

The changing nature of work and the new politics of literacy: implications for VET in Australia

*Jenni Devereaux, Research Officer
Australian Education Union (SA Branch)*

Economic, political and social developments associated with the forces of globalisation have far-reaching implications for the nature and provision of social programs and public services, including Australia's vocational education and training policies and programs. Associated with these developments is a renewed Government focus on literacy as illustrated by David Kemp's 1997 statement that "at a time of rapid technological change and pervasive internationalisation, literacy skills contribute to the increased competitiveness and productivity that the national economy demands ...[The National Literacy Policy] aims to extend an active, critical, productive and engaging literacy in the complex and mixed modes in which literacy is embedded in Australia's rapidly changing, technological, cultural and economic circumstances." Within this discourse, literacy and employment are inextricably linked, with the suggestion that literacy, or lack of it, is a key determinant in workforce participation. The question of the relationship of work and the skills required by workers to the global economy thus becomes one of singular importance and contesting arguments are put about the affects of globalisation on the future of work. At one extreme is the argument that schools need to produce highly skilled, highly literate, flexible workers to take advantage of the sunrise industries that will form the next major workforce boom while at the other it is argued that because of globalisation much of the work in VET is training for jobs that don't exist and that the major growth areas for work will be in low paid unskilled jobs. This paper will critically develop developments around Australia's national literacy policy and changes to the nature of work within the context of the changing global economy. It will argue that to develop VET policies and practices that are based in the current realities of the global economy it is important that we don't lose sight of the fundamental question: "What is it that young people need to know and to be able to do in order to capably negotiate their way through the changing patterns of work, leisure and identify?"

Topic area: The changing nature of work - implications for VET policy and practice

Key words: Globalisation, literacy, workskills, employment, training; Australian economy; Australian politics

Contact details:

Australian Education Union (SA Branch)
163 Greenhill Road
PARKSIDE SA 5063

Ph: 08 8272 1399 Fax: 08 8373 1254

Email: jdevereaux@aeusa.asn.au