

PRE-BUDGET  
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Adult  
Learning  
Australia

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ALA is the national peak body for Adult and Community Education (ACE), now in its 53rd year. ALA has members in every state and territory of Australia and maintains an office in Melbourne.

Its mission is to achieve access to “Lifelong and Lifewide Learning for all Australians”. By “lifelong” ALA means learning across the lifespan including into the senior years. By “lifewide”, ALA means learning that assists adults to gain and keep employment, participate as citizens in our democracy, and manage their health and wellbeing including ageing positively.

ALA is funded by an operating grant from the Department of Education and Training (DET), project grants and membership fees.

ALA maintains international relationships with the Adult Education sector through its membership of, and participation, in the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) and the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic Adult Education (ASPBAE).

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A vibrant Adult and Community Education sector has an important role to play in providing disadvantaged and disengaged learners with accessible points of access to Vocational Education and Training (VET) and work including for young people who have struggled to complete mainstream schooling. ACE is a key player in supporting an ageing population to remain engaged in the workplace and contributing to the economy and society in retirement. ACE organisations are major providers of foundation skills programs and adult literacy support, allowing educationally disadvantaged adults to support their children's literacy and learning.

In this submission, ALA proposes that the 2015–16 Federal Budget should:

- maintain the Commonwealth's stewardship role in relation to the ACE sector through ongoing funding to Adult Learning Australia and for Adult Learners' Week, at a cost of \$550 000 per annum
- invest in a pilot Learning in the 4th Age program to improve the quality of life for Australians in dependent care, increase independence and reduce care costs, at a cost of \$2 million
- target a proportion of VET funding from current Commonwealth programs towards workers who are older than 45 and those with the lowest literacy.

ALA proposes that in the medium term, the Federal Government should:

- formally acknowledge, in the next intergovernmental resourcing agreement for Vocational Education and Training, the role played by ACE providers in attracting previously disengaged learners, including for youth who have failed in mainstream schooling.

ALA proposes that as Budget circumstances allow, that in the medium-to-long term, the Federal Government should:

- provide up to \$10 million per annum investment for a national Family Literacy strategy focussed on targeting Indigenous and other socially and economically marginalised Australian communities, to ensure that all children have the family support that they need to succeed at school
- renew funding for the Productive Ageing through Community Education program or similar to promote Active Ageing, at an investment of \$3 million per annum
- enhance the Broadband for Seniors Initiative to provide greater incentives for community-based providers of digital literacy and access for seniors by investing \$4 million per annum
- provide remote community learning access centres in communities more than 200 km from a university or TAFE campus, at an investment of \$6 million per annum.

# OVERVIEW

The *Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education* (MCEETYA, 2008) clearly defines the commitment of all Australian governments to the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector.

ACE is defined differently in each state and territory of Australia. Some states support a sector of not-for-profit ACE providers, while others use the term ACE to refer to a set of non-formal programs. Both views of ACE have a strong focus on engaging socially and economically marginalised groups through learning. The 2008 Ministerial Declaration on ACE sees the diversity of the sector as a strength, describing ACE as dynamic, diverse and responsive.

Education and training departments in Australia have responsibility for ACE policy, due to the important role of ACE in providing pathways to VET and Further Education.

The ACE sector in Australia is diverse. However, ACE providers have some or all of these key traits in common:

- Learning as part of their core business
- Place-based or locally focussed
- Not-for-profit, community-based and governed through local volunteer boards.

The ACE sector generally offers programs that enable health and wellbeing, engagement in recreational pursuits and increased civic participation as well as skills for work. There is a strong focus on foundation skills, lifelong learning and on programs for educationally disadvantaged adults. ACE providers gain funding from all three tiers of government and across portfolio areas.

