Adult and community education in Victoria, Australia: diversity in learning

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Adult learning in Australia is organised in a number of different ways. In the jurisdiction of Victoria, adult and community education (ACE) is the fourth arm of education and training, alongside the schools, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and higher education sectors. Certain features define the Victorian ACE sector, including an emphasis on community ownership and direction, a responsiveness to local community needs, a commitment to the principles of adult learning and a strong record in access and equity in the provision of services. ACE in Victoria is well positioned to respond to the needs of groups marginalised in Australian society, including migrants, people with low levels of educational attainment and unemployed people.

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Introduction

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the understanding of Australian culture and values, particularly for migrant communities, and built communication, social and life management skills.

Current Policy Context

Within the context of an ageing workforce across Australia, ACE a critical role to play in fostering skill development for older and disadvantaged people both within and outside the existing workforce. The proportion of the Australian population aged over 65 years is set to double to 25 per cent over the next four decades thus creating a skills sustainability challenge for industry and business (Bardon, 2006). shortages across Australia have demanded a rethink of learning and working life. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) human capital reform agenda with its emphasis on “continuous and lifelong learning”, aims to raise the workforce participation rate and skill levels (COAG, 2006a). Measures comprise improving adult literacy and numeracy and increasing attainment of Year 12 (senior school certificate) or equivalent, particularly among groups underrepresented in the labour force, including the long term unemployed, mature aged people and women (COAG, 2006b). The role lifelong learning plays in providing people with the capacities to participate in the workforce, and to do so more productively, has been well documented (Feinstein, Galindo-Rueda & Vignoles, 2004; DSF 2005; Coulombe, Tremblay & Marchand, 2004). The longer term benefits to society and the economy in strengthening social cohesion are also well established (Bynner, McIntosh, Vignoles, Dearden, Reed & Van Reenen, 2001; Townsend, 2006).

Bowman (2006) has argued that ACE providers across Australia are already contributing to the goals of the COAG agenda through re-engaging adults with learning, providing pathways to further education and work and expanding access to formal qualifications through accredited vocational education and training (VET) provision. ACE providers in Victoria are particularly well placed to respond the needs of groups targeted in the COAG agenda in building social capital (Volkoff & Walstab, 2007).

ACE Longitudinal Study, 2004-2006

This study was commissioned by the Victorian Adult Community and Further Education Board. Findings are reported in Walstab & Teese (2005), Walstab, Volkoff & Teese (2005) and Walstab, Volkoff & Teese (2006).

This three year longitudinal study – the first of its kind in the sector – sought to

measure the ACE sector's impact, effectiveness and community reach by addressing the following broad questions: does ACE make a difference (and, if so, how do we know?); for whom does ACE make a difference?; and what is it about ACE that makes a difference?

The first stage of the project, undertaken in 2004, used a 'community-studies' approach which took account of the defining qualities of the ACE sector – its localism, accessibility, responsiveness and community base. This involved intensive work with over 40 metropolitan and non-metropolitan Victorian providers. A cross-section of 3,047 ACE participants in these providers undertook a classroom-based survey which aimed to establish demographic data, employment status, educational background, their expectations and rationale for being in ACE, the quality of their learning experience, and aspirations for the future. A sample of 846 participants were involved in follow-up telephone interviews in 2005, approximately 12 months after the initial contact. This re-contact yielded further data on the work and study status of the cohort (in ACE or elsewhere), pathways identification, and the respondents' reflections on their experiences in ACE.

A further sample of 646 respondents were again surveyed by telephone in 2006 to identify patterns of participation in relation to a range of socio-economic and demographic variables and to provide new data on learners in ACE and their experience of study. The survey aimed to measure the individual and community benefits which might accrue from participation in ACE over the longer term. This paper will draw on the sample of 646 respondents surveyed over the three years in exploring the role ACE plays for three marginalised groups. In addition, the longitudinal survey data is supplemented by analysis of student-level administrative data of all Victorian students enrolled in vocational training in Victoria in 2005 (Volkoff & Walstab, 2007).

Characteristics of Victorian ACE

In Victoria, ACE providers must be community owned and managed and are not-for-profit organisations. In 2005, 17.4 per cent of the 483,959 students enrolled in VET courses in Victoria were studying at an ACE provider (Volkoff & Walstab, 2007). This compared to 69.9 per cent who were studying at a technical and further education (TAFE) institute (public TVET providers) and the remaining 12.9 per cent in private TVET providers. ACE is a localised and connected sector, engaging with local government, schools, other VET providers and community support agencies. ACE providers are non-institutional and are often multifaceted, providing non-

educational services such as childcare or financial counselling. The cost-effectiveness of ACE is underpinned by the large volunteer workforce, of particular importance in small providers. One of the well researched strengths of Victorian ACE is its use of distinctive adult learning pedagogies characterised by a learner-centeredness and flexible approach to teaching (Sanguinetti, Waterhouse & Maunders 2004).

