



VALBEC response to the Securing Our Future Economic Prosperity discussion paper

June 2008

Victorian Adult Literacy Basic Education Council (VALBEC) is a professional organisation representing Victorian Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy practitioners who provide adult education in the ACE, TAFE and private RTO sectors.

VALBEC supports the Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL) position of whole of life, whole of government policy for the provision of adult education programs as outlined in *A Literate Australia* (2001).

VALBEC acknowledges that those most in need in disadvantaged and marginalised sections of the population often have most difficulty engaging in and valuing lifelong learning. Life long learning is a key goal of COAG and VALBEC recognises its importance in the framing of adult education policy.

VALBEC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussion of future delivery of vocational education and training. We focus our comments on the implications for adult literacy, language and numeracy provision and access to learning. VALBEC is concerned about the focus of education being linked so strongly to employment whilst ignoring the many individual, social and community benefits.

It is timely and pertinent to have these debates with the new federal government foreshadowing an education revolution. In their education revolution paper they clearly link literacy achievement to social outcomes.

Another recent study found that countries able to achieve literacy scores 1 per cent higher than the international average will increase their living standards by a factor of 1.5 per cent of GDP per capita.

Evidence shows that investing in education builds higher levels of civic engagement (or social capital), lower levels of crime and less social disadvantage.

<http://www.alp.org.au/media/0107/spe230.php>

There is a significant amount of recent data which indicates that language literacy and numeracy skills are a vital first step in educating individuals. **The 2006 ALLS data** clearly shows the need for increased focus on language, literacy and numeracy skills.

In 2006, between 46% and 70% of adults in Australia had **poor or very poor** skills across one or more of the five skill domains of prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and health literacy. This means they did not attain skill level 3, the level regarded by most experts as a suitable minimum for coping with the increasing and complex demands of modern life and work.

(ABS cat no 4228)

While ALLS gives us a picture of the impact of poor literacy there is very little research about the benefits of investment in literacy.

Balatti, Black & Falk (2006) in their research on the wider benefits of learning show that participation in accredited adult literacy and numeracy courses produced social capital outcomes for 80% of the students interviewed.

There was evidence that social capital outcomes had a positive impact on students' social environments, education and learning, employment and quality of working life.

Literacy and numeracy improvement often required the social capital outcomes noted above as a prerequisite or co-requisite. For example, students' literacy skills improved when their membership of networks provided them with opportunities to learn, or to implement what they had learnt.

Balatti, Black & Falk (2006)

Other research makes the salient point that many long-term welfare recipients need basic educational skills before they can embark on more job-oriented training and finally move on to paid work.

Employment-disadvantaged people require a lot more intensive support to encourage them to overcome the multiple barriers they face when looking for work. A case management approach that deliberately includes skills development should be incorporated. This will require additional resources.

Guenther, Falk & Arnott (2008)

It is essential to first support language, literacy and numeracy skills before supporting individuals in undertaking specific VET training.

The following snapshots highlight the importance of language literacy and numeracy for real students in real LL&N classes.

- A migrant has completed a Certificate 3 in Aged Care through completing oral or practical assessment tasks but cannot get employment because of poor language skills
- A student with an acquired brain injury and associated mental health issues has completed year 12. He requires special consideration and support to re-enter the workforce. The first step in this process is literacy classes.
- A woman with very low education levels has a husband with an income such that she could not access any benefits. He would not provide the funds for her to participate in literacy and numeracy classes. The woman was required to complete a statutory declaration stating that she had no support from her husband so that she could access classes at the concession fee.

As these snapshots illustrate, there is not a “one size fits all” approach. Additionally, for many people an increase in fees would be a huge barrier to their participation in further education.

Discussion Questions

Question 1: If government supported training for all eligible Victorians were introduced, what should the eligibility criteria look like?

All Victorians should be eligible. Government should be aiming to encourage a learning culture which encourages Victorians to improve or maintain skills at every level of training.

Question 2: How could this proposal be marketed to encourage higher take up, particularly among Victorians who have never considered VET studies?

No response – we do not regard marketing as pertinent to this discussion.

Question 3: What proportion of course costs do you think is reasonable for an individual or business to contribute?

VALBEC supports Learning Partnerships in which governments, individuals and business contribute. One such model the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) model has been successful in improving skills of workers; this model allows business to contribute in the form of worker’s release time to attend training. Individuals also contribute by participating fully in the program and using their improved skills in the workplace.

Question 4: Is it reasonable to introduce higher fees for students for training courses that deliver higher individual benefits with improved employment opportunities?

NO

We question such a simplistic equation; fees can be a burden on a student and disincentive to engage in education.

