



**Association of Neighbourhood Houses & Learning Centres
and
ACEVic**

**Response to
Stronger futures for all young Victorians
Discussion paper on the youth transitions system**

June 2010

Background

The Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres (ANHLC) is the peak body for neighbourhood houses and learning centres in Victoria. Currently there are approximately 342 ANHLC members providing a range of community development and educational opportunities for communities throughout Victoria. Approximately 40% of Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and 60% of ACFE funded organisations in Victoria are Neighbourhood Houses.

ACEVic is the peak organisation for Adult Community Education (ACE) organisations in Victoria. Its members comprise nearly 200 of the state's ACE providers; 80% of organisations who receive more than \$250,000 from ACFE are members of ACEVic.

ACEVic and ANHLC members are based in all ACFE regions including in remote parts of the state. They range in size from very small neighbourhood houses with an income of less than \$100,000, through to large community-based businesses with multiple functions and seven figure annual incomes.

Together, our members provide a range of learning opportunities to tens of thousands of Victorians annually, playing a critical role in delivering the social and economic benefits that ACE can bring to individuals and communities. This includes education and training spanning the learning spectrum, from pre-accredited Foundation Skills courses to nationally accredited Advanced Diplomas.

Adult Community Education (ACE) is provided through a range of centres that may be called Community Learning Centres, Adult Education Centres, Neighbourhood Houses, Community Colleges, Libraries and Continuing Education Centres. All of them offer a range of courses and programs to adults from all backgrounds and education levels.

Neighbourhood Houses and other ACE providers engage with young people in a range of ways and to varying degrees. Of greatest relevance to this discussion paper is the role played by those providers providing ACE courses to young people and particularly young people for whom conventional pathways have been less than effective and require alternative points of entry and support to reengage with learning and employment.

Neighbourhood Houses and other ACE providers have a focus on strengthening local communities, with a commitment to equity which they bring to the provision of post compulsory education. This community development approach to learning mobilises community members, government investment, skilled staff and volunteer effort to create an ideal environment for learners, particularly 'second chance' learners who often require additional support to succeed in their learning.

ACE builds the skills, knowledge and abilities of Victorian communities by providing

- Informal learning opportunities alongside formal learning pathways
- Welcoming and accepting environments
- Pedagogy that is flexible and learner-focussed
- Programs driven by local needs
- A diverse range of organisations, which each reflect, nurture and are involved with their local communities

- Interpersonal connections to build better and stronger communities
- Awareness of diversity, and promotion of harmony and connectedness
- Computer Skills leave no one behind in the digital revolution
- Personalised attention so that learners feel valued and are not lost in the system.

ACE is for everyone. Victoria's ACE providers, are therefore, particularly concerned about the impacts of government policy not only on ACE providers but also on how policy contributes to social inclusion for learners, in particular disadvantaged learners (indigenous, CALD, youth and people with disabilities).

This response will address a number of the questions raised in the discussion paper.

Strengthening literacy and numeracy in the post-compulsory years

Question: In what other ways can the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills be strengthened in the post-compulsory years?

Central to improving levels of literacy and numeracy is access to learning opportunities and environments that support their development. A number of initiatives can support this.

1. Strengthen the capacity of organisations to provide the additional and more intensive support, e.g. volunteers and mentors. Neighbourhood Houses and other ACE providers have shown an ability to mobilise community members in a voluntary capacity to provide additional and more intensive levels of support. However, there are structural impediments to the maintenance and strengthening of this effort through the current system of weighted training hours. Foundation Studies, which include language and literacy programs, are currently weighted at less than 1.0, thereby reducing the Student Contact Hour (SCH) rate paid to providers (i.e. $0.9 \times \$7.99 = \7.19). Revising the Weighted Training Hour system to remove the bias against entry level language, literacy and numeracy programs so that these programs are funded at no less than the full SCH rate outlined in the Securing Jobs for Your Future policy statement would strengthen the capacity of organisations to maintain quality training and volunteer support. Consideration should also be given to funding providers to support training and coordination of volunteers assisting in literacy and numeracy programs—possibly through DPCD's Community Programs Unit.
2. A further structural barrier exists for young people who have either disengaged from education or who find learning difficult. The content of many Certificate I and II level qualifications is heavily focused on generic employability skills and provide an opportunity to strengthen literacy and numeracy. Currently young people under 20 can enrol in and complete a number of qualifications at Cert I and II level. Young people over 20 can only enrol in qualifications higher than those already held. Certificate I and II level qualifications should be exempted from the eligibility criteria to provide the development and strengthening of generic employability and learning skills, as well as the opportunity for young people to explore and develop an appropriate career path. This is particularly important for secondary students who complete Cert I & II through VET in Schools or those completing the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning. These students can only access a limited range of Cert I & II - courses provided by the schools, often making choices based on peer influences rather than vocational intent. These

students will be ineligible for access to Government funded Cert I & II once they turn 20. For those that disengage from education and training on leaving school, this imposes a significant barrier to their future training opportunities.

