

Educating Australian adults in an era of social and economic change

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The origins and focuses of adult education across Western countries are often about meeting adults' needs, and for purposes they have nominated, not those compelled by others. Unlike other sectors (e.g. schools, vocational colleges and universities) that were mainly initiated and sustained by church or state, adult education has long been grounded in communities and provided through hybrid institutions. Across Western countries, the term 'movement,' is often associated with adult education's origins, and it is sometimes regarded as a 'fourth sector' of education, apart from schools, vocational education and training and university studies. In recent times, the concept has expanded and diversified, however, making it more amorphous and less distinctive as an educational 'sector'. Nevertheless, one of the continuing features of 'adult education' has been its concern for adults' learning needs and preferences. This paper proposes that the formation and continuity of adult education have been based particularly on three key premises: i) meeting adults' specific but heterogeneous learning needs; ii) educational purposes and purposes being understood in the local context; and iii) the enactment of adult

education being shaped by local considerations. Furthermore, the values underpinning 'traditional' adult education have not only been sustained in what is now more commonly known as Adult and Community Education (ACE) but have expanded into other educational contexts. Informed by considerations of selected research projects the authors have been involved with in recent years, this paper identifies how the three premises have emerged as features of other educational provisions for adults.

Keywords: *adult education, adult learning, situational factors, localised curriculum development, supply-side considerations*

Adult education provisions: origins, forms and transformations

The form and purposes of educational systems, the institutions that initiate them and imperatives driving them are usually shaped and regulated by government in the contemporary era, albeit fashioned by societal, economic and political factors (Pring, 1995). The formation of modern nation-states, industrialisation and rise of central government led to the development of universal schooling and mass tertiary education provisions. That is, the purposes, forms and processes of school education, vocational education and higher education are subject to the demands of central government, often mandated by legislation and administered through funding arrangements. Of course, there are some exceptions (e.g. Montessori schools), but in the Western world, state or church as founders and key sponsors usually, legitimately, define the purposes, forms and processes of these educational systems, institutions and provisions (Skilbeck, 1984).

The press of these imperatives by the state is never greater than in times of social and economic distress (Stevenson, 1995). Governmental concerns about global comparisons, for instance, have led to the introduction of literacy and numeracy testing, associated with improving comparative outcomes in state schools (Gable & Lingard, 2013). Also, concerns about alignments between what is learnt in vocational education institutions and perceived or real unmet gaps within the labour market have long shaped efforts to regulate what is taught, and how it is taught and assessed (e.g. competency-based training, industry-

led processes) in state-funded Technical and Further Education institutions (Stevenson, 2001).

The establishment of Australian universities of different kinds (e.g. **social science universities and teacher education colleges of the 60s and 70s, the technical universities of the 80s**) was also a product of governmental imperatives (Marginson & Considine, 2000), as have been their subsequent transformations. Moreover, governmental funding provided directly or indirectly to these institutions is often contingent on being utilised for achieving purposes associated with policy imperatives, not necessarily for the students attending them. A recent example is the Australian Government's 'Job-ready Graduates Package' under which university students pay less for degrees in areas of perceived employment (Tehan & Cash, 2020). These sorts of actions have long led to discussions about the extent to which it is reasonable for such imperatives to influence people's education and the role of educators (Skilbeck, 1984, Smith and Lovatt, 1990).

The sector broadly described as 'adult education' often has quite different origins and forms from these other educational sectors. Whilst the motives of the instigators of adult education provisions have differed, there is an underlying notion of individual development and often of social change (Elsey, 1986). Essentially those origins in Australia and elsewhere are grounded in the communities that adult education serves. In the main, they were not initiated by church or state. Indeed, across Western nations, the term 'movement' is often associated with the origins and provision of adult education (Nesbit, 2011), particularly when addressing disadvantage that is perceived or actual. In Britain, Kelly (1962) traced a history of diverse provision that linked adult education with religious instruction, literacy, mechanics' institutes, working men's clubs, university extra-mural programs, and local government. This involved, along with its auxiliary programs in libraries, art galleries, museums and broadcasting, being based in and responsive to local communities. Danish Folk High Schools and the Chautauqua Institution in the US performed similar functions (Houle, 1992).

