

## **Workforce Futures: towards an Australian Workforce Development Strategy**

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) is the peak council of the community service and welfare sector. Established in 1956, ACOSS is the national voice for the needs of people affected by poverty and inequality. The ACOSS vision is for a fair, inclusive and sustainable Australia where all individuals and communities have the resources they need to participate in and benefit from social and economic life. Our aims are to reduce poverty and inequality by developing and promoting socially, economically and environmentally responsible public policy and action by government, community and business while supporting non-government organisations which provide assistance to vulnerable Australians.

ACOSS welcomed the opportunity to comment on the discussion papers prepared by Skills Australia in relation to the Australian Workforce Development Strategy; and to participate in the consultation forum in Sydney on 5 November 2009. Workforce development and sustainability are significant issues facing the social service sector, particularly in the not-for-profit arena where currently high levels of pay inequity are a significant barrier to workforce sustainability. As such ACOSS was extremely interested to participate in this consultation process.

While recognising that Skills Australia is an agency with a mandate specifically focused on skills, ACOSS believes it vital that any consideration of workforce futures engages with the social policy context in which organisations and individuals work.

In the Skills Australia discussion papers, the health and social service sectors are noted as one of the current and continuing greatest employers. In that sector, social policy has been one of the biggest drivers of poor sustainability amongst the workforce, particularly in the not-for-profit sector. Currently we are seeing high levels of staff turnover and unidirectional movement from the not-for-profit sector to the higher-paying government and profit-making sectors. As a sector where significantly more than 50% of the workforce is aged over 50 years, our sector is particularly vulnerable to the consequences of an ageing workforce. In addition, many of those working in the sector represent the working poor. Thus, upon their retirement, they will be lost from the social service workforce and are likely to become clients of those services, thereby increasing the demand upon them.

While workforce planning has been underway in the health sector for many years now, we are yet to see similar planning take place across the social service sector. As a result, there is a looming crisis in the workforce of social services and in the sector's capacity to meet the needs of people on low incomes and living in disadvantaged communities.



## Australian Council of Social Service

Social policy has been a driver for poor sustainability in other areas of social services also. For instance, government has outsourced many essential services to the not-for-profit community sector as a cost-cutting measure. As a result, government contracts with the sector have continually underpaid for the cost of services and salaries; and for the capacity of organisations to offer career support and development to their staff or to develop measurement and other innovative processes.

In the not-for-profit social service sector, the future of the workforce is underpinned by matters of social policy as much as it is by the availability and location of specific skill sets. ACOSS regards it as vital that workforce develop strategies take account of the policy contexts in which sectors operate, particularly in relation to the not-for-profit sector. Ignoring this context will render any attempt to address the question of workforce futures as piecemeal and inadequate.

For further information or to discuss this submission, please contact:  
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