3. Gaining literacy and learning skills can only occur if young people are engaged in a learning environment. Many who require additional support in post-compulsory years have had a less than ideal experiences of the school system and/or experience complex social and economic disadvantages. Providing a range of informal re-entry points is critical to attracting this cohort to learning. People experiencing barriers often enter an informal learning environment without the assumption, let alone the intent that this will lead them to further education and employment. Yet such pathways have proven highly effective. Many such opportunities for engagement have been eroded through the increasingly rigid requirement for pre-accredited training to have a VET focus. Research should be undertaken to identify existing non-vocational programs and activities for young people that result in substantial transition rates into further education and training. These programs and activities should be eligible for funding under the ACFE pre-accredited training regime.
4. Levels of literacy and numeracy could be improved through the development of a matrix, similar to that used in the Commonwealth Adult Migrant Education Program, which categorises language, literacy and numeracy proficiency to identify those learners who lack literacy skills and therefore need most support. Once identified, the Weighted Training Hour system should allocate additional resources to these learners, above a weighting of 1, so that their need to be educated in small groups with additional support can be met by providers.

Support for making informed education and training choices

Question: What other actions should be taken to ensure that sound career development services are available to all young Victorians?

ACEVic and ANHLC support the provision of quality, independent career advice that streamlines the process for learners to move through the education and training sector. Whilst school based careers advice is readily available, extending quality advice to ensure either universal access to years 9 and 10 or targeted to potential early leavers is desirable. Importantly, extending universal careers advice to young people after they have left the compulsory school system should improve the current variability in post secondary career guidance.

Consideration should be given to location based career guidance services rather than provider based models. These services should be available to young learners, together with parents or carers, in all VET providers. The Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) are an ideal potential provider of careers advice as they are an existing 'honest broker' in the system. They also bring local knowledge of the broad range of options for young people. This should enhance the likelihood that advice to learners bridges the various sectors. It would also address the disparity in capacity for providing career guidance amongst diverse post-secondary VET providers.

Arrangements that support and encourage young people to complete qualifications

Question: What would further strengthen the delivery partnerships between government and non-government schools and between schools and VET providers?

1. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is varied understanding and appreciation of the role of the ACE sector, including Neighbourhood Houses, as equal players in the VET system. Strengthening the awareness and understanding of the ACE sector as effective VET providers, particularly for young people who have not done well in the institutional environment of school or TAFE and are at risk of disengagement, will improve the understanding of the range of transition options amongst teachers, careers counsellors and learners.

A greater recognition of the role and contribution of the ACE sector would also assist in overcoming ignorance and misconceptions about Neighbourhood Houses and ACE that can create barriers to developing effective partnerships.

Improved and targeted promotion of the ACE sector should therefore be undertaken throughout the education and training sector to strengthen the delivery partnerships between schools and VET providers, and to improve student transition to the VET sector, higher education and full-time employment.

2. Current arrangements discriminate against students completing their secondary school with ACE providers. ACE providers are seen as an alternative for students who are not doing well in the school environment and are therefore already at a disadvantage. This disadvantage is further compounded by the lower levels of resources that students bring with them when they move to an ACE provider, despite the fact they are completing the same (level) qualification. These students have less access to a range of infrastructure, funding and services including information technology, libraries, counsellors, integration aides etc.

These students should be given a weighted training hour rate of 1.2 at minimum in recognition of this disadvantage. Where additional disadvantage is experienced—for example, a special need or disability—then a further loading should apply. This would improve the experience and outcomes for learners transitioning from school to the ACE sector.

Question: What additional actions should Government take to support young people to complete initial qualifications in the VET sector?

As outlined above, structural disadvantage is a contributing factor to non-completion. Disadvantaged communities, such as those in Neighbourhood Renewal areas, face barriers to post-secondary education. McIntyre (2000, 1) points out that equity policy in VET

...ignores the concentration of disadvantaged people in particular localities and gives little incentive for providers, including community agencies, to develop equity strategies addressing local labour market and socio-cultural disadvantage.

McIntyre goes on to note that “the capacity of ACE to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners is limited by the constraints of cost-recovery and competition for adult learners with a capacity to pay for courses” (2000, 4). This competitive

disadvantage is of particular concern for ACE providers located in areas with low socioeconomic profiles in a context of greater competition resulting from the Skills Reform Agenda.

