

The Role of
**ADULT &
COMMUNITY
EDUCATION
IN REGIONAL
& RURAL
AUSTRALIA**



**Adult
Learning
Australia**

Australians' experiences of education and training as well as their outcomes are very much a function of where they live. This paper concentrates on the different (often more limited) opportunities for learning in remote, rural and regional Australia as compared to urban locations mainly in capital cities. As a result of more limited opportunities in often less formally educated, non-metropolitan Australia, the outcomes from education by sector are also very different. This paper suggests that Adult and Community Education (ACE) is critically important in addressing access and equity beyond the metropolis in Australia.



Young people and adults outside the major cities are around half as likely to finish high school or to attend university as their urban contemporaries but they are more likely to complete a VET (vocational education and training) qualification (NRHA & ACOSS 2013 p. 17). Schools play a unique and significant role in small communities and community partnerships are typically more central to their activities (NCS 2012, p. 27).

Adult and Community Education (ACE) also plays a particular role in regional and rural Australia. In New South Wales (NSW), Victoria, and South Australia (SA), delivery of Adult and Community Education programs is disproportionately higher in regional and rural communities, relative to their capital and major cities. In many small rural communities in these states, ACE organisations are the only 'on the ground' providers of post compulsory education. In other states, such as Queensland and Western Australia, volunteer and community based organisations provide adult literacy and other informal adult education services.

Not-for-profit ACE organisations are significant contributors to the economies of regional and rural communities. They exist in towns with smaller populations that can't sustain a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or university campus with a wide scope of delivery and where the education market is too small to attract private for-profit operators. They supplement the work of a TAFE or university in other communities.

ACE organisations in rural and regional communities tend to offer a broad range of programs and services alone or in partnership with other agencies. They provide access to post compulsory education and lifelong learning. Services commonly include childcare, job services, emergency relief and community interest groups. An increasing number operate social enterprises such as coffee shops, recycling services and second hand clothing stores.



What is ACE?

ACE is defined differently in each state and territory of Australia. In some states, it refers to a particular sector of not-for-profit, locally focused providers who deliver non-formal learning programs alongside accredited VET programs; for example, Community Colleges, Neighbourhood Houses and Community Learning Centres. In other states, it refers to non-formal programs irrespective of the sector delivering them and may include non-formal programs taught by TAFE and private training companies.

The 2008 Ministerial Declaration on ACE acknowledged this broad definition of ACE but emphasised the success of the not-for-profit ACE sector in engaging people who are

“... poor, have disabilities, have low levels of literacy and numeracy, are from non-English speaking backgrounds, are geographically and socially isolated, and Indigenous Australians, especially for people from socially excluded or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds”

(MCEETYA 2008, p. 7).

It also acknowledged the particular value of non-accredited education and training “which, for many struggling to engage, builds self-esteem and confidence and provides a viable pathway to move into further education and training or employment” (MCEETYA 2008, p. 3).

ACE across Australia

While all Australian governments are signatories to the 2008 Ministerial Declaration on ACE, the commitment of each to an ACE sector or to ACE delivery varies significantly. Building on the work of Choy et al. (2006) the variations across states are summarised below.

Sectoral approaches to ACE

NSW has funded a sectoral form of ACE for many years comprising a network of 46 community-owned and managed Community Colleges organised on a regional basis. The sector is funded by the NSW government to deliver accredited VET qualifications and discrete skill sets. Under its *Smart and Skilled* policy (DET NSW 2013), the ACE sector will be funded to provide foundation skills programs and to provide programs to particular disadvantaged cohorts.

Victoria has approximately 310 providers registered with the Adult, Community and Further Education Board to deliver pre-accredited training. Pre-accredited training refers to short courses or classes that provide basic literacy, generic work skills and digital literacy as a pathway to formal VET. These programs are targeted at but not restricted to educationally disadvantaged cohorts. Approximately 120 of the 310 providers are also Registered Training Organisations and offer (mainly entry level) VET qualifications. Victorian ACE providers operate under a variety of names and come from a variety of traditions; however, the majority deliver funded, pre-accredited and accredited training using the co-brand *Learn Local* (DEECD 2013).

