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Celebrating women's learning

Women of all ages and backgrounds come from across Melbourne, including many from outer suburbs, to be part of the community being built by the River Nile Learning Centre (RNLC) in a welcoming and engaging inner north office building.

Some have recently arrived in Australia, including individuals from detention on Nauru and Christmas Island. Many live in community detention or face government limitations on their rights to study, hindering their access to mainstream adult education.

The River Nile Learning Centre opened its doors in January 2017 to provide education programs and services to young refugee and asylum seeker women. The Centre's goal is to equip women with the language and life skills that help build confidence, encourage them to continue their education, seek employment, and become more involved in their communities.

The ages of participants range from women in their early 20s to their mid-60s, with the largest cohort

being women in their mid to late 30s, many of whom have young children. Some study for a few months to a year, while others have been attending the centre for several years. Free, pre-accredited foundation English, digital, and numeracy classes are run flexibly and tailored to the students' capacities by the Centre's three teachers.

Working in partnership with the nearby North Melbourne Language Centre, the RNLC was able to introduce an additional English class for higher-level students in 2023. Becoming one of the Centre's three paid staff members in early 2022, Engagement Coordinator Rahel Davies quickly learned—as many in the adult learning sector will attest—that 'you can't just offer a course and expect people to turn up'.

'I used to have to call students to check if they were okay and encourage them to come in again. Then I realised we had to do more than just offer classes — we had to make the women feel that we were more of a community rather than just here to teach them English or literacy'.

(Story continues on p. 3)

This edition celebrates International Women's Day 2024 with the theme #InspireInclusion. Through stories of remarkable women, we highlight the transformative power of education and training in advancement of women, unlocking their potential, fostering empowerment, and driving positive change in communities.

Message from the CEO



'We must prioritise inclusivity and equity, particularly for women and children, ensuring that all members of society have the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully to our collective future.'

I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge the challenging times we find ourselves in. Across all corners of the world, many people are facing unprecedented difficulties. From social and economic upheaval to political unrest and environmental crises, the challenges we confront are vast and complex.

Old ways are being demolished to make way for the new. But are these new ways inclusive - are they equitable? What is the antidote to these many challenges as we navigate through this tumultuous transition period? We must take proactive steps to safeguard the welfare of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, both for humans and other sentient beings. We must not allow them to be relegated to the margins or exploited for the benefit of the more privileged. Instead, we must prioritise inclusivity and equity, particularly for women and children, ensuring that all members of society have the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully to our collective future.

That is why ALA recently addressed a letter to the Australian Government to ensure that Australia does not become a cash-free society, risking further disadvantage for people and communities already struggling with challenges such as literacy and numeracy, digital access, the cost of living, and more. We called on the Australian Government to urgently enact legislation to protect a hybrid financial ecosystem that maintains the availability of cash in our society, one that helps mitigate increasing inequality. A cashless society would disproportionately disadvantage those who are already marginalised. And as recent natural disasters have shown, Australians also cannot solely rely on the Internet or online banking.

We dedicate this Quest edition to uplifting stories celebrating the best in our communities, with a focus on women as we mark International Women's Day in March under the theme #inspireinclusion. We discover the resilient journey of refugee and asylum-seeker women at the River Nile Learning Centre. We meet Elaine Butler, a dedicated advocate for women's education, as she shares insights from her extensive experience. We welcome our newest Board member, Isabel Osuna-Gatty, who brings her rich expertise in international and Australian literacy and learning. Additionally, you can journey to Arnhem Land, where the Manapan Academy, supported by ALPA, trains young people to craft beautiful furniture using local materials and cultural designs.

Perhaps this has you thinking about your next career move. You may want to consider upskilling to become an adult literacy tutor. Charles Sturt University has been approved for Commonwealth-supported places for the Graduate Diploma in Adult Language, Literacy, and Numeracy, reducing the cost from \$20,000 to \$4,000. For further details, contact Daryl South at (02) 6933 2637.

Thank you to all ALA members who participated in our survey and emphasised the significance of our professional development program. In light of your feedback, we are excited to introduce the '[What Matters 2024 PD Program](#)'. If you're not already a member, now is the perfect opportunity to [join us](#) in our mission to promote lifelong learning for all, which has the power to transform the world and reshape our perspectives.

