

Adult and Community Education: What is the role of government?

Purpose

To stimulate and inform discussion and decision making on and about adult and community education in Aotearoa.

What is Adult and Community Education?

Adult and Community Education (ACE) is part of an international movement of lifelong learning, a way to sustainable prosperity and liberation for all, championed by UNESCO, and led by inspirational, dedicated and often very courageous educators particularly in third world nations.¹

ACE has particular relevance and value to the future success of Aotearoa New Zealand. In this country, ACE covers a very diverse and wide range of post-compulsory, usually non-certificated and informal yet structured, courses or programmes to promote the discipline and habit of learning centred on a topic or theme.

For example, ACE covers library lecture series, cooking and craft classes, foreign language and culture courses, community based yoga, zumba or other “get fit classes”, technology courses, basic education in literacy and numeracy, as well as tuition in te reo Māori, sign language or English for refugees and migrants. It also covers non-formal learning, for example learning about work ethic and punctuality while training to become a mechanic.

ACE sits in the space between formal tertiary instruction and autodidactic² journeys of discovery. Through ACE, adults continue to actively learn new skills and knowledge in a relatively informal yet instructional setting.³

The Value of ACE has been addressed in the previous paper⁴. The current paper provides a perspective of both the criticality of learning to people, and the relative roles and responsibilities of social partners including central and local government and adult learners, in maximising the benefit of ACE for Aoteroa.

Role of Central Government

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Central Government agencies create policy and draft legislation to help determine the level of taxpayer contribution to each portfolio (e.g. health, justice, social development). The Ministry of Education creates policy and gives advice on the overall budget for all education, including Adult and Community Education, to the Ministers of Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment and Education.

Legislation and Statutory Obligations

The “Policy Process” is where central government officials research and develop key policy documents used to advise a Minister in their decision-making.

Once core policy decisions are made, they are enshrined in legislation. An example of enshrined policy is the Education Act 1964, 1989 (the Act) which generally relates to primary, secondary and tertiary education. Universities also have their own Acts, (e.g. Otago University Act 1878, University of Auckland Act 1961, University of Canterbury Act 1961, Victoria University Act 1961, Massey University Act 1963). Government educational policy and legislation is primarily focused on existing educational institutions (primary, secondary and tertiary).

¹ <http://infed.org/mobi/julius-nyerere-lifelong-learning-and-education/>

² Autodidactic learning – is self-education, is self-directed learning, different from informal learning. It is “learning on your own” or “by yourself”. (Wikipedia, 2013)

³ Lake J, “*The Value of Lifelong Learning*” – Abstract for The Tertiary Education Summit 2013, Auckland, December 2012, pg3

⁴ ACE Aotearoa, “*The Value of ACE*” 2013

The Education Act 1989 details government commitments, and places statutory obligations on educational institutions. Government commitments include providing a level of taxpayer funding to enable the institutions to meet their statutory obligations.

The Act also prescribes some quality assurance requirements which must be met by taxpayer funded providers of ACE. It also requires that universities promote community learning and polytechnics provide continuing education.

ACE

There is no legislation dedicated to ACE. This indicates there are no enshrined government policies around ACE and no ongoing commitment to support ACE services. It also means that there are no specific statutory obligations on ACE providers.

Relationship between government funding and policy

Government funding follows policy. Once policy is enshrined in legislation it is difficult to change. The lack of ACE dedicated legislation leaves any policy relating to ACE, open to change from government to government. Because of this the ACE sector has experienced cycles (approximately every 10 years) of “feast or famine” funding in Aotearoa, reflecting the focus (permissive or restrictive) that ACE is given by the government of the day.