Applying a loading to the SCH rate for learners from disadvantaged communities will assist providers to meet the challenges of improving outcomes, and support options for young learners seeking to complete qualifications.

Supporting young people to complete initial qualifications in the VET sector would also be enhanced by applying a social inclusion subsidy that recognises the economy of scale limitations in rural communities, where a contestable market is not always viable.

Question: What other strategies could be introduced to lift qualification completion rates for young people in the schools and VET sectors?

A number of strategies could be undertaken to strengthen completion rates in the VET sector:

1. Research from 2008 identified that

...having parents with the lowest level of education, namely incomplete secondary schooling, or being from an English-speaking home background were associated with an increased likelihood of non-completion of school or a vocational alternative. Coming from a nuclear family substantially reduced the likelihood of school non-completion or participation in a vocational alternative. (Curtis & McMillan, 2008, p. 43)

This indicates that structural disadvantage and dislocation from family are key contributing factors to non-completion. It is not unreasonable to assume that young people from such circumstances would require additional multidisciplinary assistance to complete qualifications. They may also require greater flexibility to enable them to engage and disengage depending on their circumstance (e.g. homelessness, caring for siblings or other family etc) at any given time. However within the post compulsory system there are structural issues that undermine the capacity of ACE providers to be flexible.

The shift to attendance based payment increases the financial liability for providers engaging young people experiencing this kind of disadvantage. Providers must formally withdraw students who are temporarily unable to continue learning and then re-enrol them when they are ready to resume study. This imposes a financial cost on both the student in enrolment fees and on provider through loss of payment for the student as well as additional administrative costs.

2. Griffin and Nechvoglod (2008, 12) in their review of research into VET and people with a disability found that people with a disability have lower attainment and completion rates for VET.

The new training system has an 'overriding goal' to 'ensure individuals and businesses are the central focus' (Securing Jobs for Your Future, 2008, 11). However, the Weighted Training Hours (WTH) system is based on the perceived costs of course delivery for the provider, rather the cost of delivery to a particular

learner. So for example, a student with a disability in Certificate 3 in Financial Services will be funded at 0.8 of a SCH, and an able bodied student in Certificate 3 in Automotive at 1.3 of a SCH, despite the obvious costs associated with delivering to the individual learner in the former course.

The WTH system also favours segregation over integration. Some courses specifically for learners with a disability such as Certificate 1 in Work Education are funded at a higher rate (1.5), and rightly so. However, if an individual from this course were to go into another Certificate 1 course, then they would cease to attract the additional funding. The system provides no incentives for attracting and integrating learners with a disability into mainstream VET and some incentives for segregating some learners with a disability.

Funding for learners with a disability is not designed for a contestable environment. In a large provider like a TAFE Institute, the additional costs of delivering to learners with a disability can be balanced against savings from other easier to reach cohorts. In addition, the large geographical footprint of each TAFE means that no one TAFE is likely to attract more learners with a disability than any other.

However, contestability has ushered in a range of smaller providers, who don't share these economies of scale. This particularly impacts on the ACE sector which has more than twice as many learners per head of population with a disability than other provider types, concentrated in predominantly small organizations (2004 AVETMISS data).

ACE providers are put in the invidious position of having to choose between their commitment to providing opportunities for learners with a disability and their financial viability.

The Weighted Training Hour system should be revised so that individual adults with a disability are funded at between 0.3 and 0.5 of a Student Contact Hour (SCH) rate above the rate for their particular course.

3. A difficulty arises for ACE providers where young people are no longer attending school but are ineligible for a funded place because of their age. Currently those learners who are no longer able to attend school, for whatever reason, must wait until they reach 16 years of age before they can qualify for a funded VET place. If such students are willing to participate in learning at an ACE provider, redirecting their school funding to the ACE provider would enable these learners to maintain a connection to education or training at this critical stage without placing a cost burden on the provider. ACEVic and ANHLC understand the need for age limits on compulsory school attendance. However, where schools agree that they are no longer willing to provide a place for a student, this alternative should be adopted.

Systems that assist students to move effectively between courses, institutions and sectors

Question: How can student transition to the VET sector, higher education and full-time employment be improved?

Improving understanding of the role and value of ACE within the education sector will provide better options and referral. Please see point 1 at the question 'What would

further strengthen the delivery partnerships between government and non-government schools and between schools and VET providers?’

Question: How can governments ensure that reforms to the VET and higher education sector address both skill needs and student demand for particular qualifications?

