

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

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

Submission no: 31

Received: 18/06/2004

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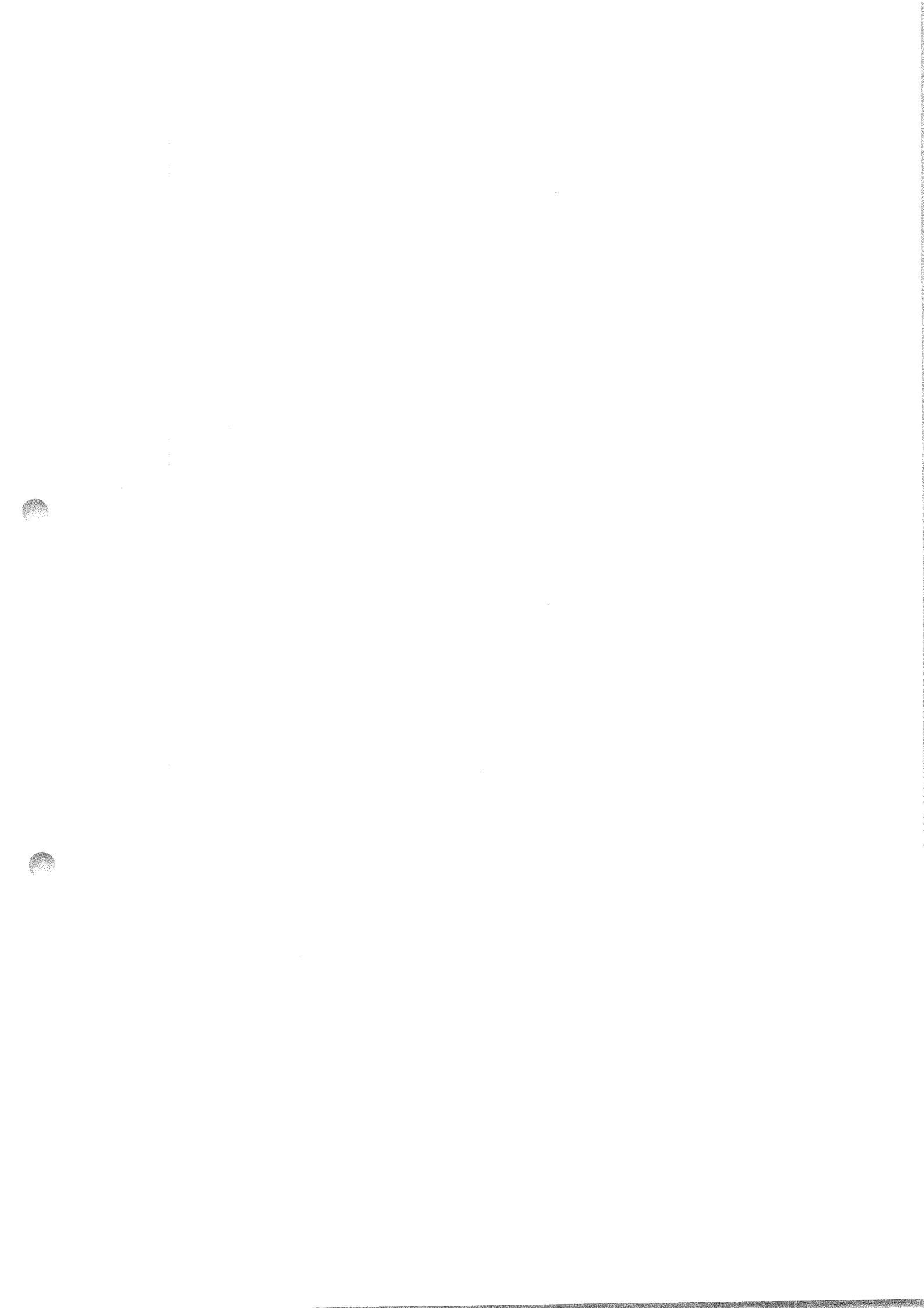
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Submission

by National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee

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

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd (NCVER) provides the following information as background to the inquiry into the progress and future direction of life-long learning, namely:

- Policies and strategies aimed at addressing the life-long learning needs of an ageing population
- The ways in which technological developments, particularly the Internet, have affected the nature and delivery of life-long learning since 1997
- 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
- Technological barriers to participation in life-long learning and adult and community education, and the ways and means by which these might be overcome
- 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, and
- Re-training strategies as an element in life-long learning, especially for those living in rural and regional areas

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

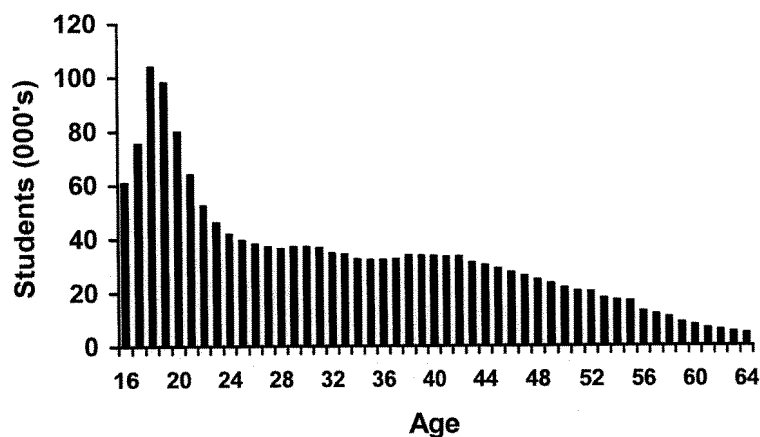
- ❖ As far as we are aware there is no explicit policy on lifelong learning in Australia. Nevertheless, for the VET sector, the new National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 2004-2010, '*Shaping our future*' specifically acknowledges the importance of lifelong learning, noting that, during the life of this strategy '*the importance of 'lifelong learning' will well and truly be established*' (page 5). In particular objective two of the strategy (*Employers and individuals will be at the centre of vocational education and training*) notes that:

Vocational education and training will have a client-driven culture. Small, medium and large businesses, and people of all ages and backgrounds, will have easy access to products and services that are increasingly customised to their particular needs. They will know what they can expect from vocational education and training, what it offers them, and how to use its pathways. Clients will be enticed to learn throughout life and will know that their skills and qualifications are accepted by all parties across Australia. Diversity will be valued and supported, and products and services will be designed to suit all learners. There will be a stronger focus on existing workers and on people affected by shifts in industry and occupational demand. (Page 12)

Two strategies (numbers 1 and 4, page 15) related to servicing the needs of businesses, individuals and communities in a flexible and inclusive way within the National Strategy also make specific mention of lifelong learning.

- ❖ The combination of more people living longer and a lower proportion of young people in the population will have a significant impact on the age structure of the Australian workforce. As the proportion of people in the younger age groups decreases, employers will increasingly have to look to older workers for the supply of skills and labour they need (Robinson, 2000). Thus, the future skill needs of Australian industry will be increasingly met through the training and re-training of existing, older workers already in the workforce rather than through the recruitment of younger people for training (Smith, 1999). Continuous skilling or lifelong learning is now necessary. We cannot continue with education and training systems that put the main focus only on initial qualifications in the hope that these will equip people with the skills to last a working lifetime.
- ❖ Fortunately, the vocational education training system in Australia is a very open one, characterised by high levels of participation, which is widely distributed across age groups. In 2002 around 1.69 million students undertook training in Australia's public VET system. This represents 12.5% of the working age population (15 to 64-year-olds). The age distribution is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Public VET students by age, 2002



The number of older students (aged 45 years or over) in the public VET system (including TAFE and other government providers) has increased steadily since 1994, and shows a trend that is generally consistent with that of the younger learners. In 2002 some 6.6% of the population aged 45-64 years participated in the public VET system compared with 3.4% in 1994. These learners account for one in five public VET students. Since 1994, there has been greater than average annual growth in the number of 45-64 year old students, albeit from a lower base, with average annual growth of 19.7% per annum. In the younger age group (< 45 years), there has been an average growth of some 5.2% per year since 1994 (Anlezark and Nguyen, forthcoming). This demonstrates the openness of the Australian vocational education and training system, and an increasing level of participation by older people.

