Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee

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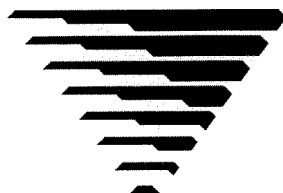
SUBMISSION

Progress and future direction of life-long learning inquiry

18 June 2004

Introduction

Building Australia's commitment to and capacity for lifelong learning is fundamental to our country's future. Life-long learning is associated with pathways through education, training and employment, and the development of a positive learning culture, not only for individuals, but also for organisations. In an increasingly globalised economy, industry requires flexible workers who can adapt to change over the course of their lives, picking up skills as the world of work changes.

Consideration of life-long learning in Australia touches on many aspects of the work of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) in its role as the national policy and funding body for vocational education and training (VET). The principles of adult learning and understanding the ways to engage people in learning are critical to our work with individuals/clients, VET professionals, employers and communities. With the development of individual capacity, organisational, economic and social capacity is built to strengthen Australian businesses and communities. This is reflected in the vision *of Shaping our future: Australia's National Strategy for vocational education and training 2004 – 2010:* VET works for Australian businesses, people and communities.

Learning on the job is a strong tradition in Australia. While learning for and at work is the context for ANTA's work with adults, our recent National Strategy consultations and research strongly indicated that this learning cannot be separated from life wide or life-long learning. The National Strategy reinforces this idea by identifying the purpose of VET as 'providing skills and knowledge for work, enhancing employability and *assisting learning throughout life'*.

Within the context above, ANTA has outlined key areas in which the VET agenda contributes to lifelong and life wide learning.

The Australian National Training Authority - ANTA - is an Australian Government statutory authority established in 1992 to provide a national focus for vocational education and training (VET).

ANTA reports to an industry based Board and is an administrator and adviser.

It advises the ANTA Ministerial Council (MINCO) of Australian Government, state and territory Ministers responsible for vocational education and training on:

- VET policy, strategy, priorities, goals and objectives nationally

- VET plans which states and territories develop each year. These plans detail how states and territories propose to meet national priorities, goals and objectives.

ANTA administers national programs and the Australian Government funding of the national VET system.

ANTA's mission is to ensure that the skills of the Australian labour force are sufficient to support internationally competitive commerce and industry and to provide individuals with opportunities to optimise their potential.

ANTA works closely with governments, industry and other stakeholders to provide advice to MINCO to develop a strategic focus and recommend on national policies and strategies. ANTA's core roles include:

- developing a draft National Strategy
- development, management and promotion of the National Training Framework
- developing advice to identify and plan for future growth requirements
- ensuring comprehensive up to date national statistical data are available
- developing advice on key performance measures and reporting objectives
- providing an integrated annual national report
- coordinating national initiatives and undertaking policy reviews, evaluation and research on national priorities
- administering programs requiring national delivery.

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

The ageing population has reemphasised the importance of life-long learning as the role of mature age workers within the workforce becomes more significant and as greater numbers of people seek to accommodate a balance in work and life responsibilities that suits successive life stages.

ANTA is addressing this issue in two ways. First by raising awareness of the specific needs of mature age workers. Second by recognising the learning needs of all age groups require attention in order to ensure that the young are provided with a good skills and learning foundations and that people of all

ages are encouraged to take responsibility for maintaining their learning and skills development through out life.

ANTA's primary focus is on learning for work. At the same time learning has significant benefits for the ageing population in maintaining health, well being and social engagement.

Access to training and the opportunity to add to and up-grade skills will become increasingly important for people of all ages if they are to remain active participants in the workforce.

It is proposed that the training needs of mature age workers, including mature age unemployed should be a key focus in the first Action Plan to implement the National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 2004-2010. This issue will be a focus of coordinated action drawing together policies and initiatives at state, territory and national level as well as cross-government approaches.

Several specific issues have already emerged:

- Strengthening access to Recognition of Prior Learning processes
- The effectiveness and appropriateness of New Apprenticeships, and
- The use of financial incentives targeted at employers and/or individuals.

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

training.com.au

Australia's first vocational education and training portal, www.training.com.au, will be the core of an e-business revolution in the VET sector. It will provide a seamless entry point and a smooth navigation process to information required by VET clients. The training.com.au web site is centred around three major releases, the first, launched in May 2003 was focused on business and enterprise registered training organisations (RTOs), the second launch due in June 2004 is focused on RTOs, with the third scheduled for 2005 focused on individual clients.

