

From literacy to lifelong learning

Prebudget submission
2025



ADULT
LEARNING
AUSTRALIA

From Literacy to Learning

Reimagining Our Futures Through Lifelong Learning

Introduction

In an era marked by rapid technological advancements, shifting economic landscapes, and dynamic societal changes, the imperative to evolve our education and training systems must take a more holistic and strategic approach, embracing a literacy-to-lifelong learning framework across our society, through a range of government departments at all levels and our communities.

This submission outlines recommendations that Adult Learning Australia (ALA) believes will significantly strengthen lifelong learning in Australia and the adult community education (ACE) sector, supporting our communities in building socio-economic capital and driving real economic savings for the government. These measures have been informed by our decades of work in this field, recent member surveys, and consultations with Australian adult education providers across the sector.

ALA welcomes the Albanese Government's engagement with the adult community education sector and values the opportunity to contribute to Australian government advisory committees and working groups. Over the past few years, ALA has actively participated in initiatives such as the JSA Foundation Skills Study Steering Committee, the VET Workforce Blueprint Advisory Committee, the Foundation Skills Advisory Group, and the SEE First Nations Stream Working Group. We acknowledge the important plans and strategies that have emerged from this work, including the National Skills Agreement (NSA) and its recognition of the ACE sector, the National Foundation Skills Strategy 2025–2035, the VET Workforce Blueprint and others.

A government committed to building economic and social resilience and productivity across our communities will actively encourage and invest in more effective and efficient charitable/community organisations like adult and community education providers in delivering better outcomes for our local communities.

According to [UNESCO's Fifth Global Report](#) on Adult Learning and Education, the ultimate twenty-first-century skill is the ability to learn. The report found that the main challenge for adult learning and education across the globe is to reach those who need it most.

Opportunities to continue learning throughout our lives are essential — not just for a more knowledgeable workforce, but for our physical and mental well-being, the health of our communities, and for a just and democratic civil society. We believe the key to Australia's future is lifelong learning.

ALA welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Federal Budget process and to engage in discussions about any issues this submission raises.

Executive Summary

We need a national approach that is fairer and includes adult education programs that build a bridge between adults with low skills and lifelong learning opportunities.

The reality is that those most in need are deprived of opportunities to re-engage in education, entrenching disadvantage and making them vulnerable to unemployment and social isolation.

ALA is calling on the Australian Government to adopt a broader perspective on training, skills, and education. We urge support for our call to action for a lifelong learning policy and inclusion of funding for high-quality adult community education programs that respond to community needs, fostering a fairer Australia for everyone. Learning has no expiry date.

ALA is calling for:

1. Development of a national lifelong learning policy backed by a comprehensive twenty-year plan.
2. Research of key priority areas.
3. Accessible professional development opportunities for the ACE sector
4. Support for other strategic projects

About us

In 2025, Adult Learning Australia (ALA) celebrates 65 years as a national not-for-profit organisation advocating for lifelong learning for all Australians. ALA is the largest national peak body for adult learning and community education in Australia with both organisational and individual members in all states and territories who reflect the diversity of adult learning and community education.

Over the decades, ALA has played a pivotal role in supporting adult learning and community education to foster personal growth, strengthening communities, and building pathways to employment and further education through adult and community education for learners. Our legacy is grounded in the belief that lifelong learning is the foundation of individual empowerment, social cohesion, and national prosperity.

ALA exists to provide leadership and professional development that advances quality services for all adult learners who reflect the diversity of adult learning and community education, including community learning centres, community colleges, neighbourhood houses, TAFEs, and other adult education institutions.

ALA is a well-regarded and trusted long-term leader in the field of adult learning and community education. Our vision is for equitable access to learning for all Australians to support social cohesion and economic prosperity.

About ACE

The ACE sector focuses on the needs of adults in the community in which it operates. ACE's starting point is to provide learning opportunities that meet the needs of adults in local communities and to build local capacity for community development and resilience.

