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Issues in Australian Adult and Social Education

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Social education is not a term which is used in Australia, and there are no laws comparable to those in Japan such as the Social Education Law of 1949 or the 1990 Law concerning the Development of Mechanisms and Measures for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning. The best approximation of 'social education' is adult education, and so I will begin with an outline of how this term has been used in Australia.

The term adult education was used in Australia for many years in basically the traditional British sense to mean non-vocational, non-credit educational activities, generally of the liberal arts variety, pursued by adults in their own time and of their own volition: the so-called 'great tradition' view of adult education. The main institutional vehicles for the provision of such adult education were seen as the university departments of adult education and voluntary associations like the Workers' Educational Association. Within the liberal tradition the outcome of education is its intrinsic value - more intellectually aware people, more tolerant and broadly cultured, and more capable of participating in the democratic process. However, in recent years, the preoccupations of the 'great tradition' have been largely displaced by efforts to promote the cause of education for adults more widely. There have been many reasons for this, but the two of the most prominent have been the recognition of the economic value of training adults to perform their jobs better and the potential of the

education of adults to increase life chances of disadvantaged groups in society. Increasingly, adult education is being seen as an appropriate vehicle for the achievement of a number of important governmental goals. Adult education can contribute to the improvement of the vocational skills of the workforce. It can offer a way back into the educational mainstream for some adults. It can contribute through the extension of access, to greater equity in the use of educational resources. It can promote greater social and political literacy. It can reach disadvantaged groups—the aged, the illiterate, the developmentally and physical disabled, Aboriginal, and immigrant adults—in a manner denied to more formal agencies of education. It is the sector of education most used by women. Thus the term adult education has come to be used more in the same sense as it is used by bodies like UNESCO and OECD, and it is seen as encompassing the broad goals of participatory democracy, equity and access, economic growth, community development, and social change. It includes trade union education, vocational education and training, human resource development, preparation for formal study, agricultural extension, Aboriginal education, adult basic education, public education, English for adult migrants, community education, as well as the non-formal, non-credit and 'liberal' education of adults.

And so today in Australia adult education is provided by many very different organisations: adult education centres; universities and colleges; government

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departments; private firms; professional associations and unions; community organisations promoting education on particular issues such as health, the environment, law, and so on; public education campaigns; and cultural institutions such as libraries, museums and art galleries. Although it is not unified as a formal system it has moved from its previously marginal position in at least two respects: firstly, the learning it provides is increasingly being recognised and accredited; and secondly, for the first time there is now a national policy on Adult and Community Education (ACE).

That part of adult education which most closely resembles 'social' education in Japan (i.e. community based out of school education for youths and adults) is provided by what is known as the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector. ACE is sometimes referred to as the fourth sector of education, alongside schools, universities and colleges. It is not possible to talk of ACE as a system, because the situation differs from state to state, but I will illustrate the typical nature of ACE by describing its provision in centres in the states of Victoria and New South Wales.

The Victorian Council of Adult Education (CAE) is arguably Australia's largest provider of adult education. Today it operates from the 'CAE Centre', a six storey complex in the heart of Melbourne's business district. It has a general staffing level of 120 people, employs more than 1000 sessional tutors, and enrolls some 56,000 participants (approx 75% female) in a broad spectrum of courses. These courses are mainly non accredited and in such areas as creative arts, humanities, book discussion groups, return to study, English as a second language, languages other than English, adult literacy and basic education, aboriginal programs, corporate and industry training, business and management programs, computer studies, and workplace basic education. The CAE also provides a range of services such as childcare, a library, an

employment service, and counseling.

In addition to the CAE, across the state of Victoria there are some 500 ACE centres recognised by the state's Adult, Community and Further Education Board, which was established under legislation enacted in 1991 to promote, plan, develop policies, coordinate, allocate resources, advise the Minister, and administer adult, community and further education. ACE centres are generally characterised by the fact that they are local and serve either a city or country neighbourhood. They are known by a variety of names such as Neighbourhood House, Living and Learning Centre, Continuing Education Centre, Community House/Centre, Further Education Centre, ACE Centre, Adult Education Centre. The name often reflects the prevailing terminology at the time of their commencement. The following are common features of ACE centres:

1. Management by an annually elected local committee of management who have control over staffing, finance, programs and policy.
2. Access is open to all people in the community irrespective of ethnicity, ability, educational experience, gender, income level, religious beliefs, political affiliations, family structure, and so on.
3. Finance - generally supported by the state government and in some cases by local government. In addition to direct funding, indirect support is provided through the use of government owned buildings, such as unused schools or courthouses
4. Activities and services - they provide a broad range of services and activities to meet the perceived learning needs in their own community, such as:
 - childcare
 - space for people to meet
 - services such as food co-operatives, clothing exchange, book swaps
 - community lunches
 - community information, counselling and referral
 - informal learning around craft activities, discussion

- groups, guest speakers and the like
- adult literacy and basic education
 - forums on local social issues
 - developing support groups around issues such as 'aids', alzheimer's disease, mental health, parenting
 - a program of user pays courses on a variety of topics
 - English as a second language
 - labour market programs
 - programs to assist people to start a small business or generate income
 - courses specifically for the elderly

In New South Wales the situation is similar, with a number of well funded and professionally managed providers (called Evening Colleges), who offer the same types of courses as the CAE in Victoria. In addition there are a host of community adult education centres which are more locally based, informal, and which offer courses as part of a wide range of community activities.

Challenges facing adult education

1. The positioning of adult education within the vocational education agenda.

There have been numerous reports and enquiries into post-compulsory education and training in Australia in recent years. These reports and enquiries have focused on the need for a national vocational and further education system with nationally agreed standards and a means of measuring those standards. The establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) is an attempt to give effect to a national approach to vocational education and training (VET), and the development of State Training Profiles is seen as a key element in this approach.

The notion of competence and the development of competencies is the cornerstone of the vocational education and training system. The idea is that competency standards, established in consultation and

co-operation with industry, will be the benchmark for curriculum development, assessment, training delivery, accreditation, and individual certification in the Australian vocational education and training system. Indeed, for effective participation in the national system it is necessary for training to be based on industry or enterprise competency standards.

Also there is a more open and competitive training market with a range of providers tendering for both publicly and privately funded vocational training.

ACE is specifically included within ANTA, which distributes 2.3 billion dollars each year, as a result it is now experiencing an unprecedented level of recognition and access to resources. But recognition and resourcing implies the introduction of formal assessment, the adoption of common standards based on identifiable competencies, the development of links with industry and local business, the monitoring of outcomes, the evaluation of course effectiveness, the accreditation of courses, the development of links with other educational providers, the adoption of a business management approach, competitive tendering for the delivery of educational programs, the professionalisation of adult educators, and the vocationalisation of educational provision. Adult education as a field is attempting to position itself within the vocational education agenda while at the same time preserving its identity as a form of education which goes beyond the seemingly narrow aims of producing skilled and flexible workers, sustainable economic growth, and improved international competitiveness. This is particularly an issue for the ACE sector which has actively pursued inclusion within the vocational education sector while at the same time warning of the dangers: 'A significant part, but not all of ACE is vocational. A majority of its offerings, it could be argued, is vocationally relevant, but a substantial part is manifestly not vocational. It would be totally inappropriate, and counterproductive for ACE to become in any sense industry driven or

pressured towards competency based training and assessment.' (Whyte and Crombie 1995, p126).

2. Access and equity

As far as adult education is concerned there has been substantial growth in the participation of adults in educational provision, whether it be continuing education for professionals, workplace training, basic literacy and numeracy, learning of English as a second language, preparatory and access courses for those seeking re-entry to education or the labour market, tertiary courses leading to formal awards, or community-based courses focusing on such areas as health, liberal studies, the arts, communication, community development, and the environment. But despite goodwill on the part of adult educators it is clear that access to adult education favours some groups, such as those already in employment or those who have traditionally participated in post-school formal education. Evans (cited in Whyte and Crombie 1995, p130) observes: 'Some 25% of adults report that they have not participated in any further education or training courses since completing their formal education which tends to have been of short duration'. A major issue is how to this group may be given access. One solution may be that proposed by Whyte and Crombie 'offer learning entitlements to those who have had the least formal education - starting perhaps with the bottom 5%, and monitoring the take up and its effects' (1995, p130). But the solution lies also in pedagogical and curriculum reform. Too often access has meant access to the 'mainstream', but in a multicultural society such as Australia it is becoming increasingly outmoded and unproductive to equate the 'mainstream' with dominant culture, especially with regard to what constitutes learning. This is a point made by the New London Group in its Occasional Paper 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies' :

' To be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore or erase, the different subjectivities that students bring to learning. Curriculum now needs to mesh with different subjectivities, and their attendant languages, discourses and registers, and use these as a resource for learning.

