

QUEST

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IN THIS ISSUE

- ◆ Learning in Motion
- ◆ CEO Message
- ◆ Introducing the ALA Board
- ◆ Meet our new Board members
- ◆ Adult Learners Week 2026
- ◆ Thanking Kathleen
- ◆ ACE News

Christopher Ward ready for his Sunday classroom

Learning in motion

What the bitumen teaches a veteran practitioner about adult learning.

By Christopher Ward

On any given Monday, you can find me deep in the formal architecture of Australian vocational education. For the past 11 years, my primary world has been the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE). I have trained and assessed the TAE across three different training package iterations - TAE40110, TAE40116, and the current TAE40122 - delivering it both online and face-to-face for various private RTOs and public TAFEs, currently at North Metropolitan TAFE in Western Australia.

When I am not training the next generation of VET practitioners, I am coordinating educational technology and mentoring subjects for Charles Sturt University or analysing professional development data for my PhD at Deakin University. I'm also a Board Member at Adult Learning Australia. Over the past couple of years, I have stepped onto national stages at conferences like the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), the Australian Council of Deans of Education Vocational Education Group (ACDEVEG), and the Australasian Vocational Education & Training Research Association (AVETRA) to present my research on professional development for

VET practitioners. My professional life is governed by training packages, data models, and national compliance.

But on a Sunday morning, none of those matter.

On weekends, my classroom changes entirely. There are no learning management systems, mapping matrices, or assessment rubrics. Instead, there is a petrol station car park, the rumble of an engine, and a nervous adult learner rider looking at me through a helmet visor.

I do not operate as a formal motorcycle instructor. Instead, I am part of a social-media-driven community where experienced riders volunteer their time to "shadow" learner riders on the open road. We connect digitally, but the learning happens on the bitumen. My role is simple but high stakes: ride behind them on my own motorcycle, act as a physical buffer against traffic, and give them the literal "seat time" they need to build road confidence.

It is a world away from a national conference lectern or a TAFE classroom, yet it is some of the purest adult education I have ever witnessed.

(Story continues on p. 3)

Message from the CEO



“Education must once again be understood as a key driver of a more caring, just and sustainable world.”

In 2014, I was lucky enough to visit Costa Rica to attend the **United Nations' University for Peace** (UPEACE), where I completed a Certificate in Education for Sustainable Development. I studied alongside learners from all over the world who were committed to reimagining the role of education in shaping a more just and sustainable future. It was an experience that continues to echo through my work today.

The course was grounded in the principles of the **Earth Charter**, a global ethical framework developed by visionaries over a decade and adopted in 2000. It sets out 16 principles organised under four pillars: Respect and Care for the Community of Life; Ecological Integrity; Social and Economic Justice; and Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace. Together, these principles articulate a vision that turns conscience into action and extends our ethical imagination, inviting us to consider the rights of the planet itself and our responsibilities as part of a wider living system.

I often return to a phrase which I first encountered during my time at UPEACE: 'Education as if the Earth mattered'. It is a powerful framing which puts ecological considerations and concerns at the heart of education. But increasingly, I find myself asking whether we now need to go further - towards education as if humans matter. Not as a retreat from ecological thinking, but as a reminder that the erosion of human rights, dignity, and sense of belonging is also at the heart of our global crises.

The evolution of human rights frameworks was once a defining achievement of the modern world. Yet many of the conditions that gave rise to that are now under strain or have stagnated. Australia, for example, still does not have a national Human Rights Act or Charter. This remains a critical gap in our democratic system, one that organisations such as ALA have consistently highlighted through our advocacy work, including our engagement with the **Stronger Charities Alliance** and in our **recent submission** to the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion, available on our website.

At its core, education must once again be understood as a key driver of a more caring, just and sustainable world. As Dr Sam Crowell and Mirian Vilela of the Earth Charter - my teachers in 2014 and still active global advocates with the Charter - reminded me, we need new ways of thinking that allow us to co-create systems capable of sustaining life, dignity, and possibility.

We are living through a period of profound transformation: accelerating technological change, the rise of artificial intelligence, deepening mistrust in institutions, and the resurgence of polarising political movements across the world. In this context, education cannot be neutral or passive. It must help us make sense of complexity while holding onto our shared humanity.

We also need to keep our stories alive, so we don't lose what they have to tell us about our origins, our mistakes, our achievements. Oral histories, particularly those of Indigenous peoples, remind us that knowledge is carried through language, place, and relationship. They call us back to deep learning in ways that modern systems often forget, while also speaking in ways the contemporary world can understand and learn from.

