LIFELONG LEARNING IN AUSTRALIA: A POLICY FAILURE

Since OECD Education Ministers declared “Lifelong Learning for All” a policy priority in 1996, the concept has been embraced by many politicians and education stakeholders in Australia. Lifelong learning has been the focus of numerous Ministerial statements and government reports over the past eight years, but in practice, there has been minimal change to Australia’s education and training system. This paper argues that the lifelong learning policy agenda threatens entrenched interests in Australian education and training that are an obstacle to structural reform. The author identifies three areas where lifelong learning is a challenge to governments: the dominance of the formal sectors; Commonwealth/State financial relations; and performance measurement. The paper concludes that in the absence of major structural change, lifelong learning is likely to remain in the “too hard” basket of national education policy and the needs of individual learners across their lifespan will not be addressed in Australia.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1996, two significant international reports identified lifelong learning as a policy priority for education in the 21st Century. The Education Ministers of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released a communique and a report, *Lifelong learning for All* which emphasised the economic rationale for supporting lifelong learning. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) also released a report *Learning: the Treasure Within* from a Commission chaired by Jacques Delors, which emphasised the link between lifelong learning and social stability in an era of rapid social and economic change. Subsequently, the concept of lifelong learning was embraced by many governments in developed countries such as the United Kingdom (Tight 1998) and Australia.

In Australia since 1996, government reports and ministerial statements on education and training have emphasised lifelong learning. The Howard government’s first review of higher education by Roderick West, *Learning for Life* (1998) declared,

> In the twenty-first century knowledge will be the most important currency of all. If Australia is to prosper in this new environment, and to continue to be a vibrant, open and inclusive society, we must also become a learning society (West 1998:1)

In its strategic policy statement on vocational education and training (VET) in the same year, the Ministerial Council of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) stated,

> 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)

Successive Commonwealth education ministers have reiterated the OECD’s policy on the importance of lifelong learning. In 1999, the former Commonwealth Education Minister, David Kemp said,

> 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).

In 2003, the new Commonwealth Education Minister Brendan Nelson declared that Australia’s higher education system would have to respond to international pressures for change that included,

> . . . the move from elite to a mass form of higher education; a revolution in telecommunications; globalisation with sweeping economic and social change, which still many Australians feel ill-prepared to face; and, importantly, the move to lifelong learning where the next generation can no longer expect to do one form of education and think that it will equip them for 40 or 50 years of a working life (Nelson 2003).

Industry stakeholders have also embraced the concept of lifelong learning. The Business Council of Australia says that “Australia’s economic and social future will depend on a well-educated and well-trained community. Such a community is fundamental to our ability to succeed in a global economy. . . (Business Council of Australia 2003a). In a policy paper entitled, *The Critical Importance of Lifelong Learning*, the Business/Higher Education Roundtable also establishes the significance of lifelong learning for Australia and explores its implications for education and training (Business/Higher Education Roundtable 2001).
This paper examines the implications of the lifelong learning policy agenda for publicly funded education and training in Australia. In the following section, we discuss the rationale for supporting lifelong learning in the 21st Century. The subsequent section explains why lifelong learning is different to our traditional conception of education and training. The final section identifies three areas in which lifelong learning is a challenge for Australian governments and discusses how entrenched interests are an obstacle to reform. The implications of our failure to implement lifelong learning policy are discussed in the conclusion.

WHY IS LIFELONG LEARNING IMPORTANT?

The international policy interest in lifelong learning is based on observations about structural change in the world economy. Demand for more highly skilled workers is growing; new technology is changing the nature of work in many occupations; and new jobs are being created while many old jobs are made redundant (Maglen and Shah 1998, Robinson 2001). High levels of participation in education and training also appear to be associated with economic growth and to contribute to national competitive advantage in the global economy (Fitzgerald 2001, Reich 1991). Workers are required to participate more in education and training than in the past, either because their jobs are changing or because they need to re-train for new jobs as their old jobs disappear (Watson 2003). Technological change, particularly the growth of information and communications technology (ICT), is held primarily responsible for changes in the nature of work.