South Australia has traditionally funded a well-developed, devolved network of community providers offering non-accredited programs. In recent years, the *Skills for All* strategy (DFEEST 2013) has positioned ACE as having a central role in building foundation skills including English language, literacy and numeracy (LLN), problem solving and digital literacy skills, and providing pathways into the formal VET system. The SA government has also committed to upskilling the ACE workforce in order to offer programs with greater vocational and literacy content as well as programs offered in partnership with registered training organisations.

Of all the states and territories, SA has shown the most commitment in recent

years to growing the ACE sector. *Skills for All* committed to significantly increasing the funding available to the not-for-profit ACE sector, with 19 new ACE organisations approved and listed with the ACE program in 2013 alone.

Most of the ACE providers in NSW, Victoria and South Australia also offer a broad array of general adult education, health and wellbeing and lifelong learning programs on either a fee-for-service basis, through local government funding or through ad hoc grants from other state government and federal government departments.

Program approaches to ACE

The Australian Capital Territory provides an annual grant program to a range of locally focused not-for-profit community based organisations or to education providers working in partnership with a community based organisation. The programs are aimed at providing pathways to further education and training for 'second chance' learners.

Tasmania funds the coordination of a broad range of non-formal lifelong learning courses through LINC's which combine the State Library of Tasmania, the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office (TAHO), Adult Education and online access centres. Tasmania also provides comprehensive and free adult literacy programs and support run through the LINC's, not-for-profit community houses, TasTAFE and Mission Australia.

Other approaches to ACE

ACE is less well recognised and supported by government in Western Australia (WA), Queensland and the Northern Territory.

The WA Government has a current ACE strategy and has a very broad definition of ACE that includes accredited work readiness and foundation programs run by a variety of provider types. It funds the Read Write Now volunteer adult literacy program; provides funding to the state ACE peak body Linkwest and, until recent budget cuts, made grant and project funding available for non-accredited ACE and equity development initiatives.

Queensland has a range of active not-for-profit and volunteer learning organisations offering informal Adult and Community Education programs. The Queensland government maintains a list of ACE providers on its website. It also funds community based organisations to work in partnership with registered training organisations to support learners in entry level accredited qualifications through the Community Learning Partnerships program (QLD DET 2013).

The Northern Territory (NT) is the only Australian state or territory to have no statement, policy or strategy for ACE, but there are a number of community owned and managed organisations serving remote Indigenous communities in particular. The NT provides Adult Learners' Week grants to not-for-profit community groups.