The individuals' release will be the largest of the three as the expectations and information requirements for individuals require careful and extensive research and planning. The first two releases solidify the data and tailor information particularly in regard to courses and qualifications so that accurate delivery to individuals of all ages is possible.

training.com.au works closely with all of the other major VET related sites and organisations to ensure that the majority of information within the sector is organised, coordinated and accessible to users in the simplest and most

accurate way possible. Once the three releases are completed individuals with be able to see accurate information on all types of nationally recognised training, including short courses, find the RTO that suits their individual requirements and also see supporting information relevant to courses such as supporting materials, statistics related to that course and much more.

training.com.au is also to be accompanied by a national InfoLine that provides a parallel access to the website content and functionality for those users who cannot or chose not to access the website. training.com.au will provide easier access to VET for learners and provides a significant tool to ensure clients make informed choices about their learning.

Australian Flexible Learning Framework

Background about the national strategy known as the *Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2000 – 2004* is given under (c).

To guide the implementation, evaluation, ongoing planning and review of the *Australian Flexible Learning Framework*, consultation about future innovation in flexible learning occurred in 2003. It is clear from the responses discussed in the consultation paper *Your future, your choice: Flexible learning futures* that there are very different approaches to learning across the generations.

Young learners may have far greater computer skills than their teachers or trainers have. Teenagers are not interested in traditional styles of content presented online; they are used to games or quick messaging, and want eye-catching short chunks which only need a short concentration span. Older learners may prefer more traditional styles, but many, especially those with less mobility, recognise the value of the Internet and email as a way of keeping in touch without having to leave home.

But though the preferred learning styles vary, what is common to all generations and all groups is that they want to be able to choose the how, when and where of their learning. Choice is a theme that pervades the responses[1].

The consultation also showed that consistent with the overall Australian picture, use of technologies to support training is certainly growing. There is a lot of e-learning happening in the community, in workplaces and in training organisations formally through e-learning programs and informally through emails, project teams, intranets and web surfing[2].

Firms are looking for faster, better or more skills acquisition. Technology enabled flexible learning offers the potential to achieve important gains for employers looking to induct and retain high performing employees, to speed

[1] *Your future, your choice: Flexible learning futures,* Flexible Learning Advisory Group (ANTA), January 2004, page 2.
[2] *Your future, your choice: Flexible learning futures,* Flexible Learning Advisory Group (ANTA), January 2004, page 4.

up the time it takes to train and assess staff on new procedures or products, to connect with their supply and distribution chains, to reach a distributed workforce and for closing the training gaps between different firms and between different industries[3].

Your future, your choice: Flexible learning futures, Flexible Learning Advisory Group (ANTA), 2003, can be found at
http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/aboutus/futures.pdf

'Flexible learning' is a term that means different things[4]:

For **business** it means being able to get the right training for employees at the right place, at the right time, at the right price.

For **individuals** it means being able to gain new skills in ways which fit in with their work and home life and which suit their individual goals and preferences.

For **communities** in both the city and in regional Australia it means getting access to a wide range of learning opportunities which will help make the community socially and economically successful.

For **training providers** it means using a variety of client centred teaching and learning methods, resources and flexible management practices that respond to the needs of a wide learner population, helping them to achieve vocational qualifications and participate in work and community life.

For **governments** it means ensuring that training is based on client need, is efficient and that the funds they allocate are used to provide training which is accessible to everyone in the community, regardless of who they are, their educational background or where they live.

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[3] *Your future, your choice: Flexible learning futures,* Flexible Learning Advisory Group (ANTA), January 2004, page 5.
[4] *Your future, your choice: Flexible learning futures,* Flexible Learning Advisory Group (ANTA), January 2004, page 2.

(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

Australian Flexible Learning Framework – a policy response

In 1996 the Australian Government along with the states and territories recognised that they had to work together, in partnership with users of the VET system to support the widespread take up of flexible learning. There was a clear need to maximise the benefits and reduce the problems that new technologies and the convergence of technologies could bring.

In 1999 they developed a five year national strategy to help the vocational education and training system make a successful transition from an industrial society to a knowledge based society. This is known as the *Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2000 - 2004.*

The Framework is a collaborative program involving the Australian Government, states and territories in conjunction with ANTA. Over its five year life, the Framework will have invested around $80 million in flexible learning infrastructure in VET. The primary area of investment has been in building creative capable people, with 41% of total Framework resources committed to projects that have had a direct professional development objective (e.g. LearnScope, Flexible Learning Leaders, NET*Working conferences, and the Australian Flexible Learning Community). The Framework emphasises people as the key to sustainably delivering more flexible and client centred VET services.

