



**RETHINKING
COMMUNITY
BASED LEARNING**



**Adult
Learning
Australia**

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Executive summary

Learning occurs in a range of environments including our schools, and other formal learning institutions, workplaces and homes. The focus of this paper is on the informal and non-formal learning that occurs in and through community-based organisations. This learning, which is referred to in Australian policy terms as Adult and Community Education (ACE), is wonderfully diverse, innovative and resilient. It relies on the goodwill of thousands of volunteers, and committed community workers and adult educators. It transforms people and communities.

This paper suggests that the informal and non-formal learning that occurs in and through Adult and Community Education in Australia has been enormously beneficial but has largely gone unheralded. Also, that an increased focus from government could result in even stronger outcomes, particularly for socially and economically marginalised groups including in rural and regional Australia.

Why focus on informal and non-formal learning?

Australian post compulsory education policy has focussed on the sectors of *formal* learning: schools, VET (vocational education and training) and Higher Education. However, the bulk of learning occurs outside these institutions. Livingston (1999) was the first writer credited with using the analogy of an iceberg to describe the relationship between informal and formal learning. As the analogy suggests, the bulk of learning through life sits beneath and effectively *supports* the formal education sector.

This policy paper focusses on how to enhance what adults learn *informally* through participation in community organisations, as well as *non-formally* through a host of courses, classes and programs in community organisations.

Whilst Adult Learning Australia strongly supports and promotes the value of formal Vocational Education and Training, and acknowledges its critical importance to the economy, business and the paid workforce, this paper seeks to focus on three fundamental questions:

1. How does non-formal and informal learning interact with and support formal education and training?
2. How do we enhance lifelong and lifewide learning for social, civic and economic purposes beyond paid work?
3. How do we help adult Australians *not* in paid work access learning?'

This paper is based on international and Australian research that confirms the value of adult learning in community settings in achieving these two objectives.

Looking below the surface': Some Australian policy history

Non-formal learning appears in the 1991 Senate Report, *Come in Cinderella: The emergence of adult and community education* (Aulich, 1991) and the 1997 follow up report, *Beyond Cinderella: Towards a learning society* (Crowley, 1997). Both were valiant attempts to bring community-based, non-formal lifelong learning into the policy arena and to position the not-for-profit adult and community education sector that Adult Learning Australia now represents as a 'fourth sector' of education.

The policy environment surrounding adult education is significantly different today than in 1991, when *Come in Cinderella* was released. Post compulsory education policy in 2014 is characterised by increased marketisation, wider participation, restrictions on government subsidies, higher fees and a move away from campus-based delivery to applied workplace learning and online learning.

As of 2014, Adult and Community Education policy remains poorly formed in some states and, where it exists, tends to position the Adult and Community Education sector as a sub-sector of, and feeder into the Vocational Education and Training system, rather than as a provider of non-formal and informal learning for a range of purposes. The National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) calls the ACE sector an 'undervalued community asset' which, with an increased profile and coherent policy and funding approaches, could further support the VET system's performance in relation to improving access, participation and outcomes for people with low skills.

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 (NVEAC, 2011, p. 13).

The Australian Workplace and Productivity Agency and its predecessor Skills Australia have 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) which recommended the following:

Recommendation 10: The role of adult and community education in communities

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).

Australian governments have largely ignored these recommendations. The role of ACE was not 'included in the next intergovernmental resourcing agreement for the sector'. There was some policy attention given by governments to ACE as part of the VET reform processes in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. However, ACE policy and funding remains weak in the remaining states and territories, and the Ministerial Declaration on ACE is now almost seven years old.

So what *are* the storms of change?

Adult education policy needs to be informed by *and respond to* broader societal shifts such as the pressures (and benefits) of an ageing population, globalisation, growing connectivity and increasing multiculturalism. With the new imperative to work longer and more efficiently, it needs to respond to a world in which career shifting between industries is more common, working lives are extended and men and women seek to balance work and caring responsibilities, and transition between part time and full time work to facilitate this.

While post-compulsory education in Australia has much to commend it, our systems have failed to seriously address the significant proportion of the population who remain without the literacy and numeracy skills required to access and remain in work (ABS, 2013); the persistent gap between the educational, health and employment outcomes of Indigenous Australians and other Australians (Thomson & De Bortoli, 2013) and the many pockets of the population who continue to suffer with entrenched, intergenerational poverty and low skills (Vinson, 2007). They are also well behind other OECD countries in adjusting to the realities of an ageing population. In this context, the role of non-formal and informal community-based learning is well worth re-examining and repositioning.

