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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Removing Barriers, Not Creating Them

Submission to the Senate Inquiry on the progress and future direction of life-long learning

Adult Learning Australia
June 2004

Adult Learning Australia

Adult Learning Australia is a national peak body representing those committed to strengthening adult learning in Australia. Its mission is to advance a learning society through:
- advocating and promoting accessible and quality learning
- researching and advancing innovative approaches to learning
- developing and influencing policy on adult learning
- celebrating the joy of learning.

ALA's members come from all parts of the adult learning field in Australia. They include community providers, TAFE institutions, universities, private training organisations, charities, libraries, museums and individuals. ALA is funded by a grant from the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), membership dues, subscriptions and project revenue.

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1. General observations

1.1 The language of adult learning

The language currently used to talk about adult learning at policy level remains inaccurate and inadequate. It perpetuates a picture of institutions and silos and overlooks some important aspects of where and how adult learning takes place. In doing so the language used by government to discuss adult learning works against the seamless life-long and life-wide learning journeys that most people are seeking.

As indicated in the ALA submission to the *You Can Too* consultation conducted by DEST:

> From the learners' point of view, many of the current divisions in the way learning is administered and funded are confusing and even a deterrent. Embracing a broad definition of learning and one that facilitates pathways between various educational institutions and in and out of vocational and other adult learning would be a significant contribution to a culture of learning in Australia.

The first step in achieving a learning society is to remove the institutional 'silos'. Adopting consistent and accurate language is a step towards achieving this goal.

Life-long learning is not simply competency-based training or, even, community-governed learning providers, but a wide variety of learning activities, undertaken in the pursuit of many different goals, and facilitated in different ways, in different venues by providers with different administrative arrangements.

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Discussions about adult learning must acknowledge the occurrence of learning, both formally and less formally, in the workplace, in the home, at libraries, in cultural institutions, in social clubs, at community centres, in hospitals, at neighbourhood houses as well as those institutions that are more specifically set up to facilitate learning, that is, schools, ACE centres, TAFEs and Universities.

RECOMMENDATION:

➢ That the language used in government documents to discuss adult learning accurately and unequivocally represents all forms of adult learning. In cases where a specific form of adult learning is being discussed, then the learning activity should be identified in terms of its outcome or mode of delivery, for example, 'competency-based training' or 'informal workplace learning'.

1.2 The benefits of life-long learning

Increasingly life-long learning in Australia has been formulated as a pathway to employment. While gaining and maintaining employment is an important quest for individuals and society alike, vocational outcomes should not be considered the only or, indeed, the primary outcomes of learning.

An exclusive focus on the vocational outcomes of learning creates the impression that learning will automatically lead to employment. This is not always the case. While on the surface encouraging people to develop new skills may appear to be a sound strategy in assisting people gain employment, skills development will not overcome all the barriers to gaining or progressing through employment.

In many regions there are insufficient employment opportunities. Discrimination against older people, rather than a lack of learning or skills, may be the principal reason why unemployment among older people is prevalent in some areas. While, at present, those within society who hold tertiary qualifications appear to be more able to obtain and maintain work, it is not clear whether if everyone in Australia held a tertiary qualification these qualifications would still be effective in giving people a competitive edge in terms of employment.

An exclusive focus on learning for work overshadows the other very powerful benefits of participating in learning activity, such as increased health and wellbeing and reduced rates of crime.

The overt vocational focus of adult learning contributes to excluding people from participating. Older workers or retirees, for example, may believe that learning activity no longer has relevance to their lives as learning is of use simply for young people in the workforce.

Learning throughout life is important and, in many cases, can assist in gaining or maintaining employment. But the full range of reasons to learn must be acknowledged. These include learning for better health; learning to achieve better relationships, learning to become more actively involved in civil society, and learning to care for others. Each of these reasons is important to individuals and each has very real economic benefits by helping to reduce public spending on health, crime and family dissolution

Conversely, the limitations of learning must also be acknowledged. Or, rather, the limitations of individual-centric learning programs in isolation must be recognised. No amount of re-training of individuals can overcome work shortages or active discrimination, however community-wide learning programs around entrepreneurship, rural renewal, leadership and diversity may contribute positively to addressing the issues of unemployment and underemployment.

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At present, responsibility for education is grounded in government departments for education. This limits the opportunity to develop adult learning strategies that address bigger picture issues or acknowledge the wider benefits of learning. While government departments for education obviously have responsibility for formal learning institutions, policy responsibility for life-long and life-wide learning falls across the whole of government because learning is of value, and can bring about positive contributions, to all areas of society.

