

Learning Towns – the Victorian Experience

The Victorian program of Learning Towns provides an example of action taken by a State Government to support local initiatives to promote lifelong learning opportunities in communities. Nine Learning Towns have been funded since 1999 with this program linked to the Government's overall development strategy set out in *Growing Victoria Together*¹.

This state government funding was provided on the basis that it was seed funding rather than recurrent expenditure, and Learning Towns would work towards becoming self sustaining. Support has been provided to the Learning Towns to assist them in this objective, such as developing skills in fund raising and tender preparation.

The Learning Towns have achieved considerable successes. One key achievement has been the development of a performance measures framework which provides indicators to evaluate the impact on the community of learning programs. This framework has been piloted by the Learning Towns themselves and has been customised for small and large Adult Community Education organisations. The performance measures framework offers community-based organisations a framework for improving management decision making by providing qualitative and quantitative data on community reach and impact.

The Learning Towns have demonstrated the value of strong partnerships and an inclusive approach to community building. For example, the Buloke Learning Town tackled the Buloke Shire's environmental challenges by bringing together Landcare groups, land holders, businesses, schools and state land management authorities. Three field trips were organised so people could see the environmental challenges and some potential solutions. This project resulted in increased environmental knowledge and skills in the Shire, improved environmental management and increased community leadership and interaction.

In her Ministerial Statement, *Future Directions for Adult Community Education in Victoria*, (June 2004) Lynne Kosky, Minister for Education & Training, has built on this experience in developing the Community Learning Partnership principle.

Community Learning Partnerships are a new way of doing business between the Government and communities. They are the working arrangements between organisations that bring together people and organisations with an interest in learning outcomes for adults. Any eligible Adult Community Education organisation can auspice a Community Learning Partnership.

¹ An additional Learning Town was funded in 2002.

Community Learning Partnerships will broaden the role of adult and community education. Where there was an emphasis on delivery to individual learners, there will now also be a focus on the learning outcomes for communities.

Community Learning Partnerships will contribute directly to community-strengthening activities. They will be projects generated out of specific local needs (such as employment or industry, environment or a range of health or welfare concerns). Funding for Community Learning Partnerships by the ACFE Board will be for up to three years. All partner organisations are expected to demonstrate their commitment through participating in resourcing the project.

Future Directions for Adult Community Education in Victoria indicates that Learning Town funding will be refocused in the period 2005-2007 to support Community Learning Partnerships. They offer a way to leverage the funding provided to Learning Towns in the past.

The outcomes of Community Learning Partnerships are expected to be:

- stronger communities, through increased partnerships between community organisations
- a contribution to the implementation of locally delivered whole-of-government service provision

increased skills of adults and communities.