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Master concept or defensive rhetoric: Evaluating Australian VET policy against past practice and current international principles of Lifelong Learning

Robin Ryan

Flinders University Institute of International Education robin.ryan@flinders.edu.au

Lifelong learning has become a frequently repeated mantra of national planning and policy agencies in Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET). Critics claim the use of the term is rhetorical rather than a real commitment to the principles and practices of lifelong learning. A review of research indicates that real progress has been made in implementing some aspects of lifelong learning in VET, but that contemporary practice falls far short of internationally agreed principles of lifelong learning or even the sector's earlier experience with the similar concept of recurrent education. Current policy settings impose too many barriers to the adoption of lifelong learning in VET and need comprehensive reform.

Vocational education, Education policy, Work-based education,
Lifelong learning, Knowledge economy

INTRODUCTION: POLICY AND RHETORIC

Lifelong learning has gained wide acceptance in many countries as a 'master concept' for planning and debating all areas of education. It has a particular resonance for Australian vocational education and training (VET) since VET, along with the adult community education (ACE) sector,

- provides the educational opportunities which most broadly apply across age and socio-economic groups;
- delivers its programs through the widest variety of locations and means - regional, remote and urban, on-line and in class, in workplaces, in colleges, in community centres, in prisons; and
- accommodates the widest range of previous educational backgrounds.

Not surprisingly, lifelong learning has become part of the standard rhetoric of the sector, not least of its primary policy arm, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), although that body came relatively late to the idea (ANTA [1998b] seems to be the first, passing, reference). While ANTA's verbal endorsement has grown stronger as its own market research has shown how widespread enthusiasm for learning is throughout Australian society (ANTA 1999), it is not clear that this has led to any realignment of policy direction.

To describe the terminology employed in setting educational policy as rhetoric is not in itself a critique, nor is it intended to ascribe bad faith. The use of rhetoric is integral to the framing of educational policy debate. As pioneer policy theorists March and Olsen pointed out "the history of administrative reorganisation in the twentieth century is a history of rhetoric" (March and Olsen, 1983, p282; see also Radin and Hawley, 1988).

The use of rhetoric in policy debate is seldom to persuade, but more to set terms of engagement and criteria of success, to determine the roster of participants and to seek allies from distant but more influential policy communities (Buamgartner, 1989).

This pattern was established in the debate leading to the creation of ANTA, as States and Commonwealth sought to frame a debate about education and training in terms of a wider discussion of federal-State finance and the future of the federal governance structure (Ryan, 1999a). It is suggested that the pattern is now replicated by ANTA itself as it seeks to defend itself against an emerging critique. That critique argues that ANTA policy over-prioritises business interests, devalues the role of individual students and communities, replaces educational goals with a narrow doctrine of vocational competency and trusts naively in a contrived market mechanism to produce efficient and equitable outcomes (see, for example, Billett and Hayes, 1998; Gonzci, 1998; Ryan, 1995; Fooks et al, 1997).

In short, it is a critique that suggests that training, in its narrowest and most utilitarian guise, has overtaken education or equity as the driving force of Australian VET. A potentially effective counter to this critique would be to claim that, on the contrary, Australian VET policy is firmly established within the international consensus represented by the lifelong learning philosophy. ANTA has attempted to make this claim: for example, by utilising the term in its national plan for VET (ANTA, 1999); by redefining an exercise in market research as the foundation for a lifelong learning strategy (Scollay, 2000); and by attempting to reinterpret its training regulatory framework in the now fashionable debate on a national innovation strategy (Scollay, 2001).

One unusual aspect of the current mobilisation of rhetoric is that it ignores entirely the VET sector's previous substantial experience with the cognate concept of recurrent or lifelong education. This paper seeks to evaluate the claim that national policy in Australian vocational education and training reflects the adoption of lifelong learning as its guiding principle. It seeks to compare the policy settings now in place in VET both with the earlier experience of lifelong education in TAFE and also with what can be established as an international consensus on the principles essential to effective strategies of lifelong learning.

