

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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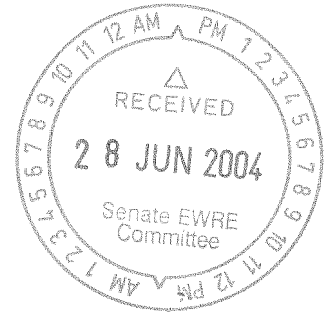
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The Secretary
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Dear Secretary,

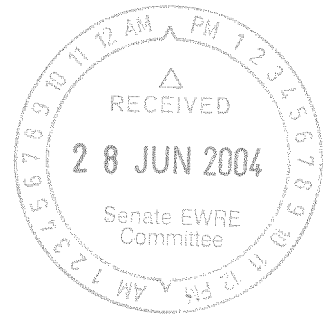
Mission Australia is pleased to make a submission to the *Senate Inquiry Into The Progress and Future Of Lifelong Learning*. Mission Australia has a broad interest in the impacts of new technologies on life long learning and the delivery of training in rural areas. Our submission specifically comments on policies and strategies to address the lifelong learning needs of Australians in the face on an ageing population. In particular we are concerned about the wellbeing of older workers, young people and other people at risk of social exclusion and disadvantage. Our submission includes:-

- a brief description of Mission Australia,
- a short discussion on the significance of lifelong learning, its characteristics and benefits; and
- why we believe lifelong learning approaches can be particularly beneficial to young people, older workers and people at risk of social exclusion and disadvantage.

Mission Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Employment, Workplace Relations Education References Committee. I look forward to receiving a copy of the Committee's report in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Anne Hampshire
National Manager, Research and Social Policy



Mission Australia

A response to

**‘Submission to Senate Employment
Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee’**

**Senate Inquiry Into The Progress and Future Of Lifelong
Learning**

June 2004

Introduction

Mission Australia is pleased to make a submission to the *Senate Inquiry Into The Progress and Future Of Lifelong Learning*. Mission Australia has a broad interest in the impacts of new technologies on life long learning and the delivery of training in rural areas. Our submission specifically comments on policies and strategies to address the lifelong learning needs of Australians in the face on an ageing population. In particular we are concerned about the wellbeing of older workers, young people and other people at risk of social exclusion and disadvantage. Our submission includes:

- A brief description of Mission Australia,
- A short discussion on the significance of lifelong learning, its characteristics and benefits; and
- Why we believe lifelong learning approaches can be particularly beneficial for young people who experience difficulties in the post-school transition, older workers and people at risk of social exclusion and disadvantage.

Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a non-denominational Christian not-for-profit organisation, with more than 250 services in every State and Territory across metropolitan, rural and regional Australia. Mission Australia aims to empower disadvantaged and isolated individuals, families and communities by giving them the support they need to get back on track and lead more fulfilling lives.

Our services include:

- *Family support initiatives* for families and children in need;
- *Youth initiatives* for marginalised young people;
- *Housing support initiatives* for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness;

- *Employment and training initiatives* for the long-term unemployed; and
- *Community building initiatives* that help strengthen and empower entire communities.

What is lifelong learning?

The following comprehensive definition of lifelong learning sits well with Mission Australia's experience working with people of all ages at various stages of their lives and in very diverse circumstances. We therefore urge the Inquiry to adopt a broad approach to lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning encompasses "*all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, and social and/or employment related perspective*". (European Commission 2003)

It embraces all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from preschool years to post retirement and values all forms of learning whether formal learning (eg university degree courses), non formal learning (eg vocational skills acquired in the workplace) and informal learning (eg intergenerational learning). Lifelong learning promotes the development of knowledge and competencies to enable people to adapt to a knowledge-based society and actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life. (ibid 2003)

Mission Australia would also draw the Inquiry's attention to a recent report commissioned by The Smith Family which identifies a range of characteristics lifelong learners will possess. These include:

- A sense of 'personal agency' or confidence in oneself as a learner
- The possession of a range of learning skills