The large and continuing shift in employment from manufacturing industry to services, the gathering momentum of globalisation, the wide diffusion of information and communications technologies, and the increasing importance of knowledge and skills in (the) production of goods and services are changing the skills profiles needed for jobs. The distribution of employment opportunities is changing, with many unskilled jobs disappearing. With the more rapid turnover of products and services, and with people changing jobs more often than previously, more frequent renewal of knowledge and skills is needed.

(OECD 1996: 13)

This assumption about the importance of education and training to individuals’ success in the labour market appears to be supported by the evidence of rising levels of participation in continuing education and training – particularly among workers in highly skilled occupations. In Australia, for example, high-skilled full-time jobs are growing fast in aggregate terms and these workers are more likely to participate in continuing education and training, financed equally by individuals and their employers (Watson 2003).

There is less evidence of the relevance of lifelong learning among workers in lower skilled occupations. In Australia, workers in the most low-skilled jobs are the least likely to engage in work-related training and only one-third of those who do are supported by their employers (Watson 2003: 30). Nevertheless, there is an argument for providing government support to people with low levels of education to improve their prospects in the labour market. Low-skilled jobs are more likely to be part-time, casual and poorly paid, placing people with low levels of education at higher risk of unemployment. As higher level of education offers one potential pathway out of low-skilled work, education and training appears to be of “critical importance” in “helping low-income individuals and families beat the poverty trap” (Business Council of Australia 2003b).

In their report to UNESCO, the Delors Commission added a further dimension to the lifelong learning debate, emphasising the importance of lifelong learning to national political stability in a time of rapid economic and social change. Delors argues for a broader, more inclusive system of education and training that meets more than economic needs. The report argues that education can help create a society where tensions can be overcome without resort to violence and where individuals are empowered to address the issues confronting their communities. Education is vital to an active participatory democracy where people both desire and have the capacity to make a contribution to public life. Education is an
“indispensable asset” in achieving Delors’ vision for a better society and for attaining “the ideals of peace, freedom and social justice” (Delors 1996: 11).

...education is at the heart of both personal and community development; its mission is to enable each of us, without exception, to develop all our talents to the full and to realize our creative potential, including responsibility for our own lives and achievement of our personal aims. This aim transcends all others. Its achievement, though long and difficult, will be an essential contribution to the search for a more just world, a better world to live in (Delors 1996: 17)

The Delors Commission warns that the capacity of education systems to fulfill this role is threatened by the divisive social impact of economic globalisation, particularly the unequal distribution of wealth. The Commission notes that the economic progress of the 20th Century has “not been equally shared” (p. 12) and assumes that extremes of wealth and poverty lead to a breakdown in social cohesion and pose a threat to social order and democracy.

The major danger is that of a gulf opening up between a minority of people who are capable of finding their way successfully about this new world... and the majority who feel that they are at the mercy of events and have no say in the future of society ... (Delors 1996).

In Australia, for example, during the 1990s, the income of the top five per cent of the Australian population increased by 18.8 per cent, compared to 4.2 per cent for the bottom ten per cent. By the end of the decade the top five per cent of households received 5.13 times more income than households in the bottom decile, whereas in 1988-89, they had received four and half times more (Harding, Lloyd and Greenwell 2001. Harding and Greenwell 2002). The proportion Australians living in poverty is now among the highest in the OECD. Only the USA, Russia and Mexico have higher poverty levels than Australia (Jesuit and Smeeding 2002).

As the forces of economic globalisation contribute to wider socio-economic gaps within populations, Delors argues that the power to reduce inequality resides in education systems. Education is a critical factor in determining the life chances of individuals and can be a powerful force for social change. But to perform this role, the goals and purposes of education must be broader than they have been in the past.

Delors defined the goals of education in terms of four principles (or “pillars”) that extend the definition of education beyond the traditional emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge: 1) Learning to know; 2) Learning to do; 3) Learning to live together; and 4) Learning to be. Delors acknowledges that “formal education has traditionally focused mainly, if not exclusively, on learning to know and to a lesser extent on learning to do”. He says that the two other pillars – learning to live together and learning to be – are “to a large extent left to chance”. Delors argues that equal attention should be paid to each of the four pillars so that “education is regarded as a total experience throughout life, dealing with both understanding and application and focusing on both the individual and the individual’s place in society” (Delors 1996: 86).

