AUSTRALIAN ACE ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN RESEARCH PROJECT 2016

Insights into scope and scale of ACE providers, programs, participants and outcomes and national policies supported

FINAL REPORT

Adult Learning Australia

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

Adult Learning Australia advocates for lifelong and lifewide learning for adults and the adult and community education (ACE) organisations that deliver on these goals. This report has been prepared to raise awareness and understanding of ACE in Australia.

The report profiles Australian ACE in terms of its distinctive features, current scope and scale of providers and programs, and for each program their participants and outcomes achieved and key national policies supported. Trends in Australian ACE programs participants and outcomes over the past five to ten years are also included where comparable data is available and to help identify challenges facing their sustainability.

The report has been produced via desktop research involving the drawing together of a range of extant information and data to piece together the best possible contemporary profile of Australian ACE, and since there is no one single source of information and data on all of the work that Australian ACE does.

Key findings

ACE is a discrete fourth sector of education in Australia, the community based, owned and managed not for profit sector, committed to providing accessible learning opportunities for adults in local communities that meet their needs and support place-based community development. There are at least 2500 ACE providers in Australia, all of which provide personal interest learning. Most also now provide adult basic education in literacy and numeracy and other foundation skills as well. A significant minority (300–500) also provide formal vocational education and training (VET). ACE providers who have extended into formal VET are concentrated in Victoria and NSW.

The state and territory jurisdictions have primary responsibility for ACE. They define ACE and support ACE in somewhat different ways. Most jurisdictions recognise and support ACE as programs in informal and non-formal personal interest and adult basic education. Victoria and NSW support ACE as a sector of providers and for all types of learning programs.

The increased vocational orientation of ACE is supported nationally by all jurisdictions, particularly to assist adults disadvantaged in learning to re-engage with learning and pathway into VET learning for work-related outcomes to keep them active members of the workforce.

The pathway back into learning for many adults is through personal interest learning. Estimates only can be provided on the numbers of adults participating in personal interest learning at ACE providers in any one year. The estimate is that there are at least 200,000 adults and many more in actuality. This is significant in the context of all personal interest learning offered across Australia from all sources, which the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) determined to have involved 1.4 million Australians in 2013. Personal interest learning yields personal benefits that improve individual health and wellbeing. Healthy, productive ageing is a key government policy that personal interest programs contribute directly to. The main challenge for most ACE providers is how to keep funding the personal interest learning programs they run, mainly on a fee-for-service basis, when many of their customers are in the lowest income brackets and given the importance of these programs as a gateway back to learning for disadvantaged learners.

The adult basic education programs in ACE are particularly for adults with limited formal education or English language skills. These programs cover literacy, numeracy, basic computing skills and other foundation skills such as communication skills, problem solving and self-presentation and management skills that are offered with a high level of support. They may be non-formal or non-accredited or formal and accredited (in VET) in nature. There is no ongoing data collection on adults involved in non-accredited basic education programs delivered by ACE providers. We do know from a one-off study in 2007 that thousands of Australian adults are involved to improve their levels of self-confidence

and capacity to interact with the wider community and that improved literacy led to further training or employment outcomes in many instances. The study also found strong continuing demand for non-accredited community language, literacy and numeracy courses, and suggested this should be acknowledged through funding support.

Accredited adult basic education programs are delivered by ACE providers who provide formal VET. This activity is reported within the National VET Provider Collection managed by the NCVER. In 2014, there were 12,585 students participating in accredited adult basic education programs at ACE VET providers receiving government funding for VET. They made up 7.4 % of all students participating in accredited adult basic education programs in that year at all VET providers receiving government funding for VET and included many people from various disadvantaged or equity groups.

The amount of adult basic education each ACE VET student receives has increased significantly over the past ten years, and from an average of 2.54 enrolments per student in 2003 to 8.07 in 2014 and from 128.59 training hours per student in 2003 to 389.60 in 2014. The trend has also been towards more full qualifications and less part qualifications or subjects only training in adult basic education but the students have been completing successfully only between 50 and 60 per cent of the total hours of training they signed up for. This rate of success is below that for students in accredited adult basic education in other VET providers, and by a margin of 9% or more.

There is a high literacy challenge in Australia that ACE providers are responding to, and to achieve social inclusion. ACE providers require support to build the skills of their adult basic education practitioners to ensure that disadvantaged learners have access to foundation skills training.

Ensuring flexibility in foundation skills training is also important as not all adults need standalone full qualifications training in this area, rather they want training that fills gaps in their foundation skills and the gap training to be integrated with vocationally focused subject or qualifications delivery.

ACE providers in the formal VET system serve a generic role and a value-adding role. The generic role of ACE in

VET is to offer VET to all adults. The value-adding role of ACE in VET is to bring in its distinctive qualities and unique delivery method – a strongly local, community-based, flexible, market-driven, learner-centred approach to delivery primarily to assist disadvantaged students into and through the VET system. In 2014, ACE VET students (95,400) accounted for 5.3% of total VET students and ACE VET delivery accounted for 3.3 % of total hours delivered. The ACE VET students included 12,585 (13%) in adult basic education programs discussed above and 82,860 students (87%) in all other fields of education. These 82,860 students made up 5.1% of all students receiving government funding in specific fields at all VET providers receiving government funding for VET in 2014.

While the number of ACE VET students in specific fields of education has decreased significantly over the past ten years, the reported training hours delivered have increased steadily. Therefore, the overall trend has been towards increasing quantities of training delivery per student. The trend has also been towards more full VET qualifications training and less part qualifications training among ACE VET students in specific fields of education, with 36% in full VET qualifications training in 2014. This trend has also occurred in other VET providers but with the proportions of their specific fields of education students in qualifications level training being much higher, and at 90% in 2014.

ACE students in accredited VET in all fields of education, other than adult basic education, include people from various disadvantaged or equity groups and at higher levels generally than among students in all other VET providers. Their graduates employment outcomes are almost as good as employment outcomes for students at all other VET providers and time series data for 2011 to 2015 show relatively consistent levels of outcomes in terms of numbers employed or in further study after training and the graduates.

Competitive funding models in VET have enabled ACE providers to enter the formal VET training market, but since 2009 they have resulted in a shift in VET provision away from ACE RTO providers and also public VET RTOs and towards other private registered providers. To reverse the unintended adverse effects of competitive funding models on ACE providers and the vulnerable learners that they serve, it has been suggested that governments outline specifically the separate and complementary roles of the public TAFE system, not for profit providers and private for profit providers and introduce some form of community social service obligation fund for providers who work with students

who require substantial additional educational time and quarantine future Foundation Skills funding applications for ACE and TAFE providers only.

There also are ACE providers who are not Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) but who assist with formal accredited VET delivery through entering partnerships with VET providers that take responsibility for assuring the quality of assessments and judgements about competence or outcomes achieved and issuing final VET awards. No information was found on the extent of these partnerships.

The other way that ACE providers can become more vocationally oriented is by providing pathways from non-formal learning programs into formal VET. The available research evidence suggests that a supported learning pathways approach may be best for many working aged Australians; particularly those with low levels of formal educational attainment and/or poor previous experiences in formal education. The available data on actual transitions made by students at ACE providers reveal their high capacity to engage adults in pre-accredited education and provide pathways to formal vocational education and work.

Conclusion

Overall, the report provides a conceptual framework for reporting on ACE in Australia in its totality and contemporary baseline data on components of the framework against which future developments can be compared. The available data suggests ACE is playing an important role in educating many adult Australians; particularly the disadvantaged, but there is more primary research required to fill in all components of the framework to determine the full impacts of ACE. Ongoing support from governments is required to sustain and grow the ACE effort.
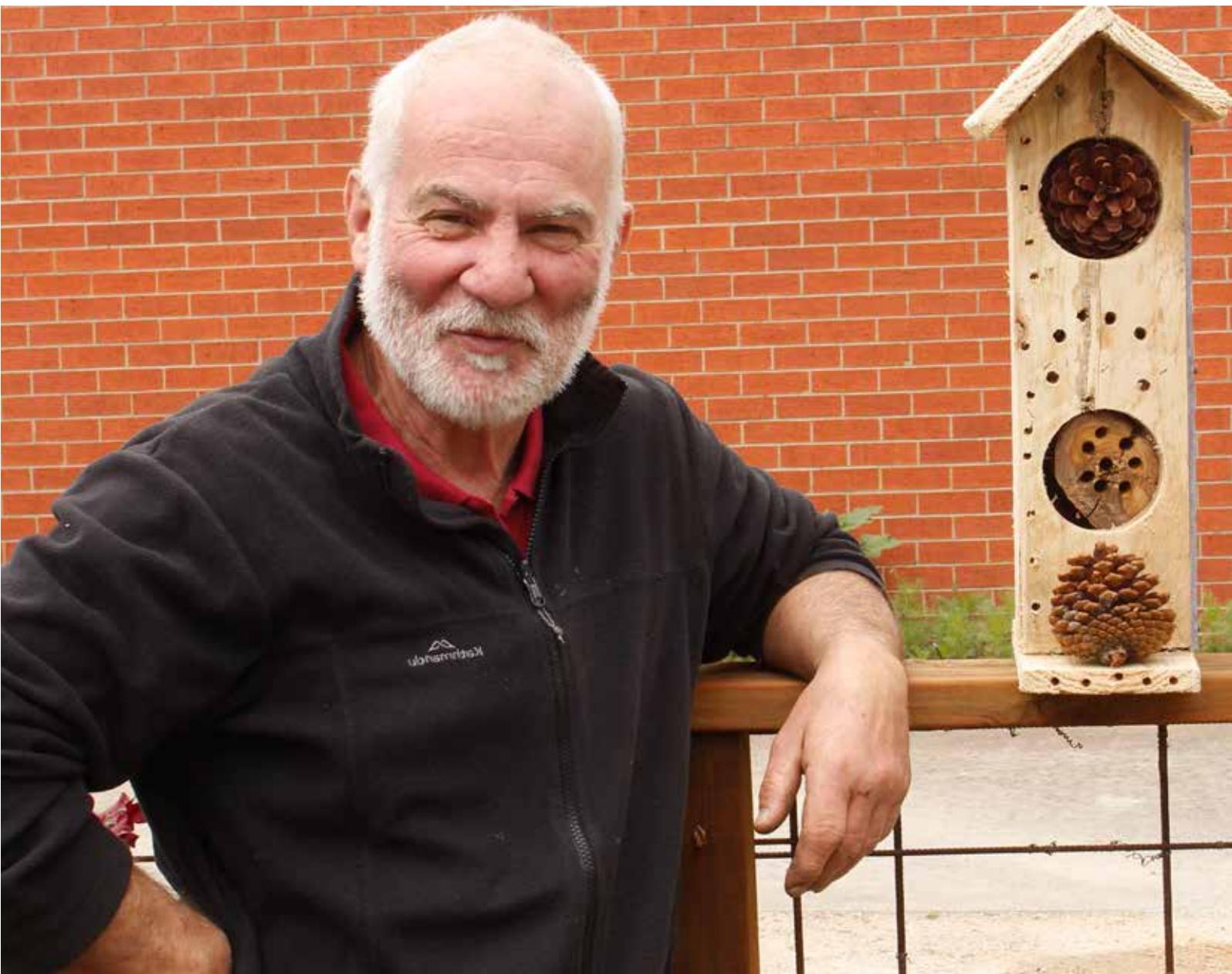
Introduction

This report aims to raise awareness and understanding of adult and community education (ACE) in Australia. It profiles the current scope and scale of ACE providers, programs, participants and outcomes and the national policies supported. Recent trends in these parameters are also identified as a means of determining challenges facing Australian ACE.

Approach taken

The report has been developed via desktop research. Data and information have been drawn from extant research reports focussed on particular aspects of ACE supplemented by data on ACE's vocational education and training (VET) specifically sourced from the NCVER and with the use made of the data in the report checked by the NCVER. Piecing together data and information from various sources is the only way that an overall profile of Australian ACE can be built since there is no single source on all of the work that ACE does. Gaps and/or discrepancies found in the data and information are highlighted as and where relevant.

Report structure

The rest of the report is presented in three sections. The next section contains a descriptive overview of where ACE in Australia has come from and is at today in terms of its scope of activities and who provides them. The scope and scale of ACE provision by Australian state and territory is also explained and the national strategic directions for ACE agreed to by all ministers across the nation with responsibility for ACE.

The third section provides details on each of the four main types of programs that Australian ACE now collectively provides. For each program, information is presented on its key features and data on the participants and the outcomes achieved, recently, in the year 2014 usually, and the national policies supported.

Trends in participant numbers and other key aspects of the learning programs over time are also presented where data is available and to help identify issues affecting program sustainability.

The fourth and final section presents the overall conceptual framework for Australian ACE developed and used in the report and summarises the contemporary baseline data on each element of the framework and draws some conclusions on where to next for Australian ACE.

Australian ACE scope and scale

This section is an overview of the history of ACE in Australia and details where it is at today in terms of its distinctive characteristics, key activities and who provides them. A short overview description of ACE by jurisdiction is also provided as ACE is supported differently by the various states and territories of Australia, albeit within overarching national Ministerial Declarations on ACE since 1992.

Where ACE came from

ACE has a long history in Australia. Its beginnings span as far back as the late 1880s. ACE was established by visionaries who recognised the aspirations of ordinary men and women for some form of ongoing education and sought to meet that need. ACE organisations flourished that offered lectures, courses and books on a wide range of topics and disseminated new ideas and stimulated debate. They broadened people's horizons at a time when there were few other channels through which this could be done (SSCEET, 1991).

As education was established in Australia in a more systematic way, through formal schooling, vocational education and training and universities, ACE was relegated to the back seat. However, the work of those early visionaries continued albeit variously within each jurisdiction of Australia, which has primary responsibility for ACE. ACE developed alongside and outside of the three formal education sectors and to provide informal learning for adults through their participation in social activities and also non-formal (that is, pre- or non-accredited) structured learning programs of interest to adults and for personal development outcomes. Then, in the early 1990s the work of ACE began to receive national recognition and through the 'Come in Cinderella' report on ACE (SSCEET, 1991). The view expressed in 'Come in Cinderella' was that ACE had become a potent education and training network that needs to be capitalised on Australia wide and with adequate data on patterns of participation, provision and expenditures to be achieved (SSCEET, 1991, p. 157). Overarching national policy statements on ACE followed.

The Commonwealth and all state and territory and ministers with responsibility for education endorsed the first national Ministerial Declaration on ACE in 1993 (MCEETYA, 1993) and have endorsed updated statements in 1997 (MCEETYA, 1997), 2002 (MCEETYA, 2002) and 2008 (MCVTE, 2008) to accommodate changes in the education and training environment that had occurred.

The early Declarations expressed commitments concerning the value of ACE in developing social capital, building community capacity, encouraging social participation and enhancing social cohesion. The later Declarations, reaffirmed this commitment and extended acknowledgement of the value of ACE beyond these areas to its potential to respond to changed industrial, demographic and technological circumstances, and encourages a collaborative approach to ACE to allow the sector to make a greater contribution to supporting the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) productivity agenda for skills and workforce development. They also identified ACE as a key player in the response to the Australian Government's social inclusion policy agenda.

The latest 2008 Ministerial Declaration called for ACE to become more vocationally oriented as ACE had already started to do in response to community demand. The idea was that ACE would serve a value-adding role in VET by bringing in its distinctive qualities; particularly to assist adults disadvantaged in learning into and through the VET system as well as serving a generic role of offering VET to all adults (Schofield & Associates, 1996). There have been significant changes in the education and training environment since 2008 but no updated national Ministerial Declaration on ACE.

Distinctive features of ACE

ACE has several defining features maintained throughout its long history and that make it the fourth sector of education (to schools, vocational education and training and university education). The theme of 'ACE is different' runs deep and strong through much of the literature on ACE in Australia.

Table 1 outlines the distinctive features of ACE as identified in many research reports. ACE has a distinctive focus, set of values and learning practice, and is delivered by a distinctive type of organisation.

