

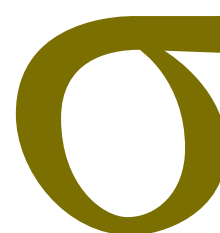
VICTORIA'S ADULT COMMUNITY AND FURTHER EDUCATION BOARD 1991-2010

A HISTORY

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**Adult, Community and
Further Education**

This publication is a history to mark twenty years since the passing of the Adult Community and Further Education Act 1991 and the establishment of the Adult Community and Further Education Board.

It has been commissioned by the Adult Community and Further Education Board.

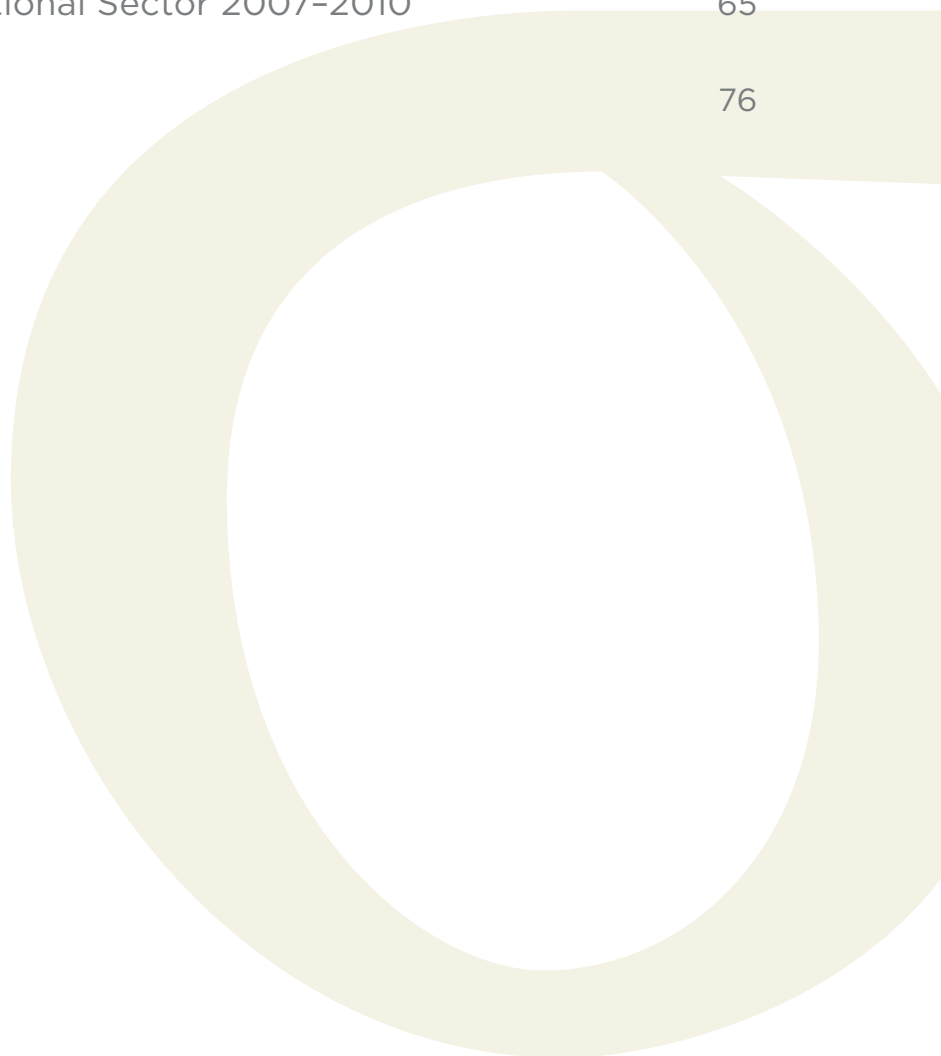
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Contents

	Introduction: Before there was an ACE Sector	1
1	Creating the ACE Sector 1983-1991	3
2	A Settled Purposeful Sector 1991-1994	16
3	A Season of Change 1995-1999	27
4	Instrument of Government Policy 1999-2004	41
5	Shaping the Sector through Policy 2004-2006	52
6	A Robust Educational Sector 2007-2010	65
	References	76





INTRODUCTION:

Before there was an ACE Sector

On 13 April 2011, the Honourable Peter Hall MLC, Minister for Higher Education and Skills, launched 'Learn Local', the new brand for the adult community education sector.

A wide and appreciative audience from providers, Regional Councils, government and the community around Victoria heard learners and teachers talk about the life-changing opportunities available, on their doorsteps, through Learn Local organisations and programs.

Their stories were compelling: a young woman with an intellectual disability whose social and employment horizons had expanded beyond imagining; a single mother who had re-entered the workforce and found satisfying employment; a young man, a refugee, who had found training and work.

Through their Learn Local organisation, each had gained a new richness in their life — skills and employment certainly, but also optimism and confidence about their futures and satisfying involvement in their local community.

The three stories were fresh and contemporary. They were also profoundly familiar. For over forty years, they have been recounted by any number of people whose lives have been changed, whose interests have been stimulated, whose career and life prospects have been enhanced by attending a learning centre in their local neighbourhood.

The brand is new, but the organisations and values it represents are not. Adult community education has a long and proud history in Victoria. The Centre for Adult Education dates back to 1947, the country learning centres it supported to the 1960s. Many of today's Learn Local providers began in the 1970s and 1980s as neighbourhood houses and community centres. They were first and foremost local initiatives that sprang up to meet a demand for education and community development in new suburbs and country towns. They were run by volunteers, and survived on local commitment and sporadic government support.

They gave people the opportunity to 'Learn Local'.

In the beginning, there was no recognised adult community education 'sector' as such. That came in stages. The first occurred in 1983 when community providers were brought under the new TAFE Board. Regional TAFE Boards were instrumental in building up the sector.

The second stage commenced in 1987, when the government again made major changes as part of its progressive restructuring of post-secondary education in Victoria. It established a Ministerial Advisory Committee on Further Education and an entire division within the Ministry of Education with responsibility for community providers, adult literacy and basic education, and adult migrant education. Local and regional input was retained through Regional Councils of Further Education.

In 1991, the sector reached its third stage of maturity and recognition with the passing of the Adult Community and Further Education Act. The Act created the Adult Community and Further Education Board, with the rights and responsibilities of a statutory authority responsible to the Minister. Regional Councils were retained. The ACFE Board and the State Training Board (responsible for vocational education and training) were required to work together on the development of adult community and further education where appropriate.

Between 1983 and 1991, just eight years, the ACE sector was created where previously there had been none. Hundreds of grassroots learning organisations were progressively brought together. Access to

the Minister had progressed from informal access, to advice through the TAFE Board, then status as a Ministerial Advisory Committee for Further Education, and finally in 1991, through the ACFE Board, a statutory authority in its own right.

In the twenty years since 1991, the sector has experienced changes as sweeping as those in the preceding twenty years. The sector has assumed significant importance in the implementation of government policy, at both Commonwealth and state level. Government funding has grown. The range of programs has greatly expanded, as have the learner groups.

The history is an account of the first twenty years of the ACFE Board, since its creation under the 1991 legislation to 2010. It draws on the Board's pre-occupations and decisions as they are recorded in the Board's meeting papers. It is a history of the central decision-making body, not the Regional Councils, nor individual providers; those stories are yet to be fully documented.

In the early 1990s, Board members visited a number of providers and regions around Victoria. They concluded ACE was a 'settled purposeful sector', working hard to address the demands of government policy and the needs of their clients, with resources never sufficient to meet the need. Throughout its first twenty years, the Board worked to build up that purposeful sector: to increase its profile in the government and public eye and to ensure the ongoing viability of providers.

This is that story.



CHAPTER 1:

Creating the ACE Sector 1983–1991

Introduction

The Adult, Community and Further Education Act of 1991 and the sector it concerned was the culmination of major developments and vigorous debates in Victoria's adult community education scene throughout the 1980s. The scale of the changes was so extensive that ten years earlier the key provision of the Act — a statutory authority for adult community education reporting directly to a Minister of the Crown — would have been barely imaginable.

The changes occurred in two bursts. The first began with the integration of technical and adult education into the TAFE sector in 1983 — 'T' + 'FE' = 'TAFE'. Four years later, in 1987, the Victorian government effectively separated the 'T', now termed vocational education and training, from the 'FE'. It did this by creating the State Training Board and the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Further Education. The Ministerial Advisory Committee was the precursor of the Adult Community and Further Education Board.

The 1980s are of keen interest because many of the policy and administrative discussions familiar in the sector in the twenty years since 1991 were apparent then. Among them were the distinctiveness of the sector particularly in educational approach (pedagogy), its success in preparing people for further study and employment, the co-ordination of local, regional and statewide needs, and the appropriate balance between government support and provider accountability.

Much of the driving energy in the period came from prominent women who were passionate about the potential of the adult community education sector for women looking for further education and employment. Some were politicians, in positions of influence — names such as Margaret Ray, Caroline Hogg, Joan Kirner, Kay Setches, and Pauline Toner come to mind. Others were working in the sector, among them Jan Corben, Phil Slattery, Christine Fensham, Helen Kimberley, Jenni Mitchell and Prue Pyke.

They and others made the 1980s a vibrant, exciting decade in Victoria's adult community education scene.



When the decade opened, there was no coordinated adult community education sector to speak of — rather several hundred organisations, tens of thousands of learners and numerous dedicated volunteers all around Victoria. Government funding from state and Commonwealth education coffers was very limited.

This situation changed with the election of the Cain Labor government in 1982, Victoria's first change of government in twenty-seven years.

The government's long-term vision for the state was international competitiveness which would bring economic and social benefits to all Victorians. A large, highly skilled workforce was vital to achieving that goal. Over the course of the next decade Victoria's education system, particularly the post-compulsory component, was transformed with that in mind. A radically different Year 12 credential (the Victorian Certificate of Education) was introduced. TAFE colleges were built in fast-growing outer metropolitan suburbs and regional areas. Education for adults, especially those who had previously 'missed out', often women, became a priority.

One of the new government's first steps to these ends was the restructuring of Victoria's TAFE system.

The previous government had taken some steps in this direction, starting the disengagement of technical colleges from the Education Department and creating a TAFE Board. The Cain government went much further, creating a TAFE sector made up of not only the technical colleges but also adult education providers — the Council of Adult Education (CAE) and its community education centres, neighbourhood houses and community providers, and the Education Department's evening high schools.

The TAFE Sector — technical and further education

For the first time, adult community education — the FE in TAFE — was formally recognised as part of the TAFE system, and so of the entire post-secondary sector. Part of TAFE, it was declared a government priority.

The effect of this change in 1983 brought new visibility, funding, growth and maturity for community providers, and so effectively laid the foundations on which even more sweeping changes were made in 1987 and 1991.

It also brought testing times for everyone. Policy makers, administrators and teachers in the T/technical side grappled with numerous issues raised by a very different, even unfamiliar, form of education. They were familiar with large trade-based, male-dominated, regimented technical colleges, not small, informal, predominately female, community-based providers which as often as not were converted residential houses. For their part, community provider personnel struggled with new administrative demands and a sense that they were competing in an unwinnable battle for the hearts, minds and purse of a large government bureaucracy.

In 1983, these issues were yet to emerge fully. The most immediate effect of the change was to give community education presence and voices at the sector's decision-making tables. The government created a new TAFE Board to plan and coordinate the system in Victoria. Unlike the previous Board made up entirely of business and industry, the new TAFE Board also included two adult and community education members. The fifteen Regional TAFE Boards, which were responsible for local planning, co-ordination and advice, also included members from community providers.

The two TAFE Board members representing adult and community education were the CAE director (Tony Delves) and a representative from 'non-college institutions' (first Jan Corben from the Mountain District Women's Co-operative, and then Prue Pyke from the Horsham Learning Centre). They were active in keeping community provision on the TAFE Board's agenda while much of the Board's attention was necessarily directed to TAFE college matters. In its first years, rarely a meeting went by when a policy or funding issue related to community providers was not raised and debated. The Board quickly established a 'Community Providers Advisory Group'. Jan Corben was appointed to the influential Facilities Standing Committee which distributed building funds, ensuring community providers could not be entirely overlooked — in fact a (small) proportion of those funds was quarantined for them.

TAFE's Community Providers

The system administered by the new TAFE Board in 1983 was made up of 28 TAFE colleges, the CAE and the 26 local advisory committees (LACs) it supported, the Education Department (over 100 technical schools and evening high schools), the Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture, and 'a variety of other agencies ... including a large number of community learning centres ...'¹

The 'other agencies' were the least known part of the newly created sector. In 1984, the Board received *Community Learning: A Public Investment*, the first comprehensive study of the community providers, their programs, participants and resources in Victoria.² Researched by Jim Saleeba from the Wodonga Community Education Centre and Geoff Benson of the Office of the TAFE Board, it was a landmark document — the first comprehensive survey of community providers undertaken, and a firm body of data on which to base policy and administrative decisions.

According to *Community Learning*, there were at least 250 community providers offering around 10,000 TAFE programs, with approximately 150,000 enrolments per year. Every week, over 41,000 Victorians participated in a TAFE program in a community provider.

The providers surveyed comprised neighbourhood houses (25.6% of the survey), community centres (27.7%), LACs (12.3%), special interest groups (12.3%), and a miscellany of school-based, art and craft and recreation/leisure centres. It showed that the 250 providers were diverse in many respects, such as size, history, and purpose. Some were sizeable operations focused on traditional hobby-type courses, while others were small community centres juggling various activities including playgroups, youth drop-ins, high schools subjects for adults, and hobby courses.

Community Learning was unapologetic in its presentation of the sector and its significance. First, it pointed out, the programs were far more than their official designation, 'hobby' or 'enrichment', suggested — they served a vital social and economic function for individuals and society at large. For some people, particularly women, people over 30 and those with limited education, these courses were

important in overcoming problems of loneliness and isolation; providing a stimulating break from routine; providing a starting place ... developing more capable and informed members of society; offering a stepping stone for many people who initially lacked self-confidence to enter the workforce; and developing skills for everyday living.

Secondly, the learners were people for whom traditional educational institutions were intimidating, or inaccessible because of physical distance or financial hardship. Women in particular were attracted to community providers with their warm inclusive atmosphere and their readiness to accommodate women's lives with flexible time-tabling, child care and low fees.

Thirdly, the report argued, the community providers were well-established and reputable: all 250 were 'organized groups with constitutions, audited accounts, management committees — all offering TAFE programs and all communicating in one form or another with Regional TAFE Boards.' The number of providers was growing rapidly in response to local need, but almost half had been in operation for at least five years.

All these achievements, the report noted, were accomplished with minimal, intermittent funds, in facilities that were often cramped and substandard, and in a central policy and administrative environment that was 'ad hoc and unstable, lacking a data or philosophical base, and with no written policies or strategy plans.'

It was clear community providers and their role in the TAFE system could not be ignored by the TAFE Board. One issue in particular — who should be TAFE providers and therefore eligible for funding — needed to be addressed quickly.

Defining 'TAFE Providers'

As the TAFE Board established itself, more potential providers came forward and funding grew. A statewide policy on the recognition of 'TAFE providers' became essential. In 1984, the Board adopted a series of 'categories'. TAFE colleges and the CAE (including the LACs) were Category A, the Education Department (including its evening high schools) Category B. These providers did not need to apply for recognition. Category C was for community organisations whose major activity was delivery of TAFE programs, and Category E for organisations that provided some TAFE programs but not as their main activity.³ The policy also set out the statistical, financial and other information required from providers, usually annually.

The fifteen Regional TAFE Boards were responsible for the managing the recognition of community providers. Initially at least, they developed their own processes to ensure the bona fides of organisations that came to them for recognition and/or funding.

A judicious mix of encouragement and pragmatism was needed. On the one hand, there were numerous community initiatives worthy of consideration; on the other, some parameters were essential in the context of government funding and accountability.

At Southern Westernport Region, it is important that a community group looking to become a TAFE provider has a good track record. That means being completely autonomous and having the earmarks of a survivor in the fierce struggle to keep afloat ... We will only look at a group that is up and running,' says Carol. 'TAFE is definitely looking for a group that has its act together.'

> CAROL KELLY, SOUTHERN WESTERNPORT REGIONAL TAFE BOARD, *TAFE TOPICS*, JANUARY 1987.

Each Board maintained a continuous register of recognised providers in their region which the TAFE Board consolidated once a year.

Several regional managers criticised the TAFE Board's recognition policy for making unnecessarily heavy reporting demands on community providers. Insisting 'sensitivity is fundamental', they warned the Board it 'must not be seen to be trying to bureaucratize the community based provider network or to be acting as 'Big Brother'.'⁴

Despite the warning, the system became more complicated — undoubtedly in a well-intentioned attempt to accommodate the diversity of community providers and bring as many as possible into the fold. By 1987, there were five separate categories for community-based providers: A3 for LACs, B for neighbourhood houses/learning centres whose major activity was TAFE, C for community groups whose major activity was TAFE programs, E community groups where TAFE programs were a minor activity, and G — organisations with an extensive statewide 'community of interest'.⁵

For all the criticism, however, it must be acknowledged that in a few short years, a widely-based and diverse system of TAFE providers had been formally established where there had been virtually none.

Regional TAFE Boards

From the beginning, the Regional TAFE Boards were the mechanism by which the TAFE Board related to community providers on a range of matters from recognition to funding allocations. The Boards were energetic advocates of community education and its capacity to respond to various local needs. They were an essential part of bringing community providers into the TAFE system, which was no mean feat given the dominance of the TAFE colleges.

Fifteen Regional TAFE Boards were set up in 1983, five in metropolitan Melbourne and ten in 'country Victoria'. They were responsible for the planning and administration of technical and further education in their region, a wide brief given their small office staff, large geographic area and/or large population. The Boards' influence on TAFE colleges in their region was problematic and probably negligible, but they were very active in keeping the Office of the TAFE Board informed about and attuned to the nature of community-based provision.

Regional TAFE Boards promoted the smaller providers in their region by many and various means. They provided information about providers in the region for their annual report, and in the annual TAFE Handbook which included course listings. This gave community providers a profile in TAFE's most public official document from the beginning. The information about community provision in general and community providers grew with each edition. Some regions — Gippsland, Eastern Metropolitan and Southern Westernport, for example — went to considerable lengths in their entries to talk about the importance of community providers in encouraging people to return to study.

Probably their most time-consuming and difficult role involved funding and in particular distributing funds to providers, but any appreciation of the funding issues around community based provision in the 1980s needs first a brief description of what constituted 'TAFE programs.'

TAFE programs

TAFE programs fell into three broad categories. Vocational programs, the flagship, trained the workforce. Preparatory or access programs provided preparation for further study and some employment. Enrichment programs were for hobbies and recreation.

In its description of the newly created TAFE system in 1983, the first Handbook referred to the ‘large number of community education centres actively involved in Stream 6 programs.’

Stream 6 (or ‘Enrichment’) was the TAFE terminology of the day for adult education courses. They were ‘designed to assist participants in expressing and enhancing creative, cultural, individual, social or leisure interests by way of educational courses and experience.’ Often referred to as hobby or recreational courses, they were paid for by the participant. They were the mainstay of the Council of Adult Education and the community education centres, and also offered by TAFE colleges.

The Council of Adult Education, some community providers and TAFE colleges also provided Preparatory or Access programs (Stream 5). These programs, which included the Higher School Certificate/Year 12) were arguably at the core of the purpose of many community providers. They were designed for ‘people who have experienced particular barriers to achieving basic educational and/or vocational goals. These enable participants to cross educational barriers to employment or further studies or to increase participation in the broader concerns of citizenship or community affairs through enhanced personal self-confidence and competence.’

Typical preparatory programs were adult literacy, ‘migrant English’, and year 12 level academic subjects such as English and maths. There was limited funding for these programs, principally inherited from the Education Department.

Vocational programs (Streams 1-4) were essentially the preserve of TAFE colleges, although the CAE and several country education centres offered some basic skills training (Stream 4).⁶ Everything about TAFE colleges — their funding, facilities and equipment, staffing and atmosphere — made trade and skills training their primary interest. They could argue that other providers were already delivering preparatory and adult education courses both in Melbourne and many regional areas. Furthermore, the TAFE Board required them to charge a 20% premium on Stream 6 programs.

The issue of program categories was immensely important for adult community education providers and their learners. They were not ready to be dismissed as providers of hobby courses. They argued women especially enrolled in their programs as a first tentative step towards retraining and employment. Women who had not studied since they left school a decade or more earlier were looking for support to return to education and/or to the workforce. They needed skills and confidence. Studying the HSC (Year 12 for tertiary entrance), Return to Study programs and so-called ‘hobby’ courses provided them.

‘... it is difficult to imagine the massive amount of debate and discussion that went on about women’s learning, women’s place in society and equal opportunity for women in all sectors of society.’

> CHRISTINE FENSHAM, CO-ORDINATOR OF THE AVENUE NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE.⁷

Typing, word processing (in the new world of computers), and sewing were typical examples of adult education courses with an obvious employment emphasis. The Centre at Wangaratta listed dozens of adult education courses in the TAFE Handbook in 1984: many of them could have led directly or indirectly to employment: Job Wise, Computers and Programming, Machine Patchwork to name but a few.

Community Learning tackled the issue head on. Enrichment programs, the report argued, led on to further study, employment, community engagement and better life skills, particularly for women. They were ‘amongst the most creative avenues for job creation,’ with enormous potential for community development and community health. It urged the term ‘enrichment’ be replaced with ‘community learning’.

A report by Helen Kimberley of the Association of Neighbourhood Learning Centres in 1986 provided clear evidence about the outcomes of adult community education.⁸ Her data showed that 38% of learners went on to further education and 33% not previously in the paid work force three years earlier now had employment. It was, she believed, the first quantifiable data on the outcomes of adult

community education available, and, as such, it made a significant impression on the then Minister for Education. It was also the first of numerous reports analysing the impact of adult community education over the coming decades.

The Commonwealth replaced 'Enrichment' with 'Stream 1000'. In a way, this reinforced the ambiguity — were these programs a first step towards re-engagement in learning, or the lowest on the education totem pole?

This was more important than semantics. Funding — however small the amounts — was at stake, and for community providers operating on a shoe string and with largely volunteer labour, every dollar was crucial for survival, success and everything in between.

Funding

Community providers had an extraordinary capacity to survive, even thrive, on 'pin money' — small government grants from various departments, small tuition fees, fund-raising activities, donations and countless hours of volunteer time. The skill and ingenuity of part-time and voluntary staff in obtaining funds and turning them into programs for learners were legendary.

Prior to 1984, the main sources of funds for community providers came from the Commonwealth Voluntary Adult Learning Group (VALG) grants, and the state Family and Community Services (FACs, now the Department of Human Services). They were small — just several hundred dollars — but they were sufficient to get some groups going and/or enable them to continue. In 1982, the Avenue Neighbourhood House, for example, started with \$500 from VALG and free rent. The grant paid for the telephone system. The following year, it secured more money from VALG, and introduced tuition fees (\$1 per class).⁹

Moe Neighbourhood House illustrates how community providers gradually managed to secure more fund in the 1980s. In 1983, its first year, it relied entirely on in-kind support (a house from the then Housing Commission), donations and volunteers. The following year, it applied successfully from grants from TAFE (\$1000), FACS (\$5000), and Youth Sport and Recreation (\$700). In 1985, it won \$1000 from the Latrobe Valley Women's Recreation Development Plan.¹⁰

Werribee Community Centre was another case in point. It had drawn government funding from various government and other sources since the early 1970s for a wide range of popular community programs for all age groups. With heavy demands on its facilities and funding for year to year unpredictable, the Centre found itself in 'straitened circumstances'¹¹. Keen to develop an educational role, the members voted to apply for recognition as a TAFE provider and, it seemed, the funds flowed. TAFE funds supported a co-ordinator and a new building. TAFE funds brought a new beginning, beyond the dreams of the Centre's founders.

What funds then were available in the 1980s? The CAE and LACS had always received regular government funding for co-ordination and administration. They were sometimes regarded as the wealthy members of the family, with nice facilities and good equipment.

In 1984, the then Minister for Education, Robert Fordham announced a 'major breakthrough': a separate budget for small community-based providers who were not LACs: \$500,000, a 100% increase on previous allocations. The amounts available (usually less than \$15,000) were far less than individual LACs received through the CAE, but undoubtedly useful.

The Government recognizes the invaluable contribution that these small providers make to the community and in particular ... the role they play in meeting a gap that exists for people who might otherwise be intimidated by the formal institutions. I refer particularly to women ...

> THE HON. ROBERT FORDHAM, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, VICTORIAN LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY,
4 APRIL 1984.

Small amounts of Commonwealth money (often under \$1000) had been available since the mid 1970s for non-government adult education providers, including 'non TAFE providers'. The group responsible for its distribution, the Voluntary Adult Learning Group committee, was chaired by a Board member after 1984.

Various other government funds became available to 'recognised TAFE providers' in the 1980s. The increases were testimony to the lobbying power within the Victorian government of women MPs and within the community provider sector itself.

The major source was from State Recurrent Funds, which for 1986 totalled over \$3 million. These were available to Category C providers (TAFE main activity) for program co-ordination and administration. Within a few years, they were granted for a three year period rather than annually. State Works and Services funds were also available: the TAFE Board set aside funds for community providers to ensure that these maintenance funds were not entirely consumed by TAFE colleges. There were also various small 'pots' of money each year, for activities such staff development, as well as some funds for specific TAFE programs in Category E providers.

Each Regional TAFE Board had the challenging task of distributing these funds among the providers in their region.

While the aggregated amounts of money rose, the funding had first to be divided between the regions and then between a growing number of providers. There was never enough money. In the Southern Westernport Region in 1986, for example, submissions came from 140 groups totaling \$143,000. Just \$44,000 was available for the particular program.¹²

Providers also complained about the resources consumed by writing submissions and reports to various agencies in return for limited funding. The government wanted reports to demonstrate value for its money. The providers often had little more than manual administrative and accounting systems to assist them. VALG grants were very popular despite their small size, because the application process was simple and straightforward. 'They only wanted one page!' recalled Helen Kimberley.

Some community providers in this period were highly successful in attracting funds and expanding their activities. Sandybeach, a Category 3 provider, saw its turnover increase from \$4 500 in 1982, to \$47 200 in 1983, to \$285 421 in 1987.¹³ That too would have been beyond the Centre's wildest imaginings in the 1970s.

Teaching and Learning in Community Providers

Much has been written, and will continue to be written, about the distinctive values that underpin community-based education provision. In 1982, Christine Fensham wrote to her local parish, The Avenue Uniting Church in Blackburn, whose support she was seeking for a neighbourhood house on the church property. What she was saying about neighbourhood houses also applied to other community-based providers and their shared ethos:

The Neighbourhood House is primarily a place where anyone can feel at home. It provides a caring atmosphere for many women who seek an outlet for parts of their lives outside the home, learning new skills, as well as relieving loneliness. Classes are a method of confidence building, which is a very significant part of what is done. We do not say it is exclusively for women, because men can feel at home there too, but the atmosphere is such that women feel free to make friends, bring their children, leave them in the crèche, and join the classes of their choice, ranging from Keep Fit, Cookery, Language, Painting or Discussions. The Neighbourhood House is not a refuge, but it is a place where women's voices are heard and encouraged and positive family building goes on.¹⁴

Christine Fensham's description emphasized the learning environment — one that was inviting rather than forbidding, flexible enough to accommodate the complexities of women's lives, one that recognised skills might mean employment or personal development or most likely both.