The Delors report therefore depicts lifelong learning as an urgent policy priority in a time of rapid social and economic change, because of its potential to empower individuals to take control of their lives. This aspect of lifelong learning is also acknowledged by the OECD. In their report, Lifelong learning for all, OECD member countries commit themselves to “lifelong learning for all as the guiding principle for policy strategies that will respond directly to the need to improve the capacity of individuals, families, workplaces and communities continuously to adapt and renew” (OECD 1996: 13).

WHAT DOES LIFELONG LEARNING MEAN FOR EDUCATION POLICY?

The lifelong learning policy agenda embraced by the OECD involves a shift from narrow concept of education and training to a much broader one. Traditionally, education and training was delivered at the beginning of a person’s life on the assumption that it would equip them with the skills they would need
for participation in the labour market. The traditional system ‘tracked’ individuals into particular segments of the labour market via education and training sectors. For example, early school leavers generally entered the unskilled labour market, skilled tradespeople were trained through the vocational education and training (VET) sector and universities trained a small professional class of doctors, lawyers and civil servants. If people wanted to participate in further learning as adults, they were expected to pay for it and it was delivered through informal mechanisms, such as the largely unfunded adult community education (ACE) sector (Watson, Wheelahan and Chapman 2002).

Australia’s “front end” model of education and training had its origins in an industrial age when young people were tracked into one job or occupation on the assumption that this occupation would serve them throughout their working lives. This model is no longer adequate to meet people’s learning needs in the 21st Century. The OECD therefore argues that education and training policy should be much broader in scope and should support lifelong learning, rather than simply “front-end” provision.

Lifelong learning is now understood to mean the continuation of conscious learning throughout the life-span, as opposed to the idea that education stops at 16, 18 or 21 (OECD 1996: 89)

Moving from a “front end” model to a lifelong learning model involves a change in the way we conceptualise and deliver education and training. A recent article in the OECD Observer summarised the following four “distinguishing features” of the lifelong learning concept which distinguish it from the traditional system (OECD 2004).

The first feature is what the OECD calls a systemic view of education and training, one that “views the demand for, and the supply of, learning opportunities, as part of a connected system covering the whole lifecycle” (OECD 2004:1). This approach to education and training denies the need for specific sectors, such as schooling, VET, higher education and adult community education, which characterise the current system in Australia. Another aspect of this “systemic view” is that it recognises all forms of learning – not just classroom-based tuition – such as on-the-job training, learning for pleasure and other forms of informal learning, much of which is delivered outside formal education and training institutions.

Second, lifelong learning emphasises the centrality of the learner, which the OECD says “requires a shift of attention from a supply side focus, for example on formal institutional arrangements for learning, to the demand side of meeting learner needs” (OECD 2004:2). This suggests that education and training providers should respond to individual learning needs and be inclusive of many types of learners, not just the learners who are selected by the provider.

Third, an individuals’ motivation to learn is critical to the achievement of lifelong learning. The OECD says that motivation to learn is “an essential foundation for learning that continues throughout life” (OECD 2004:2). To foster this motivation, the OECD suggests that providers should pay attention to “developing the capacity for ‘learning to learn’ through self-paced and self-directed learning” (OECD 2004:2).

Finally, lifelong learning recognises multiple objectives of education policy, such as “personal development, knowledge development, economic, social and cultural objectives – and that the priorities among these objectives may change over the course of an individual’s lifetime” (OECD 2004:2). This acknowledges the range of factors that motivate people to participate in learning and implies that education and training should not be provided simply to pursue economic goals, such as employment. It also recognises that the provision of financial assistance is not a sufficient inducement for people to participate in education or training if they are motivated by other factors.

To date, particularly in economic policy circles, the role of non-financial factors in motivating participation in education and training has been overlooked by analysts who assume that individuals will invest in education as long as the discounted benefits outweighed the discounted costs. Yet the continuing gap in education participation rates between people from high SES and low SES backgrounds
– in spite of the existence of means-tested financial assistance schemes – suggests that non-financial factors play an important role in determining people’s educational choices. For example, even when university students are equipped with accurate information about the wage returns to particular occupations, they do not make their investment decisions entirely on the basis of economic criteria (see Bosworth and Ford 1985).

