

Community Education and National Reform Discussion Paper

Initial comments from the Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL)

1 Expanding community education

The DEST discussion paper acknowledges the contribution made to adult education by community-based organisations and makes some timely suggestions about expanding the role of community-based organisations in realising the Australian Government's goal of increasing the proportion of the Australian adult population holding post secondary qualifications.

In principle, ACAL recognises that community-based organisations can and do perform a valuable role in providing a range of educational services to the adult population. We recognise that arrangements vary from state to state and that there is no national definition of Adult Community Education. The DEST paper, in coining the term 'community-based' to include a broad a range of disparate service providers, is introducing a new concept to the discussion.

In considering its response to this paper, the ACAL Executive reiterates its commitment to the goal of developing a national policy for Australia that provides both *life-wide*, and *life-long* opportunities for adults to develop literacy skills for life and for work. Community-based providers of literacy services will continue to play an important role in providing learning opportunities for adults who are unable or unwilling to engage in highly formal settings. Community-based providers may understand and respond to their clients more effectively than large organisations and can often provide local solutions that are more client-centred. Community-based providers, by virtue of their size and constitution, may have 'flatter' organisational structures that support greater capacity for innovation and flexibility. These characteristics in organisations may offer one solution in reforming the way literacy and numeracy are taught in this country to adults.

In this response, ACAL offers a detailed analysis of some of the proposals made in the DEST paper as these might apply to the funding and delivery of language, literacy and numeracy education for adults. There are two aspects to this analysis. The analysis identifies the *opportunities* and *challenges* arising from the ideas in the DEST paper in the context of agreements to achieve other national reforms in the VET sector that are being undertaken by the Coalition of Australian Governments.

The DEST paper offers a real opportunity to reframe adult language, literacy and numeracy services in Australia and to expand the thinking on how, where and when adults will best be encouraged to take part in a range of *engagements* likely to support and encourage learning. ACAL believes that this thinking should not be restricted by the existing paradigms for delivery, nor by the dominance of the idea of learning only as an aspect of building 'human capital'. There is an increasing body of research that expands this notion of building 'social capital'.

2 COAG agreements for national VET reform

COAG has identified the need to expand the delivery of higher-level VET qualifications (Diploma and Advanced Diploma) to meet targets for future skill needs. State and Territory training systems are proposing to grow the delivery of these qualifications by 2% per year while maintaining current effort around trades level qualifications (certificates III and IV). If there is no additional funding then cuts will need to be made in the delivery of lower-level certificates (certificates I and II). Basic education courses, including language, literacy and numeracy programs account for around 10% of each state's training effort. Of these language, literacy and numeracy courses, 75% are delivered at the level of certificate I or II. Under COAG agreements then, lower-level language and literacy courses funded through the state and territory training agencies may be subject to cuts.

The efficiency and effectiveness of lower-level VET sector qualifications have been called into question in two recent NCVET reports.¹ While these reports do not conclusively show that lower level certificates produce poorer outcomes for graduates than do Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses, around 75% of people 25 or over enrolling in lower level certificates will complete subjects only rather than the whole qualification. Certificate I and II level courses comprise about 30% of nationally accredited course enrolments and almost a quarter of the training hours. About 45% of course enrolments at certificate I level and about 10% at certificate II level were in preparatory courses. At certificate I level, 17% of students enrolled were projected to finish the course, and at certificate II around 30%. However, of those that did finish, a substantial proportion enrolled in further study at a higher level.

The preference of prime- and mature-aged people to participate in formal learning without necessarily completing whole qualifications suggests that the structure and delivery of courses accredited in the VET sector might not provide optimum opportunities for learning. The existing models for course design and accreditation; the use of the Australian Qualifications Framework as a benchmark for developmental skills; funding and accountability regimes; assessment strategies; pedagogical approaches; and institutional practices developed under quality assurance frameworks may not provide the most conducive environment for supporting adult learning and retaining adult learners who are not being trained for specific job roles. These considerations *could* support an argument for developing a new culture for 'preparatory' adult education that takes more account of the learners' needs and aspirations, is less defined by the needs of employers and less constrained by the 'human capital' model utilised widely in policy, planning and program management. Community-based educational organisations may well have characteristics that are different from other Registered Training Organisations that will make them more effective in delivering learner-centred education programs. Their efforts will be hampered however if they are constrained by the need to conform to the VET paradigm and are required to operate as if the main business were to produce graduates with specific sets of skills suitable for particular workplaces.