Beyond Australian shores: International policy history

Lifelong Learning as a concept achieved international prominence via two groundbreaking reports by UNESCO; the Faure report (Faure et al., 1972) and the Delors report (Delors et al., 1996). These reports articulated some basic principles of lifelong learning which have informed post-compulsory education policy in international bodies such as the European Union and the OECD, in most of the countries of Europe and in significant parts of South East Asia ever since.

Some of the principles of 'Lifelong Learning' were that:

1. learning occurs in a range of environments including the home, the workplace and in civic organisations;
2. new technologies will usher in a new era of self directed, or informal, learning;
3. the new globalised, technology enhanced, knowledge rich world will require all citizens to constantly update their skills;
4. the primary role of governments in relation to education will be to build a culture of lifelong learning and encourage learning across the lifespan.

The Delors report saw the role of government as an *enabler* of learning in a range of forms and environments, rather than just a *provider* of formal education in institutional settings. For these reasons, international bodies such as UNESCO, the OECD and the European Union define learning as formal, non-formal and informal and include policy levers for all three approaches. UNESCO defines learning thus:

Formal learning takes place in education and training institutions, is recognised by relevant national authorities and leads to diplomas and qualifications. Formal learning is structured according to educational arrangements such as curricula, qualifications and teaching-learning requirements.

Non-formal learning is learning that has been acquired in addition or alternatively to formal learning. In some cases, it is also structured according to educational and training arrangements, but more flexible. It usually takes place in community-based settings, the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations.

Informal learning is learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and through interests and activities of individuals. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, competences gained in informal learning can be made visible and can contribute to qualifications and other recognitions. In some cases, the term experiential learning is used to refer to informal learning that focuses on learning from experience (UNESCO UILL, 2012).

Beneath our own waves: The Australian policy approach

Despite their widespread use internationally, *informal learning* and *non-formal learning* are contested terms and can mean a range of different things depending on context (Tusting, 2003). They are often used interchangeably or to simply describe all the things that formal learning is not. For example, formal learning is commonly described as:

- taking place in an educational institution
- following an externally determined curriculum
- involving assessment against externally determined criteria
- accredited with a regulatory body
- constructed via a hierarchical relationship between teachers and learners.

The terms *informal* and *non-formal learning* are generally used to describe learning that has some or all of the features opposite to *formal* learning. For example:

- it may take place outside a formal educational institution (e.g. a workplace, at home, in a civic or community organisation)
- the curriculum may be co-created with learners
- it is not assessed
- it is not accredited
- the learning may be constructed by the teacher as mentor, peer or facilitator.

For many researchers, the distinctive feature of *informal* learning is that it is incidental (McGivney, 1999; Conlon, 2004); that is, it occurs as a by-product of some other activity. For others (Golding, Brown & Foley, 2009) the social aspects of learning where people develop skills and knowledge through engagement with each other is key.

... individuals learn in social situations, in particular places and contexts, making their own culturally negotiated meaning and understandings – where learners are always learning, through activities and guidances, though this can often be in indeterminate ways (Golding et al., 2009, p. 43).

If we accept that the key distinction between *informal* and *non-formal* learning is that the first is incidental and the latter is planned, then some examples of community-based *non-formal* learning might include:

- short classes held at a neighbourhood house
- mentoring schemes
- learning circles
- volunteer induction and training
- U3A groups.

Examples of *informal* community-based learning might include learning through:

- community men's sheds
- community-based committees and working groups
- volunteering
- public libraries
- community arts programs
- community history museums
- social activism.

Australia was one of a minority of advanced economy countries from the 1970s onwards not to follow the trend of developing a Lifelong Learning policy, based on the UNESCO principles, incorporating all three forms of learning; formal, non-formal and informal. Instead, with a few minor policy exceptions, Australia's approach has focussed on the formal education sectors; schools, higher education and vocational education and training (VET) with no one department or area within government taking responsibility for an overarching policy (Karmel, 2004). As a result, the role of non-formal or informal learning has lived 'below the surface', effectively at the margins of government policy. The government's role in enabling a culture of self-directed lifelong learning has remained largely unexplored in most states and territories, and unsupported other than tangentially by a small number of national government policies.