It is argued that real progress has been made on a number of dimensions relevant to lifelong learning goals, but that the current policy agenda in many ways rates poorly against previous practice and fails most of the essential criteria of the international consensus. It is suggested that, by adopting a wholly utilitarian and economically focused agenda, ANTA ignores its own and other research on the motivation to learn (ANTA 1999; Golding and Volkoff, 1998) and, judged by international experience, is unlikely to attain even these narrow goals.

LIFELONG LEARNING: THEN AND NOW

Ideas about the need to learn throughout life are far from new. Comenius talked about learning from 'cradle to grave' in the seventeenth century (Ralph, 1999) while the French revolutionaries introduced a law for lifelong education into the National Assembly in their Year Two (Matheson and Matheson, 1996). There was a widespread movement for the continuing education of adults throughout Scandinavia and Western Europe in the nineteenth century (Kallen, 1996) and much the same spirit drove the Working Men's College movement in Australia (Murray Smith, 1996).

However, it was in the mid-1960s that the immediate antecedents of the current model of lifelong learning emerged in discussion in Europe on ideas variously referred to as lifelong education, recurrent education and *education permanente*. A compendium of these discussions was published at the end of the decade (Council of Europe, 1970) but the first statement to gain world wide prominence was the work of Faure and his colleagues on the UNESCO International Commission on the development of Education. This was published as *Learning to Be* in 1972 (Faure, 1972).

LIFELONG AND RECURRENT EDUCATION

Learning to Be was a radical document, echoing the sentiments on ‘education as liberation’ developed by Friere, but its basic theme had considerable appeal to Australian technical educators, as did its ringing demand that

Rigid distinctions between types of teaching – general, scientific, technical and professional – must be dropped and education, from primary and secondary levels, must become theoretical, technological, practical and manual at the same time (Faure, 1972, p195).

At the same time, another vision of lifelong education was promoted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development under the title recurrent education (OECD, 1973). While supporting the UNESCO argument, the OECD had a firmer eye on the workplace and was especially concerned at overcoming the boundaries between the worlds of learning and of work. It was concerned at the persistence of distinctions between general and vocational education and, in the case of the latter, the use of traditional educational formats which failed to produce qualities of self-awareness and autonomous decision making in the learner (OECD, 1973, 43).

Australian technical educators were early adopters of the new ideas from Europe. The first to argue publicly for the use of lifelong education as a ‘master concept’ for planning vocational and adult education seems to have been Max Bone, the inaugural Director of Further Education in South Australia, in the Patricia Chomley Oration in 1972 (Bone, 1972). This echoed ideas, though not terminology, used by the Karmel Report on South Australian education (Karmel, 1969). At around the same time references to the new ideas began to appear in both Schools Commission and Advanced Education Commission reports (eg Advisory Committee on Advanced Education, 1969).

However, the greatest single influence in developing a practical application of the concept of lifelong education came from its enthusiastic acceptance by Kangan, the Commonwealth official whose 1974 report *Technical and Further Education in Australia* effectively created a new sector of education in Australia and empowered it with a strong philosophical base (ACOTAFE, 1974; Goozee, 1995).

The idea of lifelong education, usually in its OECD guise of recurrent education, became so identified with the TAFE sector that by 1977 a Chair of the TAFE Commission could speak of a diversion of resources to other education sectors as a dilution of the concept (Coughlan, 1978). Interestingly, the concept was welcomed with almost equal warmth by industry bodies interested in training, who saw it as breaking down barriers such as age restrictions on apprentice training (CAI, 1978).

Although recurrent education arose in the expansive era of the Whitlam Government, it was if anything more firmly embraced by its Coalition successor. The Fraser Administration used it to justify a string of equity and, indeed, social engineering policies in the TAFE sector, to the point that TAFE Directors warned of system overload (Ryan, 1999b; Goozee, 1995).