Unlike mandatory school education or the increasing compulsion to engage in tertiary education, much of adult education has, traditionally, been elective and at the discretion of students. Ultimately, they decide how and in what ways they participate. In recent times, however, the

defining qualities of adult education has moved beyond its local roots to encompass such diverse areas as human resource development, vocational education and training, health education, adult literacy development, and indigenous education (Foley, 2020). At times, the concept of 'adult education' have also been appropriated within the newer concept of 'lifelong learning' (Field, 2006). In Australia and other developed countries, governments have attempted to shape the curricula of adult education provisions through legislation and funding control (Tennant & Morris, 2001, Scarfe, 2011). Attempts have been made both within the sector and by governments to soften the profile and to recognise its roots by expanding the concept to include community education. As a result, 'adult education' has become an amorphous term, covering diverse provision of adult education, and has therefore struggled to preserve a distinct identity.

Nevertheless, the proposition advanced in this paper is that the values underpinning 'traditional' adult education have been sustained and have expanded into other contexts and purposes. A key contention is that the characteristics that help define the sector reflect what and how adults learn within it. That is, over the years there has been a conscious intention by educators, both professional and volunteer, to focus on the needs of adult learners. Indeed, as adult education has evolved in recent decades, this aspect has often been emphasised, as in an Australian Senate Committee's acknowledgement that what came to be known as (ACE) was much more consumer-driven than schools, TAFE and universities (Aulich, 1991). It was, the committee said, defined by its participants, who 'have already left the formal education system, have returned to learning of their own volition, and have chosen an educational structure and environment which is compatible with their situation' (Aulich, 1991, 7). Similarly, in Victoria, the state with the most extensive network of ACE providers, the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board proposed that three descriptors defined the ACE 'sector': it is by and for adults; is what adults learn in a community setting; and is community owned and managed (Scarfe, 2011). More recently, the Training and Skills Commission in South Australia (2017, 5) reported that ACE providers are 'far more than a place of learning; they offer an environment that generates a sense of belonging to, and being part of, a community and a place for personal enrichment'.

From such considerations, it is held that the formation of 'adult education' provisions is founded on three key premises about the

education of adults: i) meeting the heterogeneous needs of adults as learners; ii) educational objectives needing to be understood in the local context; and iii) the enactment of adult education being shaped by local factors such as resources, accessibility, teachers' capacities and participants' readiness.

It seems, however, that these three premises are no longer restricted to the sector traditionally known as 'adult education' but have now embraced other educational provisions for adults as a means of achieving more effective outcomes. So, the question arising from that understanding which is explored in this paper is: In what ways have the three premises identified above, in relation to the education of adults, emerged as features of other educational provisions for adults, particularly in vocational education and training, continuing education, and workplace learning?

This question is explored through a consideration of findings from selected research projects that the authors have been involved with in recent years. These studies, whilst funded by national bodies, with one exception (Dymock & Billett, 2010), engaged with adults as learners, who were interviewed, observed and engaged within their own communities.

In advancing this case, firstly, a brief discussion about the origins and distinctiveness of adult education as a "sector" is presented. Then, a consideration of the three key premises of educating adults is explored through re-engaging with a range of research projects undertaken by the authors in other Australian education and training contexts. The paper concludes with comment about how the three premises under discussion have contributed to initiatives that have helped transform individuals and communities.

Formation of adult education provisions

Educational provisions and institutions have, as noted above, by tradition in Western countries, mostly been a product of either government or religious institutions. That is, these provisions and institutions have largely been initiated, resourced, regulated and enacted in ways of meeting the needs and goals of those institutions, or some variation of them, including universities and prestigious private schools. The advent of mass schooling in many countries coincided with the formation of modern nation states and their industrialisation. The

concern of governments, sometimes in newly formed states, was for an educated population that could contribute economically, but also be aligned with the mores and ambitions of the nation state (i.e. loyal, obedient citizenry) (Gonon, 2009).

Whereas in France, the guilds were disbanded as being emblematic of the ancient regime (Troger, 2002), in Germany they were placed under bureaucratic control, because their worth was recognised in regulating the development of a skilled workforce for newly industrialised workplaces (Deissinger, 1994). Indeed, whenever there are social and economic threats to the nation state, education provisions, and the work of those teaching in them often become more controlled, regulated and mandated (Stevenson, 2001). This approach has led to traditions of highly centralised educational provisions and decision-making in countries such as Australia that position educational institutions and educators as subordinate to the centre and the achievement of government goals.