Beyond the direct investment in people, however, the Framework's other collaborative activities have also built the capability of VET practitioners for flexible learning. 42% of the Framework's resources have gone into development of online content, applications and services to produce a pool of flexible resources that support national training packages and are increasingly being used and adapted in training organisations across the VET sector.

The Framework has also continued to undertake specific policy, research and standards based activities in support of the effective application of technology in VET teaching and learning. Through targeted small scale projects issues such as access to bandwidth, interoperability, learning object repositories, copyright and legal issues have been identified and the findings raised with and/or advanced through ANTA, the Australian Information and Communications Technology in Education Committee (AICTEC), and other national and state forums.

Since 2000 there have been increases in the number of:

• Students using technology in their learning programs

- Students using technology to communicate with their peers and their teachers share information and submit work for assessment

- Technology enabled learning resources available to teachers to use

- Training providers offering enrolment, administrative and support services online

- VET practitioners accessing information on flexible learning and resources.

However, despite the growth in the uptake of flexible learning, the level of uptake is still small in terms of the overall scope of the VET sector. Many large enterprises are using technology to efficiently deliver training to their staff. TAFE institutes are making solid progress, although uptake varies between faculty areas. Some small training providers have made advances in niche markets, although skills and the cost of technology remains a barrier. Overall, in the absence of definitive data, it is estimated that less than 10% of VET activity is effectively supported by technology.

Shaping our future: Australia's national strategy for VET 2004 - 2010 recognises the anticipated strength of the emerging demand for flexibility and effective use of technology in vocational education and training, and sets a vision for the future in which VET is more client driven and delivers products and services that are designed to suit all learners. Over the next few years VET will be challenged by:

- Technology savvy school leavers who know no way of learning (or living) that does not have a technological component

- Aspirant self motivated people in the labour force looking for career advancement through training that is undertaken at a time, place and pace that is convenient to them

- Australian businesses seeking greater flexibility in accredited and non-accredited training that is just in time, fits into production or workflow cycles, allows efficient knowledge transfer, and provides the capacity for employees to undertake training in the workplace and/or at home.

The VET system's response must involve the effective use of technology, because the system's physical infrastructure will not cope with the potential volume and type of demand.

Evaluation of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework 2000 – 2004 (Flexible Learning Advisory Group (ANTA), June 2004) can be found at **http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/aboutus/resources/evaluationreportfin al0604.pdf**

(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

Access to basic skills in the use of information and computer technology continue to constitute a barrier to participation in life-long learning and adult and community education. However this is not the only barrier neither is it a barrier for all mature age people as shown by the rapid growth in Internet use by people over the age of 55.

Other barriers include age discrimination by employers and society and which may be internalized by mature age people with the result that they are reluctant to seek opportunities for training. Limited access to training opportunities particularly at the local level and the cost of training are also barriers to participation.

Learning barriers may not be directly technological but may include poor entry qualifications, problems with literacy and numeracy skills, incomplete prior knowledge, lack of confidence, low self esteem or motivation, poor listening and/or under developed study skills, domestic, financial or personal factors, physical, health and mental health conditions, difficulty in coping and adapting to change, and other specific learning difficulties. Often barriers and disadvantages are not specifically related to age but rather they are factors which have lead to cumulative disadvantage over a person's lifetime.

In 2003, ANTA funded a national project which examined On-line Learning Opportunities for Mature Age workers. Findings from this project include:

- There are few sites tailored to target the specific learning needs of mature age workers. Work and career-related online resources are presently under-developed. The report suggests the development of a one-stop access approach that combines access to courses, job and career advice and learning.

- On-line resource developers need to take account of design concepts which aid site readability and usage by seniors and mature age workers

- Successful online programs are those which have been developed through partnerships with learning institutions and which have combined online courses with opportunities for peer contact, discussion groups' knowledge sharing and collaborative learning in a 'blended learning' approach.

(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

Training is Now More Flexible[5]

The uptake of technology enabled learning (e-learning) is affected by the general adoption and use of technologies such as the Internet. Consistent with the overall Australian picture, use of technologies to support training is certainly growing.

Across the nation, user friendly training organisations, businesses, communities and learners are working together as never before to design, develop and deliver leading edge applications of technology to training.

Training providers and systems are rethinking and upgrading their technological infrastructure. We are seeing greater consistency in technological capability across Australia.