It is difficult not to feel overwhelmed at times by all that is going on right now. The temptation is to withdraw, or to assume someone else will carry the responsibility. Yet education and learning offer another path: a return to connection, to knowledge, to nature, and to the understanding that we are all earthlings - regardless of colour, creed, or background.

This is the spirit behind **Adult Learners Week** (ALW) and this year's national theme, Follow Your Compass. It is our invitation to learners everywhere to trust their direction, to navigate change with curiosity and courage, and to show that learning is not a destination but a lifelong practice of becoming. In a complex world with many twists and turns, following your compass is also about finding meaning, purpose, and connection with others.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank our outgoing Board members, Kathleen Priestly and Professor Annette Foley, and warmly congratulate our new Board members, Zoe Gow and Associate Professor Trace Ollis, along with those Board members continuing in their roles. Their leadership helps to deepen the work of Adult Learning Australia at a time when it is needed more than ever.

We hope you all enjoy this edition of *Quest*.

Jenny Macaffer, CEO

Seventeen years, two degrees and two wheels

My journey in this sector started 17 years ago, well before I had a Bachelor of Adult and Vocational Education or a Master of Education. I began in the corporate telecommunications world, delivering unaccredited, in-house technical training on Internet technologies, exchange configuration, customer service and sales. It was practical, immediate, and capability driven.

Over nearly two decades, I moved into the formal VET sector, teaching leadership and management, business, and accumulating a stack of Diplomas in auditing, WHS, and management along the way, before specialising deeply in training and adult education (TAE).

When I look at a nervous learner rider sitting on a Learner Approved Motorcycle Scheme motorcycle at a busy traffic light, I see the exact same adult learners I have worked with for 17 years. In my formal classrooms, students often reflect deeply on how learning feels - how anxiety or confidence interacts with their motivation and their ability to complete a task.

On the bitumen, it is the same. Novice motorcyclists constantly reflect on how they feel nervous, and how overwhelming the sheer volume of real-world information input can be to manage. Yet, paradoxically, they often describe the act of riding as a form of therapy. It is a unique cocktail of fun, danger, hyper-focus, and relaxation.

Even though I am not there as an accredited instructor, my instincts as a VET practitioner inevitably kick in. I know how to scaffold an experience to manage that cognitive overload. When we pull over for a coffee, we do not do a formal assessment; we do an informal, peer-to-peer reflection. We talk about what went well, how they managed a difficult corner, and how to read road conditions. It is mentoring stripped of all institutional jargon.

In my formal classrooms, students often reflect deeply on how learning feels - how anxiety or confidence interacts with their motivation and their ability to complete a task. On the bitumen, it is the same

(Story continues on p. 4)



Christopher swaps one form of teaching for another



Adult learning can take many different forms and paths



A mobile classroom brings mentors and learners together on wheels

(story continued from p. 3)

Paying It Forward

People often ask me why I spend my weekends doing this. Training and assessing the TAE is energetic and mentally taxing work, and by Friday afternoon, I am exhausted. Yet, when Sunday morning rolls around, I realise that I miss teaching. Shadowing allows me to engage in my passion for education, but in a different context.

There is also a personal cycle to complete. When I was learning to ride, I had great experiences with motorcycle instructors who knew exactly how to calm my nerves and build my self-efficacy. Volunteering as a shadow rider is my way of paying that empathy forward.

As a researcher, my current PhD work at Deakin focuses on the value of professional development (PD) for VET practitioners. But my time on the road has taught me that some of the best PD happens entirely outside the system.

When you spend your life teaching others how to teach - breaking down competency standards and presenting data at AVETRA or NCVER - it is easy to become detached from what it feels like to be a beginner. Shadowing these riders enables me to reconnect with that raw emotional core of learning. It reminds me that, at its heart, education is about human connection, empathy, and building someone's self-efficacy. It makes me a more compassionate practitioner when I step back into the TAFE classroom on Monday morning.

The View from the ALA Board

As a Board Director for Adult Learning Australia, I am proud of the work we do as a national peak body to advocate for lifelong learning across the nation. Often, macro conversations in our community about adult education centre on funding models, policy shifts, and formal accredited pathways.

But as my weekend riding community proves, adult learning is a vast, beautiful continuum. It exists in community centres, TAFE campuses, universities, conference halls, and yes, even on the bitumen of our suburban streets.