As stated above, there are structural barriers for some young people seeking second chance education due to the current eligibility criteria for government subsidised places. Removing Certificate I and II from the eligibility criteria for government funded training places will enable young people to continue to learn and find appropriate higher level training and employment options.

Question: How can governments improve provision and articulation arrangements to better support young people, especially in regional and rural areas, to access tertiary qualifications without needing to re-locate?

ACE providers are located throughout Victoria and are often the only VET providers in their community. ACE providers in rural and remote towns with small populations already struggle to put classes together in ‘thin markets’. The provision of a range of learning options is an integral part of the social and economic fabric of these towns, many of which are already doing it tough as a result of the drought, bushfires and challenges such as those posed by the global financial crisis. The tighter eligibility criteria threaten the viability of valuable training programs in areas that need them the most.

Meeting the training needs of local industries often requires the training of small numbers of people, below the critical mass required for cost recovery. The new eligibility criteria place further pressures on the capacity to meet adequate class sizes.

At the same time, costs associated with the delivery of ACE are higher for these providers. Additional costs are incurred as qualified trainers are often unavailable locally and need to travel (Anderson 2005, 10). Training materials, consumables and amenities costs are also higher.

The importance of ACE in rural areas is well recognised and the ACE longitudinal Study 1st stage report acknowledged this and recommends “That the importance of ACE in rural and regional Victoria continues to be acknowledged and maintained” (Walstab & Teese, 2005, vii). Often the local ACE provider is the only post secondary education and community development organisation in the community. Volkoff and Walstab found that:

ACE plays a particularly strong role in educational provision for regional (non-metropolitan) residents: 51 per cent of 2004 ACE students were regional residents though only 27 per cent of all Victorians live in these regional areas. Participation rates in ACE were higher for regional than metropolitan residents, but this was true for all sectors. However, ACE had a greater share of all VET activity in regional areas (range 22%-31% across the 5 regions) than in metropolitan ones (range 12%-19% across the 4 regions) (2007, 23).

To ensure continued access to learning opportunities and the supply of appropriately skilled workers in rural and remote towns with small populations, a loading must be applied to the base SCH rate to recognise and address these issues.

The principle of rural loading for education is well established, with loadings provided to non-government schools “in recognition of the higher cost of delivering education services in regional and remote regions of Australia and the negative impact that this can have on student achievement levels” (www.ato.gov.au). The principle is also applied in higher education where a regional loading is applied in recognition of the higher cost of providing places at regional campuses (www.deewr.gov.au).

By ensuring the viability of delivering VET qualifications in rural areas through a rural loading, students will be able to complete qualifications without the need to relocate.

Question: What other actions should be contemplated by institutions and government?

As noted in the discussion paper, articulation arrangements for students transitioning from VET and VCAL to Higher Education are variable. For ACE students this is exacerbated as articulation arrangements are negotiated on a course by course, subject by subject basis with providers.

Standardising articulation arrangements within the VET system has effectively been achieved without imposing the burden of negotiation on providers. The articulation between levels of qualifications within VET through the AQF addresses both course content and capacity of learners.

Strengthening Higher Education delivery in TAFEs will leave VET students in the ACE sector at a disadvantage, particularly in rural areas. Identifying the principles of best practice articulation and applying them universally at the higher education level would be a first step. Introducing electives at higher level VET qualifications in those areas perceived by universities to be lacking will at best go part way to resolving the issue. It assumes that students will be intending to go on to higher education qualifications whilst still completing their VET qualification. Whilst this may be the case for some learners it will not apply universally. Establishing a bridging qualification or course would enable those that have left VET to gain the skills required to complete a higher education qualification as well as provide an opportunity for those still in the VET system to gain the skills as electives. Students already possessing the skills required could RPL such a course.

If the concerns about learners’ capability can be addressed as above then it becomes more reasonable to develop standardised articulation into higher education qualifications based on AQF training packages.

Standardisation of articulation would enable a greater range of providers, including ACE providers, to offer their students an articulated pathway into higher education.

Opportunities for young people to re-engage with education and training

Question: Is the range of qualifications on offer to re-engage young people adequate? (Existing qualifications include VCAL, adult VCE, the General Certificate of Adult Education and the Diploma of Further Education.)

The definition of ‘re-engagement’ requires clarification. There are degrees of engagement, and the pathway from disengaged to fully engaged often does not start with the qualifications listed in the question above. Re-engagement is often a process that begins with participation in activity that is outside the formal qualifications

framework. ANHLC and ACEVic have emphasised in our response the critical need to protect and increase these informal re-engagement opportunities.

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