
RAPID ECONOMIC CHANGE AND LIFELONG LEARNING

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OPENING ADDRESS

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In March 1973, Kim Beazley Snr, who was Minister for Education in the Whitlam Government, set up a committee to advise the Commonwealth Government on the establishment and expansion of open tertiary education.

This had been stimulated by the establishment of the Open University in the United Kingdom, which had commenced teaching in 1971.

The Committee on Open Tertiary Education reported at the end of 1974. In a background chapter on the values and aims underpinning its work, the Committee remarked:

“Formal education should no longer be regarded as a preparation for life but, at least beyond the compulsory level, it should be integral with life itself. Educational experiences could then extend over a person’s lifetime with the individual moving back and forth between educational programs and work, or operating concurrently in both spheres, according to desire and need. In such a society education would be *recurrent*, in the sense that education opportunities would be spread out over the individual’s lifetime.” (para. 2.15)

The Report then drew attention to a series of reports of OECD, UNESCO and the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, all of which had discussed lifelong learning, the learning society, and recurrent education.

This was twenty five years ago - lifelong learning is not a new idea. Recurrent education is recurring: the OECD is at it again. With precisely the same periodicity have transition issues also resurfaced.

It is worth reminding ourselves that lifelong learning, in the sense of formal involvement with educational institutions over one’s lifetime, has for decades been a common Australian practice and one that has become magnified over the past 25 years.

The Report on Open Tertiary Education set out the age distribution of higher education students in 1973 and noted the significant proportions of older students. Over the next twenty five years there has been a massive increase in the proportion of older students, much of it no doubt due to the development of graduate coursework degrees. The proportion of students aged 30 years or more has multiplied two and a half times. This increase is also reflected in the decline in the proportion of full-time students in higher education from 63% in 1973 to 59% in 1997 and the increase in the proportion of external enrolments from 6% in 1973 to 13% in 1997.

Higher Education Enrolments by Age

| Age | 1973 % | 1997 % |
|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Under 23 | 68 | 51 |
| 23-29 | 21 | 22 |
| 30+ | <u>11</u> | <u>27</u> |
| | 100 | 100 |

The same situation applies in relation to vocational education and training:

TAFE Enrolments by Age

| Age | 1976 % | 1997 % |
|------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 15-19 | 41 | 20 |
| 20-29 | 36 | 31 |
| 30+ | <u>23</u> | <u>49</u> |
| | 100 | 100 |

In both TAFE and HE older enrolments have more than doubled relatively. Lifelong learning is clearly here. Questions remain, however, about:

- . the organisation of lifelong learning;
- . interactions between lifelong learning and work;
- . interactions between lifelong learning and the business of living;
- . the financing of lifelong learning.

These are questions to be addressed today.

The last twenty-five years have seen great economic changes in Australia, particularly in relation to the labour market:

- . the increase in unemployment, especially among the less skilled young;
- . the decline in workforce participation of the young and of older males;
- . the relative increase in part-time employment;
- . increased female participation in the workforce;
- . the relative decline of the middle in skill requirements;
- . the relative decline of the middle in the distribution of earnings;

. the relative rise in the service industries as a source of employment.

The fluidity and changeability of the labour market provide one pressure for promoting access to recurrent education. Another is the concern that the productivity in employment of early school leavers is lower than the socially acceptable minimum wage, and accordingly many young people remain unemployed.

Great structural changes have taken place in the nature of the Australian economy, the way it works and its relationship to the global economy. Indeed, one might argue that future change may turn out to be more the result of uncertainty than of further massive structural discontinuity.

At the same time, there has been an ideological shift of great significance in the way in which the economy is viewed: from the acceptance of a mixed economy/welfare state as the norm to a hard-nosed market-driven economic rationalist position, accompanied by a growing aversion to taxation and public expenditure and by a commitment to the mantras of modern management. Whether this ideological position will be sustained, and for how long, remains yet another area of uncertainty.

However important the economic changes have been, the social trends of the past 25 years need to be considered. Social change has been at least as great as economic change. Important elements have been:

- . the liberalisation of migration policy;
- . the development of multiculturalism;
- . the enhancement of gender equity;
- . policies relating to indigenous Australians;
- . concern for social justice issues generally;
- . changing social mores - marriage, family, lifestyle;
- . greater income inequality.

Concentration on economic change and the role of education in the labour market runs the risk of over emphasising the economic role of education and ignoring its other purposes. Put broadly, the role of education embraces:

- . personal development;
- . socialisation;
- . induction into citizenship;
- . a knowledge base;
- . key competencies;
- . vocational skills.

Exclusive attention on the last of these greatly undervalues what education can do for both individual and society and greatly overstates education's potential as a contributor to economic growth and a healthy economy.

Given the purpose of CEET, and its research program, it is appropriate that this conference concentrates on lifelong learning and economic change. The conference raises questions about the nature of this change and the ways in which lifelong education can respond to it and ameliorate its effects. However, we should remember

that the impact of change and of lifelong learning runs well beyond the economic, and that the economic factors that we will be considering today must be recognised as being embedded in a wider social context.

With this salutary warning, I have much pleasure in opening this conference on Rapid Economic Change and Lifelong Learning sponsored by the Monash-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training.