ACE organisations are often the only 'on the ground' providers of post-school education in local neighbourhoods and small rural locations. They exist in towns and communities with small populations that can't sustain a TAFE or university campus, or where the education market is too small to attract private for-profit operators. In larger communities, they supplement the work of a TAFE or university by offering non-accredited and accredited VET pathway programs and providing a range of VET courses to adult learners. The extent and scope of ACE providers varies across states and territories, influenced by each jurisdiction's history, level of support, policy direction, and overall commitment.

The ACE sector plays a significant role in positively contributing to the socio-economic status of our communities and offers accessible lifelong learning opportunities that respond to the needs of adults within local communities. ACE provision includes formal vocational and education training (VET), adult basic education (foundation), as well as personal interest learning (enrichment). ACE programs offer vital support to the 1 in 7 Australians whose literacy skills prevent them from completing everyday tasks.

The ACE sector adopts a learner-centred focus and serves as an enabler of inclusive learning. ACE recognises that there is no 'traditional student'; rather, there exists a spectrum of learners with diverse needs and preferences, necessitating a learner-responsive pedagogical design.

ACE revolves around learning approaches that actively engage adults in the process, fostering personal, social, and intellectual development. It employs adult learning principles that empower learners to take ownership of the learning process through active participation, hands-on learning, real-time demonstration of skills, co-learning via shared tasks, and reflection on their experiences. This reflection includes changes in their perceptions, goals, confidence, and motivations for future learning.

ACE providers are community-owned and managed, not-for-profit organisations with adult education as their primary focus. They maintain extensive networks within their local communities, particularly with social service providers.

Why it matters now

As we reflect on our history, we must also look to the future, recognising the critical role lifelong learning will play in addressing the challenges of a rapidly evolving workforce, the impacts of climate change, political and social upheaval, and demographic shifts such as an ageing population and regions facing under or over population.

In October 2022, during the Transforming Education Summit in New York, Australia reaffirmed its dedication to inclusive and equitable quality education by presenting its [National Statement of Commitment to Transform Education](#). This statement underscores Australia's efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) especially [SDG 4](#),

which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The commitment highlights Australia's focus on continuous improvement and targeted actions to transform education, ensuring that all individuals have access to quality learning experiences. This includes promoting both excellence and equity within the education system, as outlined in [national educational goals](#).

Our rapidly changing world calls for opportunities to learn throughout life, for individual fulfilment, social cohesion and economic prosperity. International evidence from UNESCO's [Institute for Lifelong Learning](#) (UIL) highlights the transformative power of lifelong learning to improve health and wellbeing outcomes, enhance economic participation, and foster stronger, more inclusive communities. Similarly, a recent article in UK publication FE Week warns that leaving adults behind in the AI revolution risks widening inequalities¹, urging immediate investment in adult education to equip individuals with the skills necessary for the future workforce.

Our commitment means advocating for policies and practices that ensure all Australians, regardless of background, have access to lifelong learning opportunities. It means addressing barriers such as financial constraints, geographical isolation, and systemic inequities that prevent many from fully participating in learning. It also requires flexible and inclusive approaches to education that cater to the unique needs of adult learners, including those second chance learners returning to learning later in life, those navigating career transitions, and those pursuing personal growth.

We need to reimagine lifelong learning to embrace its potential as a tool for social justice. Adult learning plays a crucial role in reducing inequality, fostering civic participation and democracy, and building social cohesion. Through education, individuals gain the skills and confidence to participate fully in their communities and advocate for their rights and better understand their civic responsibilities. In turn, communities become stronger, enriched by diverse perspectives and collective knowledge.

It is also about expanding learning environments. Traditional classrooms are no longer the sole domain of education. Lifelong learning takes place in neighbourhood houses, community centres, libraries, outdoor locations, workplaces, and digital spaces and more. By expanding where and how people learn, we can ensure lifelong learning remains accessible, relevant and responsive to diverse needs.

Lifelong learning does more than empower individuals—it drives innovation, economic resilience, and sustainability. It equips individuals with the skills needed to adapt to changing industries, fosters entrepreneurial thinking and enables communities to tackle complex challenges collaboratively.