¹ Stanwick, J, *Australian Qualifications Framework lower-level qualifications: Outcomes for people over 45*, NCVET, 2006 and Stanwick, J, *Australian Qualifications Framework lower-level qualifications: pathways to where for young people?* NCVET, 2005

Over the last decade and a half, Australia has been a world leader in integrating the delivery of language, literacy and numeracy services to adults with vocational training. There have been many gains and this effort should not be abandoned. It is clear that the provision of appropriate language, literacy and numeracy support as explicit but embedded components of training produce better outcomes for student attainment and completion of both vocational and literacy qualifications.²

However, we are now faced with the challenge of encouraging those members of the community who are less willing to participate in education or training to become more active in developing the skills that they will need to participate in the labour market and as productive citizens in a democracy challenged by an unprecedented rate of change in climate patterns, technologies, global patterns of trade and the demographic profile of our society. We will need to look beyond the paradigm of training for job skills if we are to respond to these challenges to our community.

3 Funding, costs and user-pays

The Discussion Paper argues that community-based, not-for-profit organisations are ideally fitted to deliver lower level qualifications (certificates 1 and 2) and that the cost of delivery of these programs would be reduced if delivery were shifted from the public provider (TAFE) to community-based providers. Reduction in costs is predicted to come in two ways: community-based providers pay considerably lower award rates for trainers using the Community Employment, Training and Support Services Award (CETSS); community-based providers already offer services below cost. ACAL believes that, with respect to literacy and numeracy teaching and learning, there are implications for quality in these proposals, particularly with regard to staff qualifications, skills and knowledge. This is discussed more fully later in this paper.

The paper also suggests that new forms of user-pays might reduce the cost to the public purse of delivering lower level qualifications including language, literacy, numeracy and other basic education programs. It is suggested that community-based providers, utilising local networks, might be able to persuade small businesses to pay for training for their employees. It is also suggested that community-based providers may be more successful in 'marketing' general education and access courses (including language literacy and numeracy courses) to those people who have low levels of formal education and are reluctant to participate by formal means in further education and training. The suggestion is that community-based providers may be able to make their products so attractive to these potential customers, that not only is their reluctance to participate overcome, they may also be willing to pay for the service. This idea demands careful consideration, not least because that section of the community with the lowest level of skills also has the lowest level of participation in the labour market and is therefore most likely to have low levels of disposable income.

² Casey, H et al, *'You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering...'* *Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes—the impact on learning and achievement*, National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy, 2006

As a way of creating incentives for people who are disadvantaged both educationally and in the labour market, the Australian Government has introduced a voucher system that provides a 'learning account' of \$3000 for individuals to 'spend' on acquiring certificate 1 and 2 level qualifications. One advantage of this 'user pays' model may be that supply may follow demand and training options that are more responsive to the needs and aspirations of individual learners are encouraged and supported by market flow. The more flexible the training organisation, the more responsive to individual need it is likely to be. Community-based providers are perhaps more likely to be able to generate learning and engagement options that attract customers who have vouchers to spend.

However, from the providers' point of view, the supply of customers generated by the voucher system will be uncertain, and those providers most able to take advantage of the additional customer base are likely to be those who have well-established infrastructure and the ability to subsidise the costs of delivery to these clients from other sources of funding. That is to say the provider must be in a position to manage the risks generated by responding to a 'market' constructed in this way. The larger the organisation, and the more secure its base-level funding, the more likely it is to benefit from the 'market opportunities'. In those states where the ACE sector has well-established community-based providers, supported by funding from the state government, the voucher scheme may be effective in leveraging more flexible approaches to delivery; in other states the public provider is likely to be the only option for the new customer base. In many locations, those community-based training or education organisations that are most attuned to local need and responsive to the demands of the community may find that, there is no advantage in registering to become a provider in the *Skills for the Future* program. In any case, to ensure accountability for public money coming from two different sources to deliver very similar services to an identical client base, effective tracking and accountability systems will need to be in place.

It is unlikely that the other option to promote a 'user pays' training culture, a loan scheme similar to the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), will create an effective incentive for people with low levels of educational achievement who are at a disadvantage in the labour market. In the Higher Education sector where an attempt is being made to stimulate enrolments in science, the option of a preferential HECS arrangement has been rejected in favour of reducing upfront costs.

