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# Developing a Community Housing Education & Training System

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National Community Housing Forum

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## 1. Introduction

The National Community Housing Competency Standards, and the development of education and training systems in most states, are crucial to continuous quality improvement in the community housing sector. Continuous quality improvement will support community housing through periods of growth and change, both of which are on the horizon.

However, education and training opportunities will only be taken up if there is also support for a culture of learners who seek out and meet learning opportunities and new challenges.

In July this year the National Community Housing Forum and the Community Housing Federation of Australia jointly convened a seminar to discuss:

- education and training developments across the community housing sector;
- the emerging training agendas;
- the development of a learning culture in the sector; and
- potential for national collaboration.

The seminar was attended by a cross section of people representing community housing peaks, government administrators, training bodies and education authorities (see Appendix A).

This report is based on the seminar discussions and is for wide use and distribution.

NCHF would like to thank the Seminar Working Group for their valuable input: Jenn Crowe (NSW Federation of Housing Associations), Yolie Entsch (Queensland Community Housing Coalition) and Paul Stephenson (Community Housing Council of South Australia).

Thank you also to the Queensland Community Housing Coalition for providing the venue and catering.

## 2. The State of Play

### 2.1 Context

The community housing sector is diverse. Organisations vary in terms of their management structure, funding arrangements, size, tenant group, location and the number of paid staff and volunteers.<sup>1</sup> This diversity enables the sector to be responsive to a range of housing needs. It also means there is a variety of education and training requirements.

The emerging training needs of the sector are covered in more detail in Section 3 however, it is worth noting here that the nature of the work in the community housing sector is changing. Indeed, demand for community services on the whole is on the increase and client needs are becoming more complex.

There are uncertainties over the future policy and funding arrangements for community housing. The latest Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) has provided secure, if diminishing, funds until 2003. However, there is uncertainty about the future of Special Purpose Payments under A New Tax System (ANTS) introduced in July 2000. Under this regime, states and territories receive GST revenue in which case the Commonwealth may re-consider how grants are administered.

Given this scenario, it is possible that the traditional institutional barriers within the social housing system may change. The relationships with public, Indigenous and affordable housing become more important for community housing, from both a strategic and a training perspective. The development of a common education and learning framework will be an important way of achieving the goals of the social housing system.

### 2.2 What education and training is available?

There are a number of organisations/institutions providing training in the social housing system. These include state peak bodies, Registered Training Organisations (which also includes peak bodies in some states), TAFES and universities. Some community housing peak bodies also deliver their training to SAAP services and Indigenous housing organisations. Public housing authorities and Indigenous housing bodies are developing training systems for their own staff.

There is a range of non-accredited training (delivered mostly by peak bodies); accredited, vocational training; and housing qualifications in the tertiary education sector. In some cases the articulation between these levels is structured (for instance, the CIT Certificate IV in Social Housing articulates with the Diploma in Housing Studies and other higher degrees at the University of Western Sydney) and in other cases the systems have developed independently.

At this stage, the development of education and training systems is uneven across the country, despite the range of providers. For instance, there is no accredited community housing management training available in Western Australia, Tasmania or the Northern Territory (excepting Indigenous housing). Similarly, the smaller states and territories have little housing training infrastructure and there are no mechanisms to access training in neighbouring jurisdictions.

Again, it is crucial that training systems develop coherently across social housing and across the country to achieve the common goals of the system.

### 2.3 Accredited, vocational training

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<sup>1</sup> See the report *Mapping Community Housing in Australia*, NCHF, January 2000

The Community Services & Health Training Package frames accredited, vocational education in the community services industry. The national Industry Training Advisory Body (ITAB) overseeing the package is Community Service & Health Training Australia (CSHTA). There are also state- and territory-based ITABS for community services and health.

However, training packages overseen by a variety of other ITABS (there are twenty three in total) are relevant to community housing particularly, property services. There are also common competencies and a number of these are incorporated into the community housing competencies.

One of the aims of the new training system is to 'train to the gaps': that is, recognising existing competencies and providing training that meets the current needs of the trainees. The structure of TAFES makes it difficult for them conduct assessments prior to training. In addition, there are financial pressures associated with doing assessments of prior learning as only 30% of the funding dollar is received compared to training delivery. Innovation in assessment is likely to be an important issue for training bodies in the future. Innovation in the terminology used will also be important from the point of view of consumers. Most seminar participants agreed that 'recognition' is a preferable term to assessment.