By framing lifelong learning as a tool for empowerment, equity, and adaptability, we can address pressing socio-economic and environmental challenges - while nurturing hope, and a more sustainable future for all.

¹ <https://feweek.co.uk/its-dumb-to-leave-adults-lagging-in-the-ai-revolution/>

In the current state of global socio-economic challenges, lifelong learning has a critical role to play in fostering resilience, adaptability, social inclusion and equity. Here's how it can help:

1. Upskilling for Workforce Transformation

- Lifelong learning equips individuals with the skills to adapt to technological advancements, such as AI, automation, and the green economy.
- It supports transitions into emerging industries, reducing the risk of unemployment in declining sectors.

2. Reducing Inequality

- Education and training accessible throughout life can bridge gaps for marginalised communities, fostering social mobility and reducing disparities.
- Programs designed for second-chance learners or those without formal education can unlock opportunities for sustainable livelihoods.

3. Enhancing Community Resilience

- Lifelong learning in community settings builds local knowledge and networks, fostering collective solutions to challenges like climate change, housing, and healthcare.
- It supports intergenerational and community learning, where shared knowledge strengthens social cohesion.

4. Promoting Well-Being

- Beyond economic benefits, learning improves mental health, confidence, and purpose.
- Creative and cultural learning fosters individual growth and community connection, combating isolation and burnout.

5. Supporting Civic Engagement

- Lifelong education empowers individuals to engage in civic life, understand societal challenges, and participate in decision-making processes.
- This informed engagement is vital for addressing global issues, from climate justice to democratic governance.

6. Sustaining Growth in Crisis

- During economic downturns or disruptions, continuous learning helps economies pivot by enabling workers to retrain and redeploy efficiently.
- Lifelong learning strengthens the foundation for innovation, entrepreneurship, and recovery.

7. Advancing Sustainability and Climate Action

- Lifelong learning can equip individuals and communities with the knowledge and skills to address climate change, energy transitions, and environmental sustainability.

- Education for sustainable development fosters green skills, from renewable energy expertise to circular economy practices.
- Community-based learning initiatives empower people to adopt sustainable lifestyles, advocate for climate action, and contribute to a just energy transition.

8. Unlocking the Transformative Power of Joy and Creativity

- Lifelong learning isn't just about survival and adaptation; it's also about enjoyment, creativity, and the intrinsic joy of discovery.
- These aspects are vital, especially in challenging socio-economic times, as they nurture well-being and a sense of purpose.
- In times of uncertainty, focusing on the joy and creativity of learning can counterbalance stress and instability.
- Learning isn't just a means to an end—it's a lifelong journey that enriches us in countless ways.

ALA recommendations

To ensure Australia is equipped to meet the many current and future challenges, ALA proposes the following recommendations:

1. Develop a National Lifelong Learning Policy Backed by a Comprehensive Twenty Year Plan

The development of a national lifelong learning policy backed by a comprehensive twenty-year plan is imperative. As one of the 193 countries committed to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (SDGs), Australia aligns with achieving a better and more sustainable future through the 17 identified objectives. The SDGs serve as a global call to action, urging partners worldwide to collaborate in ending poverty, enhancing health and education, reducing inequality, and addressing climate change. Specifically, SDG 4 emphasises inclusive and equitable quality education, endorsing lifelong learning opportunities both within Australia and across the region through the country's aid investments.

Resilient and equitable lifelong learning communities must be established to meet the evolving demands of the modern workplace and society, enhancing productivity and empowering individuals. According to the OECD, lifelong learning creates "a society of individuals who are motivated to continue learning throughout their lives—both formally and informally". However, significant challenges persist, particularly regarding equity, as an individual's motivation or ability to learn is influenced by social, cultural, or economic circumstances.