In 2006, the Australian Government committed substantial additional funding to support literacy and numeracy training through the *Skills for the Future* initiative and has supported the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) and the English Language and Literacy Workplace Program (WELLP) for well over a decade. Similarly, state and territory governments maintain substantial levels of expenditure delivering training for 'mixed field' or preparatory courses delivered by the public provider and, where available alternative providers in the community sector. In considering alternative funding options that may foster an increase in flexibility, effectiveness and efficiency for literacy and numeracy delivery, resulting in more people with more qualifications, we should consider the strengths and weakness of the various options. After a decade of delivering LLNP and WELLP under competitive, short-term funding arrangements, the disadvantages are now well documented. High quality staff are difficult to retain; salaries are often lower because tendering exerts a downward pressure on costs therefore high quality staff are difficult to recruit; planning and consistency is made difficult because of uncertainty around contracts

beginning and ending; and the requirements for reporting are intrusive and direct staff time away from teaching. These difficulties are acknowledged in the Discussion Paper, but not fully articulated.

Each of these models implies that funding will be directed away from the State and Territory Training Agencies for delivery of lower level qualifications. The consequences of this scenario for the public provider are discussed in the section below.

4 Language, literacy and numeracy provision in the public provider

While wishing to support ideas for expanding the role of the community sector in the provision of literacy services to adults, ACAL would be cautious about supporting the notion that language, literacy and numeracy services should be deemed the exclusive province of community-based providers. We believe it would be a mistake to undermine the role of the public provider in the provision of these services. There are a number of reasons for this.

In every state, the public provider has a well-established capacity to deliver accredited language, literacy and numeracy programs. These programs are often subsidised so that students enjoy low enrolment costs. People who have low educational achievement are often poor and without disposable income. In regional and remote areas, it is often the case that the public provider is the only community learning provider. Added to this, not every state has well-established community-based providers able to deliver accredited literacy courses. The public provider has an important role to play in ensuring equitable access to these and other services.

Secondly, as a provider of language, literacy and numeracy qualifications, the public provider has a 'high status' market recognition. People value qualifications gained at TAFE. Moreover, it is far easier for individuals to migrate to another course within a provider than between them. If the public provider no longer delivers the feeder courses for the higher level language, literacy and numeracy qualifications, the customer base for the higher-level courses may disappear thus reducing choice and articulation pathways for students³. According to the suggestions in the DEST paper, community providers will not be encouraged to deliver higher levels qualifications and may not have the capacity or the access to funding to do so. In effect, this set of conditions, will reduce delivery of higher-level qualifications in language, literacy and numeracy, reduce articulation opportunities for students and inhibit the planned growth in the percentage of the population with post-compulsory educational qualifications.

Thirdly, large RTOs can offer students enrolled in basic education courses a range of options for industry-related training as part of the structure of the preparatory course. This provides graduates with a greater range of options for further, work-related study thus contributing to the growth in higher-level, job-focussed qualifications.

Fourthly, if the language, literacy and numeracy delivery capacity of the public provider is diminished because funding for certificates 1 and 2 is reduced, or the remit for TAFE to deliver these courses is withdrawn, this will impact negatively on the capacity of organisations to service those of their students in higher-level vocational

³ A recent report from the *Reading Writing Hotline* indicated that a proportion of callers are interested in high level support.

qualifications who need language, literacy and numeracy support. Currently around 10% of the national training profile delivered by the public provider is in ‘mixed field’ enrolments: preparatory or ‘enabling’ courses including language, literacy and numeracy. Over the last decade, there has been considerable public investment in establishing the human and other resources to deliver these qualifications. There is an increasing trend to deploy these resources alongside of vocational training for trades and higher-level qualifications as the benefits of explicit but embedded literacy support become more widely acknowledged⁴. The loss of specialised teaching resources in the public provider will prevent these organisations from offering embedded language, literacy and numeracy support and promoting collaborations between these staff and vocational specialists.

ACAL believes that promoting partnerships between language, literacy and numeracy specialists and specialist workers in other fields—in this case vocational trainers, but in other situations, health workers, social workers, justice department officials and officers—is a key strategy for improving the *engagement* of adults with low educational achievement in a range of political, social, community and health initiatives.

