



How to implement a comprehensive lifelong learning strategy

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Defining lifelong learning as a 'cradle to grave' process and one that includes informal as well as formal learning poses a major problem for government strategy. To overcome obstacles to government and community support for lifelong learning, we need to establish a learners' agency.

One obstacle to lifelong learning is that the various elements of the formal learning system are disjointed, and often fail to meet the needs of learners. Efforts to coordinate between departments within governments, between governments, and with and among service providers are not only difficult to achieve. They often fail to focus on the learner to meet their needs and achieve their specified outcomes.

A second obstacle to lifelong learning is a lack of motivation. Surveys show that most people say they are too busy to undertake job-related training. This may be partly due to a resistance to further participation in formal learning. A high proportion of Australian adults (44 per cent of people aged 16–64 in 1996) have literacy levels that the OECD deems insufficient to cope with work and modern life.

The lack of motivation to learn may also be due to how learning is defined and delivered. ANTA's market research shows that recognition of prior learning (RPL) has great appeal because it affirms the value of people's learning experiences by encouraging them and their employer to build on existing skills. But for a range of reasons, education providers limit opportunities for RPL.

Lifelong learning is also substantially hindered by the lack of financial incentives to encourage individuals and enterprises to invest in learning.

My proposal is for an agency to promote lifelong learning and to act as an advocate for learners that is independent of service providers.

One function of the agency would be to monitor and inform learners at post-compulsory level about the relative effectiveness of education and training pathways. The agency could also report on the performance of providers against international benchmarks in general and in specific areas such as the take up of online interactive learning.

A second key function of the agency could be to serve as an independent assessor, on a fee-paying basis, of learning undertaken outside the formal learning system. By negotiating with education and training providers, it could gain appropriate recognition for this learning.

Assessors of RPL can use internationally benchmarked literacy and numeracy instruments that have been found robust by the OECD. The planned Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, to be conducted in 13 countries in 2002, is now also testing instruments to assess teamwork, practical intelligence and ICT skills.

A related function for the agency could be to offer an assessment of a person's literacy and numeracy and to issue a certificate for Level 3 attainment. This is similar to the function of the General Educational Development (GED) diploma in the USA. Level 3 is judged to be the minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society. It is the literacy and numeracy level required for successful secondary school completion and tertiary entry.

A third role for the learners' agency could be to administer individual learning accounts as described by Mark Latham in his Commentary of 9 May.

To be an effective advocate, such an agency must be independently funded. It could, for instance, charge for RPL and for the testing of Level 3 literacy and numeracy.

A greater focus on the learner is required for lifelong learning to work. We need to empower learners and potential learners with information, tools and incentive structures.