Lifelong learning communities cultivate a culture of learning, strengthening pathways to further education and well-being through collaboration, engagement, and advocacy. They position learning as an activity that occurs anywhere, not just in formal settings, and mobilise resources to foster empowerment, social inclusion, prosperity, and sustainability through learning.

Elevating the status of lifelong learning to a national priority is crucial to unlocking the true potential of all Australians. Australia requires a long-term approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness of informal, non-formal, and formal learning, supported by a comprehensive, whole-of-government strategy.

Lifelong learning should be a priority at all levels of government, with a national policy providing clear direction for the future. A strong commitment to lifelong learning can foster a more inclusive system, supporting at-risk groups facing economic and social polarisation, particularly adults with low literacy, numeracy, and digital skills.

ACTION: Include ALA on relevant advisory panels to guide the process and bring together the different streams of learning, ensuring a unified and inclusive approach to lifelong learning policy

2. Undertake Research in Key Priority Areas

Establish research priorities that drive evidence-based policy and practice to support lifelong learning and enhance opportunities for adult learners. This research will provide the evidence necessary to guide policy decisions, program development, and funding allocation to optimise access to adult education.

2.1 Undertake a National ACE Scan

Conduct a comprehensive national survey of adult education programs provided by ACE to fill the existing gap in up-to-date data as identified in the National Foundation Skills Strategy². The research will map and measure the reach of ACE across Australia, evaluating the sector's capacity and capability to foster lifelong learning and facilitate pathways to work and further education. This data will inform targeted strategies, funding, and policy decisions to enhance access to ACE and support the development of adult basic education and lifelong learning opportunities.

2.2 Evaluate How ACE and TAFE Work Together to Enhance Learner Outcomes

Research the complementary role of ACE alongside TAFE programs, particularly in disadvantaged areas such as regional, rural, and remote regions. Examine how ACE can support transitions into vocational education and training (VET), ensuring that ACE programs are aligned with the needs of learners and the workforce. The research will assess ACE's unique contribution to TAFE and higher education, helping to shape future collaborations and policies that integrate the sectors.

2.3 Research the Health, Wellbeing, and Social Benefits of ACE

Invest in research that quantifies the health, wellbeing, and social benefits of adult education, exploring how learning in ACE settings fosters improved mental and physical health, as well as social cohesion. This research will provide concrete evidence to support

² <https://www.dewr.gov.au/national-skills-agreement/resources/national-foundation-skills-strategy-20252035>, pg 5.

policy and program development aimed at promoting adult learning as a means to enhance overall community well-being.

ACTION: Engage Adult Learning Australia in the research process and provide it with the necessary resources to ensure that diverse perspectives and practical insights from across the adult education sector are integrated into the development of these research priorities.

3. Develop Accessible Professional Development Opportunities for the ACE sector

To ensure the sustainability of the ACE sector, ongoing professional development is essential for the workforce to stay current with evolving knowledge, skills, and roles. This is particularly critical for addressing the national skills shortage of qualified adult LLND educators and supporting both professionals and volunteers in the adult LLN workforce.

ALA, an experienced provider of professional development, was recommended in the 2022 Senate Inquiry Report, [Don't Take It as Read](#), to be funded for ongoing professional development for LLN educators, yet this recommendation has not been realised.

A range of initiatives, including professional development and scholarships, can help alleviate the current shortage of teachers. Additionally, specialised training for adult educators working with disadvantaged and at-risk communities should be promoted, alongside fostering collaboration between ACE, TAFEs, universities, and industry.

Action: Provide funding for ALA to establish and manage an online learning portal offering professional development opportunities for adult educators, and strengthening the sector's capacity, particularly in rural, regional, and remote areas.

4. Additional Strategic Recommendations

4.1 Support the Rollout of Learning Cities

Identify learner deserts and provide incentives to expand the development of Learning Cities/Communities across Australia. Building on successful models such as Melton and Wyndham (Vic), Canning (WA), and Circular Head (Tas), this initiative can be extended to aspirational towns and cities like Ballarat, Tamworth, and Wollongong, which are eager to pursue Learning Cities status. Learning Cities foster community-wide participation in lifelong learning, driving economic growth, social inclusion, and cultural enrichment. ALA will collaborate with the Australian Learning Communities Network (ALCN) to advance this initiative.

