Adult Learning Australia

# Lifelong and Lifewide Learning: A policy statement

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is Australia's peak organisation for adult and community education. ALA has been in operation for 54 years and has members in every state and territory.

We are committed to ensuring that all Australians can access the benefits of lifelong and lifewide learning. By "lifelong learning" we mean learning beyond school throughout the adult years via the formal education system, in workplaces and through community participation. By "lifewide learning" we mean developing the skills and knowledge required to engage in meaningful work, to participate fully as a citizen in a vibrant democracy, to live in harmony in a diverse, multi-cultural and rapidly changing society and to manage one's health and personal wellbeing at all ages including in later life.


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# Adult Literacy

The recent Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey indicated that around 1 in 7 Australians (14%) have very poor literacy skills (ABS, 2013)[i]. An additional 1 in 3 (30%) Australians have literacy skills, which are at a level that makes them vulnerable to unemployment and social exclusion in a modern knowledge-based economy and society. PIAAC didn't identify the levels of literacy of Indigenous Australians, however, we know from the recent PISA results that Indigenous school children are around two and a half years below their non-Indigenous peers in literacy and numeracy (Thomson & De Bortoli, 2013) and we can extrapolate from this, that their parents are likely to be similarly educationally disadvantaged. [ii]

If Australia is to compete in the global knowledge economy, and maintain the level of prosperity and social cohesion that Australians need and expect, the literacy levels of the adult population need to be at the forefront of public policy.

Lack of literacy impacts all aspects of an adult's life and has intergenerational effects on families, children and communities. It results in communities where long-term unemployment coexists with skills shortages.

The right to literacy is an inherent part of the right to an education. Lack of ALA believes that all Australians, regardless of their employment status, should be supported to fully develop their language, literacy and numeracy skills.

**ALA Recommendations:**

The Australian government should:

1. develop a comprehensive Adult Literacy and Lifeskills policy that spans all age groups and is applicable to all adults who need it,
2. fund a comprehensive national intergenerational (family) literacy program to complement existing Commonwealth and state programs.

# Non-formal Lifelong Learning

The contemporary 21st century concept of lifelong learning adopted by OECD, the European Union, World Bank, and leading OECD countries is that lifelong learning involves all forms of learning and occurs in many contexts in society. Also "Learning to learn" is the key 21st century competency.

Non-formal lifelong learning courses and programs provide pathways to formal qualifications, help to develop generic skills and literacies, promote social inclusion and impact positively on health and wellbeing.[iii]

Most non-formal learning in Australia occurs in the workplace. As a result, Australians who access non-formal learning opportunities are more likely to be working full time than part time and significantly less likely to be unemployed or out of the labour market. They are twice as likely to be in the highest income quintile than the lowest and they are much more likely to already have post school qualifications than not. In short, those who need access to non-formal lifelong learning in Australia are the least likely to have access to it.[iv]

While Australia has seen some ad hoc development of strategies to mobilise learning resources in communities to promote lifelong learning and inclusion, in the absence of policy intervention, this disparity of access is unlikely to change. Arguments around public / private benefit are regularly used to consign non-formal learning to the category of a private, discretionary purchase of limited public benefit. This argument has no research to support it and is not shared by other high performing OECD countries.

**ALA Recommendations:**

The Australian government should

3. negotiate a new Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education that includes the provision of non-formal and informal learning.
4. support "learning towns" and "learning cities" initiatives in Local Government Areas with high populations of disadvantaged adults, in collaboration with local government and the Australian Learning Communities Network.

# Indigenous Adult Education

Much of the public policy rhetoric in Australia around Indigenous education focuses on interventions into the learning of Indigenous children, with the implicit assumption that children learn in isolation from their parents and communities. Yet literacy is essentially a set of social and cultural practices which children learn from within their families and communities as much or more than through technical instruction. There are lost opportunities to integrate the learning of Indigenous adults with the learning of Indigenous children.

Public policy affecting Indigenous Australians is littered with references to empowerment, community ownership and community consultation, as though merely stating these things is enough. The institutions and organisations of the mainstream economy and society of Australia come with a range of "literacies". It is impossible for Indigenous adults to engage with, let alone drive mainstream institutions such as schools, early childhood education services and health services in their communities without the skills and support to do so.

In Australia, there is currently no comprehensive measure of the literacy skills of Indigenous adults and limited research into the literacy practices and sites of adult learning within predominantly Indigenous communities.

