



**Comment
on the

ACT Skills
Commission
Interim Report**

January 2008

Introduction

ACTCOSS acknowledges that Canberra is built on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. We pay our respects to their elders and recognise the displacement and disadvantage they have suffered since European settlement. ACTCOSS celebrates the Ngunnawal's living culture and valuable contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage, and low-income citizens of the Territory. ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' objectives are representation of people living with disadvantage, the promotion of equitable social policy, and the development of a dynamic, collaborative and sustainable community sector.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS receives funding from the Community Services Program (CSP) which is funded by the ACT Government.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

Introduction

ACTCOSS welcomes the ACT Skills Commission's Interim Report and congratulates the Commission on its work. Overall, the Interim Report provides an extremely useful overview of the workforce issues confronting the ACT at present, and gives a useful starting point for addressing the skills shortage and developing a cohesive strategy for workforce planning into the future.

We are also pleased that the Commission has provided the opportunity for the community to provide input to its initial conclusions, and hope that this submission to that process will assist the Commission in extending and developing its proposals. We would also like to acknowledge the efforts of Rosemary Follett in engaging with the community sector on their needs and those of marginalised workers.

Employing marginalised workers

ACTCOSS has long advocated that engagement in meaningful employment has enormous social benefits for both individuals and the community as a whole. Engagement in meaningful work assists people not only by improving their individual incomes and the economy as a whole, but by providing routine, encouraging social engagement, and improving both physical and mental health outcomes. In a time of low unemployment, the opportunity to improve community well-being by engaging marginalised workers in productive employment has good prospects of success, and ACTCOSS is encouraged that the Commission has identified this as one strategy to meet the skills challenge.

As part of Strategy 4, the Commission has identified a number of population groups who face barriers to participation in employment, and who might be assisted by funded programs to support them in the transition to work, including:

- principal carer parents
- people with disabilities
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
- Older workers
- Ex-offenders
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

ACTCOSS welcomes the additional attention on these groups of marginalised workers. We presume that people experiencing mental illness are included as people with a disability, although suggest that this group might be separately considered as meeting their needs often requires considerably different skills and assistance. Similarly, we applaud the inclusion of ex-offenders as a target group, and advocate that particular attention be paid to ensuring adequate services exist for this group with the opening of the Alexander Maconochie Centre this year.

We also add our voice to the suggestion that the ACT Government engage co-operatively with the Commonwealth to improve employment assistance programs, particularly in light of the change of Government federally. It is our understanding that the so-called "welfare-to-work" package has made

it more difficult for many marginalised workers to find employment. The current arrangements are not responsive to the complexities of individual need, have inadequate provision for intensive employment assistance, a reduction in support for learning, and take a punitive approach to income support that has resulted in disengagement and suspicion towards employment services. In many cases, the new system has entrenched disadvantage rather than relieving it. In our view, a more co-operative and evidence-based system of supporting the transition to work is needed to yield the most effective employment outcomes for these groups.

While the current labour market provides an opportunity for increased engagement in employment amongst vulnerable groups, naturally this requires appropriate and targeted assistance from services with the specialist knowledge and skills in working with vulnerable people. ACTCOSS notes the importance of ensuring that providers of such services have the requisite expertise and linkages in the local ACT community to maximise the prospects of success.

Changing demographics

ACTCOSS commends the Commission on its broad and succinct analysis of the demographic challenges facing Canberra. The Commission identifies a number of community services that are likely to experience growth in demand due to these changing demographics, including disability and ageing services associated with the ageing population, and childcare services that may expand with increasing reliance on formal childcare.

We also support the Commission's recommendation that settlement and resettlement incentives should be examined if additional international migration is to be a component of any skills strategy, and would extend this to the range of migrant and multicultural services that are provided in the Territory. ACTCOSS observes that international migrants frequently relocate bringing partners and children, and these individuals may have lesser employment skills as well as face language barriers and poor social connections. Increased support for ACT multicultural community services would help reduce the barriers faced by new migrants in settling in the Territory, improve social inclusion and cohesion and reduce return migration.

Further, ACTCOSS also understands that changes in workforce participation and the ageing of the population may reduce the level of volunteering in the ACT community. While an increasing proportion of older Canberrans may provide a new influx of volunteers, we understand that the bulk of volunteering hours are donated by people of working age. Any reduction in the volunteer workforce would likely increase demands on paid community sector workers, and require increased resources for organisations that rely heavily on volunteer labour to maintain their service levels.

Finally, ACTCOSS notes that page 9 of the Interim Report acknowledges that affordable housing plays a role in attracting workers to relocate, and we observe that it also assists in helping retain workers in the region.

This is true across the spectrum of occupations, and it is a particular consideration in the attraction and retention of 'key workers', who often earn modest incomes. The Commission has identified a range of industries with job vacancies that would fall into this category, and we would include community services occupations in this group. Reports from our member organisations often describe workers who remain in community services careers, but decide to pursue them interstate because of the high cost of living in the ACT, particularly as a result of high housing costs.

ACTCOSS also raises the issue of access to housing as an important element of social inclusion and individual wellbeing. ACTCOSS continues to welcome the ACT Government's Affordable Housing Strategy as a crucial response to housing affordability issues, and believes that it should continue to be implemented, monitored and expanded to ensure that the ACT can provide an affordable cost of living to all its workers and citizens.