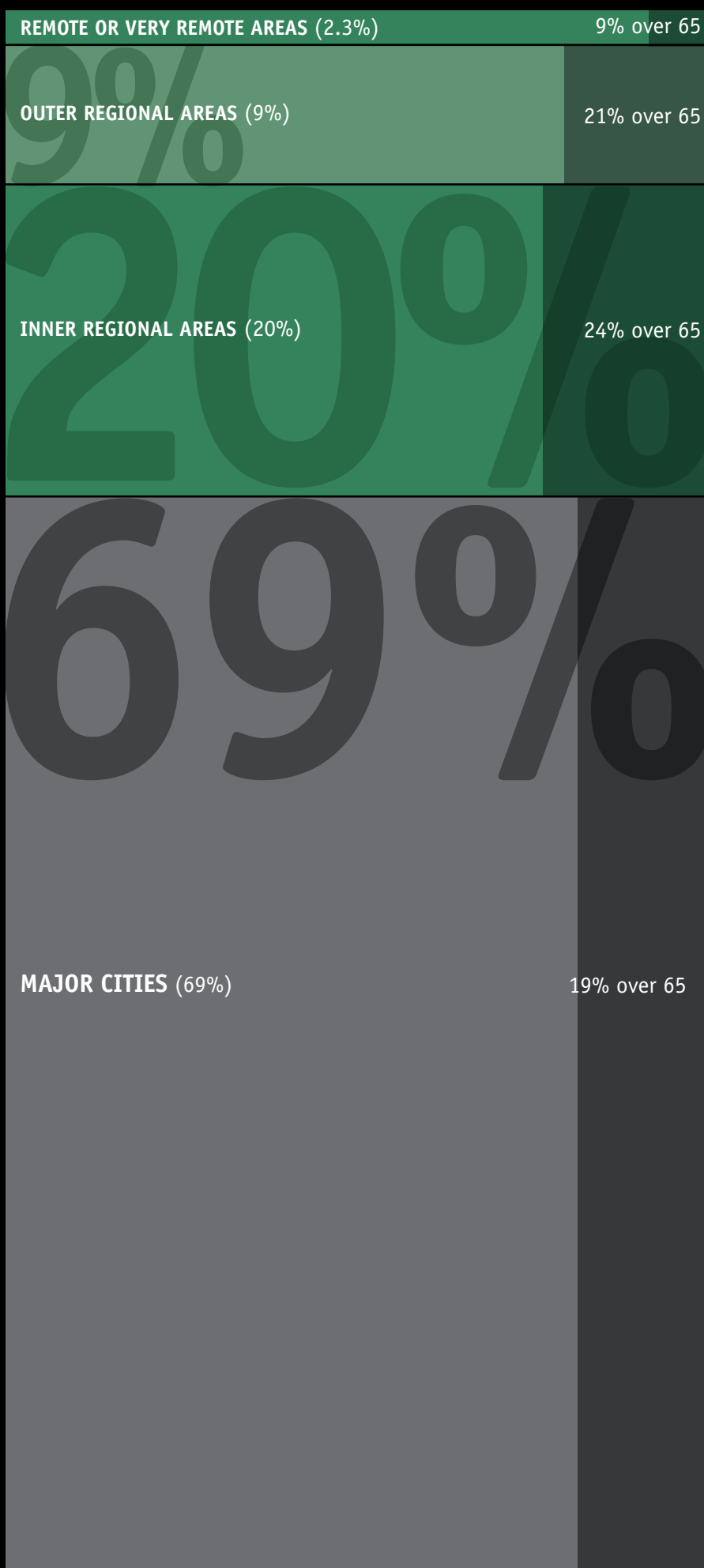


Living in regional and rural Australia

Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world, with over two-thirds (69%) of the population living in major cities. One in five (20%) Australians live in inner regional areas, one in ten (9%) in outer regional areas and around one in forty (2.3%) live in remote or very remote areas (1.5% remote and 0.8% very remote) (Baxter, Grey and Hayes, 2011).

The population in regional Australia is growing and is predicted to continue to grow. However, this growth is inconsistent across the country, with population decline in many rural and remote inland areas and rapid growth in satellite cities and coastal areas. Nine of the ten fastest declining Local Government Areas are in regional and remote parts of Australia (ABS 2013).

Australia has an ageing population and this feature is more pronounced in regional Australia. "Age dependence ratio" refers to the amount of people in a population over the age of 65. While around one in five (19%) people in major urban areas are over age 65, this proportion increases in outer regional and in inner regional areas (21 and 24% respectively). In remote and very remote communities, the age balance changes with only 9 per cent of the population over the age of 65 in very remote (often Indigenous or mining) communities. This is generally considered to be the result of two factors; young people (mainly men) moving to remote areas to work in the mining industry, and the lower age dependence ratio of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Rural and regional disadvantage

In purely numerical terms, the majority of disadvantaged Australians live in major urban areas. However, relative to their proportion of the population, Australians in regional and rural Australia are more likely to be living in a disadvantaged community. Rural and regional communities in which Indigenous Australians comprise a higher than average proportion of the total population are significantly more likely to be disadvantaged. Eighteen of the 20 electorates in Australia with the lowest household incomes are outside the capital cities (NHRA & ACOSS 2013).