## NUMBER OF ACE ORGANISATIONS

- There are 531 not-for-profit organisations explicitly recognised and funded by state government education departments to provide ACE learning programs (NSW, Vic and SA).<sup>1</sup>

- In WA, providers are not directly funded to deliver ACE programs; however, the peak body for Community, Neighbourhood and Learning Centres, Linkwest, is funded to provide professional development and support to 70, not-for-profit, ACE centres.
- There are 346 RTO providers with registrations by type 'Community-Based Adult Education Provider' recorded on the National Register on Vocational Education and Training (VET) situated across Australia.<sup>2</sup>
- ALA maintains a database of 950 providers that self-identify as ACE organisations.
- There are 1,200 Neighbourhood Houses and Centres in Australia<sup>3</sup>
- There are 1,000 men's sheds across Australia.<sup>4</sup>
- There are over 250 University of the 3rd Age groups with over 85,000 members.

## CURRENT GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT IN ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Principle 1 of the 2008 Ministerial Declaration on ACE clearly defines the important leadership role of the federal government in ACE, emphasising:

A stewardship role ... at all levels, including governments working together and providing leadership to optimise the capacity of ACE through a national approach, with jurisdictions providing policy settings and developing practical strategies that will allow ACE to flourish.

The Commonwealth has undertaken this leadership and stewardship role through support for Adult Learners' Week activities, its grant to ALA, hosting of the ACE Action Group and through the implementation of a number of initiatives such as the 'Tap Into Learning Today' website.

The Commonwealth Government funds Adult Learning Australia to provide policy advice for and on behalf of the ACE sector, to produce research reports and publications, and to offer professional development. This includes support for the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, ALA's 54 year old, A-rated peer-reviewed journal as well as the popular Quest magazine, which highlights the grassroots work of the sector. ALA's work supports a network of hundreds of local, largely volunteer organisations.

From time to time, various Commonwealth Governments have intervened to provide direct funding for ACE programs in areas of strategic importance. The most recent example was the recently concluded Productive Ageing through Community Education (PATCE), which was developed as a response to recommendations of the *Turning Grey into Gold* Report of the Advisory Panel on the Economic Potential of Senior Australians (2011).

The Australian Government's support for Adult and Community Education is minimal relative to other OECD countries including New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ireland. Policy and funding commitment to Adult and Community Education is currently growing amongst the advanced knowledge-based economies of South East Asia such as Japan, South Korea and China.

## STATE GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

South Australia, Victoria and NSW provide program funding to the not-for-profit ACE sector. In addition to this, some states and territories support the ACE sector as part of a formal ACE strategy by providing:

- Peak body support (WA and SA)
- Central provider location services – website (Vic NSW, SA and Qld)
- Curriculum resources and quality frameworks (Vic, NSW, SA and WA)
- Organisational capacity building grants (Vic, NSW, SA)
- Professional development for ACE staff and volunteers (WA, Vic, NSW and SA)
- Annual awards or celebrations (Vic and SA)
- Adult Learners' Week funding (SA, ACT, Tas)

Table 1 presents a best estimate of ACE funding type by government source, based on publicly published information about 2012 government funding allocated to the ACE sector as part of a formal ACE Strategy.<sup>7</sup>

Table 1: ACE funding type by government source

Government source	Program funding (\$'000)	Grant funding (\$'000)	Admin/Peak support (\$'000)	Total allocation (\$'000)
NSW	15,940	0	250	16,190
Vic	15,370	5,280	0	20,650
Qld	12,200	0	0	12,200
WA	0	430	165	595
SA	2,500	0	232	2,732
Tas	700	1,000	0	1,700
NT#	0	0	0	0
ACT	0	250	0	250
Commonwealth	0	250*	300**	550

**KEY:** # NT does not identify ACE separately, either as a sector or as a funding program.

\* Adult Learners' Week funding; \*\* Adult Learning Australia grant.

In addition, many ACE organisations receive program funding from non-education departments such as health, community services or ageing. ACE RTOs are also able to access contestable funding for accredited VET in some jurisdictions.