When citizens organise themselves via a social media group to safely mentor, protect, and upskill one another, that is adult community education in its truest form. It is a reminder that no matter our age, our qualifications, or our roles, we are all just navigating the road ahead and we all do a little better when someone has our back in the rearview mirror.

Introducing the ALA Board



New ALA President John Sheen

Elections for the Board of Adult Learning Australia were held in May, and we are delighted to announce the new Board team:

EXECUTIVE

President — John Sheen (Victoria)

Vice President — Isabel Osuna-Gatty (South Australia)

Secretary — Ros Bauer (New South Wales)

Treasurer — Tim Catterall (New South Wales)

Deputy Treasurer — Dr Ron Wilson (Victoria)

BOARD MEMBERS

Zoe Gow (South Australia)

Fleur Lerwill (South Australia)

Dr Robyn Ober (Northern Territory)

Dr Trace Ollis (Victoria)

Dr Piper Rodd (Victoria)

Christopher Ward (Western Australia)

The Board brings together an exceptional diversity of expertise and experience from across Australia, and we look forward to their contribution and impact.

Read more about our Board members at

ala.asn.au/about-us/who-we-are/

Our 2026 Annual General Meeting was held on May 22, with guest speaker NDIS Commissioner Louise Glanville, who generously shared her expertise on the topic Contributing to a Sustainable NDIS through Learning.

Louise's talk received great feedback from attendees – "Such valuable insights, Louise – educating vulnerable people to find their voice when things are not right" is just one example. If you missed it, you can watch her presentation here: ala.asn.au/professional-development/recorded-sessions/

A Message from ALA President John Sheen

"Having worked for many years in one of Australia's most culturally diverse communities, I see every day the power of adult and community education in helping people to participate more fully in work, learning and community life.

There is no doubt that community-based learning builds skills, fosters a sense of purpose and belonging, and creates more connected communities. It's a vital investment in Australia's future.

As Adult Learning Australia's new President, I look forward to using my skills and experience to assist ALA's fantastic work, particularly its advocacy for greater recognition of and support for the ACE sector.

My sincere thanks to outgoing President Kathleen Priestly and outgoing past President Professor Annette Foley for their exceptional contribution across many years of involvement with ALA. Thank you too to all ALA members and friends for your ongoing support.

It's an honour to take on the role of ALA President and I'm really excited about what together we can achieve for adult education and lifelong learning opportunities across Australia."

Meet Our New Board Members



Zoe Gow is ACE Program Manager and Coordinator at **Pooraka Farm Community Centre** (PFCC) in Adelaide and has more than 20 years' experience in the not-for-profit sector.

Zoe brings a broad skill set across program development, stakeholder engagement, community service delivery, as well with practical experience supporting governance processes and audit compliance. She has contributed to Skills SA pilot programs, introduced micro-credentials to ACE, and serves as a mentor for new providers.

As the parent of adult children living with disability and complex chronic illness, Zoe also has state-level advocacy experience and direct lived experience of the barriers people face, which drives her commitment to building inclusive, supportive learning environments where participants can grow in confidence and connection.

"I am really excited about the opportunity to join the ALA Board; the whole ethos of the organisation is something that sits close to my heart. As someone who has done accredited training in my early career in this sector and then developed a vast range of skills while in my current role, I know that I have skills and experience that will be beneficial to the Board."

ALA has a deep understanding of the opportunities within our sector, and I am looking forward to supporting and advocating in this space.

One key opportunity for our sector is to recognise place-based, informal learning and work experience. I think it should be recognised for its ability to support communities and the economy as a whole.

Learning is what makes us human and all forms of it should be celebrated. When we uplift learning in all its forms, we recognise that it has impact on our civic, personal, and professional lives."



Dr Trace Ollis is an Associate Professor at Deakin University and specialises in adult education and lifelong learning within Adult Community Education settings (ACE). Her research and work have made a significant contribution both nationally and internationally to understanding how adult learning across all contexts transforms individual lives and communities.

Trace served as Principal Editor of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning, ALA's flagship journal, for more than seven years. She is a member of the international adult learning network, PIMA, and of the Australian Council of Deans of Education, Vocational Education Group (ACDEVEG). Tracey's recent research with Professor Annette Foley is on the Adult Community Education (ACE) Outcomes project, learning for study, work and life. She was recently appointed an Honorary Professor of Adult and Vocational Learning at Edgehill University in the United Kingdom.