The development around the country in recent years of learning communities indicates the intrinsic need and benefit of a whole-of-community approach to learning. Local government plays an important role in supporting learning communities, but a better, more integrated whole-of-government approach from State and Commonwealth governments would assist in the strengthening of this community phenomenon. Especially as many learning communities involve not only formal learning providers but libraries and museums who, often, perform a learning shop front role in addition to their roles as learning providers in their own right.

RECOMMENDATION:

➤ That a national policy on life long and life wide learning be developed and implemented as a whole-of-government approach.

➤ That funding for learning providers be contingent upon their active involvement in local learning community networks.

1.3 A learning smorgasbord

As indicated above, there are numerous reasons why people learn. The venues and methods chosen for learning are as diverse as the participants and outcomes. However, as a result of current funding arrangements, most learning providers have been forced into a competitive, not collaborative, environment. They have been pressured into promoting themselves as one-stop providers of learning for all audiences, for all outcomes, when, in reality, no learning provider is able to offer such a broad service.

Research undertaken by Adult Learning Australia suggests that people seek different learning modes and venues to achieve different outcomes. Government policy and discussions about learning must support a smorgasbord approach, accepting that no one type of learning mode or venue can - or should be expected to - serve everyone. Rather, people will use different learning modes and venues at different times for different purposes. In this formulation, no one learning mode or provider is 'better' than another, rather, all learning providers are appropriate at different times.

While the notion of the learning smorgasbord matches well with community needs and expectations, current funding structures are at odds with it. Moreover, government promotion of adult learning often actively perpetuates narrow views of the type of adult learning that is available or important . The web resources that have been developed to assist Jobseekers, for example, focuses wholly on Registered Training (RTOs) and does not promote other providers of learning activity which, while not carrying RTO status, may be just as, if not in some cases more, effective in helping someone obtain employment. Learning activities undertaken in non-RTO environments are especially valuable in the development of generic skills – such as interpersonal communication – and helping individuals develop positive attitudes about themselves and their future. Such attributes are highly regarded by employers.

Government support and promotional of learning, including media campaigns and websites, should be compelled to reflect an accurate, holistic, view of learning. It should not promote, implicitly or explicitly, the erroneous notion that one type of learning activity, provider or outcome is more valuable or important that another.

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As indicated in ALA's submission to the *You Can* Too consultation:

> A new approach to funding must consciously address the counterproductive effects of the competitive models currently in place. The provision of ongoing core funding for neighbourhood houses and other community-based adult learning providers would create opportunities for maintaining productive partnerships between these learning organisations, larger adult education institutions (such as TAFE and universities), the Job Network, local business and government. Moreover, a secure funding base would enable these localised learning providers to offer programs that are well matched to local needs rather than having to adapt themselves to respond to funding opportunities and often stray from what they do best. An investment of government funds in life-wide learning, which encourages a collaborative effort to build a learning society, will bear dividends.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

➢ That government policy and funding of life-long learning actively fosters and promotes a suite of learning modes and venues to meet a diversity of needs, learning preferences and outcomes across different demographics and life stages.

➢ The existing Adult Learners' Week campaign be structured and better funded so that it serves as a national awareness-raising campaign to assist adults make informed decisions about their learning options and pathways.

1.4 Learning for all

In policy terms, life-long learning is often only discussed in the context of access and equity. While this is important, any national policy on life-long learning should acknowledge the potential value of learning for all Australians regardless of age, income, gender, ability, locality, attainment of formal education and so on.

Life-long learning is not just an access and equity issue. Learning is potentially as valuable for the company executive as it is for the unemployed person. It is as important for the thirty-year old as for the sixty-year old. While a focus on access and equity demographics is important, especially in terms of government funding, access to quality learning for all Australians should be a fundamental policy principle.

RECOMMENDATION:

➢ That policy be developed around a principal of ensuring quality learning for all Australians

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1.5 Better research

At present, Australian Bureau of Statistics data around learning is fragmented and limited by out-dated conceptions of learning as only taking place in formal government-funded institutions leading to formal qualifications.

As indicated in the ALA submission to the DEST *You Can Too* consultation:

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Policy-oriented research into adult learning in Australia has tended to focus on the VET sector. It has been lead by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) which has recently commissioned two important reports on adult and community education. These have been constrained by the lack of data relating to more informal learning provision and environments. A valuable outcome of the current consultation would be to recognise these shortcomings and to implement a dedicated research program into the wider benefits of learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

➢ A review of the framing of ABS data around learning activity be undertaken so that learning activity undertaken outside formal institutions be better reflected.