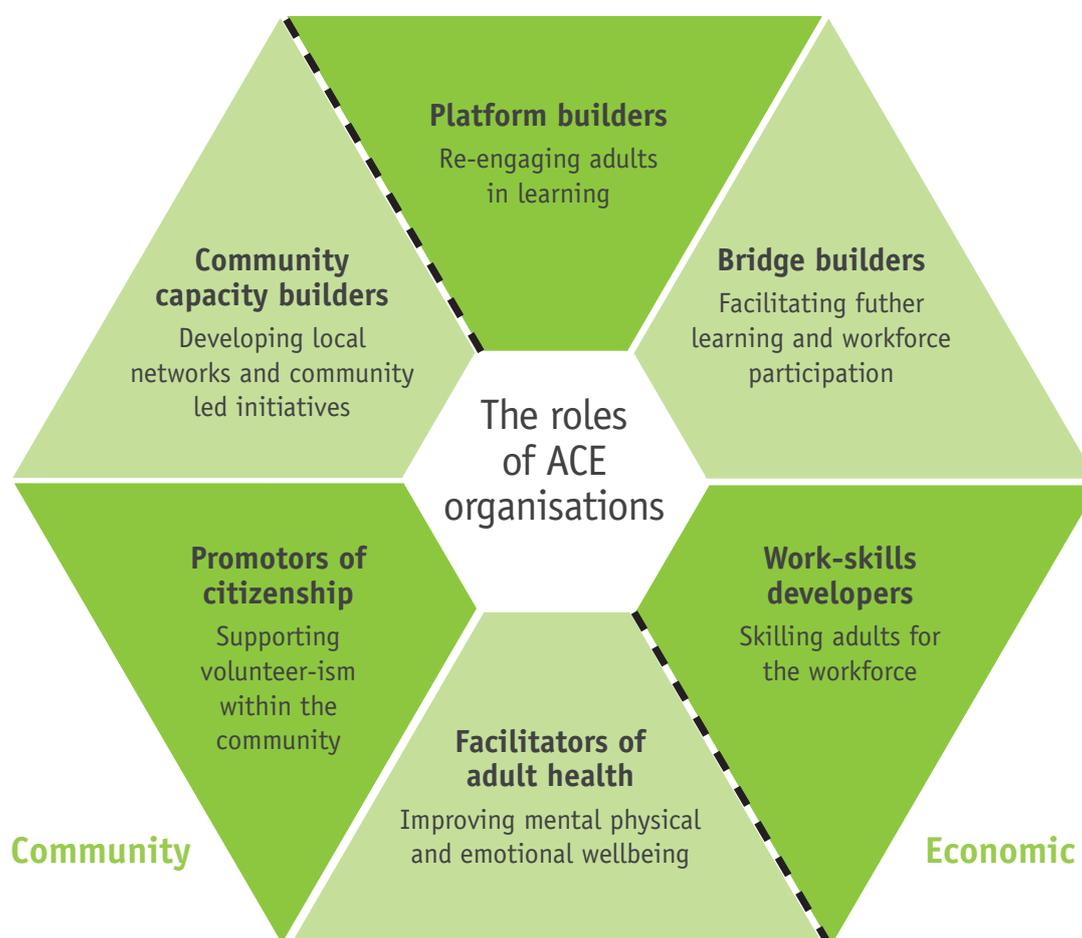
Most state and territory governments provide funding for programs that enable the provision of low fee ACE programs; for example, neighbourhood house coordination funding or one off grants provided to U3As or Men's Sheds.

# THE BENEFITS OF GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT IN ADULT AND COMMUNITY

The Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector has variously been described as “the Cinderella sector”,<sup>6</sup> the “unsung heroes of the VET sector”<sup>7</sup> and an “undervalued community asset”.<sup>8</sup> Very small amounts of government investment in the sector produce significant outcomes for Australian governments. The sector, from ALA at the national level, through to state-based peak bodies, through to individual ACE organisations is characterised by high levels of volunteerism, low overheads, high levels of community ‘ownership’ and a strong focus on the most disenfranchised learners.

ACE plays an important role within the education and training system building both human and social capital. Bowman (2006) outlines these roles below:<sup>9</sup>

Figure 1: The roles of ACE organisations



(Source: Adapted from Bowman, 2006)

A significant body of research identifies ACE as a critically important way of engaging learners with poor literacy and numeracy skills, poor experiences of schooling and / or a lack of confidence in their ability to learn in a formal setting and of setting them on a pathway into employment.<sup>10</sup>

Most recently, a longitudinal study of learners in pre-accredited training programs offered by Victorian Adult Community Education providers showed that of those surveyed who had undertaken a pre-accredited program, around seven in 10 had made a transition into an accredited pathway.<sup>11</sup>

A previous NCVET research survey of 400 learners in 300 community education organisations across Australia included six out of ten who went directly on to work or to further study. Of those who followed a pathway to further study, approximately one quarter reported that they would not have been able to continue on to further study without having undertaken an ACE course.<sup>12</sup>

There have been a number of calls from national agencies to increase national coordination, and provide policy and regulatory clarity for the ACE sector for the purpose of ensuring equity in VET.