Jenny Macaffer, CEO



ALA CEO, Jenny Macaffer, visits RNLC and meets Rahel Davies and former colleague, Charmaine Kinuthia

(story continued from p. 1)

This included regularly checking in with at-risk students, as well as sending out updates and information about the program and upcoming events via WhatsApp.

Excursions became an important part of each term, providing students with the opportunity to explore different parts of Melbourne, practice their English in a practical setting, and form friendships. Visits have included museums and galleries, tourist attractions, beaches, and gardens.

Student Tabussum started attending the Centre in early 2023 after hearing about the Centre's English classes from another organisation. Tabussum is now fully involved with maths, English, and computer classes and loves the help she gets from teachers Apeksha, Louise, and Robert.

When asked why she likes coming to the Centre, Tabussum said that it is a 'big and important question, because before I had no confidence and I felt hopeless'.

With no recurrent funding, all River Nile services and programs depend on grants and donations. Rahel quickly became aware that this meant building strong

relations with existing and prospective donors. 'We send them lots of reports and photos, but I also invite them to join us here for lunch. Most of the women love cooking, and the donors love sitting down and chatting with them over food,' she said.

Funding now enables the Centre to offer students free driving lessons, monthly Myki passes to attend classes, women-only swimming lessons, and workshops and information sessions on topics such as health. Students can also access a food bank at the Centre, which has become considerably more stretched in recent months.

Tabussum says that what the Centre does in addition to education and training is provide a lifeline for many during the current cost-of-living situation.

'Outside, everything is very expensive, so the food bank and free driving lessons are crucial. We are all struggling because everything is very expensive, so

'After I came here, I forgot everything about my hard life. I like that it is all women, this is very good, and the teachers are great, everyone is helpful and kind. It is very good for women to learn English and to come and find happiness here. When I go home its boring for me, so I love coming to school. And I am very happy and very proud,' Tabussum said.



RNLC student Tabussum



River Nile Learning Centre learners at Lume, the world's largest digital art gallery in Melbourne's CBD.

free services are especially important, especially for women.' Funding also enables the Learning Centre to employ a social worker, who, Rahel says, fulfils probably the most important role we have here.

'We have so many women here who have suffered great trauma, including family violence, and massive uncertainty. Our social worker helps them deal with things like bureaucracy, citizenship applications, and the digital literacy they need to do things like enrol their kids in school, pay fines, and avoid scams'.

'These are the things that are beyond our scope as an education provider, but there is so much going on in the lives of most of our women to stop them from accessing education. With many of the women's access restricted by their visas, we are the only place that some of them can come to', she said.

Rahel believes the flexibility of the adult learning programs is another key reason why the women come to the River Nile.

'We can't run like a school and say that people have to be here for every class because most just can't do that. We also have to check in regularly, however, with the ones not coming in to make sure they don't feel forgotten either'.

The success of the work of Rahel and staff and volunteers to attract and retain students has led to 65 students now being enrolled. The Centre has the capacity for 80 students, and Rahel is hoping to reach that number this year.

Staff and volunteers at the River Nile Learning Centre celebrated two key milestones at the end of last year, which they are confident will underpin the ongoing effectiveness of the Centre for a long time to come.

In partnership with the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), the Centre held its first-ever Careers Week in early December 2023 – its biggest program to date - with activities including a presentation by William Angliss Institute, a visit to the Melbourne College of Hair and Beauty, and a fabulous lunch and graduation party. Rahel said it was a huge success.

The Centre then wrapped up the year by winning the Victorian Multicultural Award for Excellence in Vocational Education and Training (pre-accredited community-based training). These annual awards recognise organisations that foster cross-cultural understanding and support people from migrant, refugee, and asylum seeker backgrounds to 'fully participate in all aspects of Victorian life'.

Visit <https://www.rnlc.org.au/>



Rahel pictured with the Hon. Margaret Gardner AC, Governor of Victoria (R) and Ingrid Stitt, Minister for Multicultural Affairs (L)

A lifelong commitment to adult education

Elaine Butler reflects on 40 years of advocating for adult and community education



Elaine Butler, Colly Lesker and Jenny Macaffer

Elaine Butler has been working in and advocating for the adult and community education sector for more than four decades. So, she has seen an enormous amount of change in that time. And while she says there have been a lot of ups and downs, she remains buoyed about the future of the sector.