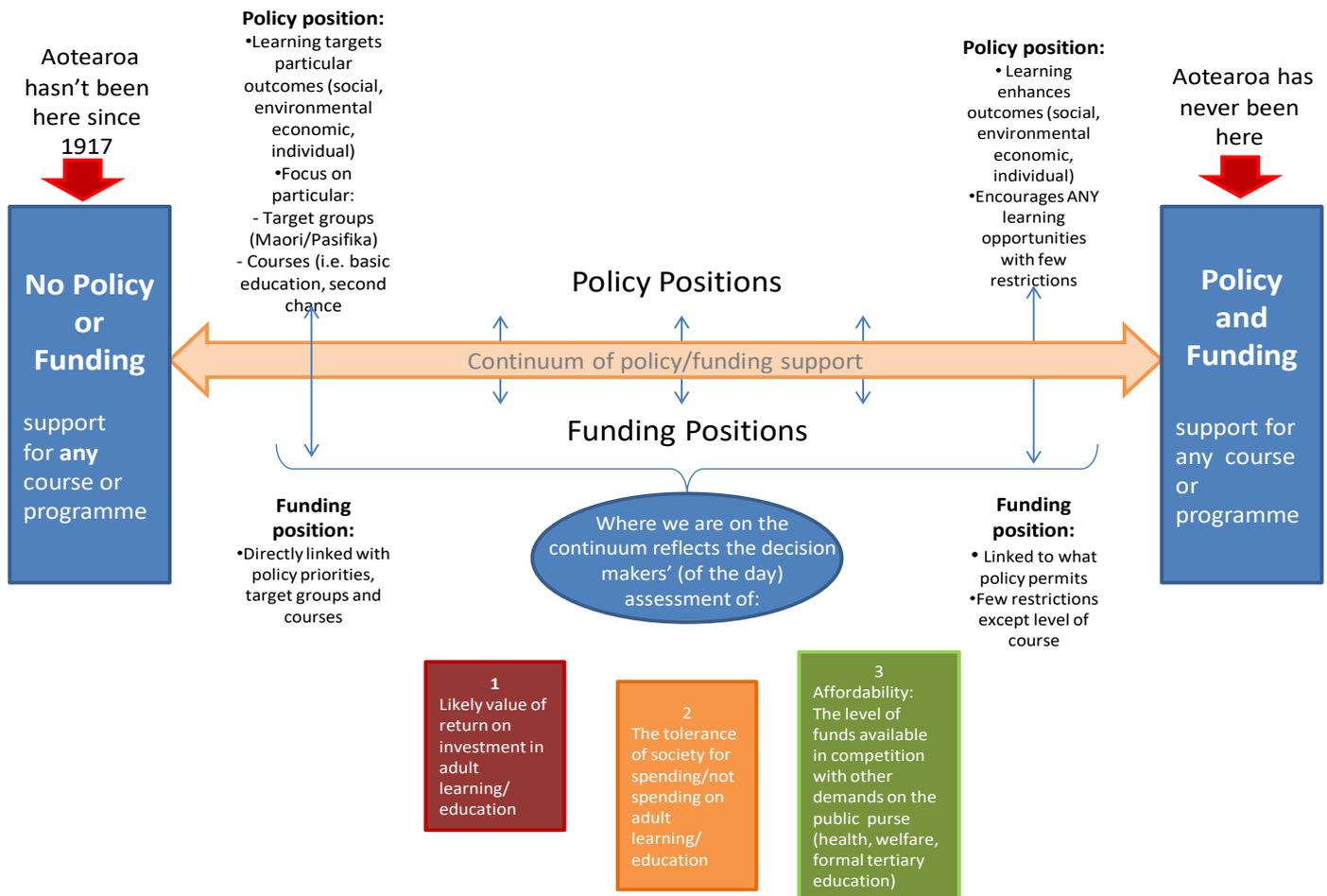
Should there be core ACE Policy?

This lack of legislation creates an environment for a “first principles” discussion.⁵ We know that people are driven to learn, their productivity and wellbeing is improved by learning. Should there be a core ACE policy enshrined in legislation? If so, how far should it go? Should all adults be given government support to learn/study? Should government have more say on what it wants adults to learn or should adults be totally free to choose what they want to learn?

Possible policy options range along a continuum. At one end, full support for all adult learning, at the other, no support for adult learning. Various policy and funding support options for ACE courses can then be plotted along the continuum. This concept is depicted below.

⁵ A “First principles” discussion means to begin with fundamental questions and assumptions about a situation and work from there.

Continuum of Policy and Funding Support for ACE



A starting policy position could be that the purpose of ACE is to *enable* a vibrant, informed population with relevant current skills and engagement in society. If there was to be core ACE policy (enshrined in legislation), it could be as simple as “education practice is to promote, and be consistent with, the principles of *lifelong learning*, including intergenerational learning”.

This wording would bind the Crown to a position where ongoing learning opportunities would be promoted for people of all ages, and maximise return for young people by promoting the engagement of their family/whānau.

An alternative policy position could be that the purpose of ACE is to remedy the defects of the compulsory education system, and to train as many people as possible to be suitable for a minimum of 10-15 years employment in the workforce. It could recognise the positive impact of adult learning on reducing health and justice costs to society and move toward requiring all adults to undergo some form of learning to ensure their skills remain current and relevant in our rapidly changing society, supporting healthier, constructive lifestyles.

Policy positions will reflect both the ideologies of those making the decisions, and their assessment of the tolerance of their constituencies for that decision.

