

Submission



Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

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Contents

Background3

 About ALA3

 About ACE3

Impact of COVID-194

 Key Issues and Challenges5

 Discussion5

Recommendations7

Conclusion8

Background

About Adult Learning Australia

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19.

ALA is the national peak body for adult and community education (ACE) providers. ALA's mission is for equitable access to lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians. Our more than 1,000 members are located in all states and territories of Australia – reflecting the diversity of sector.

ALA maintains international relationships with the adult education sector through its membership of, and participation, in the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) and the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic Adult Education (ASPBAE). In 2020, ALA celebrates its 60th anniversary.

About ACE

Adult and community education (ACE) is a discrete fourth sector of education in Australia that is not for profit and community based. ACE organisations include Neighbourhood Houses, Community Learning Centres, Community Resource Centres, Community Colleges, Indigenous Cooperatives and Adult Education Institutions such as the Centre for Adult Education and Workers Education Associations.

ACE programs build community capacity, enhance social cohesion and promote health and wellbeing. They foster skill development and provide vocationally focussed education and training programs and pathways. ACE organisations have a strong presence across Australia, particularly in rural and regional communities, where they offer a broad range of programs and services alone or in partnership with other agencies.

The ACE sector is recognised for its ability to engage jobseekers in foundation and industry skills program as a 'soft point of entry' to vocational education and training (VET), often working with the jobseeker to address a broad range of barriers impacting on employability.

Research shows that ACE providers offer a platform for disengaged and/or disadvantaged adults to:

- transition back into learning
- develop basic skills for work
- improve language, literacy and numeracy (LLN)
- pathway into formal learning programs.

ACE is an important and recognisable sector of education that is not for profit and provides accessible lifelong and lifewide learning opportunities that are responsive to the education needs of adults 15 years and over.

ACE services

ACE organisations offer all or some of the following services:

- personal enrichment learning and pathway programs
- adult basic education in language, literacy, numeracy (LLN) and other foundation skills (both accredited and non-accredited)
- foundation skills in computers and the new technologies
- formal vocational education and training (VET).

ACE has strong expertise in working with second chance learners, disengaged and disadvantaged cohorts and older learners. ACE organisations provide inclusive learning environments to enable people to transition back into learning, develop skills for work and life, improve LLN and offer pathways into formal learning programs.

The ACE sector has a well-documented track record of attracting high rates of high needs and disadvantaged learners. It has achieved this in a highly constrained funding environment where providers' capacity to engage learners through outreach activity is not funded. Investing in the outreach and engagement in the ACE sector is possibly the single most effective strategy that can lead to increased participation by learners with high needs and low Language Literacy and Numeracy (LL&N).

Impact of COVID-19

Australia, along with the rest of the world, has been totally disrupted by COVID-19. People are affected in their daily lives and afraid of the consequences for their health, education, jobs and well-being, for their families and broader communities.

The ACE sector has played a significant role in positively contributing to the socio-economic status of Australia. ACE providers are not for profit organisations that provide accessible lifelong learning opportunities that are responsive to the educational needs of adults 15 years and over. They work with Australians to develop and improve language, literacy, numeracy, employability and digital skills and offer a range of accredited (vocational education training – VET) and non-accredited training and skills development programs.

More than 2,500 ACE providers are embedded in communities in urban, regional, rural and remote areas across Australia. They are at the frontline of local communities when it comes to social connection and wellbeing across the urban, regional and rural areas of Australia. They have professional educators who are particularly experienced in working with vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians.

While the sector is facing unprecedented demands in adjusting to the current COVID-19 environment, including expanding the range of flexible learning delivery models, ACE providers are committed to ensuring that people facing hardship, including newly displaced workers, do not miss out on learning opportunities.

It is critical to ensure the sustainability of the ACE sector so it can continue to train, upskill and educate disadvantaged, displaced and vulnerable groups, as well as the newly unemployed. The sector has expertise in attracting 'hard to reach' cohorts such as adults with low level language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills, who are particularly susceptible to COVID19 job losses.

The ACE sector can be part of the solution to help build community resilience and support the skills, capacity and capability of the nation. With government and community support, ACE can help lead an education, skills and training recovery and make an even greater difference in our communities.

Unlike other education sectors, ACE offers a unique and vital frontline service by providing education and support to many Australians who are vulnerable and at risk. A significant number of ACE learners are dealing with a range of issues including disability, low mental health and domestic violence. Many ACE learners are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, are second chance learners or on pathways to accredited learning but need wraparound support.

The 1 in 3 adult Australians struggling to find and keep work because of low literacy and numeracy have access to the support they need at ACE organisations. However, In the current climate with continued job losses, business closures and breakdown of systems, the number of vulnerable people out of work and needing support will escalate. ACE needs appropriate resources to effectively meet these needs.

Key issues and challenges

We surveyed our members and identified the following key issues and challenges:

- Sustainability of the ACE sector during and post COVID-19
- Lack of access to Internet services and online systems that support flexible delivery; particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable cohorts
- Lack of digital infrastructure hardware for providers and adult learners
- Poor technological solutions for ACE providers in remote and some rural areas
- Lack of flexibility in meeting contractual arrangements
- Revenue shortfalls due to cash flow issues and student withdrawals
- Lack of organisational policies and procedures on infectious diseases, risk management, working from home, etc.
- Increased need for access to mental health services
- Difficulties in maintaining adult learner engagement

Discussion

ALA welcomes the steps taken by the Australian Government in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the provision of a range of programs to help our communities through these changing and uncertain times. Effective planning and implementation of the COVID-19 recovery process is crucial for our nation's future.