A recent ANTA-commissioned survey of 3,866 people aged 16 years and above grouped respondents into eight market ‘segments’ on the basis of their attitudes to learning. The eight segments ranged from those most negative about learning (‘Forget it’ and ‘Done with it’ groups) to those most positive (the ‘Passionate learners’ and ‘Almost there’ groups). Yet when asked to identify the positive features of learning, individuals in every segment cited personal benefits—such as a sense of achievement, personal growth, the pleasure of learning and interaction with students—more often than reasons related to the acquisition of skills (ANTA 2000). The multiple objectives of learners are identified in many studies and surveys of adult learning in Australia and overseas (AAACE 1995, Edwards 1997, Edwards et al 1993, Golding and Volkoff 1998, Rubenson and Xu 1997).

In essence, the lifelong learning policy agenda suggests that meeting the varied learning needs of individuals across their lifespan should be the goal of education and training policy. This subtle shift in emphasis has profound implications for an education and training system like Australia’s where public funding is directed primarily to institutions within rigidly defined sectors that track students into particular occupations. And although some public funding is directed to non-formal courses for people with low skills, its purpose is usually to promote employment outcomes, rather than lifelong learning.

If taken seriously, lifelong learning would turn our current education and training system on its head. Or, in the words of the Business/Higher Education Roundtable, the achievement of lifelong learning in Australia would require

... nothing less than a substantial re-appraisal of the provision, resourcing and goals of education and training, and a major re-orientation of its direction towards the concept and value of the idea of “the learning society” . . . (Business/Higher Education Roundtable 2001:13).

**THE CHALLENGE OF LIFELONG LEARNING**

Lifelong learning challenges our current system of education and training at a fundamental level because it requires changing the way in which we deliver publicly funded education and training. The apparent simplicity of lifelong learning – and the ease with which the term rolls off the lips of politicians – belies the fact that lifelong learning is a difficult concept to implement in developed countries. Countries with a long history of government involvement in education and training, such as Australia, have an established – some would say *entrenched* – “front end” system that resists new directions in policy, particularly those that imply significant structural change.

This is not to suggest that Australia’s education and training system is a failure. To the contrary, our education and training system has a depth and diversity that is the legacy of its 150 year-old evolution. Nevertheless, when profound structural change is required to implement a new policy, the presence of an established traditional system can be an obstacle to reform. This section discusses why the structure of our education and training system is an obstacle to implementing the lifelong learning policy agenda. We identify three areas where lifelong learning challenges the existing system: the policy dominance of the formal “front-end” sectors; the pattern of shared Commonwealth/State funding arrangements; and current practice in measuring the performance of policies and programs.

**The dominance of three formal sectors**

Australia’s education system is divided into four sectors: schooling; vocational education and training (VET); higher education; and adult community education (ACE). Each sector evolved – with varying
degrees of government support – in the context of an industrial age in the 19th Century. Three formal sectors provided “front end” education and training that “tracked” individuals into specific categories of lifetime employment. For example, the graduates of mass government primary schools entered the unskilled labour force with basic literacy skills. The role of universities was to educate a small professional elite such as doctors, lawyers and civil servants. As the majority of young people were destined for the unskilled labour force at an early age, governments saw little reason to provide many secondary schools, which were primarily a selection mechanism for university entrance. The vocational education and training (VET) system grew with the support of industrialists and employers as well as governments to develop skilled trade occupations (see Watson, Wheelahan and Chapman 2002: 51-66).

In contrast to the three large formal sectors that were distinctly “front end”, the adult community education (ACE) sector developed over two centuries through workers’ associations, trade unions, political parties, Mechanics’ Institutes, Libraries and Schools of Arts to meet “the aspirations of ordinary men and women for some form of education” (SEETRC 1991). Vastly different to the government-funded, formal system of education and training based on the three sectors, the ACE sector offers all types of learning for adults such as work-related skills, non-formal courses, adult literacy and hobby courses, generally on a user-pays basis with minimal government support.