Remote Indigenous communities frequently lack the basic "infrastructure" of literacy such as libraries, or affordable public internet access, books and magazines. Adult education responses too often focus on centrally developed and administered Vocational Education and Training curriculum for jobs that often don't exist in those communities or "bridging programs" to fill an arbitrary gap. Meanwhile, where they exist at all, local sites of adult learning practice such as youth media centres, neighbourhood houses or men's sheds, rely on short term grants and fundraising[v]

**ALA Recommendations:**

The Australian Government should:

5. ensure that every school with a large population of Indigenous students has an integenerational (family) literacy program as part of its core functions
6. work with local Indigenous communities to develop literacy plans to support the environments in which adults develop their literacies including youth centres, media centres, community learning centres and libraries.

# Youth Engagement

Australia has a very good school system and most young people complete secondary school. However, 17 per cent of young women and 27 per cent of young men don't finish school. A significant proportion of this group are Indigenous young people, and/or from rural and remote communities, and/or from low socio-economic backgrounds.[vi] Early school leaving casts a long shadow; impacting on employment, income and health across the life span.[vii]

There are many learning styles. For young people to re-engage with learning they need different approaches to the ones that failed them, including opportunities for applied learning at work or in a community setting. Policy in relation to youth tends to focus on skilling for work or welfare issues such drugs and alcohol prevention; however practitioners in the field identify developing agency[viii] and aspiration in youth as the biggest needs. There are many wonderful programs across the country that focus in these areas but they tend to be offered by charities and the private sector and they struggle for government support, recognition and long-term stability.

It's financially very difficult for young people in rural and remote communities to make the transition from school to higher education. Young people from rural and remote communities are almost 50% less likely to hold either a higher VET qualification or higher education qualification than their urban counterparts.[ix]

**ALA Recommendations:**

The Australian government should

7. ensure that learning programs for youth which encourage aspiration and agency are prioritised for funding,

# Learning for Civic Participation

Resilient and socially inclusive communities rely on and are fed by a culture of lifelong learning. Australians require skills to live peacefully in a diverse, multicultural society, to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship and to solve complex problems such as immigration, managing an ageing population, and moving to a lower carbon future.

Democracy consists of much more than the right to vote. It expands to the right to understand and have input into the decisions that impact on an individual's day to day life and that of their family. It is no accident that those countries with the highest levels of adult literacy also have vibrant democracies where participants have a range of points of engagement with civic life and access to lifelong and lifewide learning.

**ALA Recommendations:**

The Australian government should:

8. fund public discussion and education programs to be delivered through local Adult Education organisations in important areas of public debate, beginning with Moving to a Lower Carbon Future, Immigration and Multiculturalism and Positive Ageing.

# Learning for an Ageing Population

Australia is an ageing society in which people are experiencing more frequent, less predictable life transitions, and spending more of their lives out of the labour market. Australia's future cohesion and prosperity will require us to manage the third and fourth ages (50-75, 75+) more effectively. This involves skilling adults to understand and maintain good health and to remain engaged and active. It also includes retraining for a new or altered career path in the paid economy (the so-called "encore career") or developing skills for active engagement in community life and voluntary work.

Literacy levels are lower amongst older Australians than their younger cohorts.[x] The full reasons for this are not clear. Some commentators have suggested that poor schooling in earlier generations may be part of the answer. However, loss of access to learning through workforce participation is generally considered by researchers to be a key factor.[xi]

Despite these challenges, the vast majority of Commonwealth government programs in the adult education and VET areas are targeted at those 15 – 64 years old, despite the need for many adults to remain in the workforce beyond this age and many jurisdictions are restricting access to vocational education and training for career shifters.

Learning in the 4th Age – that is, learning for Australians 75+, many of whom are in supported care environments, is an unexplored policy area in Australia but one which overseas research suggests can increase quality of life, as well as reduce health and social care costs.[xii]

**Recommendations:**

The Australian government should:

9. provide Vocational Education and Training programs to all adult Australians who need them
10. provide adult education programs for Senior Australians that encourage Productive Ageing
11. continue funding support for Men's Sheds
12. pilot a Learning in the 4th Age Program in a number of Australian locations.

