Introduction

RMIT welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Victorian Government Workforce Participation Taskforce 2005. The imperative to increase workforce participation is clearly an issue for the post compulsory education sector as it seeks to engage with new sets of learners who may fall outside its traditional demographic profile or have limited exposure to formal adult learning. RMIT is responding to this challenge by drawing on its strengths as a dual sector institution and its history of strong community and industry links. Engaging Victorians in education and training that leads to improved labour market outcomes for both the individual and the community is central to RMIT’s mission.

Key issues

In his recent report to COAG, the Premier of Victoria clearly highlighted the importance of improving educational attainment in addressing future shortfalls in the Australian labour market. The report estimates that this factor alone has the potential to raise the aggregate labour force participation rate by 5% above what it would otherwise be in 2042.1 RMIT’s contribution to the Taskforce’s work links to Terms of Reference 2, 3 and 4. It focuses on the role of post compulsory education and training in increasing workforce participation through current and innovative responses to learning needs.

In summary we believe that policy initiatives to improve workforce participation in Victoria should go beyond the current labour market–dominated approach to skills shortages and take a broader view of the underpinning skills and capabilities needed for continued economic growth in the future. In support of this approach, RMIT believes it is important for the Taskforce to note the following:

- Traditional boundaries between vocational and higher education are blurring as the post compulsory education sector responds to skill needs of the new economy
- The role of the ‘academy’ in relation to individuals, enterprises and governments is changing as lifelong learning is increasingly attained across a range of formal and informal settings
- The rapidly changing nature of skills requires industry and government to take a long term view of the nature and cause of skill shortages in the economy. Education and training undertaken now will determine our capacity to respond to future labour market imperatives.
- State based workforce participation strategies should be consistent with a national workforce development strategy that strengthens capabilities and participation for all people, including older workers and those excluded from the labour market
- There is an urgent need for targeted vocational advice to assist those wishing to upgrade their skills and re-enter the labour market.

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1 ‘A New Generation of Reform-Prosperity, Productivity and Participation’, Premiers Report to COAG, June 2005, p.10
Integrating vocational and higher education

The demand for the types of skills needed for the knowledge economy is increasingly blurring the boundaries between vocational and higher education. The critical skills required for the modern workplace are often not strictly technical or academic, but a hybrid of both. Furthermore, these skills need to recognise a range of generic capabilities such as creativity, flexibility, communication skills and knowledge which crosses interdisciplinary boundaries. These skills and capabilities should be embedded in all levels of learning, and not confined to either TAFE or higher education.

What is important to lifelong learners is access to education and training that enables them to maintain their skills currency. Where they source this from is largely immaterial. The education sector has responded to these changes in demand by developing new ‘cross-sectoral’ products such as Associate Degrees and Higher Education Diplomas. There are also opportunities for dual sector institutions such as RMIT to offer parallel learning pathways which will allow students to combine courses across the sectors, and to offer education and training in the workplace. It also highlights the importance of education and training providers working with industry to create opportunities for learning in multiple settings, including the workplace. However, a more systematic approach to understanding and strengthening the links between higher education participation and workforce participation - for example, through capability based curriculum and work-integrated learning - is essential to meet future workforce needs in our rapidly changing economy.

Developing the ‘right’ skills

The key challenge for the education sector is ensuring that we are training people for both now and the future. Recent research reported in Manpower’s Future World of Work series highlights the changing nature of skills in advanced economies. At the same time as we are seeing an exponential growth in jobs based on expert thinking and complex communication, jobs based on routine tasks are rapidly disappearing. Non-routine manual jobs such as hairdressing and security guards are also declining, but at a much slower rate. ³ This observation is supported by Australian researchers Kelly and Lewis who found that jobs requiring interactive and cognitive skills are increasing, while jobs based purely on motor skills – being ‘good with your hands’ – are disappearing.⁴ So, while we talk about shortages in specific industries, demand is actually shifting away from technical skills (codified knowledge) to capability (a blend of both tacit and codified knowledge). This capability includes the social and empathetic skills that are developed largely in non-formal learning environments such as the home and workplace.

This highlights the limitations inherent in developing educational funding priorities around labour market shortages that employ a narrow or traditional definition of skills. There may be more effective ways to plan for long term labour market development based on a more complex understanding of the skills needed for the knowledge economy. This is particularly important in understanding the skills needed for occupations emerging in response to technological changes and industry convergence. For instance, Florida offers fresh insights into the role of creativity in the new knowledge professions and its capacity to drive economic growth that help us to understand new professions such as computer games programming that relies on IT and design skills.⁵ RMIT is actively engaged in designing qualifications that meet the emerging skill needs of the local creative industry, such as the development of a ‘Diploma of Creative Industries’.