Implicit in the description is the participatory nature of community based provision. It was fundamental to the operations of community providers. Willing volunteers were co-opted into running the office, planning the programs, organising rosters, applying for funds and finding the tutors. For all its challenges, this approach was immensely empowering.

The welcoming, participatory approach also lay at the core of learning in a community provider. Community providers deliberately differentiated themselves from traditional educational institutions as much as they could. The community facilities were usually converted houses, with domestic-sized rooms. Teachers were unlikely to have a desk or other conventional classroom equipment, and found themselves in unusually close proximity to their students. Patricia Colebourne came from a nearby TAFE college to teach a 'Return to Study' course in a neighbourhood house and was initially thrown by this. She recounted her first morning:

*By 9.30 a.m., eight women had gathered in the front room. After warming themselves around the small gas heater, they sat around the table and gazed at me expectantly. I must admit I was nervous. I was accustomed by previous teaching experience to having participants who sat in desks several metres away from me. Having people at my elbow was quite unnerving. However, I survived that first day, and went on to enjoy many happy and interesting times with some wonderful people ...'*¹⁵

Not everyone appreciated the relative privations, Bronwen Hickman had taught literacy for the CAE, which had 'all the mod cons of an established educational institution' — television, tape recorders, projectors, and staff who arranged the room according to her instructions. Her classes at the Werribee Community Centre took place around a table and she had to improvise: 'If I wanted anyone to see something, I just wrote it in big letters on a large piece of paper.'¹⁶

On the other hand, there is ample evidence that learners loved the environment. They would endorse the words of Robbie, from Nunawading North Neighbourhood House¹⁷:

There is teaching and there is learning/ for those of us who've been yearning, who've been waiting many years to be caught by the challenge in the air, and it's hard to tell the difference/ between the teacher and the taught for there's no ego-tripping/ degree dripping uniforms worn.

A Sector in its own Right

The TAFE Board had been immensely important in the creation of the adult community education sector in Victoria. Increasingly however, its attention had turned to the 'T' in TAFE, to developing technical/vocational training in the TAFE college system. There were strong pressures from government at both state and Commonwealth level to do this. The Victorian government was looking to its TAFE colleges to produce a highly skilled, internationally competitive workforce. The Commonwealth also had its own agenda to increase the competitiveness of the Australian workforce, through award restructuring and training reform. New terminology emerged for the 'T' in TAFE — 'vocational education and training' and 'VET'.

In the mid 1980s, the TAFE Board's focus shifted almost entirely to 'VET' and TAFE colleges. It did however spend considerable time addressing a range of social policies and their implementation in TAFE colleges, policies on women, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, and child care for example. The community providers, and their appeal to women in particular, had made an impact on the wider system!

The Victorian government continued to review its arrangements for post-compulsory schooling. There was considerable uncertainty in the air about the future of the existing TAFE arrangements. There were rumours of a 'takeover' of TAFE by the Victorian Department of Labour; that would have strengthened TAFE's vocational emphasis even further. The TAFE Board's regional structure, which sat awkwardly with TAFE colleges but which provided support for community providers, seemed doomed.

Adult community education in Victoria suddenly seemed vulnerable.

The Edgar Report

In 1986, the Victorian government appointed Dr Don Edgar, highly-regarded Director of the Institute of Family Studies, as chair of a committee to review the further education component of post-compulsory schooling. The committee's report, 'Focus on Adults: Towards a Productive Learning Culture,'¹⁸ was highly critical of current policy and practice. It lambasted the government for 'miniscule funding' ('no community learning group receives sufficient funding to meet its needs') and its lack of planning and co-ordination. It also criticised the shift towards vocational training, and called on the government to publicly affirm the importance of adult education:

The greatest challenge facing adult education today is, we would assert, an unthinking scramble to teach new skills, to 'retrain', to push the priority of economic, vocational training too much, at the expensive a broader educational goal.

The Edgar report pointed out the successes achieved by 'local people [who] saw a need that was not being met and were very active without adequate Government assistance.' Adult education's 'great strength' in Victoria lay in the fact that local initiatives came forward to meet local needs in forms and locations that meshed with learners' circumstances.¹⁹

The Edgar report maintained a new structure was essential for adult education in Victoria to receive the recognition it deserved. It recommended the creation of a statutory authority, the Victorian Adult Education Board, which would report directly to the Minister for Education, and be supported by a small secretariat. It proposed that Regional TAFE Boards be reconstituted as regional adult education committees. Furthermore, it recommended that adult literacy and basic education and adult migrant education services be brought under the further education administrative umbrella.

New Arrangements

By the time the government released the Edgar Report in 1988, it had already implemented a number of the recommendations. The government had replaced the TAFE Board with the State Training Board; its focus was vocational education and training and it had no regional structures. A new Division of Further Education was created in the Ministry of Education 'to provide a new focus, direction and support for further education across the State.' Regional Councils of Further Education were fashioned from the regional TAFE Boards to advise the Division on local needs. A Ministerial Advisory Committee of Further Education was to be set up to advise the Minister on statewide priorities and strategies.

Further education now had, in the words of Minister for Education Ian Cathie 'a voice and structure of its own.'²⁰

The preservation of a regional framework was a key plank of the Edgar Report. The Regional Boards may have been an awkward fit in the previous TAFE structure, with little influence on the colleges. However, they had been far more successful in the adult community education sector. There they had provided the link between the central TAFE Board and community providers, in policy, program development, administration and finance.

They could readily be reconstituted to focus on further education.

The government set up eleven Regional Councils of Further Education, five in Melbourne and six outside the metropolitan area. Each council had twelve members, all from the local community. They were appointed by the Minister for Post-Secondary Education, to advise on meeting the need for further education in their region. Each council was supported by a five person office comprising a manager, adult basic education officer, and staff for executive and administrative support. The previous Boards' assets, operations and staff were transferred to the new councils. The regional process was completed by September 1988.

The Ministerial Advisory Committee on Further Education (MACFE) was established, chaired by Professor Concetta (Connie) Benn of the University of Melbourne. Connie Benn was highly experienced and widely respected in both academic and government circles. MACFE was made up of 21 members representing or affiliated to the Regional Councils, and umbrella agencies including the Association

of Neighbourhood Learning Centres, Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council, Ethnic Communities Council, Network of Women in Australian Adult and Community Education, and Victorian TAFE Directors Association. The State Training Board, Trades Hall Council and Victorian Aboriginal Education Association were also members.

It was a very different situation from only a few years earlier, where the CAE director and a member nominated by 'non TAFE college providers' were the principal (lone) voices of further education in the high level forum of the TAFE Board. Now, too, further education had an entire division of specialist public servants, compared with less than a handful in the Office of the TAFE Board.

The changes did not meet with universal enthusiasm within the further education sector. Leaders in the adult literacy and basic education community feared co-option into a large, remote, uncomprehending bureaucracy in which the integrity of their program and their independence would be compromised.²¹ Community provider advocates agreed. They also felt they could be swamped by the size and profile of the CAE and the AMES. The Division's location in high-rise government offices in the city with the vast Ministry of Education seemed to them to prove their point.

The Division itself had a huge task. It took time to appoint staff, negotiate and transfer funds from various sources across to its budget, set up eleven Regional Councils of Further Education, and establish the Ministerial Advisory Committee.

The new Division's responsibilities extended well beyond community organisations recognised as TAFE providers. They included adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) delivered in community providers and TAFE colleges, adult migrant language programs conducted by the Adult Migrant English Services (AMES), and the new Victorian Certificate for Adults in TAFE colleges and community providers. The Division subsequently took on responsibility for the state recurrent funding of the CAE.

In sheer size, the new 'FE' was very different from the 250 or so community-based providers identified by in the *Community Learning* project. The Ministry's Annual Report 1988-89 identified over 350 registered providers of further education, and approximately 300 small groups working in adult literacy and basic education. AMES English programs were delivered in various venues: migrant education centres, community venues, and workplaces. The CAE provided programs in various locations in metropolitan Melbourne, and through its Local Advisory Committee in regional Victoria. AMES had around 35,000 enrolments, and the CAE over 55,000.

There was a sense in which the years between 1988 and 1991 were an interim period, a prelude to the sector having its own legislation and statutory authority as the Edgar Report had recommended. Important work was done. A reconfigured sector was bedded down, with reasonable working relationships established between agencies who jostled for position and at times regarded each other with suspicion. A formula for funding was developed after extensive negotiation and refinements, and it was sufficiently robust to remain in place for some time. The sector organized a number of events and publications to mark the International Year of Literacy in 1990, giving the adult literacy groups a high profile and place in the sector's sun.

The ACE sector had been created: now it needed authority.

'TAFE' PROVIDERS IN THE 1980S: THREE SNAPSHOTS

Moe Neighbourhood House (formerly Waminda)²²

It is a story familiar across Victoria. Around 1980, women at a play group in Moe were 'looking for something more in the way of a learning centre.' They organized themselves as Moe Neighbourhood Group and applied for funds from the Housing Commission (now part of the Department of Planning and Community Development). In 1983, they were allocated a venue for the learning centre — a three bedroom house in need of repair. They named it 'Waminda', or 'friendly meeting place.'

cont.

Waminda was not the first neighbourhood house in Gippsland. Traralgon, Morwell and Warragul already had them. Moe itself already had 'Cuppa Natta', which grew out of Robin Sefton's women's study course at the local TAFE college. 'Cuppa Natta' had classes in sewing and painting, ran playreadings and book discussion group, and attracted an older age group. Waminda's purpose was to 'offer support, skills and knowledge to socially isolated younger women and children.'

1984 was a good year. It brought the first government funds: \$1000 from TAFE, \$5000 from Family and Community Services (FACS) and \$700 from Youth Sport and Recreation. A committee of management was set up, and a part-time co-ordinator appointed.

Waminda's experiences in the 1980s was a typical one. The appointment of a part-time co-ordinator made organizing people and programs much easier, as well as the seemingly never-ending task of applying for funds. Funding came from FACS, and from the Regional TAFE Board for programs such as typing, introduction to computers, basic maths and 'access home maintenance.'

Its popularity grew, not only among women — men also became volunteers, and joined in the classes and activities.

Waminda was still heavily reliant on its volunteers for survival. They maintained the garden, did minor repairs, and not least, raised funds with numerous cooking and craft stalls, jumble sales and raffles.

There were some ups and downs, but the Waminda survived and became incorporated. In 1993, it changed its name to Moe Neighbourhood House.

Sandybeach Centre: a private initiative ²³

Some community providers sprang out of an individual or private initiative. The Sandybeach Centre is a remarkable example of the commitment and generosity of one family to community development.²⁴

In 1982, an advertisement appeared in the local paper announcing that the Morey family were running activities for the whole community in a large building in Sandringham, a Melbourne bayside suburb. Bruce Morey was a local school principal, his wife Rosemary worked with people with disabilities, their son taught music, their daughter studied social work. The Moreys had sold their home and borrowed money to purchase and repair the property. They lived on the premises and rented out part of it to the Sandybeach Community Co-operative Society Ltd. It introduced a membership scheme.

The building had already been used by various local groups, but the Morey's involvement meant better facilities and new energy. The Sandybeach Community Foundation was set up to raise and distribute funds. The Co-operative Society took responsibility for the Centre's running, maintenance and development, and its staffing. Membership in the Co-op cost \$1. All members were equal with one vote irrespective of how many of the 10,000 shares they held.

Initially, the Centre was run by volunteers, including the full-time co-ordinator. The first paid staff were two clerical assistants, funded through a Commonwealth government employment program in 1984. From 1985, the Southern Westernport Regional TAFE Board funded a full-time paid co-ordinator.

Sandybeach Centre went ahead in leaps and bound. It began with two program areas, Community Art (concerts, drama, art exhibitions) and Community Education (access and hobby courses). In 1984, it added a neighbourhood house program. That allowed administrative efficiencies, though the neighbourhood house was independent with its own management committee and focus.

The key was financial stability, which came in the mid 1980s. Funds came from various sources — Commonwealth employment programs, the Regional TAFE Board, Community Services Victoria (formerly FACS) and the Ministry for the Arts, co-op memberships, and local businesses. It took time and skill to juggle the resources and use them creatively and with accountability.

The results spoke for themselves. In 1982, around 300 people a week came through Sandybeach. There were two courses or activities on offer, and turnover for the year was \$4500. In 1985, 1400 people came each week to attend 75 different courses and activities each term, and the turnover had risen to \$155,500. Still it grew: in 1989, 2300 people a week, 107 activities per term, and an estimated turnover of \$430,000.

By the end of the decade, Sandybeach could plan its activities with confidence. The unusual combination of private ownership, community management and government support was highly successful.

cont.

Like other providers, Sandybeach transformed the lives of many people. Mary Walsh was simply one example. She had as much impact on Sandybeach as it had on her. Mary was unemployed when she first went to Sandybeach in 1983 as a volunteer. She was appointed to the first paid position, clerical assistant, then assistant co-ordinator, co-ordinator and finally manager in 1988. As manager, she was responsible for programs and staffing, numerous community groups, maintenance and renovations and fundraising. From Sandybeach, she went on to management in her great love, tourism.

The Avenue Neighbourhood House²⁵

The Avenue Neighbourhood House was in some ways an offspring of the pioneering Nunawading North Neighbourhood Centre. Christine Fensham, The Avenue's first co-ordinator, had worked in a voluntary capacity at Nunawading North for several years. She was looking for a new challenge. The time was right. Her parish church, The Avenue Uniting, had a property available and was ready to support her venture, a neighbourhood house. It opened in July 1982.

The initial focus at The Avenue was women's health, 'a common topic at the time' — wellbeing in 2011 terms. The house was both an informal drop-in centre and a venue for numerous classes. Christine recalled the eclectic offerings for Term 1 in 1983. They included a 'Let's Make Jam' day, Keep Fit, Chinese Cooking, Menstruation and Menopause, Sewing for Children, Creative Movement and Relaxation, Low Kilojoule cookery, English for Fun, and Home Nursing.

The range of programs grew over the next couple of years: Creative Drama and Writers Workshop, Spinning, Vegetarian Cookery, 'Remembering your Schooldays' (part of a research project looking at the differences between girls and boys schooling), Greek Dancing, Body Images and Biblical Studies. There were Pot Luck dinners (subsidised by the Department of Youth Sport and Recreation), a toy library and Sunday cycling.

In 1985, there were 44 classes and by 1988, 55. The house ran ten classes most days, five in the morning and five in the afternoon. Over 500 people a week came through the doors. Learners paid a \$1 enrolment fee for any class.

The emphasis was on anticipating and meeting local needs. 'We started a regular Begin Again program, in conjunction with the Nunawading and Eastern Suburbs Legal Service, which became a very lively group for women who had recently been separated from their husbands.'

People at The Avenue knew the value of marketing and publicity from the beginning. There were numerous articles in the local paper, newsletters, as well as displays and promotions in local shopping centres.

The Avenue was a beneficiary under the Victorian government's Neighbourhood House Program. Funding for a co-ordinator made a substantial difference. So did Commonwealth funding for community employment programs, which enabled The Avenue to employ four women.

Government funding and an ever increasing scale of operations required a more sophisticated approach to the Avenue's financial record keeping. Gwen Osborn, an early committee member, took on bookkeeping responsibilities.

The day came when we received a grant under the Employment Initiatives Program, giving us some funds for salaries and running expenses. Now we were in the big time and needed a bookkeeper and auditor. Because of my training I was happy to do the books, keeping proper records of income and expenditure — no more grabbing some cash out of the drawer, if there was any there!

Like other community providers, The Avenue provided many women in the 1980s with the encouragement and confidence to take another step in their lives and careers, 'to grow and to shine' as one said. They began with dropping in or taking a class, and then found themselves on the committee of management, writing submissions for funding, organising displays, teaching a class. Some went onto university, fulfilling a dream that had once seemed unattainable.

The transformation was as true for co-ordinator Christine Fensham as it was for the shiest person who dropped into The Avenue. Trained as a science teacher, Christine was married to an academic and had four grown children when she virtually fell into the most exciting period of her life:

At 50 years old, my work in Neighbourhood Houses, first Nunawading North and then The Avenue, mainly unpaid, began. It was my most creative period. The different strands of my life came together — Christian, political, feminist — and flourished meaningfully.

SNAPSHOTS — ENROLMENTS

1983

- > 250+ providers
 - > 10,000 programs
 - > 150,000+ enrolments (estimated)
 - > 41,000 people involved in programs and services *per week*
- Saleeba and Benson, *Community Learning: A Public Investment* 1984

1986

- > 303 registered providers (135 country, 178 metropolitan)
 - > 111,310 enrolments
 - > \$4,535,989 State recurrent base funding 1987 calendar year
- Focus on Adults (Edgar Report)* 1987

1991

- > over 280,000 learners, one in ten Victorians, compared with just over 200,000 in 1988
- > nearly 200,000 enrolled in community providers in 1991
- > 69% of these were in local community providers, 21% in the CAE, 10% in AMES
- > 80% of participants in community providers were women
- > just over 80,000 adult education enrolments were in TAFE colleges (the responsibility of the State Training Board)
- > community based provider net enrolments in 1991 were in the following programs
 - 6% Adult Basic Education
 - 13% English as a Second Language
 - 1% Victorian Certificate in Education
 - 14% General Access
 - 66% General Adult Education

Adult, Community and Further Education Board, Annual Report 1991-1992



CHAPTER 2:

A Settled Purposeful Sector 1991-1994

The year 1991 was a landmark in the history of adult community education, nationally and in Victoria.

At the national level, the publication of 'Come in Cinderella', the Senate's comprehensive report on the sector across Australia, gave new impetus to its advocates and a new profile at government level. The report formally recognised adult community education as the fourth sector in Australian education, acknowledged its distinctive characteristics and pedagogy, and pointed to its role in giving a wide range of people a 'second chance' at education, training and employment.

It was a long established, familiar form of education 'whose time had come.'²⁶

In Victoria, 1991 saw the passing of the Adult, Community and Further Education Act. The sector at last had a formal structure recognised in legislation. It had its own statutory authority reporting to the Minister, with a clear set of legislated powers, responsibilities and relationships.

Looking at the Board's development two decades on, it is quite clear that its history falls into several distinct periods, related usually to personalities, or to political or policy changes. The first period began with the passing of the Act in 1991 and concluded in early 1995 with the departure of inaugural Board chair Dr Connie Benn, and general manager Ms Meredith Sussex.

Under these two powerful personalities, the Board and its processes were established, Regional Councils were set up, and arrangements with the State Training Board were worked out. The new Board quickly familiarised itself with the raft of funds, policies, programs and providers it administered.

There was however little opportunity for an internal focus, even if the Board had been so inclined. The early 1990s were a period of significant and continuing change. Australia as a whole was caught up in an economic recession. The Commonwealth government saw the training system as a key tool in the economic recovery and future competitiveness of the nation, and pressed forward with its National Training Reform Agenda. Victoria was a leading player in the reform, at the forefront of many of the changes in the early 1990s because of its own policies and practices in vocational and further education.

Victoria itself was experiencing a period of change. At the state election in October 1992, the Liberal-National Coalition under Jeff Kennett was swept into government. The Board had now to implement the policies of a new government in a period of severe economic restraint. It was however a government committed to values that were at the core of adult community education — the importance of the power of the local community in service delivery.

The 1991 Act

The Edgar Report in 1987 had proposed the creation of a Victorian Adult Education Board, a statutory authority reporting directly to the Minister. The government of the day preferred a ministerial advisory committee, while it concentrated on establishing the state training system on a firm legislative footing. This is it did with the Vocational Education and Training Act (VET Act) in 1990.

The VET Act left the adult community and further education sector as the 'only area of education not currently supported by legislation.'²⁷ To rectify that and give the sector the recognition and status Edgar had urged, the government announced legislation would be introduced into Parliament in the autumn session of 1991.

In late 1990, the government released a discussion paper canvassing various issues to be addressed and redressed via the legislation. The multiplicity of formal sources of advice to the Minister needed

streamlining: those sources included the Advisory Committee, Regional Councils, the CAE, Division of Further Education and the State Training Board, not counting advocacy and interest groups. The absence of a structure to integrate local, regional and statewide input made planning difficult. Resource allocation was complicated, administrative arrangements messy, program development restricted and relationships with other education sectors uncoordinated.

The government proposed two options. One was minimal, just changes to address anomalies. The second, much more extensive, would ‘create a structure closely paralleling that which is already in place for vocational education and training.’²⁸ This involved a new statutory authority with statewide responsibility. Regional Councils were retained, the link between the Board’s statewide role and community providers at the local level. Two items were non-negotiable: the Regional Councils’ role in the allocation of funds to community providers and the management and operational autonomy of providers, within the context of government policy of course.

The discussion paper generated extensive comment. Over 200 submissions were received, and more than 20 consultations forums held. Minister Pullen welcomed the response, and urged continued input both before and after the bill was tabled in Parliament. He pledged himself to attend as many regional consultations as possible.²⁹

The Adult, Community and Further Education Bill was tabled in May 1991. It provided for a new statutory authority, the Adult, Community and Further Education Board, with responsibility for statewide community-based provision, the CAE and AMES. The Regional Councils of Further Education were retained. Adult community and further education in TAFE colleges remained the responsibility of the State Training Board, and the two Boards were required to plan jointly for the sector.

LOCAL LEARNING: 1991 — THE POLITICIANS’ VIEW

... we have the opportunity to acclaim the partnership between the community and government. For many years the community sector has translated local needs and resources into learning opportunities for adults and pointed the way for government support.

> A.J. SHEEHAN (MINISTER FOR FINANCE), INTRODUCING THE ADULT COMMUNITY AND FURTHER EDUCATION BILL, LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, 30 MAY 1991. VICHANSARD, ACCESSED 5/08/10.

The hallmark of community and further education, whether it takes place in a neighbourhood house or an institutional setting, is its capacity to respond to the aspirations of local communities in the way in which the programs are undertaken, the location, and the contents of its courses.

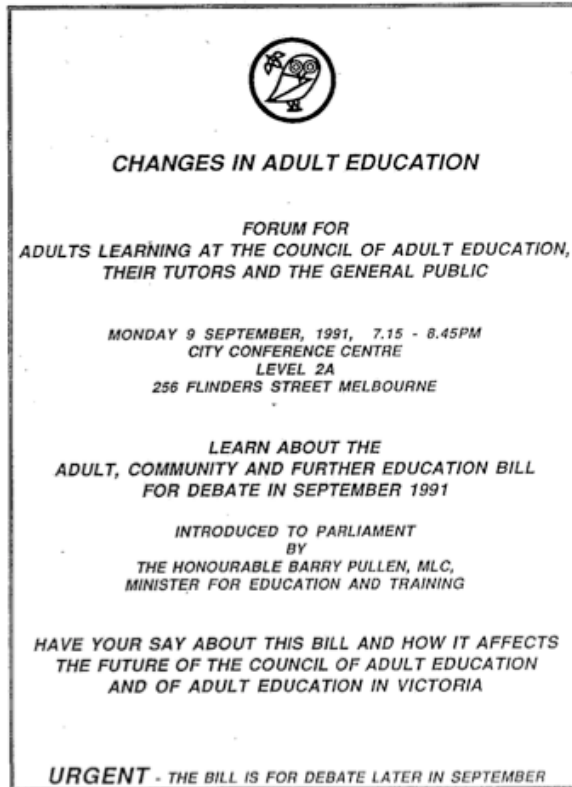
> MARGARET RAY (MLA BOX HILL), LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, 9 OCTOBER 1991. VICHANSARD, ACCESSED 5/08/10.

... the coalition supports the Bill. It will lead to better coordination in this field and should ensure that the community is well served. I emphasise again the coalition’s belief that the people who actually know best what needs to be done in adult, community and further education are those operating in the field, the providers, and it is our hope that this structure will be administered in a way which reflects that fact.

It is an interesting structure in the sense that it can be administered in a heavy-handed and very centrally controlled way, or in a very light-handed and devolutionary way. It is our hope that it will be administered in the latter way, which is the way we believe it should operate.

THE HON. HADDON STOREY (MLC), LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL, 31 OCTOBER 1991. VICHANSARD, ACCESSED 5/08/10.

There was no parliamentary debate on the bill that session. The debate — everything from conversation to heated argument — continued outside the Parliament in the months following, in regional forums, provider meetings, and departmental briefings. There were a number of contentious issues. One was the division of responsibility between community-based provision (the ACFE Board) and TAFE



college provision (the State Training Board). Another centred on whether Regional Council staff should be appointed locally (and therefore have local knowledge) or centrally (therefore have none). The CAE, itself a statutory authority with its own act, was concerned its status and independence could be eroded under the proposed legislation.³⁰

Criticism of the initially tabled bill was so extensive that it was withdrawn in August, and a new bill tabled. This, the government claimed, proved its commitment to consultation — over 500 people had participated. The basic framework, it emphasised, remained intact. The new version included consultation on Board appointments with peak bodies, more community participation in Board and Regional Council membership, and clarification around definitions and relationships with other bodies such as the State Training Board.

Debate on the bill resumed in October. A spirited government speech came from Margaret Ray, member for Box Hill and a champion of adult community education for many years. She contrasted the sector's situation in 1991 —

legislated planning and funding arrangements — with the 'ad hoc and fairly direct approach' a decade earlier, whereby 'the legendary Phil Slattery, when she was running short of funds, would board a plane to Canberra to visit [Senator] Margaret Guilfoyle and confront her with the pressing educational needs of her neighbourhood and her community.'³¹ The opportunity for women especially to learn and contribute in a friendly setting in their local community, as a student, a tutor, co-ordinator, was — she insisted — a hallmark of adult community education, and fully deserved the government's support.

The Coalition opposition was generally supportive of the bill, though it took the opportunity to express its trenchant opposition to the creation of funding bureaucracies and to financial laxity.

The bill passed through the Victorian Parliament and came into effect on 19 March 1992.

The New Structures: Boards and Councils, Committees and Cross Membership

The establishment of the ACFE Board was a clear demonstration of the rapid change in the status and profile of Victorian adult community education. From a few representatives on the TAFE Board in 1984, to a large ministerial advisory committee in 1987, to a statutory authority in 1991, were immense strides. Now, like the large and influential vocational education and training sector, the sector had its own statutory authority.

The Board had sixteen members appointed by the Minister. Membership had to reflect the breadth and diversity of adult education in Victoria (providers, users, employers and employees), and the sector's links with other areas of post-secondary education. The chair of the CAE Board held the position of deputy chair, in recognition of the CAE's status in the sector.

The Board's role was to support the development of adult, community and further education in Victoria. Its major functions were planning, policy development, promotion and resource allocation. It also advised the Minister of the day on matters related to adult community and further education.

The program areas for which it had responsibility were general adult education (the old 'hobby courses'), literacy and basic education, the Victorian Certificate of Education for Adults, access programs (preparation for work or further study), English as a second language, and vocational education and training programs where they were offered through community providers.