‘There are so many really good things happening across the sector now,’ she said. ‘There are also new programs being co-designed and place-based, and that is exciting.’

Elaine is also optimistic about the current Australian Government’s willingness to listen to people advocating for adult and community education – and hopes this will lead to more funding and a national lifelong learning strategy.

Elaine didn’t start her working life in the sector, but her earliest working experiences shaped her interest and commitment to developing educational opportunities, particularly for women.

After finishing school in Adelaide in the 1960s, Elaine began work in accounting, and later, stockbroking offices. And while she enjoyed the excitement of being in the finance sector at a time of huge Australian and international economic growth, the lack of additional training or career pathways for women chafed.

With the Whitlam Government providing new access to university, Elaine left full-time employment to study. She planned to work out how best to enhance the economic well-being and social status of women through education.

After graduating, Elaine took up her first role in the TAFE sector, which included working to develop new certificate courses, programs for marginalised groups, and opportunities for young people. It was this experience of working directly with people from low

socio-economic backgrounds to develop the courses they said they needed that left Elaine with a lifelong commitment to community education.

‘We asked these people what they needed, what it would take for them to join in classes. In particular, South Australia’s Dunstan Government had set up an amazing centre (the Parks Community Centre) that, along with a secondary school and TAFE, provided everything that the surrounding community needed from services to recreation,’ she said.

Participants were from across the spectrum – recently arrived refugees from Vietnam, First Nations people, women domestic violence survivors, young people unemployed, and/or on remand. ‘We had women who didn’t usually leave their homes attending cooking classes as that was an acceptable, if covert way, to teach them about women’s health along with functional English language skills’.

Elaine said she experienced a ‘huge chunk of learning’ herself during this time, particularly the benefits of setting up educational opportunities ‘from the grassroots up, on demand’ and in partnership with local councils and health and welfare organisations. ‘It was education in a totally holistic fashion.’

After a stint working in teacher education in PNG and the Solomon Islands – which included being part of setting up the first scholarships for local graduate women to study and gain higher qualifications in education overseas – Elaine returned to Australia to work in universities. At that time, there was a real focus on adult and community education and vocational training.

However, shortly afterwards, the Government began to shift towards adult education almost exclusively focusing on employment and skills development.



Robbie Guevara, Bruce Wilson, Maren Klein, Elaine Butler, Jenny Macaffer, Sally Thompson and Kit McMahon at the ACED forum.

Industries were given the capacity to drive the development of the post-school sector rather than ACE providers.

Until then, Australian education revolved around compulsory (school-based) education, further education (TAFE/VET and community education), and higher education (universities). While firmly committed to the grassroots approach, Elaine has also focused across her career on the academic underpinning of the sector, ensuring there is evidence to support its equitable, vibrant, and effective operation.

'With the transformation and growth of the vocational education and training system from state based to a national system and emphasis on training, what became the 'fourth sector', adult and community education, moved into a paper-thin existence. There was verbal acknowledgement of the need for such opportunities, but not the required funding or policy framework to support it.'

She has authored and co-authored many significant studies, including *A fair go for all? Equity frameworks and landmark documents in Australian vocational education and training* and *Don't be too polite girls! Women, work and vocational education and training*. Elaine has also been involved – and remains so – in global adult education and training, with a particular focus on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

While frustrated that SDG4, 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong

learning opportunities for all,' does not include more focus on adult and community education, Elaine believes that the SDGs have moved the sector forward, including through increased access to data and information.

Elaine says she is pleased when Australia signs up for international agreements and programs but often feels the need to 'remind them of the actual situation in Australia'.

This includes Australia not yet embracing the UN's call for national governments to formally recognise a 'universal entitlement to lifelong learning and reskilling, translated into practice through legislation, policy, and effective lifelong learning systems' (Our Common Agenda, UN 2021).

As a long-time ambassador for Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) Elaine is a member of the Australian Coalition for Education and Development (ACED). This coalition brings together Australian non-government organisations – such as ALA – that work on education in global development with a particular focus on education for all.