Table 1: The distinctive features of ACE

Focus

Local adult learning needs for local community development

Values

Welcoming, friendly, caring, non-judgemental, socially inclusive, accessible to all

Learning practice

Learner centred and holistic (with appropriate support services), delivered in community settings, focussed on positive learning experiences to foster further learner engagement

Providers

ACE is delivered by community based, owned and managed, not for profits that go by various names, are of various sizes and vary in activity focus in part due to their local community focus but also because they operate in state bound systems

1   ACE is focussed on local community and the learning needs of its adults

The ACE sector focusses on the needs of the adults in the particular community in which it operates. The starting point of ACE is each adult in the community and providing learning opportunities that meet their needs and build local capacity for community development. ACE takes a strong advocacy role to ensure local learning needs are met.

2   ACE is inclusive

The ACE sector is an enabler of inclusive learning. ACE has a welcoming, caring and non-judgemental culture to facilitate access by everybody and offers learning programs in friendly, community settings that cater for adults of varying abilities and backgrounds. ACE seeks to be a gateway for all adults to return to learning at any stage along the learning time line no matter their age, gender, culture, ability or previous educational experience. ACE starts where the learner is at, provides learning programs that build on their existing skills and

knowledge and delivers desired new knowledge and skills and other outcomes, including motivation to go on to bigger and better things through further learning.

3   ACE takes a learner-centred approach

ACE recognises that there is no 'traditional student', only a spectrum of learners with needs and preferences to be taken into account in learner-responsive pedagogical design. ACE is about learning approaches that engage adults in the process and foster personal, social and intellectual development.

ACE uses adult learning principles that encourage learners to; take ownership of the learning process through active participation, learn through doing and real-time demonstration of skills, learn from each other through shared learning tasks, and appraise their experiences and changes in their own perceptions, goals, confidences and motivations for learning in the future (Sanguinetti, Waterhouse, & Maunders, 2004).

4   ACE is delivered through a distinctive type of provider

Providers of ACE are community owned and managed, not for profit organisations that have adult education as a primary focus. While there are numerous other community-owned and managed organisations that deliver some adult education within their primary service orientation – such as rural fire brigades, sporting clubs, churches and Landcare organisations, as well as health, migrant, women and aged care centre – these are not usually identified as ACE providers.

ACE providers usually are highly networked within their local communities and particularly with other human services providers.

Through their partnerships, ACE providers access their clients and/or facilitate referrals for their clients to ensure appropriate support services are combined with their adult learning provision. Their partnerships strengthen the capacity of the local community to lead place based, community development. Volunteering is also an important activity in ACE providers that aids learning services provision at lowest cost and for those involved volunteering can be a stepping stone to other work.

The distinctive features of ACE are recognised by ACE participants as its key strengths.

To illustrate this point, provided in Table 2 below are the results obtained from 373 ACE VET students and also 69 ACE VET provider personnel in NSW, who were asked to rate the significance of various features commonly referred to as 'strengths of ACE'. The magnitude of the percentages confirms the perceptions of these features as strengths (and hence advantages) of ACE.

Both the providers and students surveyed chose 'Informal, friendly and non-threatening environment' as the most important feature of ACE followed by 'Capacity to accommodate students with a wide range of needs, skills and backgrounds'.

The only notable difference between the responses of the students and providers was that students ranked the item 'Able to provide wide range of teaching formats' more highly than did providers.

Below are two summary descriptions of Australian ACE that seek to explain its key features.

'ACE is held together in its diversity by its commitment to, and ownership by the community, as well as by its distinctive approaches to adult learning with a central focus on the learners and their needs. ... ACE is generally based around the learning needs of adults in local, neighbourhood or regional communities' (Golding, Davies & Volkoff, 2001, p. 5).

'To many people, ACE learning can be simply summed up as comprising highly focussed programs, often short in length, aimed at providing learners with the desired knowledge and skills in a friendly, supportive environment' (Saunders, 2001, p. 28).

Scope of ACE activities

Australian ACE traditionally provided personal interest and development learning activities. However, ACE has undergone significant change in its activities in the last few decades in response to community demand:

Table 2: The strengths of ACE as perceived by ACE providers and their students

Feature nominated as a strength	% of ACE providers rating as Extremely significant or very significant	% of ACE students rating as extremely important or important
Informal, friendly, non-threatening environment	96	88
Capacity to accommodate students with a wide range of needs, skills and backgrounds	86	80
Able to respond to special needs of students and employers	86	81
The trainer is a helper rather than a learning authority	86	82
Minimum of bureaucracy	85	77
Emphasis on mastering skills and knowledge rather than completing course in set time	83	83
Often locally managed	76	70
Students may enter and leave learning programs easily	74	72
Able to provide a wide range of learning formats	74	82
Good physical accessibility	65	80

(Source: Saunders, 2001, Table 9 & 10, pp. 30–31)

'For many years, adult and community education primarily delivered courses for hobbies, and personal interest enrichment. This has changed in the past three [now four] decades. First came the introduction of adult basic education in ACE courses designed to provide basic language and living skills to help people participate in and contribute to society. As it became apparent that students were applying adult and community education skills to employment, the sector began to offer specific vocational education and training courses, creating "VET ACE"' (Walstab, Volkoff, & Teese, 2005, p. 17) [author insert].

Today Australian ACE collectively delivers in four key activity areas:

1   Personal interest informal and non-formal learning activities – the traditional focus of ACE

2   Adult basic education non-formal and formal – the new common focus

3   Formal vocational education and training (VET) – an additional focus for some ACE providers in line with the latest Ministerial Declaration on ACE of 2008

4   Pathways from one type of learning program to another, and importantly from non-formal learning to formal learning for vocational purposes – a focus in line with the latest Ministerial Declaration on ACE of 2008.

The position of ACE within the overall Australian education landscape has changed (see Figure 1).

Today ACE delivers some formal training inside the VET sector (that includes the school aged) to contribute to work skills and economic development, as well as adult basic education for both life and work purposes and personal interest courses for personal development purposes.

Australian ACE provides a nexus between adult education and community development and adult education and economic development.

ACE provider scale and focus

ACE providers are a disparate group. They go by various names including: Neighbourhood House and Centre, community Men's Shed, University of the Third Age, Community College and various other names.

We do not know precisely how many ACE providers there are in Australia as there is no single registration arrangement for ACE providers.

We do know the ballpark number of ACE providers by the following key sub-types and which of the key activities of ACE they focus on.

Neighbourhood Houses and Centres

There are about 1200 Neighbourhood Houses and Centres nationally according to the results of the first national survey of Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres (NH&Cs) undertaken in late 2010/early 2011 (ANHCA 2011). The NH&Cs are located in metropolitan areas (47%), regional centres or large county towns (26%) and in rural/remote areas (27%).

The 2011 National NH&C Survey Report gives a breakdown of the range of programs and activities provided by NH&Cs in order of popularity. It shows that
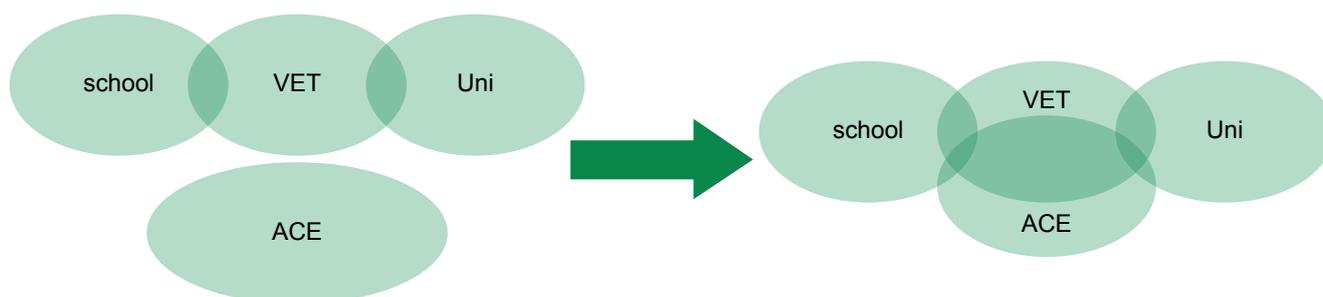
Figure 1: The position of ACE within the overall Australian education landscape historically and now

NH&Cs provide an extensive variety of services and activities in their communities:

- Information and referral was the most popular activity (92%) followed by community development projects (80%).

- Recreation and leisure, art and craft and health and wellbeing courses came in the next grouping (in the 70–80% range)

- Public computer/internet access, self-help groups, student work placements, personal development courses and volunteer community services were in the following 60–65% range.

- Pre- or non-accredited adult education and training and literacy programs were a priority focus for between 40–45% of the NH&Cs.

- Accredited training adult education and vocational training courses was a focus for just under 30% (ANHCA, 2011, Table 4 p. 13).

In summary, most NH&Cs remain focussed on personal interest learning. Many also provide adult basic education. A minority of NH&Cs have also extended into formal (VET) in their own right as well.

Community Men's Sheds

Of note also from the 2011 national survey of NH&Cs is that women are the predominant users of NH&Cs, with those aged between the ages of 45–64 most highly represented (ANHCA 2011 p. 11). However, the number of male participants in ACE has increased markedly in recent years. A stimulus to higher rates of male participation has been the offer by NH&Cs of computer classes, foundation skills classes and skills development classes.

Skill development programs have been particularly valuable in boosting participation rates of males (SA Centre for Economic Studies, 2013).

The development of Men's Sheds has boosted male numbers in ACE as well. Men's Sheds originated in Australia in the 1990s to provide a self-directed space for constructive activity and social activities and a place to meet new friends and be socially connected and regain a sense of purpose.

Men's Sheds provide health information to their members. There are now about 1000 Men's Sheds across Australia, some of which are associated with NH&Cs while others are independent.

A total of 55% of Shed members live in regional Australia (AMSA, 2011). In summary, Community Men's Sheds offer informal and non-formal adult education only.

Universities of the Third Age (U3As)

U3A organisations are open to all mature Australians. U3As provide learning programs including academic, cultural, physical and social. These programs offer stimulation and development to people in active retirement. They meet the needs of their member base through a peer-learning model. All tutors are volunteers who come from the U3A groups that operate across Australia.

Learning is pursued without reference to criteria, qualifications, assessments or rewards. It is a climate free from discrimination and there are no exams. There are 229 sites nationally (U3A Online website: U3A sites listed, 24 February 2016). In summary, U3As focus on non-formal personal interest learning.

ACE registered training providers (ACE RTOs)

Provision of formal vocational education and training (VET) is an additional focus for some ACE providers only. These include some NH&Cs, all Community Colleges (in NSW and Vic) and other ACE providers that go by other names.

To be a provider of formal VET, an organisation must meet the standards for RTOs. The number of RTOs with registration type 'community based adult education provider' as at the 1st of January 2016 was 295 according to training.gov.au – the official national register on VET in Australia and authoritative source of information on RTOs, training packages, qualifications, accredited courses, units of competency, skill sets, etc. This is considerably less than the numbers of ACE RTOs recorded as of 1 January in previous years on training.gov.au (see Figure 2).

The reasons for a drop in the number of ACE providers who are also RTOs or VET providers can only be speculated.

- As Figure 2 shows, there has been a steady decline in ACE RTOs since 2011. The creation of the national quality assurance agency for VET – the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) around mid-2011 may have caused some attrition of ACE RTOs.
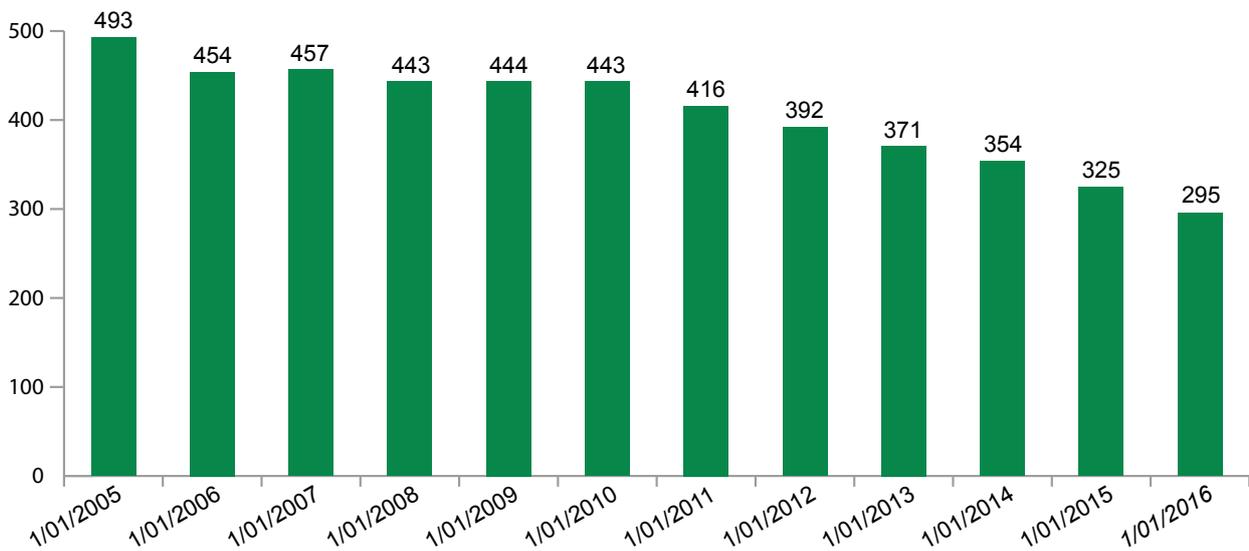
(Source: Data request from training.gov.au help desk March 2016)

Figure 2: Numbers of ACE RTOs at January 1 each year (2005–2016)

- Initial incorrect classification and then reclassification is another possible reason. Indeed an historical report on ACE RTOs (provided by training.gov.au help desk March 30 2016) shows that 44 have been reclassified from ACE RTOs to other categories of RTOs and that the earliest incidence of this happening was mid-2011.

- Also ACE RTOs have been amalgamating to adopt more sustainable new business models in response to changes in VET policy and towards more competitive training markets in which all RTOs compete for the available government funds. For example, ACE RTO providers in NSW, known as Community Colleges, have reduced from 70 ten years ago to 35 today through mergers, re-alignment of service focus and closures (ALA, 2015, p. 13).

To be noted further is that discrepancies exist between the above point-in-time numbers of ACE RTOs in the national register for VET (training.gov.au) and the numbers of ACE RTOs reported as delivering government funded VET in any one year by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER), which manages national VET data collections.

- For example in 2014 according to training.gov. au there were 354 ACE RTOs whereas the NCVER reported 426 ACE RTOs as delivering government funded VET in 2014 (NCVER, 2015a)

- For the same year NCVER reported total VET activity from all funding sources for the first time and that 498 ACE providers were involved (NCVER, 2015b).

- It has been suggested that the definitions in the NCVER managed National VET Provider Collection specifications for the Training Organisation Type Identifiers are broad enough that organisations can identify themselves incorrectly, skewing the numbers (ALA, 2015 p. 6).

In summary regarding the number of ACE providers who are also RTOs or VET providers, the best we can say is that there are at least 300 and may be as many as 500.

Total ACE providers and their activity focus

Overall, the found data suggests that there are at least 2500 ACE providers in Australia. All deliver personal interest learning and some only this type of learning. Many also provide adult basic education. A significant minority offer formal vocational education as well (see Figure 3).

