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## **Lifelong learning: Critical, desirable or just a good idea?**

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*A national policy seminar on lifelong learning was a feature of the 1999 Adult Learners Week. A key address was Philip Candy's presentation and critique of the major obstacles to developing a national policy on lifelong learning. This is a slightly abridged version of his address, in which he asks a series of critical questions on objections and concerns relating to the idea of lifelong learning.*

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### **Introduction**

Lifelong learning has been a major preoccupation of mine for a number of years and it is a policy direction that I hold very dear. Although I suspect that my enthusiasm for lifelong learning is broadly shared by many of the people attending this symposium, there

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certainly is not unanimous support for the concept amongst our colleagues outside this gathering. As a result, it is likely that the answer to the rhetorical question in the topic I have been given – critical, desirable or just a good idea? – depends on to whom one is speaking. In other words, where many of us may regard lifelong learning as critical, others think of it only as desirable, and others again simply endorse it as just a good idea but believe that there are other more pressing good ideas that require their attention.

There seems little doubt that Australia lags behind many comparable countries in terms of its attention to lifelong learning, at least at the national policy level. A couple of years ago, I had the privilege of representing Australia at an international symposium convened by UNESCO and the Japan National Institute for Educational Research. The papers presented at that gathering emphasised the fact that Australia has been slow to embrace lifelong learning as a major policy goal at the national level. Unlike other comparable countries, we do not have a unified ministry of Lifelong Learning. Nor do we have a policy context that supports lifelong learning; indeed, many major policy-makers and opinion leaders seem to regard the whole concept as something of an indulgence, and certainly as marginal to their major concerns.

Why has Australia been so slow to embrace the idea of lifelong learning? A series of objections and concerns need to be addressed by considering the following questions:

- Who is responsible?
- Who is it for?
- Why bother?
- Why is this critical?
- How much will it cost?

### Who is responsible?

Whenever Australians attend conferences abroad, they often have difficulty in conveying to their colleagues from other countries the unique challenges posed by our federal system of government. For people who are used either to a highly decentralised form of education and training or, at the opposite extreme, to a highly centralised national system, the division of responsibility between State and Federal jurisdictions can seem confusing and, indeed, counter-intuitive. However, compartmentalisation of responsibility is not just across government departments and instrumentalities. In Australia there is an additional fragmentation of responsibility when it is recognised that lifelong learning also touches on many stakeholders in the private and voluntary sector. The recent emphasis on information technology and advanced telecommunications (ITAT) has broadened the debate about lifelong learning to include issues of connectivity and infrastructure development that extend well beyond the traditional focus on issues such as learning environments, equity, pedagogy and community development.

Linked with this fragmentation of responsibility is an unfortunate tendency in Australia to engage in an adversarial style of politics and industrial relations. The progress made in some other countries through partnerships between government, business, unions and community groups would be difficult if not impossible to replicate in Australia, mainly because of our tradition of adopting a confrontational rather than collaborative stance and, in the case of government, frequently overturning policy initiatives for no reason other than they represent the ideological perspective of a predecessor.

### Who is it for?

In discussions and debates about lifelong learning, there is an unfortunate tendency to confuse 'learning' with 'schooling', with the result that advocates and apologists on both sides of the argument

have a tendency to think that learning occurs best (or only) in the context of formal education. Even where this is not the case, we sometimes suffer from the peculiar debilitating tendency to wish to 'cut people down to size', the so-called 'tall poppy syndrome'. In this case, people who voluntarily seek out education, training or self-directed learning are often undermined by colleagues, friends and family – the very people whose support and encouragement they most need.

Secondly, there is some evidence to suggest that continued learning is regarded as a gendered activity. In other words, it is imagined that women predominate in formal education and training contexts both at work and in the community. Whether this is empirically true or not, it clearly represents a major challenge for organisations such as the Australian National Training Authority and adult community education providers to encourage people of both genders and all sorts of backgrounds to participate actively in lifelong learning.