After a national forum in February 2023 to discuss Transforming Education and Training Systems in Australia, Coalition members called on the Australian Government to create a national lifelong learning policy and a national adult literacy strategy with targets and timelines.

Elaine remains committed to working to enshrine access and equity to lifelong learning for a long time to come. 'Adult and community education is where my heart is, and I have never regretted getting involved with the sector. It has been a privilege, as well as an ongoing rich learning experience. I have been very lucky.'



Katie demonstrates fire safety at Tamworth Community College



Sew and Grow students at Kensington Neighbourhood House

For International Women's Day 2024, we are recognising the inspiring efforts of women in adult community education and the positive impact they bring through their work



Jenny Macaffer and Meg Cotter at the launch of the Women's micro business hub at Wyndham Community and Education Centre



Ayan from Kensington Neighbourhood House



Janis receives a certificate of appreciation from Moongala Women's Centre



Women from River Nile venture to the city via tram



Saxon Rice, ASQA CEO and Jenny Macaffer at the Australian Training Awards Hobart

Introducing our new advocate for adult literacy

ALA's newest Board member brings international experience



Isabel Osuna-Gatty winning the Australian Training Award for LLN Practice

ALA's newest board member, Isabel Osuna-Gatty, began her career in adult literacy provision while still living in her home country of Venezuela. Isabel said that she had always wanted to become a literacy teacher, fuelled by an innate belief that education and skills enable people to live fulfilling lives.

'I speak to First Nations people, refugees, everyone, and I always tell them that it is always worth learning and gaining skills because, no matter where you go, that knowledge will go with you. It can't be taken away.'

After settling in Australia in 2001, Isabel taught in literacy, language, and numeracy programs in various areas, including as the Learning Community Centre Coordinator at the remote Yuendumu community, 300 km northwest of Alice Springs. She later taught at the NT's Bachelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, including a period as a Senior Lecturer in Foundation Skills.

In 2016, Isabel won an Australian Training Award for Excellence in Language, Literacy, and Numeracy Practice. This award recognises innovation and

excellence by individuals involved in improving LLN skills in educational, community, or workplace contexts.

Currently, Isabel combines teaching with a private counselling practice where she regularly observes the connections between mental health issues and low literacy.

Isabel says that she has always been, and always will be, an advocate for lifelong learning.

'It is the most important thing of all. Education can change people and communities.'

She hopes to utilise her time on the ALA Board to further raise the organisation's profile and that of the adult and community sector in South Australia, where she now lives.

Are you an ALA member?

Becoming a member of Adult Learning Australia is a fantastic way to support lifelong and lifewide learning across Australia.

To find out more about all the benefits of an ALA membership, go to our website:
www.ala.asn.au/join-now

Crafting opportunities

A furniture-making course for Yolngu people provides training and jobs - and is transforming lives



From a remote island off the north coast of mainland Australia, an Indigenous-owned and run organisation is providing local Yolngu people with training for a career in furniture making and joinery.

The Manapan Academy, established in 2019, is also transforming the lives of locals on an island that has traditionally struggled to offer training and employment opportunities for young people.

Successful Academy graduates can transition to the Manapan workshop and work under the guidance of master craftsman Josiah Baker, himself a former Academy trainee. Others, like Israel Gawuthal Naypilil, are now becoming carpenters involved in local house building and other projects.

Local high school students do work experience at Manapan, inspiring them to consider the opportunities presented by the organisation – including the possibility of travelling around Australia and the world to deliver and install some of the beautiful works.

Manapan is a self-sufficient and self-funded enterprise owned and operated by the Yolngu people, the traditional custodians of East Arnhem Land for over 65,000 years. With a long tradition of storytelling, the Manapan trainees and staff now craft 'beautiful furniture with a story to tell'.

Supported by the Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA), a Registered Training Organisation specialising in nationally accredited retail

qualifications and Australia's largest Aboriginal-owned corporation, the Academy and workshop are located 500 km east of Darwin in Arnhem Land on Milingimbi Island, one of six islands that form an archipelago known as the Crocodile Island Group.

When the Academy and workshop were featured on ABC's Landline program last year, Traditional Owner and Chairwoman, Elizabeth Ganygulpa Dhurrkay, said Manapan was giving the local and wider community 'something to hold on to'.