This is the necessary basis for a pedagogy of access. The danger of glib and tokenistic pluralism is that it sees differences to be immutable and leaves them fragmentary. Insofar as differences are now a core mainstream issue, the core or the mainstream has changed. Insofar as there cannot be a standard, universal national language and culture, there are new universals in the form of productive diversity, civic pluralism, and multilayered lifeworlds' (1995, p 13)

A pedagogy which celebrates and utilises difference is what is needed, and adult education is in a position to develop such a pedagogy, especially with its tradition of starting with the experiences of learners. However there needs to be further debate about how such a pedagogy reframes educational purposes.

3. Influencing pedagogical strategies

Adult education is now well placed to influence pedagogical practices in its neighbouring educational sectors. This is because, as never before, formal education is being held accountable for the quality of its teaching. For example in the university sector an annual Quality Audit has been introduced whereby universities are required to document the quality of their teaching, with a particular emphasis on innovative teaching and learning methods. It is not surprising that some universities have 'discovered' the time honoured practices of adult education and are now incorporating them in their teaching : such as utilising the experiences of the learners, involving learners in determining the content and pace of their learning, self managed or self directed learning, problem-based learning, the use of

peer learning strategies, reflection on practice or experience, and developmental assessment strategies. Learning innovations are also being driven by the advent of the information superhighway, with electronic learning strategies refocussing attention on the learner : a focus familiar to adult educators. In Australia it is significant that a major report was commissioned by the Commonwealth Government titled 'Developing Lifelong Learners Through Undergraduate Education' (1994). The principal author of this report, Philip Candy, is an academic adult educator well known for his major work 'Self Direction for Lifelong Learning'. In the Report he argues that generic or transferable skills should lie at the heart of the undergraduate program. Specifically he believes that the most important generic skill is the skill of lifelong learning i.e. the capacity to 'learn how to learn' This of course cannot and should not be taught separately from the content, rather it should be a key aim of every subject to enhance students' competence for learning after formal studies have been completed.

4. Creating a lifelong learning society

The Australian Government is clearly promoting a recurrent education strategy which emphasises the links between school, TAFE, community education, workplace training and higher education; and which encourages the recognition of prior learning across the various sectors of education. There is a move to establish flexible pathways of learning, and routes of skill formation which provide access to educational opportunities for those not traditionally well served by the system. Throughout the system there is now more scope for having learning (or rather, the outcomes of learning) recognised wherever it occurs: in schools, in TAFE colleges, through workplace training, and through private and community-based education providers.

Adult education has long recognised that the front end model of education, whereby students 'completed' their education and then 'applied' their studies throughout their working lives, is not appropriate in a climate of sustained technical, economic and social change. The values and structures referred to in the UNESCO and OECD publications in the 1970s are increasingly becoming a reality in Australian education, but it is not widespread or in any sense complete. It is certainly true that the reforms in VET have supported a lifelong learning society, especially with the emphasis on the recognition and accreditation of learning in the workplace, the substantial removal of institutional barriers to higher education, the support for broadly based training and multiskilling, and the recognition of the need for retraining throughout working lives. But these ideas need to be extended beyond the vocational arena, particularly into public education and education for older people (such as supporting the University of the Third Age movement, which now has over 25,000 participants nationally). It will also be important for adult education to harness the potential of the information superhighway and its associated educational technologies. This will include access to the Internet, cable TV, mulitmedia software, CD ROM'S, video conferencing, electronic classrooms, interactive satellite TV, and computer managed learning. The formal sectors of education, because of their resources, are better placed to take advantage of these developments, and so adult education needs to find ways to make sure it has access to these technologies and is not left 'information poor'.

Because of its enhanced position, adult education can contribute to furthering the progress of lifelong education so that learning will be recognised wherever it occurs, and educational opportunities will exist throughout the lifespan to enhance vocational,

community, personal, or civic aims.

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