5 Developing language, literacy and numeracy skills in adults – understanding the paradigm

Literacy learning is highly complex, is developmental, is inextricably linked to language practice and identity, has multiple outcomes and is not defined by any one industry standard. Literacy learning in children appears to be more successful when the child has developed language practices that closely resemble those used in school—children from white, middle-class educated homes have the best chance of success. The more unfamiliar a child finds the language practices of the school, the greater the struggle to make sense of the literacy lesson. For this child, the decoding skills used to read and write are not mastered, the level of competency that enables a reader to enjoy reading is not reached, and access to those linguistic resources offered through reading is denied. A great number of children fail to meet the literacy benchmark at Year 9 than do so at Year 3. Teaching literacy to children is difficult and is a goal imperfectly realised by our educational institutions. Teaching literacy to adults is even more difficult: these are the people for whom the usual educational service failed. The second-time-round service needs to be based on a more sophisticated understanding of language and a better quality of language teaching than was originally available to the student as a child.

When language is learnt in early childhood *learning* and *using* go hand in hand. All adults are already *users* of language; when they become a student of language they do not stop being a *user*. Learning is maximised if what is learnt is *useful* and the means by which it is taught is *relevant* to the learner and their situation. Sometimes this approach to language and language acquisition is referred to as the *social practice* model. The development of skills needs to be keyed to the demands of the learner’s life, the tasks they need to perform, the responsibilities they undertake and their goals and aspirations. Literacy skills are more effectively learnt when there is a real, concrete application for the skill: people need a reason to learn something that requires an effort. There needs to be a reward for the effort put into learning, and that

⁴ Casey, *ibid*

reward, more often than not, is to be able to *do* something that one was not able to do before. Learning is about performance, but the performance must have a context and a purpose.

The *social practice* model for understanding language and language acquisition is particularly appropriate for teaching adults because it recognises the autonomy and the identity of the individual learner. It also focuses on the *social* and *purposeful* aspects of language. Speaking, listening reading, writing are all meaning-making acts and they imply interaction. Language is a *shared* (social) practice. Because it is *social*, it is also *multiple*. There is no single set of language or literacy practices that will serve all the needs for interaction and performing roles that a person has. Moreover, becoming *literate* is more than a matter of learning to read and write. The skills of decoding and encoding underlie *literateness* and they must be explicitly taught and learnt (a proportion of the adult population left school without mastering decoding skills). People also need to acquire new forms of language to produce and comprehend the range of texts utilised in a modern, developed, post-industrial society such as Australia (including the new forms of text generated by information technologies and their users). They need to develop new vocabulary, new patterns of sentence structure and new knowledge about the contexts in which these forms are applied (discourse knowledge). This implies that people need to learn and practice new habits of language behaviour as a means of becoming competent in new situations.

There are a number of reasons for pausing to acknowledge the complexity of language learning that underpins *literateness* in a technologically, socially, economically and politically complex society. Firstly we must acknowledge that teaching language and literacy is no easy task.⁵ Indeed, the fact that such a large proportion of the adult population in a number of developed countries has poor or very poor skills⁶ suggests that systemic weaknesses in education systems may need to be addressed.⁷ Secondly, the job-role competencies learnt at certificate I and II are less complex than the developmental learning required to complete low level literacy certificates; vocational certificates and literacy certificates need to be differentiated in terms of the intellectual challenge and time required for mastery. Thirdly, what has not been accomplished after ten or twelve years of formal schooling is unlikely to be accomplished in very short time frames, with unrealistic expectations of progress. Fourthly, there would seem to be little point in replicating the kind of teaching and learning approaches that have already failed with learners—arrangements for adults learning language, literacy and numeracy must take account of the nature of damage to confidence, and the missed opportunities because of school failure that shape an

⁵ Moats, L C, *Teaching Reading is Rocket Science. What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able To Do*, American Federation of Teachers, 1999, www.aft.org

⁶ The international survey of adult literacy, conducted in Australia by the ABS as the *Survey of Aspects of Literacy (SAL)* in 1996, published data to indicate that 16% of the adult population in Australia has ‘very poor’ skills in document, prose and quantitative literacy, and a further 29% had ‘poor’ skills. This skills profile closely resembles that in comparable English-speaking countries, particularly Canada. Data from the second phase of the survey will be available from the ABS in October 2007.

⁷ Refer to work of Eric Hanushek in USA

individual learner's identity, determine their resources and affect their attitudes to learning.