The sector for which the Board was responsible comprised local community providers (in 1991, around 500 registered providers and 200 non-registered community groups), the Adult Migrant Education Services (AMES), and the Council of Adult Education (CAE).³²

The regional structure, fundamental to the development of the ACE sector since 1984, was retained. It provided the link between the statewide system — with its government focus, bureaucracy and global budget — and the local grassroots providers — community-oriented, small and with limited resources. Regional Councils, each made up of 12 voluntary (unpaid) members appointed by the Minister, were enshrined in the legislation. The Minister of the day kept the same number and boundaries of the previous councils set up in 1987, and the Coalition government that followed did the same.³³ However, the Councils' access to the Minister was reduced; whereas all eleven had had a seat on MACFE, only three Council members were appointed to the new board.

The Regional Councils were responsible for supporting and promoting adult community and further education in their region, for preparing regional plans and policies, and preparing reports for the ACFE Board. They also had a vital role in consulting local providers and interest groups in their region.

Both the Board and the Councils had considerable discretion in the arrangements they put in place to carry out their responsibilities. The Act set out certain requirements, such as minimum number of meetings, a three year plan for the sector prepared jointly by the ACFE Board and the State Training Board, annual performance agreements between the Board and Regional Councils, and an audit committee for the Board.

The Board was supported by an office in the Department of Education, made up of around 20 staff.³⁴ Each regional office had a small staff complement of around 3 or 4.

Getting Underway

The Board's inaugural chairperson was Dr Connie Benn, formerly chair of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Further Education. She and other familiar faces from MACFE (several Regional Council members and peak body representatives) provided invaluable continuity. The deputy chair was the CAE Board chair, *ex officio*.

The Board's first meeting took place on 20 March 1992, the day after proclamation of the Act.

The early meetings focused on establishing its working arrangements and committee structures. It set up committees for audit, policy and planning, program support and resources, and identified the grant allocations for which it had responsibility. It addressed regional structures and appointments (immediately recommending the Minister retaining the previous regions and their boundaries). And it determined its nominees to the State Training Board and the Council of Adult Education.

The Office supporting the Board (acronym OACFEB) was also established, from the previous Division of Further Education. Meredith Sussex was appointed general manager. Ms Sussex was highly experienced in community development, especially in Melbourne's disadvantaged western suburbs, and widely respected in the sector for that. She also had a strong profile in the development of a national policy for the sector.

Working with the State Training Board

The Act gave the ACFE Board responsibility for adult community and further education in organisations where that provision was the primary function — that is, community education providers, the CAE and AMES. Those programs in other organisations, notably TAFE colleges, were the responsibility of the State Training Board. The two Boards were required by their legislation to 'co-operate in matters related to planning, curriculum development, accreditation, articulation, credit transfer and course linkage as well as the recognition of prior learning in relation to further education.'

The divided responsibility and co-operation were addressed in various ways.

One was cross membership. The ACFE Board included a member of the State Training Board (from the Painters and Decorators Union). The ACFE chair was appointed to the State Training Board, which

also had one other member with adult community education knowledge/expertise.³⁵ The ACFE Board acted as the State Training Board's advisory body on adult education in TAFE colleges, adding two college directors when meeting in that capacity.

The second method involved the joint preparation of a three yearly ACFE Plan by the two Boards. Their first joint plan setting out the jointly agreed goals for the 1993-95 period was released in December 1992. The goals included provision of accessible relevant programs throughout Victoria, pathways for learning, ensuring program quality, promoting community management, planning and delivery of programs, promotion of adult community education, adequate and effective resource management, and effective efficient planning and evaluation processes for a coordinated statewide program.³⁶ The plan also established a number of targets, including an increase in program participation from 1 in 12 adult Victorians to 1 in 10 by 1995. The ACFE Plan 1993-95 was the touchstone document for the Board's early work.

A major area for early collaboration involved the delivery of accredited vocational training in community providers. This new direction, unthinkable only a few years earlier, was to have far-reaching ramifications for the nature of provision in the sector.

From the late 1980s, the State Training Board had moved to open up access to training by registering non-government organisations to deliver accredited vocational education and training courses, hitherto the exclusive domain of TAFE colleges. Under the system it set up in 1991, community providers could be registered, along with business enterprises and commercial training colleges.

A number of community providers were very keen to register. Recognition as a 'private provider' was a potent means of expanding the training and employment horizons of their learners and, not least, opening up new opportunities for government funding. The registration process was deemed costly and complex for community based providers, so the ACFE Board office worked with their State Training Board colleagues on a simplified arrangement for the sector. ACFE Board staff adapted the guidelines for community providers, identified accredited vocational education and training courses for which providers were likely to gain approval (such as child care and office administration), assessed their applications and made recommendations as to who should be registered and for what.

The outcome was a streamlined process for a fraction of the initial cost. It was immensely popular: more than 60 community providers in Melbourne and regional Victoria were registered by the STB by the end of 1992.³⁷ Within a short period, they were tendering successfully to run government-funded programs.

The authority to deliver accredited VET courses was a major breakthrough for community providers in their status and profile. They could now deliver training that led to formal qualifications recognised in Victoria and, with the changes underway in the national system, throughout Australia.

A Visible Identity: Finding a Logo

Mindful of its responsibility for the sector, the Board was keen from the outset to establish a symbolic, authoritative image in the form of an appropriate logo. It was a frustrating exercise for a time until, after rejecting numerous unimaginative, linear designs, the Board found the one it wanted, late in 1992.

After an extensive search for a simple, elegant and meaningful logo, the lower case Greek letter sigma was chosen because of its association with the Greek word 'Sofia' meaning 'wisdom.'

The colours chosen were associated with the feminist movement's signature palette, purple, green and white. The tag line 'Adult Education in the Community' was added in early 1993.

The logo was used from then on by the Board and the Regional Councils on official documents, and is still used in 2011. It has been a well-recognised symbol to those working within the sector for twenty years.



A new Government for Victoria

The Board had just established itself when in October 1992 the Liberal-National Coalition was elected after a decade of Labor government.

The Coalition's policy on the post-secondary education sector put a strong emphasis on decision-making at the local level, and institutional independence.

*The best people to determine the needs of a particular area are the providers of services in that area ... The Adult Community and Further Education Board and Regional Councils will be expected to respond to the needs and views of providers ... Subject to overall guidelines, funds will be able to be expended by further education providers as they think fit ...*³⁸

A paper to the Board a week after the change of government noted that 'most arrangements in the adult education sector are highly consistent with the new Government's policy for the area'. The ACFE Act was to be administered in a 'cost-effective, non-bureaucratic way.' The only specific changes followed from the Government's intentions to empower Regional Councils of Further Education to appoint their own staff, and repeal the Victorian Post-Secondary Education Act 1978 (which had implications for course accreditation).³⁹

The Minister to whom the Board now provided advice was Haddon Storey, QC, MLC, Minister for Tertiary Education and Training. Minister Storey had expressed his strong support for adult community and further education in his speech on the ACFE bill when in opposition. He had supported the legislation in its revised form, and commended the government for its response to concerns raised in the consultation process. In his speech, he had shown a keen appreciation of the sector — wide, diverse and, in the words of one commentator he quoted, 'unruly'.⁴⁰

The national context

If responding to the needs of a new state government was one challenge, the changes flowing from the Commonwealth's National Training Reform Agenda were another.

In the early 1980s, reforms to technical education by the Victorian government had had a major impact on the development of adult community education. A decade later, sweeping changes to Australian technical education by the Commonwealth government in its National Training Reform Agenda presented it with a whole series of new opportunities — and challenges.

In the briefest terms, the Agenda was a series of regulatory arrangements designed to create a national, co-operative system of vocational education and training. Key components included industry competency standards as the basis of training, and national standards for qualifications and training providers. Development and implementation had begun in the mid 1980s but gathered momentum in the early 1990s. The economic recession with its high unemployment added a sense of urgency to the Agenda, as training was often seen as crucial to the prosperity of the nation and its individual citizens.

The changes affected the funding available to adult education providers and how it was negotiated, the nature of the programs delivered and to whom the programs were delivered.

Early in 1992, the Commonwealth and State and Territory training ministers agreed to the establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). ANTA, amongst other responsibilities, negotiated and distributed Commonwealth funding to the states and territories for both vocational education and training and adult community and further education.

The new ACFE Board had to address the national agenda almost immediately. The Board set up its own ANTA working party to examine the ramifications of the new funding arrangements.⁴¹ Two things stood out. First, each ANTA-State agreement would include a profile of its course provision, and 'describe, increasingly in outcome terms, what the [State] will do with funds received for vocational education and training and adult community and further education.' That was relatively simple — a profile of adult community and further education provision was drawn up using the targets agreed on with Regional Councils, and the ACFE Plan.

Secondly, ANTA was prepared to deal with only one authority in each state, in Victoria's case the State Training Board. That meant a memorandum of understanding with the State Training Board. However, the fact that both Boards had already prepared their first joint three year plan was a huge advantage. There was also much in that Plan that resonated with ANTA's priorities, such as the importance of the sector in preparing people for the increasing demands of the contemporary workforce.⁴²

Furthermore, Commonwealth funds to stimulate enrolment growth were available: \$750,000 per annum for access and vocational courses in community providers.

The topics of discussion at the Board's first meeting in 1993 related to the national context were highly significant in terms of the development of the ACE sector. Early signs about the new arrangements were encouraging, and there was 'much in the early work of ANTA to which adult community and further education providers can respond with enthusiasm.'⁴³

The honeymoon was soon spoilt, however, by a 'long and difficult debate' with ANTA. The subject was inclusion of Stream 1000 (the old 'hobby courses') in the 'maintenance of effort' statistics which determined whether or not Victoria had met its obligations under the ANTA Agreement. The Board's case for inclusion was lost and remained so, although the debate resurfaced from time to time.

Impact of national developments

The impact of National Training Reform Agenda was felt primarily in the amount of new money available for ACE provision.

In 1993-1994, the ACFE Board was allocated \$1.85 million in Commonwealth Growth Funds⁴⁴. The funding was to be used to deliver courses in a number of priority industry areas, including business services, tourism and hospitality, and the wholesale retail and personal services sector. Specific programs and target groups were encouraged: small business, particularly women in small business, workplace basic education, community-based adult literacy and ESL for the hidden unemployed, and mature age entry programs.

The Board distributed the bulk of the funds to Regional Councils for programs in community providers.

This funding was also significant as an acknowledgement of the role of community providers in delivering vocational programs in priority industries to particular client groups. It increased the emphasis in community provision on accredited programs, be they further education or vocational education. The financial advantages of community providers registering with the State Training Board to deliver vocational training or with the ACFE Board to deliver accredited further education courses were obvious.

There were however costs, namely the accountability and reporting requirements. Providers were required to sign a service agreement with their Regional Council, but it was the statistical reporting that was irksome to them.

The issue of community providers and statistics was a long-standing one, harking back to the days of the TAFE Board and manual data collection. It presented a dilemma: funding signified government valued the programs, but it was accompanied for more and more demands for outcomes, demonstrated in statistics.

The Board was keenly aware firstly, that data about courses in their sector was frequently overlooked, secondly that this resulted in a diminution of the sector's role and significance, and thirdly that 'one consequence of our pursuit of recognition will be the need to collect more data on access and vocationally-oriented courses.'⁴⁵ In 1993, the Board published a ground-breaking report, 'Hidden From View', a survey of adult community and further education data collections in Australia.⁴⁶ Aware that more comprehensive statistics had become a fact of life, the Board and its officers worked hard to ensure that the national data collection process took account of community providers and that community providers were well briefed on the requirements.

The national statistical collection came into effect for the ACE sector in 1995, a year after its implementation in TAFE colleges. The reaction of providers became clearer in the next period of the Board's life.

Getting Down to Business

The Board had accomplished a great deal in its early months in difficult circumstances, with a constantly unfolding national agenda and the change of the state government. The ACFE Plan 1993-95, adopted by the Board and the State Training Board in late 1992, provided a steadying, agreed on course of action in the form of clear priority targets to be achieved.

The primary target involved increasing the participation in the sector from 1 in 12 (itself a point of pride) to 1 in 10 of the adult population. This was to be achieved in a variety of ways, among them by extending provision into rural and (outer) metropolitan localities which had little or no current access, expanding educational services and opportunities to the unemployed, significantly increasing English as a Second Language and Workplace English Language and Literacy, establishing more flexible forms of program delivery, and by enhancing the capacity of the community to manage, plan, deliver and evaluate adult community and further education programs.

The Liberal-National Coalition government's education policy emphasized the importance of delivery and decision-making by local service providers. A key element of this involved giving the Regional Councils the capacity to employ its own staff, ensuring local knowledge, experience and accountability. (The policy of local employment was also implemented in TAFE colleges.) The issue had been controversial during the consultations around the ACFE Bill in 1990-91, but at the end of the day, the Act had provided for the council staff to be centrally employed public servants. Many meetings were required to sort out the details but eventually the ACFE (Employment) Act 1993 came into effect on 1 January 1994. The direction and accountability of the staff in the regional offices was returned to the community.⁴⁷

1993: REGIONAL COUNCILS EMPOWERED TO EMPLOY THEIR OWN STAFF

The legislation is a demonstration of the government's commitment to community-based adult education. It ensures that Regional Council staff will be accountable to their local communities by giving Regional Councils the ability to manage and direct their own staff and allows Regional Councils to decide what sort of staff they can employ and the focus of their work.

At the same time, Regional Councils will be able to be more flexible in recruiting staff from community providers thereby harnessing that expertise and providing another career path for people who work in the sector.

The legislation is an important development for community-based providers of adult education. It supports the key features of adult education in the community — its flexibility, innovation and responsiveness. It will enable the adult, community education sector to build on these strengths as it responds to local and national challenges in education and training for adults.

> THE HON. HADDON STOREY (MLC), LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL, 27 OCTOBER 1993. VICHANSARD.

Supporting Community Provision

A good deal of the Board's focus and the Division's work during this period involved processes to support community based provision. On the one hand, there were national and statewide policies and requirements to roll-out. On the other local hand, autonomy and authority had to be supported, and the capacity of local providers to implement the changes strengthened.

The Board did this in a number of ways. It made strengthening community management a priority in 1993. A large symposium on the subject was held for providers, a discussion paper was circulated for comment, and a set of key principles and practices developed. The Board described its role as, among other things, to support and strengthen the capacity of the local community to respond to and meet the needs of members of their community.⁴⁸ The Board also set about communicating and consulting with the sector. It circulated numerous papers to the Regional Councils for discussion

and comment among the providers, taking pains to explain the background and rationale behind the proposals before them. Performance agreements between the Board and the Councils, service agreements between the Councils and providers, performance indicators, reporting requirements, program guidelines and funding arrangements: the material was extensive, comprehensive and, at times it seemed, a challenge to convey in plain English.

It was a difficult balancing act to defend the demands by government for more accountability from providers whilst at the same time pay due attention to the fundamental credo of local autonomy. But the Board was invariably positive about the response of the Regional Councils and the 'highly collaborative' relationship it had established with them.

Accreditation

One topic that continued to consume much attention was the accreditation of further education courses. The years immediately preceding the Board's establishment had seen the development of two adult literacy and basic education courses for accreditation – the Certificates of General Education for Adults. The ACFE Act required the Board and the State Training Board to co-operate on the accreditation of adult community and further education courses, but the new government's abolition of the accrediting body presented a temporary glitch. The matter was resolved with some ingenuity. The courses had been accredited in late 1992, and placed on both the state and national register of accredited courses. In 1993 legislative changes gave the ACFE Board power to accredit further education courses. While it delegated its powers to the Victorian Education and Training Accreditation Board, the power to accredit its own courses was a significant development.

Accredited further education courses were the Board's flagship programs, another measure of equality of standing with the State Training Board. They proved very popular with providers, as they met an identified need and attracted funding. The Board adopted a set of requirements to be met by providers wanting to deliver them (a process akin to the State Training Board's requirements for delivering accredited vocational education). Very keen to maintain the quality of its accredited programs, the Board devoted considerable resources to curriculum development, course materials, professional development, monitoring of provision, and research on outcomes.

Accreditation was an increasingly important issue under the National Training Reform Agenda. Accredited training alone attracted ANTA funding; it led to qualifications and presented pathways between courses which were important to providers and learners. In 1993 the ACFE Board undertook a project to increase the number of accredited access courses, as it believed that accreditation would maximise the articulation of women from those courses into accredited vocational courses. The 'plethora of non-accredited courses' was not necessarily meeting the needs of learners.

There was clearly a significant shift towards accredited programs in community providers. The Annual Report for 1993-94 noted that while overall, the story was one of growth, there were marked changes in the program mix in community providers. There had been extraordinary growth in vocational education and access programs (by 99% and 66% respectively, admittedly from a small base); English as a Second Language had doubled. Enrichment adult education enrolments had fallen, presumably because of the recession, as had enrolments in the VCE for Adults. Student contact hours had increased by 18%, but numbers fell by 4%, showing more intensive learning.

This trend was unimaginable only a decade earlier, but did demand something of a balancing act. On the one hand, accredited training both further and vocational was obviously the way of the future for government, providers and learners. On the other hand, there was a need to point out the importance of general or enrichment-based adult education, the personal development courses which were the foundation stones on which community providers were first built. As often as not, they had a 'skills formation role', and even where they had no vocational outcomes, they provided 'an increase in knowledge and understanding, social well-being, family health and individual self-esteem.' ANTA was not moved to permit these courses to be counted as part of the state's 'effort' for funding purposes.⁴⁹

OPEN LEARNING 1993 STYLE: THE MELBA NETWORK

In 1993, the Board's Open Learning Support Group gathered a collection of examples of programs in community providers and TAFE colleges where the learners used easily accessible technology such as hand held phones and video links.

A project in Melbourne's eastern outskirts demonstrated how useful technology could be in bring learning to isolated outer suburban and semi-rural communities. The MELBA Network was formed, comprising Healesville Living and Learning Centre, Upper Yarra Community House, Yarra Glen Living and Learning Centre, Outer Eastern College of TAFE, Healesville Secondary College and eight primary schools.

A number of programs were delivered to people living in these communities using the facilities and resources of the Network members. For example, a bookkeeping course was delivered using a video link from Healesville to learners in Steels Creek, Toolangi and Upper Yarra. The course ran for three hours a week, over eight weeks.

Conclusion

Three years into the Board's life, there were major changes in key personnel. Meredith Sussex, the Division's general manager, moved elsewhere in the public sector, and then Dr Benn retired as chair. They had overseen the setting up of the Board and its administrative arrangements, developed a productive working relationship with the State Training Board and its officers, and worked determinedly to implement the policies of a new state government.

DR CONNIE BENN: INAUGURAL CHAIR ACFE BOARD 1991-1995

At her final ACFE Board meeting, the members expressed their appreciation of Dr Benn's special qualities: 'her breadth of experience and willingness to give time and skills; understanding of, and commitment to, the community and community processes; personal support to other Board members; superb chairing skills; sparkle, vivacity and energy; and her judgment and careful guidance through the initial years of a new Board.'

> ACFE BOARD MEETING 1995/01, 14 FEBRUARY 1995.

In this period, the Board had managed implementation of far-reaching changes brought by both the Commonwealth and State governments. The National Training Reform Agenda was progressively transforming almost every aspect of the old 'TAFE' — providers, programs, funding and reporting. An integral part of Victoria's post-secondary landscape, the adult community education sector was profoundly affected. Community providers were financial beneficiaries.

The Liberal-National government in Victoria was also an agent of sweeping change. It had stated firmly in the early 1990s its commitment to local decision-making and autonomy. Not least, it had significantly re-oriented the role of the government from 'primarily that of a funder of TAFE colleges ... [to] a purchaser of training places, from a system comprising autonomous TAFE Colleges, Community Providers, Enterprises and Private Providers.'

These changes transformed vocational education in Victoria and with it further education. It was reflected in the Board's vocabulary: performance agreements, performance indicators, profile, service agreements, funding formulae, statistical collection, reporting requirements ...

The Board was happy with developments. The regular mid-year review of performance agreements with the Regional Councils in 1994 prompted a lyrical description of 'a settled purposeful sector actively pursuing both its traditional roles and its new roles in the training marketplace.' Tensions of the early days, the report continued, had largely 'dissipated leaving a strong sense of a collaborative relationship between partners with different roles in the same endeavour.'⁵⁰

In 1994, the Agenda and the Liberal-National state government still had several years to run. New issues and emphases were to emerge, among them a stronger emphasis on marketing and promotion, quality assurance, new client groups, and new learning technologies.

They were for the attention of a new chair and a new general manager.

SNAPSHOTS: A STATISTICAL PROFILE OF ADULT STUDENTS AND THEIR OPINIONS 1994⁵¹

In 1994, the ACFE Board commissioned a survey of students enrolled in adult community and further education programs in TAFE colleges, community providers and the CAE. Around 4500 responded (61% from TAFE colleges, 24% from community providers and 16% from the CAE).

The survey looked at who enrolled in the programs and why, and what participants got out of the course.

The learners

The survey found the majority of students across the providers were women (67%, though this rose to 78% in rural areas). Women outnumbered men in all types of programs — access, vocational and general adult education. However, TAFE colleges were more likely to attract males, particularly those aged between 15 and 19 who were often enrolled in the VCE.

Women had higher levels of previous education than men, with 71% of them reporting 10-12 years of schooling, and 48% a post-school qualification. Around 22% of all respondents had left school before Year 10.

Nearly half (47%) of the respondents were unemployed (53% males, 46% females).

Students in vocational and general adult education courses were less likely to be unemployed.

More than a third (37%) were not born in Australia, and 33% did not speak English as their first language.

Reasons for enrolling

The single most common reason given for enrolling was 'to learn a skill to find a job', followed by 'preparation for another course'.

When respondents from community providers were separated out, the results changed somewhat. Personal skill development became more important, followed by vocational development, family life and community/social life. In fact, the categories were very porous: for example, a literacy course could be for a driver's test or filling out forms or simply engaging in every day life.

Focus group interviews showed that 'many students recognised that, in a tight employment market, any enhancement to job-related skills would be an advantage.'

Satisfaction

The vast majority of respondents were satisfied with their course (87% overall, 91% in community providers). They were satisfied with the teaching staff, who were praised for being inspirational and highly committed. Satisfaction with providers was a little lower (77%), with facilities, timetabling and parking drawing some criticism.

Outcomes

More than half (55%) of all respondents believed their course would help them find a job. Thirty percent were going to further study. Other outcomes reported included the development of friendships and business contacts.

Myths debunked

The results, the researchers believed, 'debunk the popular myth 'that adult learning opportunities are primarily fulfilling social needs.' On the other hand, 'the social benefits are a welcome by-product'.



CHAPTER 3:

A Season of Change 1995–1999

The years between 1995 and 1999 were another defining period for the ACE sector in Victoria, although many of the developments were outside the ACFE Board's direct control. They were the result of government policies, such as training reform and competition, accountability and quality assurance, or of trends, such as marketing and promotion, or of technology, such as the internet. Nevertheless, the implications of these developments were profound, and it was the Board's responsibility to ensure they were implemented across the ACE sector.

The years that bookend the period were highly significant. 1995 saw the retirement of the inaugural chair, Connie Benn, and the appointment of Dr David Neilson as chair. David Neilson was from outside the inner circles of ACE in Victoria, but he had had long experience in access and equity issues during his positions at the University of NSW and La Trobe. He chaired the Board until 1998, when he was succeeded by Shirley Martin. Shirley Martin was well-known as the former director of AMES, and held the position of chair until 2001. She was the first chair from within the ACE sector, an indefatigable traveller to providers around the state and deeply committed to core ACE issues such as consultation, learned centred education and ever-widening participation. Jenny Samms, experienced public servant and deeply committed to the sector's potential, succeeded Meredith Sussex as general manager of the ACFE Division in 1994 and remained throughout the 1990s.

In October 1999, Victoria's Coalition government which had been in office since late 1992 was defeated at the state election. That change in government brought this period to a close.

In the first part of this period, from 1995 to 1997, the Board operated under the ACFE Plan 1996–98 which it had jointly devised, as its legislation required, with the State Training Board. The previous Plan had been detailed and operational; the second Plan was deliberately more strategic and flexible as befitted the rapidly changing environment. The key directions for the sector were identified as co-operation and competition, quality and quantity, consolidation and change, development and diversification, and accountability. An article explaining the Plan in the Board's new publication, *Multiple Choice*, called them 'the five ambiguities ... Working consciously with ambiguities gives us more energy and impact, stimulates creativity ...'⁵²

The Plan and the continuing roll-out of government policies were the driving factors in the development of the ACE sector in this period. The implementation of the national training system, competition policy, an emphasis on best practice in the public sector all had to be digested, accommodated into the existing policy frameworks, and implemented.

The Board's main focus in 1995–97 was ensuring robust business practices for itself, the Regional Councils and its providers in order to support the ACE sector's successful participation in the brave new world of competitive tendering and vocational education delivery. The Commonwealth and state governments' insistence on accountability for funds made this imperative. The ACFE Division's integration into the Office of Training and Further Education assisted this to happen. New words entered the ACE lexicon: continuous improvement, quality management, customer service, ANTA, AVETMISS⁵³.

The Board's next plan (1998–2000) saw a change in direction, again reflecting new emphases in Commonwealth government policy. That plan, *Taking ACE to the Year 2000*, saw a shift from business models and a renewed emphasis on adult learners:

The new directions for ACE as we approach the twenty-first century has a redoubled emphasis on the diversity and commonality of adult learners [and] also the Board's firm intention to reach a broader population in all of its diverse education needs in ways which are congruent with changes in society, the economy and the world of work. In particular the Board will seek to come to grips with the impact of new technology on learning and the power it has to serve the needs of adult learners.⁵⁴

This chapter examines the enormous demands on and changes in the sector in this period thematically. It looks at how competition and vocational education delivery became a fact of life in the sector. It describes the business and administrative requirements the Board introduced to support those developments, as well as the growing importance of marketing and promotion in a competitive environment. It shows how technology was suddenly transforming not only administrative and communication but learning also. And finally, it looks at one of the Board's most significant achievements in this period: the development of a curriculum framework for further education courses.

Competing in the Open Training Market

Community-based providers had been in competition with TAFE colleges from the beginning. In the eyes of their learners, they had natural advantages over other education providers — their local community roots, affordable programs, and welcoming environment, to name a few. These characteristics had not only attracted hundreds of thousands of learners through their doors, but also successfully challenged TAFE colleges to become more accommodating and flexible.

That competition however was limited in a number of ways. It was confined to certain programs which both colleges and community providers offered: the hobby/leisure programs and transition/access programs. It was not until the early 1990s that the State Training Board opened up funded vocational education and training program delivery to other education providers, both commercial and not-for-profit. As noted in the previous chapter, around 60 community-based providers immediately registered to deliver vocational education programs. By the mid 1990s that figure had increased to 90.