The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) and the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA) have identified that Australians in rural and regional areas are not only more likely to be poor in income terms, but also more likely to live with compounding factors of disadvantage that are unique to these areas.

“Households living in income poverty in rural and regional areas have additional problems which often exacerbate poverty, such as reduced access to health services, transport difficulties, inadequate local infrastructure, and vulnerability to drought and other natural hazards”

(NRHA & ACOSS 2013, p. 4).

A significant proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in regional and rural Australia. In many very remote communities, they make up the majority of the population. In addition to the complex and compounding features of disadvantage outlined above, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live with the legacy of dispossession and past racist welfare, health, education and employment policies. They generally have poorer health, education and life expectancy than the rest of the population (Closing the Gap 2013).

Housing prices are lower in most parts of regional and rural Australia than in major metropolitan cities, and while on the surface, this could be seen as reducing poverty, high levels of unemployment and low wages mean that there is actually a higher percentage of people in “housing stress” in regional and rural Australia. Further, the lower cost of living in some regional and rural communities can impact on people’s ability to move for work, making it harder to break out of a cycle of poverty. There is some evidence that



CASE STUDY

Capricorn Community Literacy Inc

Capricorn Community Literacy operates from a cluster of rooms at the back of Yeppoon State Primary School affectionately known as “The Cave”. According to Coordinator Carol Gorton, its combination of two large rooms for classes and two smaller rooms for individual tuition make it the perfect venue.

The program receives no government funding. Its tutors are all volunteers, mainly retirees, rooms are donated and incidentals like insurance are paid for through fundraising and donations. The learners who attend are mainly migrants studying English as an Additional Language, but also adults from English speaking backgrounds who are struggling with basic reading, writing and maths. The program aims to be flexible and to support in the most practical and immediate way. As well as small classes and one to one tuition, volunteers liaise with the local TAFE campus, help learners to navigate bureaucracies and even find work placement in local businesses. The program recently began operating in two new locations in Rockhampton and expanded to provide support to second language learners in the local secondary college.

the lower cost of living in some regional and rural areas may also be attracting people who have given up on seeking work altogether (NRHA & ACOSS 2013, p. 4).

The opposite housing phenomenon is occurring in resource rich parts of the country such as the Pilbara and Kimberley in WA, Roxby Downs in South Australia or the Bowen Basin in central-eastern Queensland. The rapid increase in high-income resources jobs has increased housing prices. This means that while work in service industries is plentiful, housing costs make it practically impossible for unemployed or semi-skilled workers to relocate to take them up (ABS 4102.0 2013).

Australia's "two-speed economy" is more pronounced in regional and rural Australia. While the resources boom has meant that some regions of Australia are booming, others have high and entrenched unemployment (AWPA 2012, p. 16). For example, the South Australian *Skills for Jobs 5 Year Plan* paints the following picture of regional South Australia:

"... some South Australian regions face declining industries, structural adjustment and pockets of high unemployment, while others are experiencing strong growth and have difficulties in attracting skilled workers. Some of the state's predominantly agricultural regions have an ageing farm workforce and find it difficult to retain young people"

(2013, p. 19).

Educational disadvantage in regional and rural Australia is significant and growing. School students in regional and rural Australia are almost two years behind their metropolitan peers in mathematical and reading literacy and almost a year and half behind their peers in scientific literacy (Thomson et al, 2013, pg 20). This leads to lower levels of school completion and lower participation in higher education. It also creates a context in which adult education is required not just for vocational and further education purposes, but also to allow participants to complete foundation level reading, writing, mathematics and general education.

Quality of life in regional and rural Australia can be very high. However, many disparities exist, with some groups marginalised and unable to share in the prosperity. Further, regional and rural communities have particular features that can leave people stuck in a cycle of poverty and disadvantage. Education across the age spectrum is widely recognised as a means of building cohesion, increasing employment prospects and reducing poverty.