With appropriate resources, the ACE sector can be part of the solution to help build community resilience and support the skills, capacity and capability of the nation.

Frontline flexible learning options

ACE is exceptionally well-placed to know what works to achieve a good outcome for their communities. They are experienced at providing flexible learning options and support to many Australians who are disadvantaged, vulnerable and at risk.

Engagement with low skilled workers and people in need

With the impact of COVID19, many more low skilled workers will lose their jobs and will need to learn new skills and knowledge to re-enter the workforce. The need for language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills in particular, will become more important. As a result, the role of ACE organisations will become even more critical. ACE offers the best chance for people to develop employability skills in tandem with foundation skills, as well as place- based and contextualised education and training to support ongoing employability.

Place based approach embedded in local communities

ACE providers are located in cities, towns and regions all over Australia. They hold significant knowledge about their communities and have established networks in the knowledge industry, strong relationships with other education and training providers such as TAFE and are experienced in offering educational and employment pathways. These pathways support building skilled workers in urban, regional and remote areas.

A record of collaboration

We can work with the government to identify solutions and rapid responses to the current environment. This includes partnering with TAFE and linking with small business operators and their staff in our communities who may need opportunities to upskill or build their confidence in learning. ACE can effectively build these relationships into long term opportunities for local tailor-made training.

Optimising support to the Government's response package

ACE is a significant community asset with the potential to be optimised to play a much greater role in supporting adults and workplaces with their training needs in the current COVID19 crisis.

Improved Adult Literacy – Critical for the Regeneration of Australia

The recovery roadmap must recognise the economic value of higher levels of adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills; particularly for socially and economically marginalised Australians. Adults with low literacy¹, numeracy and digital skills are vulnerable to social isolation and unemployment as jobs disappear in the face of technological change, globalisation and COVID-19. Literacy is an investment in the future. Addressing literacy inequality will ensure a fairer and more productive Australia post COVID-19.

¹ The OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey, which measures key cognitive and workplace skills, found that around 44% of Australian adults lack the literacy skills required in everyday life. PIAAC's data suggests that of these, 1 in 7 Australians (14%) have very poor literacy skills and 1 in 3 (30%) have below-proficiency level literacy making them vulnerable to unemployment.

All Australians, regardless of their employment status, must be supported to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills in order to achieve productivity gains and ensure they can live healthy, autonomous and full lives. Adults need sufficient literacy to comprehend health information, understand government information and services, get job ready and maintain a connection during this time of social distancing.

Many more struggle with numeracy, with around 53% of the population at below proficiency levels. And while there has been much commentary on the scale of the problem, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the urgency of finding comprehensive solutions.

Sustainability of the ACE Sector

The sustainability of the ACE sector is clearly at risk and a wholistic response is required. We must work collaboratively and quickly to maintain the ACE sector which is a critical part of the fabric of our local communities. This requires leadership from the Australian government to include ACE when developing responses and making decisions.

ALA acknowledges Australian government efforts that ensure some measures to assist individuals and community through these challenging and uncertain times of the COVID-19 virus. However, we believe that both the ACE sector and vulnerable adult learners have largely been overlooked.

Recommendations

ALA has identified a number of initiatives to support the Australian government's COVID-19 responses that we believe will value add to initiatives in the recent stimulus packages and support the socio-economic status of ACE providers and vulnerable adult learners.

1. ALA can develop a suite of specific professional development options for ACE organisations across Australia on delivering high quality learning pathway/bridging programs using flexible and mixed learning models
2. ALA can expand the existing 1300ILEARN telephone number (currently utilised for Adult Learners' Week) to collaborate with the ACE sector to support referrals to resources and new delivery options for small business operators and others in our communities who may need opportunities to upskill and match them to ACE education and employment pathways
3. ACE can work with industry and small business in local communities to provide cross mentoring programs to match expertise of business professionals with ACE organisations, sharing knowledge and expertise and providing options for operators to participate in relevant professional development options identified in #1 so they can further support learning for their employees
4. ACE can deliver nationwide adult learning projects that raise awareness of COVID 19 and other potential crises and recognise ACE as a way to engage with a sustainable future
5. Commitment to a National Adult Literacy Strategy that establishes a framework for increasing the level of adult literacy by 20% at PIAAC 2031/32 and addresses the national

skills shortage of qualified adult literacy educators and builds the capacity of the workforce, including professionals and volunteers.

Conclusion

ALA is committed to working proactively to maximise the impact of initiatives to address the impact of COVID19 and support recovery and regeneration of the Australian community and economy. We are open to dialogue about any new initiatives that could be implemented, as well as ideas to augment initiatives already being undertaken within our sector.

We would welcome the opportunity to further collaborate with government and other sectors to ensure that investment in maintaining and developing new skills will assist Australian business, industry and community to recover quickly and effectively.

ALA looks forward to your consideration of these suggestions and we hope to engage in more detailed discussions of how these measures might be applied across the adult learning sector and the communities they serve.