Both the Commonwealth and Victorian governments were committed to opening up the training market, and to purchasing services from a range of providers, not just those they had traditionally funded. The ACFE Board had had a foretaste of this in the early 1990s when the Commonwealth government had forced AMES to compete for funds in English language training, an area in which AMES had had a virtual monopoly. AMES had adjusted quickly to the new environment, successfully tendering for funds in its traditional area, and expanding into new services such as such as vocational education and employment placement. In 1995, AMES became the first service agency in the Department of Education committed to a 'sharper market orientation and an improved capacity to respond to market opportunities.'⁵⁵

From 1996, Commonwealth growth funds for education and training in Victoria were available through an open tender. TAFE institutes, registered private providers and community providers competed for funds in vocational education and further education. Community providers won 10% of the funds (approximately \$1.5 million). In the years from 1997 to 1999, the ACE sector (community providers, AMES, CAE) secured around 17% of the total funds available.

The Board was well pleased that 'the adult community and education sector is functioning well in an increasingly competitive environment.'⁵⁶ There were some issues, however. The first year, the timelines occurred over summer school holidays when community providers generally closed. Secondly, there was considerable variation across the regions in the number of providers participating; the Board was keen that Regional Councils actively encourage providers to apply for funds.⁵⁷ Certainly some were active in running workshops on tendering. However, the Board may have been a trifle unrealistic about community providers entering a process that attracted up to 10,000 submissions. Its requirement in 1997 that Regional Councils tender between 25% and 50% of their funds had to be modified a year later to between 5% and 25%; reliable competition was not always available in regional and rural areas.

The Board was nonetheless very satisfied that it had provided the administrative and resourcing support 'to build the foundations necessary for the sector to survive in the competitive market.'⁵⁸

... But Collaboratively

If competitive tendering for funds was a fact of life in the 1990s, so collaboration was also upheld as a virtue. Partnerships, consortia, and other co-operative arrangements were strongly in favour at a government level, and even an implicit condition in competing for funds. Collaboration was a competitive strength.

The Board used its publications to promote the benefits of joint activities between ACE organisations, other educational institutions, and service providers. Such arrangements were a key factor in its goal of expanding participation in ACE to new geographic areas and new client groups.

An article in an early *Multiple Choice* issue argued it was possible for ACE providers to work effectively with a TAFE institute without losing their ‘soul’. Combining the institute’s resources and the small providers’ local knowledge brought learning opportunities to small communities that would be impossible otherwise.⁵⁹ The Colac ACE co-ordinator, a veteran of community education, pointed out the win-wins in the partnership between her country centre and the TAFE institute in Geelong. The learners had more courses to choose from, better pathways for further study, and more comfortable conditions; both providers had more enrolments.⁶⁰ The King Valley Learning Exchange depended entirely on collaboration. Having no facilities itself, it was entirely dependent on the local school for premises in which to run its programs.⁶¹

Collaborative arrangements were not confined to rural and regional areas. Donvale Living and Learning ran courses for women in small business (an emerging client group in this period), in association with Swinburne University and the Victorian Women’s Trust.⁶² In inner Melbourne, the Board funded a consortium of providers and agencies to provide English language courses to older migrants who were often isolated in their own community. (See box)

OLDER MIGRANTS LEARN LOCALLY AND EXPAND THEIR HORIZONS

In 1997, the ACFE Board funded a consortium of providers and agencies to provide English for older migrants. In small friendly informal groups, elderly migrants were encouraged to develop their English language skills. The classes were very practical. They dealt with ‘day to day’ needs such as accessing the local hospital, getting around on public transport, handling problems with neighbours or shopping. While some students may need extra help with pronunciation, others may be keen to learn more about Australian culture and about the Australian education system so they can better understand what their grandchildren are learning at school.⁶³

Funding was a strong incentive for engaging in partnerships and consortia. Money available through the Office of Training and Further Education’s ‘BEEP’ initiative (Benchmarking for Education Effectiveness) in the later 1990s deliberately encouraged consortia of providers — TAFE institutes, private providers and ACE organisations — to undertake innovative projects together.⁶⁴

VET in ACE

A powerful incentive behind both the competition for funds and collaboration in delivery was the increasing trend toward accredited vocational education and training delivery in ACE organisations.

In 1997, the ACFE Board and Office of Training and Further Education published a series of case studies entitled *Forging Pathways: Good Practice in Community-based Adult Education*⁶⁵. It was one of the Board’s most significant publications in the 1990s.

The introduction explained how ACE providers were diversifying into vocationally-oriented provision, as part of their continuing commitment to meeting educational needs in their local communities. They were doing this in a number of ways. Around 90 were registered as private providers to deliver accredited courses (in whole or in part). Others had formed arrangements whereby those providers

or TAFE institutes delivered accredited courses for them. Some of the latter group had graduated to being private providers in their own right ‘after gaining confidence, familiarity and legitimacy.’

As if sensing nay-sayers in the wings, the introduction pointed to this development as an illustration of the sector’s on-going capacity to evolve to meet the needs of its learners and the requirements of their local communities. It was, in other words, continuing to be faithful to its roots:

[the] crafting of strong community networks ... have enabled educationally productive links between employers, client groups, other providers and funding sources. Mostly informal and established through personal contacts and movement within community and business groups, these networks are demonstrated as powerful mechanisms for both responding to and creating demand for vocational programs.

Finally, the studies reveal the management committees and staff as risk-takers who look ‘outside the square’ for solutions to problems relating to program provision. Collectively they are exemplars of community education leadership, innovation, creativity and entrepreneurial flair. [author’s emphasis]

The five ACE organisations showcased in the study concurred. None felt their mission or purpose as community centres had been compromised. If anything, it had been enhanced, because community-based meant responding to the community, continuing to bring opportunities within the reach of community, as ACE organisations had always done. ‘Entrepreneurial’ and ‘grassroots’ could co-exist.

The trend towards increasing delivery of VET programs in the ACE sector grew steadily in the 1990s, and was evident when the Board met the Regional Councils to negotiate their performance agreements. The Regional Councils regularly requested more funding for vocationally specific programs demanded by the community.⁶⁶ ACE providers, as noted above, fared well in the tender process for government funds for access and vocational programs.

Several qualifications should be noted about the trend. First, some in the sector worried greatly that it was endangering ACE’s core ethos, that external prescription was replacing community decision-making, that the demands for accountability and reporting were too high a price for funding, that community management and autonomy were being eroded. The Board endeavoured to counter this perception in various ways — the *Forging Pathways* publication being one example. A simple explanation was perhaps best:

In Victoria the following three descriptors collectively define the sector. ACE is by and for adults. ACE is what adults learn in a community setting. ACE is community owned and managed.⁶⁷

Secondly, the ACE sector was not being transformed into a series of mini-TAFE institutes delivering a wide range of qualifications. A few ACE providers who had multiple identities as private providers and providers of a range of government services were large and growing, but that was unusual.⁶⁸ ACE providers were in the main like they had been a decade earlier: located in community settings, run largely by volunteers. Furthermore, the VET courses they delivered were often modules of a course rather than the full course, vocationally specific rather than accredited, and as often as not in information technology (computer use).

LEARNING LOCALLY IN THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

The ACFE Board has worked to align ACFE with the national changes in VET ... without losing any of the flexibility and learner centred focus in ACE.

Many of the sites for the delivery of ACE education are community centres and neighbourhood houses ... [They] often look and feel like suburban houses with kitchens, play equipment for children, an atmosphere of welcome and a spirit that one’s past experience is not a current barrier to successful learning. ACE providers convey a message that it is OK to begin small, to build confidence and slowly consolidate successes.⁶⁹

By this time, VET in ACE was the subject of a national report, by Veronica Volkoff, researcher and member of a Regional Council. Her study covered three states including Victoria. The ACE learners she surveyed chose the particular provider because they liked the teaching, the comfortable setting, and being treated in a 'preferred way'. Course availability and affordability were also significant factors. She argued the research demonstrated the sector's capacity to deliver VET courses. However, she sounded a warning note:

*The very features, including learner centredness, flexibility and less institutionalised venues and procedures, which are characteristic of ACE provision and most valued by learners can act as a disadvantage for the provider when marketing the capacity of ACE to deliver quality VET to industry and enterprises.*⁷⁰

Business practices

One area that gave the Board particular cause for satisfaction in this period was the way in which the ACE sector was performing in the new competitive environment. 'It is now taken as read that community owned and managed organisations deliver learning effectively and efficiently.'⁷¹

This the Board believed, was largely due to its efforts to ensure robust businesses practices across the sector, a priority under the ACFE Plan 1996–98. Implementation of that Plan had given the sector 'more secure administrative processes; positioned community owned and managed organisations to compete; ... promoted quality frameworks for all facets of ACE ...'

The Board had introduced a wide range of business reforms in this period — essential if the ACE sector was to be a serious player in the Victorian state training system in the mid 1990s. There were systems (e.g. computers) of which the Division and Board could take advantage. There were major business projects in which the Board could participate, while simultaneously bringing to bear on them the distinctive perceptions and needs of the ACE sector.

Any number of examples could be used to illustrate how the ACFE Board addressed changes emanating from government policy, influenced or adapted them, and then implemented (and sold) them in the sector. Performance indicators were one instance. With the ACE sector now recognised by ANTA as part of the state training system, performance indicators appropriate to both TAFE colleges and the community sector had to be devised. The indicators the Board endorsed in 1995 were broadly similar to the previous ones but they demonstrate clearly the changing vocabulary of public sector management: activity/throughput indicators, quality and relevance, and efficiency/cost effectiveness. By 1997–98, they were incorporated into a Performance Monitoring and Review Strategy.

Statistics were another. Collection of statistics had been a bone of contention between ACE providers, Regional Councils and the TAFE Board a decade earlier. With the establishment of ANTA and government emphasis on accountability and outcomes, statistics again became an issue.⁷²

Statistics presented a dilemma for sector. On the one hand, it might complain that its role was under-appreciated by government; on the other, proof of its impact and role required reliable statistics. Statistics required resources: either time-consuming administrative systems or increasingly, computer hardware and software which not all community providers could afford.

ACFE courses were part of the Victorian State Profile for ANTA funding, and part of the new national statistical collection (AVETMISS). AVETMISS was a hungry beast, demanding detailed information about courses (19 items) and students (12). Mindful of provider dissatisfaction, the Board canvassed alternative solutions but consensus was not forthcoming. The Board was pleased to report the availability of computers for community providers to assist them with the reporting requirements.⁷³ The computers seemed to have softened resistance, as did the recognition that statistical reporting was now, for better or worse, an accepted fact of life.

The challenges of being part of the state training system were also evident when the Victorian government introduced fees and charges in TAFE colleges. Two difficulties immediately presented themselves. First, how would this apply to ACFE Board funded courses (e.g. adult basic education) and the Adult VCE, which were delivered in both TAFE colleges and community providers? Secondly,

many community providers had only ever charged minimal fees at best, seeing this as core to their accessibility to the community. How would this fundamental shift be received in the sector?

The Board took the view that fees and charges in the ACE sector would mirror those applying to centrally funded courses delivered by TAFE colleges. ACFE-funded courses, wherever they were delivered, would require a tuition fee — either \$1 per hour for short courses, or a minimum of \$40 for longer courses. Providers could charge the same amount as TAFE colleges or the Adult VCE and apply funds to other access courses. It was a pragmatic approach: the policy would increase the resource base of the sector. Providers anxious that they would not be able to compete with TAFE colleges would now have funds at their disposal to increase the level of student services.⁷⁴

During this period, the Board also undertook comprehensive reviews of its two main funding policies, the statewide formula by which resources were allocated to regions, and the formula used by Regional Councils to distribute those funds to providers. Government monies were allocated to regions and onto providers using a variety of methods accumulated over the years. Time and changing policies now called those methods into question. There were more ‘buckets of money’ and many sources, for example, to the point where the ACFE Board had become a relatively minor contributor to the total budgets of many community providers.

By 1995, funding arrangements were seriously in need of simplifying and streamlining. The Statewide Funding Formula, which went back to 1990, used a region’s population as the principal determinant of funding. It was increasingly criticised as outdated, particularly in the post ANTA world. After extensive consultation, the Board put forward a new model appropriate to the new operating environment. It integrated planning across all ACFE providers (community providers, the CAE, TAFE colleges and AMES where appropriate). It addressed delivery of specified services and achievement of agreed outcomes. It focused on access and vocational courses. Finally, it minimized direct funding from the Board to providers.⁷⁵

The formula had three components. The largest was equality of access (approximately 80%); it used lack of post-secondary school qualifications as the key indicator of demand. The second component, development of adult education (17%), provided for general operational support and the development of new providers. The final component was Special Circumstances (3%), and addressed issues that could affect Regional Council’s capacity to carry their functions.

Under the arrangement, Regional Councils received a single amount of funding, the aggregate of their allocation under the three components.

The Board then left it up to each Regional Council to distribute those funds to providers to meet the targets agreed on in the Board-Council performance agreement.

Having settled the Statewide Funding Formula from 1996, the Board turned its attention to regional funding. The Regional Funding Framework was almost twelve months in the making, and came into effect in 1997.⁷⁶ The underpinning principles were transparency, consistency, recognition of diversity across regions and providers, and efficient and effective use of government funds. It addressed the policy environment of the day: the purchaser/provider relationship, the national competition policy, and the Board’s ongoing commitment to support adult education in the community, including general adult education courses (hobby/leisure).

The Framework acknowledged the importance of provider autonomy, increased their flexibility in the use of funds to meet specified outcomes, gave Regional Councils more discretion in allocating funds, and provided for a mix of submission-based and tender-based processes. It also provided a model funding agreement between Regional Councils and providers. Minor refinements were made after a review of the Framework the following year.⁷⁷

It is clear that reforms in business practices in the ACE sector in this period were often closely related to developments being introduced by the Office of Training and Further Education, of which the ACFE Division was part. When the registration processes for Victorian private providers were re-engineered in 1997–98, the ACFE Division reviewed and streamlined the processes for registration of ACE providers, to bring them as closely as possible into alignment.

The implementation of continuous improvement processes in the state training system, a priority of the Office of Training and Further Education in the late 1990s, engaged the ACFE Board. In 1997–98, the Board identified continuous improvement in management practices and systems as a priority. The extensive range of activities under the Office’s quality assurance umbrella led to many projects identifying good practice across the state training system. Projects by consortia were encouraged, and so ACE providers found themselves working with TAFE colleges, schools, and businesses exploring excellence and innovation.

As part of Victoria’s state training system, the ACE sector was caught up in the emphasis on quality assurance. The ACFE Board agreed to a quality management framework for the ACE sector, adapted for community providers from the one developed by the Office. New language appears in the Board papers, such as good practice guides (e.g. for governance), and self-assessment tools to check compliance, levels of recognition. In 1997, it was noted that ‘significant progress had occurred on all ACE fronts in relation to customized quality assurance and has been welcomed by the sector.’⁷⁸ There were suggestions of rewards for high performing providers, such as additional funds, reduced accountability, preferred supplier status and a special logo.⁷⁹ Workshops were held. An ACE Providers Self-Assessment Manual was developed and distributed.

The ACFE Board’s publication *Multiple Choice* was revamped into a magazine of good practice, made glossy, and renamed *ACE Practice*. However, considerable initial momentum then suddenly seemed to stop. The ACFE Board became pre-occupied with other issues, and references to the quality management framework ceased. It was if this was a prelude to the new government elected unexpectedly in October 1999.

Communication, Promotion and Marketing

The Board’s legislated responsibilities included promotion of the sector. In its early days, it did this primarily by campaigning — and very successfully at that — at state and Commonwealth government level about the sector’s significance. It had also adopted a logo — the distinctive sigma — that could be used as a common brand across the diverse sector. There was no overarching communications strategy, simply a range of publications including reports, curriculum documents and Board communiqués. Marketing and promotion were largely left to individual providers and Regional Councils.

As it did in so many areas, ANTA changed that, in several ways. First, it made available funding to promote ‘adult learning.’ Secondly, ANTA presided over arrangements for the new competitive, customer driven training market, in which promotion and marketing were essential for survival, as the ACFE Board recognised.

The Board took up the challenge: it adopted a communications and promotions strategy, first mooted in late 1994, and identified this as one of its priorities for 1995.⁸⁰

A key component of the strategy was Adult Learners Week, a national initiative funded by ANTA and based on a successful program in the United Kingdom. ANTA provided a national program of events and materials into which each state could tap, as well as generous funding for local (state) initiatives. The ACFE Board was happy to have the resources (\$162,000), and to focus them on ‘adult education in the community.’ It distributed some funds to Regional Councils to encourage them to undertake activities in their local communities.

The first Adult Learners Week was held in September 1995. The Board hoped for ‘unprecedented publicity for adult education in the community during the week.’ Numerous activities were organised: a television commercial, displays in Bourke Street mall, posters and bookmarks for distribution, and a seminar with international speakers. The CAE rescheduled its annual award ceremony to that week. Victoria was pleased to claim success at the national celebrations when Sat Devi from Sunshine AMES was named joint winner of the inaugural award for services to ACE.

The Board pronounced itself pleased with the ‘quality and vigour’ of the activities at local, regional and state level.⁸¹

Adult Learners Week was immediately entrenched as an annual event each September. In 1996, using the theme ‘Lifelong learning for all’, the emphasis was on a special course information hotline which

took over 700 calls from members of the public, and relayed them to Regional Council offices. Again, Board provided funds to the Regional Councils to encourage local initiatives and media events.

In 1997, the ACFE Board handed responsibility for planning to the Department of Education's promotional team. The availability of professional expertise, a dedicated team and departmental funds made an immediate difference to the profile of Adult Learners Week. There were launches in each region, a state launch at a major suburban shopping centre, and television and radio publicity. The success of the Victorian endeavours and frustrations over the national approach prompted the Board to assert its own role more strongly rather than simply tag along with the national campaign. Over eighty events were held around the state under the banner, 'Amaze the Neighbours'.

Adult Learners Week in September 1999 was deemed to be the most successful to date, with more events than ever and provider participation and Regional Council commitment high. Like the sector it was promoting however, Adult Learners week could not stand still. The most popular events were those linked to technology, such as the new online short course directory, and the 'Seniors Online Day'; traditional demonstrations and displays could not compete with them.

The one disappointment was the cancellation of the television advertisements — the calling of the fateful 1999 election prevented the broadcast of the community services announcements.

Multiple Choice

The Board's other major communication/promotional activity was the publication, *Multiple Choice*. Launched in 1995, this was the Board's first such regular publication. Basic in design (two colour with a few black and white photos), it was a 'quarterly bulletin of good practice, news and information about adult community and further education across Victoria.'⁸²

Multiple Choice set out to communicate complex policies and priorities to the sector. Developments were presented clearly, concisely and in an intentionally persuasive manner (the contrast with Board papers is sometimes striking!). The role of ANTA and other (remote) Commonwealth agencies was explained in an early issue. The new regional funding formula was demystified, and later the tendering process. Each time, a genuine attempt was made to address (potential) issues of concern to Regional Councils and providers.

There was also a deliberate attempt in *Multiple Choice* to acknowledge that some policies and trends were controversial, a challenge to deeply held philosophies and traditions in the sector. The growing prevalence of accredited programs was one example: 'Is the price worth it? Maybe. Maybe not,' mused Peter Rushworth, a Monash academic.⁸³ Their emphasis on 'prescriptive behavioural outcomes' made these programs, he argued, like a 'foreign culture' in the sector. He concluded, however, that 'creative and experienced educators and savvy students' could adapt them to meet their needs. Not only that, the growing trend towards accredited programs 'can be enriched by the sector's powerful education traditions.'

The sensitivities of Board members to these issues were also underscored. Board chair, Dr Neilson, wrote of the need to 'balance the creative tension between accountability and the responsibility of effectively using taxpayer's funds, and maintaining the essential characteristics of adult education in the community, such as being responsive to community needs and generating flexible programs.'⁸⁴ There was even criticism of current government policy. Helen Kimberley, a serving Board member, expressed her reservation about some directions in the sector: support for accredited programs 'at the expense of community development', and a gap she identified between 'government policy and what the community wants.'⁸⁵

As an information bulletin, *Multiple Choice* featured personalities and programs, regions and providers, research and resources. The people and providers featured had often been significant players in the sector for many years. They spoke, usually enthusiastically, of the far-reaching changes in the past decades, the new opportunities in the sector, and the importance of retaining the values at the core of adult community education.

The magazine's intention was to encourage and demystify those changes, and to alleviate concerns about them among providers. Stories featured a range of providers and their determination to embrace the new demands and opportunities of the mid 90s: increased government funding, the shift to accredited vocational programs, cooperative ventures with TAFE colleges, increasingly diverse

client groups, new learning technology. They spoke of the importance of being innovative and open to new developments, while preserving the best ways of the sector such as its welcoming approach, emphasis on access, and commitment to programs and services local people need.

Multiple Choice was an important tool as the Board moved towards a stronger emphasis on communication, promotion and marketing. In 1999, it was superseded by *ACE Practice*, more sophisticated and glossy, more promotional and, arguably, less comprehensive.

PROVIDERS THROUGH THE PAGES OF *MULTIPLE CHOICE*

Mill Park Community House opened in 1985, to provide much needed community services in a new suburb on the fringe of Melbourne. It initially offered a drop in centre and typing classes, with child care. It expanded into programs for senior citizens and people with disabilities, to meet the needs those groups in the local community. By 1995, it was running over 30 programs a week — hobby/recreation, accredited vocational and further education, and integration programs, the latter in a specialised centre for people with disabilities.

‘Many people have gained knowledge and skill at the Mill Park Community House and then moved on. People return, people do not, depending on their need. The Mill Park Community House like other facilities moves with the times. It is vital for its survival.’

> LYNNE HARRIS, CO-ORDINATOR OF THE MILL PARK COMMUNITY HOUSE.⁸⁶

In 1998, the Centre Wangaratta was named Best Rural Adult Education Provider in Victoria. Set up in the early 1960s, the Centre was the first organisation of its kind. Always pioneering and innovative, by the late 90s it was a large registered training organisation but had always remained true to its original ethos.

‘... roles are often blurred — one person may be volunteer, learner, committee member, tutor and all at the same time. Every role is an opportunity to learn and to contribute ... The Centre, although now a large training organisation, was more like an organism than an organisation because it grew in a holistic and uniquely committed way.

> ADELE DAVIES, CHAIRPERSON, THE CENTRE.⁸⁷

MADEC in Mildura was also a pioneer in adult community education. It too had a keen eye for development and innovation. Firmly committed to locally based and locally focused services, and to linking vocational training and employment services, it became a highly successful job placement agency in the mid 1990s.

‘As an organisation MADEC is now required to compete not only with our own local providers, but with educational institutions and multinational companies operating with trading concessions and the capacity to utilise economies of scale. It is therefore heartening to know that in this competitive, performance-based pay-on-results environment, community-based adult education cannot only survive, but prosper.’⁸⁸

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King Valley Learning Exchange underwent a major exercise in changing its culture in the late 1990s. It was its response to the big socio-economic changes in its environment, as the King Valley moved from its dependence on tobacco production into highly successful ventures based around viticulture, gourmet food and tourism. The Learning Exchange — unusual in that it had never had premises of its own — reviewed its programs and determined changes were needed to meet the new needs of the community.

‘Forklift training and testing, and truck endorsement courses, they were the starting point of our new approach. When funding policies changed back around 1995, we had to rethink the kinds of program we were offering. We had primarily run hobby courses until then, but access and vocational courses were becoming increasingly important and we had to change the way we thought about adult education.’

> MARGARET WEST, CO-ORDINATOR, KING VALLEY LEARNING EXCHANGE.⁸⁹

New technology

The period from 1995–99 included the take-up of new technologies for teaching and learning, as well as for management and administration. This involved far more than using technology as a tool for its own use. The ACE sector played a prominent part in the spread of information technology skills among the Victorian population at large, particularly in regional areas and among older members of the community.

Much of the impetus was of course external, coming from changes in information and communications technology itself and various government policies encouraging take-up.

The Board was keenly aware of the power of the ‘New Learning Technologies’ to bring ACE programs within the reach of ever more Victorians, not just through their local education provider but their local library or even their own home. The technologies added another dimension to ‘community’. In addition to communities linked by geography or by interest, now ‘communities of the internet can be brought together and sustained by communications technology.’⁹⁰

The New Learning Technologies Implementation Plan 1997–99 set out the steps by which the Board’s ‘vision of expanding community-based learning opportunities for all adult learners in Victoria through the use of new learning technologies.’ Its initiatives covered infrastructure (computer hardware and software), development of and access to learning programs, and creating professional skills.

Computers for Business

Without infrastructure or equipment, nothing could happen. The Commonwealth and state government injected funds, the Commonwealth mainly to support the introduction of the mandatory national statistical collection. The computing hardware, software and modems that were installed for that purpose in regional offices and providers, together with the training, went a long way towards normalizing the use of computers as a complex business tool, not simply a glorified typewriter.

The Annual Reports of the period show a steady take-up of computers across the sector for business purposes such as grant applications, financial reporting and statistics. By the late 90s, reports from Regional Councils suggested that the vast majority of funded providers had access to emails and the internet and used them.

The internet had in a short space of time become an essential business tool. The Board’s new grant management system, introduced in mid 1999, was web-based.

Computers for Promotion

The TAFE or VET sector in Victoria had for many years published an annual courses directory, a guide to providers and the programs they offered across Victoria. It was an important reference tool, widely distributed every year through libraries, schools, and numerous other agencies.

For several years, the Department of Education’s JAC (Job and Course Explorer) had produced a directory of ‘leisure and community’ courses. The sheer number of ACE providers and courses, their local clientele, and short lead times limited the usefulness of a printed publication however. The internet, on the other hand, provided the ideal vehicle.

Short Courses Victoria: the Directory of Leisure, Community, Access and Vocational Courses was launched in 1999 during Adult Learners Week. Developed by the same team, it was an online directory of short courses, some accredited modules and others not, delivered by ACE providers, TAFE institutes and other providers. It was free, informative, searchable by topic, location and provider, and used data entered by the providers themselves. It was therefore always up-to-date, in theory at least. Print copies were available but the directory was, from its inception, an online tool.

It continued under the same name, at www.shortcourses.vic.gov.au, until its decommissioning in 2012.

VICTORIAN PROVIDER — ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

In 1998, Duke Street Community House in Sunshine found itself on the world stage. Education manager Toulia Karayannis was invited to talk at an international conference on Duke Street's internet projects, and the House was nominated for an international award for excellent programs in community settings. Her attendance at the conference was supported by the ACFE Board and the Office of Training and Further Education.

Duke Street had been running computer classes since the early 1990s, beginning with a 'few old Apple Macintosh computers begged and borrowed from larger corporations.'

The House was determined that 'our community is not among the growing ranks of the "technologically poor".'

'For several years the Duke Street Community House has been reaching the world through its innovative internet projects. Their home page has won several awards, their trainers have been invited to speak at training seminars and their students regularly publish stories and articles on the internet. Since they first started their internet project over 7,000 people have visited their home page and teachers from all over the world have e-mailed them for advice and ideas for using the internet with their students.'⁹⁷

Duke Street held a Computer and Internet Summer School in January 1999. The courses were intensive and cost \$350 each. One was for teachers, the other for 'people in business, administration, customer service, study [and] people who would like to learn the internet basics and join the Information Superhighway.'

