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# Lifelong learning

## What does it mean?

**Richard Curtain**

*The challenge every country faces is how to become a learning society and to ensure that its citizens are equipped with the knowledge, skills and qualifications they will need in the next century. Economies and societies are increasingly knowledge-based. Education and skills are indispensable to achieving economic success, civic responsibility and social cohesion.*

G8 Communique, Koln 1999

**A**ustralia does not have a comprehensive policy on lifelong learning. This is despite our poor rating, compared with other OECD countries, on early childhood education, upper secondary school attainment, adult participation in training, and adult literacy and numeracy. The concept of lifelong learning challenges governments and enterprises because it requires a focus first and foremost on the needs of the learner. Starting from the learner's perspective highlights barriers to learning, including the lack of motivation to learn. This starting point, however, will make little difference to how policy and practice operate unless learners have some collective capacity to make their needs known and acted upon.

This article proposes one way an empowered learner approach could be implemented by the Commonwealth government: through an independently funded agency to represent the interests of, and act as an advocate for, learners.

Why is lifelong learning important? Widespread fears about job security in the face of the pressures of globalisation

can have a debilitating effect on large sections of the workforce. Surveys show that fears about job security are growing over time despite the fact that there is little evidence of shorter job tenure.

Resorting to social safety nets in the form of social security payments is not sufficient to help individuals learn to manage risk in this more precarious world. A greater emphasis on encouraging personal responsibility and initiative is needed. This applies not only to employment but also to a range of other features of modern living, such as environmental hazards and health risks. Lifelong learning, broadly understood, can offer a framework for enabling individuals to better manage risk in their lives and for governments and employers to support them in doing this.

A comprehensive lifelong learning strategy that maximises learning opportunities can be justified in terms of benefits to the economy, enterprises and the individual. Recent research shows that in OECD countries one extra year of education leads, on average and in the long run, to an increase in eco-



Patani Mohan/Sydney Morning Herald

*A 1996 survey found that over a quarter of Year 3 primary students failed to meet a minimum standard of literacy, says Richard Curtain.*

conomic output per capita of between 4 and 7 per cent. Other benefits of higher levels of education attainment include improved health; improved chances of children receiving higher levels of education; higher levels of civic participation, volunteering and charity-giving; and a lower risk of criminal activity.

Lifelong learning first needs to be defined. This requires spelling out what the expected learning outcomes are, and who is accountable for delivering them. It involves setting targets for population coverage and the quality of the learning received. It also requires a transparent process for reporting on outcomes close to where the service is delivered. This is to provide learners or potential learners with the necessary information to decide to invest their time and money in learning.

The best expression of what lifelong learning entails is the G8 governments' 'Cologne Charter on Lifelong Learning' issued in 1999. The six essential elements of the Cologne Charter cover foundation learning, post-compulsory educa-

tion and adult skills upgrading. According to the Charter, foundation learning should start with high-quality early childhood education. However, in Australia, the average time spent in pre-primary education is only 8 months compared with at least 30 months in France, Germany, Japan and Sweden. No measures of quality outcomes related to how well children's learning needs are met are available.

Primary education, according to the Charter, needs to be made accountable for how well it enables all children to achieve competence in reading, writing, arithmetic, information and communications technology, and basic social skills. After a 1996 national survey showed that over a quarter (27 per cent) of Year 3 primary students failed to meet a minimum standard of literacy, the Australian government set a national goal for primary students to attain the skills of numeracy and English literacy, such that 'every student should be numerate, able to read, write, spell and communicate at an appropriate level'.

However, by 1999, only two-thirds of indigenous students

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**At least one-fifth of Australian school leavers in 1999 had not entered a clear pathway to full-time work or further education five months after leaving school. However, no systematic information is available ... on what happens to students once they leave secondary school.**

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(66 per cent) had reached the agreed minimum standard for Year 3 primary students compared with an 87 per cent rating for all students. The reporting process is itself limited. While an individual student's assessment results are reported to parents, only some schools and education authorities have agreed to report assessment results against the national benchmarks. Nor are there benchmarks set in relation to information and communications technology and basic social skills.

The Cologne Charter states that secondary education should develop the aptitudes and abilities of all students, not only those bound for higher education and professional careers. At least one-fifth of Australian school leavers in 1999 had not entered a clear pathway to full-time work or further education five months after leaving school. However, no systematic information is available from education authorities at the state, regional or school level on what happens to students once they leave secondary school.

The Boston Consulting Group, in a recent analysis of groups at risk in the labour market, concluded that 'given the importance of the school-to-work transition, its success rate should be measured' but then noted that 'there is no routine measurement of success rates or tracking of what happens to young people after they leave school, especially if they do so before Year 12'.<sup>1</sup> No one agency reports information on the destinations of school leavers or indeed is accountable for ensuring that the needs of 'youth at risk' are addressed.

Also important is an assessment of the quality of secondary education. OECD data show that the average cognitive performance of people in upper-secondary education in Australia is similar to New Zealand, Canada and Belgium, but is lower than that of secondary school completers in Germany, The Netherlands and Sweden.

The Cologne Charter also highlights the need for vocational education and training providers to show that they are

imparting skills attuned to the needs of the labour market. This involves using the most up-to-date technology, as well as having in place easily accessible pathways to higher qualifications. While information is available on the outcomes of some post-compulsory school options, no measures are available based on the young people themselves and the pathways and outcomes they achieve.