This 19th Century model first came under strain in the 1960s when a rising standard of living coupled with the impact of the post-war baby boom led to increased demand for secondary schooling. When state governments found they didn’t have enough secondary schools to meet demand, they converted technical training colleges into full secondary schools. This first experiment in cross-sectoral provision went relatively smoothly, probably because State governments were solely responsible for the funding and administration of both the schools and VET sectors in the 1960s (see discussion in following section).

The sectoral model came under pressure again in the early 1980s when Year 12 retention rates increased and more young people remained at secondary school. Unlike the traditional cohort, this new generation of seniors was less interested in studying for university and more suited to vocational education and training (VET). But by this time, the VET sector was developing a distinct sectoral identity. The Commonwealth assumed a significant role in recurrent funding of VET after the Kangan report in 1974, so the funding bases of schools and VET institutions were now different. During the 1980s, the industry-focus of the VET sector was strengthened so that when the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was established in 1994, its Board was dominated by industry representatives. The VET sector’s focus on industry-specific skills intensified with the development and implementation of competency based-training (CBT) that sharply differentiated VET from schooling and higher education. Differences in funding, governance and curriculum were obstacles to cross-sectoral cooperation between VET providers and schools, as well as impeding closer relations between the VET and higher education sectors (SWRSBEC 2000, Watson, Wheelahan and Chapman 2002, Wheelahan 2000).

With their different cultures, different funding arrangements and different approaches to teaching and learning, sectors create obstacles for education providers that try to co-operate across sectoral boundaries. Yet hundreds of educational institutions across Australia are developing and trying to deliver cross-sectoral programs in spite of the many administrative barriers in their path (Smart 2001, Watson Wheelahan and Chapman 2002). The main driver for cross-sectoral initiatives is the changing nature of student demand. Consistent with the lifelong learning policy agenda, providers are attempting to meet students’ new learning needs, such as the need for customised learning support and the need for learning pathways through the sectors. But without a clear policy framework in place that supports cross-sectoral co-operation, institutions engaging in cross-sectoral activities are taking considerable risks. As long as policy and planning priorities are determined exclusively within the sectors, it is simpler and safer for institutions to comply with sectoral policies and priorities rather than go beyond them (Wheelahan 2000, 2001).

The traditional dominance of the three formal sectors of education and training in Australia works against the lifelong learning policy agenda in several ways. The sectors are so pervasive in all levels of
policy and administration that there is no natural “home” for a broad, cross-sectoral policy such as lifelong learning. For example, the Federal Department of Education, Science and Training is organised on sectoral lines with a division (or Group) representing each sector: Schools; Vocational Education and Training (VET); and Higher Education. Although a few senior public servants within the sectors have discussed lifelong learning issues over the past eight years (eg.Gallagher 1999, Hill 1999, Robinson 2000), in doing so, they run the risk of being accused of operating outside of their brief, since their responsibilities are so clearly defined on sectoral lines.

A second obstacle arising from the organization of government bureaucracies on sectoral lines is that a policy such as lifelong learning that involves crossing sectoral boundaries usually invokes sectoral “warfare” between Ministers and policymakers who want to protect their patch of policy turf. Thus when the West review of Higher Education, Learning for Life (1998) recommended a single post-secondary policy framework encompassing VET and Higher Education, it was criticised by ANTA for encroaching on VET policy “from a higher education perspective” (Horney 1997, cited in Wheelahan 2001).

Third, narrowly defined sectoral interests can also provide an excuse not to allocate expenditure to lifelong learning policies on the grounds that it would be going beyond the sectoral brief. For example, in 1999, the VET sector’s peak body, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) commissioned a major study on lifelong learning. The ANTA Marketing Strategy for Skills and Lifelong Learning surveyed 3,866 people aged 16 years and above, and grouped respondents into eight market ‘segments’ on the basis of their attitudes to learning. The eight segments ranged from those most negative about learning (‘Forget it’ and ‘Done with it’ groups) to those most positive (the ‘Passionate learners’ and ‘Almost there’ groups). The consultants presented their final report to the ANTA Ministerial Council with suggested strategies for encouraging participation among each group. The ‘Training Ministers’ response to the report was to focus on only one group that was clearly within the brief of the VET sector – the group of young people who are already engaged in training but who ‘might give it away’ (ANTA 2000). ANTA subsequently funded a one-off marketing campaign targeted at this small group of learners who were clearly VET clients (DEST 2001:3). Meeting the needs of other learners was portrayed as outside of the VET Ministers’ brief and the report was not referred to any other Ministerial forum (such as MCEETYA) where its implications for education policy as whole could be examined.

