

All over, red rover? The neglect and potential of Australian adult education in the community

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Consistent with the 'looking back, moving forward' conference theme, in this paper we undertake a critical, research-based appraisal of the current, arguably neglected state of adult education in Australia in 2010, and proceed to paint a picture of how a different and potentially more positive future might be realised. Firstly, we emphasise situations (including states and territories) in Australia in which adult education is seen to be lacking or missing for particular groups of adults. Secondly we emphasise research evidence confirming the demonstrable value of learning for purposes other than those that are immediately vocational. We identify links between lifelong and lifewide learning on one hand, and health and wellbeing on the other. Part of the paper involves international comparisons with other forms of adult learning that Australia might learn from, adapt or borrow. We make particular reference to research underpinning the recent Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning by NIACE in the United Kingdom. Our

first main conclusion has to do with equity. Adult and community education (ACE) in Australia is currently seen to be least available or accessible to those Australians with the most limited and most negative experiences of school education, but the most need to learn in non-vocational domains. These groups include older Australians, some men and women, people not in paid work, and rural, isolated and Indigenous people. Our second main conclusion is that, to realise adult learning's future potential, we need changes to government policies, research and practice that acknowledge and actively support the broader nature and value of learning for life across all age groups. To paraphrase research from Belgium by Sford (2008), based around Beck's (1986) exploration of reflexive modernity, the adult education function of ACE is in dire straits, unless education is seen as being much more valuable than the sum of individual vocational competencies, and particularly unless it is also recognised, valued and supported as one of many valuable outcomes of social, lifelong and lifewide learning throughout the community.

Introduction

There has been widespread agreement for the past two decades, in a wide range of national and international research and policy literature, that there is a need for and value of ongoing lifelong and lifewide learning by adults of all ages for a wide range of social, vocational, community, economic and cultural purposes. However in 2010 there is no national policy consensus in Australia about what forms the adult and community education (ACE) 'sector' currently takes (or should take) beyond the existing higher education and vocational education and training (VET) sectors, or what roles national, state or territory governments should play in its policies, provision or funding.

In this paper we seek to explore the concerning gap between an increasing need for all adults to keep learning through life,

and governments adopting a 'she'll-be-right' approach to adult learning (Milburn, 2010). We identify an increasing abrogation of the responsibility for adult learning provision to the accredited vocational education and training 'market' and by default to the voluntary, community or third sector. This is occurring parallel to a research-based acknowledgement of an increasing proportion of 'hard-to-reach' (Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010) and reluctant learners (Wallace, 2008).

Consistent with the 'looking back, moving forward' theme of Adult Learning Australia's 50th conference, we undertake a critical, research-based appraisal of the current, arguably neglected, confused, patchy and fragmented state of adult education in Australia in 2010. While we identify evidence of an ongoing demise of the ACE sector (however it is conceived), we proceed to paint a picture of how a different and potentially more positive future might be realised.

The good news is that there is no shortage of recent, national policy exhortation. Harris identified six such major reports since September 2008 'on issues of relevance to adult learning' (2010: 5). The Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council, for example, identified the need for future Australians to develop 'greater technical, social and cultural skills and knowledge ... to adapt to changing circumstances' (2009: 5). Even if only a narrow, vocational purpose is chosen as the criteria for analysing the misfit between policy and practice, there is a complete mismatch between the '[a]lmost 90 per cent of jobs [that] now require some type of post-school qualification ... [and] at least half of Australian workers [who] do not have these qualifications or have not even completed secondary school' (Milburn, 2010: 15).

International benchmarking by national survey of a range of adult literacies in Australia confirms that most Australians have such low functional literacies that they are likely to be struggling with many important aspects of life aside from work. The Australian Bureau of

Statistics (2008) has identified that around one half of Australian adults have literacy levels below those considered adequate by the Council of Australian Governments in 2009 'to meet the complex demands of work and life in modern economies ... The implications of these figures are profound for our economy, businesses and individuals' (Skills Australia, 2010: 35).

At such low literacy levels, adults would have difficulty accessing accredited training programs above Certificate 2, let alone participating and successfully completing them.

What is adult education in Australia (and why bother about it)?