All this came to a sudden end in 1987 when TAFE was removed from the overview of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission and placed in a new economically oriented Ministry of Education, Employment and Training, with Hon J. S. Dawkins as Minister. Even before assuming the Ministry, Dawkins had written the preface to a major report on industry training in terms whose emphasis on the needs of the labour market rather than the needs of the individual and the coining of the term ‘skills formation’ to replace TAFE and training, gave a

strong indication of the new directions which were to be taken in applying economic rationalism to vocational education and training (Goozee, 1995, p107).

On becoming Minister, Dawkins used resource agreements with the States to redirect funding from general and equity based education to vocational training and utilised a series of reports by federal agencies to replace educational goals in vocational education with a much more restricted notion of competency levels linked to industrial awards (Ryan and Hardcastle, 1996).

A further Commonwealth goal, originally set out in an Employment Department submission in 1985, was also acted on:

that vocational education was not a community service but a training market, which like all markets, would work more efficiently with greater competition (Ryan and Hardcastle, 1996, p241).

In short, within a few years the philosophy of lifelong education which had underpinned Australian VET since 1974 was totally eliminated and replaced by a managerialist agenda which proclaimed its predecessor doctrine 'right for its times' but now as outdated as any other fashion from the 1970s. As the then Prime Minister argued:

...we are moving beyond the Kangan report. The report was, of course, a product of its times. It was written in the context of a relatively stable manufacturing sector, sheltered behind a series of tariff walls and other sectoral support measures...All that has changed (Keating, 1994).

GLOBALISATION AND THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT OF WORK

The new philosophy of vocational education and training, which has enjoyed bipartisan political support since 1987, undoubtedly has an internally clear and coherent rationale, which its advocates believe suited to the needs of the contemporary economy. However, as it is based on an explicit rejection of the principles of lifelong education in its 1960s and 1970s formulation, it is far from clear that it can be adapted to fit the 1990s growing interest in lifelong learning.

On the other hand, it must be accepted that lifelong learning has itself evolved considerably from its predecessors, while the world of work has equally changed in dramatic and largely unanticipated directions.

The new model of lifelong learning

A growing awareness of the consequences of globalisation lies behind the change from lifelong or recurrent education to lifelong learning. Lifelong learning differs from the earlier ideas because of changes wrought by the forces of globalisation, new technology and modern forms of the organisation of work. (Delors, 1996, 51).

The OECD education ministers, at a 1996 meeting chaired by the then Australian Minister (Hon Simon Crean), placed globalisation at the forefront of the factors impacting on education since their previous meeting in 1990. Noting that globalisation is by no means a new phenomenon, the ministers never the less remarked how,

the concept has been broadened to encompass not only movements of goods and services, but also of investment, people and ideas across national and regional frontiers. Since the 1970s, three closely related phenomena have played a central role in facilitating and spurring a new wave of globalisation: market deregulation, the advent

and spread of new information technologies based on microelectronics, and the globalisation of financial markets (OECD, 1996a, 29).

UNESCO, in the Delors report, based its concept of lifelong learning on four pillars:

- Learning to Be
- Learning to Know
- Learning to Do
- Learning to Live Together (Delors, 1996)

The OECD saw lifelong learning as based on three fundamental objectives:

- Personal development,
- Social cohesion,
- Economic growth. (OECD, 1996a)

It argued that none of these can be taken in isolation. Lifelong learning must contribute to an array of aims rather than to a single goal.

In setting out their view, the OECD contrasted lifelong learning with its earlier formulation, recurrent education.

- The earlier model implied episodes of education between episodes of work or other activity. Now education is seen as continuous and embedded in the work experience.
- The last 20 years have seen a retreat of government from full support of education and alternative financing models have to be developed.
- Very high school retention rates and tertiary participation rates have now been achieved, changing the focus to intersectoral flows and equitable participation.
- Social demand is being replaced by individual demand (OECD, 1996a).

It is reasonable, then, to expect the policy settings for lifelong learning to differ from those applied to lifelong or recurrent education. Moreover, the world in which policy operates has changes dramatically over the last two decades.