4.2 Foundation Skills for ATSI Prisoners

Partner with ATSI ACE providers on a multi-year project to create non-accredited foundation skills programs for prisoners and post-release individuals. This initiative seeks to rebuild confidence, develop "learn-to-learn" skills, and support successful reintegration, addressing the overrepresentation of ATSI people in the prison population. It will also include funding for ACE formal and non-formal education programs for offenders on community-based orders, providing critical pathways for rehabilitation.

4.3 Amplify the Adult Learner Voice

Fund ALA to enhance Adult Learners Week by establishing year-round programs that

amplify the voices of adult learners³, particularly those from marginalised groups (e.g., ATSI, people with disabilities). This initiative will ensure that learners' stories and experiences influence education and training policies, fostering greater equity, inclusivity, and responsiveness in the sector.

4.4 Protect the Hybrid Financial System: Cash Matters

The Australian Government must urgently develop legislation to safeguard the availability of cash in a hybrid financial system, ensuring equitable access to financial services for all Australians. As banks and supermarkets withdraw cash services, vulnerable groups, especially those already disadvantaged, face increasing isolation. ALA will submit recommendations to the Mandating Cash Acceptance consultation paper in February advocating for the continued acceptance of cash in essential services, ensuring that a cashless society does not deepen existing inequalities.

Rationale for investment

ACE provides critical skills development for adults, addressing workforce shortages and improving employability, particularly among disadvantaged groups.

- **Social Inclusion:** Lifelong learning reduces inequality by creating accessible pathways for people from all walks of life to participate in education and training.
- **Health and Wellbeing:** Evidence from UIL and Australian studies highlights the positive correlation between adult education, improved mental health, and stronger community ties.
- **Social Justice and Equity:** Lifelong learning is a cornerstone of social justice, promoting equity by addressing systemic barriers to education and creating opportunities for marginalised groups.
- **Building a Lifelong Learning Culture:** Promoting a culture of lifelong learning across communities fosters adaptability, resilience, and innovation, ensuring Australia's workforce and society are equipped to thrive in a changing world. By embedding lifelong learning as a societal norm, we can enhance productivity, civic engagement, and individual fulfillment on a national scale.

Conclusion

ALA's 2025 pre-budget submission underscores that Australia's future depends on investing in lifelong learning. Learning has no expiry date - it is the foundation for economic resilience, social cohesion, and individual empowerment.

Yet, our adult learning system remains inequitable and unfair. Public policy focuses almost exclusively on TAFE, universities, and workforce training, leaving many Australians, especially those most in need without opportunities to re-engage in education through soft entry points, such as learn to learn programs – informal, and non-formal education. This entrenches disadvantage and increases vulnerability to unemployment and social isolation.

ALA is committed to achieving effective learning outcomes for all Australians. We would welcome the opportunity to further collaborate with government and other sectors to expand

³ <https://learningchangeslives.org.au/scholarships/>

access to education especially for disadvantaged and marginalised adult learners, so they can build better social and economic futures.

Adult and Community Education (ACE) is a vital investment in Australia's future. To truly 'leave no one behind,' the 2025–26 Federal Budget must prioritise lifelong learning to enhance employment, education, and training outcomes while strengthening social and civic life.

In a rapidly changing world, ongoing learning opportunities are essential. Investing in ACE will create a more inclusive, skilled, and resilient nation, prepared for future challenges. We urge the Australian Government to place lifelong learning at the core of the federal budget and collaborate with ALA to make this vision a reality.

Reimagining lifelong learning means shaping a future where education is accessible, inclusive, and transformative for all. We urge the Australian Government to place lifelong learning at the heart of the federal budget and partner with ALA to make this vision a reality.

We look forward to further discussions on our proposed measures. With strong leadership from the Australian Government, we can reverse the decline in access to quality adult education.

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