

A strong future for adult learning

VCOSS Submission to DET's Future Opportunities for Adult Learning Discussion Paper

August 2018



About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups, and individuals interested in social policy. In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians in policy debates and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

This submission was prepared for VCOSS by Charlotte Newbold in consultation with VCOSS members.

Authorised by:

Emma King, Chief Executive Officer

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Victorian Council of Social Service

Level 8, 128 Exhibition Street

Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

+61 3 9235 1000

For enquiries:

Llewellyn Reynders, Policy Manager

Email: [llewellyn.reynders @vcoss.org.au](mailto:llewellyn.reynders@vcoss.org.au)

VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays its respects to Elders past and present.

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Introduction

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Future Opportunities for Adult Learners in Victoria: Pathways to Participation and Jobs discussion paper.

VCOSS is the peak body for social and community services in Victoria. VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, neighbourhood houses, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy. In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians in policy debates and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

As part of Victoria's education system, adult community education (ACE) builds the capacity of high-needs learners to learn foundational language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills, and promotes pathways into further training, community participation and employment.¹ ACE provides a unique, community-based learning environment, focusing on individual learners' needs, and providing flexible, tailored support.

While ACE builds foundational LLN skills, it has a broader role as both a 'soft' entry into the education system, and provides opportunities for everyone to participate in fee-for-service personal development courses such as cooking classes, creative writing, health and wellbeing or basic computer skills. These courses offer opportunities to learn a new skill, provide social interaction supporting community engagement, and can help build confidence leading to further pre-accredited and accredited training.

Reforming the current ACE system to focus solely on LLN has risks. Too strongly and overtly linking ACE to literacy, accredited education and training or employment may limit participation in ACE. For many isolated and vulnerable people, ACE provides social interaction and engagement in local communities.

ACE engages learners who often have multiple and complex challenges affecting their learning. People can experience significant barriers to engagement in education, training or employment, such as health problems, insecure housing, substance abuse, family violence and leaving school early. They often benefit from holistic, flexible support models to assist them to overcome these barriers and remain engaged in study, training or work. ACE providers are well-positioned to deliver effective wrap-around support as many are co-located and linked with other services.

¹ Stephen Lamb, Quentin Maire, Anne Walstab, Graeme Newman, Esther Doecke and Merryn Davies, Improving participation and success in VET for disadvantaged learners, Victoria University, 2018, accessed at https://www.ncver.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0030/2096175/Improving-participation-and-success-in-VET-for-disadvantaged-learners.pdf, page 13

Community sector organisations often partner with ACE providers to deliver wrap-around support services including health services, legal services, career advice, financial assistance, childcare facilities and disability support services.²

ACE can help tackle workforce participation barriers, such as long-term unemployment, early school leaving, low literacy or numeracy skills, and the need to retrain or up-skill. ACE helps by:

- Supporting adult re-engagement with basic education and support services;
- Offering pre-accredited and accredited training;
- Providing pathways into further education, training and employment;
- Improving mental, physical and emotional well-being and confidence of learners;
- Building community capacity, resources and local leadership skills; and
- Facilitating local networks and community-led development.³

ACE is delivered through a mix of Learn Locals Organisations (LLOs), TAFEs and Dual Sector Universities. LLOs offer pre-accredited training⁴ funded by Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE). Accredited foundation skills⁵ are delivered by LLOs, TAFEs and Dual Sector Universities.

Pre-accredited training also plays an important role in creating pathways into the growing community sector workforce. Over the next five years, the health and social assistance industry, in which community services is embedded, will be the fastest growing industry in the state.⁶

ACE providers are effective in meeting the needs of disadvantaged learners. They attract a higher proportion of learners who are unemployed, not in the labour force (i.e not working and not looking for work), have a disability, did not complete Year 12 or equivalent vocational education and training (VET) study. The learners that proceed to further VET have 30% higher completion rates than average VET training rates.⁷ ACE providers offer flexibility in the nature and delivery of the courses they offer. Many have developed courses to suit the unique needs of their communities. These may not immediately impact literacy or employment, but successfully re-engage people with education. Proposals to increase access for adult learners with a focus on literacy and numeracy should not jeopardise this effectiveness.

Despite operating in a highly constrained funding environment, where outreach activity is not funded, ACE consistently delivers good outcomes in supporting high-needs learners. As part of the broader education system, ACE works with high-needs and disadvantaged learners so adults have the skills and knowledge to participate in the community and economy.