CHANGING WORK, CHANGING SOCIETY

Most commentators agree with the OECD ministers that globalisation is the primary driver of international initiatives in lifelong learning. Globalisation is associated with rapid technological change, especially in information technologies, the transition from an industrial and service economy to a knowledge based economy, new ways of organising work and new attitudes to leisure and work (GLS, 1999; Cresson, 1999).

The new economy and the new workforce

In unpacking the components of globalisation, which call for lifelong learning as a response, commentators divide between optimistic and pessimistic scenarios.

Optimists note that knowledge is becoming the key factor in economic success and that in the new economy a workforce capable of rapid learning and innovation is critical. In the new economy, successful enterprises are those which commit to becoming knowledge organisations, in which customers, employees and managers constitute learning networks. Enterprises aim to become high performance workplaces and personal mastery is the goal of individual workers (GLS 1999; OECD 1996b). The skills workers need are not merely technical, but increasingly generic skills of communication, working together, analysis and problem solving (Robinson, 1999).

The pessimistic view argues that, while there is some evidence of the emergence of knowledge organisations (Harris & Volet, 1997), what has been more commonly found in Australia is an undervaluing of intellectual capital (Hopkins, 1998). Maglen and Shah concluded that the impact of globalisation, rapid technological change and economic restructuring on Australia has been more negative than positive (Robinson, 1999).

The pessimistic scenario is backed by evidence on changes to the nature and structure of the Australian workforce. While persistently high levels of unemployment have been reduced in recent years, only a bare majority of Australian workers enjoy traditional employment conditions of full-time, continuing tenure work with a single employer. Instead, the following apply:

- Underemployment and marginal workforce attachment are prevalent (Waterhouse et al, 1999) while those in employment experience work intensification (ACIRRT, 1999).
- Non-standard forms of workforce organisation- part-time, casual, outsourced, the use of labour hire companies- are increasingly common (ACIRRT, 1999; Burke, 1998; Robinson, 1999).
- New ways of organising work, separation into core and periphery employees (Waterhouse et al, 1997) and the emergence of the disposable workforce (Drago, 1999), are increasing.

Many of these characteristics of the new workforce are associated with lesser availability of employer supported training (Van Den Huebel & Wooden, 1999), while workplace training opportunities go most frequently to those with prior educational benefits (Fryer, 1997; Cresson, 1996; Watson, 1999b).

None of these developments reduces the need for lifelong learning. A nation's primary assets in a global economy are the skills and insights of its citizens (Reich, 1991). In some cases these are fostered by learning organisations committed to the mutual development of the organisation and its people (Senge, 1990). Alternatively, the growth of outsourcing, internal tendering, casualisation and short-term contracts shift responsibility for skill formation and maintenance from employers to individuals (Robinson, 1999).

Passing much of the risk, cost and responsibility of learning to individual workers means that the potential for lifelong learning to develop in an equitable, socially inclusive and personally satisfying manner is significantly reduced.

Demography and lifelong learning

Most advanced economies are experiencing an aging of their populations and workforces.

In Australia, the number of 15-24 year olds is expected to remain constant in the next two decades despite population growth of 20 per cent, while the number in the 45-64 age group will grow by over 40 per cent (Robinson, 1999). This significant population shift means that policy must place as much attention on the learning needs of adults as of young people. With a constraint on immigration intakes, much of the source of new skills must come from the existing workforce. At the same time, a larger cohort of older citizens will make their own demands on the education and training system.

Australian education systems have not been well geared to the vocational and other learning needs of older people. A re-orientation of education and training, to shorter modules and different forms of student services, is required (Smith, A 1999). Funding and policy discrimination against the adult community education sector also need reform if lifelong learning is to have meaning for this large and growing segment of society (Watson, 1999b).

WHAT WOULD A LIFELONG LEARNING FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

Lifelong learning is the lifeblood of the knowledge economy. The evidence suggests that the new, knowledge economy is already a reality, although it overlaps with the residual, old economy.