Computers for Learning

In the mid 1990s, policies, strategy documents and reports abounded in Australian education circles as governments, providers practitioners tried to assess the meaning and impact of the new information and communications technologies. The ACFE Board was not alone when, with a hint of apprehension, it spoke of its endeavour to 'seek to come to grips with the impact of the new technology on learning and the power it has to serve the needs of adult learners.'⁹¹

In 1995, it was about 'flexible delivery', exemplified by a course delivered via 'audiographics' (videoconferencing?) across providers in Wodonga, Mt Beauty and Corryong. Newer methods were on the horizon through the internet. Providers in central Victoria in 1996–97 were at the forefront with their regional network CEeRIC which connected community providers to the internet.

In 1997–98, the Board estimated that around 25% of community providers were using the 'new learning technologies' in teaching and learning.⁹² Examples are scattered through Board publications. Learners at Ballarat East Community House were designing world wide web pages as creative writing and literacy exercises, while tutors there were designing curriculum material to be placed on the internet.⁹³ The Elwood St Kilda Neighbourhood House offered a very popular 'grey net' program, an introduction to online technology (internet structure, web surfing etc), for people over 50.⁹⁴ The Gippsland region was now 'connected', according to a feature article on *Multiple Choice*. A partnership between the Regional Council, shire, community-based providers and internet service providers had been established which would connect all community-based centres in Gippsland to the internet for an affordable cost. 'The community network,' announced the writer, 'has found itself at the leading edge of information technology!'⁹⁵

The launch of the TAFE Virtual Campus late in 1998 provided the way and the means for adult community providers to become even more involved in online learning. It was an ambitious initiative of the State Training Board, intended to make a wide range of courses (including further education courses) available online, via the internet. All providers, including the ACE sector, had the opportunity to participate in course design and delivery.

The TAFE Virtual Campus operated through learning networks, which attracted a small number of enthusiastic ACE providers. One network, ACENET, was made up entirely of adult community education providers. ACE providers also participated in TAFE Virtual Campus pilots, including one in

south west Victoria. Their involvement, which comprised computer access for students and a venue for visiting tutors, was deemed ‘essential to the success of the TAFE Virtual Campus trial for rural students in remote areas.’⁹⁶

Courses and Accreditation

One of the Board’s most important and prized responsibilities was its legislative authority to accredit further education courses. The accreditation of the Certificates in General Education for Adults in the early 1990s, after several years of work, was seen as a landmark achievement, signifying academic integrity, influence and commitment to educational opportunity at the most basic level. The Board was also deeply committed to the development of materials and professional development to support the curriculum.

In 1995, the Board noted that the sector was being ‘somewhat reshaped as courses which were previously general adult education have been legitimately reclassified into Stream 2000 and above.’⁹⁸ This shift in the programs the sector was due to two reasons — government funding for such courses and consumer demand.

‘Somewhat reshaped’ was an understatement. There was in fact a major debate going on that would shortly result in a radical transformation of courses and accreditation across the nation’s vocational education and training system. There was much discussion about ‘devolved accreditation,’ which would have seen certain recognised providers responsible for course accreditation.

That discussion was overtaken in 1997 however by the announcement of training packages as the basis of the curriculum in vocational education and training courses. Training packages would provide nationally consistent, industry endorsed qualifications appropriate to the skills and knowledge an employee required in the workplace. Locally developed and accredited courses would progressively be superseded.

The ACFE Board expressed a number of concerns about the development. First, there was no ‘industry’ as such to establish benchmarks and standards for further education courses. Secondly, it had reservations about the approach to literacy and numeracy in the packages. Thirdly, it believed community organisations could be marginalised in a ‘second tier’ of providers if training packages delivery demanded onerous resources and restrictions.⁹⁹

The Board’s solution was the development of a curriculum framework for further education. Its own Further Education Framework would allow the sector to ‘develop quality curricula which is consistent with national requirements. The availability of free quality curricula which might result from the Further Education Framework,’ it continued, will reduce the need for providers to spend considerable time and money on developing and accrediting their own curricula.¹⁰⁰

The importance of such a framework was undeniable — around 100,000 Victorians were enrolled in government funded further education courses, accounting for 14% of the state training system’s activity. Moreover, ANTA was ready to promote its potential nationally.¹⁰¹

The new Curriculum Framework for Further Education, entitled *Transforming Lives Transforming Communities*, was completed in 1998. Two companion documents, *Curriculum Guidelines* and *RTO Managed Accreditation Guidelines* were published at the same time. The documents had been approved by the Victorian Training Recognition Council, which meant that vocational and further education had a common accreditation system. Four accredited short courses were soon available, and work was underway on a Diploma of Further Education, as an alternative to the Adult VCE for tertiary study.

The Framework was a major achievement for the Board. It showed that while further education complemented vocational education, it was different — it did not lend itself really to competency based standards or accepted notions of ‘industry.’ Importantly it positioned Victoria well in the national developments, as it was a way to ‘align ACFE with the changes without losing any of [its] flexibility and learner-centred focus. The Office of Training and Further Education was encouraging: ‘initiatives in Victoria ahead of other states and territories would serve as an anchor for national progress rather than as a stumbling block.’¹⁰²

The Board was justifiably pleased; it had ‘ensured that a generative and educationally sound environment for further education now prevails in Victoria.’¹⁰³

Client Groups

In 1997, ACFE Board chair Dr David Neilsen drew attention to ‘the broadening spectrum of clients’ in the ACE sector. ‘This client base,’ he continued, ‘extending from young adults to older members of the community, gives real meaning to the notion of lifelong learning.’¹⁰⁴

From its beginnings as individual, community-based groups in the 1970s to its emergence as a sector in the 1980s, ACE’s driving motivation was to meet the needs of people who for various reasons had had limited schooling and who sought more education. Its main client base was women — *but* they were women who came from a great variety of backgrounds: from rural, regional and suburban areas, from English speaking and non-English speaking groups, single mothers, women seeking employment after years raising a family, young women, older women.

In the mid 1990s, the Board faced considerable pressure (and financial incentives) to provide for the education needs of an ever expanding number of groups. Commonwealth and state governments funded various training-based programs for unemployed people, Koories, people from diverse cultural backgrounds, people with disabilities, amongst others.

The Board encouraged ACE providers, as part of Victoria’s state training system and an education sector committed to addressing disadvantage, to respond to the needs of these groups.

People with disabilities were one such group. Previously educated in schools, irrespective of their age, people with disabilities became the responsibility of the state training system. Several successful programs had been pioneered in ACE providers since the early 1990s. In 1997, the Board endorsed its policy for people with disabilities. Under the program *Future for Young Adults*, it encouraged Regional Councils to encourage community providers to offer programs for people with disabilities. It devoted an entire issue of its publication *Multiple Choice* to its policy and programs in the sector.¹⁰⁵

Koories were another group to which the Board gave priority. Its support took various forms: a statewide Koorie program co-ordinator, the encouragement of Koorie providers such as Songlines (around 30 in 1997), funding for specific programs both for Koorie students and to support their learning. Perhaps the most high profile project was the development of the Certificate in Koorie Education, popularly known as the ‘Coorong-Tongala course.’ The course, which was designed by Koorie educators, incorporated literacy and numeracy, vocational education and training, and cultural studies. It was accredited in 1997 and thereby available in Victoria and nationally. There were approximately 1,000 Koorie enrolments in ACE in 1997.¹⁰⁶

One group that was almost entirely new to the ACE sector was young people. At its first meeting in 1997, the new Minister Phil Honeywood drew the Board’s attention to young people who had missed out on educational experiences. ‘The special features of the sector,’ he said, mean that the ACE sector is ‘especially suited to address the needs of young learners who are not part of other educational systems.’¹⁰⁷

Neither the Board nor ACE providers were unfamiliar with young people, typically those aged between 19 and 24. They were among the Adult VCE students in community providers (though VCE students tended to gravitate to TAFE providers), the unemployed learners in the Commonwealth’s pre-vocational programs run in some ACE providers, among the Koorie students and people with disabilities. But now the sector was being asked to take on ‘youth’, people aged 15–19, often early school leavers and/or with any number of issues. Both the Commonwealth and Victorian governments were instigating programs to keep young people in education and training, and as part of the state training system, Victorian ACE providers could apply for funding.¹⁰⁸

In 1999, the Board considered a paper on the emerging role of the ACE sector in meeting the needs of young people.¹⁰⁹ The paper concluded that while the sector was making some contribution to the needs of young people, it was not attracting 15 to 19 year olds. More work was needed to attract this ‘large potential market for the ACE sector.’ The paper acknowledged a number of possible issues for providers, such the ‘gender dynamic’ between young male school leavers and women from older ages

groups (the majority of ACE learners). It proposed in the first instance an ACE Youth Forum, to discuss the way forward. It was held in November 1999, weeks after the election of the Labor government.

Another group of interest were older learners, who the Board identified as a priority group in 1996–97. They were not seeking employment or retraining, but through the U3A organisation (University of the Third Age) they had a considerable voice. In 1999, the Board supported a number of projects such as internet training for senior citizens as part of the Victorian government’s acknowledgement of the International Year of the Older Person.

In 1999, the Board reflected

... given the current demography of the ACE sector reflects past educational policy on school completion levels by girls, changes since the early 1980s may lead to changes in the composition of the ACE sector in the future. It was agreed that there will be a continued need for the ACE sector to provide second chance learning opportunities regardless of how such changes to the sector are played out.¹¹⁰

So, it might be asked, what of women, the sector’s traditional client base? Clearly, women still made up the great majority of learners in the ACE sector. As it had done in the 1980s, ACE providers were still giving many women a second chance at employment, community engagement, and self-esteem — and virtually on their doorstep.

LEARNER ADVOCATE: CAROL, LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYED SINGLE MOTHER IN HER 30s

When I started, I didn’t want to look too far, I wanted to get confidence in myself ... see what I could do, and now I know I am capable ... I want to be qualified and get a job, don’t want to clean toilets all my life ... There should be these sorts of centres and opportunities in every suburb.¹¹¹

However, the ACFE Board had also identified women in small business as an important potential market. In 1998 it published ... *But Who’ll Answer the Phone?* Women starting small businesses often needed training so they had the skills for their business to succeed: market research, promotion, accounting and stock management. The study found that the ACE sector was particularly well-placed to help English-speaking women starting a business. Women liked to learn co-operatively in situations where their experience was valued, but found it hard to find time for education and training. They also valued the support that came from business-related networks.

The report suggested there was room for more extensive research into potential markets for the ACE sector.¹¹²

In this period, as in every other period of its history, the ACE sector remained firm in its commitment to disadvantaged groups. Some were traditional clientele, but there were always new groups being thrown into relief by economic conditions, social policy and government funds. It would prove equally true in the next decade.

Conclusion: Learn Local 1995–99

Clearly, the years from 1995 to 1999 were a period of rapid change for the ACE sector — in government policy, business practices, profile, technology and clientele. However, the forces for change rarely overcome the force of continuity, in this case pride in the ACE sector’s distinctive tradition, expressed in the words of the ACFE Plan 1996–98:

ACFE in Victoria has a strong foundation, built up over many years, of flexible and relevant programs provided for local communities, by local communities.

The next chapter in the Board’s life begins with a new, Labor government elected in October 1999.



CHAPTER 4:

Instrument of Government Policy 1999–2004

Introduction

The passing of the ACFE Act in 1991 and the establishment of the Board had ushered in a period of major change for the ACE sector. It had a new status with government, more resources, and a much stronger profile in Victorian post-secondary education provision than previously. ACE providers themselves had undergone significant development, with access to government funds and with a new role, delivery of nationally recognised vocational education and training programs.

The bookends of the period from 1999 to 2004 were the formation of Victoria's new Labor government late in 1999 and the release of the first Ministerial Statement on ACE in Victoria in mid 2004. These years saw the elevation of the ACE sector into an important instrument in the new government's commitment to education. The government saw education as an integral component of both economic *and* social development across the whole state, in regional and rural Victoria as well as metropolitan Melbourne. Its platform and policies were sympathetic to many valued principles held in adult community education.

The most striking aspect of these years in the development of the ACE sector is its new significance in the implementation of government policy, in regional development and community building as well as education. The government's long term vision, spelt out in 2001 in the much publicised document *Growing Victoria Together*, drove its agenda across portfolios including the directions and priorities of the ACFE Board. The vision included strengthening communities (rural, regional and urban), linking Victoria to promote social cohesion and growth, building opportunities for quality education and lifelong learning for all Victorians, reconciliation between Koories and non-Koories, planning for the needs of the changing population at all stages of life, and improving participation in democratic decision making.¹¹³

A whole of government approach was fundamental to the implementation of the policies, and achievement of the goals and targets associated with them. Some changes were accomplished smoothly, such as the ceding of the ACFE Board's accreditation powers to the new Victorian Qualifications Authority. Others presented challenges, such as how Learning Towns, ACE Clusters and Local Learning and Employment Networks (new) should mesh with the Regional Councils of Further Education (existing).

The entry of ACE providers into extensive vocational education and training delivery in the 1990s had been unforeseen by ACE pioneers a decade earlier; the unforeseen development in the early noughties was the changing demographic of the ACE learner population. The number of young people in ACE increased rapidly as a result of state and Commonwealth government programs and funding to the point where 15 to 19 year olds became the largest single age cohort in the sector in 2002. At the same time, there was pressure for the sector to address the needs of learners at the other end of the lifelong education spectrum, such as retirees and older workers. In addition, expectations continued that ACE would meet the particular learning needs of a wide range of groups in the community: Koories, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, refugees, people with disabilities, people with court orders and sentences to name some.

There were at times suggestions that the sector, or elements of it, felt hard-pressed in the face of new policy imperatives. Not all providers were ready, willing or able to take up the challenge of disengaged

young people, though others embraced it enthusiastically. Not all providers felt equipped for flexible delivery, but it was used extensively in ACE programs and providers. Board members seemed to concur: in late 2000, they noted that ‘many providers feel overwhelmed by the range of tasks which they are required to undertake’.¹¹⁴ The research that prompted the Board’s comment captured the providers’ dilemma: ‘the commitment of ACE providers to social justice objectives has at times impeded their capacity to prioritise, choose and select “clients”.’

Like the sector itself, the ACFE Board in this period reflected both continuity and change. Shirley Martin retired as chair in 2001 on the expiration of her term but remained a member of the Board. She was succeeded by the highly respected Peter Kirby who had chaired the influential Ministerial Review into Post-compulsory Education and Training, and then in early 2003 by Lynne Wannan, well known as a social policy analyst and community leader. There was also change in senior staff: Jenny Samms was succeeded as general manager in 2000 by Sue Christophers, and then Sandy Forbes in 2003.

The account below of the first years of the Bracks’ Labor government endeavours to capture the most significant of the new policies and their impact on the ACE sector. It is also a prelude to the release of the first Ministerial Statement on Future Directions in ACE in 2004.

A new government and its initiatives

In August 1999, Premier Jeff Kennett called an election.

The immediate impact of the election call on the ACE sector was the cancellation of the television and radio campaign for Adult Learners Week; government advertising was banned in the caretaker period before the election.

While pollsters and pundits regarded another Liberal National victory as a foregone conclusion, Election Day brought a shock poll-defying result, a cliff-hanger that took several weeks to resolve. Three independent MPs from rural seats broke the impasse when they announced their decision to support a minority Labor government under Steve Bracks. The new government was sworn in more than four weeks after the election. The perception of a Melbourne-centric approach by the new Ministry was a factor to which the new government was to pay great heed.

The new government’s election platform identified education as its ‘number one priority’.¹¹⁵ Its particular focus was young people who were leaving school ‘early’. School retention rates had fallen in the 1990s, with young people leaving without a year 12 qualification. This, the government argued, came at a ‘heavy school cost, including increased drug abuse, crime and youth unemployment.’

The government had a number of solutions, and saw the ACE sector as having a vital role to play in them.

At first glance the government’s view of adult and community education expressed in its election platform was conventional — the sector ‘provides education and training opportunities for many people who have found that traditional educational environments are failing to meet their needs.’¹¹⁶

Certainly, the challenge and opportunities presented by young people had been evident under the previous government, but under the new government 15 to 19 year olds were a key priority.

The ACE sector was now the responsibility of the Minister for Post-Compulsory Education Training and Employment, Lynne Kosky MP. Minister Kosky’s career before politics had involved being a community education officer in Melbourne’s western suburbs and a policy adviser on youth affairs. She was keenly interested in the ACE sector and its contribution.

The incoming government’s reform of educational policy and structures was fundamental in achieving its objectives of improving school retention and school to work transition. Three initiatives in particular impacted on the ACE sector: the learning towns network, support for neighbourhood houses and community providers, and a new approach to post-compulsory education and training. Their implementation brought increased resources into the ACE sector, and linked the sector to a range of policies and programs in departments outside the education portfolio.

Learning Towns

The Learning Towns program was designed to address the government's concern that services in adult education, training and labour market assistance were fragmented and uncoordinated, particularly in rural and regional Victoria. The election commitment was 'to provide five rural and regional centres with funding to employ a co-ordinator to foster collaborative learning partnerships between ACE providers, educational institutions, industry, local government and communities, and [to] integrate economic, social and educational development.'¹¹⁷ The budget allocation was \$400,000 per annum.

The original initiative, which borrowed from similar programs overseas, provided for 5 Learning Towns. The Minister quickly decided to expand it to nine communities, a step that required simply a 'slight adjustment to the budget.'¹¹⁸ Each network was allocated \$110,000 per annum.

The successful nine submissions and their plans as featured in the 2000 issue of *ACE Practice*¹¹⁹ were

- > **Kyabram:** bringing together education and training providers, health and welfare agencies, industry groups, manufacturers, local government and community groups
- > **Horsham:** focussing on retaining and skilling young people, developing rural leadership, and creating education and learning opportunities for smaller Wimmera communities
- > **Geelong:** complementing the new SmartGeelong program with a focus on resources, research and relationships
- > **South Gippsland:** bringing together nine education groups to provide 'second chance' education, support small business and prepare learners for work
- > **Wycheproof:** using smart technology such as the internet and videoconferencing to bring partners, providers and learners together
- > **Wangaratta/Benalla:** using innovative IT solutions to connect remote geographic areas and overcome distance barriers to education opportunities
- > **Albury/Wodonga:** holding a Festival of Learning and a 'One-Stop-Learning-Shop' in the central business district to provide learners with advice on meeting learning goals
- > **Ballarat:** becoming an exemplar of enterprise and technical knowledge and
- > **Bendigo:** working on community access to learning resources, greater cohesion between education providers, and heightened awareness of the value of lifelong learning in the local community.

The inaugural Learning Town conference took place in Albury/Wodonga in late 2000, and a national network of similar programs was established.

Following an independent evaluation after eighteen months, the Board requested each Learning Town to develop a three year strategic plan and put forward proposals for long-term sustainability and alternative sources of funding for the Board's consideration. The proposals were strong on process but all too often lacked attention to planning and tangible outcomes. The problem was at in part related to blurred lines of activity between the Learning Towns and another of the government's major initiatives, Local Learning and Employment Networks (discussed below). The Geelong Learning Town was hailed as the most effective, because of its strategic approach, connection with wider initiatives and constant reference to tangible outcomes.

The program was rejigged, so that Learning Towns focussed on 'action learning projects' and activities related to the economic development of their regional communities. By working with local industry leaders and employers, their task was to facilitate initiatives that developed the skill base of several (familiar) target groups — the unemployed, workers in low skill occupations, and people typically marginalised by traditional education and training. A comprehensive performance framework was developed, one that went beyond the traditional student hour contact measure and included both tangible and intangible impacts on the community, wide community participation, and identification of local learning needs.¹²⁰

LEARNING LOCALLY IN LEARNING TOWNS

> **Geelong Learning Town**¹²¹ was an integral part of the SmartGeelong program. The city of Geelong, seriously affected by financial and manufacturing problems in the 1990s, had identified emerging technologies as a potential development market. The Learning Town role was based on the need to foster information and communication technology skills in the community. It promoted delivery of the 'International Computer Drivers Licence' and set up a Learning Shop to promote learning.

Its strengths included the budget commitment to strategic planning, performance monitoring and evaluation, and the close relationship between identified community need, strategies and outcomes.

> **Wycheproof Learning Town: The Shed**¹²² 'Rural producers face full or partial deregulation of domestic commodity markets, globalisation of world markets, more opportunities in Asia and continuing changes to government's industry assistance and advice to farmers. Many farmers don't have access to the information they need to understand and profit from these changes, nor do they have the time or opportunity to go to classes. Buloke Shire's learning towns initiative in North Western Victoria set up a shed at the Wycheproof saleyards to provide information and training to farmers where they do business.'

ACE Clusters

A second major initiative for adult community education in the government's 1999 election platform involved resources to strengthen providers' organisational capacity in several areas which had in the past proved problematic: marketing, IT support, data collection and education and training needs analysis. This program, which with \$3.6 million recurrent funding was far more lavishly resourced than Learning Towns, required clusters of providers to develop strategies to improve their capacity in these areas. It was aimed at small providers in particular.

The program was immediately popular. Within months, the first year's funding had been allocated to 55 clusters representing around 300 providers (some 60% of ACFE funded providers).¹²³ A preliminary review of the first year showed that clusters usually comprised 5 ACE organisations, the majority (59%) were in regional Victoria, and that funding was directed mainly to information technology and data collection. Pleasingly, the clusters had used the funds for projects that were key government priorities (such as youth pathways). However, as with the Learning Towns initiative, the evaluation showed up a lack of strategic planning, so the clusters were required to develop work plans. By this time, the number of clusters had increased to 65, involving 70% of eligible providers. Each cluster member received \$10,000 per annum.

The Board was delighted that the clusters were making a 'pro-active contribution to the sector', and it believed the program should be extended even though that would mean reduced funding per member.¹²⁴ As with the Learning Towns initiative, some adjustments were made. In 2002, the Board decided the clusters should focus on two areas, both relating to quality. The first, quality assurance, involved measures to support the implementation of the AQTF, increased savings, and stronger collaborative networks. The second was the enhancement of ACE programs and services.¹²⁵

The program continued to expand: by 2003, 75 clusters were funded. The Performance Management Framework developed for Learning Towns was adopted, and the Board agreed to fund the program until the end of 2004.

ACE CLUSTERS: SUPPORTING LOCAL LEARNING

Careers Guidance through an ACE Cluster¹²⁶

Eight providers from the Southern Western Port and Eastern Metropolitan Regions combined to form an ACE Cluster to develop career guidance and learner pathways, in order to address the lack of motivation and dropout rates in some courses. The Cluster formed an alliance with careers counsellors from RMIT, who provided advice and good practice examples, and assisted the providers track student pathways and outcomes.

‘Teachers, tutors, volunteers and coordinators will study the Graduate Certificate in Careers Counselling as part of their cluster involvement. Cluster members will also contribute to regional discussions — through regional forums for example — and share their knowledge ...’

Post-compulsory Education and Training

Learning Towns and ACE Clusters were important initiatives for the sector. The flagship of the new government’s approach to education, however, was the Ministerial Review of Post-compulsory Education and Training. Usually known as the ‘Kirby Review’, after its chair Peter Kirby AO the distinguished educational policy-maker and respected public servant, its function was to review post-compulsory education and training in Victoria for young people aged 15 to 24. The review involved substantial research and consultation. The report was released in August 2000.

The thorny issues tackled by the Review panel were dear to the heart of the ACE sector. Its traditional role was disenfranchised learners, initially women but now increasingly other groups including young (15–19 year old) early school leavers. It had long championed pathways between educational sectors, a concept that had always proved good in theory but challenging in practice. Briefing the Board, Kirby indicated the Review’s intention to remove ‘nonsensical barriers which block pathways for young people’, and to identify new programs and services that address their needs.¹²⁷ He and the final report of the Review acknowledged the importance of the sector in meeting the educational needs of some young people.

The Review’s recommendations and the government’s response had significant implications for the ACE sector, from legislative and structural arrangements to program funding for young people. First, there was structural change. A new statutory authority, the Learning and Employment Skills Commission, replaced the State Training Board — its name signifying the connectivity the government wanted to promote. The new cross-sector Victorian Qualifications Authority was charged with responsibility for further education accreditation, previously the legislated responsibility of the ACFE Board. Significantly, while the ACFE Board was to remain with its current charter (excepting its accreditation authority), a number of local planning networks (between 10 and 15) were to be set up to address the planning, co-ordination and regional delivery of post-compulsory education and training. Not surprisingly, the Board immediately queried the relationship between these new bodies, the Regional Councils of Further Education, Learning Towns and ACE Clusters.¹²⁸

Local Learning and Employment Networks

Fifteen of these new bodies, which came to be called Local Learning and Employment Networks (or LLENs), were established in early 2001. Funded through the Learning and Employment Skills Commission, the LLENs were another example of an initiative based on successful programs in other OECD countries. They were intended to identify gaps in the provision of education and training for young people and develop programs and opportunities to address them, to link provision to local employment needs, and ensure that the programs and services were coordinated. They were made up of a broad range of locally-based stakeholders: employers and industry, welfare agencies, local government and education providers. ACE organisations were represented on them. They sat somewhat awkwardly with existing networks, but they were important signifiers of the Bracks’ government commitment to young people, local service delivery, regional development and ‘joined-up government’.

The necessary legislative and structural arrangements took some months to implement. Most immediately evident was the additional funding to assist young people who were at risk of not participating in further education, training or employment. The ACE sector received a third of the \$1.5m allocated (\$1.0m to TAFE providers, \$0.5m to ACE). Sixty providers submitted proposals for programs and services to assist 15–19 year olds make a successful transition from school to further study and employment. The funds requested for these ‘Managed Individual Pathways’ or ‘MIPS’ was four times the amount available, but there was concern that the smallish number of applications suggested exhaustion or ‘saturation’ at the local level with respect to submissions for new programs.¹²⁹ A more likely explanation was the relatively specialised nature of provision for young people which attracted some providers more than others. The initiatives in the sector for young people are discussed below.

ACE and Young People

Perhaps the greatest single challenge to the sector in the early noughties involved the participation of young people. It was after all, the *adult* community sector and yet increasingly it was being pressed or persuaded to expand its clientele to embrace teenagers disengaged from the school sector. On the one hand, this was simply an extension of its traditional role of catering for the disenfranchised, a chapter in the philosophy of lifelong learning. As a government priority, it brought funding. On the other hand, this new client group meant competition for resources and priority, consideration of duty of care and staff professional development, and in some instances attention to safety and security issues.

The incoming government’s concern about falling education retention rates and the perceived consequences in social dysfunction gave significant impetus to the emerging role of the sector in engaging young people. In practice this meant people as young as 15 years old were being enrolled in ACE providers.

At its first meeting in 2000, the Board considered a paper on young people in ACE. It noted that more than 40% of the young people enrolled under the TAFE Youth Allowance voucher were in ACE providers. It also determined to identify and share good practice initiatives.¹³⁰

WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE — MODEL PROGRAM IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Future Connections Bendigo was an early leader in the sector in provision for young people, mainly in literacy and numeracy. It recommended that as far as possible, the provider make the experience ‘very different from the participants’ school experience by, for example:

- > a commitment to ‘getting the school teacher out of the staff’
- > a flexible and shortish day, with a 10 am start
- > strong emphasis on positive outcomes ...
- > open process (e.g. students have access to their files)
- > minimum regulations.