² Learn Local, About Learn Local, Victorian State Government, accessed at <https://learnlocal.org.au/about/>

³ Dr Kaye Bowman, The value of ACE providers, October 2006, Adult Learning Australia, accessed at https://www.ala.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/research/Bowman_final_draft_30_Oct_2006.pdf

⁴ Assists learners to gain the confidence and skills to search for a job or complete further study. Examples of courses include: communication, job search skills, getting ready to go back to work and literacy and numeracy – see <https://learnlocal.org.au/about/>

⁵ Accredited training is delivered by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and provides learners with the skills and knowledge that lead to a nationally recognised qualification – see <https://learnlocal.org.au/about/>

⁶ Australian Department of Jobs and Small Business, Employment projections for the five years to May 2022, Labour Market Information Portal, <http://lmip.gov.au/>

⁷ Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: Pathways to Participation and Jobs discussion paper, Department of Education and Training, 2018, p.19

Recommendations

Support scale and capability

- Introduce a new outreach subsidy to increase participation, support assessment at intake, and offer support that enables participation.
- Fund wrap-around support staff in ACE to conduct outreach, build relationships and deliver tailored support to facilitate learning.
- Fund high-quality professional development for the ACE teaching workforce, designed in consultation with the sector.
- Undertake further work to understand the current teaching skills, competencies and qualifications of the ACE workforce.
- Ensure at a minimum, all language, literacy and numeracy teachers have accredited qualifications.
- Remove the 'two course' rule for high-needs learners.

Orient towards jobs and industry

- Support insurance coverage for pre-accredited work experience to encourage greater partnerships between industry and ACE and create work placements that can support a pathway into secure and sustainable employment.
- Recognise the important role that pre-accredited training plays in creating pathways into the growing community sector workforce.
- Undertake further scoping work between ACE, VET and industry to identify opportunities for conducting skills gap assessments for workers and conducting in-house LLN training.

Ensure a cohesive, collaborative system

- Support effective partnerships between ACE and TAFEs to support learners' momentum and ongoing engagement with further education, as a pathway into employment.
- Provide funding to LLO's to employ part-time business development coordinators to foster partnerships with industry.

Support scale and capability

Assist high-needs learners to engage

Recommendations

- Introduce a new outreach subsidy to increase participation, support assessment at intake, and offer support that enables participation.
- Fund wrap-around support staff in ACE to conduct outreach, build relationships and deliver tailored support to facilitate learning.

ACE funding should reflect the extra costs of providing services to people requiring additional support to undertake study, such as those with social, emotional and behavioural barriers to engagement, and those facing challenges in re-engaging in education.

Outreach, learner wellbeing, pedagogy and pathways underpin effective intervention programs to support high-needs learners' re-engagement.⁸

Effective outreach strategies can help support disengaged learners who are marginalized. These overcome participation barriers by providing easily accessible information and advice about further learning available in local communities.⁹ Despite being effective for engaging high-needs learners, this is resource-intensive,¹⁰ and providers are not currently funded for outreach activities.

Introducing a new outreach subsidy would help increase participation, support assessment, and promote ongoing participation and course completion.

*“you have to be willing to keep on going and not be discouraged...hard to reach learners are wary about participation and you have to be prepared to go back and back and have the funding to do it”.*¹¹

⁸ Dr. Merryn Davies, Prof. Stephen Lamb & Esther Doecke, Strategic Review of Effective Re-Engagement Models for Disengaged Learners, Prepared for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, August 2011, accessed at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/about/research/revreengage.pdf>, p.21

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: Pathways to Participation and Jobs discussion paper, Department of Education and Training, 2018, p.30.

¹¹ Dr. Merryn Davies, Prof. Stephen Lamb & Esther Doecke, Strategic Review of Effective Re-Engagement Models for Disengaged Learners, Prepared for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, August 2011, accessed at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/about/research/revreengage.pdf>, p.24

Funding more wrap-around support staff in ACE would help promote strategic outreach, build relationships,¹² enable mentoring, promote community partnerships, build relationships with industry to enable work experience opportunities, and deliver tailored one-on-one support. This helps increase participation of high-needs learners in ACE and helps overcome barriers through supporting access, ongoing engagement and completion of LLN courses, providing pathways into further training and employment.

Learner wellbeing supports effective engagement and intervention. This involves recognising the structural obstacles affecting a person's ability to learn, including mental health, substance use, family violence, insecure housing and intergenerational unemployment.¹³ Examples of approaches to improve learning wellbeing include creating non-academic support, adopting a client sensitive approach to wellbeing, supporting development of relationships in the community and industry, co-locating services and providing intensive support through guidance, counselling, monitoring and follow-up.¹⁴

Ensuring that pre-accredited training has a sound pedagogical base, underpinned by a quality framework, supports engagement and learning success.¹⁵ This can be supported by providing flexible learning options, including contact hours and curriculum delivery, pace of study and accessible place-based learning, alongside effective outreach services and wrap-around support services.