Role of Local Government

Local government also has an important role to play as it has responsibility for community facilities and the local environment.

Given that ACE is part of the fabric of society⁶ local government has a role in providing facilities which remove some of the barriers to ongoing learning by members of the community. This includes the provision of quality libraries, with internet access capability, and librarians or learning “champions” who can assist library users of all ages to access relevant resources.

It also includes support for local community houses which are increasingly being used as community hubs in lower decile communities with adult education (including parent courses, health services, budgeting advice etc) an integral part of their role.

Role of the Individual/ Family/ Whānau

With the exception of those youth/older people who have not been well served by the compulsory education system, adult learning is a shared responsibility.

Adults are encouraged to identify areas for ongoing self-directed, autodidactic learning, keeping themselves current with changing technology and other systems as well as improving health and social engagement. Family/Whānau are also seen as able to identify areas for their own advancement through ongoing learning, with encouragement given in terms of facilities and support where necessary.

In respect of those people who have lost confidence, or believe that they are not able to learn, interventions should be available to help them reignite the drive towards constructive structured learning, bearing in mind that when not engaged in positive learning, other learning with less benefit to the individual, community and society will still occur.

“We Do Not Live By Bread Alone”

Learning is essential for human beings of any age. People are *driven* to learn; it is as vital to survival as eating or drinking.

The literature on human learning is enormous. Research has shown that babies learn in the womb; once born, if they are not stimulated (a trigger for learning) they do not thrive and are likely to die.⁷ Toddlers and children enchant their families/whānau with their ability to “pick up new things”, almost as they breathe. They are learning (known as incidental learning) every moment.

Research⁸ has shown that old people in rest homes who participated in learning activities (of any kind) had a reduction in the use of incontinence products, medication (sleeping and other) and an increase in functioning (such as verbalisation, and appropriate emotional responses).

Human learning is relentless. But what is being learned? If the learning is positive and esteem enhancing, the benefits to society are evident in reduced health and welfare costs, reduced justice costs as well as increased productivity and earning capacity. If the learning is negative, the impact on society is also negative.

Education in the Context of Learning

Given that people are driven to learn, educators need to be able to tap into that fundamental *drive* to optimise what is learned, and as a consequence, help improve those economic, environmental, social, community, family and individual outcomes.

Too often, education is talked about as if it *is* learning; even more concerning, education in the classroom is given precedence over actual learning.

Popular definitions of *learning* and *education* see the two terms used synonymously, as if they share the same meaning.

⁶ ACE Aotearoa, “The Value Proposition of ACE” - Policy discussion paper, 2013.

⁷ McConnell J “Understanding Human Behaviour – An Introduction to Psychology, 1977.

⁸ Aldridge, F “Enhancing Informal Adult Learning for Older People in Care Settings: Interim Report and Consultation Document, NIACE – cited in NIACE – The Facts.

“**Education** in its general sense is a *form* of [learning](#) in which [knowledge](#), [skills](#), and [habits](#) of a group of people are transferred from one generation to the next through [teaching](#), instructing, training, or simply through [autodidacticism](#).^[1] Generally, it occurs through any [experience](#) that has a formative effect on the way one thinks, feels, or acts.” (Wikipedia, 2012)

Wikipedia equates *education* to formal or “intentional learning” that takes place in an orderly manner. In Aotearoa New Zealand, we tend to talk about education as being acquired through “going to school” or some other educational institution. However, in recent times it has even been suggested that it is only *education* if it leads to a qualification; (otherwise it is life skills).

By this definition “informal learning” (also known as incidental learning) is not considered education implying that if it is not education *nothing* is learned. However learning occurs whether or not a person attends an educational facility or gets a qualification.

For the purpose of this discussion, it is suggested that EDUCATION is about the structured, organised, purposeful, presentation of material (by a person who is an expert/authority or well informed about the topic).

Similarly, LEARNING is about a recipient of the material *internalising* the message in the material. Once this process has taken place, learning is achieved.

From that perspective, *when the learner internalises the intended message from the structured, organised, purposeful presentation of material, “education” as we commonly mean it, has occurred.*

Key to this discussion is the concept of education being “ACCESSIBLE” to all. If a person learns the intended message *and* incidentally that they are *capable* of learning, then education becomes accessible and their likelihood of achieving success in education and other areas of life is further improved.

However if a person struggles, they may learn “incidentally” that education is not for them. If this belief persists into adulthood it can prove costly to the individual, their family and their community.

In our society, education level is directly related to employment; and with employment comes greater prosperity and wellbeing. Therefore, making education accessible to all is critical to the future and ongoing prosperity of individuals and Aotearoa as a nation.

