



ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN A LEARNER-CENTRED SYSTEM



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FOUR PAPERS BY ALA VISITING RESEARCH FELLOWS

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PREFACE

In recent times a view that post school education should focus almost exclusively on training appears to be evolving. Since COAG announced its agenda for national reform, a high priority has been given to increasing the participation of the adult population in education and training. Adult learning has become a major imperative.¹

There is no question that community education, and Adult and Community Education (ACE) organisations in particular, have a key role to play in reaching adults who wish to re-engage in learning and work as well as the providing for those who already participate. ACE contributes to a skilled workforce by making vocational education and training readily accessible in terms of both cost and local access. More broadly, it makes it possible for people to undertake learning that enables them to contribute to both to Australian economic life and to personal and community wellbeing.

Yet ACE is valuable in a further way—it contributes to our understanding of how to engage adults in learning within Australian VET system, and it contributes lessons from the experience of promoting participation.

The overview and four papers in this publication were commissioned by Adult Learning Australia from four leading researchers in the field to examine the challenges posed by the 'participation imperative' for the VET system as a whole, with particular reference to ACE. The papers explore key questions—what kind of capability is needed to re-engage those in the community who are missing out on the benefits of education and training? How can programs be made more adaptive to the needs and preferences a cross the spectrum? What kind of innovation in teaching and learning will be necessary to meet the needs of a broader spectrum of learners beyond the traditional clients of the system?

The publication provides further evidence of the key role that the community education can play in national reform, and provides further evidence of the benefits that will flow from greater investment in the sector and the coordination of its cohesive development by Australian Governments.

Thanks are due to Janie McOmish for her valuable editorial work.

We look forward to all responses from our readers.

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¹ See Adult Learning Australia's response to the DEST Discussion Paper, *Community Education and National Reform*, November 2007, at www.ala.asn.au/report/Bardon_response_v4.pdf

OVERVIEW

If Australia is to succeed in widening participation in adult learning and increasing levels of skill in the population, there will need to be fresh approaches to engage those adults who have been reluctant to enter the formal training system.

This is the collective view of four authorities who have written papers for Adult Learning Australia exploring the issues raised for the VET system by the participation and productivity goals of the national reform agenda of the Council of Australian Governments. Recognising that the main thrust of national VET reform should continue to be the creation of a client-centred system, the papers propose further action in four areas:

- *Understanding* engagement and participation in adult learning as a process with stages and milestones that can be translated into measurable outcomes
- *Expanding* the horizon of accredited training beyond institutions to embrace less formal, community and workplace learning that develops the capacities adults need to enter formal training
- *Recognising* the broad spectrum of adult learners beyond the traditional VET student, and their diverse needs, preferences and circumstances—making customised learning the norm rather than the exception
- *Remodelling* VET institutions to make learner-centred pedagogy fundamental to their culture—adapting teaching and learning according to learners and creating training solutions that are less institutionalised

Each of the papers by ALA's Visiting Research Fellows, Drs. Kaye Bowman, Darryl Dymock, Madeleine Fernbach and John McIntyre, takes a particular perspective on the engagement and participation of adult learners.

The four authors share the view that success in formal training depends on adults having those qualities that enable them to participate successfully in formal training—qualities that may be developed through a range of community and workplace contexts.

Darryl Dymock's paper examines the role of non-accredited language, literacy and numeracy in building readiness to participate, arguing that it has been underrated and undervalued. The paradox is that these programs are more widely available to and used by 'returning learners' who prefer a less structured setting. The horizon of accredited training is far off for many adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills who are least likely to participate in formal training and often lack the capacities and qualities required for success. Despite the efforts of individual teachers and trainers, accredited language, literacy and numeracy courses in their nature have specific expectations and are less tailored to individual needs.

Dymock argues that engagement is a process of developing the capacities enabling participation in adult learning. He emphasises that construction of a learner identity and the development of confidence are major outcomes of less formal learning. Current VET policy rarely acknowledges the import of this in-

itial involvement, and has been slow to recognise that there are precursors to formal training, such as pathways from community learning, that are key to lifting participation levels. With the other authors, he points to the clear role that community providers can play in a reformed system that is more flexible and geared to client needs and preferences.