# Learning in Regional and Rural Australia

Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world. In numerical terms, the majority of people living in relatively disadvantaged localities live in major urban areas. However, disadvantaged people are over-represented in smaller towns and localities and in remote areas.

Remoteness from University and TAFE campuses is a significant factor in the educational disparities between Australians living in regional and rural communities and those in urban centres. Research mapping the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia with TAFE and University campuses identified 92 Australian communities with populations over 200 who live more than 80 kms from a TAFE or University campus. Further, Indigenous Australians are 11 times more likely to be living in a community without geographic access to TAFE or Higher Education.[xiii] Since this research was conducted, a number of TAFE campuses in regional Victoria and Queensland have been marked for closure due to state government funding cuts, making this situation even more acute.

The National Broadband Network is likely to usher in a range of new learning opportunities in these communities giving adults the opportunity to access learning online via Universities, TAFEs and other training providers. However, adult learners, particularly those with low skills, will need on the ground support to engage with learning. At the same time learning providers will need local intelligence to be able to effectively reach adults in these communities. Community development will be needed to build a culture of learning and to stimulate demand amongst groups who won't automatically demand learning opportunities in a market based system. Non-formal and informal learning opportunities will be needed to underpin formal study.

Modeling has indicated a range of market and private non-market benefits attributable to the presence of even a very small Adult and Community Education provider in town, including increased incomes, increased labour market participation and more efficient household management.[xiv]

The provision of community learning access points in geographically isolated communities would improve take-up of the NBN and provide access points for VET and Higher Education provision. ALA would like to see the Government make a long term goal of ensuring that a community learning centre exists in every Australian community more than 80 km from a University or TAFE campus, with the highest priority being for Indigenous and low SES communities. Community Learning Centres/Access Points could be housed within existing services such as neighbourhood houses, local government centres or sporting and recreation clubs.

**ALA Recommendation:**

The Australian government should:

13. ensure that every Australian town with a population of more than 200, that is more than 80 km from a TAFE or University campus, has a Community Learning Centre to operate as an access point for Higher Education and TAFE and for local community learning.

# A Strong Community Education (ACE) Sector

The Not for Profit Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector, made up of Neighbourhood Houses, Community Colleges, Adult Education Institutions, Continuing Education and Community Learning Centres - has given real effect to the concept of lifelong learning for many citizens across a wide spectrum of Australian society. ACE plays a particularly important role in rural and regional Australia as it is capable of existing in very small communities and thin markets. The ACE sector's focus on the learner as an individual, responsiveness to identified personal, social or economic needs, its flexible delivery and strong ethic of equity, makes it an ideal vehicle for delivering on COAG's Human Capital Reform Agenda. [xv]

There have been two Australian Senate Inquiries into the Adult Community Education Sector (1991 and 1997). The 2008 Ministerial Declaration on ACE commits all Australian governments to an action plan for building the capacity of the ACE sector. Both the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency and the National VET Equity Advisory Council have recommended that a specific role for ACE be articulated in Commonwealth and State and Territory funding agreements.[xvi]

So far these policy recommendations have not been acted upon, and as a result, the not for profit ACE sector lacks a coherent Australia wide policy response. It is practically non-existent in some states and territories and survives on the fringes of the Vocational Education and Training system in the states in which it is funded.

Successive Australian governments have funded ALA to provide leadership and professional development support to the field. They have also funded Adult Learners' Week activities and coordination. This is an important starting point to building on the unique strengths of the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector.

**Recommendations:**

The Australian Government should

14. ensure that the next Commonwealth agreement with the States and Territories on Skills articulates a specific role for locally focused not for profit ACE organisations
15. continue to fund Adult Learning Australia to provide leadership and support to the not for profit Adult and Community Education sector
16. continue to fund Adult Learners' Week to encourage the public to engage in community based lifelong learning.

i Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013), Programme for the international assessment of adult competencies: 2011–2012.

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vii Teese, R 2004, Early school leavers and VET, in Equity in vocational education and training: research readings, ed. K Bowman, NCVER, Adelaide, pp.184-193.

viii We means "agency" in the sociological sense of purposeful, goal directed activity in which the "agent" or person has awareness of the impacts and potential of their actions.

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x ABS (Australian Burea of Statistics) (2013), PIAAC Survey, ABS Canberra.

xi Shomos, A, 2010, Links Between literacy and lumeracy skills and labour market outcomes, Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper, Melbourne.

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