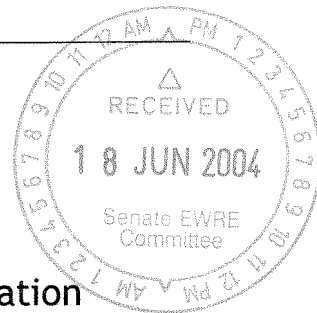


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The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia



Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
References Committee

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

**The capacity of government policy to  
implement a culture of life-long learning.**

**5 Page Submission**

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## An appreciation of the terms of reference

This submission proposes to address the title of this inquiry, in that it sets out to explore future directions for life-long learning. It begins by critically examining the terms of reference of the inquiry.

The ostensible concerns of the inquiry are the apparently conflicting phenomena of the increasing number of older persons, and the rapid technological advancement that threatens to leave them behind.

Put this way, the terms of reference seem to contain an untested assumption: that older persons are somehow inherently challenged by technological advance.

It is suggested that this assumption is invalid; older persons suffer no such fundamental disadvantage. It is cultural attitudes that give rise to this assumption. It is necessary to reframe the issue of life-long learning, unencumbered by these attitudes, in order to envision future directions for life-long learning.

## A working definition of life-long learning

Life-long learning is an attitude, or rather, an approach to living itself. Its aim is betterment - the natural desire to improve one's lot - which exists in every person. One has the confidence and freedom to explore new ideas and develop new skills. The result is to thrive on change and become increasingly adaptable to new challenges.

Life-long learning may apply to an individual, but may also apply to a community. Government policy has an immense capacity to shape these attitudes within the Australian community. This submission proposes to set out how this might occur, using the existing resources of the community.

## The learning culture of an aging population

A brief appraisal of the current policies addressing the needs of an aging population would say that they take the vocational education systems for young adults and try to restructure them for older adults.

It should be understood that the vocational objectives of older persons are vastly different from those of young adults. Young adults wish to rapidly gain new skills so as to find a place for themselves in the workforce.

Older persons, looking beyond their traditional occupations, have an incalculable diversity of skills which they are typically seeking to apply to the wider good of the

community. (This is evinced by the majority proportion who seek volunteer and community representational roles in their late career and early retirement.) Their familiarity with a greater range of social issues gives them the perspective to effect reform at many levels of community.

Rather than simply recommit these people to basic training, government policy should seek to engage them through learning programs befitting their wider community objectives.

There are countless volunteer, community, representational, professional peak organisations and local governments running programs and projects to improve how the Australian community works and lives, which naturally attract older persons.

Policy should acknowledge that all these programs and projects share the common aims of life-long learning: “betterment ... to explore new ideas and develop new skills.”

Policy should recognise these organisations as **communities of learning**, and support their activities accordingly.

Essentially, this approach is to activate communities of common interest, which already exist, through organisations, which are already established, to develop learning programs, which they already do! Government policy simply needs to recognise these communities of learning for what they are, and integrate their informal objectives into a **consolidated culture of learning** within the aging population.

(Within this framework of organisations, then, will be found facilities to develop the more specifically remedial programs envisaged by this inquiry’s terms of reference.)

## The nature of a culture of learning

What this submission has proposed thus far rests on an understanding of learning as distinct from teaching. Rather than focus on the nature of teaching (the role of adult educators, teaching facilities, etc.) government policy should understand how and when learning occurs. Policy should recognise that **learning occurs in all forms of dialogue**, and should acknowledge the legitimacy of the various forms of dialogue.

For example, imagine an internet forum for cattle farmers, in which participants identify a common interest experimenting with sustainable soil management practices. A ‘culture of learning’ policy would recognise the educational value of such a dialogue, and **provide funding, consultation and support material for the interest group to develop its own learning program**. The group could then use the support to extend

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their experimentation program, to engage a consultant of their own choosing from the scientific fields, or to set up a conference on a national platform.

Or, as Simon Fenton-Jones (who has also made a submission to this inquiry) has elsewhere devised, the chat groups that gather in response to documentaries such as *Four Corners* can be organised so that the audience can enter into dialogue with the experts portrayed in the documentary - and together create modules of learning based on the queries raised by the audience. In this case the role of government policy is to assist the media in developing these feedback loops between the inquiring public and willing mentors.

As a corollary to this, policy should encourage all members of the community to believe that **all forms of personal endeavour are educational opportunities**, from hobbies and side businesses, to community action groups and charity functions. Members of the public should be encouraged to think of making these activities means of education, and to seek financial and consultative support for the pursuit of all educational opportunities.

The premise for a culture of life-long learning is that all individuals, and groups within the community, naturally seek betterment through inquiry and dialogue; therefore any life-long learning policy should aim to create forums for individuals to pursue and develop their own programs of education.

## The institutions of wider learning

Central to consolidating these diverse forms of communication into a community of learning is **to reinvent the media into an institution of wider learning**. Government policy can establish charters for learning-directed content in the various sectors of media, much as it does for Australian-produced content in the radio sector. Policy can also contribute funding for the development of learning-based media technology, such as 'community of practice' web spaces.

Government policy must also revitalise the network of **public libraries as the central institutions of wider learning**, which it is their fundamental purpose to be. Public libraries should have primacy of place in our towns and cities, just as cathedrals and town halls have done in the past.

Policy must recognise and build upon the success of public libraries in creating environments where all forms of media become accessible to people of all ages. Government should seek to expand and elevate the role of libraries as the cultural focal points of our communities, just as Singapore and Japan have done with projects such as the Library @ Orchard Road and the Sendai Mediatheque.

## The wider possibilities for an Australian culture of life-long learning

Government policy has the chance to create a new cultural perspective for the Australian community in the widest sense.

Imagine if Australians were encouraged to identify with a life of learning, just as Americans identify with personal freedoms, Japanese with a life of incremental improvement, or Italians with *la vita bella*.

Imagine, then, that the world may come to associate Australia with learning, just as Germany is associated with industry, or France with cosmopolitanism.

The pursuit of life-long learning is a visionary cause. It should seek a visionary future.