- ❖ NCVER is currently undertaking a systematic review of research with the support of the Australian National Training Authority, on the question:

What evidence is there that skill development activities for the mature aged lead to (1) improved attachment to the labour market (2) improved productivity?

The review, focusing on people 45 years and over, will systematically find and evaluate all available research (Australian and international) on this question and synthesise it into a report to provide a sound base of evidence for policy.

Which skill development (both formal and informal) activities work, as well as how, when and for whom, will be reported in the research findings and final report. The factors (such as attitude) that have an important bearing on these key outcomes, as both barriers and facilitators, will also be drawn out and reported in the findings.

Preliminary information will be available in September 2004. The review is due to be finalised by the end of this year.

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

- ❖ Consistent with younger learners, the majority of older learners in VET study at a campus. However, the data show that older learners are more likely to study via remote access (including online learning) than younger learners, consistent with the greater proportion of older learners located in rural areas (Anlezark and Nguyen, forthcoming).
- ❖ The work done by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (AFLF) to address this issue for the vocational education and training sector has been underpinned and supported by a body of strategic research which the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) has managed on behalf of the AFLF. The attached NCVER flyer (NCVER, 2003) and publication entitled '*Flexibility through online delivery: Research at a glance*' (NCVER, 2002) document and summarise the underpinning research.
- ❖ It has been hard to establish the extent to which on-line learning and the internet is being used in the VET sector. This is because the use of technology and the internet is usually blended in with a wider range of learning approaches, at least in formal vocational education and training programs. Good blended delivery, using a mix of face-to-face, online and paper-based distance approaches will be more successful in the marketplace according to research by Peters & Lloyd (2003).
- ❖ NCVER (2002) considers the success factors identified by teachers and learners needed for on-line approaches. In addition another project, also funded by the AFLF, has examined demand issues (Peters and Lloyd, 2003). They found that, regardless of age, purely online training is unlikely to be the main driver of demand. The chief attribute of technological developments is that they allow for a more flexible approach to delivery and therefore can assist life long learning.

(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

- ❖ AFLF has been the major focus for these technological developments in the VET sector. The Framework is designed to create and share knowledge about flexible learning and to support its take-up in the sector. Up to \$20 million per year from 2000 to 2004 has been committed to fund projects and initiatives. The AFLF is currently under review.

(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

- ❖ Research (NCVER, 2002; NCVER, 2003) found that the greatest deterrents to a high-quality learning experience for students, particularly using the internet, are problems with technology and access to the internet. For students, barriers can include bandwidth, fast and affordable internet access, speed of software and access to up-to-date equipment. The relative speed and stability of internet access is a bigger issue in regional Australia than in metropolitan areas.
- ❖ Significant issues which may also constitute barriers include the level of technical support available (help in downloading information, how to participate in discussion, web etiquette and quick response to problems), their literacy and IT skills and other aptitudes (such as their ability to be self-directed, confident, motivated and willing to interact with teachers and peers through email, chat rooms etc.)
- ❖ Many young people have skills in using the computer and other technology. However, these skills do not necessarily mean that they have both the traditional literacy and the information and communication technology (ICT) literacy skills needed for effective technology-based lifelong learning. Likewise, older people who have not grown up with these emerging technologies may need special help to meet their information needs and enable them to participate as fully as possible in lifelong learning. Therefore the barriers are not only technological.
- ❖ Data shows that access to a computer is related to both income and employment status (NCVER, 2002). Those with higher household incomes are also far more likely to have internet access at home. Equity of access needs to be kept in mind as these technologies and learning approaches can exclude many who are on low incomes or who may not be in work (NCVER, 2002). Others live where the maintenance of a reliable and high-speed connection to the internet is problematic, such as rural and remote areas. In a world becoming increasingly dependent on computer technologies and access to information and knowledge, there is a danger that, while such technologies and online learning will open doors for some, others will become further marginalised. On the other hand, the research has shown that online learning and the use of appropriate technologies can enhance opportunities for learners whose educational prospects are limited by distance, illness or disability (NCVER, 2002).
- ❖ Learners may require support to help develop their skills in using these technologies effectively. The body of AFLF research (NCVER, 2002; NCVER, 2003) shows that both induction programs and on-going support are particularly valuable in helping to overcome technological and other barriers to effective participation. Programs such as these may help to reduce unnecessary attrition and assist learners to develop the 'technical' and other 'soft' skills they need to enable them to focus on learning, rather than focusing on mastering the technology.

