

THE BOB FREW ORATION 2008

The Future of ACE: The Policy Challenge

Given by Dr John McIntyre,
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Adult Learners Week 2008
Sydney Mechanics School of Arts
Thursday 4 September, 1pm to 2pm

The Bob Frew Oration in Adult Learners Week 2008 is an opportunity to again consider the future of adult and community education nationally and in NSW.

In 2008, more than at any other time in recent history, those of us working in the community education sector are challenged to consider where we fit in the big picture—that is, the national policy picture.

The future of community education will be worked out within a comprehensive framework for education and training agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in its human capital reform report, now amplified by the Rudd Government's commitment to address disadvantage through its Social Inclusion Agenda. In this, the community sector has been accorded a key role.

Though not all in the ACE sector have grasped the reality, Australia now has a lifelong learning policy in all but name, signified by COAG's adoption of a whole-of-life framework for education and training. This, together with the commitment to social inclusion, signals the new terms on which ACE providers will be recognised, valued and funded by government. The proposed Ministerial Declaration on ACE challenges the sector to build ACE's capacity to contribute to workforce participation and productivity and signals its 'crucial role' in re-engaging disadvantaged adults. VET reform will underwrite the role of community education providers with a strong vocational focus.

In describing the new policy universe for ACE, the argument will outline as challenges, credibility to government, client engagement, capacity building and connection to work. It will draw on the Adult Learning Survey 2007's unequivocal evidence that non-formal learning reported by adults is overwhelmingly work-related in purpose and provision.

It is important to examine the new policy consensus, to appreciate that the Aulich vision of the Senate Report has passed into history, to know the new touchstones of adult learning as social policy and to consider how we may build the capability of ACE organisations to meet the high expectations now placed upon them.