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The Hon Anne Tolley,
Minister of Education,
Wellington.
Email: a.tolley@ministers.govt.nz

Dear Ms Tolley,

I write as someone who has devoted many years to research and teaching in adult and community education (ACE) to express my deep concern at the funding cuts to adult and community education announced in this year's budget.

As I understand it, about \$13 million p.a. (or about 80% of the subsidy to schools for ACE) is to be withdrawn from the beginning of the next financial year. Subsidies for so-called 'hobby and personal interest' courses are to be cut entirely and 20% of the present funds are to be used to fund what are called 'literacy, numeracy and foundation skills'. In addition, I understand that \$8.9 million p.a. (or about 50% of the funding received by tertiary institutions for ACE) is to be cut the following year, and that the remaining funds will also be focused on literacy and numeracy.

There are several aspects of these decisions and of this new approach which concern me. However I will limit my comments here to one or two issues which arise directly from an apparent failure to take into account some important findings of research.

1. The policy seems to assume that an appropriate and useful distinction can be made between courses aimed at promoting 'literacy, numeracy and foundation skills' and other kinds of courses. The former are seen as high priorities and are presumed to be worthy of continued government funding,, while the latter, which are labelled as 'personal interest and hobby classes', are not considered high priorities in terms of government funding.

The **distinction or dichotomy between 'literacy, numeracy and foundation skills' courses and 'hobby and personal interest' courses is however a false one.** It rests on several misconceptions about adult learners, their learning and in particular the nature of adult literacy, numeracy and foundation learning. The policy seems to assume

that those who have difficulty or struggle with reading, writing, numeracy and other foundation skills will be best served by encouraging or requiring them to join courses, classes and groups which are designated as promoting 'literacy, numeracy or foundation skills'. This is however not the case for everyone.

A substantial body of research points to the fact that things are never as simple as they seem. **People's motivations, interests and approaches to learning are almost infinitely varied** and the wider the range and scope of learning opportunities and programmes that are available and the fewer the barriers (including geographical, cultural, social, psychological & financial barriers) faced by potential learners, the more likely they are to become engaged in learning effectively. On the other hand, the more we characterize people in terms of 'deficits' (including literacy and numeracy deficits), the more we try to direct and strait-jacket potential learners and teachers and restrict their learning and teaching options, the less likely people are to recognise themselves as potential learners and the more likely they are to fall into the trap of seeing themselves as 'permanently inadequate' and incapable of learning.

Special literacy, numeracy and foundation classes of various kinds are badly needed if 'second chance' or even 'first chance' adults are to achieve their goals. But these will never be enough. Researchers have long since recognised that there are many different literacies and that a range of approaches including a diversity of content and themes is essential even to achieve the limited goal of promoting 'literacy, numeracy or foundation skills'.

2. So far I have summarized some of the evidence pointing to the inadequacy of an approach to funding ACE which focuses exclusively or even predominantly on promoting 'literacy, numeracy or foundation skills'. In addition, however, there is considerable research evidence which points to the **wider benefits** of other forms of ACE. These include social & cultural (including family & community) benefits, educational (including inter-generational) benefits, health (including public health and disease prevention) benefits, benefits in relation to crime reduction (including the rehabilitation of offenders), economic benefits (including employment creation) and political benefits (including those of active citizenship and participation). These benefits, which may be direct and planned or indirect and secondary, derive from a wide range of programmes and activities including those which might be labelled as 'hobby and personal interest classes'.

For these social benefits to be gained, however, a **broad-based approach to ACE is essential**. Some funding may be needed to target particular groups or objectives. However, as mentioned in the previous section, the evidence suggests that there are real dangers in relying on targeting population groups on the basis of alleged deficits which all-too-readily become self-fulfilling prophecies. People's characteristics, their perceptions of themselves, their motivations, their interests and their approaches to learning are all too varied and multi-layered to conform readily with a model of provision determined at a national level. Moreover people's interests, attitudes and perceptions change in the course of participating in programmes, making it problematic to define performance levels and satisfactory course completion rates in advance.

3. In view of all this a broad-based approach to ACE is even more essential now than it was in times of full employment. **The kinds of benefits outlined above are needed more than ever in these times of recession**. Moreover, in terms of the overall government budget the sums expended on ACE are miniscule.

Under the previous regime funding priority was given to the following five areas: 'Targeting learners whose initial learning was unsuccessful', 'Raising foundation skills', 'Strengthening social cohesion', 'Encouraging lifelong learning' and 'Strengthening communities by meeting community learning needs'. As I understand it, the current proposal is to eliminate the latter two priority areas, leaving only those dealing with targeting those with least formal schooling, raising foundation skills and strengthening social cohesion.

In these times of recession and growing unemployment I believe that there are good reasons to adopt a new approach to ACE funding. This would, however, not be narrower and more restrictive than in the past, but instead would add new priorities. These would include not only the five priority areas contained in the previous tertiary strategy but would add new priorities in some of the areas referred to above in the discussion of the wider benefits of ACE.

4. In the light of the above summaries I wish to recommend as a matter of urgency that:

- (a) the level of ACE funding be restored to that which existed prior to the recently announced cuts to school funding for ACE and the projected ACE cuts to tertiary institutions,

- (b) a review of the research relevant to the issues referred to above be commissioned as soon as possible which can then be used to inform policy, and
- (c) a new approach to ACE funding be set in place which would be based on a broad rather than narrow conception of the nature, purposes and potential benefits of ACE. This new approach would include the following:
 - I. statutory recognition of ACE in all its forms with special reference to the statutory protection of community learning initiatives;
 - II. at the level of the state closer co-ordination on ACE policy between the TEC and Ministry of Education; and
 - III. endorsement of a model of ACE provision based on minimal regulation by the state at the national level (subject to the requirements of overall policy direction and sound financial practices), and maximum levels of self-determination and self-regulation by communities of interest, recognised agencies & institutions, and local & regional networks.

Yours faithfully,

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