However, as foreshadowed, the origins of adult education are not predominantly from church and state. Instead, this sector has arguably been community-initiated. For example, the Nordic folk high schools originated as community-based education for adults to support their general education and social betterment (Larsson, 2013). In the United Kingdom, the need for and provisions of adult education arose from demands arising from the Industrial Revolution associated with developing mechanical skills and were initiated by local organisations such as the Birmingham Brotherly Society and widely enacted by local Mechanics Institutes, sometimes supported by local philanthropy (Kelly, 1957).

Although there was a focus on mechanics and mechanical arts, general education for adults was also provided through these institutes. One of their features was a library for adults, intended as a distraction and more worthwhile pursuit for adults than drinking and gambling. The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and university extension departments were established for similar purposes (Dymock, 2001). There was also adult education provided by Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of the Arts in communities across Australia (Beddoe, 2003). Like their British counterparts, a key feature of these institutions were the reading rooms and libraries they provided across suburbs of large cities, regional towns and relatively small rural communities.

All these initiatives arose from concerns that the educational needs of working age adults, albeit mainly males, were not being addressed. Sometimes initiatives such as the WEA were criticised as instruments of the capitalist system, designed to steer workers down a safe pathway that did not challenge the privilege of the 'ruling class' (Boughton, 1999). Nevertheless, 'Labour Colleges' and other more radical educational institutes also claimed to be meeting individual learning needs, as well as initiating social change (Elsey, 1986).

Over the years, the term 'adult education' has tended to retain a strong connection with the notion of community learning, reflected in the renaming of national bodies which became the National Institute for Adult and Community Education (NIACE) in the UK and the Australian Association of Adult and Community Education (AAACE).

So, it was localised interest, commitment, and imperatives that often led to the formation of adult education provisions across many Western countries. This largely occurred without direct government action. Instead, adult education generally evolved at some distance from and through autonomy from direct control of the state, notwithstanding that it also benefits from (sometimes sporadic) state support for the important contributions it makes to adults' lives. Central to the nature of adult education is a concern that its purposes, forms and enactment need to be shaped by local factors and contributions.

However, as with other educational sectors, in times of social and economic distress, governments have sought to intervene in adult education to realise policy goals. For example, such interventions commenced at the outbreak of the Second World War when, for the first time, the Australian federal and state governments collaborated to implement programs focused on training adults to provide materials to prosecute that war (Dymock & Billett, 2010). Following this initiative, the same collaboration turned its attention to providing educational provisions for returning servicemen and women to assist them find employment and pursue careers post the end of the conflict. Indeed, these two examples established a precedent for what followed in terms of state intervention nationally in tertiary education in times of social and economic distress (Dymock & Billett, 2010).

This kind of intervention has also been evident in the adult education sector in Australia in recent decades. The nature of adult education has

been changing since the 1980s as successive governments have sought to harness 'the movement' for what some describe as utilitarian purposes (Tennant & Morris, 2001). From the early 1990s, following leads from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a 'national training reform agenda' dominated governments' vocational training policy (James & Beckett, 2013), and what was now called ACE increasingly became an awkward 'also-ran'. The New South Wales Board of Adult and Community Education attempted to identify a legitimate role for ACE in this new policy paradigm with the publication of *The vocational scope of ACE* (McIntyre, Morris & Tennant, 1993). In Victoria, the Managing Director of the Board of ACFE argued similarly:

ACE is ideally suited to compete in the vocational education and training market because it is cost effective and concentrates its efforts on particular parts of the market. ACE provides first step opportunities for people returning to learning or learning to earn. Program costs are kept to a minimum because of low overheads and high community and volunteer support. ACE providers are able to attract students to programs and achieve good outcomes from programs because they respond to local demand. They can develop and maintain a positive support environment which is flexible and responsive to the needs of students. (Sussex 1994: 1–5, quoted in Tennant & Morris, 2001, 50).