Policy responses elsewhere

In contrast, most of the countries of Europe and many of the developing economies of South East Asia have pursued policies that cover learning in all of its forms. The Lisbon European Council in March 2000 outlined an ambition for lifelong learning to be a basic component of the European social model with a target that every member country have a comprehensive lifelong learning strategy by 2006, which includes non-formal and informal learning (European Commission, 2005). More recently, the European Union's Strategic Framework for cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) includes a series of goals for early childhood, school, higher education, vocational and adult education, with its *adult education* policy area defined as 'all learning undertaken by adults after they have left their initial education and training' which encompasses:

- formal, non-formal and informal learning for improving basic skills, obtaining new qualifications, up-skilling or re-skilling for employment
- participating in social, cultural, artistic and societal learning for personal development and fulfilment (European Union, 2012).

Lifelong learning along the UNESCO lines was adopted enthusiastically in Japan from the 1970s onwards, when the Faure report was translated into Japanese. In 1971, the Social Education Council to the Minister of Education, Science and Culture produced a report called *The arrangement of social education to cope with rapid changes in the societal structure*, which defined the purpose of lifelong learning as organically combining 'family education, school education and social education' (Sawano, 2007, p. 475). More recently, the *New strategy for growth: A scenario to recover 'Vigorous Japan'* was released in 2009. It included lifelong learning as key strategy for economic and social development (Sawano, 2011).

The concept of lifelong learning has long been valued philosophically in South Korea, and it is relatively recently, since the economic crisis of the 1990s, that a more instrumentalist approach to work-based education has been added to a very broad view of education that includes non-formal learning. South Korea implemented a *Lifelong Learning Law* in 1995, which had amongst its strategies, the operation of lifelong learning centres and lifelong learning halls at city, county and local area levels (Lee, 2007).

As a large and unevenly developed country, the People's Republic of China has a diverse range of systems to support all forms of learning and has come to a national policy position on lifelong learning relatively recently. Article 11 of the Education Law of the PRC, issued in September 1995, stipulates that China will develop and gradually implement a system to 'create favourable conditions for all citizens to receive lifelong education' (Meng, 2007, p. 498). More than 40 major cities including Shanghai, Dalian, Qingdao and Hangzhou currently have goals to become 'learning cities'.

Closer to home, New Zealand has a long and strong tradition of non-formal and informal learning through churches, the YMCA, the Country Women's Institute, the Workers' Education Associations, the Maori Women's Welfare League, trade unions and community groups. In 1938, the New Zealand government created the Council of Adult Education along with an extensive rural library service and adult education radio programs on the national broadcaster. In addition, recent reassertions of Maori cultural aspirations and practices have led to Maori education principles being incorporated into public education policy. These principles include an emphasis on self-directed and continuing education (Casey, 2007, p. 397)

Lifelong VET?

Some commentators have argued that the flexibility, affordability and accessibility across the lifespan of Australia's formal Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system has made a formal lifelong learning policy and the policy recognition of non-formal and informal learning redundant. Karmel (2004) identified that relative to the rest of the world, the level of participation by adults in formal education and training in Australia has been very high, with Australians spending, on average, more years in formal education and training (whether part time or full time) than other OECD countries. He pointed to features such as income contingent loans, flexible delivery, the movement of adults between higher education and TVET and the acceptance of the legitimacy of part time study in the national system as support for lifelong learning.

Karmel (2004) recognised that attention to informal and non-formal learning has been largely absent from the Australian system; however, he dismissed these features as simply 'a belief in learning for its own sake' (Karmel, 2004, p. 17). He suggested that areas where the Australian policy

approach was falling short could be addressed by greater recognition and attention from the formal education and training system.

It makes perfectly good sense to tackle specific problems such as ensuring that all young people have a firm educational foundation, or the poor educational outcomes of Indigenous Australians, or the problems faced by older workers who are displaced from their jobs, rather than to agonise over a grand plan for lifelong learning (Karmel, 2004, p. 18).

Pathways learning

Non-formal learning is often broken down for policy purposes into two subsets: learning for life and learning for work. There is a significant body of qualitative research that has identified non-formal learning (and informal learning) as useful means 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 (McGivney, 1999; Birch et al., 2003; Walstab et al., 2006; Beddie & Halliday-Wynes, 2009).

Informal learning can be a potent means for re-engaging disengaged learners. For the disengaged learner and worker, less formal means of skills development can be an effective route back to education and training and can lead to building sustainable skills (Beddie & Halliday-Wynes, 2009, p. 4).

Where non-formal and informal learning is recognised in Australian policy terms, and funded by Australian governments, it tends to be vocational pathways learning. For example, the 2008 *Ministerial Declaration on ACE* set a goal of 'increased provision of vocationally focussed programs by ACE'. The NSW ACE Statement identifies community education organisations as 'uniquely placed to link informal learning to formal training pathways'.