Accounts of the origins of adult and community education in Australia such as within the first Senate report, *Come in Cinderella* (Senate, 1991: 1) tend to refer back to the development, from the second half of the 1800s, of Mechanics Institutes in Australia (formed originally in Scotland), Schools of Mines, Schools of Arts and circulating libraries as well as transplantation to Australia of the Workers Educational Association from England just prior to the First World War. Vestiges and descendants of each of these prior organisations exist in Australia 150 years hence, each of which is now seen as comprising part of a very diverse adult and community education (ACE) sector.

The *Come in Cinderella* report examined 'existing policies and practices in adult and community education' (Senate, 1991: iii), and prided itself as 'the first national account of adult education since the 1944 Universities Commission Report by W.G.K. Duncan' (1991: 3). Duncan framed his report in the context of a need, towards the end of the Second World War, to reconstruct a new Australian postwar economy. As Duncan put it in 1944,

A new economy has to be built, involving drastic changes ... people have to be given new skills, but more than that, they have to be shown the reasons for the large-scale shifts in occupations, and be prepared for repeated shifts in the future. In a word, adults have

to be 'educated for change' ... [N]ew inventions are likely to render old skills redundant. (Duncan, 1973 [1944]: 141)

Two thirds of a century after Duncan's report, these imperatives still ring true. What greatly exacerbates them is research into two factors operating internationally at different ends of the lifespan on older people and mothers: population ageing and infant mortality. Global population ageing is what Gayondato and Kim characterise as '[o]ne of the greatest social challenges of the twenty-first century ... the ageing of human society ... So profound is this demographic revolution that every aspect of social life and society is affected' (2007: 13). Older adults (50+) in Australia, typically after several shifts in individual work occupations, are living much longer and risk becoming further isolated through not being educated and/or working during the information and communications revolution of the past two decades. And yet there is evidence from recent, empirical, national research that for older men 'adult and community education (ACE) tends to be missing, less accessible to or appropriate' (Golding et al. 2009: 66).

What has made lifelong and lifewide learning absolutely essential in the same two decades is improved knowledge of the interaction between education and the social determinants of health. As the World Health Organization concluded, the 'evidence is compelling that business as usual is increasingly unfeasible ... Yet policy-making all too often appears to happen as if there were no such knowledge available' (2008: 27). While there is compelling international evidence of the link between average infant mortality rates and education levels of mothers, arguments about maternal wellbeing are rarely, if ever, mentioned in adult education policy discourses in Australia. Meantime ACE is known from international research 'to be particularly effective in enhancing *the wellbeing of our most vulnerable citizens*. Any government that ignores this evidence is open to serious criticism' (Field, 2009: 36).

A review of policy on adult education in Australia

Come in Cinderella implored the government to:

recognize that a commitment to the ‘clever country’ and ‘lifelong learning for all’ requires a willingness to embrace a larger vision of how people get their education and training in Australia. If we as a nation are serious about economic and social justice goals we must get serious about adult education. (Senate, 1991: 160)

The *Beyond Cinderella* report that followed identified ‘a conceptual inadequacy which haunts present policy and funding mechanisms in adult education and training’ (Senate, 1997: 3), specifically the ‘insistence on differentiating between educational programs on the grounds of their perceived or declared vocational orientation’ (p. 3). The conceptual problems caused by education policies based on vocational differentiation were sown several decades before within Myer Kangan’s (TAFE, 1974) report *TAFE in Australia*. While the national government gave an ‘unequivocal commitment to the concept of lifelong learning and the promotion of a learning society’ (Senate, 1997: 3), programs in ACE without a vocational orientation have been at risk ever since.

By 1980, Kangan (1980: 10) had retrospectively recognised that his report had been framed in 1974 in a more receptive climate of full employment, interest in alternative lifestyles, and a questioning of economic growth for its own sake. In setting up TAFE (Technical *and Further Education*: added italics), Kangan had deliberately widened the prevailing International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNESCO economically oriented definitions of technical and vocational education to include ‘further education’. Aside from education for vocational qualifications, Kangan identified the need for Australian adults also to seek or acquire through TAFE the ‘knowledge or skills for secondary, additional or supplementary occupational purposes, or for the purpose of personal enrichment, or to use leisure creatively’

(TAFE, 1974: 5). Kangan saw that the acquisition of this latter type of knowledge and skills usually occurred in courses that ‘are usually less formal and described as adult education’ (p. 5), including those held in technical colleges.