Although this statement was intended as a justification of ACE providers' contributions to government's focus on vocational education and training, it also provides, inter alia, a reinforcement of the three premises of educating adults identified earlier in this paper: i) meeting the heterogeneous needs of adults as learners; ii) educational objectives needing to be understood in the local context; and iii) the enactment of adult education being shaped by local factors such as resources, accessibility, teachers' capacities and participants' readiness.

Nevertheless, by the end of the first decade of the present century, Victorian ACE providers, who have long prided themselves on meeting local needs, were increasingly being drawn into the State government's vocational training agenda (Golding & Foley, 2011).

As a result of such developments and the demise of government funding for adult community education in every state, it has been suggested that adult education is no longer recognisable as a distinct sector of education

in Australia or as a social movement (Tennant & Morris, 2009). On the other hand, Adult Learning Australia (Bowman, 2017) maintained that ACE continues to be a discrete fourth sector of education in Australia, distinguished from other sectors by being local, learner-centred, inclusive and not-for-profit. Certainly, attempts to define ACE have found it a slippery concept, as Golding, Davies and Volkoff (2001: 57, quoted in Golding & Foley, 2011, 63) recognised: ‘On one hand, ACE is a diverse adult and community learning network whose essence is not amenable to simple definition or boundary setting. On the other hand, ACE is at least in part, a publicly funded form of educational provision and, for the purposes of rationing of public funding, requires definition and boundaries.’

The popularisation of the concept of lifelong learning in the past two decades has served only to reinforce the lack of clarity around the nature of adult education, and to draw attention to the tension between meeting community learning needs and serving government economic agendas (McIntyre, 2012; Field, 2006). ‘Lifelong learning’ – a personal process, is often confused with ‘lifelong education’ – the provision of educational services that may facilitate learning (Billett, 2018). Yet the term ‘lifelong learning’ has been appropriated in Australia by ACE providers themselves (McIntyre, 2012), and around the world by educational providers across the age range, from pre-schools to universities, and adopted as policy by governments (Field, 2006).

As in Canada and the United Kingdom, despite the transition of ACE providers in Australia to an increasingly certified education environment, and the demise of many ‘soft’ courses deemed not sufficiently ‘vocational’ (Tennant & Morris, 2009), there is evidence that during such transformations the three underpinning premises have not been lost. Instead, they have emerged in other education and training-purposed contexts that reflect changing times more broadly.

A key point emerging from the origins and later development of ‘adult education’ is its concern for the ‘education of adults’. Instead of a focus on the provision of education, the major concern of the adult education sector has remained on adults’ learning and – their needs, capacities and outcomes. Indeed, earlier, building on Schofield and Associates’ report (1996) on ACFE in Victoria, it was proposed that the kinds of models adopted by the adult education sector might well be a more effective approach for use in vocational education than the top-down approach currently adopted (Billett, 1998).

Moreover, the three premises of what constitutes effective practice in ACE still provide a platform for adult education to make its distinct and important contributions, fend off unhelpful encroachments and be used as premises for sustaining and advancing the sector. Indeed, for government to erode them further would reduce its capacity to achieve the outcomes it seeks. This has been evident in studies conducted by the authors across the last two decades which included responses to key societal concerns.

It is not suggested that the projects discussed here comprehensively cover the fields of vocational education and training, continuing education, and workplace learning. It is proposed, however, that the selected projects are indicative of the sorts of Australian education and training contexts in which the three premises have begun to take on increasing significance.

Although the focus of some of these studies is on vocational education, the point is that the educational provisions that are the objects of these investigations are intended for working age Australians, and therefore are concerned with the education of adults. The lessons from the ACE sector are, therefore, potentially highly pertinent. Moreover, whilst some of the examples emphasise preparation for occupations, they do so to make the point that the outcomes government want to achieve through programs and content taught in particular ways, usually arising through centralised processes, are often seen to be difficult to translate, tend to miss the mark, and are inappropriate for the circumstances of their enactment.

Each of the three premises of educating adults is now discussed using examples from recent investigations in different educational contexts.