On the other hand, school holidays are observed.¹³¹

Addressing the needs of young people was a government priority (with ambitious goals and targets set), and therefore an imperative for the sector. The sector’s *raison d’être* had always been supporting disadvantaged learners in alternative, community settings. Young people were already among the sector’s clientele — as Koorie youth, young people with disabilities, the unemployed for example. But should this role extend to school-age learners, those between 15 and 17 who were now appearing in ACE programs? Shouldn’t that group be the responsibility of the school sector?

There was clearly concern out in the sector about this cohort. As noted above, relatively few providers applied for program funding targeting unemployed 15–19 year olds. There were strong arguments that students should stay in school ‘as long as practicable’ and that schools should in fact learn from

and adopt the ACE sector's successful initiatives with young people.¹³² The young people in question frequently required extensive support services, and funding was not always available.

In 2001, the ACFE Board took stock. It noted that in the year 2000, there were 8,000 learners aged between 15 and 19 enrolled in the ACE sector — an increase of over 80% since 1996. More than half (60%) were 17 or younger, and the majority (70%) were in rural and regional providers. Their experience of schooling was often poor and many had significant personal, family and health issues that necessitated significant support on the part of the provider. The engagement of providers was uneven: some had little or no delivery to young people while others had emerged as 'specialist' youth providers. The Board concluded the impact of the growth of young people in ACE should be researched and quantified.¹³³

As a government priority, funding was streamlined and increased in 2002 as the Youth Pathways Program. For the first time it became available for 15 year old school leavers. A few additional ACE providers joined the program. It became apparent that there were students younger than 15 enrolled in ACE providers, nearly 500 probably more. Some were still enrolled in school but some were not. The issue of 'serious legal risks' to ACE staff and students now loomed, not to mention a possible breach of the Education Act.¹³⁴

After consultation and internal negotiation, guidelines were finalised. Students under 15 could be enrolled in an ACE provider 'in exceptional circumstances', subject to protocols accepted by the Office of School Education. Several pilot programs involving ACE providers were set up to improve the retention of high risk students until they turned 15.¹³⁵

For all the challenges to the sector presented by the presence of young people the demand for places soon exceeded funding, which forced the Board to inject additional funds. It felt that the accountability for the 15-17 year old age group was still unclear. While proud of high quality innovative programs for young people, it was firmly of the view that 'the preferred role of the ACE sector ... is as a partner with schools and other providers, *not* as a surrogate alternative/community school that takes the 'most difficult' students.'¹³⁶

Nothing succeeded like success. The number of providers funded under the Youth Pathways Program remained relatively small (34 in 2004) but the number of young people in ACE and their student contact hours escalated dramatically, to the point where the traditional ACE demographic seemed transformed. Statistics bore that out as the figures in the box show.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS: YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACE IN 2002¹³⁷

- > total student contact hour provision for 15-19 year olds increased substantially between 2000 and 2002.
- > 'Provision for 15-19 year olds is now greater than for any other age cohort ...'
- > Provision in regional and especially rural areas is skewed towards the 15-19 year cohort (25% compared with 9% in metropolitan areas)
- > 'ACE has become a major provider for young people, in particular in Employment Skills (24% of provision) and Adult Literacy and Numeracy programs (28% of provision).

It was scarcely surprising then that young people over the age of 15 were a key target group identified in the Ministerial Statement on ACE released in 2004, and discussed in the next chapter.

The Other End of the Spectrum: Older Learners

Older people also had certainly had a presence in the Board's deliberations and resource allocation in the 1990s. The Board had long provided funding for the University of the Third Age (U3A) peak body and individual U3A programs. The year 1999 had been the International Year of the Older Person, celebrated in Victoria by various initiatives such as internet training in ACE providers.

The profile of this group seemed on the rise as a result. The vice-president of U3A was appointed to the Board early in 2000. The Board quickly identified older learners as a key market, including not only retirees but also retrenched older workers, older men and older people in rural and isolated areas, and set about developing a policy and strategic plan. The plan foreshadowed significantly increased demand from older learners, and 'aimed to spearhead radical change.'¹³⁸

There were two immediate problems. First, despite the U3A's profile not everyone agreed it represented the learning needs and interests of older people in the community at large or in the ACE sector — it attracted already well-educated participants rather than, for example, the older migrant with limited English skills. Secondly, much of the new government's attention and resourcing was firmly directed to young people aged between 15 and 19 who were disengaged from school, training and employment. The U3A member on the ACFE Board may have been right in theory when he said the Older Learners Plan would provide a 'complementary approach to the current approach on youth' but the reality was the government's priority was young people.¹³⁹

Nevertheless, important work was done. The Board continued to fund the U3A organisation and programs and commissioned research into older learners by the University of Melbourne. The research found that both the U3A and the ACE sector generally were 'meeting the needs of certain older Victorian adults very well.' It noted however that there were significant gaps in provision: among older men and culturally and linguistically diverse groups in particular. The report also noted a number of emerging trends in the older population that should be addressed, including retirees who wished to remain part-time in the workforce, older workers wanting to retrain and return to the workforce. It commented (as if the members did not know) that the Board 'faces competing demands from many groups within the community' and recommended a whole of government approach to planning and resourcing.¹⁴⁰

As attention turned to the government's goals and targets for young people, older learners slipped from prominence in the Board's deliberations. However, the discussion paper for the forthcoming Ministerial Statement on ACE noted that older learners over 65 years old were a 'significant and growing cohort in ACE' and that male enrolments in this group increased significantly. It was a trend that grew in the second half of the decade.

Koorie Learners

The ACE sector catered for what seemed an ever-increasing array of segments of society, most with limited involvement in traditional education and all with particular learning needs and interests. Victoria's Koorie community was one such group.

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI) had long had a member on the ACFE Board. The Board distributed Commonwealth funding for programs for the community, recognised Koorie providers such as the Aboriginal Advancement League and Songlines Music Aboriginal Corporation, employed a statewide Koorie program co-ordinator, and was justifiably proud of its innovative culturally aware curriculum popularly known as the 'Coorong-Tongala course' which had been accredited in the late 1990s.

Engaging Koorie learners was a challenge. In 1999, the Board adopted a range of strategies increase their participation which in 1997 was just 4% of the Koorie population.¹⁴¹ The number of enrolments soon doubled, and the participation rate increased to almost 6%. The basic Coorong Tongala (Certificate I) program was extended with the accreditation of Certificates II and III, providing Koories with much-needed pathways into further education or employment.

Support for Koorie providers was crucial in attracting Koorie learners. The number funded by the Board increased in both 1999 and 2000, bringing the total to 17. The introduction of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) (see below in this chapter) prompted the Board to fund VAEAI to work with Koorie providers on their capacity to meet the new national registration requirements. It also funded Songlines Music to develop partnerships between Koorie and non-Koorie providers to the advantage of both, with the focus on cultural awareness and quality outcomes for Koorie learners.

The development of Wurreker, the strategic partnership between the Office of Training and Tertiary Education and Victoria's Koorie community from 2000, was a watershed. With its guiding principle of self-determination for Koorie people, it provided a practical framework to address outcomes — improved participation, personal development, educational pathways, completion, improved literacy and numeracy, and employment. It provided a strong foundation from which the ACE sector would address the needs of Koorie learners from the mid noughties.

VICTORIAN ADULT LEARNERS WEEK — OUTSTANDING KOORIE LEARNERS¹⁴²

In 2003, for the first time the Victorian Adult Learners Week Awards included an Outstanding Koorie Learner section. The winners were:

- > **Kelly Feldon**, who completed a Certificate III in Broadcasting (Radio) and Songlines and went on to co-host a segment on Victorians first indigenous radio station.
- > **Erin Fenton**, who was a trainee flora, fauna and forests officer in the Victorian government. Her youthful enthusiasm, desire to learn and work ethic were instrumental in winning the award.

Business arrangements

Funding Arrangements

Establishing, implementing and monitoring equitable and practicable funding models at statewide and regional levels were important responsibilities of the Board. The Board undertook minor reviews annually, and major reviews from time to time. It hoped initially that the most that needed to be done in 2000 was to ensure the models and the regions accommodated the various new government initiatives. That in itself was a challenge: the ACE sector was in fact awash with funds compared to previous periods. The amount to be allocated grew from \$30 million to \$46 million in a year, with the new state government initiatives and Commonwealth funds for capital works and infrastructure.¹⁴³ By late 2000, it was clear that a review of the state funding formula was necessary to accommodate Learning Towns, Cluster and youth programs.

The task became urgent in early 2001 when Minister Kosky 'asked' the Board to consider its funding policies and address a number of issues. The Board sought a 'simple flexible model ... to ensure that funding is directed to areas of Government priority.'¹⁴⁴ The model it adopted used levels of educational attainment in the region as the key determinant of funding: the lower the levels, the higher the funding.

A major source of money to the sector in this period came via the Commonwealth support fund for the physical infrastructure requirements of ACE providers. A total of \$9 million over three years was available from 2000 for projects such as extensions, computer laboratories, disability access, and heating/cooling. More than half was spent in regional and rural Victoria, with priority given to ACE organisations in small towns without other adult education or training facilities. The Commonwealth money was supplemented from other sources — state and local government, provider fund-raising, and in-kind support brought in a further \$4 million. Over 150 projects were funded, ranging in cost from \$1105 to \$1.08 million. The program was hailed a success.¹⁴⁵

AQTF Compliance

The Australian Quality Training Framework established a set of nationally agreed standards for all registered training organisations in areas such as teaching staff, facilities, student administration and business processes. It was the final piece of the national training reform agenda in which Victoria had played such a leading role. Compliance was mandatory from July 2002 for 214 ACE providers that issued accredited qualifications (77 in further education, 137 in further education and vocational education and training).

Always keen to promote the quality of provision, the Board supported a number of projects to assist the implementation of the AQTF well before the deadline. It developed protocols and an evidence guide to assist ACE providers with self-assessment against the standards, and aligned its own funding eligibility criteria with the AQTF requirements. The ACE Clusters initiative was a useful tool, as it supported organisational development projects. The Board provided resources to assist Koorie ACE providers meet the new standards. Regional Council staff were trained to assist providers with understanding and meeting the requirements. All in all, the Board was pleased with the outcomes of the first audit of ACE providers under the regime.¹⁴⁶

Accreditation arrangements

The ACFE Board had from the beginning placed great importance on the responsibility, enshrined in its legislation, to accredit courses. In implementing the Ministerial Review (Kirby Report) however, the government established a new body with authority to accredit or recognise all post-secondary education qualifications in Victoria except higher education. Like the State Training Board and the Board of Studies, the ACFE Board ceded its accreditation responsibilities to the Victorian Qualifications Authority. The Authority for its part delegated its responsibility for recognising ACE providers to the general manager of the ACFE division. The ACFE Board chair was appointed an ex officio member of the VQA Board.

Technology

One of the most significant developments in the sector in the late 90s was the increasing availability and use of computers, both for learning and administration.

Early in 1999, the ACFE Board had applied for funds under the Commonwealth's Networking the Nation initiative. This program provided grants to not-for-profit organisations in regional, rural and remote areas for online services and internet access. The Board secured almost \$2 million over three years (2000-03), an amount it supplemented from time to time.

Under this initiative, ACE organisations could provide the community with public internet access and their learners with more online learning opportunities. They could also upgrade their business processes, using the internet and email for administration and reporting.¹⁴⁷

After early glitches, the 'Connected ACE' program rolled out in stages to non-metropolitan providers. By the end of the program in 2003, 160 ACE providers had benefited from new or upgraded information technology. The Board was pleased, not least with the way it could leverage off the Commonwealth funds for its own projects. The greatest limitation, however, was that not all providers had access to the broadband width required; the old 'dial-up' which had seemed so advanced not so long ago was already out-of-date.

Flexible Delivery

An initiative that rolled together the government's commitment to information technology access and to regions was the mobile computer library program, introduced in 2001. Over 400 state of the art notebook computers were provided and networked to form computer lending libraries in each region. The emphasis was on access in remote parts of Victoria or small community settings where training in information technology was limited. It was a significant impetus to training in information technology, and also the e-learning skills of both teachers and learners.

The extent to which information technology was used for teaching and learning in ACE providers became apparent in a research project conducted in 2004.¹⁴⁸ The investigation found that flexible learning was in fact 'flourishing' in the sector despite numerous obstacles (technical and attitudinal), and that use of technology had enhanced not diminished ACE's learner centred approach and local focus. The project uncovered a vast array of programs in ACE providers across Victoria using flexible delivery in various forms and formats. Its major contribution was the compendium of practical examples of programs, available over the internet for any provider or teacher who wished to follow them up.¹⁴⁹

LEARNING LOCALLY FROM A DISTANCE VIA FLEXIBLE DELIVERY IN ACE – EXAMPLES FROM THE RESEARCH

- > Simple, effective and thoroughly enjoyable readers using PowerPoint for women from the Horn of Africa with low level English skills (Carlton North Learning Centre)
- > Computer 'games' to develop literacy and numeracy skills, motor skills, internet and computer skills among learners with mild intellectual disabilities (Murray ACE, Swan Hill)
- > Selected online modules from a nationally recognised training package for specific job related preparation (Dingley Village Neighbourhood Centre)
- > Delivery of the Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment online to a wider audience that can physically access the provider, building in some face to face contact to maintain learner motivation (Merinda Park Learning and Community Centre)

ACE's Contribution to Social Capital and Community Building

That ACE programs and providers contributed to the lives of individuals and in that way to the whole community was a long and deeply held tenet of ACE policymakers and practitioners. 'Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities' was after all the title of the Board's curriculum framework. The election of new government committed to community building made this view official policy, but evidence-based research would never go astray.

Research by a team led by Ian Falk at the University of Tasmania showed clearly in a series of case studies that ACE programs and providers contribute to individual well-being and social capital.¹⁵⁰ The case studies covered a comprehensive array of ACE learners – unemployed people, Koorie elders, refugees, migrants, people with disabilities, young people at risk, senior citizen, rural women, existing workers and community leaders. The Board welcomed the research, and began thinking about the next step – demonstrating the economic impact of ACE.¹⁵¹

Both the Minister and the Board were keenly interested in the role of ACE in building sustainable small communities. The work commissioned from Barry Golding and Maureen Rogers was important here.¹⁵² Their report was challenging – there was more to be done – but it provided a ringing endorsement of the importance of adult community education to health of small communities in particular. Like the Falk report, this work would be taken up and developed through the Ministerial Statement in 2004.

LOCAL LEARNING: VITAL TO SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

'Adult learning is a critical success factor for community sustainability ... There is ample confirmation from the communities studied that adult learning can and does play a central and important role in non-metropolitan communities ... Communities where people learn together, and share information and knowledge, are creative and innovative, and where participation and involvement are fostered, more likely to be successful.'

Conclusion

Earlier challenges to the Board had involved the nature and role of providers. This time, the challenges were about the sector's traditional clientele – disadvantaged and disengaged yes, but teenagers?? They were also about the pushing by government policy directions and the pull exerted by resources. Arguably in this period, the ACE sector had more funds than it had ever had – more than some long in the game might ever have predicted – but the demands and the expectations were high. They would not become less once they were formalised into a Ministerial Statement, as they were in 2004.



CHAPTER 5:

Shaping the Sector through Policy 2004–2006

Introduction: A Ministerial Statement for ACE in Victoria

Soon after the 2002 election (in which the Labor government was returned), the Minister for Education and Training requested advice from the ACE Board on a formal statement on adult education in Victoria, to complement and complete the Minister's other statements on schooling, education and training, and higher education.

A discussion paper and extensive consultation with Regional Councils and ACE providers culminated in mid 2004 in the release of the policy statement *Future Directions for Adult Education in Victoria*.

The Statement left no doubt as to the important role that community-based education organisations played in achieving the government's objectives for the state. Its theme was partnership — between the government and ACE organisations, between ACE and other organisations in business and community, and between ACE organisations themselves. It set out a series of initiatives and desirable outcomes around four strategies: broadening the role of ACE, specific priority learning groups, enhancing the sustainability of provision and investment in ACE.

Future Directions was a strong, significant statement for the ACE sector. It announced clear priorities for funding, closely aligned with government economic and social objectives. It took existing good practices (examples of which appeared in the document), and proposed ways and means for their spread across the sector.

The Ministerial Statement became the driving force behind the Board's decisions for the next three years. Board agendas and papers were arranged under the strategies (though specific initiatives at times crossed strategy borders). In discussions about funding arrangements, program delivery and eligibility to be an ACE provider, the Statement was a reference point. Progress towards implementation and impact dominated the annual planning workshops and in the annual reports.

Strategy 1: Broadening the Role of ACE

Community Learning Partnerships

Broadening the Role of ACE was the first of the four strategies set out in the Ministerial Statement. The core initiative under that heading was the Community Learning Partnerships program (CLPs).

CLPs were described as a new way in which the Government and communities would work together — communities and community-based organisations together planning and implementing adult education.¹⁵³

Three types of partnerships were presented in the Ministerial Statement to illustrate what they meant in practice. Communities could choose the kind of arrangement that best suited local need and circumstance. The learning focus was on connective, not individual skills development.

For example, community-based adult education organisations could deliver the ACE component of programs run by other government departments. Alternatively, a community could form a partnership to address a particular local challenge, in which ACE could provide specialised training or skills. Or again, community-based adult education organisations could form partnerships with other learning or community organisations to deliver programs to meet local needs. In each situation, all partners contributed their expertise.

COMMUNITY LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL¹⁵⁴

- > Trainees at Bayside Employment Skills Training (BEST) constructed a garden and seating at Eumemmerring Secondary College, under the Community Jobs Program (Department of Victorian Communities) and Doveton Eumemmerring Neighbourhood Renewal.
- > The Shire of Buloke brought together Landcare groups, land owners, businesses, schools and state land management authorities to identify and address environmental issues confronting the community.
- > AMES worked with community-based organisations to provide English as a Second Language programs to new settlers, asylum seekers and refugees.

There was room for considerable variation according to local need, but the program did require all partners involved to contribute to the arrangement, with financial resources, expertise, and/or in-kind support.

The Board set itself to developing this flagship program as quickly as possible. Several issues had to be addressed. There were the obvious ones around developing and implementing any complex program in a sector with so many providers within a few months — guidelines, selections, negotiation and approval had to be completed so the program could be ‘up and running’ in 2005.

This was achieved. Eighteen projects (at least one in each region) had received grants of between \$10,000 and \$30,000 for proposals early in 2005. The number of partners varied from 2 to 12, and the organisations involved were typically ACE providers, local government, secondary colleges, Vic Health, Neighbourhood Renewal and the Office of Housing.¹⁵⁵

Two problems quickly emerged however. The first involved tactfully discontinuing the Learning Towns project, itself a much heralded initiative when the Labor government came to power in 1999. The program had its loyal defenders, but in practice it had not always led to strategic projects with demonstrable outcomes related to local need. The Learning Towns were acknowledged as ‘part of the genesis of the CLPs’, but their budgets were reduced, ‘refocused’, and redirected to the CLPs. Their funding ceased in 2006.

The second issue revolved around partnership arrangements themselves, and their capacity to achieve the objectives for which they were established. Partnerships were not new in the sector — the Learning Towns and the ACE Community Building Hubs initiatives both involved ACE organisations working in co-operation with government and other agencies to meet local learning needs, with varying degrees of success.

The government was determined that CLPs would achieve clearly demonstrable outcomes for both communities and learners. However, warnings sounded in mid 2005, and the program was discussed at length in the Board’s annual planning workshop and subsequent meeting.¹⁵⁶ The program had been rolled out in some haste, with the result that aspects of it were unclear, guidelines required revision, and key elements (‘partnership’, ‘learning’) needed clarification.

Definitions could be clarified, providers and Regional Councils could be better briefed. More worrying to the Board was the way in which the CLPs had exposed ACE organisations’ ‘limited capacity to develop a partnership across a range of community stakeholders.’¹⁵⁷ This was due in part to imperfect networking and negotiation skills.

There was a much more fundamental issue: ACE organisations lacked, the minutes record, ‘*understanding of community development as a concept distinct from delivering to individuals*’ and an appreciation that they had to be a *community business*.

The proposals submitted for 2006 improved over the 2005 projects. That year, there were 28 projects involving 122 partners, with a total value of over \$1.5m, of which more than half came from cash or in-kind support from partners.¹⁵⁸

The evaluation of the 2005 program had found ‘support ... but there is confusion around the concept and the language.’ The evaluation recommended clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities, simplified administrative procedures, clearer differentiation between the CLPs and other community strengthening partnerships, closer integration of the program with other Ministerial Statement initiatives (such as meeting the needs of priority learner groups), and professional development on effective community partnerships.¹⁵⁹

Redressing these issues and consolidating this type of program was the key, the Board believed, to the sustainability of the ACE sector in the current political climate. Fortunately, this could be — and was — addressed under the Ministerial Statement’s strategy, Enhance the Sustainability of ACE Provision (see below in this chapter).

After a challenging start, the CLPs went from strength to strength.

The Board saw a number of its other activities and concerns as related to ‘broadening the role of ACE’, although they were not specifically mentioned as part of that strategy in the Ministerial Statement. They included its research strategy and several research projects, further education curriculum, and Adult Learners Week.

Research

One of the Board’s keen interests post-Ministerial Statement was the encouragement of research in and about the ACE sector, to support implementation of the Statement. It had already endorsed a Framework for Research and Evaluation in 2002, which recognised the importance of research to an evidence-based approach to policy and program development. A number of important research projects had been commissioned, including a longitudinal study of ACE students, and a report of participation by gender. The Board was keen to promote a ‘research dialogue across the ACE sector,’ and the Ministerial Statement provided a rationale for this new and enhanced form of professional development.

The Board’s Research Strategy 2005–07 was closely linked to the priorities and programs of the Ministerial Statement. The recently completed research projects provided invaluable data on whom the sector was not reaching by socio-economic group and geography.

The Board determined that the best way to build a research culture in the sector and to forge links between research, policy and implementation was through the establishment of Circles of Professional Research Practice.¹⁶⁰ The Circles would bring together researchers, ACE practitioners and ACE organisations around particular issues or projects, to explore their meaning for and application to the sector. It seemed an ideal way to encourage ACE organisations to take up research findings, respond at the local level, and feed back the outcomes. In this way, both researchers and practitioners would be obliged to leave their comfort zones, develop mutual understanding and communicate, for the betterment of the sector and its learners.

The Board identified the Circles as a priority for 2005. Three were established in the first instance, around the recently completed research projects — the ACE Experience report (Victoria University), Men’s Learning through ACE (Barry Golding), and the ACE Longitudinal Study (2004–06). The Circles were led by the projects’ researchers, coordinated by ACE organisations and made up of interested ACE practitioners. Each had a finite lifespan in terms of funding.

The three Circles were an unmitigated success: there was a ‘richness in outcomes and a high level of return on investment for the Board’, the process was ‘transformational’, the impact ‘powerful and exciting and going well beyond the life of the project.’ Research findings had been disseminated, researchers and practitioners had engaged together, professional conversations had been stimulated, new relationships and networks had been cultivated, commitment to strategic priorities had been rekindled (even men’s involvement), ACE practice had been improved and a research culture fostered.¹⁶¹

The three Circles were continued for 2006 and 2007. In 2006, the Board agreed to fund each Circle to conduct two projects that would lead to increased participation by specific learner groups identified in the Ministerial Statement (such as people in remote/rural areas and growth corridors and men over 45). The Circles had themselves become researchers.¹⁶²

The Board's own major research project was completed in this period. The *ACE Longitudinal Study* of a cross-section of over 3000 ACE learners was released as each stage was completed.¹⁶³ The studies showed clearly and statistically the role and effectiveness of ACE for individuals and communities, in terms of further study, employment and community engagement.

THE ACE LONGITUDINAL STUDY 2006 – KEY FINDINGS ABOUT VICTORIA'S ACE SECTOR

- > it is accessible, and engages a wide range of learners including older workers, unemployed, people with disabilities, people in small rural/remote communities, indigenous people
- > it is a localized sector, drawing people from local communities
- > it is distinctive in style with adult pedagogies and support structures
- > the vast majority of ACE learners are very positive about the experience
- > ACE retention and completion rates were high
- > ACE provides learners with pathways to further study
- > ACE contributes to the economy of Victoria through literacy and numeracy skills, school completions, entry level skills training, employability skills and employment outcomes.

The Board however noted the research presented it and the sector as a whole with a number of challenges: 'continuing to meet the needs of those for whom social development and connection to the community is important as a first step', raising the participation of some key groups including men and people with incomplete schooling, and the need for better connections to workplace and employment opportunities especially for the unemployed.¹⁶⁴

Further Education Curriculum

In 2005, spurred on by the Ministerial Statement, the Board (in conjunction with its contracted maintenance and management provider Victoria University) reviewed all its curriculum to ensure it continued to meet identified learner needs. In 2006, it up-dated and re-accredited the entire further education curriculum, refreshing the original framework. By the end of 2006, it predicted that 'all the steps will be in place ... from learning how to read and write through the Certificates in General Education for Adults to fast-tracking entry level adults into high level VET qualifications and second year University through the Diploma level qualifications.'¹⁶⁵ The pathways were in place.

CGEA LIBERAL ARTS, HIGHER EDUCATION CASE STUDY¹⁶⁶

- > 'Sam' is from a CALD background and was in his 30s when he enrolled in the Diploma in Liberal Arts
- > He had been unable to read English until a few years prior to commencing the Diploma. He had improved his reading and writing skills with the Certificate in General Education for Adults.
- > 'Sam' completed the Diploma and then completed a Bachelor of Social Work.

Victorian ACE Awards

Adult Learners Week had been a regular inclusion on the ACFE calendar for a number of years. In 2005, it was still the Board's single most significant promotional activity for the sector. Each year, the Board reviewed the Week and its impact, but the event had remained largely unchanged for some time. It was increasingly hard to muster provider interest in the Adult Learner Awards. By contrast, the equivalent awards in the Victorian VET sector enjoyed a high and glamorous profile and provided substantial cash prizes.

In early 2006, the Board considered a proposal to reinvigorate the Week, raise its profile and thereby increase the profile of the sector. It created the 'Victorian ACE Awards ... to provide a better vehicle for promoting and celebrating the value and achievements in learning in community-based settings.' The awards were promoted in more sophisticated way than previously, were considerably more valuable than the existing awards (\$4000 for individuals, \$10000 for organisations) and took place in the lead up to Adult Learners Week. The Board funded the awards, while using Commonwealth money for Adult Learners Week to support regional and local activities.

WINNERS OF THE INAUGURAL VICTORIAN ACE AWARDS 2006

- > Outstanding ACE Learner: Stella Lado, ACE Learners Centre, Dandenong
- > Outstanding ACE Teacher/Tutor: Louisa Vale, Bright Adult Education Inc, Bright
- > Innovation in ACE Learning Award: DIY Housing, Southern Grampians Adult Education, Hamilton
- > Outstanding ACE Koorie Achievement — Innovation Award: Licence Program, Mildura Aboriginal Co-operative, Mildura
- > Outstanding ACE Organisation: The Centre for Continuing Education (The Centre), Wangaratta
- > The DIY Housing program (Innovation Awards winner) was a resource for mixed ability literacy and life skills classes using the Certificate in General Education for Adults. It was the first in a series of practical resource books on lifestyle themes. The ten units included house plans, how to start building, house design, construction and decoration.
- > Louisa Vale (Teacher/Tutor winner) had produced a new manual for volunteer adult literacy tutors working 1:1 with learners.

