

Lifelong Learning

Keith Suter Comments

Wesley Mission's School for Seniors is having another successful summer school. The School for Seniors is one of the oldest and largest in Australia.

This year is the 40th anniversary of the concept of lifelong learning. I have just been reading an article by Professor Sol Encel, of the University of New South Wales and a member of the NSW Ministerial Advisory Committee on Ageing, on the history of lifelong learning. The article appears in the papers of the 2004 annual conference of the Independent Scholars Association of Australia: *The First Necessity: Access to Learning in the 21st Century*.

In 1965 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the concept of lifelong learning as a major objective. Education in the later years of a person's life has expanded considerably since the 1960s. Encel notes among others: adult education, further education, continuing education and post-graduate studies.

But of course this type of education goes back much further. For example, the Sydney Mechanics School of the Arts was established in the 1830s, followed by similar institutes in many regional centres and by the Workers Education Association created in the UK a century ago.

What is different now, of course, is the sheer size of the educational industry. A value of Encel's article is to illustrate the size and diversity of lifelong learning.

From the UK, he quotes the case of The Open University. This was formed in the 1960s, in the face of great opposition from British universities and the civil service. The University of the Air, as it began, enabled people to study at home via broadcast programmes and its own course books. It became a pioneer in producing readable textbooks.

Another innovation was actually asking students what they thought of the courses, teaching etc. The other universities took much longer to get a customer-focus!

From the US, Encel quotes the case of ElderHostel, created in 1975. Participants are aged 60 and over. It now has 10,000 annual programmes in 2,000 locations, with over a quarter of a million students. ElderHostel contracts with universities to put on specific courses. For example, the Sorbonne in Paris offers a course on France today, while the University of Queensland has a course on the Australian environment.

Encel's Australian case study is the University of the Third Age (U3A). This began in 1972 in France, as a system of non-degree university courses for older French people. The first Australian U3A group was in Melbourne in 1984. The Australian movement has over 20,000 participants.

An Australian examination of the U3A success noted that one characteristic was the high level of prior education by the participants. The better educated a person was, the more likely they were to enrol for a U3A course. This implies that, given the better educational opportunities for current Australians, the scope for U3A will expand as there will be more people with more prior learning coming through.

He is right. But the experience of Wesley Mission School for Seniors is that formal prior learning is not the only factor. There has to be a thirst for learning. Many people did not get the opportunities for learning that younger Australians now enjoy (and often take for granted). They had to leave

school at 14 or 15 to earn money.

Now they are in a position to make up for what they missed. They are eager students and a joy to have in class. They are learning because they want to.

Author Details

Keith Suter

kdsuter@wesleymission.org.au

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