LIFELONG LEARNING:
A NATIONAL POLICY RESEARCH NETWORK ON POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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Introduction

The goal of lifelong learning for all poses a policy challenge to governments. To achieve this goal, governments must encourage all individuals to participate in education and training throughout their working lives and ensure that the framework for education and training provision is conducive to lifelong learning. As lifelong learning involves increased participation in all types of education, structural divisions between schools, TAFEs, universities and community education providers can be barriers to ongoing participation. Governments need to develop cross-sectoral policies for education and training to help reduce unnecessary divisions between the sectors. To promote a cross-sectoral perspective on education and training, a national network has been established to undertake collaborative, cross-sectoral policy research.

Lifelong learning and government policy

> Lifelong learning means the continuous development of the skills, knowledge and understanding that are essential for employability and fulfilment.

> Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1998) *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain.* p. 11.

> There is little doubt that the nations which will succeed in the 21st Century will be 'knowledge societies' – societies rich in human capital, effective in their capacity to utilise and deploy their human resources productively and successful in the creation and commercialisation of new knowledge. In such a world there will need to be greater opportunities than ever before for lifelong learning – for preparation not just for the first job but for succeeding jobs.

> Kemp 1999, *Preparing Youth for the 21st Century: the policy lessons from the past two decades,* Washington D.C. 23-24 February 1999.

The Ministerial Council of the Australian National Training Authority also supports the promotion of lifelong learning:

> Changes in the markets for Australian products and services, industry restructuring and technological change have all contributed to a growing acknowledgment that people need to upgrade and update their skills throughout their working lives. (Australian National Training Authority 1998)

While business enterprises will need to play a significant role in creating a learning society, governments must also develop policies to promote lifelong learning. There are two policy dimensions of lifelong learning that should be of interest to governments. The first is to ensure that all individuals have the capacity to undertake further education and training. The second is to ensure that the framework of education and training provision offers individuals access to wide range of educational experiences throughout their lives.

A lifelong learner is a person who takes responsibility for their own learning and who is prepared to invest "time, money and effort" in education or training on a continuous basis (West 1998, 43). However, some people are ill-equipped to embrace education and training on a continuous basis (Barnett 1994, Lamb 1998, McClelland at al 1997, Marginson 1997). For example, those engaged in work are more likely to participate in education and training than those who are unemployed. Whereas 80 per cent of Australian wage and salary earners are involved in training, only 30 per cent of people who are not in work are involved in training in the same twelve-month period. Low levels of participation in education and training are generally more likely to be associated with unemployment.

More than two thirds of Australia's unemployed people have not completed Year 12 (ABS Cat. No. 6278.0). Governments therefore have a role in encouraging all individuals to develop the capacity for lifelong learning, particularly those who are not able to access training through the world of work.

As governments are responsible for financing and managing a large part of educational provision in Australia, they need to ensure that the policy framework for education and training facilitates lifelong participation. This means that people should be able to access education and training at any stage of their lives and be able to move between the sectors with maximum efficiency in terms of their learning. For example, students with a diploma in engineering from a TAFE institute should be able to progress to a degree without undertaking the full content of a university course. This would involve gaining admission to a university and receiving significant credit transfer for study already completed at TAFE.

In recent years, Australian governments have tried to remove some of the sectoral barriers to participation in education and training by promoting common standards and improving mechanisms for credit transfer between the sectors. The Australian Standards Framework (ASF), developed in the 1990s as a result of Industry Award Restructuring identified a set of eight levels of competence ranging from entry-level skills to advanced university research. The intent was to link these levels to pay rates. The ASF was never fully realised and it was later replaced by Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The AQF describes the key features and characteristics of qualifications across the secondary school -VET higher education continuum and links them to standards of performance expected of a person in the workplace (Kennedy 1997b). Credit Transfer mechanisms between VET and university have come under closer scrutiny and many more students now receive recognition in higher education courses for prior learning in TAFE. The establishment of several multi-sectoral institutions is facilitating the creation of "seamless pathways" between the sectors within those institutions (Kulevski and Frith 1998).

Nevertheless, a recent Parliamentary Committee concluded that it was still difficult for TAFE graduates to gain places in older, established universities, and that university practices in regard to credit transfer often discouraged rather than encouraged students to move between the sectors (Nelson 1998). Furthermore, in a competitive market where universities and TAFEs offer common awards, sectoral differences can be exploited for the purposes of gaining market share (Hill 1999). As Kulevski and Frith conclude, "although progress has been made, the VET/higher education interface is still struggling at the margins. This has been made worse by the different funding, regulatory and administrative arrangements for the two sectors" (Kulevski and Frith, 1998, 2-3).

