commonwealth government department and community groups
- As learning independents, LG is able to apply the widest definition of what constitutes learning whereas other providers have specialised definitions depending on their sphere of interest
- LG can be responsive to the learning needs of all groups in community
- Through its close relationship with the community, LG is aware of changes in the demographics, economic circumstances, and social issues and is in a position to respond quickly to those changes
- It is in the interests of LG to help develop the reserves of human and social capital in the community to ensure sustainability, distributed leadership, and quality of life
- Promoting learning enables LG to overcome apathy by encouraging participation and active citizenship
- Lifelong learning in the hands of LG can become as fundamental as Roads, Rates, Rubbish
- As LG is often the greatest user of ICT in a community, they have first hand knowledge of the community strengths and weaknesses regarding infrastructure, skill capacity, access problems
- LG is in ideal position to encourage community to use technology (on-line services, community portal)
- LG can positively influence the learning culture of the community

STANTHORPE SHIRE

The Stanthorpe Shire is located on the New England Highway in Queensland near to the NSW border. The total population is slightly more than 10,500 approximately 4,000 of which live in the town of Stanthorpe itself.
- According to the Queensland Department of Local Government and Planning, by the year 2026, the population of Stanthorpe Shire will have a median age of 52 compared with 42 for Queensland as a whole. 57% of the population will be over 45 compared with 45% of the Queensland population. We have a population that is ageing more rapidly than the rest of Queensland!
- The last Census taken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, although a somewhat strange measure, indicated a computer usage in Stanthorpe of 32% compared with 41% in Queensland as a whole.
- Internet usage in Stanthorpe was 23% compared with the Queensland figure of 35%
- Levels of educational attainment in Stanthorpe are lower than those of Queensland although these measures are of formal education only and do not take informal learning into consideration

We apparently have an ageing population with lower levels of educational attainment that seems reluctant to take up ICT!

However the real picture is somewhat different:
The LG Council has recognised the significance of learning to the district and has taken up the challenge, helping to forge learning partnerships with the result that:

- We have a vibrant and dynamic community that is embracing the opportunities to diversify from the traditional agricultural base into wine tourism to such an extent that the Granite Belt region, in which Stanthorpe is located, has been recognised as the premier wine producing region in Queensland
- With the help of State and Commonwealth funding a Community Learning Centre was built on the State High School Campus to accommodate a Learning Network Queensland facility, and a Community Radio Station
- The Granite Belt will soon be the home to a College of Wine Tourism with state wide and national significance
- Further facilities are planned to build a Learning Precinct catering for learners of all ages.

Nevertheless, it is true that our population as a whole and our older residents in particular seem to be reluctant to embrace the learning potential of ICT. In the latter case, where a greater level of informal learning is involved, the feeling seems to be that face to face interactions add to the pleasure of the learning experience. On-line learning is seen as supplementary. There is also a lack of locally available technical expertise to provide the level of service necessary to make the use of ICT reliable for tentative users

CONCLUDING POINTS

- With the appropriate level of commitment to lifelong learning and targeted funding, the Local Government authority is the most appropriate body to generate a culture of lifelong learning.
- The supported development of the Learning Community network in Australia is the most promising strategy to ensure the nationwide adoption of lifelong learning.
- Funding should be based on learning needs and not rely upon the capacity of communities to track down and access specific program funding
- A holistic approach to lifelong learning is required. One that recognises the importance of informal learning as being of similar importance to formal, accredited learning.
- Age equals experience. An ageing population should be treated as an asset to be nurtured rather than as a liability.
- ICT infrastructure needs to be developed where it is of most value, in isolated and rural areas. Not where it is most profitable.