One area of systemic weakness in education systems has been identified as teacher quality. The Rowe Report⁸, argues that the quality of the teacher is the single most influential factor in successful literacy teaching. The report presents evidence to support the need for reforms in pre-service and in-service training for teachers of literacy. Too few teachers employed to teach literacy are well enough educated about language and language structures, language acquisition, variations in language practice and in the full range of methodologies and approaches for teaching reading and writing. This national call for better-trained, higher-skilled teachers of literacy is at striking odds with the proposal in the Discussion Paper that it is appropriate for community-based organisations to employ 'trainers' rather than 'teachers', and that the lower costs associated with employing trainers under the CETSS award will produce cost efficiencies. The price tag on provision may be reduced, but it is unreasonable to expect that lesser-trained, less knowledgeable people will be able to produce better outcomes with students in highly complex curriculum areas.

Teachers of literacy to adults currently must hold qualifications that meet the education industry standard: they must hold three or four year teaching degrees. It is difficult to see how providers offering the CETSS award rates and conditions will be able to attract teachers with qualification that meet the requirements of curriculum documents for accredited language, literacy and numeracy. What may happen is that the delivery of quality accredited training in language, literacy and numeracy will diminish and be replaced with poorer quality, non-accredited delivery that cannot offer the same portability of credentials.

6 Paradigm shift for language, literacy and numeracy provision

Over the last decade and a half, adult language, literacy and numeracy in Australia has been 'integrated' with vocational training. That is to say that provision of services has been defined, funded and regulated as a component of the far-reaching reforms of the vocational, education and training agenda. Accredited language, literacy and numeracy programs offer basic education qualifications that enable graduates to gain entry to TAFE, higher education, and the armed forces, police and emergency services and to get jobs. General education programs account for around 10% of the public expenditure in state and territory systems. More literacy programs are delivered in 2007 than were available in 1990 (the International Year of Literacy) and more of the programs are accredited. Nearly all of them are focussed on producing skills for work. All of this must be recognised as progress and possibly world leadership.

Literacy and numeracy, included in the Mayer Key Competencies and now in Employability Skills, are meant to be addressed as integral components of vocational training. In this respect, integrating literacy with vocational training has been less successful than the front-end literacy courses. Early versions of Training Packages did not always clearly define the language literacy and numeracy skills required to perform in the job; new funding mechanisms—the purchasing model—reduced

⁸ Rowe, K, *Teaching Reading. Report and Recommendations. National Report on the Teaching of Literacy*, DEST, 2005

opportunities and incentives for different groups of professionals to work together; competition policy did not always result in collaborative problem-solving.

One of the more successful strategies in the Australian adult literacy story of the last decade and a half—in both models of literacy delivery (front-end and embedded) outlined above—has been in the development of partnerships between different kinds of specialists, formalised through team-teaching or other collaborations. ACAL believes that it is now time to consider a broadening of this approach to other social policy domains and envision new modes of partnerships that might be supported by governments. New approaches should build on the successes of integrating literacy with vocational training but avoid replicating its failures.

7 The way forward

ACAL identifies the following as key *issues* to be considered in the process for reframing Australia's adult literacy policy:

- Language, literacy and numeracy learning is in essence different from learning vocational skills and not best designed using models appropriate for workplace learning.
- Much of the language, literacy and numeracy delivery is at certificate I and II levels and will be adversely affected by changes that are designed with vocational courses in mind.
- There are opportunities we have not yet realised in designing *engagement* opportunities for adults with low educational achievements because we have been too focussed on producing qualifications of a type that are designed to suit industry and thereby failed to recognise how people's identity and behaviour is related to literacy use and achievement.
- We need to explore and exploit the potential of a *social capital* model for analysis and policy-setting because this offers more opportunity to fully recognise the social and interactive nature of literacy learning, and the social and interactive nature of the outcomes of that learning.
- If we want to revitalise the contribution that can be made by a range of community-based organisations to developing literacy as *social capital* we will not be position these organisations as the 'cheap' alternative to more authentic 'training' organisations.
- Community-based organisations offer the opportunity to build skills in the community but should not be required to undertake this activity as an 'outreach' of VET.

The characteristics of a reformed community sector would offer literacy services that:

- Operate on collaborative partnership models—between literacy providers and other agencies in social policy domains
- Employ suitably qualified staff, paid appropriate award rates
- Support participant-owned initiatives (learning circles, enterprise activities, action groups)
- Build social capital and contribute to community capacity-building

- Offer a genuine alternative to more formal education and training institutions
- Develop recognition processes that are capable of linking up learning undertaken as components of a range of social and community activities with more formal pathways for learning.