About three times as many women as men enrol in ACE courses. Figure 1 below plots the participation rates (calculated as a proportion of the population) in ACE in 2005 (Volkoff & Walstab, 2007). These participation rates vary accordingly for men and women, as well as by age-group. As a percentage of the population, there was greatest representation from women aged between 30 and 50 years participating in ACE. Conversely, the participation rates for men of different ages remained fairly uniform. The highest participation rate is that of teenagers. For these teenage males participation in ACE also varies according to social status. The lower the socio-economic status, the higher the proportion of enrolments in ACE.

ACE provides an integrated approach to curriculum and pathways development, including non-accredited and accredited programs from Certificate I to Diploma levels. The majority of learners enrol in non-award courses (58 per cent of students in 2005), Certificate I (9.5 per cent), Certificate II (15.5 per cent), or Certificate III (11.4 per cent). ACE has a complex role delivering entry-level training to learners with a diverse range of characteristics. Even so, there is a strong endorsement of the ACE learning environment from participants. When asked to reflect on their experiences in ACE, respondents in the ACE longitudinal study were emphatic with very high proportions reporting that: ‘it is easy to get along with the teachers’ (98 per cent agreement) and ‘the teaching is good’ (97 per cent agreement); ‘learning is enjoyable’ (98 per cent agreement); ‘there is a supportive learning environment’ (97 per cent agreement) and ‘you are able to learn at your own pace and level’ (90 per cent agreement); and ACE courses are very affordable (84 per cent agreement).

This strong endorsement of ACE is particularly important in rural and regional Victoria where the ACE provider is often the only education provider apart from a school within the local area (Birch, Kenyon, Kishy, & Wills-Johnson, 2003). Participation rates in ACE are higher for regional than metropolitan residents, and ACE has a greater market share of all VET activity in regional areas (range of 22-31 per cent across 5 administrative regions) than in metropolitan ones (range of 12-19 per cent across 4 administrative regions). Thus the sector is uniquely placed to serve a pivotal role in regional sustainability and development, due to its strong

links with local communities. In some rural settings, ACE addresses the education and training needs of groups in the community that other sectors choose not to, or cannot serve.

The role of ACE for Migrants

While ACE clearly plays a pivotal role addressing education and training needs in regional Victoria, migrant populations, for whom ACE is also important, are more likely to be living in the city. The make-up of metropolitan Melbourne is culturally diverse with 27.9 per cent of Melbournians speaking a language other than English at home (this compares to 4.9 per cent of non-metropolitan Victorians) (ABS 2006). In some local government areas, this proportion increases to 59 per cent of the population. The ACE sector has identified certain groups the Victorian community as being “high priority learners” including “people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds” (State of Victoria, 2004).

Migrants surveyed as part of the ACE longitudinal study (representing 16 per cent of the stage 3 cohort) were able to provide an insight into what drew them to study in the ACE sector as well as the key benefits of participation. The number and range of languages (over fifty) demonstrates the diversity of communities represented in the cohort, and who are at the same time presenting themselves to the ACE sector. However, as a group the migrants surveyed were more marginalised compared to non-migrants in terms of educational levels and unemployment rates, and were more likely to be from the poorest socio-economic group. These learners indicated that they enrolled in ACE hoping to become more prepared for work and further study and also hoping that ACE will help them make connections with other people and their community.

When asked to reflect on the benefits of their original ACE study in 2004, or any other study to 2006, migrants were more positive than non-migrants on almost all fronts, and were especially emphatic regarding the socialisation aspects of their learning experience. In particular, this group of learners reported improvements in their ability to communicate with people (86 per cent of migrant group agreeing compared with 71 per cent of the non-migrant group), to better work with others (82 per cent agreeing compared with 68 per cent), and an improved capacity to get along with people and make friends (84 per cent compared to 69 per cent). ACE participation also helped the migrant group build links with the community. Three quarters of migrants reported that their ACE study had helped them to ‘understand how Australians live and what they think’ (compared to 45 per cent of the non-

migrant group), and 53 per cent reported an increased capacity to ‘do volunteer or community activities’ (compared to 42 per cent of non-migrants).

Role of ACE for people with low levels of educational attainment

One of the goals of the COAG agenda is to raise levels of adult literacy and numeracy across the Australian population. There are many well documented economic and social benefits of having strong literacy and numeracy skills (Murray, 2003; McIntosh & Vignoles, 2000); they are even described by some as *critical skills for life* (DfEE, 2001). to OECD figures, 17 per cent of Australians aged 16-65 years have the lowest level of literacy (level 1 prose, document and quantitative literacy) (OECD, 1997). Conversely, only 55 per cent has medium to high levels of literacy. The role that community education provision can play in reaching and providing benefits for adults with low literacy skills is also widely acknowledged. Findings from the ACE longitudinal study confirm this. Nearly half of all respondents reported improvement in numeracy and literacy skills as a result of participating in ACE (see Figure 3 below). The proportion agreeing was even higher for unemployed people (53 per cent), people with incomplete schooling (54 per cent), and migrants (69 per cent).