Skills Development in the Community Sector

The Interim Report captures some of the challenges facing the community sector, highlighting in particular the difficulties involved in recruiting and retaining staff in a competitive employment market, reporting that:

The strained resources of employing agencies are not permitting pay and conditions to be made attractive to potential employees in a tight labour market where there are many well-paid opportunities.¹

ACTCOSS has previously raised these concerns with the ACT Government, and wishes to continue to work with community organisations, the Government and unions to improve the remuneration and conditions of community sector workers as a strategy to address high staff turnover and the consequential erosion of the skill base of the sector. In particular, ACTCOSS draws the Commission's attention to the Report of the Community Sector Taskforce: *Towards a Sustainable Community Services Sector Workforce in the ACT*, which contains a number of strategies to improve workforce outcomes.

Increasingly, the sector is recognising the value of qualifications in community services, and we speculate that these will become increasingly important. While in the past community organisations have relied heavily on relatively long staff tenures as a basis for building skills through on-the-job training and experience, these forms of learning are becoming less dependable in a more dynamic labour market. At the same time, both services users and funding agencies are promoting greater emphasis on identifiable and consistent skills in service delivery, further encouraging the use and recognition of formal qualifications. ACTCOSS observes that there are a number of existing initiatives in this area, including an agreement in one sub-sector to ensure all service delivery staff have minimum formal qualifications, the addition of formal training capacities in some organisations to ensure that they can provide low-cost and flexible

¹ ACT Skills Commission Interim Report, p.14.

paths for qualifications to their own and other agencies staff, and a number of co-operative partnerships that have formed between RTOs and organisations to facilitate access to training, often supported by ACT Government grants.

However, as both workers and organisations have limited financial resources, both the time and financial costs of training remain significant barriers in increasing the acquisition of qualifications among workers. Further, workers are often motivated to pursue a community service career by their own experiences of disadvantage, and require a range of pathways and learning environments to cater for their diverse needs.

ACTCOSS generally welcomes the initiatives suggested by the Commission in Strategy 2, and recognises that many of the general proposals may also have positive effects for the community sector. For instance, we concur that inadequate knowledge by employers of the range of options and incentives for training and apprenticeships has contributed to lower usage of some of these pathways in community services, and that a Skills Centre or other mechanism for improving awareness of training services would be of benefit.

Similarly, ACTCOSS recognises the potential of group training services to contribute to the development of skills and staff retention in the community sector. The basic premise of group training services, to provide certainty of employment to potential participants and reduce risks to organisations, has much to commend it. We are also aware of some of the criticisms of group training organisations, most pertinent the concern that some GTOs are seen to have preferential relationships with allied training providers. Given the diversity of community sector workers and potential trainees, it is essential that any community sector GTO is able to make maximum use of the spectrum of training options available in the ACT.

We would envisage that the most successful model for a community sector group training service would be to ensure that it was capable of matching prospective trainees with the most suitable provider, from among government providers, specialist not-for-profit and private RTOs, and community organisations who have developed a training capacity. We are aware that training providers often have different pedagogical approaches, including their ability to offer flexible learning times, their use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), the course time intensity and its assessment tools. In our view, a successful group training service must be able to take into account a trainee's individual needs, life experience and preferences for learning, and place them with both the employer organisation and the training provider that offered the greatest chance of a successful outcome.

Another recommendation of the Interim Report canvasses staff exchanges between the ACT Public Service (ACTPS) and the ACT community sector. ACTCOSS has observed the success of a number of staff exchanges in community organisations, and believe that an appropriately designed program could provide mutual benefit for both members of the public

service and community organisations through sharing of information and knowledge and understanding of the constraints and needs of different agencies. This strategy would also build upon the principles of partnership, understanding and respect articulated in the Social Compact.

If adopted, ACTCOSS would look forward to working closely with other community organisations and the ACT Government to identify any potential concerns with an exchange program and reaching consensus on the most appropriate model, helping to ensure that it operated smoothly and maximised the opportunities for mutual learning and improved relationships.

In addition, ACTCOSS suggests that the Department of Education and Training also examine its grants and subsidy programs to ensure they allow all vulnerable workers to participate. ACTCOSS has been given anecdotal reports that some programs have restrictive eligibility criteria, for example, excluding part-time or casual workers, which do not allow a number of already disadvantaged workers to participate.

Finally, we also raise the concern that community services careers, along with a number of occupations that are experiencing skill and worker shortages, are often not rated highly by young people determining the direction of their future working life. There may be some benefit in increasing awareness of the benefits and wellbeing that can be derived from a career in community service, particularly amongst young people, as part of a strategy to attract new workers to the sector.

Improving Retention in the Community Sector

Again, we note that many of the recommendations in Strategy 3 also have application in the community sector. For example, the provision of paid maternity leave could boost retention of community sector workers, particularly in an industry in which 85% of staff are female. ACTCOSS is aware that a few organisations provide this benefit, but most of the workforce is largely unable to access these benefits. ACTCOSS would encourage the ACT Government to work with the sector to examine strategies for improving access to paid maternity leave.

Similarly, for some time the ACTCOSS, other community organisations and the Australian Services Union have been advocating for a statutory portable long-service leave scheme for the ACT community sector. Similar schemes are in operation in the cleaning and construction industries, and have improved workers access to this entitlement. This initiative formed one recommendation from the Community Sector Taskforce, and we understand the ACT Government is currently considering this option.

ACTCOSS would also point out that the community sector has also been innovative in adopting strategies and working conditions to improve staff retention, particularly in an environment where they cannot compete on remuneration with other industries. ACTCOSS observes that community organisation are often leaders in the provision of flexible working

conditions and the use of part-time employees, and other industries could learn from the sector's experience.