The Queensland Government’s recently released Green Paper, ‘Skills for Jobs and Growth’, highlights the difficulties faced by governments and industry in articulating the rapidly changing nature of skills. The Government’s discussion paper prepared in response differentiates between

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³ This is the topic of a forthcoming UNESCO seminar ‘Vocational Content in Mass Higher Education? Responses to Challenges for the Labour Market and the Work-Place’

⁴ Manpower: Future World of Work 2005 Series, Paper No. 1

⁵ Kelly, R and Lewis, P. The Changing Pattern of Skill Demand in the Australian Economy, 2003

⁶ Florida, R. The Rise of the Creative Class, 2002
strategies to address immediate skill shortages in the trades now, and those required to build a skills base that will increase workforce participation in the longer term. This is a useful way of thinking about how we gear education and training provision towards achieving the most productive outcomes for the most number of people, now and in the future.

**Stronger links with industry and the community**

Feedback from industry suggests that future leaders will come from the shop floor. These leaders will be skilled in both ‘mind and hand’, and will move seamlessly through educational pathways gaining new skills as needed. Many of these skills will be developed through workplace based training, with ‘learning by doing’ the dominant pedagogy. To achieve this vision, education providers must be better networked with industry and with each other to facilitate more effective skill development across the different sectors.

Recent research by Rolland clearly indicates that engagement with formal learning and development declines with age. While there is some evidence that this partly reflects a reluctance on the part of some employers to fund training for older workers, Louise Rolland’s research also indicates that the picture is more complex – that employers may be willing to provide the training, but there is little interest from older workers, who believe that it will have little value to them personally. This presents a significant opportunity for employers/industry and educational institutions to work together to support people to undertake education and training while they’re in the workforce.

A stronger role for industry in defining skill needs for existing workers, is a key element of a ‘national workforce development strategy’ proposed by Peter Noonan at a recent CEDA Forum on lifelong learning. Noonan argues that the current government approach to lifelong learning is not working, and should be replaced by a strategy that sets clear targets and spans the range of learning environments including educational institutions, workplaces and community-based organisations. Engagement with community-based learning is particularly important since this is the main pathway through which many adults, especially women, return to learning.

The Victorian government’s Ministerial Statement, ‘Future Directions for Adult Community Education in Victoria’, acknowledges this important issue and sets targets for engaging specific cohorts by the ACE sector. RMIT currently contributes to this strategy through its ACE delivery, and will continue to work closely with the ACE sector in meeting the overall objectives of the Statement.

An important example of this approach is RMIT’s involvement in the Hume Global Learning Village, a network of learning organisations ‘who are collectively taking action to promote learning opportunities and improve learning achievements in Hume’. This initiative is central to increasing workforce participation in the region and has so far demonstrated strong learning and employment outcomes. RMIT is an active contributor to this initiative as part of its regional engagement strategy with Melbourne’s north, with staff currently conducting an evaluation of the Village’s ‘Learning Together’ strategy, and holding a Chair position of the Victorian Learning Communities Network.

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6 Interview with Chris Robinson, Campus Review, Vol 15, No 24, June 29, 2005, p.7
7 Louise Rolland, ‘The drivers for and imperatives of lifelong learning’, Lifelong Learning: CEDA Growth No 56, June 2005
9 Rolland, op cit
Need for targeted vocational advice

Given that improving levels of workforce participation will continue be a major policy challenge, it is important that this is supported by informed educational and labour market choices. There is a clear need in the community for the provision of vocational advice tailored specifically to the needs of people at different stages of their working life. As Louise Rolland has argued, there is a direct connection between the quality of vocational advice – and its links with detailed knowledge of local labour markets and emerging employment trends – and outcomes for learners. RMIT recently received over 500 phone calls in response to a radio interview in which we said we were looking at the education and training needs of people over 45. This prompted us to run a series of focus group discussions for more than 200 respondents which doubled as advice sessions.

In general, confidence in their knowledge of labour market links was poor and consequently levels of anxiety were high. Many were unaware of emerging opportunities for employment, and of how education and training might help them access those opportunities. Many were in fact working – but concerned that they were working in dying industries, or conscious that what they were doing did not demand a great deal of them. However, unless they are recipients of welfare benefits, there’s no way for people to get targeted vocational advice about the links between education and training and employment opportunities, other than to pay for it themselves.

This experience highlighted some real challenges for education providers, government and industry in tackling skill shortages through education and training. Whilst there is great potential for retraining older workers, the concept of lifelong learning doesn’t mean much to those who are not actively engaged with learning or employment. In order to encourage lifelong learning, we have to actively help individuals, enterprises and educational institutions make the longitudinal connections between education and training and employment opportunities. RMIT is responding to this challenge by developing a vocational training program targeted at older workers that will provide advice and support to help this group successfully re-engage with the education, training and labour markets.

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12 Rolland, *op cit*