CASE STUDY

Northern Inlands Community College

Community College Northern Inland Inc (CCNI) was formed in 1981 after a public meeting in Barraba, NSW. People recognised that Adult and Community Education could fill an educational void in rural communities. Since 1981 the College has grown to service the small communities of Narrabri, Inverell, Wyallda, Moree, Bingara and Gunnedah.

The CCNI campus in tiny Gunnedah (population 12,000) offers pre-accredited pathway programs, accredited vocational qualifications in the growing aged care and disability care fields, and a range of short health and wellbeing courses. A Job Services Australia provider operates from the College one day a fortnight, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service once a month, and the College hosts a Broadband for Seniors kiosk. Coordinator, Ross Barnard even runs a Classic Movie Club each Monday night.

ACE in regional and rural Australia



Adult Learning Australia's records suggest that of 938 Adult and Community Education centres across the country around half are in rural and regional Australia. These centres vary in size from large Community Colleges, which offer entry level VET and pre-accredited programs, to small volunteer-run, community networks.

In Australian states where ACE providers are formally registered and funded and they are required to report on their delivery, programs are delivered at a higher proportional rate in regional and rural areas than in urban areas.

It is difficult to get a picture of the total quantum of ACE delivery or its presence in regional and rural areas in those states and territories, such as Queensland, NT and WA, where the sector receives no state government program funding and is therefore not required to report on its delivery via the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). However, there is evidence of informal adult education occurring through community, social, sporting and religious organisations (Dymock, 2007).

We know, for example, that the Neighbourhood House sector is a significant provider of Adult and Community Education in every state and territory across Australia. A 2011 survey of houses reported that 67,000 adults were assisted into further study or work via their Neighbourhood House participation in the previous year (ANCHA 2011). However,

the Neighbourhood House sector's adult education activity is only reported as part of the NCVER annual statistical collection in South Australia and Victoria and even then, this reporting obligation only extends to government funded pre-accredited and accredited training, not to the myriad of local government funded, fee for service and project based adult education occurring in the houses.

There is an argument for widening (and changing) the definition of ACE to include critically important adult education that occurs beyond or across state or federal government funding. Most providers of Adult and Community Education have multiple sources of funding, of which government funding is often only supplementary. Some adult education takes place, for example, through fire and emergency services organisations, sporting organisations, senior citizens organisations and community men's sheds. In the case of volunteer fire and emergency service organisations, much of this training is accredited. In many smaller regional and remote communities, the fire station and/or men's sheds provide the equivalent of a community hub not unlike some more traditional ACE providers (Golding, Brown & Harvey 2009). While most of this 'other' rural and remote ACE remains uncounted, unacknowledged and unsupported by governments, Adult Learning Australia sees it as a critically important part of adult learning.

Some examples of the value of ACE where state governments support it

In the three Australian states where ACE providers are formally registered and funded, they are required to report on their delivery programs. The data shows that in these states ACE programs are delivered at a higher proportional rate in regional and rural areas than in urban areas.

- One quarter (25%) of Victorians live in rural and regional Victoria, yet 44% of delivery by community based adult education providers registered with the Victorian ACFE Board in 2011 occurred in regional and rural Victoria and approximately half of the 312 providers are based in a rural and regional community (ACFE 2012).
- Around one quarter (27%) of the residents of NSW live in regional and rural NSW, yet close to three quarters (72%) of NSW government funded Community College delivery was in regional and rural NSW. There are twice as many regional and rural Community Colleges (31) as metropolitan colleges (15) contracted to the NSW government (DET NSW 2012).
- Around one quarter (27%) of the residents of South Australia live in rural and regional areas, yet 30% of accredited and 59% of non-accredited ACE activity occurs in regional and rural areas. Every one of the 12 state government regions has at least one ACE program in operation, most often with a digital literacy focus (DFEEST 2013).