In the Council's view, the time has come to: further acknowledge the role of ACE in building social inclusion; place it in the context of the current COAG agenda; clarify its policy, funding and regulatory frameworks; and formalise recognition of its pathways into further learning (National VET Equity Advisory Council, 2011, p. 13).

The Australian Workplace and Productivity Agency and its predecessor, Skills Australia, repeatedly identified the need for greater policy clarity for Adult and Community Education, starting with *Skills for prosperity: A roadmap for vocational education and training* (2011), Recommendation 10: 'The role of adult and community education in communities' was that:

Australian governments affirm the importance of the adult and community education (ACE) sector as a pathway for individuals undertaking pre-vocational, bridging, entry-level and foundation skills programs by formally acknowledging in the next intergovernmental resourcing agreement for the sector the role played by ACE providers in attracting previously disengaged learners. (Skills Australia, 2011)

## MAINTAINING THE ARCHITECTURE OF ACE

The ACE sector is largely funded at the state and local government levels. However the Commonwealth has committed to a critically important leadership, stewardship and coordination role for the sector. Adult Learning Australia, has been funded for approximately 18 years by successive Australian governments as part of this stewardship role. A moderate national government investment of approximately \$300,000 per annum allows ALA to provide:

- research into national and international trends in ACE
- a comprehensive database of the nation's self-identified ACE organisations
- professional development for the sector
- an A-rated, peer reviewed journal to inform program and policy development in the field
- a print based and online magazine, *Quest*, which highlights best practice in ACE
- relationships with ACE in the region and internationally through participation in ASPBAE and the ICAE.

ALA currently leverages \$3.50 for every dollar of investment from government in its core grant including through project work, sales of publications, consultancies and membership contributions. Like the sector itself, ALA draws heavily on volunteer support, further leveraging this modest investment from government.

Adult Learners' Week (ALW) has been celebrated in Australia and internationally for the past twenty years. Its aim is to encourage all forms of learning, (formal, non-formal and informal) across the lifespan and into the senior years. ALW is particularly targeted at Australians who are not currently engaged in learning, particularly those with low skills, low engagement with learning and / or poor earlier experiences of learning.

Funding for Adult Learning Australia and Adult Learners' Week, in combination, form the architecture of a national approach to ACE. The approach is very cost effective and allows Australia to engage with the region and internationally on issues related to Adult Education. ALA recommends that this base funding be renewed for the next three-year period.

## BUILDING FAMILY LEARNING AND LITERACY

Literacy and attitudes to learning are intergenerational, with the skills of one generation impacting strongly on the other. Parents' experience of, and achievement in education have a profound effect on their children's success at school, more than family income. In many communities around Australia, including Indigenous communities, participation in education, training and lifelong learning are not normalised: many parents lack the capacity to support their children with their schooling.

The Forrest Review of Indigenous Training and Employment identified that:

Early childhood development and adult literacy are often discussed as separate topics, yet the interrelatedness of these concepts is of utmost importance. Research shows that the most effective services to support lifelong learners begin at birth, involve families, target the poorest children, are sufficiently intensive and long lasting, and are holistic – they include health, nutrition, and parenting. Services need to support both the parent and the child (p. 70).

Professor Michael Christie of Charles Darwin University has identified the inclusion of adult education in schools as one of the two most effective means of improving school outcomes for Indigenous children.<sup>13</sup>

ALA's research into Indigenous intergenerational learning has identified a range of high quality grassroots programs, developed through initiatives of individual agencies, universities, library systems and church dioceses that either fail to move past pilot stage or otherwise struggle for sustainability.<sup>14</sup> There is a role for the Commonwealth to play in providing strong leadership and coordination in the provision of school-based and kindergarten-based intergenerational literacy and learning programs with Indigenous and other socially and economically marginalised communities.