- Trends in the major OECD economies show that knowledge based production already accounts for more than half of national product, that high technology industries are growing faster than manufacturing generally and that knowledge intensive service sectors are growing faster still (OECD, 1996b).
- The knowledge economy's emphasis on the diffusion and use of knowledge creates a 'network society' in which the social and economic success of individuals and firms depends on developing relationships, which promote learning (OECD, 1996b).
- The learning society is one which builds on these networks to develop an interactive, information-rich society in which learning is widely diffused, with a culture that values learning throughout life for all citizens (Kearns, 1999).
- Most European countries have favoured active public intervention rather than market forces alone to mould learning networks into desired channels, for example the SOCRATES and LEONARDO programs of the European Commission and the local learning consortia of Italy and the Netherlands (Papadopoulos, 1999).

Education and training in the knowledge economy needs both technical and 'soft' skills, but it is important that it be geared less to specific vocational competencies and more to the development of key or generic competencies transferable to a wide range of tasks (Moy, 1999).

Principles of lifelong learning

The concept of lifelong learning cannot be reduced to a single set of precepts, although most commentators would accept the core principles of UNESCO and OECD (Delors, 1996; OECD, 1996a). These have been built on to establish a substantial international consensus, represented by major documents published by public authorities in Britain, Japan, Finland, the Netherlands, the Council of Europe and the European Union (Papadopoulos, 1999; Cresson, 1996).

Thus, while there is no single model of lifelong learning equally applicable to all national and cultural contexts, there is a consensus on key strategies. These include:

- putting the individual learner and stressing quality and flexibility in learning within a coherent strategy embracing all forms of education (OECD, 1996a; Fryer, 1997);
- promoting the widest possible participation in education and training for all age groups, with emphasis on foundation learning and effective transitions (OECD, 1996a);
- the development of social partnerships and learning networks (Papadopoulos, 1999), including those which bring education and business closer (Cresson, 1996) while not restricting education to meeting the needs of business (OECD 1996a); and
- priority to those most in need with special attention to adult learning, especially for literacy difficulties (OECD, 1996a).

Lifelong learning requires policies which:

- do not discriminate among sectors or on perceived vocational/non-vocational distinctions (SEETRC, 1997);

- build appropriate pathways not only from school to work and through the education sectors but for all needs of adult learners (Robinson, 1999); and
- minimise artificial barriers erected by accreditation rules, funding regimes and intergovernmental relations (West, 1998; NBEET, 1995).

Partnerships and networks are part of the innovation cycle in the knowledge economy. Lifelong learning will often be expressed through the creation of learning organisations, the development of professional, geographic and virtual learning communities, and even through the creation of learning cities (these ideas are explored extensively in Kearns, 1999).

For Australia there is a pressing need to rediscover the social, citizenship and equity dimensions of lifelong learning which are crucial to most overseas policy development (OECD, 1996a and 1998; Papdopoulos, 1999). Australian economic policy makers have conceded that competition policy and associated reforms incur costs in terms of social and regional impacts (Productivity Commission, 1999). A similar recognition of the risks and disadvantages of a wholly instrumental approach to education and training is overdue.

HOW FAR HAVE WE COME?

Australia has made significant progress in expanding participation in various forms of education and training.

- In the last decade, there has been enormous growth in higher education; on present participation patterns, 45 per cent of the population will undertake higher education at some stage in their lives
- Participation has grown most rapidly in the 20-24 age cohort; female enrolments now exceed male, although there is great gender segmentation by educational field.
- 16 per cent of the 20-24 cohort participates in higher education, while 17 per cent participates in VET; the latter has grown more slowly, but rates for females, indigenous people and those of non English speaking background have converged on male participation (Ball, 1999; Marginson, 1999)
- 20 per cent of the population aged over 15 years is enrolled in a formal course of training each year and 60 per cent of employers provide some kind of training for their employees each year (Robinson, 1999).

Looking only at the apprenticeship system, important changes have been achieved in policy which recurrent education in the 1970s challenged without significant success.