The new awards enjoyed a high profile, and have continued until this day.

Strategy 2: Recognise Specific Groups of Learners

Learning opportunities for people in the community who were vulnerable economically and socially had always been at the core of ACE philosophy and practice. Specific groups had varied in accord with economic conditions, social change and government priorities.

The government, through the 2004 Ministerial Statement, gave priority to 'areas, groups and individuals that need better access to adult education and training,' and promised to 'invest accordingly.'¹⁶⁷ It listed six particular groups: Koories, men over 45, people with disabilities, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people aged 15 and over, and people over 55. None were new to the sector, but the Statement did provide an opportunity to set out publicly ACE's sense of responsibility for particular groups. For example, ACE provision was for 'some young people' only, early school leavers especially in regional or rural locations; the vast majority of school-aged youth were the responsibility of secondary schools.

Koories

In one sense, policy and planning for Koories was straightforward because it had already been addressed in the Wurreker Strategy, the partnership struck between the training system and Victoria's Koorie community to address the community's education and employment needs. All Regional Councils and the CAE had Wurreker implementation plans, which required them to participate in Wurreker regional planning forums and advisory committees.

Moreover, data showed that a higher proportion of students in the ACE sector were Koories (1.3%) compared with TAFE (1.0%) and private providers (0.9%).¹⁶⁸

People with Disabilities

People with disabilities were also a group highlighted in the Statement with whom the ACE sector and Board had already been engaged, with a policy endorsed in 1997. In 2004, 320 ACE organisations delivered programs and services to people with disabilities, 28 of them specialised providers.¹⁶⁹ Approximately 13% of ACE students in 2005 reported a disability, a much higher proportion than TAFE (5.2%) or private providers (5.9%).¹⁷⁰

The Ministerial Statement and not least Commonwealth requirements under the Disability Standards for Education 2004 did however necessitate a re-examination of provision for people with a disability. Following release of the Statement, the Board endorsed its ACE Disability Strategy with four themes: inclusion, professional development and resource training, strengthening partnerships and networks, and the role of specialised disability providers.

The Board funded the ACE Disability Network to implement the strategy through various projects, such as mapping relevant resources and services and linking providers to them, and professional development activities across the state, particularly on the requirements of the Education Standards introduced by the Commonwealth under the Disability Discrimination Act. A number of providers developed Disability Action Plans as a result.¹⁷¹ The ACE Disability Network continues to this day.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners

Provision of English as a Second Language programs had always been a significant component ACE provision. AMES was the largest and specialist provider of a wide range of programs and services, although many ACE organisations also delivered programs. Around 14% of ACE students in 2005 came from a language background other than English (a lower proportion than in TAFE at 19%).

In the light of the Ministerial Statement, the Board funded AMES to undertake a project addressing employment pathways for CALD learners. The emphasis was on ‘increasing the capacity of ACE providers to support CALD learners to articulate and pursue employment goals.’ It was highly successful in establishing linkages with government migration and employment departments and agencies at local and regional level, as well as conducting professional development workshops for local ACE providers. The project also led to the Board commissioning further research on the learning needs of CALD learners in ACE, an increasingly diverse cohort than a decade earlier.¹⁷²

Men over 45 and Men’s Learning

There is no doubt that this, like the participation of the other ‘non-traditional’ group youth, was a sensitive issue for the sector. The government saw ACE as having two key roles for men over 45 who faced unemployment, particularly those in manufacturing with low basic skills or no qualifications — firstly equipping them for re-entry into the workforce (for example with literacy and numeracy skills), and secondly preventing the social isolation that often accompanied retrenchment or unemployment. They were not unknown in the sector as participants in government labour market programs in ACE providers since the 1990s, but the Ministerial Statement identified them as a priority group.

Research by Barry Golding on men’s learning in ACE had also ensured attention to this group before the Ministerial Statement. In his study of learning opportunities in small Victorian towns for the Board, he had argued that the ACE providers were vitally important for men’s access to learning but that they were not an attractive or congenial environment for men.¹⁷³

A self-evident truth — that more women than men had always participated in ACE — had become a criticism and a policy issue. Men over 45 continue to be under represented in VET settings in general, including in ACE, even today.

As noted above, Golding’s research on men’s learning and its implications for ACE was turned over to one of the first research circles in 2005, where the researcher and practitioners could together address the issue from their perspectives. This was a successful move: the report of the circles to the Board indicated a new commitment to men’s involvement in ACE.

Golding's research attracted considerable interest, locally and overseas. It resonated with the men's shed movement which was emerging in local communities around Australia — strikingly similar in many ways to the emergence of neighbourhood houses and community education centres in the 1970s.

In 2005, the Board commissioned Golding to research men's sheds in Victoria. His report argued that Men's Sheds appealed to older men (55 and over) 'many of whom do not otherwise access learning opportunities, [but who] respond positively to environments that allow them to feel at home and learn by doing in practical group situations with other men.'¹⁷⁴

In words that echoed those in histories of neighbourhood houses and ACE providers which had begun as play groups two or three decades earlier, the research found that initially social groups of men meeting in a shed on ACE premises began to look for more — for training ('internet for their hobbies, email to keep in touch with relatives'), then opportunities to share their skills ('offering courses in mower repair, woodwork, gardening ... leading directly to employment opportunities for both trainers and students'). The shed (like the play group) was the decisive factor.¹⁷⁵

The final report was published in 2007.

THE MEN'S LEARNING CIRCLE: RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

The Men's Learning Circle was a chance to discover how the Centre could do more for men in the district — [the co-ordinator] felt she didn't know how to take the activities further. She felt 'naïve' but the first Melbourne seminar 'really opened her eyes' and she made contacts all over Victoria and heard about what other places had been doing for years. The Circle gave her the motivation and the momentum to reach out to the wider community and develop some new ideas.

The Circle has been a catalyst for ongoing developments — men's learning is a 'long-term issue' that started with her talking to other providers and an experiment with a men's shed. There is now a computer users group composed mostly of men, that uses the Centre two days a week, maintains the computer network and recycles old computers. There are active partnerships with the Lion's Club and the Centre at Wangaratta who provide tutors for accredited computer training linked to the user group's activities ...¹⁷⁶

People over 55

People over 55 as a clientele presented a dilemma as the ACE moved increasingly into vocational programs, either directly or through provision of pathways. The U3A had always pressed the claims of older people vigorously, and despite arguments that it was not representative of this age group, had received and continues to receive ACFE Board funding as an ACE partner.

The Ministerial Statement noted the interests of many people over 55 were already catered for by the U3A network. Unlike the ACE sector, it added, U3A did not have learning pathways as its 'primary goal.' Nonetheless, the ACFE Board continued to fund the U3A in recognition of its learning activities, but from 2005 implemented a more rigorous process requiring a performance and funding agreement with defined outcomes.¹⁷⁷

Young People aged 15-19

By the time the 2004 Ministerial Statement was released, many of the issues around young people's participation in *adult* community education had been addressed — they had become a significant group in the sector. There were expert youth providers, such as CREATE in Geelong, which played a key role in assisting other providers with matters such as effective program delivery, duty of care considerations, and building relationships with local schools — 'the best place for young people.'¹⁷⁸ The government regarded the ACE sector as a key player in the challenging task of achieving its targets for Year 12 qualifications.

In early 2005, the Board endorsed a Youth Strategy whose goals included development of a consistent statewide approach for young learners, improved capacity to plan for effective outcomes for young learners and professional development for Regional Councils. It also emphasised the importance of partnerships between schools, TAFE and ACE in encouraging retention by young people and pathways to further study and/or employment.¹⁷⁹

Two programs for young people at particular risk featured in the Board's papers in this period. One involved young offenders (17 years and over) sentenced by the courts to community-based orders. The intention was to reduce the risk of their re-offending through education, training and employment. The program, funded by Corrections Victoria and managed by the ACFE Division, was piloted through four community corrections offices in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. In all over the project's lifespan (2005-07), almost 50% of the participants had achieved an outcome, such as completion of the program, meaningful employment or enrolment in further study.¹⁸⁰

The other program involved young people at high risk of problem gambling. It had high level support, from both the Minister of Health and the Minister for Education and Training. The early intervention program comprised covered addiction, e-gambling and problem gambling, and could be customised for Koorie and CALD participants and people with a disability. It was accredited as part of the Certificate in General Education for Adults and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.¹⁸¹

Defying Neat Categories: Commonwealth Games Pre-Volunteer Program

The Ministerial Statement was the compass that set the Board's directions, the yardstick against which activity was constantly monitored. However, there were programs that did not fit neatly into the 'specific groups' listed in Strategy 2, but nonetheless were clearly at the core of what ACE programs and providers did best.

One example was the Commonwealth Games Pre-Volunteer program, deliberately targeted at 'people traditionally under-represented in volunteering for community and major events.' Over 1400 completed the course run in 2004-05, the participants a typical ACE kaleidoscope — born in 61 countries, speaking 40 different languages at home, more than twice as many women as men, spread across age groups, more than half not employed, a quarter without Year 10, and 20% reporting a disability. About 400 participants became Games volunteers, others volunteers in their local communities.

The program was praised in Parliament by Minister Kosky:

*The majority of those disadvantaged Victorians are now playing an active role in their local communities. That is a fantastic outcome ... Not only did they volunteer for the Games, but now they are also well-trained to volunteer within their communities. That focus on disadvantaged Victorians is very important.*¹⁸²

The program continued after 2005 on a fee-for-service basis.

'Growing at Both Ends'

To gauge progress in implementing the government's policies, the Board requested twice yearly statistical reports on delivery. The first report showed that some marked changes were taking place in the sector's participants, and that the 'specific priority groups' were indeed present in larger numbers than previously. The 'traditional age cohorts of the thirties and forties [were] declining in numerical dominance and SCH delivery ... The ACE profile is *growing at both ends* — to youth and to the 50-60 years cohort.'¹⁸³

Other findings suggested implementation was on track. Between 2003 and 2005, delivery to people with disabilities had increased by 6%, to 15-19 year olds by 22%, to Koories by 32% ('but from a very low base'). The strong level of accredited training delivery to older learners (50 — 64 years) 'reinforces the role that ACE can play in the state and national agenda to enhance training options for mature age workers.'¹⁸⁴

The results were very pleasing.

Strategy 3: Enhance the Sustainability of Provision

The notion of ‘sustainability’ was not new in the ACE sector. It was central in the government’s vision for a ‘fair, sustainable and prosperous Victoria’ set out in *Growing Victoria Together* (2003). It was now percolating through government policies and documents and gaining broader application: whereas once the term referred to the natural environment, it was being applied increasingly to communities and businesses. Under the Ministerial Statement, the sustainability of ACE provision was elevated to a priority.

Similar ideas and programs had ‘been around’ since the mid 1990s under such names as ‘quality assurance’ and ‘continuous improvement.’ In the Statement as then, the government concern was that ACE organisations ‘adopt the practices necessary to be viable and sustainable in the long term, so that they can continue to deliver learning opportunities, along with other government programs.’¹⁸⁵ Encouragement of proven, appropriate business practices was at the heart of the strategy.

The Board was quick off the mark, alerted by matters raised during the Statement consultations about sustainable provision. The consultations had confirmed the highly prized, unique characteristics of the sector — its accessibility, affordability and informal, learner-centred approach. They had also shown that these values often clashed with pragmatic business decision-making; ‘Many ACE organisations find it difficult to balance the need to make sound business decisions with a genuine desire to achieve outcomes for learners, whatever the cost.’¹⁸⁶ It was scarcely a new revelation, with echoes in every phase of the sector’s development — but it had to be addressed. The key areas to be tackled were community business management and services (finances, human resources, information technology and governance), community entrepreneurship (marketing, business development, partnerships), organisational arrangements, and staff and volunteer management.¹⁸⁷

Two major projects were developed to address them, one on Building Sustainable Community Businesses and one on the ACE Workforce. Contracts were let early in 2005.

When the Board gathered for its planning workshop in 2005, sustainability had become a matter of ‘paramount’ importance. Although projects were underway, it was felt they would only ‘scratch the surface’ in terms of what was needed to develop skills to manage a community business. A ‘significant shift’ had to happen before a ‘critical mass [could] undertake the shift from running a community organization to a community business.’¹⁸⁸

The significant shift actually lay in the terminology: community organisations had to be community *businesses*. Organisations building communities was one thing, a community business was another matter entirely. Arguably, it was not a new issue — financial management and viability had been demanded of ACE organisations for many years — but the language was certainly different, and the demands of market based rather than grants-based funding for accredited training providers brought new challenges, especially related to cash flow management.

At the Board’s next meeting, the first stage of the Building Sustainable Community Businesses had been completed, and the results were not good. The report presented a catalogue of problems: ACE providers did not see themselves as community businesses, they lacked business acumen, risk management skills, entrepreneurial strategies, and good workplace and governance practices. Their constant dilemma was to balance ‘sound business decisions with the desire to be responsive to the social justice needs of a vast and diverse client base.’

The Board was nonetheless ‘positioned to continue to drive an agenda for change in ACE business practices and knowledge.’¹⁸⁹

The Board made a number of decisions to support the sustainability strategy. It supported the development and piloting of business models to equip ACE providers to be sustainable community businesses (the project’s next stage). It allocated ‘sustainability grants’ for ACE organisations in problematic areas such as governance, workforce management and entrepreneurship — some \$3.5 million across almost 400 providers. Applications from providers were generally for attracting and retaining skilled and experienced workers, improving business and management practices, and communities of practice.

New policies and programs were frequently introduced into the sector through professional development workshops, case studies, and tools for assessing progress, and sustainability was no exception. The Building Sustainable Community Businesses: Strategy for Success provided information and direction for providers about identifying programs that met community need, building organisational capacity through resources, structures people and partnerships, building and managing linkages and partnerships, and managing the revenue base.¹⁹⁰ By mid 2007, 36 workshops had been held on the framework attended by over 150 ACE organisations around Victoria.¹⁹¹

Partnerships in which ACE providers participated usually involved other ACE providers, schools and community organisations; working with industry and businesses required a different approach. The development of fee-for-service revenue from commercial training for industry, as the VET sector had done, was regarded as a potentially important element of sustainability. Pilot projects were undertaken with the automotive and dairy industries, and became the basis of workshops held for ACE providers in 2005-06. ACE providers now had a model for working with Industry, and a number of case studies.

The ACE Workforce Planning project became a component of the Sustainability framework. It was undertaken through a web-based survey, in which ACE providers provided information on their workforce, staff recruitment and retention, and workforce planning. The returns from over 100 organisations showed clearly the diversity of the workforce in the sector in terms of employment categories (full-time/part-time, casual, sessional), both within and between providers. Problems with recruitment included pay levels and lack of suitable applicants in the area. Just over half undertook workforce planning, with approaches varying greatly from formal processes to informal arrangements.

The Board was delighted to receive anecdotal evidence from the workshops that the organisations participating had made 'substantial changes to [their] business practices.'¹⁹²

The Framework is still available on the department website.

SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL¹⁹³

'Across the board' community engagement is the key to success for Morrison House. It has built strong partnerships with local schools, the local Shire and local politicians, and has numerous partnerships with local businesses. If it happens in Mount Evelyn, you can be sure Morrison House will be involved somehow.

Through its partnership with Visy Ltd, Meadow Heights Learning Shop was encouraged to apply for Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) Status, and it became the first ACE organisation to achieve that status. It now receives about 5% of its total income from deductible gifts and donations.

Colac ACE is one of a number of ACE organisations involved in the Dairy Industry project. That project represents a collaborative arrangement between ACE providers in Gippsland, Western and Northern Victoria and regional dairy boards. It involves recruiting, inducting, training and mentoring people to meet shortages in the dairy industry. For the collaborating partners, the project has provided business opportunity, operational efficiencies and some economies of scale, together with the chance to share information and expertise and build relationships with new organisations.

Strategy 4: Investment in ACE

The fourth strategy was primarily about funding the ACE sector to meet 'government priorities as well as community and learner needs.' It involved three year funding agreements, research into learner outcomes, and a performance measures framework to assess learning outcomes at the community level and the impact of government investment.

Three year funding agreements for Regional Councils and providers were introduced quickly — they had been mooted for some time before the Statement. They brought an assurance of longer term funding as for TAFE institutes, which had enjoyed three year agreements for some time.

Of the other two initiatives, research (a high priority) was generally discussed within the context of the 'broadening' or the 'specific learner groups' strategies. Most attention was given to the 'Measuring Impact' performance measurement framework as the Ministerial Statement gave a clear direction for increased emphasis on outcomes.

Measuring Impact was a tool developed to evaluate the effect on learning of various projects in the ACE sector. It was evidence-based, provided both consistency and flexibility in measurement, assisted planning and decision-making, and encouraged community participation.

The tools used in Measuring Impact were designed to provide evidence of outcomes in four areas: function (the effectiveness of programs, identified needs and networking), delivery (the effect of delivery, participation, contribution to local knowledge and skills), lifelong learning (contribution to fostering lifelong learning, impact of learning on individuals and communities), and community capacity (the impact of the program on 'the social, economic, environmental and cultural conditions within the community leading to changes in social capital and community building').¹⁹⁴

Measuring Impact became the standards means by which the ACFE Board determined that the programs and services it funded had achieved their objectives, and remained aligned with government priorities. It is still in use.

MEASURING IMPACT: EXPLANATION FOR PROVIDERS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL¹⁹⁵

Community Capacity

Your project may not affect all areas, but you may notice some change in:

- > The development of new networks
- > Employment opportunities
- > Support of the environment
- > Participation in the arts

Becoming a Whole of Government Player through Partnerships

It was clear from the Ministerial Statement that the government set a high value on the ACE sector as a contributor to the achievement of its objectives. It was also clear that the preferred way of working was through partnerships between players and stakeholders; numerous examples were provided to illustrate the new way of working at local and regional level.

At the state level, partnerships and collaboration were also emphasised as a whole of government approach became the order of the day. Linking related community building services at the local level was a priority, and that meant co-operative arrangements between government departments.

ACE providers were well-used to a multi-agency approach. As long as they had existed, ACE providers had dealt directly and indirectly with a range government agencies in education, employment and community services at local, state and Commonwealth level. Neighbourhood houses had always had a strong community services orientation and been largely funded by the government department responsible. For its part, the Board's frame of reference was generally focused more on the Commonwealth departments, which funded adult literacy, basic education and English-language programs and its statutory counterpart for education and training (the Learning Employment and Skills Commission), with which it discussed closer collaboration from time to time.

As noted above, the ACFE Board had been involved in two projects with other government departments, one to reduce re-offending with Corrections Victoria (the Department of Justice) and another on

problem gambling among young people with the Department of Human Services. It had also built connections with the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) set up in 2002 to implement a range of community building initiatives under the government's social policy, *A Fairer Victoria*.

A Fairer Victoria was an item on the agenda at the Board's planning workshop in 2005 — the first since the Ministerial Statement's release — and its implications for the sector were discussed at some length. Of particular interest to the Board were measures for neighbourhood houses — the establishment of ten new ones in areas of need, funds for information technology equipment, and the transfer of responsibility for neighbourhood houses to DVC.

The meeting saw potential for the ACE sector to be active in establishing whole of government approaches and to provide a platform for the delivery of a range of government programs, but concern was expressed that neither the Board nor the sector should be diverted from 'the importance of learning as a foundation for community building.'¹⁹⁶

Closer interdepartmental relations were evident in the Board's business. Its work on performance measures for community organisations ('Measuring Impact') generated interest in several government departments.¹⁹⁷ From late 2005, reports from the division's general manager included updates on interdepartmental discussions (in one instance headed 'interdepartmental achievements') around community building projects and related areas in which ACE was involved, with players such as the Country Fire Authority, Victoria Police and the Department of Sustainability and Environment. There was 'growing awareness of ACE as a community learning platform and a vital partner in learning initiatives seeking direct community support.'¹⁹⁸

Neighbourhood houses with their several identities and multiple funding sources were an obvious area for shared information and discussions across government — around 60% of ACE organisations were neighbourhood houses.¹⁹⁹ In 2005, the ACFE division joined the interdepartmental committee established by DVC to do precisely that. New conditions of registration for ACE organisations were prepared in consultation with not only Regional Councils, but also DVC and the Department of Human Services.²⁰⁰

In mid 2006, the Board heard that DVC was to prepare a major cross-government report on all neighbourhood houses and community-based education organisations in receipt of government funding through the Neighbourhood House program and the ACFE Board. The same meeting was told that Minister Kosky had announced a major injection of funds into neighbourhood houses — \$27.8 million over four years 'to expand the range of social, educational and recreational opportunities they provide for the 95000 Victorians who use their programs every year.' The initiative would increase delivery by 34% and the hourly rate of coordinators.²⁰¹

The issue of funding more broadly had already exercised the Board's mind for much of the year. Over the course of several meetings after the 2005 planning workshop it thrashed out a statement clarifying the purpose of ACFE Board funding. Notions of community building and strengthening could be nebulous. The Board was anxious to demonstrate the vital role of adult community education to this government priority. It was equally anxious to defend its funds and determine who could access them (which organisations?) and for what purpose (accredited programs only?). It was a dilemma that had been faced before, in a slightly different guise: should hobby courses be funded because they can have a vocational purpose/outcome?

The Board adopted the following statement:

The ACFE Board acknowledges the role of adult community education in building community capability whilst retaining a clear focus on how education and learning contribute to and support that process.

*ACFE Board funding aims to improve the capability of individuals and the capacity of communities through education and learning. This purpose informs all policies, processes and decisions made in relation to ACFE Board funding.*²⁰²

The report on neighbourhood houses and community education organisations seemed an ideal opportunity for ACFE to ‘clearly articulate the intersections and the differences between the Neighbourhood House and Learning Centre sector and the ACE sector and to reiterate the objectives of the Ministerial Statement.’²⁰³

At the time it was imagined the conversation would be between departments — the ACFE Board in the Department of Education and Training and the Department for Victorian Communities. In fact, they were to take place within the same department when a few weeks later, ACFE and the ACE sector became part of the Department for Victorian Communities.

Conclusion: Driving Change with Policy

Several times in the Board records of this period, reference was made to renewing the ACE sector, in the present and for the future. The Ministerial Statement provided the motivation and the means for significant change, and the Board absorbed itself in its implementation. It provided a focus against which other issues (even the complexities of the legislation, the Education and Training Bill) seemed relatively straightforward and easy to deal with.

Much of that change involved continued development or the reinvigoration of existing trends or good practice — meeting the needs of disadvantaged groups, equipping providers to be financially viable and responsive to a wide range of demands from individual, communities and government, facilitating and promoting partnerships to which each participant brought skills and resources.

Arguably, it was comfortable change. But late in 2006 came the announcement of a machinery of government change. The Board, the bureaucracy and the sector were to become part of the Department for Victorian Communities, the department responsible for community building and community strengthening, for government programs for youth, Koories, and many other groups who were a priority for the whom the ACE sector.

Was this continuity or change?



CHAPTER 6:

A Robust Educational Sector 2007–2010

Introduction

The years from 2007 to 2010 began with a move for the sector from the Department of Education and Training, where in one way or another, the Board and the sector had always been located, to the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) (subsequently the Department for Planning and Community Development [DPCD]). It ended in November 2010 with the return of the Board and sector to the education portfolio, the Department for Education and Early Childhood Development. Both ‘machinery of government changes’ followed election results, the first the return of the Labor government in late 2006, and the second the election of the Liberal/National Coalition government in late 2010. Skills Victoria (responsible for the vocational education and training system with which ACFE and ACE were inextricably linked) was also brought back into the education portfolio after four years in the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development.

The reasons for the change in 2007 were well documented: the government regarded the ACE sector as a key component of its community building initiatives, and the synergies had been increasing under the ACE Ministerial Statement of 2004. However, the ACE sector was also recognised as an essential element of the state’s training system, providing access and pathways for people who otherwise would not have engaged in training. This position was firmly reiterated in the government’s sweeping skills reform program announced in 2008. This had significant, unavoidable implications for the ACE sector, which were taken up again in the connected, complementary ACE policy statement ‘A Stronger ACFE: Delivering Skills for Victoria’ in 2009. The intense pre-occupation with the development and implementation of these statements from 2008 onwards meant a gradual shift from the community building focus by the Board.

The movement towards education and training was reinforced by a change in Board chairs. In 2008, chair Lynne Wannan resigned to take a government post in community development. Her background, experience and commitment to the community sector and its potential for the development of individuals and societies, had suited well the ACE sector’s participation in the government’s community building priorities. She played an instrumental role in the Board’s life from 2003 to 2008. Adrian Nye, who had a financial background, was acting chair for more than a year, until the appointment as chair of Rowena Allen. Ms Allen had been a member of and at the time of her appointment, acting chair of the Victorian Skills Commission. As founder and director of a Uniting Church multi-service agency in Shepparton she had had extensive experience with disengaged and hard to reach learners and the ACE sector’s priority groups including youth, unemployed people, people with disabilities and Koories. Rowena Allen became chair of the ACFE Board in October 2009 and continues in that important role.

This period also saw a change of General Manager with the departure of Ms Sandy Forbes. Her replacement, Ms Sian Lewis, had extensive experience in education and training, as a public servant and in social justice, with a particular emphasis on quality assurance. Sian was appointed General Manager, ACFE, in February 2010.

This chapter ends as Victoria went to the polls in 2010. At that point, the changes made under the skills reform package were still being rolled out with a view to full implementation in 2011. Many projects were still underway, such as the ACFE Board’s important new positioning strategy, and various changes in the roles and functions of both the Board and the Regional Councils. There is, then, something necessarily incomplete in this account of this period in the ACFE Board’s life.

In November 2006, Victoria's Labor government was returned for a third term in office.

While its broad policy directions for and priority on education remained the same, Premier Steve Bracks made a number of ministerial and departmental changes. Responsibility for post-compulsory education was spread across three government departments. The Office of Training and Tertiary Education of which ACFE had been a part since the early 1990s was divided up. Skills Victoria (vocational education and training) became part of the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development, ACFE moved to the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC), and the Department of Education retained responsibility for youth transitions and the Local Learning and Employment Networks. With the appointment of Lynne Kosky to another portfolio, the ACFE Board became the responsibility of Jacinta Allan, Minister for Skills, Education Services and Employment.

The government placed great emphasis on building and strengthening communities, and its indicators of success crossed traditional portfolio/agency boundaries — increased school completion, better health, increased rates of employment and reduced contact with the criminal justice system. Its intention was a 'shift from multiple-portfolio responses to a more joined-up response from government to the needs of a local area.'²⁰⁴

DVC — the main agency for implementation of the government's approach — was a complex entity. Its role was to provide an integrated approach to the planning, funding and delivery of a range of services at local level. It worked across an extraordinary ten portfolios, including aged care, youth affairs, multicultural affairs, sport and recreation, local government and now adult community and further education.