There is a unique opportunity, with the recent move of the Vocational Education and Training Foundation Skills initiatives into the Department of Education and Training, alongside early childhood and school education, to take a "whole of family" and "whole of community" approach to literacy and learning in order to make significant shifts in communities where NAPLAN results indicate long term and systemic failure to improve literacy outcomes for children.

Aside from their impacts on the literacy skills of children, family learning initiatives have the added benefit of providing a pathway into vocational and further study for adults, who would otherwise be marginalised from the education and training system:

ALA's review of research into international and national family learning and literacy programs indicates that the most effective models have the following features.

- They involve partnerships between schools and community-based adult education providers.
- They offer opportunities for adults to develop their own skills as well as to support their children.
- They are culturally appropriate including the involvement of grandparents and other extended family carers.

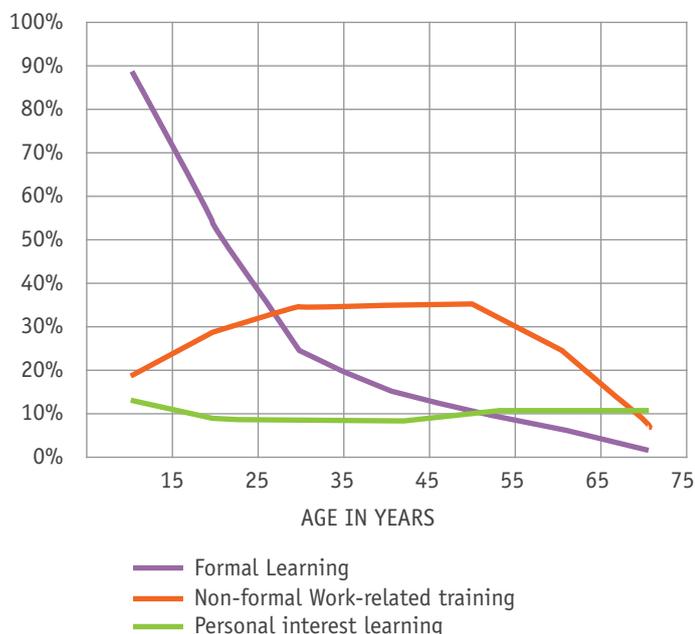
ALA urges the Federal Government to continue to take leadership in this important area through the development of a new national family literacy strategy. The strategy would be designed to complement the current range of grassroots and state-based family literacy initiatives by highlighting best practice, identifying gaps in provision and barriers to further development of family literacy initiatives. It would also provide grant funding to support existing programs or seed the development of programs in areas of high need.

## LEARNING TO SUPPORT AN AGEING POPULATION

Australia is an ageing society in which people are experiencing more frequent, less predictable life transitions, and spending more of their lives out of the labour market. Australia's education and training system has not yet made the transition from a model that assumes one transition from school to work, into a system where workers are supported to manage numerous career shifts. The new world of work is characterised by moves between casual, part time and full time work and caring responsibilities, continual upskilling using new and emerging technologies, remaining in the paid workforce longer, and remaining active into retirement.

The ABS 2013 *Work Related Training and Adult Learning Survey* looks both at learning in the formal post compulsory VET and Higher Education systems, as well as at non-formal, work-related training and personal interest learning. The survey identifies a significant lack of investment for adults 45 years and above in either formal or non-formal work-related training, while personal interest learning, remains relatively steady across the lifecycle at around 10 per cent of the population.

Figure 2: Percentage of Australian adults engaged in workplace training and adult learning