A third potential problem for lifelong learning in our context is Australia's distinctive brand of anti-intellectualism; the assumption that we are a nation of non-learners. However, there is little evidence that this is true; indeed, it ignores both the reality that at the turn of the century Australia was one of the best educated nations in the world, and even today we are amongst the most widely read and widely travelled people on the planet.

### Why bother?

Under this heading, three different types of objections are sometimes raised. The first is captured by the phrase 'we have already done it'. Many commentators will point to evidence such as Australia's early adoption of lifelong learning principles as far back as the Kangan Report, the establishment and impact of the Centre for Continuing Education at the Australian National University, and the seemingly endless series of government reports that over the years

have advocated (or at least used the language of) lifelong learning. While this is an impressive pedigree, of course, it is likely that many of these reports and initiatives touched the lives of only a relatively small proportion of the Australian population.

The second type of objection revolves around the claim that, because Australia has excellent information and telecommunications infrastructure, a world class university system and high levels of participation in schooling and post-compulsory education, this is evidence that we are leading in terms of our commitment to lifelong learning. There are two errors of logic in this line of argument. First, having a good cultural and technological infrastructure is no guarantee that its benefits are widespread. Second, formal education should not be confused with lifelong learning.

The third and final type of criticism ironically reflects the reverse of the 'cultural cringe,' namely, the exaggerated belief in our distinctiveness and the fact that we have no need to follow the example, nor learn from the experience, of other countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, Canada and so on. The claim that Australia should become a 'clever country' is, for some people at least, proof that we have already done so.

#### Why is this critical?

In times of rapid and pervasive change, and especially in a robust and diverse democracy such as Australia, there will always be arguments over which particular policy initiatives should take precedence. In Australia, for instance, it has been argued that we need micro-economic reform, that the environment is a high priority, that we should concentrate on reconciliation with the indigenous population, that we need a national curriculum across our schools and so on. Without denying the importance of these or other worthwhile policy objectives, a concentration on lifelong learning and, in particular, a 'whole of Government' approach to the subject would significantly

help in achieving these other valued policy goals by laying a foundation of continuing learning and critical inquiry.

#### How much will it cost?

A final category of objections to lifelong learning is the concern that such initiatives will be unaffordable. At the national level, there is a concern that broadening access will have undesirable economic consequences, because it will cost money. However, such an argument fails to take account of the costs of not broadening access; as the old saying goes: if you think education is expensive, try ignorance!

At the level of individual enterprises, there is widespread reluctance in Australian business circles to invest in learning for employees. Unfortunately, many Australian companies and enterprises equate money spent on staff development with a cost rather than an investment. To the extent that they adopt a short-term perspective, they fail to recognise that the long-term competitiveness of their enterprise, especially in a global marketplace, will be vitally dependent upon the extent to which their staff are committed lifelong learners.

A third problem for Australia is our taxation system which, in many cases, penalises employers and employees, especially when the learning undertaken is not of a specifically vocational type. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the government has introduced an initiative under the heading of 'Individual Learning Accounts' in an attempt to attract disillusioned and marginalised adults back into education and training. Very often, the route back into learning is through programs that do not in the first instance have any direct relevance to their employment. In Australia, such a scheme would target the funds expended, either as income or as subject to fringe benefits tax. Both cases militate against voluntary participation in 'return to learn' programs.

## Conclusion

In concluding, I would like to pose three particular questions that may be considered by people attending this symposium:

- How can we get lifelong learning into the public awareness and into the consciousness of senior policy-makers and other influential opinion leaders?
- How can we get business and industry leaders to take the concept seriously, and to accept their role within the context of 'lifelong learning partnerships'?
- How can we help to develop a taxation regime that actively supports rather than militates against lifelong learning?

As I mentioned at the outset, my personal view is that lifelong learning is vital to Australia's international competitiveness, to our quality of life including our social inclusiveness, and to the employability and satisfaction of individuals. It is incumbent on those of us who believe in learning, not only to advocate for it in a variety of forums, but also to actively model our own commitment to such values.

## About the author

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*This paper may also be found on the web at:*  
<http://www.ala.asn.au/lll/candy.htm>