➢ The learning activity for cohorts aged above 65 be collected and published.

➢ 'Non-completion' data be better formulated to indicate the reason for non-completition.

➢ A national life-wide research facility (similar to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research – NCVER) be established as a matter of urgency to facilitate cross-sectoral mapping of learning activity and to demonstrate the wider benefits of learning. To be effective, the National Centre for Adult Learning Research should be independent and managed by people who have broad and current knowledge of adult learning in all its forms.

1.6 Better consultation with adult learners

While DEST and ANTA conduct, from time to time, consultations around proposed policy development, these consultations often do not elucidate the voice of adult learners or, more importantly people who might benefit from learning but who are, for whatever reason, excluded from it.

While ANTA has a commitment to involving the voice of industry in it policy development consultations, there has not been a similar commitment to seek and promote the voice of learning participants.

RECOMMENDATION:

➢ That public consultations on aspects of adult learning should be encouraged to incorporate the voice of learning participants and potential learning participants.

➢ That funding be made available to support and promote learners' forums.

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2. Specific Senate Inquiry foci

2.1 Policies and strategies aimed at addressing the life-long learning needs of an ageing population.

To date the Australian government's approach to adult learning has been piecemeal, incidental and too narrowly focused on vocational outcomes. Moreover, strategies to address an ageing population seems to be grounded in the current cohort of older people and not the needs and demands of ageing cohorts of the future. There appears to have been little detail around the

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specific implications in terms of infrastructure and support for the learning needs of an ageing population over the next fifty years.

2.1.1 DEST policies and strategies aimed at addressing the life-long learning needs of an ageing population

At the Commonwealth government level one might expect the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) to take the lead on policies and strategies aimed at addressing the life-long learning needs of an ageing population. Under the stewardship of Dr Brendan Nelson there have been several reports focusing on the issues of ageing and life-long learning, including *Age Counts*, *Barriers to Training for Older Workers*, *Securing Success*, and *Furthering Success* (forthcoming). However, there appears to have been little implementation of the findings of these studies, findings which have been remarkably consistent across all reports.

This may be due, in part, to the fact that there is no designated sub-division within the Department that has responsibility for adult learning outside of the tertiary sector or adult literacy.

RECOMMENDATION:

➢ That a sub-division be established within DEST to create and implement national policy around adult learning.

While literacy in the workplace is promoted and supported through the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) Program, there appears to be little or no commitment to assisting the development of literacy skills for broader social and community needs.

One in five Australian adults does not have fundamental literacy skills. This means they have difficulty with basic reading and arithmetic. Yet, currently, Australia has no national policy on adult literacy and numeracy. Adult literacy is addressed in a piecemeal fashion, primarily through the VET system. A more cohesive response to adult literacy problems— which extends well beyond the workforce— is essential if this critical problem is to be addressed.

RECOMMENDATION:

➢ That a national policy on adult literacy be developed.

2.1.2 ANTA policies and strategies aimed at addressing the life-long learning needs of an ageing population

At the Commonwealth level responsibility for much adult learning strategy has fallen to the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). While ANTA has identified a number of access and equity groups, ANTA does not nominate older people as a group of particular focus. Nor are the implications of an ageing workforce – such as the increase in part-time work and flexible learning arrangements – clearly articulated in the ANTA 2004-2010 strategy document.

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> ## RECOMMENDATION:
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> ➢ That ANTA be encouraged to include 'older people' and, in particular 'older men' in their list of cohorts that warrant special access and equity effort.

For whatever reason, at the national level, ANTA has become the principle government agency promoting adult learning. However, as ANTA's brief is to promote competency-based learning, the messages that ANTA develops and disseminates are underpinned by a particular conception of learning.

For example, the ANTA definition of a 'learning pathway' is:

> A path or sequence of learning or experience that can be followed to attain competencies or qualifications. (*Shaping the Future: Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training 2004-2010*, p.22.)

By formulating the 'learning pathway' in these terms, by promoting competency-based training as the penultimate experience and formal qualifications as the only outcome, learning can be made to appear irrelevant to people not interested in pursuing these goals. For many older people the attainment of a competency or qualification is not relevant to their needs and hence is not attractive. Indeed promotion of competencies and qualification may actively work as a disincentive.

