



Submission on the draft Tasmanian Adult Learning Strategy

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1. Background

Tasmanian carer action plan

2. Introduction

Tasmania was the last state to adopt a Carers Policy and Carers Tasmania's role as a peak body is relatively new. As a state we are still developing our carer awareness and consideration of carers in the development of policy. The Tasmanian Adult Learning Strategy 2019 – 2022 is one such example, as Carers Tasmania had to ask to be a part of the key stakeholder consultation.

We were sincerely welcomed when we approached the Office of State Growth, suggesting this was an oversight, and further carer awareness is needed so carers are routinely considered in the work of Government.

Acknowledge the impact of caring on education and employment

Carers access to work and study is important enough that it is the seventh principle of the Tasmanian Carer Policy 2016: *Carers are to be supported to enjoy optimum health, social and economic wellbeing, and access to educational and employment opportunities*¹.

Caring impacts on education outcomes for young carers. By year nine we know that boys who spend two or more hours per day caring were the equivalent of 1.9 years behind their peers in Year NAPLAN Reading. Girls caring for two hours or more per day were 1.6 years behind in NAPLAN Reading. Both boys and girls in Year 9 caring for two or more hours per day were approximately fifteen months behind their peers in NAPLAN Numeracy². Unless more is done to identify and support young carers in schools, the cohort will continue being less likely to complete high school and pushed further to the fringe of the Tasmanian community.

We know young carers are less likely to have completed year 12 or equivalent than their peers, and nationally, over 60% of primary carers aged 15 – 25 are not studying³. Less formal adult learning opportunities may provide the flexibility, crucial to combining caring and study for the young carer cohort.

Many carers have been unable to maintain their employment and may require retraining in another field that fits in with their caring responsibilities. Women are more likely to give up full-time employment to meet the increasing demands of their caring role, whilst men are more likely to move from full to part-time employment. Obviously, women are often out of the workforce longer and become substantially more de-skilled than male carers.

Use carers as trainers – their life experience is a resource

Carers develop a range of skills during their time out of the workforce. These skills could be assessed and recognised as prior learning and form part of the pathway into the disability or aged care sectors, where they could be employed as support workers, peer workers, or as trainers.

¹ Department of Premier and Cabinet Communities Sport and Recreation, 2016: Tasmanian Carer Policy 2016

² Australian Institute of Family Studies (2017) Longitudinal Study of Australian Children 2016 Annual Statistical Report.

³ Students Representative Council Disabilities and Carers Collective, 2016, Access and Inclusion: Carers in Higher Education, p.3

Carers Tasmania is therefore particularly invested in making comment on this draft Adult Learning Strategy to provide a carer perspective.

3. Definition of Adult Learning

Every component of adult learning is relevant to carers:

- Building literacy, numeracy – important in filling gaps in learning due to caring responsibilities
- Digital literacy – these skills are increasingly required by carers to navigate online service systems such as the NDIS portal, My Aged Care, and My Gov. These can be of particular challenge to older Tasmanians, many of whom still prefer written text
- Gaining employment skills and learning behaviours relevant to the workplace – relevant when re-entering the workforce after caring for someone. A carer may lose all confidence in navigating employment, including job seeking, resume preparation and job interview skills
- Informal peer-led learning – carers have significant skills to share with peers, including self-care strategies, knowledge relevant to the type of care they have been providing and can help each other develop confidence and skills to navigate systems, and to advocate and influence change
- Gaining a formal qualification, or higher education qualification – carers may want and need to re-engage with education if their circumstances change.
- Reskilling for a promotion – carers may be underemployed due to caring responsibilities and may need support to develop their skills further if circumstances change
- Learning to gain knowledge, understanding, for life skills, sport, recreation and leisure, including through community education – community involvement can provide respite, reduce isolation and be a key factor in improving and maintaining wellbeing, often compromised by the caring role.

Specifically acknowledge carers within the strategy

Carers Tasmania believes carers should be included as a population group facing significant disadvantage alongside others mentioned in the draft strategy. This is the least we can do for a group who have such an obvious need that is already acknowledged in Tasmanian Carer Policy 2016.

Further reasons for this approach are that carers exist within the other population groups mentioned: migrants and those with little English, and Aboriginal Tasmanians.

Carers experience a range of barriers to education, including financial hardship, access to respite, and the impact of caring on mental health and wellbeing⁴. Such barriers indicate carers may require specific acknowledgement and specific strategies to ensure their access to adult education is equitable.

Lifelong approach to identification in education

Carers Tasmania has been advocating for the routine inclusion of a question regarding caring in primary and secondary enrolment for some time. This would result in young carers being identified and provided with the flexibility and support they need. This principle could also be used in adult education, potentially increasing retention and outcomes for adult students with caring responsibilities.

⁴ Australian Unity 2015: What Makes Us Happy? – Fifteen Years of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index

4. Draft Tasmanian Adult Learning Strategy Goals

Goal 1: A co-ordinated approach to adult learning

We recommend engaging with carers in the provision of programs and services and offer them recognition of prior learning for the work they do.

Carers Tasmania agrees there is significant benefit in providers engaging with local communities, industry and business to design programs and services.