Kangan’s *TAFE in Australia* report in 1974 identified and separated six types of educational options ‘usually’ found in TAFE from those ‘usually’ found in adult education. Kangan’s vocational typology (with apprenticeships at the apex), has persisted in aggregated vocational and education and training data for more than a third of a century. Of particular relevance to ACE, the TAFE course typology relegated preparatory or bridging courses ‘usually’ found in adult education (but with ‘obvious’ overlaps) into the fifth type towards the bottom, just above ‘courses of an informal kind and varying in length from a number of years to quite short periods in any aspect of technology, science, liberal studies, self expression, home handicrafts and cultural expression’ (TAFE 1974: 5).

Even in the original vision of TAFE in 1974, Kangan recognised the tendency for ‘all forms of education ... [to] become more closely related to employment, modifying the concept of education as intellectual development for its own sake’ (TAFE, 1974: 5). Five years later Kangan (1980) lamented the way in which the subsequent economic downturn had moved his broad vision of TAFE even closer to the purely vocational, and led to ‘a backswing of the social pendulum’ away from adult and further education for its own sake. He belatedly urged TAFE authorities to ‘proclaim that they are educational authorities, not manpower employment departments’ (Kangan, 1980: 12).

Research into Australian adult and community education

Campbell and Curtin identified that ‘differing definitional, contextual and financial structures of ACE in each State and Territory, and the blurring distinction between vocational and non-vocational programs,

make it very difficult to determine the full extent of ACE provision' (1999: 9). Attempts by survey to measure adult and community education nationally or even within states are beset by a widespread lack of brand recognition of ACE. Even where there is provision, it is not often recognised by learners as ACE. Previous attempts to sieve out the ACE component of nationally aggregated VET data say as much about which states (mainly Victoria and New South Wales) and which types of providers (mainly TAFE) contributed the data and very little about the nature or diversity of ACE. Some forms of widespread and regular accredited learning and training by volunteers, such as through community-based fire and emergency service organisations in all areas of Australia, is seldom recorded in national collections either as VET or ACE. Similarly, many other organisation types involved in regular informal learning, such as the growing number of community men's sheds across Australia, remain beyond the reach of most data collections typically based on enrolled learners.

Two decades since *Come in Cinderella* the remaining vestiges of further education retained within the TAFE acronym are now very small. More than half of ACE provision counted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) in 2010 is accredited vocational education and training. The policy and funding commitment to non-vocational ACE in the most populous Australian and previously strong ACE state, New South Wales, has greatly reduced and fragmented in recent years. In Victoria, the last Australian bastion of ACE as a statewide, government-supported network of community owned and managed providers, the new emphasis in ACE is on 'pre-accredited training' as part of a 'vastly reformed vocational education and training system' as part of the '*Securing jobs for your future - Skills for Victoria* package discourse' (ACFE, 2009: 5). Even the research discourse on 'what works in reaching and keeping' hard-to-reach and reluctant learners in Victoria (Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010) is peppered by multiple exhortations from the ACFE Board for reluctant ACE providers to

‘operate effectively in the new funding environment’ (2009: 6), by adopting the competitive, new student ‘entitlement model’, originally recommended for ACE by Campbell and Curtin (1999: 86) that funds the student rather than the provider.

One hundred and fifty years since the original Mechanics Institutes were founded, many places across Australia (beyond Victoria and parts of urban New South Wales) retain only the Mechanics Institute building and no ACE provision. While there have been periodic national ACE policy releases framed as visions, goals and objectives by the national government, typically as part of federal election cycles, it is state and territory governments ‘who have primary responsibility for the provision of ACE’ (Campbell & Curtin, 1999: 84). Most states and territories have similarly produced policy documents and occasionally research purporting to support the small amount of remaining community provision as part of election cycles. A 2002 Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education (MCEETYA, 2002) was effectively only a declaration and was not followed up. A 2008 formal review of the 2002 declaration showed that none of the consistent, two-decades-long research effort on the impacts and benefits of ACE had been translated into nationally coordinated action.

The state of Australian adult education post 2005

Much of the recent (post 2005) evidence for the value of adult learning has been generated through NCVER-commissioned research as part of national adult literacy strategies (eg Balatti, Black & Falk, 2006; Perkins, 2009) or through an interest in training and retraining older workers with a recognition of our ageing society and workplaces (e.g. Martin, 2007; Lundberg & Marshallsay, 2007; Ryan & Sinning, 2009; Skinner, 2009). Most of this recent research is oriented towards vocational skilling and only makes oblique links to the ACE sector.