Figure 3. Reported improvement in numeracy and literacy skills

ACE is an accessible sector, playing a compensatory role for those with unsuccessful and inadequate schooling which is particularly important in the context of the ageing Australian workforce. For those with low levels of educational attainment, the findings from the ACE longitudinal study suggest that ACE provided a platform for further study, both within and beyond the sector. Of the 646 respondents surveyed in stage 3 of the study, 36.6 per cent had not completed secondary school nor undertaken any post-school qualifications when they first enrolled in ACE in 2004. For those who continued to study following their original 2004 ACE course (half the cohort), the group with low levels of schooling were more emphatic than those who had finished school or had higher level qualifications about links between their original ACE study and any new course. Those with poor schooling were more likely than those who had finished school to report that their ACE study had provided the encouragement, laid a foundation and facilitated entry to new courses. (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Those continuing in study – links with ACE, per cent agreeing by level of

educational attainment (per cent agreeing)

% agreeing	No qualifications	Senior school certificate or above
New course followed on from ACE study	82.2	69.4
Completing ACE course helped me to get in	78.6	72.6
Experiences in ACE encouraged me to apply for a new course	86.7	72.6

In addition those with no qualifications were more likely to move out of the ACE sector if they continued to study after their original 2004 ACE course. In this way ACE has proved a platform for these vulnerable learners in facilitating their transition to a more formalised training setting.

The longitudinal study found that those who continued to study in ACE over the duration the study, and those who moved out of the sector to study at a non-ACE provider, had different motivations when they first enrolled in their 2004 ACE course (45 per cent of those doing a new course in 2006 had moved to a non-ACE provider). In particular those who were studying outside of the ACE sector in 2006 were more likely to have reported economic and vocational reasons for enrolling in their 2004 ACE study (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4. Motivations for 2004 ACE study by sector of 2006 study (% agreeing)

For some in the cohort with poor prior levels of education, ACE has become a staging ground to move into other educational sectors. In addition there is evidence of a move over the three survey contacts to study at higher qualification levels.

The role of ACE for unemployed people

Australians with low levels of educational attainment and particularly early school leavers face severe economic risks. Unemployment rates for Victorians who do have post-school qualifications have halved in the past decade, falling from 5.6 per cent in 1995 to 2.8 per cent in 2006 (ABS, 2006). Conversely, for people who do not have a post-school qualification and have not completed Year 12, the unemployment rate has only diminished slightly, from 11.2 per cent to 9.8 per cent in that period. The long-term unemployed are one of the groups targeted in the COAG agenda to foster skill development and increase workforce participation. Evidence from the findings of the ACE longitudinal study would suggest that ACE is well positioned to respond

to the needs of this group.

Over the duration of the study, there were strong employment outcomes. The proportion of workers employed full-time more than doubled from 13 per cent in 2004 to 28 per cent in 2006. This was matched by a decline in the unemployment rate from 24 per cent in 2004 to only 8 per cent in 2006. The proportions working part-time and not in the labour force remained fairly constant. Of all those who were unemployed in 2004, 52 per cent were working in 2005 and 63 per cent were working in 2006. While 27 per cent remained unemployed in 2005, this dropped to 19 per cent in 2006. In addition, some of those unemployed in 2004 had moved out of the labour force (21 per cent during 2005 and 18 per cent during 2006).

Strong links were made by respondents between study and work. More than 7 in 10 said that their study helped with tasks they do at work (73 per cent agreeing), 61 per cent said it taught them skills to help them get a better job, 47 per cent said that it helped them to get a job, and 26 per cent said their study helped them to set up or run a business. Moreover, 58 per cent of those who were unemployed in 2005 said in 2006 that their study had helped them to get a job. Despite these strong employment outcomes, many respondents believed that were insufficient links between their ACE course and the workplace. Half of the ACE learners surveyed also believed that ACE courses should focus more on skills for job seeking (see Figure 5 below) and this response was even higher for people with low levels of educational attainment, migrants and unemployed people. This data suggests that the learners in ACE most in need of work experience, support and guidance for job seeking were not able to adequately access it through their ACE provider. It is important that ACE addresses this within the current Australian policy environment, particularly as ACE engages with these disadvantaged groups so effectively.

Figure 5. ACE courses should focus more on skills for job seeking (% agreeing)

Conclusions

The organisational structure of the adult community and education sector facilitates a connectedness with community providing a capacity for outreach, responsiveness to local needs, community building and flexibility, particularly in regional areas. It is an accessible sector, playing a compensatory role for those with unsuccessful and inadequate schooling which is particularly important in the context of the ageing Australian workforce and the national policy response. The ACE sector is of strategic importance because it has the demonstrated capacity to reach the groups of people

targeted in the COAG agenda, including migrants, people with low levels of educational attainment, and unemployed people. As demonstrated by the findings of the ACE longitudinal study, it also has the capacity to provide literacy and numeracy skills development, qualifications and strong employment outcomes for the workforce. Challenges remain for the sector, in particular expanding its employment advocacy and career advice role to better reach, guide and provide appropriate skills and qualifications. This paper highlights the diverse learning opportunities provided by the Victorian adult and community education sector, and the strong educational and employment outcomes of learners.

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