

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 755

CE 065 590

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 TITLE Adult Education in Australia: The Council of Adult Education.
 PUB DATE 17 Nov 93
 NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (Dallas, TX, November 17, 1993).
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; Adult Learning; Adult Literacy; Adult Programs; *Community Education; Community Services; *Educational Change; Educational Development; *Educational Opportunities; Foreign Countries; Literacy Education; State Programs; Statewide Planning
 IDENTIFIERS *Australia (Victoria)

ABSTRACT

Liberal adult education in Victoria, Australia, takes its ideals, if not its form, from the pre-war university and Workers Education Association (WEA) partnerships: the university providing tutors and content, the WEA providing contact with unions and workers. Unique to Victoria is the level to which community-based adult education has been developed. Adult education is developed and administered locally by separate and independent organizations. Such centers organize their own adult education programs unique to their communities or provide government-funded programs such as literacy and basic education or job skills. Within Victoria, community-based learning centers fall into three categories: adult learning centers, neighborhood houses, and adult literacy groups. Two especially important changes in adult education are student demand for proof of attendance and commonwealth funding for research projects into adult education that raise the visibility of the sector. The Council of Adult Education (CAE), the Victorian statutory authority responsible for adult education, is unique in Australian adult education. As a very large provider of adult learning opportunities, CAE sits uncomfortably in a sector made up principally of small organizations that consider the council's considerable resource allocation as disproportionately favorable to the CAE. The CAE appears especially suited to carry out some proposed initiatives given its statutory independence and sole function of providing adult education. (YLB)

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**Adult Education in Australia:
the Council of Adult Education**

Paper presented at the Preconference International Unit Seminar of the 1993 annual
conference of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education
Winds of Change: Opportunities and Challenges for Adult Education
17 November 1993, Dallas, Texas, USA

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Introduction

Education in Australia is mainly a function of the six states and two territories that make up the federation. State and territory governments have the principal policy and funding responsibilities for primary and secondary schools, the technical and further education sector (or TAFE as it is known in Australia) and adult education. The commonwealth government has responsibility for all higher education—universities and the former colleges of advanced education that have now been amalgamated into one sector. It is also the commonwealth government that has the principal revenue-generating powers, particularly from income tax, so that states are reliant on the commonwealth for significant transfer of funds to do the things they want to do, including education.

Since 1974 the commonwealth has had increasing involvement in TAFE and early in 1992 made an offer to the states to take over all TAFE funding, subject to negotiation. Some states balked at this and it did not eventuate. The commonwealth then proposed the setting-up of a national authority for training with additional funding for TAFE as long as the states maintained their commitment. This was accepted and the Australian National Training Authority was established in 1993. Unfortunately, the adult education sector which forms a significant part of post-secondary provision has not yet been successful in gaining additional commonwealth resources other than for specific programs such as literacy, English as a second language and labour market programs.

The commonwealth did not exist until 1901 and prior to that the separate colonies were not distinguished by any capacity to cooperate with each other. They are not too good at it even now but way back then they could not even agree on the size of rail gauges and constructed a network where it is not always possible for trains in some states to cross the border into the neighbouring states. This multi-track diversity is typical of many matters in Australia and education is another good example of the problem—adult education in particular. As a result of this state control, and the diversity it has produced, it is not a simple matter to describe adult education across Australia.

Nevertheless adult education in the various states does have common British origins and this makes some comparisons possible. Adult education tends to have three principal strands: technical and vocational education and training, liberal adult education and a second chance or social justice component. In Australia these areas are frequently interwoven but as the history of each state is different it is necessary either to look at each state separately or use one to illustrate the rest. I will concentrate on Victoria, the state where I live and make reference to other states where appropriate.

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Adult Education in Victoria

Victoria made primary education free, compulsory and secular in the 1870s. Not long after that the state began to develop a technical education system. For most of this century this meant technical schools paralleling the other state secondary schools and the establishment of a few large and often specialist technical training institutions. This was Victoria's manifestation of the great liberal/vocational split.

