

Executive summary

Adult learning

and Australia's ageing population

A Policy Briefing Paper

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national policy leadership is needed to give coherence to efforts to promote learning by older people



The ageing of the Australian population has become an important policy focus for the Federal Government. It has outlined measures to address the impacts of demographic change with the objective of retaining older people in the workforce.

As the Federal Government's discussion paper *Adult Learning in Australia* made clear, this has thrown the spotlight on the learning of older adults, particularly for those who have missed out on learning earlier in life.

This will mean rethinking our attitudes to the learning of older people and our preoccupation with formal education and training for youth, not to speak of a wholesale shift in historical attitudes to work and leisure in later life.

Adult learning Australia (ALA) has commissioned this policy briefing paper to consider what is needed to realise the vision of older Australians engaging more fully in learning and work. In summary, we conclude–

- First, that *national policy leadership* is needed to give coherence to efforts to promote learning by older people. Any framework needs to be cross-sectoral and holistic and concentrate on learners and contexts rather than institutions and sectors. It will need to address the very uneven commitment by the States and Territories to existing goals to promote lifelong learning.
- Second, *an ecological perspective on adult learning* is needed, emphasising strategies to facilitate learning in workplaces and communities. This will require thinking beyond the institutional square to embrace concepts of 'workforce development' and 'skill eco-systems'.
- Third, adult learning needs to be *understood in relation to broad social policy*. We need to appreciate how different groups perceive the risks and benefits of participation in learning in later life, and consider how social policy can mitigate the 'riskiness' of life-course transitions.
- Fourth, *the 'learning community' is a key focus*. We endorse the Federal Government's emphasis on partnerships of educational providers, community agencies, local government and employers. We suggest that many adult and community education (ACE) organisations have the capability to lead community-based learning initiatives.

The need for national policy leadership was the major outcome of national consultations around the Federal Government's discussion paper *Adult Learning in Australia*. That paper emerged as part of the wider debate on Australia's ageing population. It rightly laid emphasis on mature age transitions, the 'learning community model', the role of employers in improving older workers' access to learning in the

workplace and the needs of rural and regional areas.

The primary policy response to Australia's ageing demographic is to retain older people in the workforce through measures such as better health and education. This brings into question the adequacy of support for the learning of older workers—the OECD has recommended that Australia should strengthen measures to assist low-skilled older workers by broadening the range of training possibilities.

Employers can manage the impact of the ageing workforce through a range of strategies to retain older staff and their expertise, especially where work is increasingly based on knowledge-creation. To retain valued workers, organisations need to consider how work can be organised to promote learning as part of work. However, high-skill workers in the 'knowledge-economy' have greater access to employer-provided training and informal workplace learning.

Low-skill and low-paid workers, those most at risk of redundancy, have had fewest opportunities to acquire new skills and develop a positive orientation to learning. Low-skilled older workers have less 'pay-off' in increased wages from gaining additional low-level qualifications especially where age discrimination acts as a barrier to employment. Hence, a national policy on adult learning needs to focus on those older people with fewer educational and occupational resources to support their participation in lifelong learning.

Broader social policy affects the incentives to older people's attitudes to participation in work and learning. Endorsing the emphasis of *Adult Learning in Australia* on complex life-course transitions, the paper recommends European social risk management approaches to prevent or mitigate the perceived social risks of participating in learning and working later in life. Giving older workers greater access to learning opportunities in the workplace means finding flexible and appropriate approaches, rather than 'more of the same' skills training.

Adult learning should be seen in a broad 'ecological' way that emphasises the contexts of learning as much as formal courses and qualifications. Consistent with this approach are new concepts such as 'workforce development' and 'skill eco-systems'. This strategic focus can embrace both workforce and community contexts, and draw on the services of educational providers in collaborative ways.

The concept of the 'learning community' is a key focus for a national policy that is consistent with an ecological and cross-sectoral approach. Many adult community education (ACE) organisations are well-placed to take a leading role in catalysing learning within communities, in partnership with TAFE institutes, business, government and other agencies. They have developed a good capability in working with older clientele.

We do not lack knowledge of the barriers older learners face or the measures that will assist their participation. We lack a framework for action that is nationally agreed and implemented with commitment.



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Key references

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We do not lack knowledge of the barriers older learners face or the measures that will assist their participation. We lack a framework for action that is nationally agreed and resourced.



Websites on ageing

Adult Learning Australia. A copy of the full paper may be found at www.ala.asn.au/#research

Council of the Ageing. Reference information on older people www.cota.org.au/referenc.htm#keytext

Ageing research online. Comprehensive public policy site. www.aro.gov.au

ARC/NHMRC Research Network on Ageing Well www.ageingwell.edu.au

Treasury: Australia's Demographic Challenges www.demographics.treasury.gov.au/content

Australian Policy Online www.apo.org.au/

Skill eco-systems www.skillecosystem.net/about

Positive Ageing Foundation of Australia www.positiveageing.com.au