Some other research and policy evidence has been developed since 2005 by peak stakeholder bodies such as Adult Learning Australia (Choy, Haukka & Keyes, 2006; Bowman, 2006; ALA, 2007; Holmes, 2009; Bowman, 2009) in a last ditch attempt to state an evidence-based case for learning that goes beyond policy rhetoric, that is lifelong and valuable but not necessarily vocational. As Holmes put it:

After several decades, the merits of and necessity for lifelong learning have been dutifully intoned by policy makers and elsewhere. In practice, and sadly more so in Australia than in many comparable countries, the pursuit of lifelong learning has been honoured more by the breach than the observance. (2009: 1)

It is possible that future historians may perceive these recent flurries within the policy and research literature as the last throw of the ACE dice.

The first Senate report, *Come in Cinderella*, closely examined ACE across Australia by state and territory. It concluded that involvement ‘tends to be peripheral to their major areas of concern—schools and TAFE’ (Senate, 1991: 23). Since the ‘largest formal provider of adult and community education in every State and Territory’ (p. 37) was found to be TAFE, it is arguable that ACE should be treated more as a segment of TAFE than as a stand-alone sector. As Campbell and Curtin put it, in the case of several states such as Western Australia, ‘There is little if any provision for the ACE sector to have an identity other than in terms of its capacity to contribute to the VET sector’ (1999: 70). The observed differences by state and territory in the 1991 Senate report ranged from ‘significant formal involvement’ in Victoria (1991: 24) to no comprehensive policy in South Australia and no formal administrative structure in the Northern Territory. These differences were found to reflect different government approaches, degree of responsiveness to community pressures and the ways in which ACE had evolved historically.

The patchy and partial nature of ACE across Australia painted by the 1991 Senate report, repainted a decade later by Campbell and Curtin (1999: 66–74) as well as by Choy, Haukka and Keyes (2006: 51–54) has not improved. The conceptual inadequacies identified in the *Beyond Cinderella* (Senate, 1997) report as a definitional tear in the ACE canvas have their origins in the ongoing tensions between ACE perceived as education delivered within an institutional setting, and adult learning as experienced in diverse community settings. This remains somewhat similar two decades later in 2010. As Golding, Davies and Volkoff summarised, there is a difficulty reconciling the

two different perceptions of ACE. 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. (2001: 57)

In essence, ACE as a form of government-supported, community provision beyond Victoria remains restricted to some cities and towns in parts of New South Wales and some parts of South Australia and Western Australia. In 2010, as at the time of the first Senate report (Senate, 1991: 59), the most numerous group of community-based providers operating across the country, still mainly for and by women, are likely to be neighbourhood learning centres, houses or community centres.

Bardon (2006) prepared a Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) discussion paper anticipating the national reform of Australian community education. It included an ‘ACE capability framework’, which grouped providers under tiers by approximate size and vocational orientation and which helped inform a new Ministerial Declaration on ACE (MCEETYA, 2008). The 2008 declaration had four goals, all of which were strongly vocationally directed. Each of Bardon’s tiers, as Bowman (2009: 4) observed, presupposed that ACE providers would need to ‘move up the capability tiers’ towards

accredited training in order to implement the MCEETYA (2008) Ministerial Declaration on ACE. While Sanguinetti, Waterhouse and Maunders (2004) had independently created a framework for ACE pedagogy for the Adult, Community and Further Education Board in Victoria by identifying ‘many roads to learning’, the vocational road was now the government-sanctioned, official highway. All the policy roads and official discourses pointed towards vocational learner choice and neo-liberalism at both federal and state levels. While Bowman (2009) used a broad scan of pertinent research to identify roles for ACE beyond the vocational straightjacket contained within the 2008 ministerial declaration, it was ‘all over, red rover’ for ACE in a government sense as Victoria began to follow New South Wales’ neo-liberal ACE capitulation.