Personal interest learning
All ACE providers (at least 2500 in number) with Mens'Sheds and U3As only providing this kind of learning

Adult basic education
Most ACE providers

VET
Some ACE providers 300–500
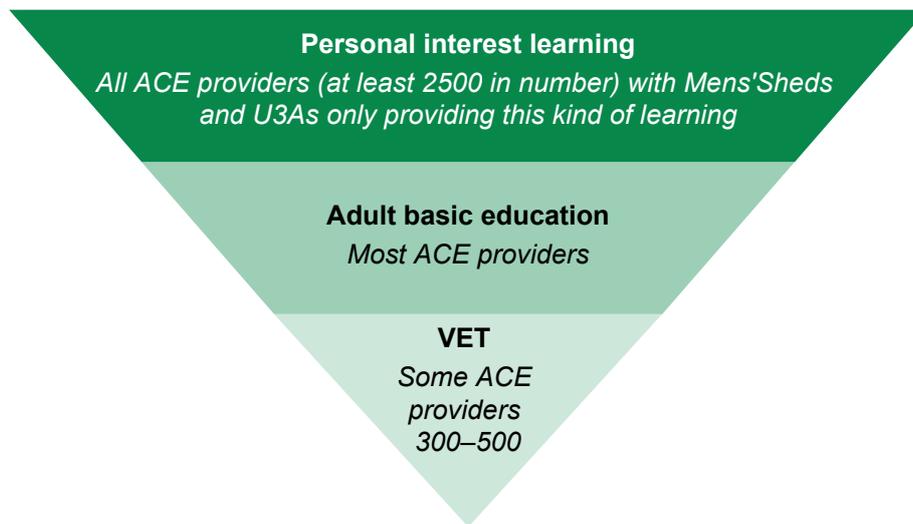
Figure 3: Schematic view of scale of Australian ACE providers today by activity focus

ACE by jurisdiction

Australian ACE is complicated in part because of its own community needs focus that makes its learning provision diverse, tailored to the local community in which it operates. ACE is also complicated because it is influenced by state and territory governments who have primary responsibility for ACE. There are differences in how the jurisdictions view and fund ACE.

Contemporary descriptions of ACE by Australian state and territory have been compiled by Adult Learning Australia (2015). These have been compared with snap shot descriptions developed in 2000 by Borthwick, Knight, Bender and Loveder (2001) to reveal key changes. It was found that:

- Two states (NSW and Victoria) fund a network of not for profit community-based providers that deliver in all key activity areas of ACE described above and have been doing so for years.

  » NSW focusses its ACE funding on a regional network of ACE VET providers branded as 'Community Colleges' (that includes 3 of the original Workers Education Associations) and mainly for ACE VET.

  » Victoria brands the ACE providers it funds as 'Learn Locals'. Learn Locals are a diverse group that includes Community Houses, Learning Centres, Community Colleges and Neighbourhood Houses. They also include training centres managed by major not-for-profit organisations such as Yooralla,

Brotherhood of St Laurence, Jesuit Social Services and Melbourne City Mission, and a number of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) specialist providers. Victoria funds Learn Locals to deliver programs in personal interest learning and adult basic education (non-accredited and accredited). ACE providers also have access to VET funding if they are RTOs.

- Two other states (SA and the ACT) fund ACE as programs in personal interest learning and adult basic education (non-accredited and accredited) only and via community owned and managed not for profit organisations only.

  » Of note is that there was minimal central co-ordination of ACE in these two states in 2000 but central co-ordination has since improved.

  » South Australia funds ACE providers made up of Neighbourhood houses and Community Centres and other not for profits, and one large Workers Education Association.

  » The Australian Capital Territory funds Neighbourhood Houses and Centres.

  » A further three states (Qld, Tas and WA) fund ACE as programs in personal interest learning and adult basic education (non-accredited and accredited) only and via various types of organisations including ACE organisations.

  » This is a change on the 2001 situation when these three states recognised and funded ACE mainly as non-VET programs delivered through public VET providers or TAFEs.

» Further Tasmania has built a state-wide ACE network since 2001 – the LINC Tasmania network of libraries, ACE centres and online access centres with 87 physical service points providing community and personal learning and adult literacy programs and there is an association of 34 community houses providing literacy programs and other community programs.

» Queensland has developed a register of ACE providers listed with the Department of Education.

» Western Australia, on the other hand, appears to be at a cross road with state funding ceasing in 2015 for ACE via Linkwest, the peak body for 205 registered Community, Neighbourhood and Learning Centres.

• The eighth jurisdiction (NT) does not a recognise ACE per se but has examples of community based adult education provision. This is the same situation as reported in 2001.

Overall, the level of jurisdictional support for ACE has improved between 2000 and 2015. In 2000 Australia

split more or less in half (4:4) in state/territory funding specifically for ACE (Borthwick et al 2001). Today seven of the eight jurisdictions fund ACE albeit in varying ways and to various degrees (ALA, 2015).

Figure 4 shows the percentage of each of the key types of ACE providers located in each jurisdiction. To be noted is that the data used to construct Figure 4 is not all for the same time period. Therefore, it is indicative only of the proportional distribution of key types of ACE providers by Australian jurisdiction. Figure 4 shows that:

• ACE providers of all types are spread across Australia making ACE accessible to a large number of Australians.

• Victoria has the largest and most diverse ACE sector.

• ACE RTO providers are concentrated in Victoria and NSW and together they account for 70% of the total ACE VET providers in the country.

Against this backdrop, the next section profiles Australian ACE by key program area as a means of revealing further all of the work that Australian ACE does.

ACE provider types by jurisdiction
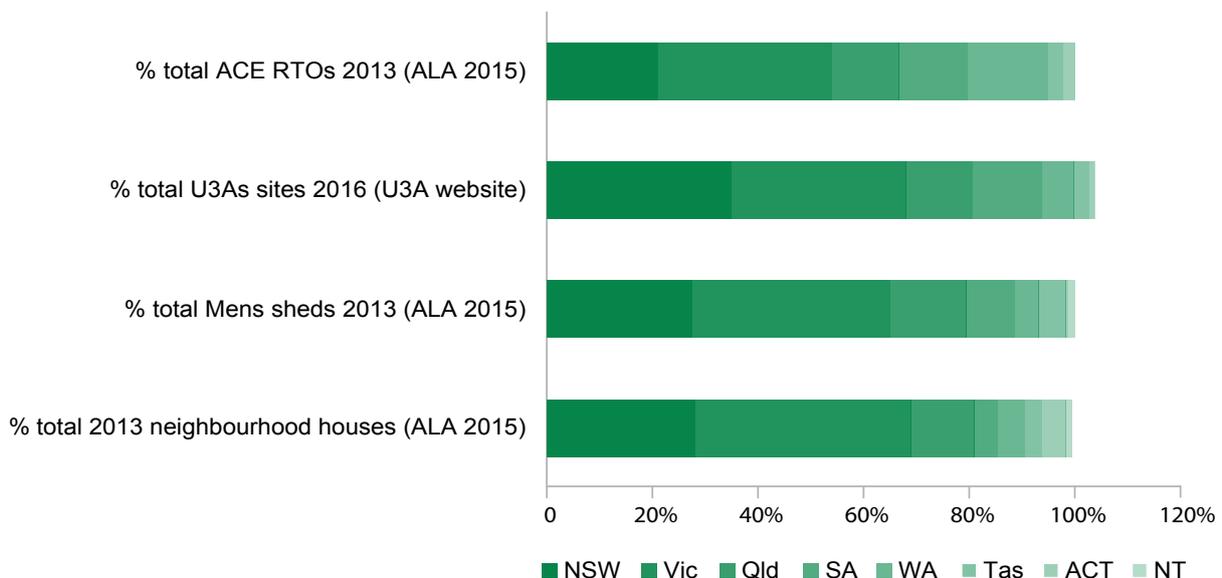
Sources: The data for ACE RTO or VET providers has been drawn from the ALA 2015 report and is for the year 2013. The data for U3As is from the U3A website and for early 2016. The data for Men's Sheds is drawn from a 2011 report (AMSA, 2011) and the data for Neighbourhood Houses was also drawn from a 2011 report (ANHCA, 2011) and as shown in ALA, 2015.

Figure 4: Indicative proportional distributions of key types of ACE providers by jurisdiction

Australian ACE: programs profiles

The four main programs of ACE, previously outlined and presented schematically in Figure 5, provide a common framework for describing all of the work of Australian ACE. For each of the four programs in turn, this section details their key features, providers, current participant numbers and participant characteristics and the outcomes achieved with trends in performance over recent years included where data is available to aid identification of issues affecting program sustainability.

Personal interest learning – the traditional focus of ACE

Australian ACE started out offering and still offers as a core service leisure, recreation and personal enrichment programs and activities. The logic of personal interest learning programs is shown in Figure 6.

Key features

ACE hobby, recreation and personal enrichment learning programs have the following key features:

- They cover a wide range of topics: history, literature, languages, politics, philosophy, science,

arts, crafts, health, personal development and many others.

- They are short structured learning programs that do not lead directly to attainment of a formal qualification or award (otherwise referred to as non-formal and non-accredited learning).

- They mainly operate on a user-pays system, with government grants sometimes for particular policy agendas that enable fees to be reduced or waived for individuals and those who are financially disadvantaged in particular.

- They are considered to be non-vocational, however, the intent of the learner may well be vocational:

| 1. Hobby, recreation and personal enrichment programs (non-formal, non-accredited) | + | 2. Adult basic education programs (non-accredited and accredited) | + | 3. Vocational education and training programs (formal, accredited) |

+ 4. Pathways between the three main types of activities above
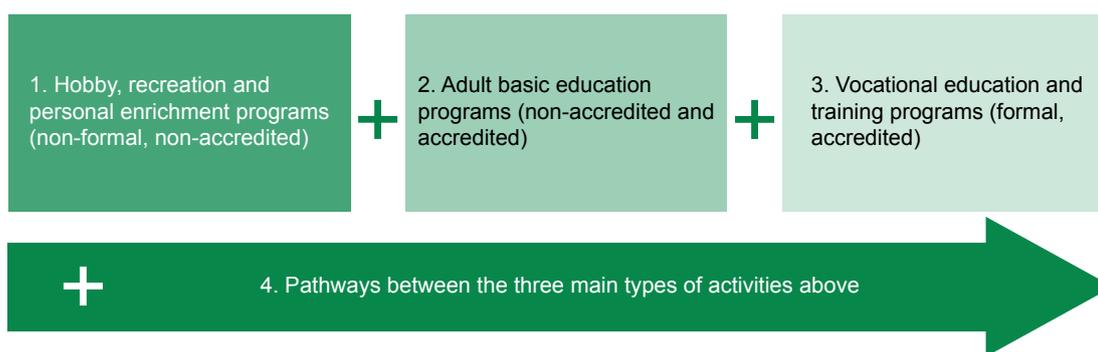
Figure 5: The four programs of Australian ACE today

Activity	Participants	Key Outcomes	Policy links
Hobby, recreation and personal enrichment programs (non-formal, non-accredited)	All adults, particularly those already keen to learnand others coaxed to give it a go	Improved health and wellbeing, Increased social connections, Motivation for further learning	Healthy, productive ageing
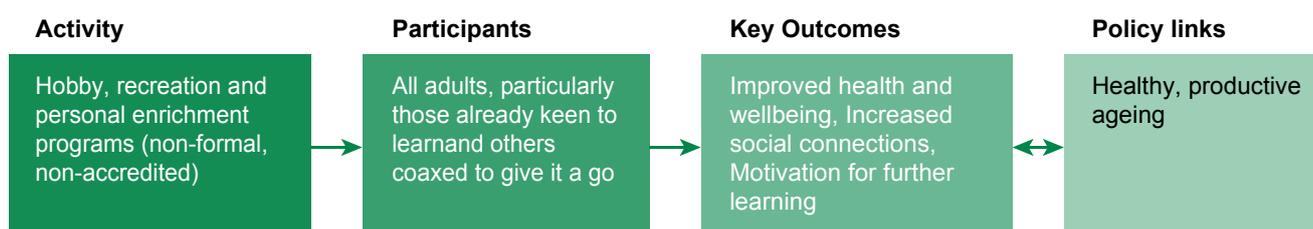
Figure 6: Program logic of personal interest learning

'Information from interviewees indicated that many students who undertook courses commonly labelled as general interest, leisure, enrichment or personal development realised upon completion of their course that they could apply the knowledge and skills learned to their jobs. This suggested that while the ACE courses were not identified as vocational, they did have vocational application. Indeed, it appears that many students are now enrolling in ACE courses not identified as "vocational" with the specific intention of learning vocationally applicable skills and knowledge' (Saunders, 2001, p. 85).

Providers

All ACE providers provide personal interest learning. Indeed for some (and generally smaller sized ACE providers) this is the only type of learning they provide. However, personal interest learning is also offered by other than ACE providers.

Participants

All adults may participate in ACE personal enrichment learning programs, particularly those already keen to learn and others coaxed to 'give it a go'. Estimates only can be provided of the numbers of adults participating in personal interest learning in ACE providers alone and some details on the characteristics of the participants.

There is firmer data on the scale of all personal interest learning Australia wide from all sources and the characteristics of the participants. This data is presented first below to provide context for the estimates on participants in personal interest learning in ACE only.

Participants in personal interest learning from all sources Australia wide

The ABS undertook a survey of personal interest learning across Australia from all sources in 2013 (ABS, 2013). Personal interest learning was defined as 'structured learning that does not lead to a recognised qualification and is not related to employment' and is therefore largely undertaken on a self-motivated basis for a range of reasons including the pursuit of knowledge, personal development, interest and enjoyment'.

The ABS estimated 1.4 million Australians (or 8.4% of all Australians) had participated in structured personal interest learning in the 12 months to April 2013 (ABS, 2013).

The demographic profile of the 1.4 million personal interest learners showed:

- more women participating in at least one course (10%) compared with for men (6.6%)
- people aged 15–19 participate at the highest rate, with 11% in this age group participating
- older people aged 65–74 years also participate in high numbers, with 8.7% in this age group participating
- participation is lower among people living in areas of relatively high socio-economic disadvantage (Quintile 1 of the Index of Socio-Economic Disadvantage) than among people living in areas where disadvantage is low (Quintile 5) (4.8% compared with 12%).

Participants in personal interest learning in ACE only

The readily available data found on participants in personal interest learning in ACE providers is piecemeal and by ACE provider type.

Community Men's Sheds and U3As

As these ACE providers only offer personal interest education we can include all of their participants. There are about 175,000 men being serviced by Community Men's Sheds most of whom are older men, with the mean age 69 years (median=70) and an age range from 23 to 100 years (AMSA, 2011). The only data found in the public domain on the numbers of participants in the U3As was in a report by Swindell et al and for 2010.

The total membership base for U3As reported was 64,160 (for 62% of all U3As who responded). Scaling this up membership for all U3As comes to about 100,000 in 2008.

Neighbourhood Houses and Centres (NH&Cs)

All Neighbourhood Houses and Centres (NH&Cs) offer personal interest learning but participants in this learning were not separated from participants in other types of learning in the national survey of Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres (NH&Cs) undertaken in late 2010/early 2011. However, it may be fair to assume that most of the participants in NH&Cs are involved in personal interest learning. The survey found that on average each week 320 people participate

in activities at a Neighbourhood House or Centre. Nationally that equates to 320,000 people engaged in activities each week and converts to approximately 14,500,000 visits per year across the entire (NH&Cs) sector. Unique visits were not stated (ANHCA 2011).

As to the characteristics of those involved, 98% of the NH&Cs reported engaging people on low incomes, socially isolated people or those at risk of social isolation and people with low levels of formal education and training (see Figure 7).

ACE RTO providers

Some data on personal interest learning among ACE VET providers is available within the National VET Provider Collection managed by the NCVER and for those ACE

RTOs in receipt of government VET funding. This data is not of core interest to the VET sector though and is removed from national reports on VET by the NCVER, and also because it is unclear how complete it is.

ACE RTOs are not compelled to provide their mainly fee-for-service personal interest learning data. The data for the years 2003 to 2014 are shown in Table 3. The point of including this data is to provide ballpark figures.