- The ability to link new knowledge to what is already known
- To be curious
- To value learning
- To be self regulated as a learner
- Basic literacy and numeracy skills

(ACER, The Smith Family 2004)

Why lifelong learning is important

Australia has experienced rapid social and economic change during the last twenty years. The effects of globalisation and competing within a knowledge economy have changed the way that Australian society and many workplaces now operate. As the nature of work changes new pathways are emerging. Those in the workplace are now far more likely to change employers, industries and their working arrangements (eg full-time, part time or casual employment) during their working life. Mission Australia is convinced the promotion and uptake of learning opportunities for people in the workplace is to a great extent dependent on the establishment of a life long learning culture. The uptake of these learning opportunities is essential, given the changes identified above.

The prospect of emerging labour shortages arising from an ageing population has fuelled the debate on the need to retain older workers in employment and ease the transition to retirement. How well we respond to these challenges, is to large extent dependent on the extent to which Australia is committed to a lifelong learning philosophy. A well coordinated lifelong learning strategy would equip Australians with the means to adapt and respond to changes in the workplace.

Lifelong learning also contributes to the wellbeing of society in a much wider sense through the achievement of other social goals such as civic

participation, sustainable development, improved health and wellbeing, reduced crime and greater social cohesion. (Scottish Executive 2003)

Mission Australia recognises the importance of lifelong learning as a strategy for achieving social goals, raising educational standards and promoting individual and social wellbeing.

A well integrated lifelong learning culture must acknowledge the potential value of learning and provide opportunities for all Australians to participate regardless of age, income, gender, ethnicity, ability, locality, and the attainment of formal education.

Mission Australia invites the Inquiry to consider in particular, the role a lifelong learning strategy can play in assisting those young Australians who are not experiencing successful post-school transitions, older workers who are at risk of retrenchment and long term unemployment, and individuals and families who are experiencing social exclusion. Our services come into daily contact with all three of these groups.

Successful transitions for all young people

Mission Australia acknowledges that for many young Australians the transition from school to positive post-school activity (further study, training and employment) is relatively smooth. However there are a number of young people for whom the transition from education and/or training to work is anything but smooth, especially those who leave school early or before completing years 11 or 12. The Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2003) estimated approximately 76,000 young people were not in full time education, employment or training, and that one in ten school leavers do not make a positive transition to employment.

It is essential that young people who leave school early or without going on to further training or study, not be disqualified from full participation in Australian

society because they missed out on the chance to, or were unable to learn while at school. These young people are more likely than their counterparts to experience unemployment and less likely to obtain full time employment. Early school leavers (ie. those who leave school prior to completing Year 12) are at a high risk of unemployment. A national commitment to lifelong learning is an important step in ensuring these young people are able to participate fully.

The Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Taskforce highlighted the importance of skills and attributes for lifelong learning for young people to succeed in a rapidly changing world. For young people to succeed they need to be encouraged to see 12 years of education or training as the platform for a future of learning throughout their lives. (Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Taskforce 2001)

Creating better opportunities for young people to embrace learning beyond school is critical. A lifelong learning culture provides a context and a learning environment that can encourage school leavers back into training or education and over the long term can reduce the number of early school leavers by providing more flexible learning opportunities.

Creative Youth Initiatives (CYI)

Mission Australia is directly engaged in providing lifelong learning opportunities for at risk young people. For example, our Creative Youth Initiatives (CYI) provides a unique specialist service for homeless and socially disadvantaged young people, aged 16-25. Based in Sydney, CYI provides positive learning and educational experiences to build self esteem, confidence and a sense of achievement, and at the same time improve literacy and numeracy skills in a non-threatening environment. The CYI program has been successful in helping young people overcome substance abuse, homelessness, mental health, family breakdown, unemployment and poor educational experiences.

It is essential that our education and training systems as well as our community services are flexible enough to deliver lifelong learning outcomes, if Australians of all ages are to enjoy social and economic participation.