1. Heterogeneous needs of adults as learners

A common basis for educational provisions, such as schooling and tertiary education, is to make student cohorts as homogeneous as possible, so the educational processes can be organised and directed towards collective readiness (i.e. what they know, can do and value), needs and capacities. This basis is founded on concerns about organising and enacting educational arrangements that are appropriate for students based on assumptions about their readiness. The original meaning of the word 'curriculum' referred to the track to progress along. The inference here is that everybody would commence from the

same starting line. Instances here include five-year-olds commencing primary school, foundation courses in universities being undertaken largely by school leavers, apprentices commencing their programs first needing to learn basic hand and tool skills et cetera, higher education students needing basic occupational skills before work placements. These assumptions are important for efficacy of educational provisions, and effectively managing learning support for cohorts of students with similar levels of readiness (i.e. existing knowledge).

However, adopting this premise for educating adults is quite problematic. The diverse characteristics of adult learners in terms of age, educational background and existing capacities mean that adult students' readiness is likely to be quite heterogeneous. Moreover, adults are more likely to participate in educational programs to meet their needs, not the compulsion of others.

For instance, in a national study of adult literacy programs, the answer to the research question, 'What are adult learners' motivations and goals in nonaccredited language, literacy and numeracy programs?', the answer was that they want "to engage with the world on their own terms, and that their goals are a mix of personal, social and vocational" (Dymock 2007, 8).

Whilst measures such as categorising courses as beginning, intermediate or advanced can be helpful they will never be sufficient in such situations, as adults' interests are also likely to be diverse (ACFE 1996). Regardless of whether the courses are associated with literacy development, cultural betterment or developing quasi or actual occupational capacities, it is likely the readiness of adult students will be quite diverse.

All of this means that the planning and implementation of programs cannot proceed with any great confidence unless much more is known about the learners than can be deduced from simple entry information. Instead, understanding goals, needs and readiness and having the flexibility to respond to them are central to effective educational provisions for adults. Moreover, adult participants' satisfaction is the predominant basis of such an evaluation, not the degree by which sponsors goals have been met.

The diversity of adult learners' needs was centre stage in another study of non-accredited adult literacy and numeracy programs that aimed

to engage adults with a range of literacy capacities to develop further those capacities (Dymock & Billett, 2008). These courses were unusual because, being non-accredited, they were an exception to guidelines to receive national funding premised upon alignments with qualification levels in the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF). Instead, these non-accredited programs were for adults who did not need or were not yet able to cope with certificate level training. The investigation aimed to identify means by which that development could be assessed and was undertaken in collaboration with six community educational providers in four states and featured collaborations amongst researchers, coordinators, teachers, tutors and students in the development of a number of assessment instruments. However, it was found that these adult learners' needs were so diverse and complex that they could not be captured by specific assessment tools.

Ultimately, these courses were mostly defunded, as they failed to meet the requirement of being aligned with government accreditation criteria. This outcome ignored the diversity of adults' learning needs and readiness, and that these needs were best understood locally. That is, they could only be ascertained by teachers working closely with adults and understanding not only their readiness but also the interests and needs that would be the focus for them to engage in the effortful process of learning.

So, all of this suggests that the institutionally focused processes of schooling and tertiary education are even less likely to be appropriate for educating adults than for those other sectors. Adults' participation is also often not constrained by needing to meet certification requirements that are often key premises for the kinds of content being presented and intention of the experiences provided. For example, in a national investigation of continuing education and training in Australian workplaces, Billett et al (2015) found that workers' motivations for undertaking training were often to develop skill sets for specific workplaces, rather to complete a full vocational certificate.

All this reinforces the view that whilst the goals, content and assessment of courses are pre-specified and nationally stipulated they are not necessarily a good fit with adults' needs and readiness as learners. This is because their heterogeneity means their involvement as adults in educational provisions will be far from uniform.

Even when the goal of educating adults is to achieve uniform outcomes, such as understandings about health care, public education about obesity or smoking, let alone developing occupational skills that have national uniformity, this requires an understanding of how experiences can be provided to achieve those outcomes, the gaps amongst learners' readiness and capacities, the goals to be achieved, and the kinds of specific factors that might either impede or support achieving those outcomes.

For instance, it was found that when there was concerted effort to meet localised needs by vocational education institutions it was necessary to adapt uniform curriculum intents and programs and engage teachers directly with local employers (Billett 2000). Hence, to address the diversity in readiness, needs and interest, the course objectives and content ideally need to be generated locally.