The shown decrease in student numbers in personal interest learning among ACE RTOs may be due to a drop in data provision over time rather than represent an actual decrease.
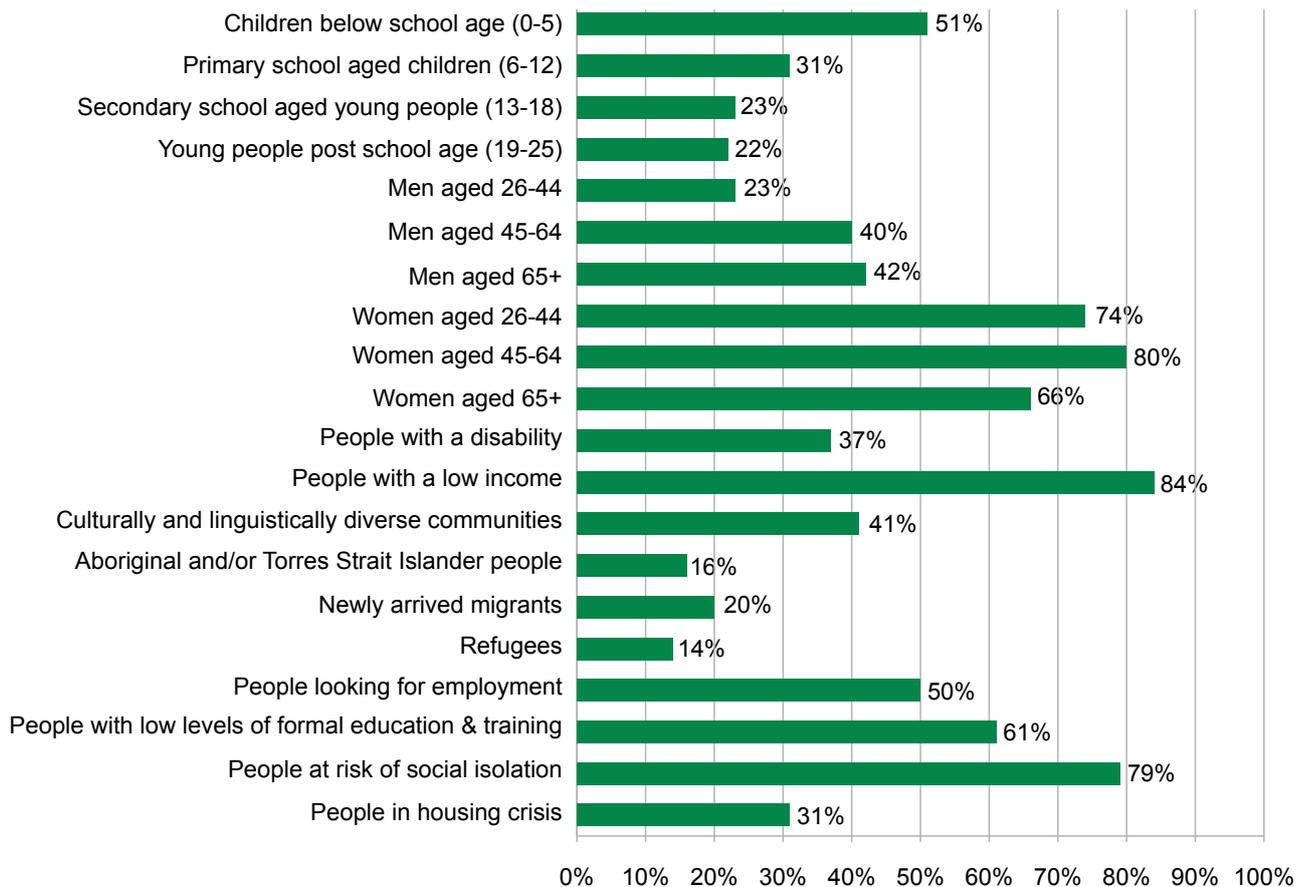
(Source: ANHCA, 2011, Table 3, p. 11)

Figure 7: Percentage of NH&C respondents reporting the demographic listed

Table 3: Numbers of students involved in personal enrichment learning among ACE RTO providers in receipt of government funding for their VET activity (incomplete data as ACE RTO providers have not been compelled to provide this data)

2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
187160	177550	151195	163420	159280	144795	89455	78850	63095	81835	49340	37750

(Source: NCVER data request, March 2016)

The significance of personal interest learning in Australian ACE

Comparing the estimated 1.4 million Australians involved in personal interest learning in 2014 from all sources with various estimates of the numbers of participants in personal interest learning in ACE providers suggests that ACE providers are significant providers of all personal interest learning undertaken in Australia, and many of the participants are from disadvantaged groups.

(We can add at least 175,000 men involved in Men's Sheds; at least 10,000 involved in U3As and at least 37,750 students involved in ACE VET as personal enrichment learning among ACE RTO providers as these data sets do not overlap. There are also many adults involved in personal enrichment learning in NH&Cs).

Outcomes

Personal interest learning yields personal benefits that improve individual health and wellbeing. To give a specific Australian example, we turn to community Men's Sheds. In mid-2013, a survey was conducted of 1436 members of Men's Sheds (Flood & Blair, 2013).

The benefits of Men's Sheds that members highlighted are outlined in Table 4.

- Social interaction is the main reason men join the Sheds and is also perceived as the greatest benefit of Sheds. A total of 45% of Men's Sheds members surveyed mentioned 'getting out and socialising' as the greatest benefit of the Sheds and 41% mentioned 'making friends'.

- Learning or passing on skills is the next most often mentioned benefit (20%); including learning or passing on 'trade skills', 'computer skills', 'how to engage with people skills' and 'learning about health issues'.

- Health benefits are not highly ranked by members of Men's Sheds in the greatest benefits list but the

identified social interactions benefits have significant impacts on personal health and wellbeing by combatting the effects of social isolation; providing men with a sense of purpose and self-esteem; improving physical health and mental wellbeing and increasing help seeking behaviour. This was shown when members of Men's Sheds were compared with a similarly profiled non-Shed sample who are less socially active. The Shed members scored significantly higher physical functioning, physical roles, general health, vitality, mental health and mental wellbeing than non-Shed members as measured by the Short Form (12) Health Survey (SF-12) and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) instruments (Flood & Blair, 2013).

There is also strong international evidence showing that participation in adult education contributes to positive changes in health and attitudes.

A recent review and update of research into the wider benefits of adult learning in the UK, focussed on studies with methodologies able to account for causality found that:

> '... the main wider benefits of adult learning show up in health, mental health and job-related outcomes. The previous literature generally supports this. Both formal and informal types of learning tend to matter, suggesting that participation in learning in itself is important.

> 'The impact on self-confidence is worth a special and final mention. Adult learning has more than twice the impact on self-confidence than does being employed. This is an especially large effect and there are potential positive spillovers for a range of market and non-market outcomes from feeling better about oneself' (Dolan, Fujiwara & Metcalfe, 2012, p. 8).

Table 4: Greatest benefits of Men's Sheds as perceived by their members

Theme	Percentage	Example quote
Socialising/getting out	45	Non-judgemental social interaction.
Making friends	41	The consistent companionship of coming to the Shed and getting to know a whole new 'set' of people from different backgrounds.
Learning or passing on skills	20	Social interaction, giving to the community and learning new skills.
For the community	13	To keep busy, giving back to local community, to share with others old and new.
Talking about issues	7	Companionship. Freedom to discuss a very broad range of issues without preplanning or bias. Helping others who are struggling.
For health	3	Personal satisfaction in its growth and seeing change in members' interests and personal health.

(Source: Flood & Blair, 2013, Table 1, p. 11.)

Policy links

Good health is a fundamental for all and most important for our ageing population to keep them active members of the community and workforce. Healthy, productive ageing is a key government policy that personal interest programs contribute directly to but these programs also can increase motivation for further learning and be a gateway for participants into other learning activities (see later section: Pathways provision between learning programs).

Sustainability challenges

The challenge for most ACE providers is how to keep funding their personal interest learning programs when they are not funded by government; particularly as many of their customers are in the lowest income brackets and these programs are an important gateway back to learning for many disadvantaged learners (see later section: Pathways provision between learning programs).

This challenge is confirmed by the ABS 2013 survey on personal interest learning. People who had wanted to participate in personal interest non-formal learning but did not, or who had participated but wanted to do more were asked by the ABS what the main barriers to participation were. The answers included: too much work or no time (48%); financial reasons (24%); personal reasons (12%) and course not available (5.4%). Of these reasons, financial reasons were more likely to be the main barrier to participation for people aged 15–24 years (31%) when compared with older people aged 55–64 years (19%) and 65–74 years (14%) and financial reasons were the main barrier to participation for unemployed people (44%) (ABS, 2013).

Adult basic education – a common new focus of ACE

Many Australian ACE providers nowadays provide adult basic education in addition to offering leisure, recreation and personal enrichment programs.

The logic of adult basic education programs is shown in Figure 8.

Key features

Key features of ACE adult basic education programs include:

- They cover literacy and numeracy and basic computing skills and other foundation skills such as communication skills, problem solving and self-presentation and management skills that are offered with a high level of support. They also include English as a second language courses.

- They may be non-accredited or accredited in nature.

  » non-accredited literacy and numeracy training may be standalone or embedded in other courses such as English through cooking, language of childbirth and healthy eating

Activity		Participants		Key outcomes		Policy links
Adult basic education – alone or with vocational content (non-accredited and accredited)	→	Adults with limited formal education or English language	→	Improved self-functioning, Improved self confidence, Better understanding of work, Motivation for further learning	↔	National Foundation Skills, Strategy for Adults; Social inclusion through education

Figure 8: Program logic of adult basic education

» accredited programs may be standalone or integrated with an area of vocational interest to the learner so that opportunities to explore the world of work and learning pathways to work are also provided.

» accredited programs may be at the full qualification level or at the level of subjects only and/or skill sets only to fill gaps in an adult's basic skills.

Participants

Adult basic education programs are particularly for adults with limited formal education or English language skills.

Participants in non- or pre-accredited adult basic education

There is no data collection on Australian adults involved in non-accredited basic education programs delivered by ACE providers. We do know from a one-off study that thousands of Australian adults are involved (Dymock, 2007). The Dymock study was the first (and only known to the author) attempt to gauge the extent of provision of non-accredited literacy and numeracy training across Australia, that was taken to include: courses and other activities where students were given a statement of attainment or participation but not accredited qualifications (for example, Certificate I); instances where students undertook specific language, literacy or numeracy embedded in other courses and adult English as a second language students, adult literacy for native speakers of English, and adult numeracy students.

The data Dymock collected via a national survey sent to providers was reported in a variety of ways that made it not possible to arrive at an accurate figure for the number of students who were receiving non-accredited language, literacy and numeracy help. However, there appeared to be around 4000 students engaged with the

125 providers who responded to the survey from across Australia, except the Northern Territory. The students in these courses were indicated by the majority of providers to be mostly aged between 30–49 years, with strong representation also from the 20–29 years and 50–59 years cohorts.

Outcomes from non-accredited adult basic education

Providers of non-accredited adult basic education report a range of reasons for adults' participation:

• To learn English for everyday purposes, seen as the major motivation

• For social contact and the desire to take more control over their lives, also strong motivations

• To improve levels of self-confidence and capacity to interact with the wider community

• Because they do not need or would struggle with accredited adult basic education courses (Dymock, 2007)

Only around one-quarter of the program coordinators believed that students participated in non-accredited adult basic education primarily for employment-related reasons but their perceptions were that improved literacy led to further training or employment outcomes in many instances:

• approximately 26% of respondents believed that up to 10% of their students went on to other education or training, while around 7% believed that up to 75% of their students went on to employment

• only a small number of providers believed that none of their students went onto other training or employment

• around one-fifth did not know the extent to which their students went on to other training or employment (Dymock, 2007, Table 5, p. 19).

Overall, Dymock (2007) found strong continuing demand for non-accredited community language, literacy and numeracy courses in Australia, and that many adults choose this form of assistance because they either do not need or would struggle with accredited courses.

Dymock suggested that the contribution of non-accredited language, literacy and numeracy courses to both personal development and social capital should receive greater attention and acknowledgement, particularly through funding support.

Participants in accredited adult basic education programs delivered by ACE VET providers

Accredited adult basic education programs are delivered by ACE VET providers and reported within the mixed field programs category in the National VET Provider Collection managed by the NCVER. The Field of Education (FOE) Type 12 – Mixed Field Programmes – are made up of general education programmes, social skills courses, employment skills courses and other mixed field programmes (NCVER communication 29 March 2016).

Current participation levels

Based on NCVER provided statistics on FOE 12 – Mixed Field Programmes – in ACE VET providers and in all other VET providers the following has been found:

In 2014 there were 12,585 students participating in accredited adult basic education programs in ACE VET providers receiving government funding for VET.

These students made up 7.4% of all students participating in accredited adult basic education programs in that year at all VET providers receiving government funding for VET.

- The percentage that ACE students are of all students in adult basic education programs in VET has ranged from 12.2% in 2003 to 7.4% in 2014 (see Table 5).

Trends in participation

Student numbers in accredited adult basic education in ACE VET providers have fluctuated over the past ten years, whereas both subject enrolments and supervised training hours have steadily increased to 2013 (see Figure 9).

These trends have given rise to overall steady increases in the average subject enrolments per student in adult basic education in ACE VET providers over the 2003–2014 period (from 2.54 enrolments per student in 2003 to 8.07 in 2014) and in the reported training hours per student (from 128.59 in 2003 to 389.60 in 2014 (see Figure 10).

Table 5: Accredited adult basic education student numbers 2003–2014: a) in ACE VET providers b) in all VET providers c) % ACE students of total VET students

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
ACE student numbers	20195	14285	11430	12615	13085	14320	14560	12945	14425	17615	21525	12585
Total students	166115	191365	192945	198435	193710	191240	192175	193265	181910	210530	227465	169675
% ACE students of all students	12.16%	7.46%	5.92%	6.36%	6.75%	7.49%	7.58%	6.70%	7.93%	8.37%	9.46%	7.42%

(Source: NCVER specific data request)

ACE Adult Basic Education VET students, 2003-14

ACE Basic Adult Education VET subject enrolments, 2003-14

ACE Adult Basic Education VET training hours, 2003-14
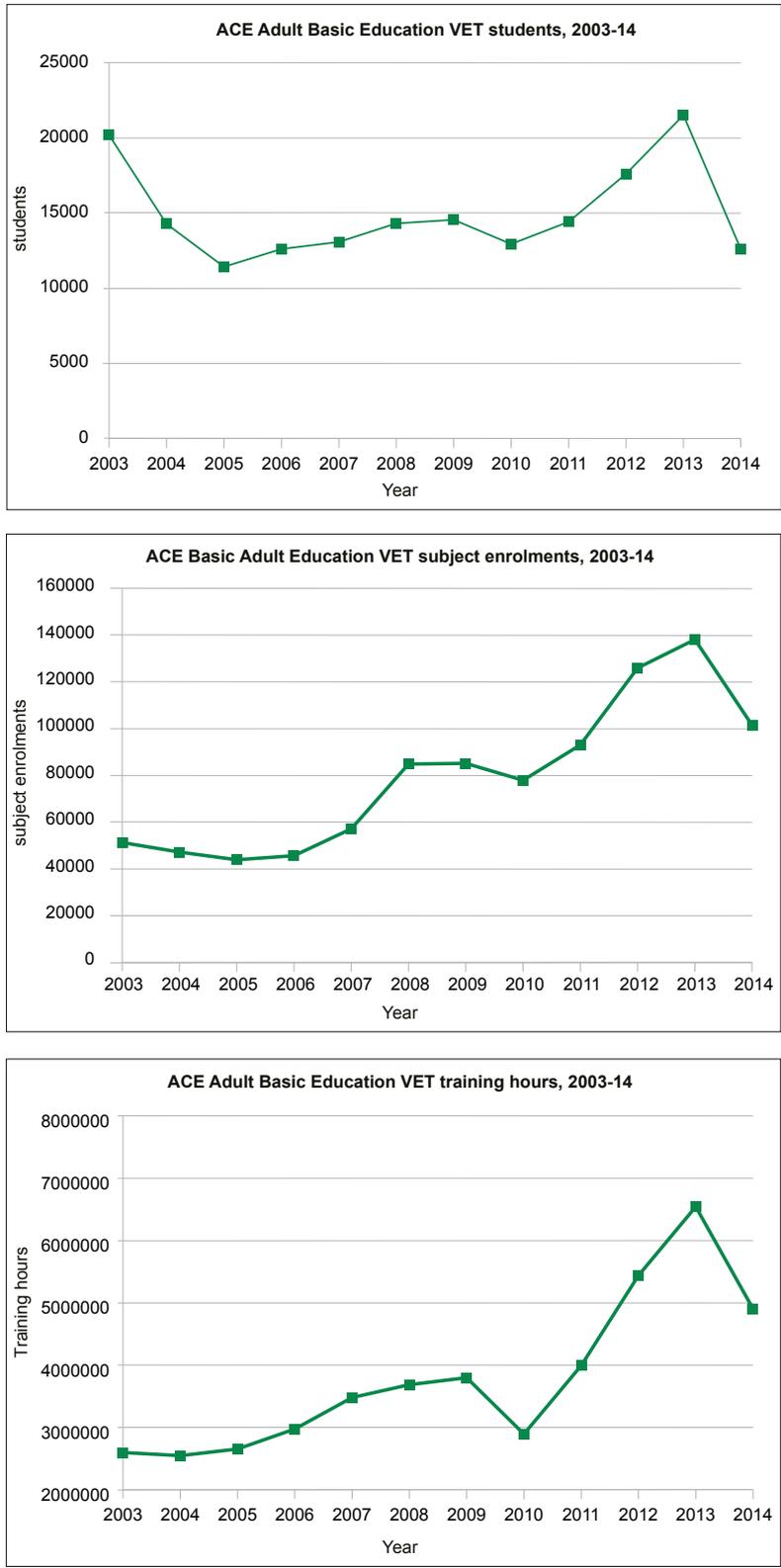
(Source: NCVER specific data request)