The case for ACE in regional and rural Australia

A number of writers have identified how the unique characteristics of ACE produce strong workplace participation, productivity and social inclusion outcomes (see Volkoff & Walstab 2007; Choy, Hayes & Keyes 2006; Golding, Foley, Brown & Harvey 2009).

Bowman (2006) identified six roles of ACE providers that provide a cohesive value proposition that can easily be seen as adding value to regional and rural communities. ACE providers act as:

- Platform builders — re-engaging adults with learning who have limited previous education and giving them a new start at obtaining basic education skills, for life and work purposes;
- Bridge builders — providing pathways for learning-engaged adults into formal tertiary education and paid work and so helping to upskill Australians to keep pace with the increasingly skills rich nature of much of the available work nowadays;
- Work-skills developers — offering vocational training in their own right and across the full spectrum of VET qualifications and fields of educational study, including in the trades areas and at diploma levels where there are identified skills shortages across the country;
- Facilitators of adult health — improving mental, physical and emotional well-being, that is a growing issue in Australia, given the ageing of our population among other reasons;
- Promoters of citizenship — achieving adults active as volunteers in community activities, and thereby contributing to social cohesion and unity;
- Community capacity builders — facilitating local networks and community-led developments, which is in line with current government policies that advocate self-help local development.

However, a number of other commentators have identified that the sector has never reached its full potential due to lack of consistent policy and funding. For example, the National VET Equity Advisory Council calls the ACE sector an “undervalued community asset” which, with an increased profile and coherent policy and funding approaches, could further support the VET system’s performance in relation to improving access, participation and outcomes for people with low skills.

“In the Council’s view, the time has come to: further acknowledge the role of ACE in building social inclusion; place it in the context of the current COAG agenda; clarify its policy, funding and regulatory frameworks; and formalise recognition of its pathways into further learning”

(NVEAC 2011, p. 13).

The Australian Workplace and Productivity Agency (AWPA) has identified that the ACE sector can play a significant role in assisting disadvantaged learners to re-engage with learning in order to meet VET equity goals. It cites the South Australian ACE system as a model in which the program is focused to work more collaboratively with the VET sector

to improve learner pathways, while at the same time “the underlying policy of the reformed program acknowledges the importance of retaining the unique qualities of the ACE sector that are successful in engaging hard-to-reach learners” (AWPA 2013, p. 79).

The ACE sector’s flexibility, its ability to partner and adapt, combined with its emphasis on both individual and community needs, makes it a neat fit for regional and rural communities. In those states where ACE is supported in policy and funding terms, it is already playing a unique and important pathway and participation role in regional and rural communities. If, as is suggested here, that role is further refined and supported, it has enormous capacity to bridge the gap between the educational and employment opportunities of adults in regional and rural Australia and their city-based counterparts.

Ironically, those states that have the least policy and funding commitment to ACE (Queensland, WA and NT) also have the highest amount of remote and very remote communities, where it could be argued, ACE is needed the most. In those states, ACE activity occurs informally; however, a small investment in identifying providers, communicating with and supporting them has the potential to provide a significant social and economic return.



Conclusion

The ACE sector's diversity and independence from government are its greatest strengths. Each community-based organisation is a product of its particular community and it is able to deliver on the particular government priorities through partnership with government rather than dependence. However, it is clear that in those states where ACE providers are formally registered with government to receive funding, and supported with coordination and professional development, that the sector is more robust and able to adapt to deliver on the government agenda of the day.

Adult Learning Australia would argue that Adult and Community Education plays an important social inclusion, workforce participation and productivity role in communities across Australia. Also, that the unique features of life in rural and regional Australia make ACE even more worthy of support. The role of ACE as a "Bridge Builder – providing pathways for learning-engaged adults into formal tertiary education and paid work" (Bowman, 2006) would seem to be particularly important in regional and rural Australia given the significantly lower levels of educational attainment. Not only this, but in remote and very remote communities, it is hard to think of a more viable model to fulfil this role.

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