"Joining the Board is representative of my ongoing commitment to the ACE sector. I'm always excited to work with Adult Learning Australia as it has a noticeably clear and well-developed purpose, and that broad mission and its learner focus is really important."

One of the most important things for me is adult learning and understanding diverse learners' needs. I'm also interested in giving further recognition to ACE teachers and coordinators - it's an under-recognised workforce, and a lowly paid workforce too. How do we raise the status of the sector in terms of promoting understanding of the learning that goes on in ACE spaces, which is transformative and remarkable?

My research is very deeply embedded in community, and I can bring to the ALA Board a current understanding of different types of adult learning that are going on not just in Australia, but also in other parts of the world."

ADULT LEARNERS WEEK

Follow your compass

1-8
SEPTEMBER
2026



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ADULT LEARNERS WEEK



1-8
SEPTEMBER
2026

Follow your compass

The countdown is on for Adult Learners Week 2026!

From September 1-8 this year, hundreds of events and activities across Australia will celebrate the life-changing power of learning using this year's theme of **Follow Your Compass: Learning for Life**.

The compass has been a vital tool for finding the right direction for thousands of years and across many cultures. Its arrival changed the world forever. With a compass, people could navigate and explore in many new and exciting ways – far from land at sea, on cloudy days, in unknown lands or on starless nights.

The compass today remains a powerful symbol of discovery and direction, with different types of compasses for different purposes and paths.

This similarity with learning's ability to reveal new paths and open up new horizons is a compelling one, and we are excited to see what events and themes you create from it.

Maybe it's past learners sharing inspiring stories of their journeys, or an event which showcases new learning pathways, or maybe an activity which explores the use of numeracy and literacy in compass and map reading – there are so many options!

#ALW2026 #FollowYourCompass #FindYourTrueNorth

Register your events

Open days, come and try sessions, online classes, community activities, awards ceremonies - whatever events you have planned for Adult Learners Week, register them **HERE** to have them promoted and help build momentum around learning.

Be an early bird and win a cash prize

Organisations which register their events before 24 July can win one of 20 prizes of \$200 to help cover event costs.

ALW 2026 Best Events

Be in the running for a prize of \$1000 as one of the week's three best events.

New: Learning Together Award for outstanding learner and educator duo

To celebrate this year's ALW, we are introducing a new **Learning Together Award**. This award recognises the incredible ways in which adult learners and educators

can learn from each other when they work together. Do you know an exceptional duo who have learnt from each other in transformative ways?

Nominate them **HERE** by 29 July.

Nominate an inspiring learner

Stories about students whose lives have been led in new directions by adult education are inspirational to others. Nominate an adult learner with an inspiring story for an Adult Learners Week scholarship **HERE** before 19 August.

Those stories will be shared across social media and winners will be announced during Adult Learners Week.

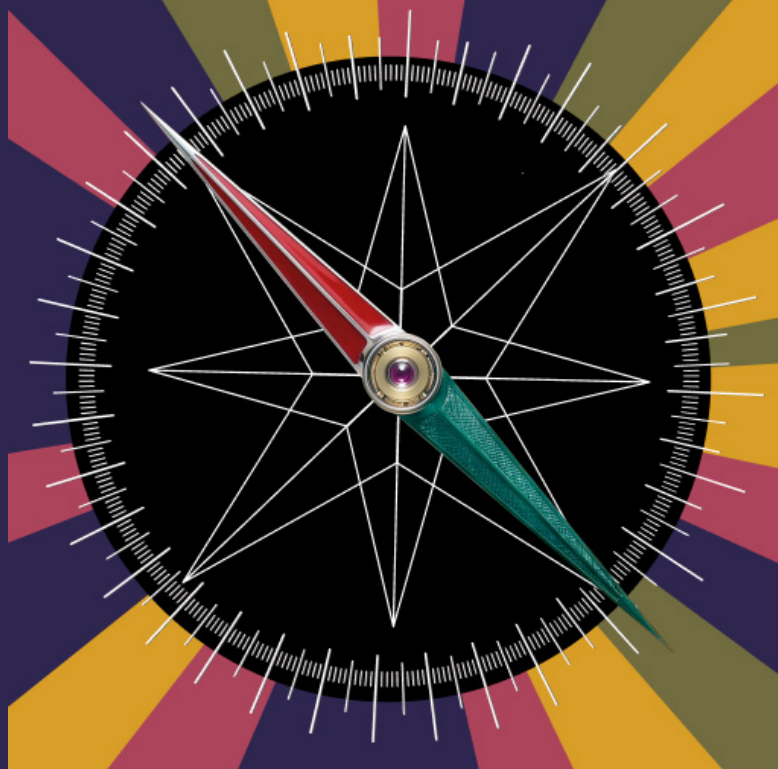
Check out the Adult Learners Week website and follow the ALW Facebook page