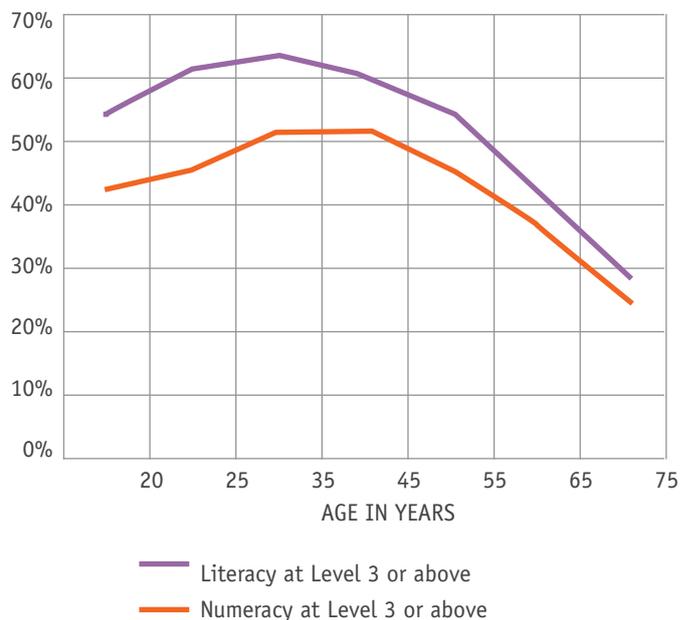


**KEY: Formal learning** is structured learning that leads to a qualification recognised by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF); **Non-formal work-related learning** refers to structured learning that does not lead to a recognised qualification; for example, a construction site induction; **Personal interest learning** is learning for purposes other than work. Adapted from ABS 4234.0 *Work-Related Training and Adult Learning, Australia, 2013*.

Government has particular responsibilities to assist young people in their first transition into the workforce, so it is entirely appropriate to prioritise funding towards this group. However, it will be challenging to meet the government’s aspiration for Australians to remain in the workforce until they are seventy, with the current steep drop off in training for those aged 45 and above.

The desire to keep seniors in the workforce and active in community life is currently stymied by the very low levels of literacy and numeracy of older Australians, as evidenced in the recent Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Survey (2011–12). This survey identified that age cohorts older than 45 years had significantly lower literacy than younger age cohorts. PIAAC measured literacy and numeracy at 5 levels, with Level 3 considered adequate to cope with the demands of a technology rich, knowledge-based economy and society. The survey showed a sharp decline in literacy and numeracy for adults at Level 3 for the 45–70 age cohorts, as illustrated below.

Figure 3: Adult literacy and numeracy levels at Level 3 or above by age (%)



**KEY:** Adapted from ABS, 4228.0 – *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), Australia, 2011–12*.

Drawing on the work of the UK-based *Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning*, ALA recommends a stronger emphasis on learning for 50–75 age groups, with 75 years treated as the nominal upper age limit for economic activity, irrespective of the age at which the pension is potentially accessed. This greater investment would recognise the vulnerability of workers at this stage of life and the potential damage to the economy and to individual lives of ‘early exit’ from employment. Recognition of prior learning and intensive career counselling should form key components of this life stage.

Learning in the Fourth Age; that is, the age of dependent care, is a little explored area in Australian policy despite being the fastest growing national age cohort. There is early evidence from the UK and Europe of positive returns on investment in terms of costs of care where learning opportunities are provided to adults in the Fourth Age, not to mention improvements in quality of life.<sup>15</sup> Learning in this stage would focus on self-managing health and wellbeing with a strong focus on intergenerational learning.

Where activities are offered in care centres, they are usually leisure based. Learning opportunities are significantly different in that they assume that older adults are capable of growth and development, may want to pursue new areas of enquiry and may be interested in the future as well as the past.

ALA recommends a small pilot of learning programs in care settings to test the applicability of this UK research finding in a not dissimilar Australian context. The pilot would assess both quality of life outcomes as well as quantitative measures such as costs of care, reduction in use of medication, etc.

Table 2 identifies the potential role of the ACE sector in a revised approach to learning across the lifespan.