Fourth, the dominance of the three formal sectors over government funding works against the expansion of government into new areas that are necessary to pursue the lifelong learning policy agenda. One example is the relatively under-funded adult community education sector. In spite of being recognised by all Education Ministers as the sector which is learner-centred, responsive to community needs, accessible and inclusive, diverse, varied and flexible (MCEETYA 1997), ACE providers receive no recurrent funding from the Commonwealth government and a minimal level of financial support from State and Territory governments. Although ACE providers receive some government funding to provide learner-centred programs to disadvantaged groups, the funding is usually offered by tender on an annual basis. Its position outside of the funded, formal sectors has enabled ACE to develop a diverse array of courses to meet individual learning needs. Yet, its historical position as an unfunded sector means that ACE providers rely heavily on private income and ACE provision is skewed towards higher income groups. In spite of being well-placed to deliver lifelong learning, the ACE sector’s role and status in national education policy has barely changed over the eight years since the lifelong learning policy agenda was announced.

**Commonwealth/State financial arrangements**

Under the Australian constitution, education is the financial responsibility of State and Territory governments. The Commonwealth became involved in education funding through the provision of specific purpose payments under Section 96 of the Constitution from the early 20th Century. The pattern of Commonwealth financial support was not consistent across the sectors, with the result that the Commonwealth is now the main funding source for higher education but the Commonwealth and States share funding for the VET sector. The Commonwealth also provides about 10 per cent of funding for government schools and 70 per cent of funding for private schools. This patchwork of funding
arrangements has resulted in different levels of government having a greater financial stake in some sectors over others. Thus higher education and private schools feature strongly in Commonwealth education policy whereas State and Territory governments are preoccupied with public schooling. As VET funding is equally shared, both governments are involved in VET policy together with a strong industry presence through ANTA.

The first problem arising from the patchwork of Commonwealth/State funding arrangements in education is that no one level of government has responsibility for education and training policy as a whole, because each government is preoccupied with the sector that it supports most. The stakeholders within each sector also focus their efforts on the dominant funding partner, thus reducing the external political imperative for reform.

Second, the patchwork of Commonwealth/State funding reinforces the sectoral divisions in Australian education and training. For example the prospects of cross-sectoral collaboration between VET and schools, and VET and higher education are undermined by accusations of cost-shifting between levels of government (SWRSBEC 2000: 241-242, Wheelahan 2000).

Third, if a government decided to pursue an agenda such as lifelong learning, its capacity to implement reform would be limited by its funding reach in a particular sector. Thus State governments are able to implement reform in schooling and the Commonwealth in higher education because they are the major funding providers for these sectors. The only prospect for large scale reform would be if all the Ministers of the national Ministerial Council – MCEETYA – could be persuaded to pursue reform through national collaboration. But although MCEETYA has pioneered some national reforms in education and training, it is generally considered a weak policy mechanism because the different political backgrounds of its members make it a forum for political point scoring as well as collaboration (Spaull 1987).

Fourth, the existing division of financial responsibilities between the Commonwealth and the States can generate a “stand-off” over which level of government should fund new policy priorities that fall outside of the three formal sectors, such as young people “at risk” (Spierings 2001, Sweet 2001) or early childhood intervention. For example, several decades of educational research and experimentation has demonstrated that high quality early learning programs contribute to better educational outcomes from schooling for disadvantaged children, such as higher educational attainment and increased school retention rates. Research also demonstrates that greater benefits are obtained for children ‘at risk’ if the intervention occurs from birth to five years of age (Barnett 1996, Currie 2001, Karoly et al.1998). In North America and the United Kingdom, model early childhood education programs for disadvantaged families are now delivered between the ages of 0 and 5 years but there is no comparable early childhood interventions in Australia. Both levels of government – State and commonwealth – provide numerous types of services at this level, but often within health and community services portfolios rather than education. State education Departments have traditionally limited their education services to the pre-school sector and the Commonwealth’s makes a substantial contribution to early childhood education through funding childcare. The difficulties associated with co-ordinating policies and programs across government agencies involved in early childhood services is compounded by the split in funding responsibilities between the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments.