¹² Dr. Merryn Davies, Prof. Stephen Lamb & Esther Doecke, Strategic Review of Effective Re-Engagement Models for Disengaged Learners, Prepared for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, August 2011, accessed at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/about/research/revreengage.pdf>, p.23

¹³ Dr. Merryn Davies, Prof. Stephen Lamb & Esther Doecke, Strategic Review of Effective Re-Engagement Models for Disengaged Learners, Prepared for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, August 2011, accessed at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/about/research/revreengage.pdf>, p.26

¹⁴ Dr. Merryn Davies, Prof. Stephen Lamb & Esther Doecke, Strategic Review of Effective Re-Engagement Models for Disengaged Learners, Prepared for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, August 2011, accessed at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/about/research/revreengage.pdf>, p.26-30

¹⁵ Dr. Merryn Davies, Prof. Stephen Lamb & Esther Doecke, Strategic Review of Effective Re-Engagement Models for Disengaged Learners, Prepared for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, August 2011, accessed at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/documents/about/research/revreengage.pdf>, p.30

Build excellence in the teaching workforce

Recommendations

- Fund high-quality professional development for the ACE teaching workforce, designed in consultation with the sector.
- Undertake further work to understand the current teaching skills, competencies and qualifications of the ACE workforce.
- Ensure at a minimum, all language, literacy and numeracy teachers have accredited qualifications.

VCOSS supports ongoing professional development for the ACE teaching workforce so students receive high quality and consistent learning and teaching practices, and the profession is continuously supported to increase its capability, particularly in delivering foundational LLN. Given professional development costs and limited ACE provider budgets, VCOSS supports extra funding from the Victorian Government to facilitate delivery of professional development. This should be developed in consultation with the sector, and focus on building their skills and knowledge in teaching, learning, engagement and assessment design to improve the outcomes for high-needs cohorts.

VCOSS members report mixed views on establishing a new Adult Literacy and Basic Education Research and Professional Development Centre, noting there are already many respected researchers and providers, and further duplicating efforts may be unnecessary. Some VCOSS members note trialing communities of practice using existing networks and expertise may be a better approach, such as through the Victorian Adult Literacy Basic Education Council (VALBEC).

In relation to accreditation or minimum standards of the ACE workforce, VCOSS would support further work being undertaken by the Victorian Government to understand the current teaching skills, competencies and qualifications of the ACE workforce to inform any future consultation around minimum qualifications across the teaching sector.

In relation to teaching LLN skills to high-needs learners, at a minimum, all language, literacy and numeracy teachers should have accredited qualifications (e.g. an English as an Additional Language (EAL) or Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) qualification) This will help promote consistency of teaching practice and assessment design, and help improve outcomes for high-needs learners.

Remove systemic barriers to learner progress

Recommendation

- Remove the 'two course' rule for high-needs learners.

To best address barriers to learners' progress, VCOSS recommends that the 'two course' rule for high-needs learners be removed. Under this rule, students are restricted to:

- Commencing a maximum of two government-funded courses in a calendar year;
- Undertaking a maximum of two government-funded courses at any one time; and
- Commencing a maximum of two government-funded courses at the same level in their lifetime.¹⁶

As a result, VCOSS members report that learners' momentum and skill development in LLN can be stymied, as they may complete two government courses in the first 3 months of a calendar year, and then have to wait another 9 months before accessing a further government subsidy. Short transitions between courses helps learners maintain momentum in their learning journey, helping support seamless transitions into further training or employment.

Funding models can focus on encouraging people's engagement with learning, rather than creating barriers to participation. Members report this rule removal would positively support learner momentum, as people could take consecutive courses and build on their learning, engagement and skills development.

¹⁶ Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: Pathways to Participation and Jobs discussion paper, Department of Education and Training, 2018, p.29

Orient towards jobs and industry

Improve responsiveness to educational priorities and industry needs

Recommendation

- Support insurance coverage for pre-accredited work experience to encourage greater partnerships between industry and ACE and create work placements that can support a pathway into secure and sustainable employment.
- Recognise the important role that pre-accredited training plays in creating pathways into the growing community sector workforce.

Individual learning outcomes are important, but a narrow focus on pathways to further learning or employment overlooks the value of other individual learning achievements, particularly for vulnerable learners. For example, when working with disengaged learners, developing learning skills and sustaining engagement in education is an outcome in itself, which can later be built upon towards employment pathways. Engagement in adult education helps build confidence, fosters an appreciation for the importance of learning, supports community goals and aspirations and can enable learners to begin to consider new possibilities, including further study and potential career pathways.

The Victorian Government can consider policy levers and funding that help foster greater partnerships between ACE and industry, and which provides opportunities for more pre-accredited work experience. VCOSS supports insurance coverage for pre-accredited work experience for learners, helping support work placements and workplace-based education.¹⁷

The Victorian health care and social assistance industry (which includes most community services) employs about 412,000 people and is the state's largest industry by employment.¹⁸ It has also experienced the fastest employment growth of any industry in Victoria; in the five years to 2015 jobs in this industry have increased by 56,200.¹⁹ This growth is expected to continue with an additional 72,000 health care and social assistance new jobs projected to be added to the Victorian economy by 2022.²⁰

¹⁷ For further analysis regarding how to improve partnerships between industry and ACE, please see section three, Ensure a cohesive, collaborative system.