The Victorian government uses the term 'pre-accredited' to distinguish vocationally focussed pathway programs, which attract government support, from other non-formal programs that are offered by the community sector on a fee for service basis. The Victorian *Learn local: Focussing on the future strategy* describes these short, non-accredited programs as 'initial vocational training' (p. 15). The South Australian *Skills for all strategy* funds the ACE sector to

provide non-formal learning in the areas of language, literacy, numeracy, problem solving and digital literacy skills 'that will start people on a pathway to learning and work' (p. 3).

Alongside the qualitative studies cited above, there is also quantitative research to support the notion that non-formal learning provides an accessible point of entry to vocational education and training and to employment for disadvantaged learners. 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 (Teese, 2012).

Birch and colleagues had similar results from a survey of 400 learners in 300 community education organisations (Birch et al., 2003). The ACE students in Birch's sample 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 onto their further study without having undertaken their ACE course (p. 26).

Adult literacy and learning

The bulk of funding for adult literacy in Australia is aimed at formal competency based training, increasingly called 'foundation skills'. However, the overwhelming body of research on the topic suggests adult literacy is essentially a social practice, shaped by the everyday demands of work and life and developed through a process of purposeful participation in social and cultural practices (Street, 1997; Gee, 2000; Papen, 2010; Shore, 2010). In other words, the most effective way for adults to develop their literacy and numeracy skills is by applying them in context for particular purposes.

Competency-based training, based on centrally determined competencies and abstract sets of skills, is a poor fit for what the research is telling us about the ways adults best develop their literacy. On the other hand, informal learning, where adults master texts in order to do something (e.g. take minutes at a community meeting, manage the finances for the netball club, measure out a woodwork project in a men's shed, take a child through story time at the local library, etc.) is much closer to what we know about the nature of literacy development. Non-formal learning, where adults work in small groups or individually to learn the texts that interest them in order to fulfil a personally important need, is similarly supported by the research.

In the Australian context, perhaps the most powerful picture of the disconnect between formal education and training systems and the literacy and numeracy needs and practices of people is Kral and Falk's (2004) study of the literacy practices of a remote Northern Territory Indigenous community. Aptly titled *What is all that learning for?* the study identified a raft of literacy and numeracy development occurring through participation in the outstation Christian Church, and interactions at the clinic and the community store, running almost parallel to a VET system that is described as 'ad hoc, short-term and compartmentalised into disconnected sectors of health and education and from a range of registered training organisations' (p. 7).

Kral and Falk's overview, while specific to this particular community, could well be extrapolated across many communities that contain large proportions of socially and economically marginalised members with low levels of English language literacy.

A theme that emerges in the study is that most training does not fit into the meaning and purpose of community life. The connection between education, vocational education and training and employment pathways is not linked to any future planning process that takes account of community aims and aspirations. Consequently, a relevant and appropriate 'training culture' has yet to evolve and become integrated into community life.

The community believes that for education to be successful and to lead to sustainable outcomes, it must be integrated into the social and cultural framework of the community, and must include community goals and aspirations. In this community, relationships through the kinship system are a crucial, cohesive element in an unchanging authority structure determined by Aboriginal law. Literacy, therefore, is only relevant if it is linked in a useful way to the prescribed roles and responsibilities in the community. The mainstream education and training system invests in the individuals progressing along a pathway towards labour market employment, whereas in this remote Indigenous context the most important investment is in the social capital – norms (values), networks and trust (Putnam 1993) – of the communal whole (Kral & Falk, 2004, p. 8).

Learning for Life

Policy support for learning for personal development, civic and social purposes has had few advocates in Australia, and Karmel's dismissal of non-formal and informal learning as 'learning for its own sake' is not uncommon. As Clemans, Newton, Guevara and Thompson (2013) note, 'the dominant education logic in Australia has resulted in an education and training system with a narrow approach to lifelong learning which focuses more on life span than on life-relatedness' (p. 7).

Axford and Seddon (2007) suggest that an unwillingness to support broader notions of lifelong learning reflects the 'deep vein of pragmatic utilitarianism that underpins Australian popular culture' (p. 416). They point to the array of different policy names used to build interest in Australia as a learning society, ('clever country', 'knowledge nation') as evidence of the discomfort policy makers feel with moving beyond utilitarian approaches to learning and work.