Under the Australian Qualifications Framework, it is possible for schools, TAFEs, universities and Adult and Community Education (ACE) providers to offer courses that are also offered in other sectors. However, the different funding arrangements for each sector work against the growth of cross-sectoral provision. For example, schools are not funded at the level necessary to provide extensive vocational educational opportunities to students in Years 11 and 12. Australia's adult and community education sector is funded by many levels of government, a range of non-government organisations as well as private sources. Although it is possible for all institutions to offer some courses from other sectors, the extent of cross-sectoral provision is limited. Only 11 per cent of students at secondary school take TAFE-accredited subjects (ABS Cat. No. 6268.0). Higher Education awards account for 12 per cent of TAFE enrolments, and TAFE-level enrolments account for only 2 per cent of Higher Education provision (Nelson 1998).

Nevertheless, the changing nature of student demand is a continuing pressure for reform to the policy framework for education and training. Patterns of participation in education and training have changed markedly in recent years. There is now greater movement of students between the sectors, including from higher education to VET courses (Golding 1998). Increasing numbers of young people now follow non-linear education to work pathways that involve non-traditional, concurrent and/or sequential combinations of education and work (Dwyer and Wyn 1998, Nelson 1998). The demand for VET courses in schools continues to grow, and customised courses for workers to develop specific skills are in greater demand within TAFE. The majority of students in post-compulsory education and training are combining study with some form of employment, increasing the demand for flexibility in education and training provision (ABS Cat. No. 6268.0 1998).

Although there is a strong imperative for education policy to be more cross-sectoral, it is difficult for governments to move beyond the sectoral perspective. Since the commencement of government involvement in education and training over a hundred years ago, education provision has been organised on a strict sectoral basis, with different Departments responsible for the administration of schools, vocational training institutions and universities. The involvement of the Federal government in selected areas of education provision adds a further complication to the funding arrangements. Universities – as autonomous institutions – are now almost entirely a Commonwealth funding

responsibility. Both State and Federal governments provide funding for vocational education and training which is administered through the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). Funding for schools is largely a State government responsibility, except for private schools that receive the bulk of their funding from the Federal government. The persistence of jurisdictional differences and the complexity of funding arrangements make it very difficult to develop common policies on issues such as course fees, access and equity, standards and qualifications across the education and training sectors. Recent Commonwealth reviews of education and training – while acknowledging the importance of cross-sectoral issues and lifelong learning – have nevertheless been confined to reviewing the needs of one sector (eg. West 1998, Nelson 1998).

The role of policy research

The Australian research community's capacity to examine cross-sectoral issues in education and training is limited by the same divisions that constrain cross-sectoral policy development in government. The sectoral division of responsibilities between government agencies is often duplicated in the funding of research activity. The sectoral interests of funding agencies influence the research interests of academics so that most education researchers specialise in one sector. Governments' capacity to develop cross-sectoral policies for education and training is hampered by lack of research on cross-sectoral issues, such as the changing nature of student participation in all the sectors (Lifelong Learning Network 1998).

In July 1998, the University of Canberra invited a group of education and training researchers with varying interests, to discuss the establishment of a cross-sectoral policy research network on post-compulsory education and training. It was suggested that the Network would fill the gap in policy research on cross-sectoral issues covering schools, vocational education, higher education and the adult and community education providers. The initiative was supported by representatives of DETYA, ANTA, and NCVER each of whom recognised the need for policy research to become cross-sectoral in focus. It was widely acknowledged that both policy makers and researchers were struggling to keep up with the changes in patterns of participation in education and training. There was a need for a new agency to sponsor cross-sectoral research that would complement existing research in the various sectors. Given the tendency of researchers to focus on one sector, it was important for the Network to take a collaborative approach to produce work that was relevant to education and training policy across the sectors.

The impact of policy research on government decision-making is highly contested – not least because of the difficulty in demonstrating direct links between research findings and the development of government policy (Wiltshire 1993). At best, one can argue that research has an indirect impact on government policy. Factors such as political mandates, social pressures, and interest groups also influence policy development (Bush 1976, Premfors 1979, Kirst at al 1981).