- Age restrictions have been decisively overcome.
- There has been some growth in part-time and school based apprenticeships.
- The occupational base covered by 'new' apprenticeships has significantly widened.
- There has been a major increase in female participation: although it still lags the proportion of females in the workforce, this is partly countered by the very much greater female than male participation in higher education.
- There has been a growth in indigenous and non-English speaking background apprentices.
- There has been an improving position for people with disabilities (NCVER, 2001).

Watson concluded from such indicators that "Australia appears well on the way to becoming a learning society" (1999a, p1).

However, there are indicators, which suggest Australia remains far from a learning society.

- Australia has recently experienced an actual decline in total participation in education and training (Watson, 1999a).
- Year 12 retention rates have been declining since 1992; Australia is the only OECD country to experience this (Ainley & McKenzie, 1998).
- Only 53 per cent of Australians in the 25-64 age band have completed Year 12, ranking Australia at 17 out of 25 OECD countries, and 19th for 25-34 year olds (McKenzie, 1998).
- There is now no prospect of achieving the Finn participation targets for 19 year olds and more than a quarter of 20-24 year olds (32 per cent of females) are neither in full-time employment nor studying for a recognised qualification (Ball, 1999).
- Australia is at best a mid-level performer in adult literacy: 45 per cent of adults will experience literacy difficulties at work and in community life (McKenzie, 1999).

Only limited progress has been made in the construction of intersectoral bridges and pathways.

- Although two thirds of VET students in the 20-24 age group have completed Year 12), only one in ten commencing university students does so from a background in VET.
- About 5 per cent of VET enrolments are of students with a completed higher education qualification, with a similar proportion having partially completed university courses.
- After decades of effort, transfers between universities and VET remain marginal to each sector (Ball, 1999; Marginson, 1999).
- There remain systemic difficulties in securing broad based credit transfer from VET to universities and the use of competency based criteria undermines university-VET articulation (NBEET, 1995).
- Adult and community education continues to be a vital part of learning in Australia, catering to around one million people each year, but artificial distinctions between vocational and non-vocational distort public policy on ACE (SEETRC, 1997).
- Although there has been recent growth in vocational education programs in schools, too much emphasis has been placed on relabelling to inflate participation numbers (Malley, 1999); VET in schools remains marginalised and is not well served by accreditation arrangements (Ryan, 1997).

The hope that a training, or even more, a learning culture is emerging in Australian enterprises has some support.

- Over 80 per cent of employees receive some kind of training from their employers, although the vast majority is unstructured, on-the-job training (Robinson, 1999).
- A study of 17 Australian companies identified common characteristics in which purposeful learning contributes to individual, team and organisational development (Harris & Volet, 1997).

Against this are substantial reasons for believing that a learning culture remains far from reality.

- Only 18 per cent of Australian companies provide structured training for their employees (Peoples, 1998).
- Employer expenditure on structured training decreased on all measures between 1993 and 1996 (Burke, 1998).
- Learning organisations remain far from common and the absence of a training, let alone a learning culture, in small enterprises is well documented (Kearns, 1999; Field, 1997).
- Australian businesses characteristically undervalue intellectual capital (Hopkins, 1998).

POLICY BARRIERS TO LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE VET SECTOR

Many VET policy stances have created outright barriers to the implementation of lifelong learning. Often this derives from an unbalanced, economic view of VET with an emphasis on short-term industry relevance, rather than the simultaneous pursuit of the array of personal, social and economic objectives advocated by the OECD (OECD, 1996a). For example, the emphasis on skill widening inherent in the New Apprenticeship system is to some degree at the expense of skill deepening. Traditional (Level III) trade and related apprentice numbers have largely recovered from their collapse of the early 1990s, but remain substantially below their peak in 1990 and are failing to grow at anything like the rate of lower level (I and II) training (NCVER, 2001).

Some commentators argue that there has been a decline in the quality of apprentice training, whether through the imposition of a mandated competencies regime or because of a lower ability recruitment pool (Smith, L, 1999). Diploma courses in VET have failed to grow at anything like their counterparts in higher education (Ball, 1999).