Moreover, a heavy promotion of competency-based training without an equally strong promotion of other forms and outcomes of leaning, can potential obscure the vocational value of non-accredited learning activity – such as courses taken recreationally as well as informal workplace mentoring programs. Such informal and non-accredited learning activities are attractive to many older people and can have just as valuable vocational outcomes as more formal programs.

> ## RECOMMENDATION:
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> ➢ That activities, such as Adult Learners' Week and other commonwealth level-support for adult learning, be formulated to enhance the full range and benefits of adult learning for a variety of outcomes, not only as a stepping stone to competency-based training or formal qualification.

For many years the national campaign to promote New Apprenticeships only featured people in their late teens and early twenties. Such a focus simply perpetuated stereotypes and beliefs that training is not for older people. Given the enormous potential for television in creating and shaping popular views, this focus on youth and training was actively promoting negative stereotypes from a life-long learning perspective. However, recently a New Apprenticeship campaign featuring an older workers has been launched and this is to be applauded and continued.

> ## RECOMMENDATION:
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> ➢ That any national promotion of learning activity actively promotes age diversity.

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2.1.3 Department of Health & Ageing policies and strategies aimed at addressing the life-long learning needs of an ageing population

Of all the Commonwealth departments the Department for Health and Ageing appears to have been the most active in developing policy that acknowledges the learning activity of this cohort. The Department's understanding of the issues and potential of learning for older Australians, however, appears somewhat constricted by a framing of life-long learning in vocational terms. For example, in their National Strategy for an Ageing Australia they pose and address the question, 'why will access to education and life-long learning be important?'. Their answer is that:

> Policy on Analysis by Access Economics suggests that stable population numbers for young people will result in demand for education services for this age group being relatively stable over the next decades, whereas demand for education services among older age groups can be expected to increase over the next decades. The education needs of the youth population will need to continue to be a high priority. However, there will also be a need for greater emphasis on life-long learning to enhance workforce skills. This will improve overall national productivity to better meet the needs of an ageing population. If, as projected by Access Economics, the youth population is relatively static over this period the easing of upwards growth pressure on schools and tertiary training institutions may create opportunities to free some resources towards adult learning without an overall increase in resources for education purposes.

Elsewhere in the strategy there is discussion of the importance of training for mature-age workers:

> Training is about skilling the whole workforce in order to address current and future needs. A culture of continuous learning and re-skilling may be fostered by employers and mature age workers acknowledging the need to keep their skills up to date. (*http://www.ageinghealth.gov.au/ofoa/agepolicy/nsaa/nsaabk6.htm*)

While the report suggests that there may be educational funds available for the older cohorts there is an implication that the life-long learning needs of older Australians will be strictly vocational. There is little clear discussion in this strategy document of the role that ongoing participation in learning will play in helping all Australians deal in terms of lessening the potential for stress, anxiety, depression, and ill health and the expenses that stem from these. There is no focus either on the importance of helping adults become skilled in the art of learning, as a strategy for dealing productively with change, either in themselves or in the world around them.

While education is clearly seen as being important, there is no clear detail as to how learning opportunities for an ageing population will be presented in line with the basic principles of adult education and, in particular, the principles highlighted in DEST reports such as *Securing Success*.

RECOMMENDATION:

➤ That Government policy acknowledges and actively embraces the wider benefits of learning for all Australians beyond vocational outcomes. In particular that life-long learning be promoted as strategy for successful ageing.

➤ That Government policy respond to the fact that effective learning strategies vary considerably from individual based on factors such as their prior experience of structured learning, how long ago they experienced structured learning, and their preferred learning styles.

2.2 The ways in which technological developments, particularly the Internet, have affected the nature and delivery of life-long learning since 1997.

Except in some notable cases (such as U3A Online and the telecentres), technological developments have, on the whole, appeared to have limited affect on the nature and delivery of life-long learning since 1997.

To be effective, the way in which learning is delivered must suit the learning styles of the student. While many students appreciate the possibilities that e-learning or television learning may offer them, a large proportion of adult students find the opportunity to learn in a 'live' social setting the most rewarding. The social aspects of learning – both in terms as an aid to learning as well as a key benefit from it – is sometimes not well replicated through technology.

Technological developments have been of greatest benefit to those who are highly self-motivated (those who previously might have undertaken correspondence courses), or these who were prevented from participating in learning by some situational barriers.

