

Submission to the Productivity Commission

Inquiry: Building a Skilled and Adaptable Workforce (Pillar 2)

Executive Summary

Australia cannot compete on scale. Our strength lies in design — weaving education, workplaces, training, and regulation into a seamless whole that enables every stage of life to contribute.

Adaptability is not found; it is built. Productivity becomes sustainable when every contribution is recognised and reinvested, from young people entering the workforce to older Australians who continue to share skills and wisdom.

Government itself, as the country's largest employer, has the depth, reach, and jurisdiction to trial the Commission's recommendations urgently and transparently. By harnessing the best minds and modern tools, it can model adaptability at scale and diffuse knowledge into private industry more effectively than piecemeal initiatives.

Introduction — A Nation of Constraints

Australia is a nation of constraints. We cannot compete with countries of hundreds of millions on labour supply. Our strength must come from design.

Just as farmers once invented tools and workflows to stretch limited hands, today we must design:

- Education systems.
- Workplaces.
- Training and regulation.

These cannot stand as separate silos. They must form a seamless whole, so individuals can move fluidly between them as their lives and interests evolve. The same applies to government itself: when federal, state, and local institutions collaborate across their jurisdictions, the result is no waste and no boundaries — only a shared platform that multiplies value.

Adaptability is not found. It is built. And when designed well, it is what makes productivity sustainable in a small nation: drawing the best from every stage of life, every skillset, every contribution.

Foundations of Adaptability

Foundational skills in schools matter, but adaptability is more than literacy and numeracy. It is curiosity, confidence, and the ability to draw on varied experiences.

In my business, staff brought backgrounds as machinists, nurses, administrators, and artists. Together, this eclectic mix built resilience.

When contributions are not recognised across the arc of life, they slip away before being reinvested — like leaks in a pipeline. Productivity suffers when human potential is wasted.

Policy should:

- Foster curiosity and confidence alongside core skills.
- Give students exposure to enterprise and problem-solving early.
- Value diverse backgrounds as a strength, not a barrier.

Life-long Means Life-long

Lifelong learning must mean what it says: from the early teens to the later decades of life.

- Youth: safe, structured, and paid exposure to workplaces, similar to music or sport training.
- Older Australians: contributions can remain strong if tasks are designed around strengths.

I have worked with staff in their 60s, 70s, and 80s who were highly effective.

Policy should:

- Create early, flexible entry points for teenagers.
- Design pathways that keep older workers engaged, whether in paid roles, mentoring, or volunteering.

Regional and SME Realities

Most Australians work in small and medium enterprises, many in regional areas. Training programs often overlook this reality.

- Apprenticeships take years, but SMEs face immediate demands.
- Formal training incentives are often too complex for small businesses to use.

Policy should:

- Support shorter trial pathways and immersion programs.
- Encourage enterprise-based academies where learning and work combine.
- Make incentives simpler and more accessible for SMEs.

Harnessing Older Australians

Older Australians are often told to retire or step aside, yet many want to keep contributing. Their accumulated wisdom is peak human capital.

Policy should:

- Recognise later-life contribution as valuable, not marginal.
- Create structured mentoring and flexible roles for older workers.
- Value volunteering as part of national productivity.

Government as a Testbed for Adaptability

Government is the country's largest employer, spanning nearly every occupation. Its jurisdiction is deep and wide — federal, state, and local levels, with reach into health, education, infrastructure, environment, and administration. This breadth gives government both the expertise and coordination capacity to disperse new skills and practices rapidly across the nation.

This scale makes government uniquely placed to act as a testbed for adaptability. Because it already has safeguards, diversity, and deep policy knowledge, it can trial many of the Commission's recommendations more urgently and transparently than private enterprise. By harnessing the best minds and the best automated technologies, government can respond to priorities swiftly and show how adaptability works in practice.

Private enterprise and lobby groups often ask for more freedoms, while government is layered with more regulation to police standards. Some reverse engineering may be required: government could demonstrate adaptability at scale first, then release proven skills, knowledge, and frameworks into industry.

In doing so, diffusion would not be left to 'the biggest and strongest take all.' Instead, micro-enterprises as well as large firms could access data, training, and just-in-time adjustments. Adaptability becomes a shared capability across the whole economy, not a prize captured by a few.

Private enterprise may question this approach. But government is already the guardian of regulation and standards — and so it must also strive to be the ideal employer. This is the moment to test adaptability with the most efficiency and timeliness possible, free from the constraints of private enterprise, which cannot diffuse knowledge and practices as widely or as benevolently.

Teaching Beyond Schools

Learning happens everywhere, not just in classrooms. Some schools are already experimenting with distance learning, flexible schedules, and self-directed projects. Workplaces do the same when they train staff and pass on culture.

Adaptability depends on recognising the whole human, not fragmenting people into only what is easiest to measure. True productivity comes from keeping individuals alive in their lifetime of contribution.

Policy should:

- Recognise every workplace as a teaching ecosystem.
- Encourage partnerships between schools, TAFEs, and enterprises.
- Support safe, mentored pathways for young people within workplaces.
- Credit workplace learning toward formal qualifications.

Regulation and Pathways

Complex licensing and fragmented recognition slow adaptability.

Policy should:

- Streamline licensing across states.
- Make credit transfer truly national.
- Simplify recognition of prior learning.
- Review occupational regulations with sunset clauses to ensure relevance.

Conclusion — Designing for Adaptability

Australia cannot compete on scale. Our edge is ingenuity.

Adaptability must be cultivated across life:

- From early exposure for youth.
- To pathways for older Australians.
- From SME realities.
- To government leadership as a testbed.

In a country of constraints, adaptability is our resilience — and resilience is our greatest competitive advantage. This is the foundation of sustainable productivity.

And it leaves us with a simple but essential question: what are we building all this for? If productivity is to matter, it must serve human dignity, peace, and stability — not just output for its own sake.