In the early 1970s a new commonwealth government anxious to improve educational opportunity in Australia commissioned reports including one on TAFE. The 1974 Kangan Report, a watershed report in Australian educational history, resulted in an enormous fillip to TAFE as large amounts of commonwealth funds were directed into the area. In Victoria this necessitated the establishment of a TAFE department inside the Ministry of Education. But this did not prove satisfactory to handle the growth requirements of the area and in 1981 TAFE was established as a separate sector outside the Ministry. Technical and vocational education and training continued to be a priority for a nation concerned to build and rebuild its skills in a changing and highly competitive world.

The Victoria liberal adult education strand takes its ideals, if not its form, from the pre-war university and Workers Education Association (WEA) partnerships: the university providing tutors and content, the WEA providing the contact with unions and workers. This model, derived from the earlier part of the century, promoted contact between workers and education as a means to enlightenment and personal development. This was not always a very fruitful partnership but its values and outcomes are still important in much of Victorian adult education today.

After World War Two there was a strong movement in Australia to promote adult education through separate statutory organisations. The university-WEA partnerships had begun to founder in most states by this time under the pressure of some of the most horrendous internal politics. Statutory boards with substantial independence and reporting to their Minister were made responsible for adult education in Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland. The Council of Adult Education (CAE) was the Victorian statutory authority and it is the only one of the three remaining today. The Tasmanian and Queensland boards were amalgamated into the TAFE sector and disbanded. Adult education in New South Wales (NSW) maintained a strong connection to the university-WEA alliance and continued to operate this model until the 1970s. By this time NSW had begun to develop a community-based sector of adult education and community-managed adult education colleges. This led to a new statutory authority in NSW called the Board of Adult and Community Education existing alongside the TAFE sector, and along the lines of the adult education sector that had been developed in Victoria with the support of the CAE. Community-based adult education in Victoria is now administered by the Adult, Community and Further Education Board.

Community-based Adult Education

Community-based adult education is not unique to Victoria; what is unique is the level to which it has been developed. Community-based adult education means that adult education is developed and administered locally by separate and independent organisations controlled and directed by their own committees of management.

Such centres organise their own adult education programs unique to their communities and/or provide government-funded programs such as literacy and basic education or the provision of job skills for local people. These are not state agencies. They access state funds but they also generate their own finances and maintain a fiercely independent profile.

Within Victoria, community-based learning centres fall roughly into three categories:

- 1 adult learning centres
- 2 neighbourhood houses
- 3 adult literacy groups.

Adult learning centres provide general and specific adult learning programs to their communities. They operate principally in the short course, non-accredited area although such definitions are becoming less and less useful as the demands of a changing society are picked up and transformed by such learning centres into educational programs that meet the needs of their own communities in a variety of ways. Programs could be in local economic survival, skill training for jobs, environmental issues, health, self-provisioning or the more familiar arts and crafts. Such learning centres are often quite small; perhaps with only one or two staff, although they might have up to 40 or more depending on the level of their community, the extent of its commitment and its history.

Neighbourhood houses are scattered throughout the suburbs and small towns of Victoria. Neighbourhood houses received their initial support from the Victorian Government's community welfare department and they continue to maintain a strong social work tradition, melding it with learning opportunities as those seem appropriate. Their principal target group is women and, although most adult learning centres in Australia have a strong involvement of women, many neighbourhood houses have that as deliberate policy rather than program preference or happenstance. Neighbourhood houses are a strong manifestation of social justice policy in action. While other adult learning centres and the CAE have substantial social justice programs they are not as directly committed to government programs as are many of the neighbourhood houses whose main focus is dedicated to that end.

Adult literacy groups are monopurpose groups set up in communities and supported by government to provide learning opportunities for those people whose literacy and basic education skills are low. Migrant adult education groups also receive commonwealth funds to assist them to build up confidence in the Australian use of English and acculturate for life in Australia.