VALBEC believes that as language, literacy and numeracy skills are the foundation of further education, programs should be provided by the Government for the common good. Higher fees would make education and training inaccessible for many disadvantaged and low socio economic groups.

With increasing rents, petrol and food prices, fees will put education and second chance vocational training courses out of the reach of many people, especially older students, women, migrants and those in rural and remote communities.

Specific sub-groups of young people systematically miss out on VET; structural barriers also stand in their way. Young people most likely to miss out on VET in the late 1990s were those with disabilities, those still living at home, those from single-parent families, and those from families with a history of parental unemployment.

Considine, Watson & Hall, (2005)

Research shows that disadvantaged groups are already missing out on VET. If fees are increased, these groups will be even further marginalised. There are many younger students undertaking VET courses who need support in literacy, language and numeracy and funding provision for this support should be a priority.

Question 5: Should the Government consider an income contingent loan scheme as currently applies to university education?

NO. Fees, in whatever guise are still a deterrent. Fees are counterproductive to an environment where education & training need to be encouraged.

Question 6: How can the system be structured to produce a better match between the future needs of the Victorian economy and the training choices made by individuals and businesses?

Industry and businesses need to be better informed of what is available and the benefits of further education and training. They also need information about options for supporting and promoting a lifelong learning culture.

A model in which workers are encouraged to study in both work and their own time allows both parties to contribute. If businesses are offered an incentive this model can be further encouraged.

A system of encouraging students to do work placements in skills shortages areas may also encourage more engagement in these areas. Work placements may be enhanced by offering incentives to businesses and streamlining paper work involved.

Question 7: How can Government best support TAFE and ACFE providers to thrive in a more competitive environment?

The first and most important step is parity of funding. For years ACFE providers have been delivering education and training on shoestring budgets. With increasing demands of AQTF standards and accountability the pressures for appropriate infrastructure, governance and administrative support have multiplied for the small provider.

Teachers in TAFE and ACFE are delivering comparable education and training courses so deserve the same wages and conditions. The pay scales should reflect national standards and Victorian teachers across the board should have parity of pay and conditions accordingly.

The ACE sector is known to have a higher proportion of disadvantaged students, those from low income families, those with disabilities and those who find the larger TAFEs overwhelming. It is important that the ACE sector continue in its present form to allow for variety and choice for such students. But it is also vital to acknowledge the work of the ACE sector that is largely hidden and undervalued.

Students with disabilities or health or welfare issues in the ACE,,TAFE and broader vocational educational sector require more educational support and thus more financial support to achieve the outcomes desired by the government. Many teachers accept lower pay in the ACE sector and are paid at higher rate for delivering the "same" in TAFE or for private providers. They accept and embrace the challenges associated with working with students who access ACE courses. It is very important that ACE can allow those who seek to move from basic literacy to Certificate II and III in VET courses and onto further qualifications within an environment that is conducive and understanding of their learning needs.

Professional Development funding and collegial support are crucial to the standing and sustainability of the teaching workforce as well as for quality of educational outcomes. VALBEC recognises the importance of choice and diversity of adult education provision but is concerned when sectors are set up in competition rather than in a collaborative and complementary model with equity and security of funding from government.

Question 8: How can government make its support for students undertaking training available in a way that encourages training providers to be more innovative, flexible and responsive to the needs of individuals and businesses?

The WELL model has proved to be a successful way of providing training as it is needed and in a way that suits all parties. It is important to note that

this training does not require participants to complete a whole certificate, just the units that relate to their work.

There are many examples of participatory and community based programs that have achieved high levels of success in terms of learner outcomes and community and individual benefits. A government approach to funding programs that allows for project based and flexible delivery would encourage higher levels of participation of marginalised and disadvantaged learners.

Question 9: In what ways can Government help individuals and businesses better understand and access the benefits of vocational education and training?

Communication strategies that involve real learners and reach out to the wider community and business need to be developed and implemented. The Reading and Writing Hotline has a record of providing direct assistance to learners and could be further developed with strategic marketing.

Government funding within, for example, the manufacturing industry which employs lower-skilled people who may experience literacy, language and numeracy difficulties, would benefit from focused programs especially in the financial literacy area. There is a focus on the unemployed but not the under-employed and some of those who take on the lower paid jobs do so because they don't have the necessary literacy / numeracy skills to move higher. They already have a sound work ethic so they would be ideal recipients of basic literacy-numeracy training in the workplace. Definitions and concepts for programs in vocational education need to be broadened so that pre-vocational education can lay the foundations for specific training later and thus encourage lifelong learning for all.

We look forward to the outcomes of the consultation process on this discussion paper and would be happy to speak in more detail about these matters.

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On behalf of VALBEC