For tips and resources to set your #ALW2026 celebration on the right path, visit:

www.adultlearnersweek.org

www.facebook.com/adultlearnerswk/

Ten tips for exploring this year's ALW theme - Follow Your Compass: Learning for Life



1. Start planning early — Register your event early so you can go in the draw for an early bird prize. It's a great way to build buzz and get staff, volunteers and learners excited about and involved in planning Adult Learners Week 2026. Register here by 24 July.

2. Nominate an outstanding learner or educator for an Adult Learners Week scholarship, including our new Learning Together Award. Explore the 2026 Award categories and nominate someone here by 19 August.

3. Explore this year's theme — ALW 2026's theme of Follow Your Compass: Learning for Life offers plenty of event themes and ideas: whether it's stories of direction and discovery, skills in problem-solving and life navigation, mapping your learning journey, maybe an event about learning to read a map or use a compass – there are so many options!

4. Showcase what you do — Offer taster sessions of some of your classes, give guided tours or hold an Open Day, launch new programs or projects and showcase your successes.

5. Share stories — Invite former students to share their learning stories and the ways in which they have followed their compass; this could be at an in-person or online ALW event, or you could record their stories on your socials.

6. Tag ALW — When you're sharing photos, tips and stories about learners on your socials, use our ALW hashtags to share the excitement and get noticed! #ALW2026 #FindYourTrueNorth #FollowYourCompass

7. Spread the word — Keep your local media outlets updated with your plans for Adult Learners Week. Sending out a press release or calling the local editor well ahead of time will improve your chances of media coverage and send your message far and wide.

8. Invite your local member to attend your Adult Learners Week event – let's remind our political representatives how adult learning changes lives and strengthens communities.

9. Have fun and be creative — Brainstorm new ideas. Involve locals who have specialist skills. Make your ALW learning activities unique and interesting so that everyone, including staff and trainers, have a ball.

10. Finish on a high — Hosting an awards event or a wrap party that recognises the achievements and efforts of everyone involved is a fantastic way to end Adult Learners Week 2026!

www.adultlearnersweek.org

<https://www.facebook.com/adultlearnerswk/>

Our Thanks to Kathleen



After she stepped away from the ALA Board in May, Quest spoke to Kathleen Priestly about her time as a Board member, Vice President (2022-2023) and as President (2024-May 2026).

What led you to join the ALA Board?

I joined the ALA Board in 2021, and it was a good fit for me – I have always been very passionate about how learning opportunities can benefit people's lives. I am really interested in the informal learning opportunities that start people on learning journeys or re-engage them with learning.

What have been the highlights of your time on the Board since then?

Influencing and advocating for adult learning in all its forms. Engaging with other Board members who are passionate about learning and hearing what is happening in their states and territories. Celebrating the many different opportunities for people to engage in adult learning and hearing the stories of individual learners and their successes. A particular highlight was the launch of Adult Learners Week last September in my hometown of Devonport, which also marked 30 years of ALA coordinating that flagship national event.

In your role managing all libraries on the West Coast of Tasmania, you recently spent some time at the new Hub on King Island. What were your impressions?

I have been involved in planning conversations around the **King Island Hub** since about 2021 and I was keen to see it being used. It's a community building designed for multipurpose use and to provide a space on the island for training, conferences, digital access, and business services. It's also a beautiful and peaceful space that is a true asset to everyone who lives and works on the island.

The Hub is accompanied in an older refurbished building by 'The Study Hub', which provides a drop-in, facilitated study space which is a place of learning via free WiFi, conferences, seminars and regular webinars around learning opportunities.

Having a new beautiful space that is open to all enables residents to study without leaving the island and improves retention and completion rates for remote learners. It also supports the development of the island's workforce, supports social cohesion and recognises cost of living impacts by providing services locally.

New horizons for learning at the King Island Hub

What lessons are there from King Island when it comes to expanding learning opportunities across remote and regional communities?