The University of the Third Age Online (U3A Online) was established specifically to provide learning opportunities for older people who are, by circumstance or geography, isolated from other learning environments. It appears that, while not sufficiently resourced to engage full time staff or develop the concept to its full potential, U3A Online have been successful to date in delivering their service.

There is also great potential for computer technology in allowing people with disabilities to participate in virtual communities and learning actives where physical or social impediments often make participation in actual social groups on real-time difficult. For some, computer-based communication creates a level-playing field by offering them the opportunity to take as much time as is needed to formulate and convey their contribution or understand the contributions of others.

While the internet has helped remove some physical barriers for some learners, the involvement of technology in learning has created barriers for others. Technology may be ill-suited for many of the access and equity client groups, especially people with low income or low literacy ability, or for those who suffer from 'techo-phobia'.

In order for the full potential benefits of technology as an aid to inclusively with respect to learning can be realised, a national campaign to increase information literacy among the Australian community must be brokered.

> **RECOMMENDATION:**
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> ➢ That a national campaign supporting the development of information literacy skills among all Australian adults be developed and be delivered through organisations that have demonstrated connectivity with the wider community, for example libraries, community groups and adult and community education providers.

Television & radio appears to be under-utilised as a learning resource. The introduction of Digital television would appear to represent a valuable opportunity to facilitate learning through this most prevalent of technological media. However, the role of broadcast media in supporting adult learning appears to have diminished, not increased, since 1997, due in no small part to continual cuts to ABC funding.

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The role of community radio and television should also be better acknowledged by governments as an important vehicle of adult learning resources, especially in terms of reaching people in dispersed rural communities.

Telecentres make good use of video conferencing technology to connect rural communities, both in terms of learners and learning providers.

RECOMMENDATION:

➢ That policy be developed around the use of broadcast technology to foster and support adult learning.

2.3 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.

On the whole Commonwealth government responses to technological developments in the area of learning appear to have been hampered by the persistent belief that adult learning is only important for vocational outcomes and that all learning must be delivered by Registered Training Organizations.

The *Basic IT Enabling Skills (BITES) for Older Workers* program, for example, is designed for:

> Older welfare dependent people [aged 45 and above], who are in the labour force, to gain nationally accredited skills in information and communication technology, so they can operate more effectively in the workforce.

The program is administered by brokers "who will manage delivery of the training through a network of Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)". The content of the training are three units from the Certificate I qualification under the Information Technology Training Package. (http://itskills.dest.gov.au/Information/Guidelines.asp).

Less formal and flexible learning arrangements have been shown to be effective in helping many older people learn basic computing skills. Local libraries, using peer education, as well as Neighbourhood Houses and community groups (such as the Seniors Computer clubs and Universities of the Third Age) have all demonstrated achievement in assisting older people gain basic computer skills. In ignoring the potential for less formal learning programs to achieve the desired outcomes, the BITES program seems to have been designed to fit more with administrative needs than with an eye to what will achieve the best outcomes for the participants.

The focus of the BITES program is on older people who "who are unemployed and seeking paid work, or currently in paid employment". This appears to actively discriminate against people who may have retired but want to develop computer skills so that they can, for example, participate in volunteer work, work which is unpaid but contributes enormously to the productivity of individuals and society. Retirees are estimated to save the country some $17 billion per annum through their voluntary efforts as carers, mentors, community workers and so on. The VET focus of the BITES program seems unnecessarily restrictive because every member of society can, potentially, find benefits from learning basic computer skills.

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RECOMMENDATION:

➤ That government programs aimed at assisting the development of basic technological skills no longer be limited by vocational outcomes or requirements that programs be delivered by RTOs where non-RTOs can be shown to achieve the same or better results for the participants.

➤ That age limitations be removed from basic computer-skills and information literacy programs.

2.4 Technological barriers to participation in life-long learning and adult and community education, and the ways and means by which these might be overcome;

Technology, in itself, rarely represents a barrier. Rather, the barriers to participation in life-long learning can be described, as others have, in terms of being 'situational', 'institutional' and 'dispositional'.

'Situational' barriers are those that relate to aspects such as insufficient money, lack of time, limited transport or access to childcare.

'Institutional' barriers are those that relate to the way in which the learning is provided. An institutional barrier might be programs that are conducted too quickly – or too slowly – for the participant, or using a delivery mode, such as a lecture format, that doesn't suit the learning style of the student.

'Dispositional' barriers describes individual beliefs and attitudes that may prevent participation a learning activity. A fear of technology may be a dispositional barrier.