2. Educational programs needing to be shaped in the local context

Early definitions of educational objectives stated they were focused on achieving the goals of the school (Tyler, 1949), thereby reflecting a focus on education institutions and provisions, rather than realising the needs and goals of learners. As proposed above, this is quite misaligned with the origins of adult education or, even pragmatically, of achieving the kind of purposes for which it was founded and, more recently, governments would like to realise.

For instance, an NCVET-funded project on how older adults could sustain their employability through continuing education and training found that what constitutes an older worker was very much premised upon the kind of work they did (i.e. age tolerant), their own personal circumstances, health, interests and opportunities available to them for employment and further education (Billett, Dymock, Martin, & Johnson, 2009).

When asked what constitutes an older worker, one respondent stated that if you are a concreter, 'older' is when you reach 40, but if you are an academic, it will be much older, emphasising age tolerance. We know that frontline emergency service workers and defence force personnel are deemed not to be able to conduct that work beyond 45 (Billett et al 2012). Other informants suggested that being an à la carte chef was only sustainable for younger workers, and an advertising agency worker stated that it also was an industry for younger people. Interestingly, both informants found work in their occupation in different kinds of work that

were more age tolerant. However, both informants made career changes that were probably only available in the metropolitan capital, and their pathways might not have been what others would have pursued (i.e. charity cooking project and public relations in a government department).

So, such is their person-dependence and complexity, that the factors shaping what is possible and what constitutes employability can only be understood through processes that could account for the interdependence amongst sets of personal, workplace, occupational and community considerations, and these can be best understood at the local level. Addressing the issue of sustaining adults' employability, which is a key goal for Australian government with an ageing population and lengthening working lives needs, therefore cannot be understood from a distance or captured through national prescriptions. Instead, it needs to be understood and negotiated at the local level.

A number of research projects undertaken in the late 1990s and early 2000s focused on how the local educational needs of an adult population might progress, including a project comparing the needs of adult and vocational education provisions across metropolitan, regional and remote Australian communities (Billett, 1998a). That study found that the needs of adults and the opportunities for educational provisions and employment options differed across metropolitan, regional and remote communities, often based on the kinds and qualities of needs found in those communities and localised engagements.

It was also found that accommodating these factors through the education of adults required adaptations by local adult educators and communities. It was a curious coincidence that at the time of this study the federal government was making much of the need for vocational education to meet the demand-side of students, but mainly industry, need rather than the supply-side (i.e. the programs they wanted to offer). Yet, concurrently, top-down approaches were being adopted through the provision of national curricula in the form of training packages. Far from accommodating the demand-side, this approach reflected a top-down and supply-side emphasis. That is, programs were tightly prespecified, modularised and organised with an imperative to be nationally consistent. So, taking the governmental rhetoric on being responsive to the demand-side, it is worth considering this in the context of formulating provisions for, and the enactment of, educating adults.

Demand-side emphases in educating adults

Curiously, and as noted, whilst deploying top-down and pre-specified outcomes, much of government policy has emphasised meeting the needs of the demand side, and those of employers and industry. Yet, often, these needs can be only be understood at the local level. A review of market-driven policies found that achieving this goal required understanding and being responsive in the locality of those needs (Billett 1998b). Also, an inquiry appraising the demand side of adult and vocational education in Australian metropolitan, regional and remote communities (Billett 2000) found that even when the educational goals were about nationally consistent occupational competences, that these need to be understood and developed at the local level. Indeed, the policy rhetoric at that time was about focusing on demand side need rather than supply side provisions of adult and vocational education.

For instance, one of the sectors involved in the study was food-processing. Across Australian regional and remote communities, the requirements for such a sector were found to be quite highly diverse, albeit addressed under one food-processing qualification. Requirements for working in viticulture, making potato chips, producing breakfast cereals and processing and canning fruit products require quite distinct sets of skills.

Also, with clerical work, there was a need for flexibility to address two very different kinds of workers: school leavers and older workers, and the kind of work that they could likely secure in those relatively isolated localities (Billett, 2000). The preference was, however, still for having nationally consistent programs and certification referred to as training packages. Yet, industry spokespersons were requesting a greater tailoring of these courses to the needs of local enterprises. For a short time, there were elements within these Training Packages that were discretionary to meet specific enterprises' requirements, but, since these were in addition to nationally prescribed outcomes, they were phased out over time.