The division between general or academic and vocational education remains as wide as ever and pathways between higher education and VET remain poorly constructed because of a separate accreditation system in the VET sector, derived from industrial awards (Sweet, 1993), which acts as a barrier to mutual recognition (NBEET, 1995).

Adult community education remains neglected and, in so far as it is covered by VET policy and funding, the vocationalist orientation acts to distort the goals of ACE (SCEETRC, 1997).

Development of social partnerships, apart from engagement with employer bodies, has largely been ignored and key stakeholders, including regional communities, complain that they are excluded from the policy process (Billett and Hayes, 1998).

While the need to focus on individual learners is at the forefront of the international debate on lifelong learning, individual students are rarely consulted by VET policy makers (Golding & Volkoff, 1998). VET policy assumes an identity of interest between students and their current employers, despite the contrary picture revealed in TAFE and VET graduate destinations surveys (eg ANTA, 1998).

CONCLUSION: GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT LIFELONG LEARNING IN AUSTRALIAN VET

Despite the increasingly prevalent rhetoric, lifelong learning is not a firmly established goal of contemporary Australian VET policy. The theoretical base underlying a decade of VET reform is not easily compatible with principles of equitable lifelong learning (Gonzci, 1998).

This does not mean that the sector can simply revert to the policy framework of the TAFE 'golden age' of recurrent education in the 1970s. The challenge from technology and globalisation is sharper now. The rationale of western governments has changed, so that proposals for generous public funding and universal public provision in any education sector are unsustainable.

Even so, a strong case can be made that 1970s TAFE policy provided a firmer foundation for contemporary ideas of lifelong learning, as evident in international writing and practice, than does current VET policy. The task is to take what is valuable from the sector's previous experience and to apply it in terms compatible with present needs and realities.

A commitment to lifelong learning in VET would require policymakers to undertake a fundamental reappraisal of core components of present policy.

Four areas for reform are suggested.

1. Reshape VET policy to put the individual learner at the centre of education and training

The most striking characteristic of VET policy in Australia since the mid-1980s has been its indifference to the demands and needs of individual learners. Public policy has defined the client of VET as 'industry' or 'enterprises'. VET policy making has adopted a model in which learning is assumed to take place as a result of a training need agreed between an enterprise and an employee; students are often referred to as 'employees', as if this were the usual mode of VET learning.

This approach is contradicted by all available evidence. It is clear from graduate destination studies (ANTA, 1998) and from research on motivation for training (ANTA, 1999) that the official model applies only to a small minority of VET students. The vast majority of students are either school leavers seeking to gain a first job, or adults hoping to re-enter the employed workforce or to gain work with a different employer. Even in cases of planned enterprise training, the individual is most commonly the source of the decision to train (Smith & Hayton, 1999) and personal interest and self-fulfillment rank highly as motivators (Golding & Volkoff, 1998; ANTA 1999).

Although ANTA's recent marketing studies have reinforced the importance of a focus on individual learners, the response of the ANTA Ministerial Council has been once more to place marketing to industry ahead of marketing to the community (ANTA, 2000).

2. Recognise the diversity of stakeholders in VET and the need to build networks and partnerships

The greatest strength of a decade of VET reform has been an increased focus on relations between training providers and employers. The corresponding weakness has been a refusal to contemplate a wider range of stakeholders, especially the notion of learning communities. There is a strong feeling within Australia's regions that both individuals and communities have been the overlooked parties in VET (Billett & Hayes, 1998). The knowledge economy creates a network society where the ability to enter learning relationships is crucial for individuals and firms (OECD, 1996b). Most European governments have favoured active public intervention to mould learning networks (Papadopolous, 1999). Australian VET needs to recognise the social dimension of learning and the range of stakeholders who influence learners.