Figure 9: Trends in ACE accredited adult basic education student numbers, subject enrolments and training hours 2003–2014

ACE Adult Basic Education VET subject enrolments per student, 2003-14

ACE Adult Basic Education VET training hours per student, 2003-14
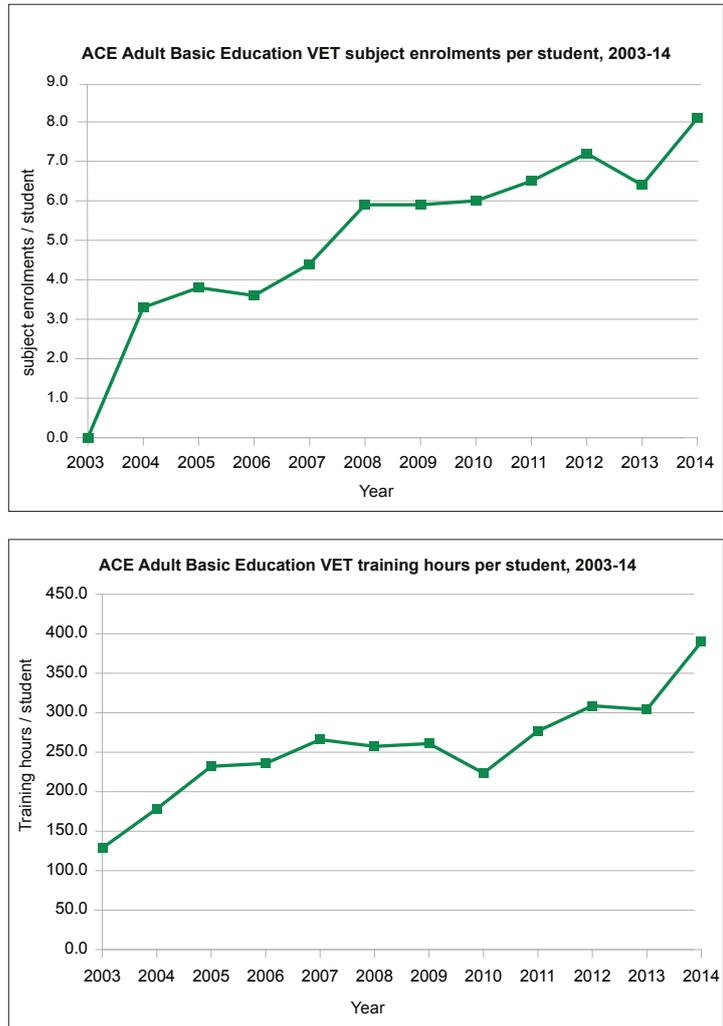
(Source: NCVER specific data request)

Figure 10: Trends in scale of accredited adult basic education per ACE student 2003–2014

Overall, the trend in accredited adult basic education provision in ACE providers has been towards increasing quantities delivered per student per year.

Trends in the type of accredited adult basic education provided

The trend has also been significantly towards what NCVER refers to as AQF training in accredited adult basic education by students involved with ACE VET providers – from 37% in 2003 to 74% in 2014. The same trend has occurred in all other VET providers as well – from 47% in 2003 to 81% in 2014 (Table 7). AQF training is all Certificate I and above qualification courses. Non-AQF training includes courses at secondary education level (Year 11 & 12), non-award courses, subject-only enrolments (i.e. not enrolled in a course), statements of attainment (part courses), and not elsewhere classified. So the trend has been towards more full qualifications training in accredited adult basic education by students (or at least more enrolments therein) and less part qualifications or subjects only training.

Table 6: Adult basic education students by AQF and non AQF in ACE VET and other VET providers

Item/year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
ACE students	20195	14285	11430	12615	13085	14320	14560	12945	14425	17615	21525	12585
% AQF	37%	55%	76%	80%	79%	75%	78%	69%	66%	74%	82%	74%
%Non AQF	63%	45%	24%	20%	21%	25%	22%	31%	34%	26%	18%	26%
Other provider students	68680	73110	76715	68715	81055	79305	88010	88465	91825	124425	143535	127430
% AQF	47%	41%	42%	37%	45%	45%	50%	49%	55%	64%	70%	81%
%Non AQF	53	59	58	63	55	55	50	51	45	36	30	19

(Source: NCVER specific data request)

Characteristics of students in accredited adult basic education

VET adult basic education students include people from various disadvantaged or equity groups as shown in Table 7 and for students in ACE VET compared to students in all other VET providers.

Table 7 shows that:

- People with a disability, the unemployed and people not in the labour force are more highly represented in accredited adult basic education at ACE VET providers than in accredited adult basic education in all other VET providers

- Students from a non-English speaking-background (NESB) are highly represented in accredited adult

basic education at ACE VET providers and also in accredited adult basic education in all other VET providers

- Indigenous students are also significantly represented in accredited adult basic education at ACE VET providers but not as highly as they are among students in accredited adult basic education in all other VET providers

- Students from outer regional, remote and very remote regions are less well represented in accredited adult basic education at ACE VET providers compared to their representation in accredited adult basic education in all other VET providers.

Table 7: Accredited adult basic education students: per cent of total in various equity groups in ACE VET providers compared to in all other VET providers

Equity group / Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Students with a disability as												
% Total ace VET students	13.6	14.8	19.3	20.5	20.1	20.3	19.2	21.8	24.0	24.4	20.2	36.5
% Total other VET providers	13.2	11.3	11.8	12.0	11.8	11.7	11.4	11.6	12.7	12.0	11.8	13.9
Indigenous students as												
% Total ace VET students	3.2	1.5	1.7	2.7	3.4	3.9	5.2	4.9	4.4	3.3	3.4	5.4
% Total other VET providers	8.0	7.0	7.1	6.8	7.1	7.7	7.9	8.4	8.0	6.9	6.1	6.7

Equity group / Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Students from a non-English speaking-background (NESB) as												
% Total ace VET students	20.8	34.5	40.8	40.6	40.4	43.1	40.5	41.4	47.6	47.5	58.9	41.1
% Total other VET providers	21.2	19.8	21.2	22.9	28.0	28.5	29.9	31.2	31.6	33.6	35.1	47.6
Students from outer regional, remote and very remote regions as												
% Total ace VET students	14.5	8.9	5.5	7.7	7.7	7.5	8.0	11.3	5.3	3.7	3.5	3.7
% Total other VET providers	19.5	18.6	18.5	16.7	17.5	17.8	15.9	17.9	14.2	13.5	11.7	8.8
Unemployed students as												
% Total ace VET students	21.2	22.0	23.8	24.1	24.9	27.5	28.4	29.6	36.5	43.9	36.5	42.8
% Total other VET providers	22.9	20.1	19.4	19.4	20.3	20.4	22.4	22.8	25.1	27.1	31.6	33.0
Students not in the labour force												
% Total ace VET students	22.8	28.6	36.4	35.0	34.4	32.2	30.6	32.6	33.5	29.7	36.6	32.9
% Total other VET providers	23.2	20.8	20.6	20.8	23.9	24.1	26.6	25.9	26.1	26.3	24.9	32.1

(Source: NCVER specific data request)

Student success rates

Successfully completed hours in accredited adult basic education in ACE VET providers and in other VET providers have been calculated and 'load pass rates' determined (Table 8). A load pass rate is the ratio of hours studied by students who passed their subject(s) to the total hours committed to by all students who passed, failed or withdrew from the corresponding subject(s).

In other words, a load pass rate can be thought of as the ratio of 'profitable hours' to the total hours undertaken by students. Table 8 shows that over the years 2003–2014, students in accredited adult basic education in ACE VET providers have been completing successfully 50 to 60 per cent of the total hours of training they signed up for. This rate of success is below that for students in accredited adult basic education in other VET providers by a margin of 9% or more.

Table 8: Load pass rates (%) in accredited adult basic education in ACE providers and other VET providers 2003–2014

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
ACE providers	51.1	51.8	50.0	50.6	46.8	45.6	46.6	49.0	47.7	53.0	58.4	56.6
Other providers	59.6	60.0	62.1	63.2	64.9	65.1	65.5	65.1	67.1	69.6	71.0	65.8
Total	59.2	59.6	61.5	62.5	63.9	63.7	64.2	64.2	65.6	68.1	69.8	65.1

(Source: NCVER specific data request)

Outcomes

Accredited adult basic education programs assist people to cope with the demands of everyday life in our society. They boost the every functioning, confidence, and self-pride of previously educationally disadvantage adults and can motivate them to do other study (Foster & Beddie 2005).

Adult basic education programs can also enable participants to meet the requirements of the work they perform. When the development of these skills is combined with vocational subjects then the learner also attains a better understanding of the world of work.

Policy links

There is a high literacy challenge in Australia that ACE providers are responding to, as well to achieve social inclusion. Almost half of Australia's adult population has literacy and numeracy skills levels below those required for effective functioning in the workplace and modern life in general (ABS, 2008 and OECD, 2013).

There is a 'foundation learner type' who needs to further develop in key areas such as literacy, numeracy and interpersonal skills in order to undertake further study.

In response, there is the National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults endorsed by all governments in 2012 (SCOTESE, 2012). The Strategy recognises that literacy development is a lifelong activity with life-wide implications, particularly in the modern context. Through the Strategy, governments aim to reach a target of two thirds of working age Australians having the literacy and numeracy skills levels required to function effectively in workplaces and modern life generally by 2022.

The Strategy acknowledges 'providers of adult education in community settings' as critical to providing diverse foundation skills programs for adults, including through pre-vocational and bridging programs in the National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults (SCOTESE, 2012, p. 12).

Sustainability challenges

The contribution of non-accredited language, literacy and numeracy courses to both personal development and social capital should receive greater attention and acknowledgement, particularly through funding support. Finding ways of assessing and acknowledging the full range of outcomes achieved from non-accredited community language, literacy and numeracy courses may aid achievement of this support (Dymock & Billet, 2008).

With regard to accredited adult basic education, the noticeable decrease in student numbers in ACE VET providers between 2013 and 2014 requires investigating to determine if it is cause for alarm or part of the ongoing fluctuating pattern. The increasing focus on full qualifications (AQF) training may need review.

Ensuring flexibility in foundation skills training is important as not all adults need standalone full qualifications training in this area, rather they want training that fills gaps in their foundation skills and the gap training to be integrated with vocationally focussed subject or qualifications delivery (Bowman, 2015, unpublished).

Also, ACE providers require support to build the skills of their adult basic education practitioners to ensure that disadvantaged learners have access to foundation skills.

Formal VET – the new additional focus of some ACE providers

Some ACE providers provide formal vocational education and training as well as adult basic education and personal interest learning. These ACE providers have registered training organisation (RTO) status to deliver formal or accredited VET subjects, skill sets and whole qualifications, and issue recognised Australian VET qualifications and other awards. The logic of formal VET in ACE programs is shown in Figure 11.

There are also ACE providers who are not RTOs but who assist with formal accredited VET delivery through entering partnerships with RTO VET providers that take responsibility for assuring the quality of assessments and judgements about competence or outcomes achieved and the issuing of the final VET awards. No information was found on the extent of these partnerships.

Key features of ACE providers formal vocational education and training

ACE providers in the formal VET system serve a generic role and a value-adding role (Schofield & Associates, 1996).

Activity	Participants	Key outcomes	Policy links
Vocational education and training (formal, accredited). In partnerships or own right	All adults Targeted disadvantaged	Increased work skills, Improved job status, Increased wages/ incomes, Motivation for further learning	Skills to improve workforce participation and productivity Social inclusion in VET
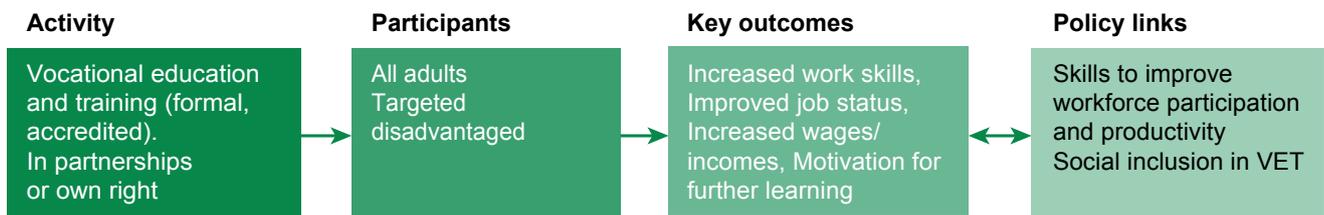
Figure 11: Formal VET in ACE program logic

- The generic role of ACE in VET is to offer VET to all adults.

- The value-adding role of ACE in VET is to bring in its distinctive qualities and unique delivery method – a strongly local, community-based, flexible, market-driven, learner-centred approach to delivery – primarily to assist disadvantaged students into and through the VET system.

- It is the value-adding role that distinguishes much provision by ACE providers in VET and makes ACE-VET complementary and supplementary to VET provision by other VET providers and particularly private VET providers. For example, Harris & Simons (2007) have compared data they collected on a sample of ACE providers (84) with a sample of other private RTOs (330). The picture painted was the distinctiveness of ACE in a number of aspects:

  » ACE providers generally were more embedded in their local communities than private providers, with most ACE providers delivering in one state only.

  » ACE providers offered markedly different programs from private providers. ACE programs were markedly more socially oriented with dominantly high percentages of their courses relatively in mixed field programs such as literacy and numeracy, information technology and in the fields of society and cultures, education and creative arts.

  » ACE providers offered more pastoral care, education supports and personal and career counselling services than private providers.

» ACE providers relied more heavily on government funding for their nationally accredited training and on part time and casual staff than did private providers and so 'skate on relatively thin ice' (Harris & Simons 2007).

Scale of ACE VET within total accredited VET regardless of funding source

Data on 'Total VET activity' was collected for the first time in 2015, on 2014 training activity and in accordance with the November 2012 then COAG Standing Council on Tertiary Education Skills and Employment (SCOTESE) agreement to the introduction of mandatory reporting of all nationally recognised training activity from 2014 and onwards.

'Total VET activity' (TVA) includes all accredited VET provided from all funding sources and not just that provided through government funding.