A review of CSHTP is about to commence and will continue over the next year until July 2001. The review is funded by Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and will be undertaken by the national ITAB, CSHTA. The review provides an opportunity for the community housing sector to have specific input into the package so that it will reflect the future needs of the system. It is also an opportunity to up-date the operating environment which can also be built into the revised package. A sub-committee of the ITAB Board will oversee the review and will be advised by reference groups with specific expertise.

There is also a national ANTA funded project to develop assessment tools for the CSHTP.

#### 2.4 Skills, training and education

One debate that emerges from an overview of available training is the relationship, or nature of the continuum, between concrete skills development and the attainment of qualifications. Some community housing peak bodies say they have, in effect, two client groups: paid or unpaid workers who need skills (particularly an issue for tenant volunteers) and paid or unpaid workers who are looking for qualifications to build a career.

For some individuals, and organisations, 'knowing how to do stuff' is all that is required of a training system. It is the operational know-how necessary to run an accountable organisation. Some of this training can be provided by peak, resourcing bodies or can be accessed through other generic training (though it is not always clear where). Training with a skills development focus can also provide the specificity an individual or organisation needs.

The VET system has been designed to deliver both skills and recognised qualifications. Tertiary education providers are also focussed on providing individuals with a recognised qualification that will be a career building block with a strong emphasis on portability, a critical contextualisation of skills and multiple entry and exit points in regards to the sector.

Ideally, an effective education and training system will incorporate a range of skills development training and higher education options. The challenge is to integrate and deliver the range of education and training options that are available to meet the needs of all paid and unpaid workers in the sector.

#### 2.5 A Professional Association?

The question of whether an overarching framework would assist with the development of education and training raises the issue of a 'Professional Association'. NCHF conducted a national study in 1999 to assess the feasibility of establishing an Australasian Social Housing Professional Association and to consider how it would be structured.<sup>2</sup>

There was strong support for a body that would be a forum for workers across all parts of social housing; would support individual practice and career development; and be an advocate from the point of view of practitioners. It was also considered an important element of building an 'industry' or a 'profession' for social housing workers and as such provide recognition and mobility both within Australia and internationally.

A Steering Committee of practitioners is now working towards the establishment of an association.

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<sup>2</sup> *Investigation of the Opportunity to Establish a Social Housing Professional Association in Australia*, Final Report, NCHF, November 1999

### 3. Emerging Training Agendas

The changes occurring in the community housing environment (at a policy and funding level and the nature of demand) are likely to impact on the future skills and resources that are needed in the system.

#### 3.1 The skills and resources in the sector – here, now

A number of comments can be made about the skills and resources that exist here and now in the sector. It is clear that industry-specific, operational skills exist. Further, the ‘how-to’ training is available, though this does vary across jurisdictions. There is also an array of learning materials that support operational level expertise for instance, good practice guides, information kits, management hotlines and publications (though little of it is shared or consolidated across jurisdictions).

Some states have additional infrastructure to support the development of skills including industry-based RTOs or strategies and networks for social housing skills development (this is particularly the case in Queensland).

#### 3.2 The skills and resources needed in the sector – five years on

There are number of general skills that will become increasingly important over the next five years or so. As noted in section 2.1 the environment in which community housing operates could change with the end of this CSHA in 2003. Understanding the political and policy pressures that impact on community housing and how to best deal with them will be increasingly significant for the sector. This scenario also flags the importance of managing for change and growth in community housing and building flexibility both into the system and the way that training is developed and delivered.

Another emerging challenge for community housing providers is the increasing tension between running an enterprise (in terms required by funders, whether public or private) and maintaining the community focus and social justice perspective that are defining characteristics of the sector.

A number of community housing organisations are experiencing growth (generally as part of a government strategy, but for some organisations as a result of privately financed initiatives) which can create these tensions. Their experience in successfully managing growth and change needs to be shared, as do the lessons they have to offer. Overseas experiences can also be instructive. For instance, housing associations in the UK have grown rapidly over the past decade and offer cautions for how to best manage the experience.