3. Refocus competencies on the career needs of individual learners, not on the past practices of industry.

Given the increasing transfer of responsibility for lifelong learning from governments and industry to individuals, it becomes less important to identify specific vocational competencies in existing industries. What is needed now is to ensure that all post-compulsory education becomes highly developed at imparting the generic skills that are increasingly important throughout the workforce, especially for new jobs emerging in the information age (Robinson, 1999). Frequently, these will be 'soft skills' identified in reports like *Enterprising Nation*, still largely ignored by VET and universities (Sheldrake, 1997).

4. Value the expertise of educators

Transference of specific competencies to generic skills does not happen easily. Industry endorsement of competencies is not a substitute for educational expertise in planning systematic learning experiences. Education and training programs must change continuously as skill requirements change in order to meet the diverse learning styles of adult learners (Robinson, 1999). One-size-fits-all solutions such as the Training Packages imposed by ANTA as a condition for funding and accreditation have limited utility in a lifelong learning philosophy.

The development of meta-learning ('learning to learn') skills for a population with a wide range of prior learning experiences is a major educational challenge. The disdain for educational expertise implicit in much public policy in the VET sector is a major barrier to success in lifelong learning.

5. Construct more flexible adult learning pathways

Pathways between VET and university education remain poorly developed (Marginson, 1999). While universities need to approach the issue of articulation more constructively, barriers constructed within VET should also be removed. Rigid systems of competency based curriculum impede intersectoral transfer (NBEET, 1995). More generally, pathways need to be developed which recognise the wide variety of adult learners, together with accrediting and recording systems which allow a diversity of learning experiences to be matched, when required, with formal qualifications (Robinson, 1999).

6. Rethink the role of competition and the way VET is funded

The Commonwealth-State review of the ANTA Agreement in 1996 warned against seeing competition as an end rather than as a means towards responsiveness and efficiency (Taylor, 1996). Research indicates that some elements of the competitive agenda have led to a weakening of quality in both public and private providers (Smith, L, 1999; Schofield 2000a, b, c).

The appropriate role of a competitive training market needs to be balanced against the benefits of collaboration and the risks to quality. A clearer definition of the role of the public provider, recommended in the Taylor review (1996), remains to be undertaken. Similarly, the best means of providing low demand programs, the needs of regional and remote communities and a broad range of equity issues remain unresolved.

FUNDING, PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIES

The contemporary lifelong learning literature recognises that, in contrast to 1970s views which saw public funding as the only option, private benefits from education and training need to be matched by household and enterprise contributions to its cost (OECD, 1996a). The funding issues raised in the West Review require addressing (West, 1998) so that funding arrangements facilitate

rather than hinder mobility between sectors (Robinson, 1999). Funding discrimination against adult community education should be avoided (SEETRC, 1997).

Increased public funding is almost certainly required by a policy of lifelong learning, but additional claims on the public purse need to be realistic and focused on achieving equitable outcomes.

There is a strong public policy case for providing those who have benefited least from formal education with a route back to lifelong learning (OECD, 1998). OECD estimates that costs of extending lifelong learning to adults who have not completed secondary education will entail an annual expenditure of three per cent of GDP, on top of education's current five per cent share (McKenzie, 1999). To include even more disadvantaged adults, those at the lowest literacy levels, would mean a doubling of education's share of GDP.

Thus the implementation of even the early stages of a lifelong learning philosophy will require rigorous prioritisation. Policy makers will need to explore innovative funding mechanisms, balancing contributions from individuals, industry and government. There is a need to discard traditional debates in which universal public funding or the simple application of market forces are seen as the only choices.

Beyond the vitally important resource issues, policy makers need the nerve and imagination to admit where their existing course is faulty and to envision a new way. Some of the new strategy might look like elements of the policy abandoned in 1987, but other elements will be entirely new. What is needed is not a return to the policies of the golden age, any more than the present international consensus is simply a duplication of earlier models. The need is for new strategies as imaginative as those developed by pioneers like Kangan, Karmel, Bone and their contemporaries. The international community's experimentation with lifelong learning provides a wide menu of choices.

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