New learning systems, new business models, attitudinal and behavioural change amongst providers and users alike and increasing numbers of VET professionals skilled in flexible learning approaches have all strengthened the capacity of the training system to respond to client need. However in remote areas such as many of the Indigenous communities across Australia, infrastructure capacity, eg access to bandwidth, can inhibit e-learning potential.

There is already a lot of e-learning happening in the community, in workplaces and in training organisations formally through e-learning programs and informally through emails, project teams, intranets, web surfing and the like. But old ways die hard. The vast majority of vocational training in enterprises and in training organisations is still provided through conventional trainer led face to face or classroom sessions which offer limited choice and limited flexibility.

Many and perhaps most training organisations have not yet incorporated the new models of learning into a systemic approach and management culture that builds on technologies already adopted by the community. The vision of *Shaping our future: Australia's national strategy for VET 2004 - 2010* is to provide options to meet varying client needs and expectations including through flexible learning experiences.

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[5] *Your future, your choice: Flexible learning futures,* Flexible Learning Advisory Group (ANTA), January 2004, page 4.

Professional Development

Working and learning in VET in the Knowledge Era: Final Report of the Professional Development for the Future Project (Flexible Learning Advisory Group (ANTA), February 2004) explored questions about effective professional development for the VET sector from the perspective of VET staff and managers.

The research succinctly defined registered training organisations as knowledge organisations together with the capabilities of VET sector personnel as knowledge workers. By defining the VET professional as a knowledge worker, this project advanced the argument for greater autonomy of VET professionals and for forms of professional development that contribute to and expand their knowing and skills repertoires. This research concludes that key capabilities of VET professionals as knowledge workers will be more readily developed and displayed in contexts that value knowledge sharing, coherent conversations and dialogue, collaborative work and generosity.

From the research eight enablers of professional development of knowledge workers in VET were identified, including:

- Integration of information technology with the social milieu of the workplace

What is required here is more than management of borrowed knowledge. Information technology needs to supporting knowledge workers' 'communicative connectedness' by facilitating their communications and the capturing and sharing of learning.

As start up activities for the integration of technology with the relationships through which knowledge workers converse, professional development activities should be premised upon the participants being ICT literate. This enabler is not about basic ICT skill development but about the integration of technology based communication with the other work based social practices of knowledge workers.

Integration of information technology into a socio -technical system for knowledge work within an RTO would promote the development of information rich work environments. A socio - technical system combines access to technical tools for information storage and retrieval, one to one and group communication, with a culture among staff who effectively employ the technical capacity of the tools for all these purposes. Workers would be highly competent in the navigation of the electronic databases and interactive communication sites without being 'terminal - bound'. This enabler focuses attention on the constructive interplay between e-learning/working and the

other forms through which collegial groups of knowledge workers learn and work together[6].

Working and Learning in VET in the Knowledge Era (Flexible Learning Advisory Group (ANTA), February 2004) is available at http://flexiblelearning.net.au/projects/resources/PDFutureReport.pdf

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

Retraining for those who have been retrenched or for those seeking to re-enter the workforce after a period of absence are a crucial strategies in facilitating re-entry into employment.

Access to such services and opportunities in rural and regional areas can often be problematic. Retraining opportunities also need to be targeted in order to assist in matching job seekers to local job opportunities.

These issues have been the focus of a range of recent reports including *Making experience work: Generic skills through the eyes of displaced workers volume 1 by* Crina Virgona, Peter Waterhouse, Robyn Sefton, and Jill Sanguinetti (NCVER, 2003). The report is available from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) on their web site at http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr1007vol1.pdf

This year ANTA embarked also on a major partnership with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations to improve training outcomes for Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) participants. This project, *Pathways to Employment*, aims to improve outcomes for Indigenous Australians by developing more strategic, long term coordinated links between CDEP and employment programs.

Conclusion

VET is part of a lifelong learning continuum with our clients transitioning between VET and school, adult community education (ACE), university, the workplace and/or the community though formal and informal learning.

Because of the need to adapt to the changing nature of knowledge and skills, emerging trends in employment, and an ageing society/workforce, learning has become even more important as an integral and continuous part of working. Australia needs to recognise and value learning. This would seem to indicate the need for a policy response and leadership by all levels of

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[6] *Working and learning in VET in the Knowledge Era: Final Report of the Professional Development for the Future,* Flexible Learning Advisory Group (ANTA), February 2004, pages 36 – 37.

government. Any national policy on life-long learning should be developed around the education and training continuum with reference to existing sectoral policies such as *Shaping our future: Australia's National Strategy for vocational education and training 2004 – 2010.*

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