Older Australians

It is widely recognised that people in the labour market must extend their skills and educational attainment to either enter the labour market, or further their career development. The absence of a consistent life long learning strategy has contributed significantly to high unemployment levels among older Australian workers. At present older workers are poorly placed to adapt to labour market demands because many lack the range of skills employers now require (Senate Committee on Superannuation 2003).

Without the support of an integrated lifelong learning culture, Mission Australia is concerned that the skills and competencies older workers have acquired during their working life, are at risk of losing their value as new technologies are introduced. This is particularly the case as many older unemployed people have found their diminishing access to training and up-skilling has seriously disadvantaged them in the labour market.

Mission Australia is encouraging Governments and business to work together to develop policies which will protect older workers from retrenchment, invest in on-the-job training and make it easier for older workers to continue working. One of the main challenges is to reverse the trend among older workers not to participate in further training compared to their younger counterparts.

Lack of self confidence, fear of failure, unfamiliarity with training environments and fear of competing with younger and better educated trainees have been cited as reasons for this reluctance (Cully et al 2000). Cost has also been cited as a factor with a belief that older workers are more expensive to train and slower to learn than younger workers. Recent research suggests that

there is little difference in fact between the costs of training older workers compared to their younger counterparts. (Cully et al 2000)

Mission Australia has been actively involved in the delivery of a range of programs for older Australians that fall within the umbrella of lifelong learning. One program in particular we believe has the potential to provide older Australians with the opportunity to learn in a comfortable environment and engage with new technologies which are critical to their participation within knowledge based economy.

Basic IT enabling skills for older workers (BITES)

Funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Science (DEST), BITES is designed to help people attain basic IT skills. The free course is designed for people over the age of 45, who are employed or looking for work and who have little knowledge of computers or software. Learners take three study units from Certificate Level 1 in the Information Technology Training Package as well as experience 10 hours of supported learning to in a practical environment. Students learn in a structured, self-paced environment, and may undertake training in other software programs such as Excel or Access, or other special projects of interest to them. On completion of the program, students are assessed and if successful, are issued with a nationally recognised Statement of Attainment.

Fostering social inclusion

Many of the people Mission Australia assists through our services have experienced first hand the effects of social exclusion. Our clients have the desire to learn skills but often lack formal education qualifications and previous poor educational experiences have made some reluctant to engage in formal learning.

A lifelong learning philosophy has enormous potential to *socially include* and reconnect disadvantaged Australians back into their communities. Mission Australia provides a range of lifelong learning programs to broaden social participation and reconnect individuals to communities.

The Community Café

For example Mission Australia's Community Café provides opportunities for people to interact and build relationships with others in a non-threatening, non-judgmental, supportive environment. The café provides affordable meals, as well as a range of individual support and services, such as health, housing and legal help, in relaxed surroundings. The café also offers training in Certificate III Hospitality and work experience in a busy café setting, as well as access to Mission Australia's employment services next door. People from many backgrounds find the café a place of acceptance, encouragement and professional help.

Being a place for the entire community brings opportunities for people to interact and build relationships with others in a non-threatening, non-judgmental, supportive environment. The Community Café is very much a site for life-long learning.

Other opportunities – the Clemente learning approach

Mission Australia is also looking at opportunities to introduce the Clemente learning approach to some of our programs. Developed in New York, the program works with socially disadvantaged people (including homeless people, prison inmates, and people with drug and alcohol dependence) and provides training in classical humanities. The Clemente learning approach has been well received in the United States and is currently being piloted in Australia.

Conclusion

Mission Australia urges the Inquiry to consider lifelong learning within a broad understanding of its capacity to contribute to both the economic and social wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and the nation as a whole.

We would particularly urge the Inquiry to consider the positive impact a national lifelong learning strategy (with accompanying implementation) can have on groups such as older workers, young people who have not made a smooth post school transition and those who are socially excluded.

We look forward to hearing of the Committee's deliberations.

References

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