Of the total VET activity reported in 2014, by 4601 training providers and that included training to 3.9 million students; 27.5 million subject enrolments; 818.2 million hours of training; 3.6 million programs and 815,600 completed AQF programs, ACE VET providers accounted for

- 11% of total providers
- 5% of total students
- 4% of total training hours received by all students
- 3% of total subject enrolments.

(NCVER 2015a and Figure 12)

Percent of total providers

University 0%
TAFE 1%
Enterprise provider 5%
Community education provider 11%
School 21%
Private training provider 62%
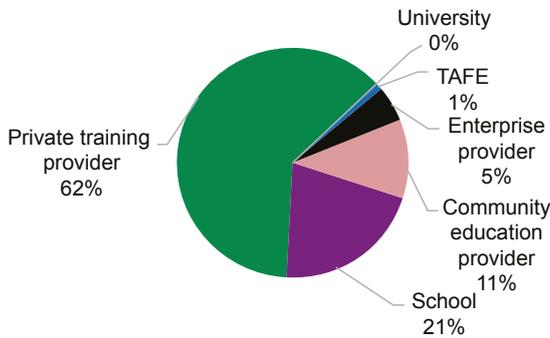
Percent of total students by provider type

Students attending more than one provider type 1%
University 2%
Enterprise provider 2%
Community education provider 5%
School 5%
TAFE 27%
Private training provider 58%
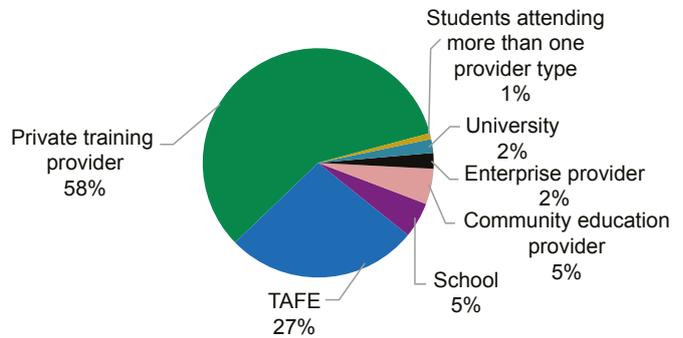
Percent of Subject Enrolments by provider type

Private training provider 50%
Enterprise provider 2%
University 2%
Community education provider 3%
School 8%
TAFE 35%
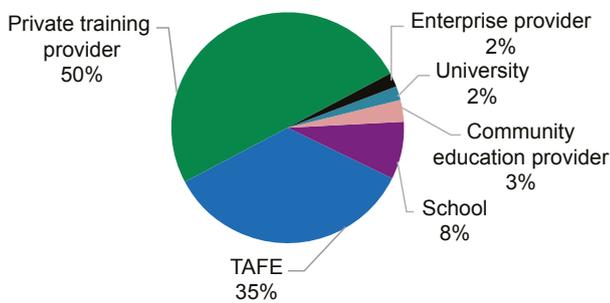
Percent of Training Hours by provider type

Private training provider 45%
Enterprise provider 2%
University 3%
Community education provider 4%
School 5%
TAFE 41%
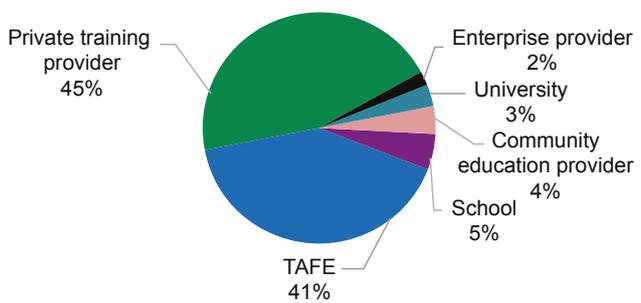
(Source: Lovedar, 2016)

Figure 12: Total VET activity from all sources: proportions attributable to various provider types

It is important to note though that 2014 is a transition year in which a number of training providers were granted exemptions from reporting and others did not report their training activity.

Scale of ACE VET within total government funded VET

The main focus of NCVER reporting has been on government-funded VET that is broadly defined as all activity delivered by government providers and government-funded activity delivered by community education and other registered providers.

The latest national VET statistics for government-funded VET for 2014 show that there were 1.79 million students enrolled at a total of 2071 registered training organisations and to whom 546.9 million training hours were delivered. Of this government-funded VET:

- ACE VET providers accounted for 426 of all providers (20%) of total government funded VET

- ACE VET students (95,400) accounted for 5.3% of total students

- ACE VET delivery (18,018.300 hours) accounted for 3.3 % of total hours of delivery

(NCVER, 2015b, Table 11, p. 15)

To complete the picture on government-funded VET in 2014, 58 TAFE institutes and 13 other government providers had a combined 1.08 million students (60.6% of all students) and 341,709.900 hours of delivery (62.5% of total hours of delivery). Other registered providers included 1641 in number with 582,500 students (32.6%) and 187 198.300 hours of delivery or 34.2 % of total hours of delivery). Also 1500 or 1.5% attended more than one type of provider (NCVER 2015b, Table 11, p. 15).

In 2014 of the 95,400 students in ACE VET providers, 12,585 (13%) were in mixed field programmes or adult basic education programs (that have already been discussed in the previous section) and 82,860 students (87%) were in all other fields of education. From here on the focus in this section is on ACE VET in all fields of education other than adult basic education.

ACE VET in all fields of education other than adult basic education

Current level of participation

In 2014, there were 82,860 ACE VET students receiving government funding for VET specific fields of education. These students made up 5.1 per cent of all students receiving government funding in specific fields at all VET providers. The percentage that ACE VET students are of all students participating in specific education fields of VET with government funding has ranged from 11% in 2003 to 5.1% in 2014 (Table 9).

Trends in participation

In ACE VET providers, the number of students participating in specific VET education fields with government funding has decreased significantly over the past decade while the associated subject enrolments have remained relatively steady and reported training hours have increased steadily (Figure 13).

These trends have given rise to:

- an overall steady increase in the average subject enrolments per student in all fields of VET other than adult basic education in ACE VET providers over the 2003–2014 period and from 2.22 enrolments per student in 2003 to 4.65 in 2014

- an overall steady increase in the average reported supervised training hours per student in all fields of VET other than adult basic education in ACE VET providers and that has tripled over the 2003–2014 period from 57.6 to 158.3 (see Figure 14).

Therefore, the overall trend over the past ten years with regard to ACE VET specific field of education provision has been towards increasing quantities of delivery per student.

The trend has also been towards more AQF or full VET qualifications training and less non AQF or part qualifications training by ACE VET providers in all fields of education other than adult basic education, and from 23% in AQF training in 2003 to 36% in 2014. This trend has also occurred in other VET providers but with the proportions of their specific fields of education students in qualifications level training being much higher and at 76% in 2003 and 89.89% in 2014 (Table 10).

Table 9: Students in specific fields of government funded VET a) in ACE VET providers b) in all providers and c) % ACE VET students of all students in all VET providers

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
a) ACE student numbers	165930	122995	141365	114000	115395	109690	107990	96650	93790	78370	87145	82860
b) Total students	1503320	1380850	1410915	1438470	1435490	1476185	1485170	1579335	1678155	1713600	1626430	1619465
c) % ACE students of total students	11.04%	8.91%	10.02%	7.93%	8.04%	7.43%	7.27%	6.12%	5.59%	4.57%	5.36%	5.12%

(Source: NCVER specific data request)

**ACE VET students in FOEs other than
Adult Basic Education, 2003-14**

**ACE VET subject enrolments in FOEs other than
Adult Basic Education, 2003-14**

**ACE VET training hours in FOEs other than
Adult Basic Education, 2003-14**
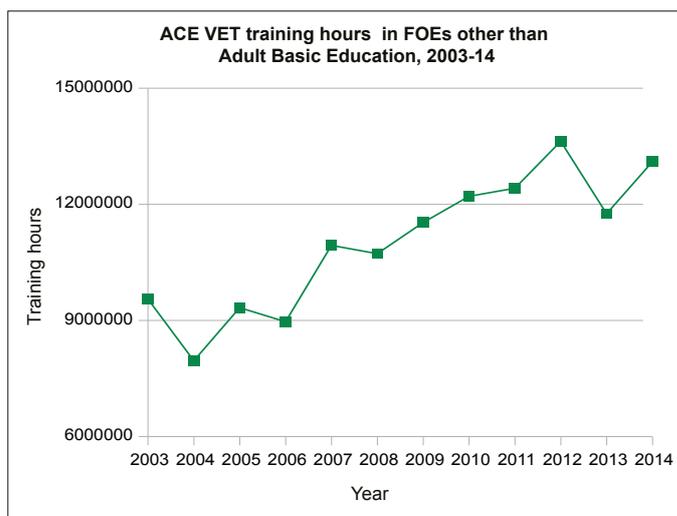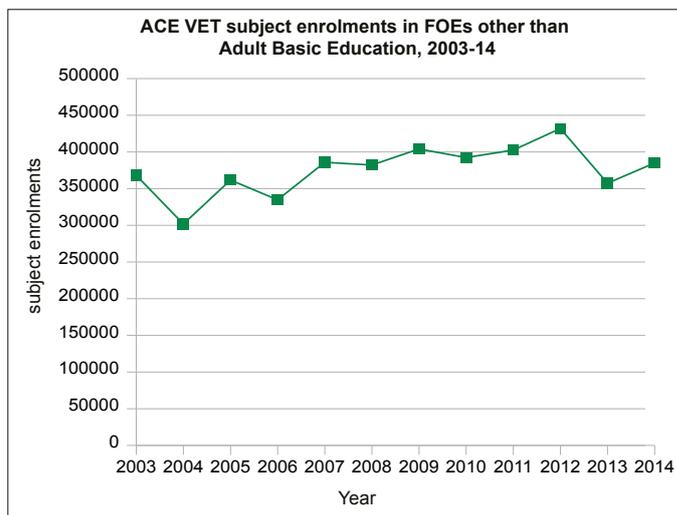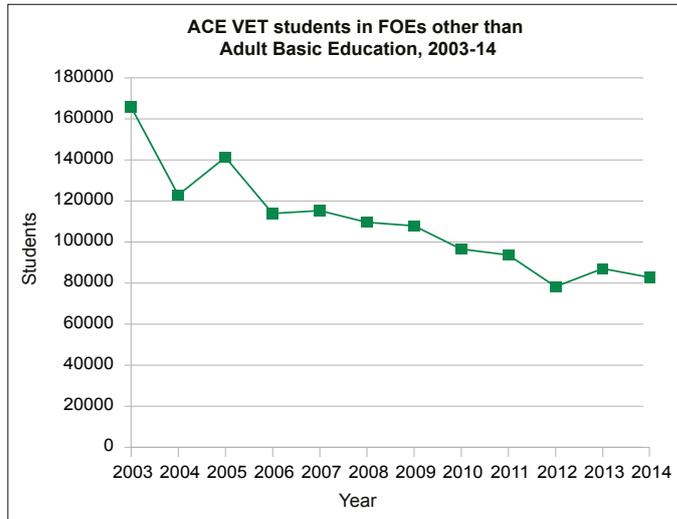
Source NCVER specific data request

Figure 13: Trends in ACE VET specific field of education student numbers, subject enrolments and training hours 2003–2014

ACE VET subject enrolments per student in FOEs other than Adult Basic Education, 2003-14

ACE VET training hours per student in FOEs other than Adult Basic Education, 2003-14
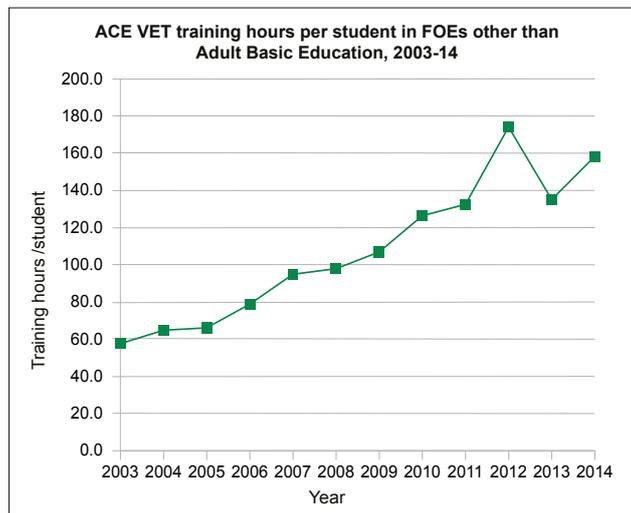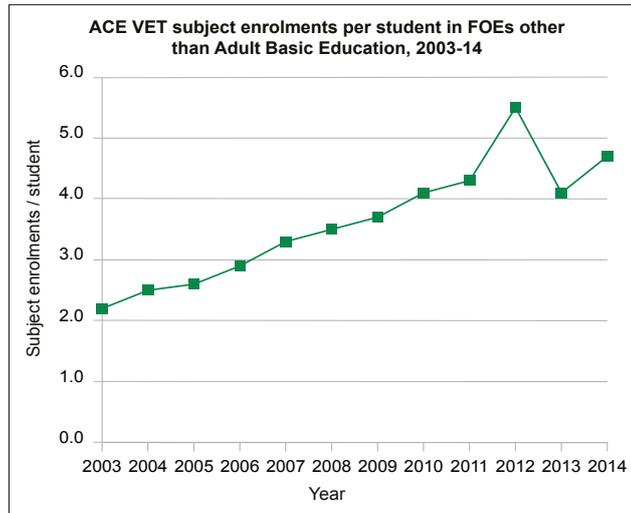
(Source: NCVER specific data request)

Figure 14: Trends in scale of ACE VET specific field of education provision per student 2003–2014

What ACE VET students are studying

Table 11 shows the distribution of the total 95,400 ACE VET students (rounded) in 2014 by field of study in the top half of the table. Table 11 top half shows:

• In 2014 of the 95,400 students in ACE VET providers, 12,585 (13%) were in mixed field programmes or adult basic education programs as mentioned before, while a further 55% were in non-AQF subject only VET. Of the third approximately in AQF or full qualifications specific fields of education training most were in the field of society and culture (14%) followed by in management and commerce (6%) and the rest were spread in smaller percentages across the other fields.

Table 11 also shows the total 95,400 ACE VET students (rounded) in 2014 by AQF and non-AQF in Table 11 bottom half shows that:

• In 2014 about 40% of total ACE VET students were in AQF or full VET qualifications training and with the largest numbers in Certificate III level courses (39.2%), the rest mainly spread across the other Certificate levels I, II and IV (and at 17% each), and diploma and above level students accounting for the final 8% of students.

Table 10: VET students in all fields of VET education other than adult basic education: percentage by AQF and non-AQF for ACE VET providers and all other VET providers

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
ACE students	165930	122995	141365	114000	115395	109690	107990	96650	93790	78370	87145	82860
%AQF	23.54	26.98	29.07	35.70	39.17	38.99	43.69	45.18	46.52	54.94	35.41	36.29
%Non AQF	76.46	73.02	70.93	64.30	60.83	61.01	56.31	54.83	53.48	45.06	64.59	63.71
Other provider students	1337390	1257855	1269555	1324470	1320090	1366495	1377180	1482680	1584365	1635230	1539280	1536605
% AQF	75.91	78.18	78.51	80.63	80.77	81.88	85.13	86.99	89.67	90.12	90.91	89.84
% Non-AQF	24.09	21.82	21.49	19.37	19.23	18.12	14.87	13.01	10.33	9.88	9.09	10.16

(Source: NCVER provided statistics from the National VET Provider Collection)

*AQF training is all Certificate I and above qualification courses. Non-AQF training includes courses at secondary education level (Year 11 & 12), non-award courses, subject-only enrolments (i.e. not enrolled in a course), statement of attainment courses, and 'not elsewhere classified'.