The number of Australians with post-school qualifications has not improved markedly over time. The proportion of the population with post-school qualifications only increased from 46 per cent to 50 per cent between 1993 and 1999. Australians with degrees have increased from 12 to 18 per cent of the population over this period. However, persons with sub-degree (including skilled and basic vocational) qualifications declined from 33 per cent to 31 per cent over the same time period.

The Cologne Charter proposes as a minimum benchmark that tertiary education be open to everyone capable of profiting from degree-level work, with financial support to ensure access for everyone who can benefit. Australian universities do report information on outcomes in terms of graduate satisfaction with teaching, goals and standards, workload, assessment, generic skills and overall satisfaction, as well as graduate destinations (employment, starting salaries or further study).

What is missing in terms of accountability are measures on course completion rates and the satisfaction ratings of non-completers. Only nine of the 39 higher education institutions report on completion rates. Only two universities, Murdoch and Flinders, report on access rates for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Only five universities refer to credit transfer arrangements with the TAFE sector and only two specify recognition of prior learning as elements of their Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans for the 2000–2002 Triennium.

#### **Continuing learning**

Finally, the Charter proposes that opportunities for adult skill acquisition should be based on appropriate public or employer support, accommodate family needs and afford ready opportunities for re-skilling throughout life. This includes high-quality work-based learning systems that also equip people with the skills needed for self-generated learning. Australia has no regular measures of the training participation rate of employed adults. Some (out of date) OECD comparative data show that Australia ranks behind the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the United States.

In terms of adult literacy and numeracy, OECD data show that nearly half of Australia's population aged between 16 and 65 years have literacy and numeracy levels below that widely regarded as necessary to cope with the demands of modern life and work. Despite this poor rating, no official measures are available concerning adult literacy and numeracy.

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## Richard Curtain

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The primary challenge for governments and enterprises is how to meet the needs of the learner. A comprehensive life-long learning strategy is difficult for governments to adopt because it involves many entrenched institutions whose starting point is to defend their turf. It requires a high degree of policy and service delivery co-ordination. This is near impossible to achieve without an agency specifically charged to bring the range of players together to meet the needs of individual learners.

One valuable way to improve the motivation to learn is to make it easier for the formal learning system to recognise that learning takes place outside its institutional setting. This requires addressing the limitations of existing mechanisms for assessing and recognising prior learning. Market research conducted by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) in 1999 confirmed that recognition of prior learning has great appeal because it affirms the value of people's own learning experiences by encouraging them and their employer to build on their existing skills. However, the formal system's resistance to recognition of prior learning—or perhaps its inability to assess it adequately—is demonstrated by data supplied by ANTA which show that skills outputs associated with the recognition of prior learning accounted for only 2.5 per cent of total training activity in 1999.

What is required is third-party independent assessment of non-formal learning. This overcomes the potential conflict of interest education providers may have. The less prior learning is recognised, the more formal learning must be undertaken to obtain a qualification, and the larger the fees a higher education or training provider earns. Another benefit would be the greater capacity to develop and refine a set of assessment tools that can ascertain such basic 'soft' skills as capacity to learn and to problem solve.

A third-party agency, funded at least in part by learners, and independent of the suppliers of education services, could provide a neutral and supportive setting. This can be done, for example, by actively advertising and promoting this service. Such an agency would be well placed to promote the complementarity of formal, non-formal and informal learning, and to develop open networks of opportunity and recognition between all three learning settings.

Providing a financial incentive through sharing the costs of learning is another way that governments and enterprises can encourage a greater investment in learning. Individual learning accounts now being implemented in the United Kingdom are one example of how this can be done. These accounts are a mechanism to encourage people to contribute to the cost of their own learning through special savings that attract matching or supplementary grants and benefits from public and private funding sources.

Employers and unions could also participate by funding learning accounts through collective bargaining agreements. Contributions to the account from employers and individual

employees could be negotiated as part of the collective bargaining process in a way similar to employer and employee contributions to an enterprise superannuation fund. Alternatively, the concept could help to underpin organisational development, employee development schemes and individual career planning.

National measures are needed to assess progress against international benchmarks in each of the areas outlined above. Validation of our qualifications are needed through independent survey of literacy, numeracy and other life skills, such as problem-solving and capacity for team work. Other measures at state, regional and metropolitan levels are also needed. Eventually, performance measures for individual education and training providers would be required to enable learners to make informed decisions. The data have to come from each provider's administration records and a system of data collection needs to be put in place to track the destinations of students.

New targets for upper secondary school completion need to be adopted. The Finn targets set in 1991 and revised in 1995 endorse too low a level of formal education attainments for young people. Targets for improved literacy and numeracy levels for the adult population also need to be set. The Victorian Labor government has recently set three targets in relation to education and training. The first is to achieve, by 2005, at least the national average benchmark levels for reading, writing and numeracy as they apply to primary students. The second is for, by 2010, 90 per cent of young people to complete Year 12 or its equivalent. The third is to increase by 6 per cent the proportion of young people aged 15 to 19 in rural and regional Victoria engaged in education and training. The Premier of Victoria, in announcing the targets, stated that 'Governments have traditionally not liked targets. Setting them is a bold step and a sign of our determination for action.'

Other governments should set themselves similar targets, and identify what levels of the formal education and training system are accountable for their delivery. Also needed is an independent agency to provide regular feedback on performance against the targets. The agency could also encourage learner participation through provision of services such as assessment of prior learning and advice on financial support for investing in learning.

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<sup>1</sup> The Boston Consulting Group, 2000, 'Early intervention to reduce long-term unemployment', Business Council Papers, p.74