Similar sentiments were expressed by representatives of local enterprise who wanted courses tailored to meet their specific needs and to engage with local educational providers (often TAFE) to achieve these needs. Local educators and administrators in those institutions reported being keen to engage more with enterprises to understand their specific needs.

Indeed, business and government representatives for these regions were complimentary about the local TAFE providers and praised their engagement (Billett & Hayes, 2000). Also, in regional and remote communities, the centrally developed governmental imperatives about competition and the private provision of adult and vocational education were often viewed as problematic as it eroded the service side and engagement of local education provision.

The demand-side includes those who participate in adult and vocational education, as well as industry and the providers. The responses from individuals in these communities were insightful, often because of the person-dependent focus they emphasised, along with the lack of alignment with the prescribed focus of national adult and vocational qualifications. More than just employment, these outcomes are about progression within and across enterprises and self-employment. Pathways to higher positions and the attainments of personal goals reinforce this focus. To illustrate these person-specific needs of adult learners, the following short statements capture the diverse backgrounds and goals of five participants in one focus group about what they want from their education courses:

- A good job, which is not in a factory and pays well so she can buy a house.
- Partner wants to retire from train driving in 5 years' time and drive trucks. She wants to be the bookkeeper for this business.
- Has been in catering for the last 10 years but was made redundant last year. She enjoyed some short computer courses and decided to work her way up the ladder.
- Daughter is now in high school and will need to know how to use a computer. It is important that she can show her because her daughter has a learning disability.
- Completed a course last year, Cert. in General Ed. for adults, and decided she wanted to do another course. She is new to the region and hopes to meet people and get some work in office admin, even as a volunteer. She has not been in the workforce for 20 years and wants to bring herself up to current standards and get over her fear of computers. (reproduced from Billett, 2000)

These examples indicate that adults' goals for learning and processes to achieve them are diverse and need to be understood and responded to at

the local level, not only within the ACE sector. Indeed, a key finding of an associated study examining the role of adult and vocational educators (Billett, 1999) found that teachers need the capacities to be responsive to the kinds of diversities associated with learner readiness, the specific needs of enterprises and variations in the requirements for occupational skills across enterprises where occupations are practised.

All of this points to the need for local factors to be understood and accommodated as it is only through those that the needs of these enterprises can be understood. So, and more broadly, such education provisions need to be informed by a consideration of local factors.

3. Adult education provisions shaped by local factors

More than understanding the needs of courses and the readiness of local learners, the third premise here is how educational provisions for adults can best be offered, because the factors shaping it and needs for it differ across communities (Billett, 2000). Some communities have well-established educational institutions that can provide a base for organising educational programs and engaging adults, either directly or by electronic means. Even then, these institutions may or may not be able to offer the kind of programs that are needed. However, in other locations, such institutions are absent, and the physical settings used for these purposes may not be suited for such activities.

Some specific examples of these localised factors arose from these earlier studies. For instance, in an evaluation of continuing professional development programs (CPD) for the Victorian VET Development Centre (Billett, Choy & Smith, 2013), the difference in options for adult educators in metropolitan and non-metropolitan centres was quite marked in terms of their access to face-to-face events and interactions with other educators. The concentration of experienced participants and access to administrators and government workers in the metropolitan centres, provided a different set of experiences than those in the regional areas of Victoria.

One reason this was particularly important is that the distinction between initial teacher preparation and continuing professional development has become blurred in this sector with the cessation of comprehensive initial teacher education programs. Instead, these have been replaced by short (Certificate IV) level programs. Hence, many

of those participating in CPD programs are at the commencement of their teaching careers and novices. Given the diversity of participants experience, unlike such programs for teachers in schooling, there can be no confidence about starting points for such programs, or the best way of providing experiences.

Moreover, in the same project there were marked differences across regional centres. For instance, in one regional city that was seeking to respond to the closure of a large manufacturing plant, the needs for worker education, and the work of adult educators, were very distinct from a community 30 kilometres away which was the centre of a fruit production area. Whereas the regional centre had a large tertiary education institution, with practical workshops, equipment and industry-experienced staff, the small nearby town had an integrated community centre that provided access to library, healthcare, counselling and education facilities in one building.