Following on from these considerations, there are a number of priority areas for training in the community housing system over the next five years. They are:

- governance for Boards of Directors and executive level management
- high level financial and business management
- asset management (that could increasingly include privately funded stock)
- quality management (that is, managing processes such as standards and accreditation)
- building strategic partnerships and alliances
- developing linkages with support services and managing tenants’ housing transitions
- IT and information systems (there is the related issue of the lack of consistent or integrated IT infrastructure across the community housing system)

State housing authorities, peak bodies, RTOs and the national and state/territory ITABS, must consider these new directions for community housing when developing training

policies and packages.

### 3.3 The systems needed over the next five years

Systems will need to be in place to support these evolving training needs. Firstly, continuing to build flexibility into the training system will enable it to be responsive to the changing demands and pressures in community housing and indeed the whole community services industry. Coupled with this notion of flexibility is the need for a variety of delivery modes such as distance education and the expanded use of information technology.

Another key structural initiative is to consolidate the links between the elements of the social housing industry that is, community, public and Indigenous housing. This will increase the size of the market and the resources available. Improved linkages will also enable exchange and mobility between the sectors. This in turn will be build the sense of an industry and the career prospects available. Governments and peak bodies have a key role in understanding and fostering these links in the social housing system.

An increased focus on professional development is likely to occur in the next five years or so, which may include the establishment of a Professional Association as discussed already.

When considering the training structures that will be required over the next five years to support the increasingly challenging community housing task, the notion of a national framework is again pertinent. There are questions about whether such a framework exists (the CSHTP), whether it is possible (given the different legislative and funding arrangements in each state, not to mention geography and demographics), and who would take responsibility. This paper will return to the issue of national collaboration in section 5 'Finding a collaborative approach'.

#### 4. The development of a 'learning culture'

Given an environment of change, and the growing challenges faced by community housing organisations, what does the notion of a learning culture mean and how will it be useful?

##### 4.1 What is a learning culture?

The National Marketing Strategy for Skills and Lifelong Learning states that lifelong learning 'is about achieving personal competence, economic resilience and social inclusion... the interdependence of all three outcomes [is] the basis for a fair and open society that can survive and grow in the conditions of the new economy.' (Literature Review, 1999) In other words, learning enables individuals and organisations to survive and grow, adapt to change and meet new challenges.

The paper prepared for the seminar, *Learning Culture – what do we mean*, identifies some of the characteristics of both individuals and organisations in a learning culture. These characteristics overlap and there is mutual benefit for the individual and the organisation.

Individuals in a learning culture tend to:

- seek learning opportunities
- inquire and ask questions
- reflect on experience and learn from this process
- be self-motivated
- cope better with change
- see mistakes as a source of learning
- know how to identify the skills, knowledge and attributes their organisation needs

Some of the characteristics of an organisation that has a learning culture are:

- committed workers (who are its best asset)
- shared values and vision
- feedback is encouraged and support is given
- ideas are freely exchanged and there is trust and openness in communication
- conflict is managed and difference contributes to the development of the organisation
- adaptable to change
- willing to take risks and meet challenges

Learning can take place in a variety of environments that include formal education and training modes through to the organisational culture (for instance, the scope for feedback or debriefing). There are also levels of learning from skills development through to formal education qualifications and a more 'esoteric' reflection and questioning. A learning culture, sector-wide, would incorporate learning across this spectrum.

There are also varying levels of interest amongst workers for learning and their respective needs and expectations need to be catered for. Generally speaking, these groups can be characterised as people who *love to learn*; people who are *purposeful learners*; people who are focussed on the required *skills learning*; and *blockers* or people who actively resist learning.

##### 4.2 What issues does this raise for community housing?

Given the diversity of the business in community housing, and the lack of systematic focus on this issue, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which a learning culture exists in the sectors. There are numerous examples of individuals and organisations taking up new opportunities to learn for instance, Indigenous housing organisations in Queensland have recently responded very positively to a new, state-wide training program.

Managing change is a powerful driver for the development of a learning culture. As has been argued, there is considerable potential change in the community housing environment and in terms of the requirements of organisations and workers. For example, there are growing demands for demonstrations of professionalism and viability in the community housing sector. A learning culture, as described above, can assist organisations to meet this challenge.

It is interesting to note that the ‘the most unsettling feature of lifelong learning is the organisational and institutional change it demands.’ (National Marketing Strategy for Skills and Lifelong Learning, Literature Review, 1999).

A learning culture both within the sector and individual organisations also facilitates continuous quality improvement, which has been a priority of peak bodies and numerous providers for some time.