ACFE's move from a department responsible for education to one focusing on community strengthening was not a complete surprise. The ACFE Board and Division had become increasingly involved in projects with other state government departments, notably Health, Justice and Victorian Communities itself. It had also adopted the government language of the day, such as partnerships, collaboration and community building.

The ACFE Board formally became aware of the 'machinery of government' changes at the Christmas meeting in 2006. It was a move of considerable significance on any one of a number of levels. The administrative practicalities affected everything from stationery to financial systems and took months to complete. The policy implications were major: once more, the purpose and defining role of the ACE sector had to be articulated, and in a different departmental environment.

When the sector was administered by the TAFE Board in the 1980s, it was defined primarily in terms of the individual's need, mainly for personal development but also for improvement of personal circumstances through further study and employment. The community education members of the Board and other voices, such that of the influential Don Edgar, criticised the increasing dominance of vocational education and training — the 'T' in TAFE.²⁰⁵ In the 1990s, the ACE sector itself became a contributor to government agendas to build up the nation's skills, both to build international competitiveness and to cushion individuals against unemployment. The sector's role then was couched in terms access to skills training for individuals in their local communities. In the early 2000s came an interest in government and policy circles in social capital and community development: then the ACE sector's role was defined in terms of benefits to individuals *and* communities.

Irrespective of these shifts in emphasis (and available funding), however, the target market of the sector remained the same: people who for a wide range of reasons had limited skills or qualifications.

With the move to DVC, the ACFE Board was for the first time in a department outside education. It had declared clearly in 2006 that its role in community building — and the purpose of its funding — was education and learning.²⁰⁶ At its first meetings in 2007, the Board re-iterated this point. 'Our skills development focus and the availability of a platform of ACE providers', chair Lynne Wannan commented, brought an important dimension to the department, 'community strengthening through learning.' DVC spoke of the 'centrality of people and place', the ACFE Board of the 'local community base and outcomes for learners', but their target groups were very similar. The Board, she said, would have a 'continuing focus on skill development as core business'.²⁰⁷

At the 2007 annual planning workshop, the Board determined to 'maintain a focus on [the] skills agenda but with a complementary focus on community strengthening through learning.'²⁰⁸

Throughout its discussions and decision-making for the next several years, the Board maintained this position. It was determined to make the point as often as necessary in a new and largely unfamiliar environment, that ‘the ACE sector is a *robust educational sector*, not a sector of disadvantage and welfare.’²⁰⁹

The *Future Directions* Ministerial Statement of the previous government remained the Board’s beacon in 2007 and until the release of Minister Allan’s policy statement in 2009. There were still major *Future Directions* initiatives and commitments underway. The Board continued to receive reports on their progress and to arrange its business under the 2004 Statement’s four strategic directions as before. New projects were tucked in under the appropriate direction.

It is useful therefore to look at a selection of the Board’s major activities in 2007 and 2008 in the context of the 2004 Statement. (As in the previous period, some initiatives moved through different policy directions.)

Strategy 1: Broadening the Scope of ACE

Community Learning Partnerships

The Community Learning Partnership initiative continued as before to have a high profile. In 2007, the Board decided to reward ‘exemplar projects’ with additional funding because they modeled best practice in ‘community’, ‘learning’ and ‘partnership’ (always somewhat problematic). A selection of the first exemplars illustrates the breadth and diversity of ACE learners and their needs:

Linking Public Housing Estate Residents and ACE Providers (Sandybeach Centre): a project to address problems of public housing residents exacerbated by living in affluent areas with few services for people of low income and disadvantaged backgrounds

Healesville Keeping Place (Upper Yarra Community House): a community museum in Healesville dedicated to preserving and exploring the heritage of the local indigenous community

*Sounds like Men Learning (Carringbush Adult Education): integrating literacy components into an existing IT and music program targeting isolated/alienated men in the local housing estate and supported accommodation.*²¹⁰

COMMUNITY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP: WINNER 2007 ACE AWARD FOR INNOVATION IN ACE LEARNING

The Springvale Community Centre and its eight partner organisations (including the local Migrant Resource Centre, AMES, Youth Link and the Dandenong Police) worked with South Sudanese young people to bridge language and cultural gaps and encourage community involvement.

For all their challenge and complexity, the CLPs proved very successful initiatives, so much so that they were taken up and expanded in the new minister’s policy statement in 2009.

Circles of Research Practice

The Board had set considerable store on its Circles of Professional Research Practice as a means of developing a research culture appropriate to the sector, that is relating to policy and practice in the field. The first round had generated considerable interest and engagement by the sector.

Evaluation of the second round showed it too was a success.²¹¹ The sector now had a compendium of recent research conducted at local and regional level available to the whole sector online. The ACE Teaching Practice Circle had attracted teachers from a number of ACE organisations around the state, building networks between them and ‘energising’ their centres. The Men’s Learning Circle had also been successful, revealing a number of strategies for engaging men in the ACE sector. ACE

organisations, it was reported, were now more conscious of the importance of the participation of men in their programs and activities, and were developing strategies to address men's learning.

Overall, the Circles had benefited participants, providers, and researchers. Above all, they had linked research to policy and practice for the benefit of the sector and the government.

The final evaluation of the Circles at the conclusion of the project described them as extraordinarily effective, and a key element in the implementation of the Ministerial Directions.

RESEARCH BY, AT AND FOR LOCAL LEARNING²¹²

'The Circles were able to activate this key dynamic of professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building, by providing a means for ACE organisations to engage with research and policy. In this way, the Circles operated as an effective catalyst for educational innovation and organisational development, in a way that is appropriate to community-owned and managed organisations. The Circles show change in relatively autonomous community agencies can be achieved in a coherent way, supported by research-based public policy frameworks.'

ACE's Economic and Social Role

In late 2006 the Board commissioned a research report into the contribution of ACE to the economic and social sustainability of Victoria. *Setting the Scene*²¹³ provided a stock take of the sector. It set out numerous government policy documents that had impinged to a greater or lesser degree on the sector since 2000, presented extensive statistical data on ACE learners, and proposed areas for further research and investigation. The Board was pleased to reiterate the report's emphasis on 'learning outcomes' and took the opportunity to roll together its research and curriculum budgets to reinforce their connection.²¹⁴

Believing there was still something missing — incontrovertible proof of a link between ACE's role in contributing to human and social capital on the one hand and the economy on the other, the Board commissioned well-known consultants The Allen Consulting Group to prepare a major report focusing on the return for the government of its investment in (funding of) ACE programs and services.²¹⁵

Applying an economic benefit approach, Allen Consulting concluded that the return on the Victorian government's investment in ACE had been substantial on every level: for individuals, local communities and the state as a whole.²¹⁶

Individual benefits included better employment opportunities, higher wages, and improved health and well-being. Communities had benefited from local employment opportunities, volunteer activity, social engagement and reduced crime, and inter-generational relationships. The whole state of Victoria had benefited from increased productivity.

Furthermore, Allen Consulting quantified the return on the Victorian government's investment in ACE as an extraordinary \$16 billion increase in Gross State Product over 25 years. The Commonwealth government had also benefited in various ways, such as reduced dependency on welfare.

THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT'S INVESTMENT IN ACE

... Market benefits are estimated to amount to an increase in GSP of \$16 billion, and positive fiscal benefits to the Victorian Government of \$21.7 million over the period 2007 to 2031 in net present value terms, with non-market benefits of at least a similar magnitude. These benefits are achieved relative to a Victorian Government investment of \$741 million over twenty-five years (in discounted terms).

> ALLEN CONSULTING GROUP

The study was a landmark one, in terms of its data, analysis and argument.

Flexible Delivery

One area that defied categorisation under a single policy direction was flexible delivery, also referred to as blended delivery and e-learning. Flexible delivery did broaden the scope of ACE, could reach out to specific groups of hard to reach learners, did enhance the capacity of ACE providers and practitioners, and did represent an investment in ACE provision. The Board's previous research, including several sustainability projects in 2005–07, had shown this to be the case.

In this period, the Board's major flexible delivery project was *Access ACE: Clever Use of ICT in ACE*, published in 2008. Results of its investigations were disappointing, showing just 'some increase in the adoption of [learning] technologies in some ACE learning environments'.²¹⁷ The barriers to adoption were familiar: lack of infrastructure, insufficient support for teachers, high set-up costs among them. Mentors ('just in time' and 'just for me') were highly recommended.²¹⁸ The report and extensive other material was posted on the project website, with extensive information in plain language about use of online tools such as wikis, blogs and podcasts.²¹⁹ Mentoring activities using identified e-learning champions were introduced to revitalise effort in this area. The mentoring program remains in place today and has been a significant lever to enhance the uptake of e-learning in ACE settings.

Strategy 2: Specific Groups of Learners

The Board's approach to initiatives for specific learner groups during the years 2007 to 2010 were different from its approach in the previous period, when it had considered numerous papers and activities on particular groups. There were now various multi-year strategies and programs in place to address the participation of nine hard to reach learner groups, and the Regional Councils and sector were charged with (and funded for) 'getting on with it.' The Board was not passive: it provided data on participation through annual 'evidence guides', and was quick to encourage providers to take up new funding for projects that broadened participation by hard to reach learners (such as the Commonwealth's Workskills vouchers for people over 25 without a Year 12 qualification).²²⁰

The Board also directed particular initiatives towards engaging specific groups of learners, particularly Access ACE (flexible delivery) and pre-accredited delivery. These usually appeared on the Board's agenda under other policy directions, but were nonetheless about specific groups of learners.

Equally clear in the Board's mind was that shifting delivery by providers from one group to another was in reality a slow and sometimes difficult process.²²¹

The year 2004 was the base year or benchmark against which the Board measured success. The Board took stock of the outcomes with data from 2008.²²² The figures showed that the greatest success in improving participation rates had occurred with three groups: Koories, people with disabilities and people without a Year 12 or equivalent qualification. The number of Koories enrolled in Board funded programs exceeded 700, while the number of people with disabilities was almost 9000 (their representation approaching that in the population at large). The greatest achievement had been in engaging people without a Year 12 qualification. In 2004, they had comprised 38% of Board funded students, in 2008 they were 48% — a significant increase in a priority target group (although improved data was acknowledged as a factor).

There were groups whose engagement the initiatives seemed not to have changed in a significant way, notably the number of males aged between 40 and 64 without Year 12, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse groups. It was also disconcerting to note that the overall number of students in Board funded programs had actually dropped between 2007 and 2008 — the result it seemed of a pleasing trend to longer, accredited programs.

The most successful engagement was with people with disabilities. In 2008, the Board updated its strategy for this group of learners and was pleased to note considerable progress. The rate of participation of students with disabilities had grown since 2004 to the point where it approximated the proportion of people in the community with disabilities. It noted that learners with disabilities were likely to be young, male and from an English-speaking background, to have an intellectual disability or multiple disabilities, were equally likely to be doing a pre-accredited course as an accredited

course, and were enrolled in adult literacy/numeracy programs and/or an employment skills course. The Disability Network had played an ‘invaluable role’ through professional development, information dissemination and support for providers.²²³

Strategy 3: Enhancing the Sustainability of ACE Provision

The evaluation of the Board’s sustainable community business projects held since 2004 occurred during this period. Conducted by the Equity Research Centre, it found that participants from some 200 ACE providers understood the concepts, language and practices of business sustainability and were now applying them in their organisations.

The same research revealed that more than half of ACE ‘businesses’ reported changes in their services in the past twelve months, the result of community/client demand on the one hand and government policies and funding on the other. Some were deliberately diversifying their business and their funding sources so as to have as much flexibility as possible. They had a new attitude, seeking to be “not for profit” but also “not for loss”.

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY BUSINESS — A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE²²⁴

> Alan, Kangaroo Flat Community Group

‘I hadn’t thought of us as a business before, we are a Community House — but I realised that for us to continue, even though we were a not for profit community organisation we needed to actually make a profit, so we could put it back into the business and use it to provide services.’

> Neil, Preston Neighbourhood House

Neil observed how the demographics of Darebin were constantly changing and as a result the needs of the House’s learners:

‘Computer courses which were our staple diet for many years seem to have lost their appeal. Is it because they are not accredited and this is the need? Have the typical “Anglo-Saxon” members of the community moved on, hence Folk Art, Calligraphy, Quilting could be replaced by options more relevant to our multicultural community? Are our marketing strategies meeting our target audience?’

Once again, the Board was pleased with the outcomes. Providers were more sustainable in a business sense, *but* had also retained their community focus and maintained their core values. Those that were particularly vibrant and strong had diversified their funding sources, adopted measures to meet increasing accountability requirements, were flexible and responsive, had high service standards, and were ‘self-aware’ — with clear purposes, sound processes and regular reviews.²²⁵

The projects were deemed an outstanding success. As it turned out, they had positioned ACE providers well to accommodate major changes on the horizon which would bring in a fully contestable training market.

Strategy 4: Investment in ACE

Pre-accredited Delivery

A significant issue under the Board minutes ‘investment’ heading in this period was pre-accredited delivery, a new term for a familiar activity — semi-formal courses, designed and delivered the local level, in a non-institutional setting, to learners whose previous educational history meant they ‘lack[ed] the confidence and skills to engage in the first instance with nationally accredited programs.’ The focus of pre-accredited courses was generally literacy and numeracy and/or employment skills.

Pre-accredited delivery constituted a significant component of the Board's programs. Many more ACE providers delivered pre-accredited training than accredited training (327 compared with 177 in 2006). While the Board funded more accredited delivery than pre-accredited (75% compared with 25%), in fact the majority of learners (65%) in the sector were enrolled in pre-accredited courses. The most extensive delivery was in regions showing the most socio-economic disadvantage, and the programs catered for 'the most reluctant and hardest to reach learners and [the] more labour intensive to teach.'²²⁶

Pre-accredited delivery counted towards Victoria's training effort (an argument won in the 1990s) and provided a pathway to accredited training. However it could not itself be accredited as the Australian Quality Training Framework did not accredit individual subjects (modules). The Board had developed and adopted its own curriculum framework 'A Frame: A Framework for Non-accredited Learning' in 2006, adapting the guidelines it had used under its previous power to accredit courses. In 2007, the Board funded the CAE to incorporate work skills into the A Frame (mooted as a likely requirement for funded programs) and to promote its use across the sector.

In 2008, the Board developed a strategy for purchase and delivery of this important category of programs.²²⁷ Its criteria for funding were typically within the tradition of the sector's values: building on the strengths of ACE, geographical access, recognising the best contributions of regional and local knowledge, and a focus on provider expertise and learning resources.

A PRE-ACCREDITED PROGRAM SERVING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

'Eley on the Park Café is a joint project of The Avenue Neighbourhood House and Eastern Access Community Health. Eley on the Park Café opened in February 2009 and provides training for people with an acquired brain injury in pre-accredited hospitality skills. The menu offers a variety of dishes all prepared and served by the students. This training has generated pathways to further education, volunteering and employment for learners.'²²⁸

The government's acknowledgement of the role of pre-accredited delivery was shown when it incorporated it into its skills reform package in 2008, provided additional funds and exempted the program from the rigours of the contestable market. A three year longitudinal study of the value of pre-accredited delivery was commissioned by the Board in 2010.

New Policy Statements 2008–09

The year 2008 was a challenging and important year for the ACFE Board, with the ministerial announcement of sweeping changes to the skills sector (including ACFE programs) in the offing.

Skills Reform

In April 2008, the Victorian government released its discussion paper foreshadowing extensive changes in the training system. The broad areas of reform proposed were (i) increasing access to government supported training and increasing investment in training from those who benefited most (government, business and individuals), (ii) strengthening the TAFE and ACE sectors, (iii) increasing choice and contestability by enabling individuals and business to access government funded training at a wider range of public, private and community providers, and (iv) improved information services about the training system.²²⁹

The paper acknowledged the 'critical role' the ACE sector played, particularly in delivering initial (foundation) skills to people with high levels of educational disadvantage or who had not been in the workforce. It pledged assistance to the sector so it could operate effectively in the new contestable environment.

The ACFE Board responded positively to the paper.²³⁰ It welcomed the recognition paid to the ACE sector, and the promise that the government would assist the sector to remain sustainable in the new competitive environment. It saw opportunities for pathways between providers and choice for learners in 'collaborative contestability'. It signalled that it assumed that ACE would be included in any new government investment, sought assurance that pre-accredited training would be recognised as a 'critical entry point and pathway for learners with multiple barriers to participation in further education and employment', and indicated ACE providers would need assistance to develop new relationships with industry and make further gains in engaging people without Year 12.

The Board's main areas of concern centred around eligibility criteria for a government funded training place, and potential safeguards against price undercutting and other inappropriate practices in the new environment.

The discussion paper also set the Board thinking about a new Ministerial Statement on ACE, and what it might address.

The public statement, *Securing Jobs for Your Future* was released in mid 2008.²³¹ The sector would be affected by the introduction of contestability (an opportunity for ACE registered training organisations to be rewarded for efficiency and responsiveness). Two of the areas of reform were particularly significant for the sector. First, a significant investment of government funds would bring the ACE student contact hour price to parity with private providers. A proportion (notionally one quarter) of the ACFE delivery budget was to be reserved for pre-accredited training (priced at the same level as the 'Foundation Skills' category). Secondly, substantial government funding was available to ACE providers operate in the new contestable, learner demand driven market. With an extensive set of capacity building initiatives covering technology, business skills and teaching and learning, the sector would be well-equipped to participate, even flourish, under the new training arrangements.

The reforms were to be implemented progressively from mid 2009 to 2012, to enable Victoria's training system to accommodate the radical reforms.

Again the Board responded positively.²³² The greatest risk it saw involved the possible withdrawal of some providers from the sector. Very small providers, particularly in regional and rural Victoria where the population and potential pool of learners were small, might not be viable, it argued, and this should be avoided. In addition, some neighbourhood houses might opt out of training, preferring to focus on community development. Both these predictions subsequently proved true, but to a lesser extent than anticipated at the time.

The next few months were spent developing various capacity initiatives for ACE providers. The technology initiative was straightforward: funding for the ongoing relationship with Microsoft to supply providers with software at education prices. Business skills and teaching and learning involved a number of projects which had to be developed, tended and implemented. The Building Business Skills for a Contestable Environment initiatives involved first, an expansion of the previously successful Sustainable Community Businesses and ACE Business and secondly, pilots in which small ACE providers could trial sharing 'back-of-house' activities, such as workforce recruitment and student data collection. The other initiatives focussed on developing the capacity of ACE practitioners to meet the needs of 'hard to reach' clients, and on further improving the quality of pre-accredited training delivery. The Board received extensive up-dates at each meeting.

ACFE Policy Statement

As it had indicated in connection with the skills reform discussion paper, the Board was very keen for a new policy statement by the government on ACE in its own right. Areas that might be addressed, it believed, included a continued focus on hard to reach learners, building the sector's capacity in the new market place, and expanding access to technology. Successful projects such as the Community Learning Partnerships should be continued.²³³ The shape and contents developed over the ensuing months, as the details of the skills reform package and their implications for the ACE sector were revealed.

The title of the policy statement, *A Stronger ACFE – Delivering Skills for Victoria* (June 2009) was instructive. It showed clearly that the government saw the ACE sector as an integral part of Victoria's training system. It also demonstrated how much the sector's role had changed, a statement such as this being unimaginable even two decades earlier:

The Government sees the ACE sector as a key contributor in addressing workforce issues in all economic situations, enhancing workforce productivity and addressing the Government's human capital agenda.

The language of the statement was positive, even upbeat. The government was committed to ensuring that the sector was 'well known and respected [and] where independent organisations deliver high quality, tailored learning in local communities and workplaces across the State.'

The statement identified two outcomes that would result from its vision for the sector: first, that 'ACE contributes to Victoria's economic prosperity by delivering quality education and training outcomes', and secondly, that 'ACE contributes to strengthening the capacity of individuals and communities through learning'. These were to be achieved through four key areas of action: maximizing access to quality ACE services and programs, promoting the ACE sector, supporting sustainable ACE organisations and a sustainable sector, and positioning ACE as a partner in achieving solutions to wider problems through community-based learning.

The ACE capacity initiatives announced in *Securing Jobs for Your Future* were rolled over into *A Stronger ACFE*, among them the projects on hard to reach learners and specific target groups, pre-accredited training, and the activities related to technology, and business practices and capacity.

There were five additional initiatives. One involved a partnership with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority to streamline requirements for the regulation and quality assurance of registered ACE organisations. Two promotional activities were announced, one a statewide branding and positioning campaign to ensure ACE programs and services were seen as a viable option by learners, and the other aimed at better matching of the skill needs of individuals and employers. The highly successful Community Learning Partnerships project was extended and enhanced, ACE organisations now being encouraged to engage with a broader range of partners (business and industry, local government and outside their immediate location). Finally, the ACFE Board was to develop strategic alliances with other government agencies to facilitate the sector's delivery of programs, such as to work with the Victorian Multicultural Commission on a program for interpreters in regional areas.

Just as *Future Directions* had driven the Board's agenda in the years after its release, so *A Stronger ACFE* focussed activities after its release. The number of projects to be contracted was extensive and took time, as it did for the projects to report results or reach fruition. The state-wide promotional campaign, Learn Local, for example, was launched in April 2011.

Several examples have been selected simply as illustrations of projects under the new policy, as it is premature to give a comprehensive account or assessment of its achievements.

Hard to Reach Learners²³⁴

Both the skills and ACFE policy statements had recognised the longstanding, distinctive role of the ACE sector in engaging 'hard to reach learners' and in providing pathways for them to further education and employment. As this history as shown, the groups identified as 'hard to reach' changed with time and/or government policy, and the ACFE Board and ACE sector responded to each change. The attention to the unemployed, then youth and then men is testimony to the way in which a sector which originally mainly attracted women in their 30s and 40s could accommodate social change and new funding priorities.

Always mindful of the importance of practical illustrations of good practice accompanied by research, the Board commissioned a report to investigate best practice for engaging and retraining hard to reach learners. In many respects the material was familiar to ACE practitioners: put the learner at the centre of the process, consult the learner about course content and process, build on existing experience and knowledge, and develop links with agencies, employers and further education options. The study

was however important as ACE providers sought to balance the demands of learner driven market with the policy/funding imperative of seeking out precisely those least likely to engage in learning.

The report also continued the important evidence-based research culture in the sector developed under *Future Directions*.

ACE Business Models

Using various names and approaches — quality, sustainability, capacity — successive ACFE Board had worked hard since the 1990s to impress on ACE providers the necessity for sound business practices as a basis for their credibility and very survival in an increasingly competitive training environment. A *Stronger ACFE* drove that further with a raft of ACE capacity initiatives.

Since 2005, the ACFE Board had commissioned an annual survey of providers. The quality of the data improved with each successive instrument, providing increasingly robust information on trends in providers programs and services, student demographic, workforce and funding. The 2010 survey (completed by 48% of ACFE funded providers) was taken a year or so after the first skill reforms were introduced, so provides an early indication how providers regarded the changes.²³⁵

The report found that more than half of the providers had added new programs and services to their offering over the previous twelve months. Their client profile had changed little from the previous years, although there appeared to be a fall-off in the participation of learners aged between 45 and 64. Around a quarter indicated an increase in particular learner groups such as youth without Year 12, people returning to work, new arrivals, unemployed and employees.

The survey indicated that the Board's capacity programs had made an impact. Organisations had responded to opportunities to expand their programs and services, welcomed greater access to funds to deliver accredited programs, and had streamlined their business processes. The challenges presented by the reforms that they identified included increased administrative and compliance requirements, deciphering complex funding information, and securing suitably qualified staff in the increasingly competitive environment.

The survey led to a mid-term evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of the ACFE capacity initiatives to date, which was commissioned by the Board late in 2010 and led to several refinements.

ACFE Strategic Alliances

Culturally and linguistically diverse people had been a significant client group since the late 1980s when AMES became a major provider in the sector. One of the strategic alliances identified for the Board to pursue involved the Victorian Multicultural Commission for provision of a course to boost the number of interpreters in regional Victoria in recognition of the needs of refugee and newly arrived settlers.²³⁶ The course was piloted in Bendigo and Mildura in 2009, and then expanded in 2010 to Albury/Wodonga, Geelong, Shepparton and Morwell for speakers of new and emerging languages. The advantage of involving ACE provides was their networks and their capacity to support participants during and after the program. The program, delivered on Saturdays, was a first step towards further training for accreditation. The Board's commitment to culturally and linguistically diverse learners was also evident through its four year project, led by AMES, and commenced in 2009 to build the capacity of ACE providers to deliver education services to CALD learners. This project published its findings in 2012.

Helping Local Communities in Need: Bushfire Relief

In February 2009 Victoria was devastated by the 'Black Saturday' bushfires which resulted in loss of life and property, as well as extensive dislocation of communities around Melbourne and in regional Victoria.

A number of ACE providers — their staff, students, communities and premises — were affected directly by the fires. The Board monitored developments closely. Twenty-four providers in fire-affected areas received grants to assist with emergency activities. In the long aftermath of disruption in these

communities, enrolments dropped, classes were cancelled, and staff and volunteers were unavailable.

From the beginning, many ACE organisations were involved in relief and recovery efforts in their own and adjacent communities. They provided a gathering place, a site for services such as counselling and legal advice, and equipment such as computers, photocopiers and phones. They supported the activities of the Red Cross, Country Fire Authority and other agencies with personnel and supplies.

As recovery efforts gathered pace, ACE providers were able to supply a wide range of services in partnership with other organisations and agencies. The following are only examples:²³⁷

- > Continuing Education Arts Centre Alexandria was asked by Murrindindi Shire for training for the ‘white card’ required for construction industry entry
- > McIvor Neighbourhood House assisted schools in their area develop fire safety plans, held forums for parents on how to cope with children under stress, and funded primary school staff to attend stress management training
- > Funded as a CLP project, the Marysville Triangle Virtual Community Centre involved Continuing Education Arts Centre Alexandria in partnership with Berry Street Victoria, district and community groups, small businesses, Regional Arts Victoria and Murrindindi Shire. It provided ‘a virtual community centre for people who had lived in the Marysville Triangle before the fires, a quiet space, a familiar voice, a central service to find ways express frustrations, small triumphs and ask for and offer training, ideas and help for friends and family.’

In Conclusion

When the Victorian government entered caretaker mode in preparation for the election in November 2010, the reforms it had introduced into the training system, including ACE, were still being implemented. The ACFE Board was working through the implications for its role and that of the Regional Councils once its functions transitioned to Skills Victoria from 1 January 2011 — continuing the purchase of pre-accredited delivery, funding entitlement driven accredited delivery through bulk payments to Skills Victoria made under an MoU with the Treasury, and providing ongoing grants and program support. The branding strategy was nearing completion but not finalised or ready for public unveiling. Many projects were a ‘work in progress’.

There is a sense that this period in the Board’s history was an experiment in which a government committed to community building tried but did not fully succeed in bringing together a range of hitherto unrelated services to achieve this end. In the end, however, the major achievement of these years was the incorporation the ACE sector into the government’s skills reform package, with its key components of the contestable market and recognised synergies and pathways across post-compulsory education programs.

The Board had worked to ensure that the ACE sector was sufficiently robust to accommodate the new environment, as with every previous change.

The outcomes will be part of the ongoing history of the ACE Board.



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