The potential of Australian adult education

While the picture of ACE as originally envisioned in *Come in Cinderella* is over, the need for and benefits of lifelong and lifewide learning for *all* adults beyond compulsory schooling and in early phases of life remain and are now better understood through research. We understand in 2010 that difficult early lives tend to be persistent and debilitating to both individuals and families, and often become inter-generational. Schuller and Watson, in their summary of the inspirational suite of research undertaken as part of the Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning in the UK, recently asked:

[W]ould we think it a strangely skewed health system if it subordinated to a large extent the needs of younger age groups to those at the end of their lives. Yet this is broadly a mirror image of how we organize our education and training, concentrating hugely on the initial phase and neglecting the subsequent ones. (2009: 7)

We now know, most recently from experiences of the Global Financial Crisis, that the market, as a mechanism even for money and its derivatives, let alone education, is imperfect. We also know through research as well as from several of the Nordic countries that there are

other, arguably better ways of organising and valuing adult learning through and for the community, aside from the vocational value of learning acquired through or for paid employment. The diversity and goodwill of adult education is fundamental to its success and contribution to community health and wellbeing. This contribution needs government acknowledgement through policies that nurture and recognise the value in individual and community enhancement (Foley, 2005).

Australia would be wise to heed John Field's words and place 'wellbeing at the centre of our education goals, and rather than focusing narrowly on one specific set of skills and qualifications, we should value a broad and generous range of adult learning' (cited in Schuller & Watson, 2009: 33).

Discussion

In hindsight, it is obvious that Cinderella 'came out' in 1991 (Senate, 1991) as neo-liberal governments began to shut down the ACE ball. Pusey in the same year identified that the previous notion of the 'social good' had become marginalised or a 'buried discourse' (Pusey, 1991: 166), to be replaced by what Welch described as 'a new economic rhetoric of individual rights, and ideologies of "efficiency" and "choice"' (2010: 244). In Welch's words, this marginalisation of progressive 'social policy by positivist economics' in Australia, in this case adult education, has been achieved through 'a radical hollowing out of traditional state functions', to reveal 'a very different policy landscape, the contours of which have only deepened since' (2010: 244–245). The loss of the Board of Adult and Community Education in New South Wales and the gradual erosion of the roles of Adult, Community and Further Education in Victoria are recent evidence of this marginalisation of ACE at different times for similar reasons in all Australian states. 'In the process, whole programs, and

specialist units and agencies designed to focus on marginal groups, disappeared' (Welch, 2010: 245).

There is little doubt that as we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, 30 years since the publication of the Cinderella report, little remains of the original vision of ACE. This however need not preclude different visions of ACE now and into the future that recognise the potential contribution of ACE through engaging and achieving equity in their access to learning, for both preparatory education and skills development programs and more broadly through programs related to community connections and engagement that promote health and wellbeing through lifelong learning. We have highlighted the lack of ACE funding and in turn ACE provision for members of our community that are its most vulnerable. These members include Indigenous, older people, men and women who are not in paid work, young mothers, early school leavers and disengaged youth. Some of these 'missing' members are identified as having negative experiences of school and formal education (Golding et al., 2009) but they have the most need to learn in non-vocational domains to support their diverse needs and wellbeing throughout life. We need policies that recognise the value of ACE's flexible and equitable non-vocational approaches that give other arguably more important outcomes such as health and wellbeing benefits for the community. These policies could well borrow from the European model where the importance of lifelong learning for all European citizens is stressed as a priority.

Conclusion

The Commission of the European Communities have put forward an action plan for adult learning that incorporates a focus on 'those who are disadvantaged because of their low literacy levels, inadequate work skills and/or skills for successful integration into society ...

these could include migrants, older people, women or persons with a disability' (2007: 3).

- The commission's approach starts from the premise that the need for a high quality and accessible adult learning system is no longer a point of discussion, given the challenges Europe has to meet in the coming years. The Commission's Action Plan on Adult Learning includes the following priorities: To address the problem of the persistent high number of early school leavers ... by offering a second chance to those who enter adult age without having a qualification;
- To reduce the persistent problem of poverty and social exclusion among marginalised groups. Adult learning can both improve people's skills and help them towards active citizenship and personal autonomy;
- To increase the integration of migrants in society and labour market. Adult learning offers tailor made courses, including language learning, to contribute to this integration process. (Commission of the European Communities, 2007: 3)

The Australian adult education system is currently patchy and partially funded at best. Adult education policies in Australia need to recognise that an appropriately funded and accessible adult education system has the capacity to provide essential and equitable opportunities that promote healthy, connected citizens from all age groups and backgrounds who benefit from the flexibility afforded by ACE approaches. Australia would do well to look to Europe to develop policies that include agency around the discourses of equity, inclusion, health and wellbeing, and not just a de facto education system that is valued only for vocational outcomes and competencies.

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