So, the needs of adult learners were distinct across these two regional communities as were the institutional arrangements for enacting those provisions. Indeed, localised planning and enactment are essential to achieve the kinds of goals that governments often want of adults' education, despite their adopting top-down, pre-specified approaches that are regulated in ways that inhibit being flexible to meet local needs. This approach risks disempowering teachers who are requested to undertake their work through highly prescribed syllabus documentation, and, of course, over time de-professionalising those who educate adults.

Also, findings from the NCVET funded project: 'Towards more effective continuing education and training for Australian workers' suggested that adults, learning for their working life was most effective when enacted and supported in the immediate circumstances of work and workers' learning preferences (Billett et al 2015, 39). Consistently, among workers from a range of industry sectors, the most common reference to learning was as a product of both a workplace and personal need or imperatives, but mainly realised through everyday work activities (Billett et al, 2012).

In many of the examples here, there were specific circumstances that were central to developing these capacities and which can only be understood at the local level. For instance, these included 30-minute 'Shed meetings' between shifts at trucking companies, and a buddy

system for new staff at an aged care facility (Billett, et al, 2012). To instantiate, the truck drivers' responses were summarised as 'Learning is an ongoing process and arises through undertaking work tasks ('getting on the road'), meeting clients and responding to their changing needs, to new equipment and driving environments.' (Billett et al, 2012, 17).

Taking another example, in a study of how small business owners had learnt to implement and administer the goods and service tax (Billett, Ehrich & Hernon-Tinning, 2003) it was found that a set of conditions had to be applied to their business and it was only through intimate knowledge of that business that their learning associated with the GST could progress. Moreover, many of the small business operators wanted to avoid becoming captive to accountancy companies and consultants and preferred instead to engage locally and with individuals they could trust to be fair and provide impartial information. An example of a particular localised process was the partners (i.e. wives) of many of the small businesses having the role of managing the finances. There were also highly localised processes through which these women came to share information and learn from each other, again with trust being central to the sharing.

So, all of this suggests that understanding the requirements for adults' learning and how to best meet the needs of adult learners are found locally. This suggests that those directly teaching or providing educational experiences for adults require the discretion and capacities to undertake this role.

Conclusion

A key founding and enduring premise for adult education has been that the participants are undertaking the learning of their own volition and will only engage purposefully when they believe their purposes are likely to be met and view the process as being advanced in their interests. The history of adult education is replete with examples of such provision, including the Workers' Educational Association, Mechanics' Institutes, Chautauqua lectures, folk high schools, university extra-mural departments, community adult literacy programs, Neighbourhood Houses, and the University of the Third Age. In this respect, then, until recent times 'adult education' arguably has been differentiated from 'institution-centred' education of adults (as in universities and technical colleges) to a more

learner-centred education for adults. This focus on the individual has meant a recognition of the diverse range of adult learners' needs and the significance of the local context. That is, adult education has been strongly demand-driven and within specific communities.

In recent decades, however, governments have increasingly intervened in the adult education 'marketplace', through withdrawal of funding and targeted funding, as a means of developing the sorts of skills they believe are needed to develop and sustain a modern economy. As a result, the education of adults has become much less volitional and less centred on individuals' preferences, and more focused on nationally certified training. It has become supply driven. The concern here is that the essence of adult education, i.e. the premises that underpin effective adult learning, will be lost.

As the examples from the research projects above demonstrate, it is essential (and possible) to capture those premises – the heterogeneous needs of adults as learners, the significance of the local context, and local factors – in other contexts. In fact, the evolution of those contexts, such as in vocational education and training and workplace learning, have validated the efficacy of the premises of adult education. In other words, the three key premises for adult education are not restricted in terms of their utility to that sector alone but provide an ongoing legacy for the education of all adults and have helped transform individuals and communities of all kinds.

Ultimately, whether referring to compulsory, tertiary or adult education, the quality of the outcomes will depend upon how the learners have come to engage with what is offered. This is no more or less true for adult education than any other sector, however it is adults who are likely to be most selective and have discretion about what provisions they engage in and how. Hence, whether provisions for the education of adults are wholly centred on the needs of adults, or are derived from plans and intentions from others, unless these requirements are addressed, the learners' participation is likely to be less than full-blooded, and the outcomes partial.

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