- ❖ NCVET is aware that the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) is conducting a review entitled *Australia's Future Using Education Technology*. The review is looking at the current uses and providers of education technology as well as examining potential and emerging applications. (See <http://www.dest.gov.au/afuet/default.htm>).

(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

- ❖ The research for the AFLF has demonstrated need for professional development in a wide range of areas to help VET teachers make better use of online learning and delivery. Professional development needs are recognised in areas such as teaching, use of technologies, seeing what others are doing, keeping up to date with new technological and other developments in a fast-moving field, resource development and, importantly, the development of adequate levels of written and other communication skills for the on-line environment. The research also found that VET teachers need training in assessment, evaluation and on-line facilitation, especially in the management of self-paced groups (NCVER, 2002).
- ❖ However training and professional development are only part of a more comprehensive solution. The most recent of the AFLF funded research (see NCVER, 2003) suggests that the current context (awards, performance indicators, funding models etc.) in which VET practitioners and providers operate does not prohibit new and more flexible ways of working (including using new technologies and online developments) but it does make it more difficult. Industrial agreements and human resource policies and practices have not kept pace with the changing nature of technologies and ways of working. Problems of job design and workload and performance management also need to be tackled as a matter of increasing urgency, along with continuing attention to professional development needs.

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

- ❖ Anlezark and Nguyen (forthcoming) have found that older people who have previously completed post-school qualifications are most likely to participate in education later in life than those who have only completed school level studies. Furthermore, the higher the previous level of education, the more likely they are to undertake studies later in life.
- ❖ Older learners (45 years and older) are less likely than younger learners to undertake studies leading to a nationally-recognised qualification and are more likely than younger ones to study subject-only courses and in mixed field programs (which include general education and preparatory courses in literacy, numeracy and study skills). It is reasonable to assume that these enrolments are for the purpose of re-training (for example the development of management skills), personal satisfaction, or to lay the groundwork for further education or re-training.
- ❖ The major reason why older learners undertake study is job related. This is more so than for younger people. Many older learners, however, also have a focus on personal interest and skill improvement (see Anlezark and Nguyen).

Supporting material

Hard copy and/or web locations of a range of NCVER publications that have addressed the issues of lifelong learning, the aging workforce, on-line learning and the use of technologies to support learning are attached or given below. Key publications cited in the submission are:

ANTA, 2003 *Shaping our future: Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training 2004-2010*. ANTA, Brisbane, <http://www.anta.gov.au/dapStrategy.asp> Accessed May 2004

Anlezark, A & Nguyen, N. (forthcoming) *Older learners in VET 2002: At a glance*. NCVER, Adelaide. **(Available shortly)**

NCVER 2002 *Flexibility through online delivery: Research at a glance*. NCVER, Adelaide <http://www.ncver.edu.au/teaching/publications/885.html> Accessed May 2004

Peters, K & Lloyd, C 2003 *Differentiating needs: Customer demand for online training*. NCVER, Adelaide <http://www.ncver.edu.au/teaching/publications/1428.html> Accessed may 2004

Robinson, C 2000 *New directions in Australia's skill formation: Lifelong learning is the key*. NCVER, Adelaide <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/454.html> Accessed May 2004

Smith, A (Ed.) 1999 *Creating a future: Training, learning and the older person*. NCVER, Adelaide. Available in hard copy only **(Attached)**

NCVER (2003) *Online learning in vocational education and training: Research resources*. Brochure, NCVER, Adelaide. Available in hardcopy only **(Attached)**