



Adult Learning Australia

*Lifelong and Lifewide Learning
for All Australians*

NSW State Election 2011 Policy Priorities

February 2011

Introduction

Adult Learning Australia Inc (ALA) is Australia's largest peak organisation for adult and community education. ALA has been in operation for 50 years and has members in every state and territory.

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

ALA believes that the economic and social challenges for NSW are best met through a rigorous commitment to lifelong and lifewide learning for its citizens.

We call on all political parties in the NSW election to adopt and prioritise the following policy areas.

Adult Literacy

ALA Seeks a Commitment to:

- Develop an Adult Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan to build the state's literacy and numeracy levels.
- Using Goal 4 of the UNESCO *Education for All Campaign* as a guide, set a goal to “double adult literacy levels by 2015” for those with “poor” and “very poor” skills.

The 2006 ABS Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey revealed a sizable lack of literacy skills across the adult population of Australia, including in NSW. Approximately 55% of adult in NSW were found to have had “poor” or “very poor” literacy, and numeracy skills (levels 1 and 2). Based on the data only 45% of NSW residents have the literacy and numeracy skills to operate effectively in a modern economy and society. (levels 3 and above)

Failure to focus on the adult literacy and numeracy levels of the adult as well as child populations, impacts in a range of ways across the life of the NSW community: in high levels of preventable illnesses, in communities where long term unemployment co-exists with industry skills shortages, and in communities where families struggle to manage their finances.

A range of new and emerging 21st Century fields of knowledge bring with them their own sets of language and concepts or “literacys”. If NSW is to compete in the global knowledge economy, and maintain the level of prosperity and cohesion that its citizens deserve, the literacy levels of the adult population need to be at the forefront of public policy.

Non-Formal Lifelong Learning

ALA Seeks a Commitment to

- Develop a Lifelong Learning Policy which combines non-formal, community-based learning alongside the formal accredited VET and Higher Education systems.
- Fund selected “Learning Community” Pilot projects in disadvantaged urban and rural contexts to test and refine strategies to foster lifelong learning, and social inclusion, leading to guidelines and tools to assist communities throughout Australia.

There are currently parts of NSW where industry skills shortages exist alongside a cohort of adults unable to secure the employment they need and desire and not accessing formal VET studies. These adults are often described as “socially excluded.”

Working Australians take part in high levels of non-formal learning that occurs through the course of their paid work. The higher the level of their formal qualification, the higher the amounts of self funded or workplace funded non-formal learning they participate in. These adults draw on non-formal learning to build their own prosperity and strengthen their own communities. However, in the absence of investment by the state, not all residents of NSW and not all NSW communities are able to access the many benefits of non-formal lifelong learning.

Non-formal, community based learning through Community Colleges, Neighbourhood Houses and other not for profit community managed organisations has a strong record of assisting socially excluded adults to make the transition back into the paid workforce.

It also has an important role to play in maintaining health and wellbeing and “productivity” in its broadest sense for the almost one third of Australian adults who are either unemployed, or are retired, or who work full time doing unpaid work in the home or community.

Indigenous Adult Education

ALA Seeks a Commitment to:

- Target communities with high Indigenous populations to become official “Learning Communities” with state of the art “learning infrastructure” such as public internet access, library services and fully funded community - managed learning centres.

Much of Australia’s public policy discussion around Indigenous issues focuses on the education of Indigenous children, with the implicit assumption that children can learn in isolation from their parents and communities. Yet research overwhelmingly supports the notion that literacy is a set of social practices which all children learn from within their families and communities as much or more than through instruction in school. There are lost opportunities to integrate the learning of adults with the learning of Indigenous children, to the benefit of both.

NSW communities with large Indigenous populations often lack the basic “infrastructure” of literacy and learning such as libraries, or affordable public internet access, books and magazines. Adult education responses focus on centrally developed and administered Vocational Education and Training curriculum which fails to engage and / or keep young Indigenous adults. Meanwhile, where they exist at all, local sites of adult learning practice such as youth media centres, community learning centres or men’s sheds, rely on short term grants and fundraising.

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

Learning for Civic Participation

ALA seeks a commitment to

- Include a Participatory Democracy and Civics Strategy within the Lifelong Learning Policy which funds innovative approaches to community engagement and learning.

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

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

Learning that Supports an Aging Population

ALA Seeks a Commitment to:

- Include a Strategy for building on the skills and learning of an ageing population within the Lifelong Learning Policy.

Australia's future cohesion and prosperity will require us to manage the senior years more effectively. This involves skilling adults to understand and maintain good health and to remaining engaged and active. It will also include retraining for "encore careers" or developing skills for active engagement in community life and voluntary work.

Much of the public discussion around an aging population is negative. A commitment to lifelong learning, right through the senior years, treats older Australians as a resource to be built on rather than a problem to be solved.

A Strong Community Education (ACE) Sector

ALA Seeks a Commitment to:

- Restoring funding to NSW Community Colleges to 2004 levels (in real terms) and implementing annual CPI adjustments.
- Providing funding to ACE organisations for targeted arts, music and wellbeing programs for disadvantaged individuals and in disadvantaged communities.

A strong not for profit Community Education sector is crucial to expanding learning opportunities for all NSW residents. The ACE sector's philosophy - with its focus on the learner as an individual, responsiveness to personal, social or economic needs, flexible delivery and strong ethic of social justice and equity - has given real effect to the concept of lifelong learning for many citizens across a wide spectrum of NSW society.

Community Colleges in NSW are significant providers of language and literacy, and vocationally oriented courses and are the provider of choice for many of the most disadvantaged learner groups. Community Colleges play a key role in stimulating demand for training by removing barriers to participation for key learner groups and providing pathways to further education and vocational training.

In addition, Community Colleges and other community based education providers such as Neighbourhood Houses, provide important civic, health and wellbeing programs that promote social inclusion and community cohesion and play an important role in preventative health.

The revised 2007 Ministerial Declaration on ACE, of which NSW is a signatory, commits governments to an action plan for building ACE capacity to assist individuals manage life and career transitions, in line with COAG's Human Capital Reform agenda and its 'whole-of-life' perspective. However, there must be resources to match these higher expectations of community education providers.

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