'It is very important. It is the dream and cries of desperation of every parent. Every mother and father dreams of a better future for their children,' she said.

For graduate and now an employee at Manapan, Jordan Gaykamangu, it is being able to 'see it' that made all the difference to him, after previously not feeling like he could believe in himself.

Manapan operates on the basis that its pathway to full-time employment doubles as a celebration of the local people's 'traditional talents and contemporary skills'. Trainees and staff collaborate with furniture designers from across Australia to create furniture and gifts made from timber locally sourced from the Gumatj, an Aboriginal Corporation in Nhulunbuy, blended with sustainably harvested, specialty Australian timbers. The unique and beautiful pieces are now well-known and loved across Australia and around the world.

In 2019, Manapan Crocodile Lamps and other pieces were showcased at the world's biggest furniture and design expo in Milan. Several are now displayed in Australian embassies in Europe and locations in the US. Manapan has been featured in Vogue and GQ and commissioned by Cartier and Qantas.

'We're creating jobs for the kids when they finish school' - Josiah Baker



L - R: Jordan Gaykamangu, Adam Baker, Dawson Garrawurra and Josiah Baker.

In 2023, Manapan Furniture delivered the Gundar Nungalinya (Old Man Rock) Table, designed by Josiah Baker, to NT's Government House for permanent use and display.

Last year was particularly significant for the company and academy. In August, they received a Northern Territory Indigenous Business Networks Blak Business award in the field of construction and resources. Then, in November, they were named as the NT winner of the Telstra Best of Business Award in the Building Communities category.

Josiah, who is now responsible for many of the furniture designs, says, 'We're creating jobs for the kids when they finish school'. Having become a fully qualified carpenter through the Academy, he now feels inspired to teach others and has recently been teaching his son, Adam.

Josiah and others are eager to continue providing new challenges and opportunities for further skill-building. Manapan and the ALPA recently collaborated on the construction of 60 pieces of furniture for a remote housing project.

Trainees and staff had to develop simple, affordable designs for everyday furniture, such as small tables and chairs, beds, and TV units, and adapt to constructing them in more of a production line system than they had previously experienced. The results were functional and beautifully made.

Manapan is now striving to 'see the children and grandchildren working within the community and gaining the skills and qualifications that will sustain their community for future generations'.

Visit manapan.com.au/



Member round-up



The Reading Writing Hotline, established in 1994, is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. The national telephone referral service for adult literacy and numeracy responded to around 4000 calls in 2023. A special event will be held in Sydney on 3 April. www.readingwritinghotline.edu.au/

Staff and volunteers involved with **Linkwest** member centres in WA are currently building or refreshing skills during Be Connected Digital Mentor Training. The training, presented by the Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association (ASCCA), is an opportunity for centres to ensure they have the expertise to support the digital skills of community members over 50. ascca.org.au/

Charles Darwin University has run a second highly successful gathering of First Nations students from across the NT to explore pathways into health qualifications and careers. The program, which emphasises how First Nations students can incorporate their traditional knowledge into Western education, introduces students to fields including community-controlled health care, occupational therapy and speech pathology, emergency health care, psychology, health policy, and research. cdu.edu.au/news/health-program-attracts-students-across-nt

Laverton Community Education Centre is again offering its 'Stepping Forward to Independence' course for young Victorians with a permanent cognitive impairment or intellectual disability. Participants complete a 22567VIC Certificate I in Transition Education two days per week, while Tuesdays and Thursdays are devoted to life, health and well-being skills to support the transition to a more independent, adult life. lcec.vic.edu.au/courses/stepping-forward-to-independence/

Sports Turf Management students at the **Canberra Institute of Technology** (CIT) spent their summer

helping to prepare courses for some of Australia's biggest golf tournaments. Annabelle Southall, a 21-year-old student (pictured above), became the first female apprentice to be crowned Graduate of the Year by the ACT Sports Turf Managers Association (ASTMA). CIT teacher, Jon Tait, said the course – which attracts students from Canberra and surrounding regions, including the NSW South Coast and Riverina – is ideal for people who love working outdoors. cit.edu.au/news/cit_turf_students_make_cut