The growth of community-based adult learning centres, neighbourhood houses and adult literacy provision has been very strong in Victoria over the last decade. There are now about 400 such organisations receiving substantial government funds. This is in a state with a population of about 4 million people.

Changes in Adult and Community Education

In addition to this growth there have been other significant changes to adult education in Victoria over the last 20 years. Some of these changes overlap. They include:

- growth in the participation of women;
- a curriculum shift from the 'liberal tradition' of critical discourse to one that provides more for personal development programs;
- increasing injections of government funds for specific purposes and a greater involvement of governments in policy direction;
- a widening split between government-resourced and general adult education programs which have to be paid for by the users;
- expansion of work-related adult education both in the workplace and in adult learning centres;
- the development of adult and community education as a social justice arm of government—the point alluded to with regard to neighbourhood houses.
- considerable increase in English language provisions for migrants whose first language is other than English.

Most of these factors would relate to adult education in other states in Australia, particularly where such practice is directed through the community-based sector.

While most of these points are quite clear, one in particular needs elaboration, and that is work-related programs. Students are asking more and more for proof of attendance at adult learning programs. For some students the provision of a certificate of attendance to show to their employer or place in their resumé is enough. Others are seeking formal recognition for the learning they have undertaken and the CAE is moving towards accreditation for some programs that were historically offered as short course/non-credit. This is seen to be legitimate, however, and the adult education sector in Victoria is experimenting with ways of accrediting what were once short courses as modules of certificated programs and of articulating other courses so that they can lead into certificated areas. So a short gardening course might either be accepted as a module for the purpose of credit transfer or through the recognition of prior learning for a horticultural certificate or be taken as a necessary prerequisite to such a course. The recognition of prior learning is a major step forward in treating adult learners as adult.

Another new development of considerable importance is commonwealth funding, through the Department of Employment, Education and Training, for several research projects into adult education. These have concentrated on the kind of data collected by adult education providers and the outcomes for students in adult education programs nationally. While these reflect the government's focus on accountability, they will inevitably raise the visibility of the entire sector.

TAFE and Adult Education

In those states where adult education comes under the aegis of TAFE, and that is certainly the case for Tasmania, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia, the problems are different. The existence of a separate adult and community education (ACE) sector in Victoria and New South Wales helps determine separate agendas for adult education in those states because, in a sense, an important distinction has been made. Adult and community education is formally recognised as an independent sector. In the states where it comes under the TAFE banner it is not always easy to get priorities for adult and community education recognised, particularly up against the current strong priorities of technical and vocational education.

All too often, unfortunately, adult education is still dismissed as 'underwater basket weaving' by people who should know better, given continuing evidence of its relevance and worth.

Even so in the areas where TAFE and adult education sectors coexist the boundaries are not always clear. Adult literacy and basic education is a case in point. While it is a strong component of the ACE sector in Victoria it is impossible to deny funds to TAFE colleges who wish to provide such services to their students and their communities.

These boundary conflicts create disquiet, particularly among administrators for whom tightness of definition means retention of funds.

A Future for TAFE

TAFE is in an unusual position in Australia. It does not have the same status and recognition of the higher education system. Parents and students appear to view TAFE as second best and see a university education as the preferred option. The commonwealth government is aware of this and is taking strong action to upgrade the status of TAFE for a variety of reasons, not the least being that enrolments in the university sector have burgeoned over the last five years and Australia continues to experience shortages of skilled tradespersons and para-professionals. The commonwealth has established new participation targets to be achieved by 2001 and has set aside substantial funds to raise the quality, diversity and efficiency of the vocational education and training system. The TAFE sector has also taken cognisance of its image problem and has initiated a major marketing drive to make itself an attractive alternative to university education. The drive is focusing on employment prospects and heightening the status of TAFE graduates as 'professional' to compete with the image of university graduates.