Table 11: ACE VET students (government funded) by field of education and level of education

Program field of education	Number	%Total	
01 - Natural and physical sciences	570	0.6	
02 - Information technology	960	1.0	
03 - Engineering and related technologies	410	0.4	
04 - Architecture and building	2175	2.2	
05 - Agriculture, environmental and related studies	1125	1.2	
06 - Health	3100	3.2	=100%
07 - Education	5700	6.0	
08 - Management and commerce	13365	14	
09 - Society and culture	395	0.4	
10 - Creative arts	3045	3.2	
11 - Food, hospitality and personal services	12585	13.2	
12 - Mixed field programmes	52015	55.5	
Subject only activity - not enrolled in a program			
Program level of education		% all AQF	
Diploma or higher	3280	8.3	
Certificate IV	6950	17.6	
Certificate III	15480	39.2	=100%
Certificate II	6780	17.2	
Certificate I	6945	17.6	
AQF sub-total	39440		
Secondary education	1125		
Non-award courses	1130		
Other education	1835		
Subject only activity - not enrolled in a program	51920		
Non-AQF sub-total	56010		
Total students	95445		

(Source: NCVER provided statistics from the National VET Provider Collection)

Characteristics of students in ACE VET fields other than adult basic education:

ACE students in accredited VET in all fields of education other than adult basic education include people from various disadvantaged or equity groups and generally at higher levels for students in all other VET providers. As shown in Table 12:

- People with a disability are more highly represented at ACE VET providers than at all other VET providers (e.g. 13.7 % compared to 6.2% in 2014).

- Students from outer regional, remote and very remote regions are represented more in ACE VET providers compared to all other VET providers (19% compared to 14% in 2014).

- The unemployed are more highly represented at ACE VET providers than in all other VET providers (26% compared to 20% in 2014)

- People not in the labour force are most highly represented in ACE VET providers compared to all other VET providers 19% compared to 8% in 2014)

- Indigenous people are represented equally at ACE VET providers as at all other VET providers (4.9% in 2014)

- Students from a non-English speaking-background (NESB) are also represented about equally at ACE VET providers and all other VET providers

Table 12: Percentage from various equity groups of ACE VET students in all fields of education other than adult basic education and for all other VET students

Equity group	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Students with a disability as												
% Total ace VET students	6.0	6.9	6.4	6.8	9.3	8.6	8.2	8.7	9.1	7.5	11.8	13.7
% Total other VET providers	4.4	4.7	4.9	5.1	5.0	4.7	4.9	5.1	5.3	5.5	5.6	6.2
Indigenous students as												
% Total ace VET students	1.3	1.5	2.1	2.4	3.3	3.5	3.5	4.1	4.6	4.6	3.9	4.9
% Total other VET providers	3.3	3.4	3.7	3.9	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.3	4.4	4.4	4.5	4.8
Students from a non-English speaking-background (NESB) as												
% Total ace VET students	9.0	9.4	9.8	10.5	11.1	11.0	10.5	12.3	12.4	10.2	14.2	17.4
% Total other VET providers	11.1	11.1	11.2	11.8	12.0	12.9	13.1	13.2	13.5	13.7	14.5	15.3
Students from outer regional, remote and very remote regions as												
% Total ace VET students	17.3	16.8	18.9	20.9	21.6	20.3	21.0	23.1	18.1	20.1	18.9	19.2
% Total other VET providers	19.8	19.8	20.3	20.5	20.4	19.9	19.6	19.1	15.3	15.1	14.7	14.3
Unemployed students as												
% Total ace VET students	10.6	13.4	12.3	13.8	15.8	17.0	19.2	21.7	22.6	22.7	23.0	26.7
% Total other VET providers	12.4	12.0	11.3	11.1	10.6	10.7	13.5	14.9	15.8	16.1	17.7	20.0
Students not in the labour force												
% Total ace VET students	15.3	16.3	15.0	14.8	16.4	16.4	14.0	14.3	14.7	11.6	18.6	18.9
% Total other VET providers	8.0	7.8	7.4	7.7	7.4	7.4	7.7	8.2	8.0	8.3	8.5	8.7

Student success rates

Successfully completed hours as a proportion of total hours committed to by all students who passed, failed or withdrew from the corresponding subject(s) in accredited VET in all fields of education other than adult basic education in ACE VET providers and in other VET providers have been calculated with the resultant 'load pass rates' shown in Table 13. Table 13 shows that students in specific fields of education provision in ACE VET providers complete successfully about the same proportion of the total hours of training they signed up for as do students in other VET providers, and with that being about 84 per cent in 2014.

Outcomes

Outcomes achieved by VET students whose training was government funded are collected by the NCVER through the annual student outcomes survey (SOS). The SOS is undertaken in the year following training, meaning that respondents will have finished training between approximately 5 to 18 months prior to undertaking the survey. Note the following SOS data relates to all VET students (that is, students in mixed field programs or adult basic education programs as well as in all other VET fields of education).

Employment outcomes

The VET student outcomes survey of 2015 (NCVER, 2015c) provides some comparisons of outcomes for students by provider type. The survey found:

- 70.0% of ACE VET students in AQF or full qualifications training were employed after training. By comparison, 72.3% of AQF trained TAFE students were employed after training; and 74.5% of students at private training providers

- 65.6% of VET subjects only completers (i.e. in non-AQF) in ACE providers were employed after training. By comparison, 64.8% of VET subjects only completers in TAFEs and other government providers were employed after training and a higher proportion (71%) were employed after training at private providers

(NCVER, 2015c. Table 1: Key outcome measures for government-funded graduates by provider type and funding source, 2006–2015).

In summary, employment outcomes for students at ACE VET providers are almost as good as employment outcomes for students at all other VET providers, even though there are higher proportions of students from equity groups in ACE VET providers and many are there for personal reasons only.

Satisfaction with the quality of the training

The VET student outcomes survey of 2015 (NCVER, 2015c) also found that

- Of students whose full qualifications training was government funded some 88% were satisfied with the overall quality of training at ACE providers. By comparison, a similar proportion (87.7%) was satisfied with the overall quality of training at TAFEs and other government providers and a lower proportion (85.3%) at private training providers.

- As for subject only completers, 84.7 % were satisfied with the overall quality of training at ACE providers. By comparison, a similar proportion were satisfied with the overall quality of training at in TAFEs and other government providers; and similar proportion were satisfied (80.6 %) with the overall quality of training at private training providers

(NCVER, 2015c, Table 2: Key outcome measures for government-funded subject completers by provider type and funding source, 2006–2015).

Table 13: Load pass rates for all fields of education other than adult basic education (i.e. mixed field) for ACE providers and for all other VET providers 2003–2014

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
ACE AQF	78.7	83.6	79.8	79.1	77.7	76.9	81.2	81.6	86.0	85.1	82.6	84.9
ACE non AQF	78.9	72.7	76.7	69.4	70.8	65.4	70.1	76.8	78.2	78.9	81.0	83.9
ACE total	78.8	81.7	79.4	78.1	77.0	75.7	80.2	81.0	85.1	84.4	82.3	84.8
Other providers AQF	80.2	80.6	81.1	81.3	81.5	82.4	82.8	82.9	84.5	84.7	84.9	84.8
Other non AQF	79.8	80.4	82.0	81.8	83.6	83.1	82.0	81.4	82.7	82.3	82.8	88.9
Total	80.2	80.6	81.1	81.3	81.6	82.5	82.7	82.8	84.5	84.6	84.8	84.9

(Source: NCVER specific data request)

In summary, students at ACE VET providers are as satisfied with the overall quality of training as are students at all other VET providers. Further, time series data for 2011 to 2015 for students of ACE VET providers show relatively consistent levels of outcomes in terms of numbers employed or in further study after training (Table 14).

Sustainability challenges

Competitive funding models in VET, particularly the student entitlement funding models introduced since 2009, have resulted in a shift in VET provision away from ACE RTO providers and also public VET RTOs (TAFEs) and towards other private registered providers as the time series data in Figure 15 illustrates.

Some specific impact data on ACE of the demand-driven individual choice approach to VET was found for Victoria (in an undated but apparently 2014 briefing paper entitled 'Impact of skills reform on adult and community education (ACE) providers' endorsed by several ACE peak organisations – ACEVic, Adult

Learning Australia, Community Colleges Australia and Neighbourhood Houses Victoria). The briefing paper reveals that since Victoria's demand-driven individual choice in VET funding model was introduced in 2008, there has been a 27% drop in ACE providers delivering government-funded VET across the state and enrolments in pre-accredited pathways programs aimed at disadvantaged learners have dropped 25% (DECD, 2013).

The briefing paper calls for reconsideration of the question of how to accommodate disadvantaged students in VET within competitive VET funding models and to reverse the unintended adverse effects on its ACE providers and the vulnerable learners that these models are having. The paper suggests governments:

1   Outline specifically the separate and complementary roles of the public TAFE system, not for profit providers and private for profit providers; and in particular not to treat ACE RTOs the same as private providers as they have a fundamentally different model with Table 15 and 16 included to illustrate this point.

Table 14: Key outcomes for government-funded community education provider graduates and subject completers, five-year time series (%)

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Graduates					
Employee after training	75.0	68.2	75.7	74.2	70.0
Employed or in further Study after training	83.6	78.8	84.5	86.0	81.4
Enrolled in further study after training	33.6	32.3	32.7	35.4	31.7
Subject completers					
Employed after training	68.3	67.6	71.0	68.1	65.6
Employed or in further study after training	69.5	68.5	72.2	69.1	65.9
Enrolled in further study after training	3.0*	4.0	4.9	3.0*	2.1*

*The element has a relative standard error greater than or equal to 25% and should be treated with caution.
(Source: NCVER, 2015d, Table 8)
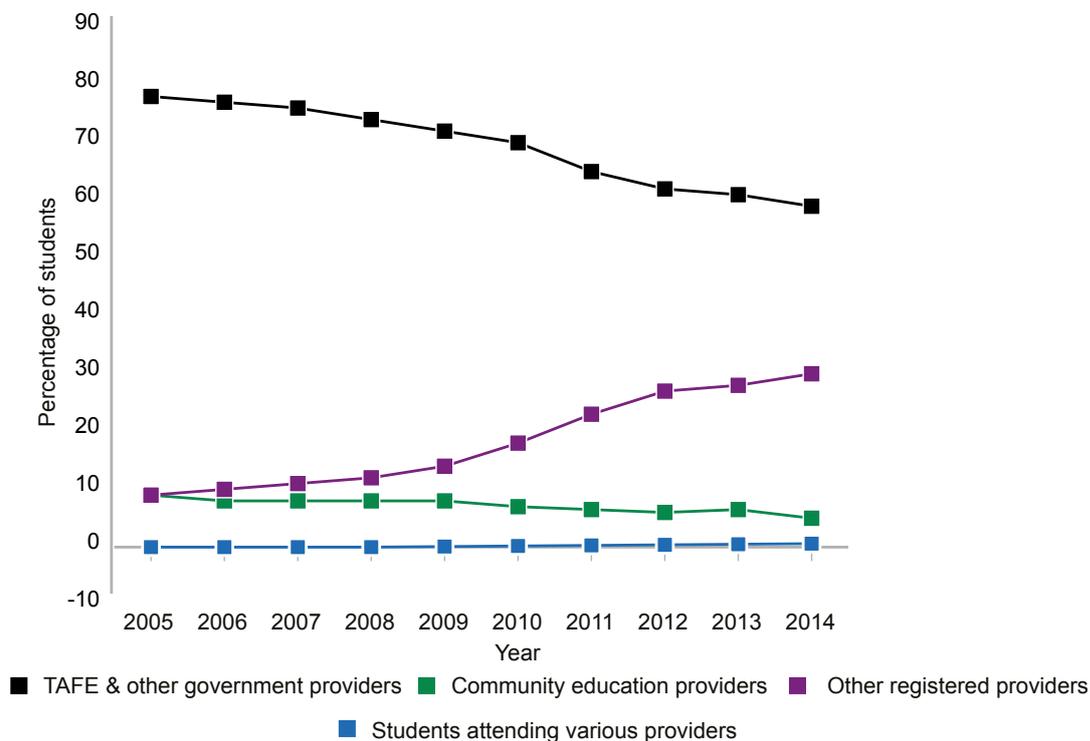
Figure 15: Percentage of government funded students by provider type 2005–2014

(Source: NCVER government-funded students and courses 2014: infographic 30 June 2015, revised 11 September 2015)

2   Introduce some form of 'community social/service obligation' fund (other than the existing standard loadings for Indigenous/regional/disabled learners) for providers who work with students who require substantial additional educational time.

3   Quarantine future Foundation Skills funding applications for ACE and TAFE providers only.

4   Ensure that in regional 'in situ' ACE providers are given additional funding where key industries are those that receive extremely low student contact hour fees to assist the local employers and industries to have the opportunities to train their staff.

In NSW, the government has 'community social service obligation' funds for ACE providers and quarantined future Foundation Skills funding applications for ACE and TAFE providers only (Bowman and McKenna 2015). However this may change. VET funding models remain dynamic in all jurisdictions and are under review currently as part of the review of the 2012–16 National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform.

Table 15: Participants in Victorian ACE VET providers compared to other VET providers

TAFE Learners	Private RTOs Learners	ACE Learners
21% unemployed	28% unemployed	32% unemployed
14% not in the labour force	5% not in the labour force	29% not in the labour force
8% with a disability	6% with a disability	22% with a disability
33% did not complete Year 12 or equivalent VET study	34% did not complete Year 12 or equivalent VET study	48% did not complete Year 12 or equivalent VET study

From Table 1.16: Government subsidised enrolments(AQF1+), summary of selected characteristics within provider type, VTM Qrtrly Rpt, Q2, 2013)

Table 16: Characteristics of ACE VET providers compared to private VET providers

Private RTOs	ACE RTOs
• Profit focused and driven	• Not for profit
• Responsible to owners, director/s, and shareholders	• Responsible to a committee and a membership representing the local community
• Targets niche training to large areas	• Responds to local community needs
• Industry focus – often specific industry	• Learner focused
• High volume and formal training methodology	• Flexible and accommodating to learner needs and issues
• Access to private financing, equity and bank loans	• Limited access to capital; especially if in council premises
• Limited access to teachers, high level of self-paced and assessment only delivery	• Small classes with committed teachers, additional learning and educational assistance provided face-to-face
• Mostly capable students – often delivering to those in work and in industry settings	• Mostly low socio-economic, retrenched, more mature, disabled. CALD, unemployed students
• High percentage of income spent on marketing	• Student recruitment through outreach and word of mouth
• Accredited courses only	• Pre-accredited (and entry level accredited)
• Often deliver skills building and deepening courses	• Mostly delivering Foundation Skills courses and entry level VET
• VET delivery only	• VET offered amongst a range of social supports & services (chidcare counseling, health & wellbeing courses, informal groups a 'meeting place).

Pathways provision between learning programs

The extension of ACE to include more vocationally oriented offerings and formal VET programs has increased opportunities for people to move from one type of learning program to another within the supportive learning environment that ACE offers. The program logic of learning pathways provision in ACE is to provide adults several learning experiences that each build on the previous experiences and step them through the four critical steps in the adult learning journey as depicted in the Figure 16.

Key features

ACE focusses on learning opportunities that create the potential for further learning and skills development through a stepping stone approach to learning, as depicted in Figure 16:

• The first step is to re-engage adults in learning. This requires activities that target an individual's personal interests and social needs. To be engaged in learning is a major milestone for some adults and through which confidence in learning can be built and can encourage adults to participate in further learning. For example, Kearns (2006) found from a review of research into the wider benefits of learning a recurring theme was that personal

Figure 16: Learning pathways provision program logic

outcomes – confidence, self-esteem and the aspiration to engage in learning – are 'important and necessary stepping stones towards confident participation in VET provision'. Miller (2005) confirms that personal outcomes from VET act as the platform for the achievement of education outcomes and, in turn, for the attainment of employment and community-related outcomes.