Learning and Stages of Development

There is much educational literature on human learning and cognitive development focused on improving learner outcomes, designed to assist educators to improve teaching methods and better understand learners.

In practice, New Zealand’s approach is that an adult’s learning and lifelong development is their own responsibility. But that ignores the social, economic cost of negative learning and the benefits to New Zealand of ongoing positive learning.

This paper looks at adult learning and life stages taking into account physiological, hormonal, biochemical and neurological changes as well as changes in familial status and employment (rather than a pure “educational” focus).

Adulthood

ACE is particularly relevant to the developmental stages of adulthood, documented as the “predictable crises of adult life”.⁹ These are outlined below:

Stage: 20-25 years, embark on first career or lifestyle choice - possibly coinciding with finishing a tertiary qualification and commencing work in paid employment in a vocation/ profession of choice or commencing a life on the fringe of society, unemployed and low skilled.

Stage: 32-37 years, review life-style/career with possible change in direction (including additional study or skills training) or further developing existing work/employment/ lifestyle.

Stage: 46-55 years, realisation that the life span is about half way completed, capabilities have changed/are changing, and confronting the next twenty years – sometimes dismissed as the “mid-life crisis”.

There is less documentation relating to post 60-70years, but that may be developed as actual life span increases for a greater number and proportion of the population. However, the value of learning for the elderly has been documented.¹⁰

If we are to address the question of how people achieve and maintain “optimal” productivity and constructive engagement in society we need to understand the learning needs associated with the “predictable crises of adult life”, particularly as life expectancy increases, and the population ages.

Each of the developmental stages in adulthood, even for those who are successfully participating in society, is associated with a need to acquire new skills and knowledge, adapt with confidence to changes in the environment (including family/ whānau and individual), and maintain positive relationships with significant others in existing and new networks. Failure to do so results in increased social and health costs (particularly for older adults), as well as justice costs (for younger and middle aged people).

Ageing society

Like other countries Aotearoa New Zealand has an aging population with changing patterns of paid and unpaid activity. In 2012, 21 percent of 65+ year olds were in the workforce with a predicted increase to about 30 percent from the mid-2020s.¹¹ As the workforce ages, adults will need to constantly up skill if they are to stay in paid employment or unpaid active retirement (the latter could be for decades).

Policy that encourages adults of all ages to continue lifelong learning, to keep current or further their skills, will bring both environmental, social and economic gains in the form of increased involvement in social, community and/or voluntary activity and continued tax contributions.¹²

Changing careers

The average adult in Aotearoa New Zealand can experience a change in career as many as six times in their lifetime,¹³ due to a job loss, redundancy, physical incapability or the desire to change career.

In Australia ACE is promoted as a starting place in transitioning to a new career.¹⁴ The same could be done here in Aotearoa. ACE provides business related subjects, short taster courses to

⁹ Sheehy G, “Passages – Predictable crises of adult life”, Bantam Publishing 1976.

¹⁰ Ibid note 8

¹¹ http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/population/estimates_and_projections/NationalLabourForceProjections_HOT_P06-61Augupdate.aspx

¹² NIACE, “Lifelong Learning: Contributing to wellbeing and prosperity” Spending Review 2010, pg8

¹³ <http://www.careers.govt.nz/education-and-training/study-and-training-options/adults-considering-training-or-retraining/>

different jobs. ACE can provide a pathway to further training and higher tertiary study for those who are not quite ready for formal study, in an environment that is not overly structured.

Key messages about ACE

ACE provides tangible economic and social benefits to Aotearoa New Zealand.

Government decision making (through policy and legislation) influences the way the general public think. Government needs to foster the attitude that lifelong learning is important for the future of Aotearoa and its citizens.

Raising awareness of the importance of lifelong learning is critical if we want an adult population that is confident, capable, engaged and empowered, enterprising and innovative, active in their communities and contributing positively to society and the economy. Adults who will have a lasting positive influence on their children and youth around them.

People who struggle to recover from an experience of “failure” early in their learning journey, risk missing out on the opportunities available to others around them. Lifelong learning opportunities must be made available to all, whether they are taken or not.

This paper presents a principles-based discussion aimed at assisting decision makers to develop their view of where ACE should be in Aotearoa and consider the following key questions:

- Should there be specific changes to legislation that include ACE?
- If so, what should the wording be?
- What is the most effective way for local government to foster lifelong learning in their communities?

¹⁴<http://www.myfuture.edu.au/The%20Facts/Education%20and%20Training/Adult%20and%20Community%20Education.aspx>