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University of  
New England

# **The times are a changin' - what does this mean for higher education adult educator programs?**

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# Introduction

- Supporting the learning of adults is undertaken by a broad ranging workforce that requires its own education and training
- In the past these educational and qualification requirements have been met through a mix of higher education and VET based courses and programs

# Introduction

- BUT Over recent years however, the higher education courses for adult educators have been declining,
- This has left the adult education workforce more primarily reliant on VET based training and qualifications, especially the Cert IV TAE.

# Introduction

- This is a significant issue for not just universities, but also the VET sector
- Several investigations over the last few years have linked this shift to issues of VET teacher quality (Smith et al 2014; and Wheelahan and Moodie, 2010).
- It is important that there is a clear understanding of the factors that have led to this decline, as well as factors that are leading to the continuation of other higher education programs.

# Background

The experience of UNE, a regional NSW university

- Long and strong history of delivering a number of adult education programs
- 2014 – 2015 decline culminating in decision to cut 2 of the 3 final programs still operating, due partly to low enrolments
- One single undergraduate qualification remaining

# Background

- This experience coincided with anecdotal stories from other universities, such as UTS and University of SA
- According to Smith (2014) as of 2014 there were approximately 1700 students enrolled in university based adult educator programs across 12 universities

# Background

This leaves the question:

- What is the future for adult educator programs in Australian universities?

And related to that, especially for today –

- What impacts might this have on the teaching of VET in Australia?

# The study

## Multi-phased study

- **Initial Scoping Study May 2015:** internet search of 13 Australian universities – Which universities were offering adult educator programs (including adult literacy and numeracy and TESOL)?
- 9 out the 13 universities were offering at least 1 adult educator course for 2016 (ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate courses).



# Phase 1 (2015 -2016)

**Goal 1:** Investigate the closure and continuation of adult educator programs in Australian universities.

**Data Collection:** Structured interviews with 6 experienced academics from 8 different universities (some had worked for more than one university; most involved for more than 20 years).

**Key questions included:** the closure and/or continuity of adult education programs that they have been involved with; perceptions of change with the wider field of adult education/learning; and estimates of where the field may be headed.

# Phase 1 (2015 -2016)

**Goal 2:** Interview related stakeholders e.g. employers of adult educators, relevant unions, peak bodies etc. to identify needs of adult educators and their employing organisations and capture further perspectives on issues in the wider adult learning field

Only 1 stakeholder interviewed due to time and resource constraints

# Phase 2

- Goal: identify the perceived educational and qualifications needs of adult educators in Australia
- Surveys (and tapping into existing data) of recent adult education program graduates, as well as current and potential future students

# Findings

- *Causal factors for closure of courses*
- *Commonalities for continuity*
- *Impacts of Course Loss*
- *Changes in the wider field*

# *Causal factors for closure of courses*

- Changing university management paradigms
- Cuts in government spending on community and social services and public institutions such as TAFE
- Drop in minimum qualifications for VET teachers from university based to the vocational certificate IV level qualification

# *Commonalities for continuity*

- Strong focus on teaching vocational and workplace teachers/trainers, including TAFE teachers, police and defence
- Shift away from specific community based adult education stream
- Rebranding/ renaming of programs with stronger vocational and professional terminology.
- Developing and maintaining strong relationships with employers such as TAFE institutes.

# *Impacts of course loss*

## Loss of Adult Education specialist Academics within universities:

- Loss of specialised teaching knowledge AND
- Loss of research into adult education field, including the VET and Adult Literacy and Numeracy sectors
- Growing concern of the quality of teachers in VET (e.g. see Wheelahan & Moodie, 2010; current research by Smith et al 2014)

# *Changes in the wider field*

- Adult education now more accepted within government and industry and utilised quite widely by a broad range of organisations.

## *Informant 6*

*...and so a lot of what we offered as Adult Education or Lifelong Learning or Organizational Learning was actually embraced and adopted by corporations running their own programs or business schools and universities.*

*... and so adult education went from being “please, please recognize us” to, you know, we'll actually take you over or we will offer it our own way.*



# *Possibilities for the future?*

Future of H.E based programs connected to the future of TAFE and VET sector

Some possible opportunities:

- Calls for higher level qualifications for ongoing VET Teacher development (e.g. Wheelahan and Moodie, 2010)
- VET delivery of degree level qualifications

# *Possibilities for the future?*

Some possible challenges:

- Role TAFEs will play within the wider and extremely competitive VET field
- How well TAFEs are funded (and by whom); and
- The structure of TAFEs in different jurisdictions

# *Possibilities for the future?*

## Key Issues:

- The quality of higher education engagement with the wider adult learning and VET field.
  - will there be any one left within universities who are interested in and experienced with adult education to keep researching the field and deliver adult educator programs?

# Significance?

- H.E. adult educator programs need the VET sector

AND

- VET sector needs H.E. adult educator programs

BUT the research also suggests that there is a need for exploration of a wider adult learning diaspora

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