While technology itself may not represent a barrier, its presence can create or magnify one or more of these fundamental barriers. For example a lack access to a computer in the home – owing to a lack of money – becomes a situational barrier to participating in online learning. A learning provider who limits correspondence with tutors to email exchanges may be creating a 'institutional' barrier. For people suffering 'techno-phobia' technology used in learning often will create or magnify a disposition barrier. Even those who don't suffer 'techno-phobia', the increase in SPAM (much of it offensive), viruses and internet scams has made otherwise technologically-skilled learners less inclined to use internet technology as much as they might.

The strength of many adult and community education providers is the empathy with their students and understanding of learning barriers. They understand that technology can be a barrier and so, for the most part, have deliberately not adopted technology as a primary delivery mode.

Having said that, other providers of adult learning, specifically libraries and some large museums, have embrace information technology with relish and have developed some innovative ways of using it both as an onsite resource and as tool to combat barriers of time and distance.

2.5 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

The internet – coupled with video conferencing – has facilitated the development of networks among learning providers, both within Australia and around the world. However, as the number of conferences would attest, online communities have not replaced face-to-face meetings among learning providers.

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Poor resourcing of many learning providers – both in terms of money and time – limit the potential for them to participate fully in either the provision of online learning resources or participation in online learning provider communities. Unless a learning provider has sufficient time and equipment their use of online communications still remains secondary to communication by traditional means.

As indicated in the ALA submission to the *You Can Too* consultation:

> The Australian Flexible Learning Framework has achieved a great deal in spreading the e-learning revolution in Australia. It has not, however, had great success in penetrating deep into the area of community learning, usually characterised by outdated equipment, casual and volunteer staff, few financial resources ... In considering the future directions of flexible learning in Australia, particular attention should be paid to the infrastructure and professional development needs of community learning providers. Not to do so would be a retrograde step in efforts to remove the digital divide in Australia.

2.6 Re-training strategies as an element in life-long learning, especially for those living in rural and regional areas.

As indicated elsewhere in this submission, the narrow focus on training is not always beneficial. While in areas where jobs are available and where providers offer flexibility in program delivery, re-training may delivery positive outcomes for the unemployed and the underemployed. However, if 'training' is defined as the competency-based acquisition of skills, then it represents only half the picture.

The development of generic skills – such as interpersonal skills – a positive attitude, and learning how to learn are all necessary to a workforce who are productive, flexible and able to cope with change. These generic skills are invaluable in gaining and maintaining employment. These generic skills also help make the task of 're-training' easier for the individual is better able to identify and build upon their current skills as part of a transition to a new skill area.

At present considerable emphasis has been placed on competency-based training. The same emphasis needs to be place on the development of generic skills to complement industry skills and enhance productivity. Less formal and community-based learning venues represent enormous potential for helping to develop these generic skills.

The potential for formal recognition of skills obtained informally needs to be explored more fully. At present Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) processes are onerous and expensive. More effective ways of recognising current skills need to be formulated as a strategy for making the process of re-training more efficient and effective.

RECOMMENDATION:
That government undertakes to develop ways in which recognition processes can be implemented at minimal cost and effort to the learner as a strategy for streamlining the re-training process.

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3. Conclusions

The discussion and recommendations contained with this submission are built upon a number of basic principles. That:

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- The opportunity to access appropriate learning should be a considered a right for all Australians;
- The language of adult learning should be accurate and inclusive;
- All the potential benefits of life-long and life-wide learning should be valued, supported and promoted equally;
- No one form of learning or type of learning provider can be expected to service all the learning needs of an entire community or, indeed, a single individual throughout their life;
- Research around life-long and life-wide learning should aim to document the learning activities of all Australians regardless of the age of the participant, where the learning activity takes place and for what end;
- The voice of adult learners – current and potential – should be at the heart of policy work on adult learning; and
- The Commonwealth Government should develop a national policy around adult learning that takes a whole-of-government approach to it.

While an injection of public funds remains an important priority for Australia's adult learning community, increasing funding will not in itself bring about world best practice in terms of serving the needs of an ageing or rural population an age of rapid technological change. The articulation and adoption of a set of fundamental principles, such as those outlined here, at the very highest levels of policy formation is required to ensure that the government's efforts, with regards to life-long and life-wide learning, are productive and supportive of the real needs and expectations of the Australian community.

Adult Learning Australia commends the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee for conducting the inquiry into life-long learning and offers its ongoing assistance to the Australian Government to help develop a strong and sustainable learning culture for all Australians.

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