- The second step is to build foundation skills. This often is part of the process of building identity and confidence as a learner because gaps in these skills limit effective participation in formal vocational education and training and work. Palmeri (2007) overviewing many research studies focussed on disadvantaged learner groups found that they all echoed as positive factors for their successful engagement: motivating the learner – through negotiating learning that is of interest to them; relevant to their world; providing an informal learning environment; to give a level of comfort given their lack of confidence; offering low intensity learning or training – at least at first – that is not to be assessed because assessment is threatening, using quality teachers; and supporting the learner –through peer learning and personalised support by tutors and mentors. Merit has also been found in re-joining the disadvantaged in learning through the delivery of preparatory vocational programs. These programs usually include literacy and numeracy, employment preparation activities and some basic vocational skills training.

For example, Barnett and Spoehr (2008) found VET can assist the welfare-to-work transition if it addresses students' needs in a holistic way and that for most students this involves providing a preparatory pathway prior to engagement with 'mainstream' VET programs to ensure that effective training outcomes are achieved, therefore increasing the capacity to obtain high-quality employment. Oliver and Karmel (2012) show that pre-vocational programs are providing a pathway into traineeships in the same way that pre-apprenticeships are an established route into apprenticeships in the traditional trades. Trainees in lower-skilled occupational categories such as sales workers, labourers and machinery operators and drivers are more likely to complete their training if they have completed a pre-vocational course beforehand.

Researchers have also found that it can take several engagements in basic adult education before an adult who has been disadvantaged in learning or a long time away from it may move to the third step (Dymock, 2007; Dawe 2004).

- The third step is directed formal VET learning. With gaps in basic skills filled, the learner may then move on to undertake study for specific job-related outcomes (formal vocational learning) and towards achieving the fourth step.

- The fourth step is to achieve an employment outcomes perhaps first through volunteering in the ACE organisation or elsewhere to gain work experience (Bowman 2007).

Overall, research evidence suggests that a supported learning pathways approach may be best for many working aged Australians; particularly those with low levels of formal educational attainment and/or poor previous experiences in formal education. Pathways provision has the potential to aid disadvantaged learners to make the transition from informal learning for leisure and self-improvement to more formal learning to build basic or foundation skills and vocational skills, steps they may not have contemplated previously through lack of confidence in their ability to cope with formal study.

Participants

All ACE providers start where the learner is at and provide learning programs that build on their existing skills and knowledge and actively engage them in the development of their own future learning directions. They engage people who are socially and educationally disadvantaged, providing opportunities to access pathways to further formal education, training and/or jobs.

Outcomes

Student transitions from accredited VET

The NCVER government funded VET student outcomes report for community education providers of 2015 (NCVER, 2015d) shows that:

- 31.7% of 2014 ACE VET graduates were enrolled in further study after training. This is about the same per cent as for all graduates of VET (32.6%)

- 81.4% of ACE VET graduates were employed or in

further study after training, and noting that 15% of the graduates had undertaken their training mainly for personal development reasons and not employment-related reasons

- 65.9% of ACE VET subject completers were employed or in further study after training, noting that 35% of subject completers had undertaken their training mainly for personal development reasons and not employment related reasons

- 82.0% of ACE VET graduates and 84.8% of subject completers reported that they had fully or partly achieved their main reason for training.

Time series data

Time series data for 2011–2015 for students of ACE VET providers show relatively consistent outcomes in terms of numbers employed or in further study after training (NCVER, 2015d, Key findings for government-funded community education provider graduates and subject completers, five-year time series, p. 38).

Other data on transitions made between learning activities by students at ACE providers

This appears to be confined to longitudinal studies of ACE students in the state of Victoria. For example, a 2005 Victorian ACE longitudinal study followed up 846 participants first surveyed in 2004 when they were enrolled in a course at an ACE provider. The study demonstrates the high capacity of its ACE providers to engage adults in foundation education and provide pathways to formal vocational education and work.

- Of the 846 respondents in the 2005 survey cohort, 36 per cent (302 respondents) were engaged in study in 2005. Of these, 57 per cent of respondents who were studying in a new course remained in the ACE sector. However, an additional 8 per cent had returned to school, 19 per cent were studying in TAFE, 10 per cent with private providers and 6 per cent had entered university.

- The 201 respondents studying in the ACE sector in 2005 comprised 83 learners continuing their 2004 course and 118 who had enrolled in a new course. Learners staying in the ACE sector strongly endorsed their 2004 ACE study, with 88 per cent reporting that their experiences in their 2004 course encouraged them to apply for a new course. Those moving into the TAFE sector also valued their

2004 ACE study highly with 79 per cent reporting this link, as did 55 per cent of those who moved into a private provider.

The study pathways of those who stayed in ACE showed a progression in the level of study for a substantial proportion of the cohort. For example:

- 43% of subject only students in 2004 continuing in study were doing so at a full qualification or award level

- 74% of Certificate I graduates continuing in study had progressed into Certificate II or above

- 59% of Certificate II graduates continuing in study had progressed into Certificate III or above

- 53% of Certificate III graduates continuing in study had progressed into Certificate IV or above

(Walstab et al, 2005)

A more recent study by Teese et al (2013) on the reach of Victorian ACE provider pre-accredited courses into the community and their impacts found pre-accredited courses offer a pathway to reverse the disadvantages of limited education and precariousness in the labour market:

- Pre-accredited courses drew disproportionately on groups who are economically vulnerable.

- Every third completer of a pre-accredited course went on to further study, but workforce-vulnerable learners were much more likely to do so (40–47%). This finding is important because it shows that high-need groups build on their pre-accredited course participation and that a pathway is being used to improve location in the workforce.

- Pre-accredited courses offer a pathway to reverse the disadvantages of limited education and precariousness in the labour market.

Other one off studies on learning pathways by disadvantaged students into and through VET at all provider types include:

- The Phan and Ball (2001) report on VET enabling courses or lower-level preparatory or pre-vocational courses that have a large proportion of students from disadvantaged groups. They found positive

outcomes for most students who completed enabling courses. Over 20% of the enabling course graduates went on to enrol in a VET course the following year. Of these graduates, a third enrolled in a course at a higher level of qualification, less than a tenth in a lower level qualification while almost half of these graduates had enrolled at the same level of qualification as their previous course.

- Dawe (2004) followed up the work of Phan and Ball and investigated the reasons why some students remain at the same level of qualification or re-enrol in the same enabling course in following years. Overall Dawe found that the return of students to enabling courses was a positive outcome. It is just that students who lack self-esteem or maturity may take longer to find their area of interest and so try several enabling courses before achieving the self-confidence or motivation to continue with studies for a higher-level VET qualification.

Policy links

The 2008 Ministerial Declaration on ACE encourages ACE to offer a pathways approach to VET:

'ACE offers highly supportive pathways into learning, further education and training, and work and, as a result, is well-placed to engage those with low levels of educational attainment. Participation in non-accredited education and training for example, can serve to build the self-esteem, motivation and confidence many struggling to engage require to move into further education and training or employment. The non-threatening adult environment also makes ACE an attractive option to those marginalised from the more formal education system, and provides opportunities for the development of the foundation skills that are critical for effective educational, labour market, and social participation. This capacity of ACE to support the re-engagement of Australians from disadvantaged backgrounds in learning and work is the key to its crucial role in supporting the Australian Government's social inclusion agenda.'

(MCEETYA, 2008, p. 3)

The work of the former National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) through its Good Practice project of 2010 also identified examples of programs and initiatives that are achieving positive outcomes for disadvantaged learners and that learning pathways is one of them. Indeed, embedding pathways planning into the VET system is a recommended key reform area (no. 5) of the National VET Equity Blueprint 2011–2016 prepared by NVEAC (NVEAC, 2011).

Sustainability challenges

For a learning pathways approach to work the supply line of students from non-formal (non-accredited) programs needs to be maintained to allow student passage into formal learning.

Continued government investment in non-formal ACE personal learning and adult basic education is required especially for the many customers of ACE who are in the lowest income brackets.

In addition, and once they have built their foundation skills and confidence, there needs to be formal VET opportunities available for these leaners to enter either within ACE providers or through ACE–VET partnerships that need to be encouraged.

In addition, and to help justify a learning pathways approach, ACE needs to track its learners' success in the particular ACE program they are on and the transition they make afterwards and using measures that show progress for the individual.

As the former National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC 2010) explains, the need is to recognise and acknowledge small transitions and improved quality of life as important milestones for learners with low level initial skills.

For those who experience disadvantage in VET these may be personal or social in nature in the early programs undertaken rather than or in addition to work related and economic in nature.

One approach being taken to improve reporting on outcomes in pre-accredited ACE is Results Based Accountability (RBA).

Community and neighbourhood centres in cooperation with Community Centres SA are sharing, learning and improving their practice using the RBA framework. They are also supporting collaborative approaches to RBA with other services providers to their adult learners to achieve effective collective impact approaches that can assist government to use cross-sector community and service organisation's power to bring about measurable results in a community setting and progress in programs through a focus on results.

Other findings

Learning in the ACE sector is associated with a range of positive outcomes for individuals and their families.

The potential overall contribution of ACE

Learning in the ACE sector is associated with a range of positive outcomes for individuals and their families as has been discussed in this report. These outcomes cascade to positive impacts for the Australian society and economy as a whole and that include:

- Income gains for the individual and tax revenues to government and community

- Improvements in health and wellbeing for the individual (Hartley & Horne, 2006)

- Decreasing calls on welfare services and significant cost savings in these services

- Lifting of the overall workforce participation rate and productivity (see Figure 17)

The wider and full value that flows to the community as a whole from Australian ACE is less researched but two examples were found as follows.

Example 1

The overall economic value of the ACE sector in Victoria.

Victoria, has, as explained earlier, the largest, most diverse ACE sector in Australia that has been well funded over many years and delivers in all four program areas of ACE.

A 2008 report describes and quantifies the economic benefits resulting from all ACE activity then in Victoria to assist the Victorian Government to evaluate the contribution of ACE to the achievement of policy objectives and to the economies of local communities, regions and Victoria as a whole.

The benefit categories of the model included 'market benefits' that are traded in the market economy that result from the additional productivity of Victorians who have increased their human capital by participating in ACE.

The other category was non-market benefits that are not traded in the market economy, such as benefits to the health and wellbeing of ACE participants, that while not as readily quantifiable, are real and substantial, and should not be overlooked when estimating the value of ACE.

- The market benefits were estimated to amount to an increase in GSP of $16 billion, and tax benefits of $21.7 million over the period 2007 to 2031 in then net present value terms.

- The non-market benefits were suggested to be of at least a similar magnitude. These benefits are achieved relative to a Victorian Government investment of $741 million over twenty-five years (in discounted terms)

(Allen Consulting 2008)

Example 2

The economic value of ACE in South Australia.

South Australia provides an example of an ACE sector with a more traditional focus – on personal interest informal and non-formal learning activities, and adult basic education non-formal and formal – and also facilitating pathways to formal VET.

An impact Study of the Community and Neighbourhood/Community Centres Sector of SA was conducted in 2013 (SA Centre for Economic Studies, 2013). The principal objective of this study was to provide evidence as to the overall impacts of community centres.

The interest was particularly in assessing the following outcomes:

- employment, participation in education (including accredited and non-accredited courses), volunteering pathways, return to work, skills transference
- social inclusion especially for people with a disability, new arrivals, the older demographic including retirees
- health and wellbeing, family resilience
- the scale of volunteering and participation in centre's activities.

The research found that:

- the number of visitations to centres is over 2 million per annum
- the value of the volunteer contribution is between $32 million and $43 million
- crèche services provided either free or for a very small donation are valued (conservatively) at $1.3 million
- the conduct of ACE programs have a positive wage/income impact and a value in delivery of up to 4 times their cost
- the ability of centres to leverage up other funds is 3.5 times what they are provided but the cost of grant applications some for very small amounts is quite high, estimated conservatively because it does not include cost of acquittal to be between $231,000 to $385,000

(SA Centre for Economic Studies, 2013, Table E.2 p. iii).

Summary and conclusions

This report has profiled the work of Australian ACE to raise awareness and understanding of this community based not for profit education sector.

The existing evidence base has been scanned and the available data and information presented to

demonstrate the contribution of Australian ACE to the overall national education effort and social and human capital development policies. The framework developed for profiling and reporting on Australian ACE is provided in full in Figure 17. The key findings are discussed and some conclusions drawn.

Distinctive features	**Focus** – local adult learning needs for local community development
	Values – welcoming, friendly, caring, non-judgemental, socially inclusive, accessible to all
	Learning practice – learner centred and holistic (with appropriate support services), delivered in community settings, focused on positive learning experiences to foster further learner engagement
	Organisation type – ACE is delivered through community based, owned and managed, not for profitsthat go by various names, are of various sizes and vary in activity focusin part due to them operating in state bound systems

|	**1. Traditional focus** ➝	**2. Common new focus** ➝	**3. Additional focus, sometimes**
Scope			
Learning activities	Hobby, recreation and personal enrichment programs (non-formal, non-accredited)	Adult basic education – alone or with vocational content (non-accredited and accredited)	Vocational education and training (formal, accredited)
Participants	All adults, potentially	Adults with limited formal education or English language	All adults potentially Targeted disadvantaged
Outcomes Immediate – for individual and their family	Improved health and wellbeing Increased social connections Active citizenship	Improved self /family functioning Improved self confidence Better understanding of work Motivation for further learning	Increased work skills Improved job status Increased wages /incomes Motivation for further learning
	4. Pathways between the three main types of activities		
Outcomes Longer term for society and economy	Decreased health costs Increased community cohesion	Decreased call on welfare services	Increased taxes
Policy links	Healthy, productive ageing; Social inclusion through education	National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults; Social inclusion through education	Skills for workforce participation and productivity Social inclusion through education
	National Ministerial Declaration on ACE State and Territory ACE policies		

Figure 17: Australian ACE – a framework for reporting

Key findings

Australian ACE is a recognisable fourth sector of education providing accessible 'lifelong and lifewide learning' opportunities responsive to the needs of adults within the local community it serves.

The scope of Australian ACE includes personal interest learning that all ACE providers and in the vicinity of 2500 deliver and some provide only this type of learning but most also provide adult basic education as well. A significant minority (300–500) also offer formal vocational education.

ACE providers are significant providers of all personal interest learning undertaken in Australia and many of the participants are from disadvantaged groups. The challenge is how to keep funding the personal interest learning programs they run, when they are not funded by government and many of their customers are in the lowest income brackets, and given the importance of these programs as a gateway back into learning for many disadvantaged learners to improve individual health and wellbeing and keep them active members of the community and workforce.

ACE providers are also assisting many adults to improve their basic foundation skills and as a platform for further vocational learning with 7.4 % of all adults participating in accredited adult basic education programs in 2014 doing so in ACE VET providers.

The current scale of the total direct VET effort in ACE providers is 5.3% in student terms and 3.3 % of total hours of VET delivered. Although this is small, the students involved include significant numbers from various equity groups for whom ACE VET is their preferred choice.

There also is the indirect VET effort that ACE providers provide through entering partnerships with Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). No information was found on the extent of the formal accredited VET delivery ACE providers deliver through these partnerships.

Conclusions

Overall, the report provides a conceptual framework for reporting on ACE in Australia in its totality, and is the first such framework. The report also provides contemporary baseline data on components of the framework against which future developments can be compared.

The available data suggests ACE is playing an important role in educating many adult Australians and particularly the disadvantaged but ongoing support from governments is required to sustain and grow the ACE effort.

There is more primary research required to fill in all gaps in the evidence data on some components of the framework to determine the full impacts of ACE. This further research includes to determine:

- precisely how many ACE providers there are in Australia
- total numbers of adults participating in personal interest learning delivered by ACE providers
- total numbers involved in non-accredited basic education programs delivered by ACE providers
- full impacts on ACE VET of competitive VET funding models and how to avoid negative impacts
- full extent and impacts of the learning pathways approach that ACE providers seek to provide adults through personal interest learning and on to foundation education and formal vocational education for work.

Australian ACE is a recognisable fourth sector of education providing accessible 'lifelong and life-wide learning' opportunities responsive to the needs of adults within the local community it serves.

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