Performance measurement

A significant – and generally useful – product of managerial reforms in the Australian public service during the 1980s was the recognition given to identifying the outcomes of government expenditure. The inherent danger in this approach was that outcomes would be biased towards things that were easy to measure (Watson 1996). In areas of policy that have multiple objectives, such as education, policy outcomes tend to be measured in a narrow way, such as the number of graduates who get a job, or the apparent retention rate to Year 12 (ABS 2002). The difficulties of measuring complex, intangible or multiple outcomes have yet to be addressed. This poses a problem for any government that wants to fund programs to promote lifelong learning.
Commonwealth government expenditure on short non-formal courses is largely allocated to people who are unemployed with the specific objective of achieving employment. These programs are delivered through the Jobs Network and are funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. In its Annual Report for 2002-03, the Department defines its major goal (Outcome 1) as “an effectively functioning labour market”. The narrowness of this policy goal and its measurement is illustrated in the following excerpt from the Department’s Annual Report.

Government policies and programmes aim to maximise the ability of unemployed Australians to find work. Assistance is targeted to groups that face the most severe barriers to employment such as long-term unemployed people, Indigenous Australians, mature age people, people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, sole parents, people with a disability and young people. The overall effectiveness of the policies and programmes is best measured by examining changes in the average duration of unemployment (DEWR 2003: 27).

The Department diligently reports the average duration of unemployment for each of these targeted groups over the previous year and finds it has decreased slightly for most groups while increasing for Indigenous Australians, people with a disability and young people (DEWR 2003: 30). This is an example of how specifying a narrow (albeit important) policy goal such as employment leads to an equally narrow evaluation of the impact of government-funded programs and services. It is quite likely that many of the employment programs funded by the Department provide participants with self-confidence, motivation and willingness to learn, but these outcomes are not acknowledged, nor measured within the policy framework.

Specifying goals and outcomes in such narrow terms also runs the risk of reducing the content of funded courses. For example, a short course in computing skills may assist the participant to obtain a job in the short term but not necessarily help them if they lose the job six months later. In contrast, a course which aimed to build self confidence, motivation and a capacity for learning may help the participant navigate both the labour market and their lives more effectively. The lifelong learning policy agenda does not deny the importance of instrumental outcomes such as employment, but it recognises that education should promote multiple policy objectives. The lifelong learning literature argues that education which responds to the varied interests of the learner is more likely to produce outcomes such as employability as well as other goals (OECD 1996, 2004).

The trend in performance measurement in recent years has been to make the purposes of education narrow in order to measure the outcomes of government expenditure more accurately. As lifelong learning policy recognises multiple goals for education and training programs, the challenge for performance measurement will be both to broaden the goals of education programs and to find ways of measuring the outcomes of such programs.

CONCLUSION

The lifelong learning policy agenda is based on observations about the changing nature of work and society in the global economy of the 21st Century. In a labour market which has been transformed by technological change, people need to be able to learn throughout their lives, both to remain employed and to contribute to society.

Although the Australian federal government is committed publicly to the policy goal of lifelong learning, there has been minimal change to our system of education and training over the past eight years. The lifelong learning policy agenda has had very little impact on the structure or funding of education and training in Australia. This paper points out that implementing a lifelong learning policy agenda would involve a substantial structural reform of our education and training system. Entrenched structural features such as sectoral divisions, Commonwealth/State financial arrangements and performance
measurement remain a significant barrier to reform and will continue to limit the scope of policies to promote lifelong learning.

Australia appears well integrated into the global economy and has experienced strong growth in highly skilled employment. But people with low levels of education face deteriorating labour market conditions and have access to fewer opportunities for participation in education and training. If lifelong learning remains in the “too hard” basket of national education policy, the needs of individual learners across their lifespan will continue to be neglected, and the socio-economic divisions in Australian society are likely to deepen.

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