There is a range of resources, education and training opportunities available across the sector, which indicates an appetite for learning and the development of systems and structures to facilitate learning. A common misapprehension is that learning is equivalent to the number of days spent in training. However, learning can occur in a range of environments, which is supported by flexible delivery arrangements and materials.

An organisational and individual commitment to a learning culture will be more likely if there is an appreciation of its value and relevance. The value from a management perspective is, at least, an increasingly robust and flexible organisation and continuous quality improvement. For individuals, it provides an environment where they are valued and where there is support and opportunities.

On more practical level, the development to a learning culture will also be dependent on a commitment of organisational time and resources. Funding bodies and management committees who appreciate the value of learning as an investment will have workers who are able to do their job better, adapt to change and meet challenges. The organisation also has to take on the challenge of developing a culture with the characteristics outlined in section 4.1. This may also mean looking at the internal dynamics of the organisation through to having a designated training budget

On a sector level it will be important to develop an understanding of the relationship between a ‘learning culture’ and ‘good practice’. There is a growing body of good practice material in the sector (including good practice units, good practice guides and the 1999 national Expo of best practice), which encourage an active approach to continuous quality improvement. However, the development of a learning culture may not be an explicit objective of these materials.

There are creative ways in which the sector can support learning across organisations and across community, public and Indigenous housing. Mentoring, peer support networking and partnerships to share expertise can all be formalised to promote a learning culture. In fact, ‘the practical implications of a commitment to lifelong learning demand a network of organisations and institutions capable of linking together intelligently to give people access and opportunity for learning when and where they need it.’ (National Marketing Strategy for Skills and Lifelong Learning, Literature Review, 1999).

Therefore, it will be important to build the links between organisations, and particularly across jurisdictions. Again governments, particularly state housing authorities, and peak bodies have a significant role to play in achieving these linkages.

On a national level, there needs to be a concerted effort to keep learning, education and training onto the agenda of governments, funding bodies and policy makers. This could potentially be part of a campaign to promote the value of learning within the sector. It

would need to incorporate a community development approach coupled with a marketing strategy to capture the attention of both providers and government.

The campaign would also need a consistent and a simple message (given that the combined jargons of community housing and the training industry can be potentially daunting) and provide clear reasons for developing and valuing a learning culture. There needs to be more discussion about who would take the lead role.

## 5. Finding a collaborative approach

Collaboration – across all parts of the social housing system and across the country – can provide a stronger base for the development of learning, education and training. This in turn will contribute to a workforce (paid and unpaid), organisations and a social housing system that is adaptable to change and ready for new challenges. Importantly, there are also benefits for individuals who want to develop their qualifications and career opportunities within the industry.

Collaboration across community, public and Indigenous housing has a number of advantages. These include:

- a stronger national voice for social housing education and training needs;
- a stronger national voice on industry issues;
- increased portability and mobility for workers across the social housing system; and
- efficiencies and improved purchasing power that flow on from shared resources.

Collaboration requires the commitment of key decision makers in the social housing system. These include the Community Housing Federation of Australia and state peak bodies; state government administrators and policy makers; and the education and training industry. These players have the influence to foster collaboration at a systemic level. More discussion is required about who will take a lead role however, it is crucial that all these players are involved.

Collaboration can also continue informally particularly, information sharing. Continuing to meet and discuss the issues in seminars, forums or national meetings is productive (and given the expense involved in holding these types of events they could be held in parallel with conferences or other national gatherings). As discussed earlier, networks of individuals and organisations linking together to provide access and opportunity for learning is a key feature of a learning culture. There is also scope for government and peak bodies to share resources more consistently across the sector and across jurisdictions.

Seminar participants agreed to a number of specific proposals to begin the process of national collaboration. They are:

- that a small working group be convened to discuss national collaboration and how the process can be resourced;
- that the community housing sector have structured input into the review of the Community Services and Health Training Package to ensure it reflects the requirements of the social housing sector; and
- that a comprehensive mapping of available education, training and learning materials is undertaken to provide a key tool for future planning and collaboration.

The National Community Housing Forum and Community Housing Federation of Australia will work together in the latter half of 2000 to pursue these immediate recommendations.

Appendix A – Developing a Community Housing Education and Training System  
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7<sup>th</sup> July 2000, Brisbane

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