The impact of policy research upon government decision-making appears to be greater when government agencies are closely involved in sponsoring and supervising the projects, and where the researchers introduce, define and formulate policy problems (van de Vall and Bolas 1979). In other words, policy research that is commissioned by government is more likely to have an impact on government policy. When governments sponsor policy research, they seek answers to specific problems within a limited time. Policy researchers in Australia generally retain the right to publish and disseminate their research findings without government interference (Robinson 1999, 8). However, the researcher's freedom over the objectives of the research may be restricted by the sponsoring agency's conception of the dimensions of a particular problem. It is therefore important for policy researchers to engage sponsors in a dialogue about the objectives and scope of their research. The Lifelong Learning Network has developed a process that facilitates a dialogue between researchers and policymakers at the earliest possible stage of its research projects.

Collaborative cross-sectoral policy research

The Lifelong Learning Network's major research activity is to investigate the changing nature of participation in post-compulsory education and training. In consultation with DETYA and NCVER, the Network has identified a broad set of research issues as a basis for developing its research program. Current research priorities are patterns of non-linear participation in education and training; the outputs and outcomes of each sector; access and equity issues; data on transitional pathways; and effective institutional structures. On 28 January 1999, the Network sent a list of these issues to its members inviting them to contribute to the development of briefs for each research project. The

project briefs developed by the Network bring together the ideas of the sponsoring agency and the responses of Network participants.

The project briefs identify the scope and methodology of the research, an agreed budget, and the proposed members of the research team. The members of the research teams are selected on the basis of their relevant experience and the quality of their submissions to the project briefs. There are no sectoral barriers to participation in the Network's research projects. Researchers in VET, schools, universities and the adult community education sector are encouraged to participate in the collaborative research projects. This approach is consistent with the Nelson Committee's call for increased collaboration and research partnerships between TAFE and the university sector (Nelson 1998, Recs 4.3-4.5). The Research Advisory Committee of the Network's Governing Board oversees the selection of research teams. Professor Kerry Kennedy, from the University of Canberra, is chair of the Research Advisory Committee and its members are drawn from the funding bodies, presently ANTA, DETYA and NCVER. Once the Project Briefs have been approved by the sponsoring agencies, the collaborative policy research projects commence.

Although this process of developing project briefs takes time, it has advantages over conventional approaches. It gives the funding agencies access to a wide range of academic expertise at an early stage of the project's development. As most researchers tend to work within particular sectors, it enables us to bring together specialists in schools, VET, ACE or Higher Education on cross-sectoral research projects. By engaging researchers in the design of the project briefs, the Network promotes dialogue between researchers and funding agencies on the scope and direction of the policy research.

The Lifelong Learning Network

Hosted by the University of Canberra's Faculty of Education, the Lifelong Learning Network was established to undertake policy research network on post-compulsory education and training in January 1999. It is supported by an establishment grant from the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and project funding from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and the Commonwealth Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs. The project funding will be distributed to education researchers across Australia who participate in the Network's collaborative research projects on cross-sectoral policy issues.

The Network is governed by a Board of academics and government policy makers, chaired by Professor Don Aitkin, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra. Professor Frank Hambly has been appointed Executive Director, Louise Watson is its Research Scholar, and Adela Clayton is the Network's Manager.

With a membership of over one hundred and fifty researchers and research institutions, the Network provides services to researchers interested in cross-sectoral policy issues. Through its web-site, the Network will manage a database of researchers in education and training. Members also participate in an electronic discussion list through which they can share ideas and information.

In December 1998, the Network hosted a policy workshop on post-compulsory education and training in Canberra that brought together education researchers and policy makers from Commonwealth and State agencies, including ANTA. The Workshop provided a forum for discussing issues such as participation, client choice, institutional structures and the changing social and economic environment. The Network is convening a national policy conference on post-compulsory education and training in Canberra on 27 August 1999.

Summary

Lifelong learning is a policy priority for education and training in many countries because of its importance to national economic growth and development. While Australia has a mass education system with relatively high levels of participation, many policy issues need to be addressed before we become a learning society. Traditional divisions between the education and training sectors remain a barrier to active educational participation because they restrict the movement of students through our education and training systems. Governments need to develop education policies on a cross-sectoral basis if they are to remove some of the barriers to lifelong participation in education and training and create a framework for education and training provision that is conducive to lifelong learning. Policy research on cross-sectoral issues can assist governments to develop options for reform. The Lifelong

Learning Network was established to promote collaborative cross-sectoral policy research on education and training in Australia.

The Lifelong Learning Network is located at the University of Canberra, 170 Haydon Drive, Canberra ACT 2601. Membership is open to any researcher or policy officer who is interested in post-compulsory education and training. For more information, contact the Network by telephone on 02 6201 5357 or by email to: louisew@education.canberra.edu.au

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