The mix in Australian post-secondary education has been overbalanced in favour of the higher education sector and it is widely believed that to provide Australia with the educational infrastructure necessary to support a modern economy demands more attention to TAFE. As already indicated the commonwealth government has extended its current financial responsibilities for higher education to encompass the whole of post compulsory education and training by supplementing funding to the vocational education and training system on a triennial basis from 1 January 1993.

A Future for the CAE

The Council of Adult Education is unique in Australian adult education; and it is in an unusual position in Victoria. The CAE is a very large provider of adult learning opportunities. In 1992 it had over 60 000 students and organised about 4 500 programs to cater for them. It is on its way to exceeding these figures for 1993. The CAE has a permanent staff of 140 and also employs over 1000 sessional tutors a year.

The CAE's principal work is an ongoing course program offered to residents of Victoria four times a year through a program guide delivered to all recent students and through a variety of public outlets. The CAE also provides a secondary school completion certificate for adults and a comprehensive ESL program, runs a significant and nationally known workplace basic education program in conjunction with government agencies and the private sector, and provides information, advice and support to other adult education agencies.

Over 8 000 students each year participate in self-directed learning groups to discuss a book they have selected and read each month.

But the CAE sits somewhat uncomfortably in a sector that is made up principally of small organisations many of which consider the CAE's considerable resource allocation as disproportionately favourable to the CAE. This tension that can be found between a large flagship provider and smaller agencies receiving funding from the same government source is replicated in the performing arts industry in Australia where struggling and often innovative community-based groups must compete for diminished funds with state opera, theatre or ballet companies. It is a bit like the story of the cuckoo: a large occupant with a host of smaller co-dwellers only the other residents of 'the nest want to throw out the cuckoo instead. But the CAE is large and has considerable community support. It is likely that it will continue to occupy a unique educational niche in Victoria.

Under legislation proclaimed in 1992, responsibility for policy, planning and resources distribution has been assigned to a new statutory authority known as the Adult, Community and Further Education Board. A major function of this Board is to develop with the State Training Board (which administers the TAFE college system in Victoria) a joint plan for adult, community and further education in Victoria. The CAE remains a statutory authority and its functions have been amended to describe its operations more accurately. It is likely that the CAE's future as an adult education provider will revolve around its significant strengths. They are:

- its central Melbourne location and size;
- its reputation for quality;
- the diversity of its program and the capacity of its tutors; and
- its capacity to innovate.

Nonetheless, the CAE will change significantly under pressure from government and the community to provide more of its courses for credit and to plan collaboratively with other sectors.

Conclusion

Adult and community education in Australia was the subject of a parliamentary inquiry in 1991, the first of its kind in Australia history and a milestone for ACE in Australia. The report published by the Australian Senate was entitled **Come in Cinderella**, an appropriate title that picked up on the rather peripheral position of adult education to this point.

The report proposed strategies for developing a national policy and a national structure for ACE in recognition that it has now become a sector of education in its own right, providing education, training, recreation and self-confidence to millions of Australians. The sector has earned more consideration by government in the allocation of funds than it currently receives, as is reflected in the report's recommendations for a move to triennial funding and guidelines to provide for both vocational and non-vocational criteria in determining grants. These are prerequisites to the strengthening of research, staff development and data collection which are urgent requirements of the ACE sector.

The reports' recommendations have already led to the development of a draft National Policy of Adult and Community Education and to the first allocation of funds from the

commonwealth to the sector for general adult education.

The value of the CAE in this situation is that it is the most significant model of a fully resourced centre whose sole function is adult education. Its statutory independence provides it with the opportunity to be guided primarily by the needs and interests of adult learners in the planning and provision of its programs and services. The CAE appears most suited to carry out some of the proposed initiatives given the strengths I have identified above. Moreover it will continue to provide its exemplary program to the people of Melbourne and, to a lesser extent, to the people of Victoria.

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