Place-based learning and development to support communities affected by natural disasters has been identified as a key priority in a guide developed with the assistance of **Queensland neighbourhood centres**. With more Australian communities dealing with the impacts of natural disasters, the need is increasing for local adult education providers to help their communities prepare, cope and recover. The guide suggests that Qld centres could be the ideal facilitators of community workshops in disaster resilience. ncq.org.au/queensland-neighbourhood-centres-strategy-for-disaster-resilience-2023-2026-officially-launched/



ACE Update

Adult Learning Australia commends the Australian Government for deciding that Australia will re-join the OECD's international research pact. ALA has long advocated for participation as this research will provide policy-makers with a better understanding of Australian foundation skill needs. [ministers.dewr.gov.au/oconnor/key-research-bolsters-drive-improve-foundation-skills-0](https://www.ministers.dewr.gov.au/oconnor/key-research-bolsters-drive-improve-foundation-skills-0)

The City of Hobart has become Australia's second UNESCO City of Literature. Libraries Tasmania Executive Director, Sue McKerracher, said the designation would be used to promote 'reading, writing and a love of books as something for everyone'. hobartcity.com.au/Council/News-publications-and-announcements/Latest-news/Hobart-successfully-nominated-as-a-City-of-Literature

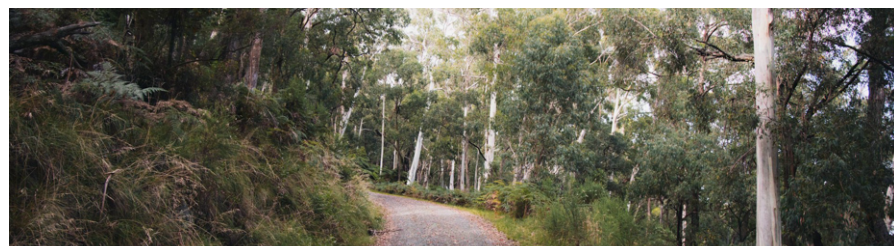


Former TAFE Queensland CEO, Mary Campbell, received a Public Service Medal (PSM) in the Australia Day Honours for outstanding public service to vocational education and training in Queensland. The honour acknowledged Mary's collaborative and inclusive leadership across her 36-year career in the sector.

Community Colleges Australia CEO, Ross Hawkins, was recently interviewed on the What Now? What Next? Insights into Australia's tertiary education sector podcast, which focuses on 'education for adults on a human scale'. You can listen to the podcast episode here: podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/russ-hawkins-cca-members-offer-education-for-adults/id1465708674?i=1000643291475

The University of Adelaide Library is trialling recreational reading zones in its academic libraries to promote student wellbeing. These informal student spaces, containing non-academic print fiction and non-fiction books, will encourage students to take a break from the stress of university life through leisure reading. Lana DiStefano will discuss the trial at the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) national conference in Adelaide (6-9 May). alianational2024.alia.org.au/program/

TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) annual conference will be held in Sydney on 8 and 9 May. The conference will explore TAFE's role in vocational education, skills development, and training. To register, visit tdaconvention.com.au/



Mount Riddell, Healesville by Pat Whelen

In case you missed them, the most viewed National Council for Vocation Education Research (NCVER) publications in 2023 were:

- ◆ [Beyond the standard: motivators of high-performing RTOs](#)
- ◆ [VET delivery in regional, rural, and remote Australia: barriers and facilitators](#)
- ◆ [Student equity in VET 2021: participation, achievement, and outcomes](#)
- ◆ [Drivers of student training choices - a focus on student support services](#)
- ◆ [Effective teaching practices and student support services in online VET](#)

The contribution of workplace experiences on lifelong learning is the focus of ALA's special edition of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning. Full copies are available to ALA members. ajal.net.au/latest-issue/

Visit our website to find previous issues of Quest and individual stories for sharing. ala.asn.au

QUEST

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CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Jenny Macaffer

WRITER and EDITOR

Sophie Arnold comms@ala.asn.au

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Kathleen Priestly (TAS)

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Isabel Osuna-Gatty (SA)

CONTACT



Adult Learning Australia
Henderson House
45 Moreland St.
Footscray VIC 3011



03 9689 8623



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