¹⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force, Australia. Detailed, Quarterly Cat. No. 6921.0.55.003, May 2017.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Australian Department of Jobs and Small Business, Employment projections for the five years to May 2022, Labour Market Information Portal, <http://lmip.gov.au/>

The community services workforce is expected to grow at similar, if not greater, rates. This is driven in part by population growth,²¹ an aging population,²² the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)²³ and recent family violence reforms.²⁴

The Victorian Government should also recognise the important role that pre-accredited training plays in creating pathways into the growing community sector workforce. Supporting the growth of this sector is important not only from a social good perspective, as the industry supports people to overcome poverty and disadvantage, but also from an economic perspective. In Victoria for example, it is estimated that community sector charities contribute \$13 billion to the economy.²⁵ Less than half of the sector's revenue comes from government funding, with the balance from fundraising, donations and other revenue raising activities.

Address the needs of workers with low literacy

Recommendation

- Undertake further scoping work between ACE, VET and industry to identify opportunities for conducting skills gap assessments for workers and conducting in-house LLN training.

As Victoria moves to a knowledge-based economy, workers in transitioning industries face the prospect of their company closing or their industry downsizing. They are likely to benefit from reviewing their skills set, with the opportunity of further contextualized, accredited LLN training delivered in their workplace. Given the burden of industry closure often falls on workers and their families, the Victorian Government should further consider how best to proactively ensure workers have the LLN skills they need to obtain a new, secure job.

There are lessons from Australia's previous structural adjustment policy responses to business closures and industry downsizing. The most successful responses often involve early planning, engagement with the workforce and local community, and specific measures to help people find new jobs, protect existing jobs and create new ones. In helping people find new jobs, incorporating a specific funding and connection between ACE, VET and industry to conduct LLN skills training in workforces could particularly benefit low-skilled workers, particularly where this occurs before a business is closed and while the worker is still employed.

²¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Demographic Statistics, Cat. No 3101.0, June 2017

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/1CD2B1952AFC5E7ACA257298000F2E76?OpenDocument>.

²² Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Demographic Statistics, Cat. No 3101.0, June 2017

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/1CD2B1952AFC5E7ACA257298000F2E76?OpenDocument>.

²³ Productivity Commission, PC news, August 2017, <https://www.pc.gov.au/news-media/pc-news/pc-news-august-2017/ndis-costs>.

²⁴ Victorian State Budget, 2017-2018, <https://www.budget.vic.gov.au/priority/family-violence>.

²⁵ VCOSS, Strengthening the State, 2015, <http://vcoss.org.au/documents/2015/05/Strengthening-the-State.pdf>.

When upskilling existing workforces, personalized in-house assessment of LLN skills and delivery of LLN training would substantially benefit many workers, particularly in firms where employers are concerned about existing capabilities. Any LLN training conducted in the workforce should be funded by employers or require a co-contribution, particularly where conducted to upskill an existing workforce, which has demonstrable benefits to their flexibility, productivity, improved individual and team communication and business success.

Ensure a cohesive, collaborative system

Clarify roles and embed a culture of collaboration

Recommendations

- Support effective partnerships between ACE and TAFEs to support learners' momentum and ongoing engagement with further education, as a pathway into employment.
- Provide funding to LLO's to employ part-time business development coordinators to foster partnerships with industry.

The Victorian Government should support better transitions of high-needs learners from ACE into further education. VCOSS members report promoting greater partnerships and collaboration between LLOs and TAFEs particularly benefits disadvantaged learners' momentum to continue and complete further training, and acquire the skills to obtain secure employment in an evolving and increasingly knowledge-based economy. However, a number of VCOSS members delivering ACE confirm they do not have the resources to proactively work with or develop existing relationships with local TAFE institutions to effectively support learners continued pathways into further training.

Effective partnerships between ACE and TAFEs supports high-needs learners' momentum and journey into further training and employment. Increasing awareness of other sector's training opportunities amongst ACE providers helps support disadvantaged learners on their learning journey, informing course selection, with a view towards career mapping.

VCOSS members suggest that the Victorian Government fund LLO's to employ part-time business development coordinators to foster partnerships with industry. This could include identifying and arranging work placements for students in local businesses, as well as fostering a pipeline of LLO's graduates.

Victorian Council of Social Service

Level 8, 128 Exhibition Street,
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

e vcoss@vcoss.org.au

t 03 9235 1000

www.vcoss.org.au