Madeline Fernbach analyses the challenge that diversity of adult learners poses for the VET institutions—what institutions have to do to accommodate ‘hesitant and reluctant learners’ that are being pressed to participate in the system particularly by welfare to work reforms. She notes that in the past, equity has been addressed by a paradigm of ‘accommodation’ to the needs and preferences of equity groups by modifying traditional teaching and learning approaches. The new policy environment is bringing greater diversity that cannot be accommodated in this way—what is required is a systemic shift to a wholly learner-centred pedagogy that recognises there is no ‘traditional student’ but only a spectrum of learners with needs and preferences to be taken into account in learner-responsive pedagogical design.

Fernbach argues that adaptive pedagogy is the key to a flexible system, and she sees this exemplified in what has become known as the ACE Pedagogy Framework² where pedagogy embraces ‘the processes and dynamics of teaching and learning, including the purposes, relationships, environment, management and social context of learning’.

Fernbach’s analysis suggests that institutional reform will be important with many implications for professional development of teachers and trainers. The adaptive pedagogy and client-centredness expressed in the ACE Pedagogy framework ought to be the norm throughout the VET system, not simply a quality of community provision. Too much is made of the community sector’s contribution of flexibility and client-responsiveness to a formal training system that is (by implication) less than flexible.

John McIntyre echoes the theme that client engagement will be a driving force in VET institutions in coming years. Like his colleagues, he argues it is only possible to engage that the broad spectrum of adult learners if the VET system becomes more adaptive, recognising that their needs and learning preferences are differentiated by a range of lifestyle, social, and economic factors, that they come to formal training by different pathways and connections.

He reviews a number of perspectives on client engagement—the social marketing approach of the National Marketing Strategy, a transactional perspective (participation as a decision weighed in terms of its costs and benefits) and a perspective on transition and social risk. He argues that the ‘riskiness’ of learning (its benefits relative to perceived costs) varies greatly across the segments of the adult population, that the social risks have increased with greater complexity of life-course transitions. For the most disadvantaged adults, the potential social costs may outweigh the perceived benefits. He concludes that higher levels of participation will require much more ‘client differentiation’, more flexible and adaptive providers and a system that recognises and connects to a

² Sanguinetti, J., Waterhouse, P. and Maunders, D. (2004). *The ACE Experience: Pedagogies for life and employability*. Final Report. Melbourne: Adult, Community and Further Education Board, Victoria.

broader range of community and workplace learning opportunities—not 'more of the same' for those groups that already participate.

Kaye Bowman takes up the challenge of widening the policy horizon to encompass the breadth of outcomes implied by the process of engagement and participation in learning. She sets out a framework for conceptualising the steps from first engagement to maintaining skill learning at the higher national qualification levels. The proposal is for a set of adult learning milestones, that begin with the disengaged learner with no inclination to participate and their re-engagement through the development of enabling capacities mentioned by Dymock and Fernbach. Then further milestones of a 'bridging' nature are suggested towards vocational learning, via the acquisition of generic and employability skills (referred to as identity capital or 'soft' psychosocial outcomes, and related generic skills). Participation in lower level qualifications can then build a platform for higher qualifications. Finally, health and wellbeing outcomes, and continuing participation in learning may result from achieving former outcomes.

The authors share the view that there is a yawning gap between ambitious national goals for increased participation and qualifications, and current theory and practice in the VET systems across the jurisdictions, despite outstanding innovations in areas such as flexible learning.

While the papers touch on the contribution of the community (ACE) sector, all address the core challenges to be faced by the entire VET system in achieving the national reform agenda's ambitious goals for increased participation in adult learning. The drawbacks of an overly prescriptive and standardised approach to training are becoming ever more apparent. Increased participation will come through fresh approaches that challenge the norm, as Australia's VET institutions become much more responsive to the needs of a broad spectrum of learners. To do so, they will need to capitalise on existing learning in the community and workplace and find ways to connect this to nationally recognised training.

John McIntyre
October 2007