Table 2: The potential role of the ACE sector for learning across the lifespan

Lifestage	Focus	Role of government	Role of Adult and Community Education
16 to 25	Transition into the workforce Qualifications	Provider of alternative school environments for disengaged young people	Significant support
25–50	Productivity but also resilience to move in and out of the labour market, balancing work and caring responsibilities	Enabler	Short vocational course provider Short life skills course provider Literacy provider
50–75	Career advice, career shifting, skillsets	Enhanced support	Short vocational course provider Short life skills course provider Literacy provider
75+	Self managing health and wellbeing, intergenerational learning	Enabler	Seniors education, U3A, digital literacy, men’s sheds

## LEARNING CENTRES IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

Australian experiences of education and training and outcomes are very much a function of where they live. Young people and adults outside the major cities are around half as likely to finish high school or to attend university as their urban contemporaries but they are more likely to complete a VET (vocational education and training) qualification.<sup>16</sup>

Adult and Community Education (ACE) is critically important in addressing access and equity in regional and rural Australia. In New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and South Australia (SA), delivery of Adult and Community Education programs is disproportionately higher in regional and rural communities, relative to delivery in capital and major cities. In many small rural communities in these states, ACE organisations are the only ‘on-the-ground’ providers of post-compulsory education. In other states, such as Queensland and Western Australia, volunteer and community-based organisations provide adult literacy and other informal adult education services.

While online learning has the potential to significantly reduce educational disadvantage in rural and regional Australia, learners with low skills experience very low completion rates through online learning: most need face-to-face mentoring and on-the-ground support to engage with learning. At the same time learning providers need good local intelligence to be able to effectively reach adults in these communities. Community development will be needed to build a culture of learning and to stimulate demand amongst groups who won’t automatically demand learning opportunities. Non-formal and informal learning opportunities will be needed to underpin formal study.

Victorian modelling has indicated a range of market and private non-market benefits attributable to the presence of even a very small Adult and Community Education provider in town, including increased incomes, increased labour market participation and more efficient household management (Allen Consulting Group, 2008).

A community learning access point in geographically isolated communities would provide a supported, physical environment in which community members could access VET and Higher Education courses offered by providers across the country. ALA would like to see the Australian Government make a long-term goal of ensuring that a community learning centre exists in every Australian community of more than 500 people more than 80 km from a university or TAFE campus, with the highest priority being for large and often remote Indigenous communities. Community learning centres / access points could be housed within existing services such as neighbourhood houses, local government buildings, sporting and recreation clubs or men's sheds. By building on the ACE model, the Australian Government has the ability to leverage the support of already existing volunteer and locally funded services as well as local knowledge.

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## END NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Ibid
- <sup>3</sup> Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Centres, <http://www.anhca.asn.au/node/1>, retrieved, Jan 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> Australian Men's Sheds Association, <http://www.mensshed.org/home/.aspx>, retrieved, Jan 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> Thompson, S. (2014). Rethinking Community Based Learning, Melbourne: Adult Learning Australia.
- <sup>6</sup> Aulich, T. (1991). Australia Parliament Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. Come in Cinderella: The emergence of adult and community education. Senate Printing Unit: Canberra.
- <sup>7</sup> Bardon, B. (2006). Community Education and National Reform Discussion Paper Department of Education, Science and Training.
- <sup>8</sup> National Vocational Education Advisory Council (NVEAC) Equity Blueprint 2011–2016 Creating Futures: Achieving Potential through VET, 2011.
- <sup>9</sup> Bowman, K. (2006). The value of ACE providers: A guide to the evidence base. Canberra: Adult Learning Australia.
- <sup>10</sup> See McGivney, 1999; Birch et al., 2003; Walstab et al., 2006; Beddie & Halliday-Wynes, 2009).
- <sup>11</sup> Teese, R. (2012). Longitudinal study for the ACFE Board, Centre for Research on Education Systems, University of Melbourne, Melbourne: Adult, Community and Further Education Board.
- <sup>12</sup> Birch, E., Kenyon, P., Koshy, P. & Wills-Johnson, N. (2003). Exploring the social and economic impacts of adult and community education. Adelaide: NCVET.
- <sup>13</sup> See <https://theconversation.com/listen-to-your-elders-inviting-aboriginal-parents-back-to-school-31300>
- <sup>14</sup> Powell, M. (2014). Indigenous Intergenerational Learning, Melbourne: Adult Learning Australia.
- <sup>15</sup> Aldridge, F. (2009). Enhancing Informal Adult Learning for Older People in Care Settings: Interim Report and Consultation Document, Leicester: NIACE.
- <sup>16</sup> National Rural Health Alliance Inc. & Australian Council of Social Services. (2013). A snapshot of poverty in rural and regional Australia, Joint Report, October 2013.

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