Now a connection between State Growth and Carers Tasmania has been made, it is our desire to assist by providing advice or assisting the Department to engage directly with carers to determine their needs. Linking Carers Tasmania to the Adult Learning Reference Group proposed in this strategy may be helpful.

This ongoing relationship could enable Adult Education to continually consider how carers' skills might fit within current trends, gaps and opportunities in industry and business. Carers could be provided with recognition of prior learning for skills they have developed and fast tracked with appropriate training and linked with vacancies to meet some of these needs.

Carers Tasmania identifies value in considering carers as potential workers in the Vocational Education and Training Sector. Certainly, in areas of aged care and disability, carers hold specific expertise and knowledge and may be an untapped cohort, well suited to working part time in order to combine caring and work.

Of course, carers are not all interested or naturally inclined to work in these areas, in which case, they need multi-modal, regionally located flexible options to facilitate avenues to employment in areas where there are gaps in the market. Access programs enabling the sampling of a variety of potential training options would benefit carers and other disadvantaged population groups.

Don't make an online Adult Learning Portal the only option

Carers Tasmania can see the merit in an online Adult Learning Portal. Information regarding flexible study options and supports could be included on the Portal. This may be of particular use to young people in caring roles, or those who are combining caring with part time or full-time work and can navigate technology. However, we are aware Tasmania's digital inclusion is the second lowest of any state or territory in Australia⁵, and that internet access is compromised in rural and remote areas.

Include mechanisms for carer identification and information

This increases the importance of a triaging and referral service. This would benefit carers returning to education who need support to navigate their return to study. The inclusion of a conversation regarding flexibility and supports could be a part of this service. If barriers to education were identified referrals could be made to relevant organisations e.g. referral to Carers Tasmania to provide advice about respite.

Goal 2: Learning for work

Define vulnerable

While the importance of supporting vulnerable Tasmanians to engage in work and training to enter the workforce by learning work relevant skills is noted in the strategy, there is no clear definition of what constitutes a "vulnerable Tasmanian".

⁵ Roy Morgan – RMIT University (2018) Measuring Australia's Digital Divide

A definition of what it means to be vulnerable in the context of learning could be included in the glossary. Many Tasmanians who are “vulnerable or who have low education levels” may struggle to self-direct and navigate in self-directed learning offsite with communication via email or a remote tutor.

Again, digital literacy is likely to be an issue for this co-hort. Face-to-face learning will often be the best option for many vulnerable Tasmanians as it allows for discussion, immediate assistance and facilitates socialisation. This minimises the risk of failure or inability to complete course work.

Reduce carer underemployment – prioritise them to upskill

The draft strategy acknowledges that adult skill set needs are not constant, and this poses a particular challenge for carers needing time away from the workforce, or who are time poor due to combining caring and part time or full-time work. Short courses provide carers access to upskill and improve their employability.

Make carers a priority group in services provided in the Skills Fund Program

Given the contribution carers make to the Tasmanian community and the possibility they may be able to engage in education and work that is flexible, our economy may benefit from prioritising carers in the Skills Fund program, particularly when the likely skills of carers match the areas of skills demand. Access to subsidised and accredited training would be an imperative part of this process.

Prioritise carers returning to the workforce in 1:1 support

Carers Tasmania supports the need for a program to provide one-on-one support and access to career advice and would like to see carers as a priority group. Such a service would need to understand the key issues and challenges facing carers trying to maintain employment, such as the need for replacement care, the need for carer leave, the need for workplaces to be carer aware and provide flexibility.

Goal 3: Learning for Life – skills for caring

Provide education opportunities relevant to carers and make it accessible

Carers Tasmania endorses the priority on learning for life. The provision of flexible learning programs for digital literacy will be of particular use to carers navigating aged care and disability systems and online portals such as MyGov and My Health Record.

Make education options accessible and non-threatening

Carers Tasmania encourages government to consider additional strategies to the Tasmanian Training Awards to engage Tasmanians in learning. Carers currently considering returning to work or study are unlikely to see the Tasmanian Training Awards as relevant to them. Making learning accessible and unthreatening through their provision on local communities, achievable with short courses, fun and engaging in style, where success is built into the experience may be important factors in a sense of success.

Rename Second Chance Learners

While there is certainly merit in the concept of a service guide for adults navigating a new learning pathway, Carers Tasmania would like to recommend there be consideration given to an alternative title for this project. This title may suggest the first time of learning was a failure, and also does not acknowledge learning as lifelong.

Partner with us in research and programs relevant to carers

Carers Tasmania is supportive of the benefits of researching motivations and outcomes for those engaging in adult learning and would be happy to partner on research regarding carers.

The value of Adult Learning Ambassadors is also supported, particularly in an organisation like Carers Tasmania, who would very much like to employ carers and assist them to return to the workforce and is supportive of peer workers.

5. Conclusion

Carers Tasmania hopes the Tasmanian Government considers the need for carers to be acknowledged as a population with specific needs and includes them as a priority within the Strategy.

Now that there is engagement with Carers Tasmania, this relationship can be further developed, to look more closely at ways of meeting the needs of this population. With the right approach, namely flexibility and support, informal carers could return to education and potentially the workforce and make significant contribution to the diversity and productivity of our state.