Smaller communities often think that this type of service and place is too hard to achieve and so it's never put on the table for the community to work on. King Island is a great example of collaboration, perseverance, pivotal thinking and achieving an island dream together.

Adult Community Education works best when delivered from multi use hubs (libraries, community hubs, service centres) - not standalone facilities. Learning becomes something people drop into, not commit to upfront. Spaces like the King Island Hub remove barriers to learning and entice everyone to give learning a go.

Looking ahead, what do you see as the key challenges for our sector?

Misinformation and disinformation along with the rise of AI. The amount of information online grows at a vast rate of roughly 29 terabytes per second.

For adult learning this means the challenge isn't just access to information for everyone, it is also about coping with the overwhelming volume, rapid change, and being able to separate reliable trustworthy knowledge from the noise. Adult learners - or indeed any adult - may not have the time or support to critically evaluate the vast amounts of information encountered online. This then makes them particularly vulnerable to misleading or false content, especially on social media and informal learning platforms. In Australia in remote and regional communities this impact is amplified by varying levels of digital literacy and access. And we know that misinformation undermines trust in content, government systems and policy, and even in evidence-based knowledge.

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated response, and a greater emphasis on digital and media literacy to equip learners with the skills to recognise trusted information and understand where and how it has been generated.

And the biggest opportunities?

I am a technology early adopter, so change also excites me. There are so many changes coming that – if managed and put to use in an ethical, trusted way - could provide fantastic opportunities to individual learners and to learning institutions.



Do you have a farewell message for ALA members and friends?

It has been a privilege to be part of a community so strongly committed to lifelong learning, inclusion, and opportunity for all. The work ALA does to support adult learners, educators, and communities across Australia is both inspiring and essential, particularly in a time of rapid change and growing complexity in how we access and understand information.

While I am moving on, I remain a strong supporter of ALA's mission and the important role it plays in shaping the future of adult learning in Australia. I look forward to seeing the organisation continue to grow, adapt, and lead in response to new challenges and opportunities.

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this incredible journey.



Caption: (L-R) ALA CEO Jenny Macaffer, Kathleen Priestly, Federal Minister for Skills and Training Andrew Giles MP, and ALA Deputy Treasurer Dr Ron Wilson

ACE NEWS

South Australia has launched a new “one stop” digital hub for VET and ACE educators across the state. Funded as a joint federal-state government initiative to strengthen the growing vocational education workforce, the **VET and ACE Educator Hub** offers professional development, mentoring and scholarships. “The new hub enables our educators to expand their qualifications, removes barriers to further development and helps them learn from leaders early in their career,” says Lucy Hood, South Australia’s Minister for Education, Training and Skills.

In **Victoria**, applications are open for the Victorian Government’s ACE Scholarships Program. Scholarships of up to \$20,000 are on offer for study as an adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) educator in Victoria’s **Learn Local** settings. Find more information about eligibility, course options and how to apply: www.vic.gov.au/ace-scholarships-program

Tasmania has a new **Adult Literacy Strategy**, with a 10-year plan to improve literacy through a focus on public awareness, clearer pathways to learning, and equipping communities and employers to help adults address their literacy needs and goals. “We know that when people improve their literacy, everything improves,” says Tasmania’s Education Minister Jo Palmer.



ALA Board member Dr Robyn Ober

Lead researcher and educator at the **Northern Territory’s** Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and ALA Board member Dr Robyn Ober will be the Opening Keynote Speaker at the **AES26 International Evaluation Conference** in September. A Mamu/Djirribal woman from Far North Queensland, Robyn will draw on three decades of practice in Aboriginal communities to show how traditional knowledge systems and contemporary evaluation can work together.

The latest edition of ALA’s **Australian Journal of Adult Learning** (AJAL) focuses on curiosity in our community of practice, with five research articles by Australian and international experts, including adult learner experiences in a rural foundational numeracy program, volunteer firefighter training, and higher education in Thailand. AJAL is free for **ALA members** or you can subscribe: ala.asn.au/australian-journal-of-adult-learning/

New research from the NCVER explores how place-based and culturally responsive teaching in VET can create more meaningful outcomes for First Nations learners. The research examines the experiences of three Aboriginal-led RTOs: www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/place-based-and-culturally-responsive-vet-for-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-learners

In a submission to the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion, Adult Learning Australia **has renewed its call** for a national Human Rights Act and greater recognition of the vital role which adult and community education plays in strengthening our social cohesion. Read our submission at ala.asn.au/submissions/

QUEST

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