This discomfort appears to be a largely Australian and North American phenomenon that is not felt to the same extent in other parts of the world. The Delors report identified lifelong learning as not just important to facilitating economic growth in the emerging technologically enhanced knowledge economies, but also to contributing to social cohesion and democracy in a more mobile and globalised world.

[In] the twenty-first century everyone will need to exercise greater independence and judgement combined with a stronger sense of personal responsibility for the attainment of common goals (Delors et al., 2009, p. 21).

The Delors report in 1996 (and the earlier Faure report in 1971) referred to four 'pillars' of learning:

1. learning to know (foundational education),
2. learning to do (vocational education), and also
3. learning to be (self-development) and
4. learning to live together (democracy and social cohesion).

The European Union makes policy provision for 'participating in social, cultural, artistic and societal learning for personal development and fulfilment' (European Union, 2012). Its recently concluded Lifelong

Learning Funding Strategy (2010–2013) was divided into four sectorial sub programmes, named after significant philosophers in their respective fields. These were:

- Comenius for schools
- Erasmus for higher education
- Leonardo da Vinci for vocational education and training
- Grundtvig for adult education (Grundtvig being a Danish pastor and philosopher who believed that the primary purpose of education is for active participation in society and popular life).

Personal, civic and social development is also valued in Japanese lifelong learning policy. Two of the goals of Japan's, *New strategy for growth: A scenario to recover 'Vigorous Japan'* to be achieved by 2020 in the field of education and Lifelong Learning include:

- 'Increase the number of workers engaging in learning for self-enlightenment up to 70% of full-time employees and 50% of part-time employees
- 50% of Japanese participate in the 'New Public' Initiative'.

The 'New Public' Initiative includes volunteerism and other forms of civic engagement and participative democracy (Sawano, 2011).

China's lifelong learning theory and policy also emphasises social, civic and personal development. Rather than using credentials as the primary measure of educational progress and value, there is evidence that the Chinese state is

seeking to militate against the stress employers place on credentials over broader qualities and demonstrated ability (Meng, 2007, p. 492). Summarising the dominant thinking around lifelong learning in China, Meng suggests the following aims:

- People are no longer study or money-making machines, but rather are free and complete individuals who have achieved a true return to human nature.
- Study is no longer difficult, unprofitable, and utilitarian, but rather emerges from the heart and is inherently pleasing.
- Work is no longer only for making a living, but rather is enjoyable and challenging.
- Life is sweet, beautiful and rich (2007, p. 494).

New Zealand has a long-standing humanistic approach to adult education focussed on non-formal learning for democracy, citizenship and personal development. The 1980s and 1990s saw an increased emphasis in public policy on learning for business and economic imperatives and on standardised assessment. However, these reforms generated much popular criticism, including from 'increasingly articulate and politically effective Maori and Pacific Islander communities' (Casey, 2007, p 395). Though not as strong as the period leading up to the 1980s, there is still an active Adult and Community Education sector in New Zealand providing 'active learning across the life course, amongst diverse New Zealanders for diverse interests' (Casey, 2007, p 401).



Examples of community-based informal and non-formal learning

While there is no overarching policy direction around learning for personal, civic and social purposes in Australia, this doesn't mean that it is completely without government support. There are a number of examples of Australian governments providing support to community-based organisations, which enables them to provide an informal learning environment for adults or to provide non-formal courses and classes on a low fee basis.

Neighbourhood houses

Most Australian state jurisdictions provide funding support for the operation of community and neighbourhood houses. A 2011 survey of 443 of the nation's approximately 1,000 neighbourhood houses found that around a quarter offered formal VET programs, but much more common activities were non-formal courses and classes and informal learning activities, the majority of which, had a civic, social or personal development outcome. Table 1 indicates the range of non-formal and informal adult learning activities occurring in the surveyed houses and percentage of houses offering them (Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association, 2011).



| Informal learning activities | % |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| Public computer / Internet access | 68 |
| Self help groups | 67 |
| Student work experience | 65 |
| Community garden | 36 |
| Mutual obligation (work for the dole) | 36 |
| Personal counselling | 36 |
| Men's Shed / Community Shed | 25 |
| Non-formal learning activities | % |
| Art and craft | 78 |
| Health and wellbeing courses | 73 |
| Parenting courses | 48 |
| Pre-accredited learning | 48 |

Table 1 Informal and non-formal learning activities through neighbourhood houses (Source: ANHCA, 2011)



Community Colleges, WEAs and other ACE

The Adult and Community Education sector in Australia is made up of organisations coming from different traditions. ACE organisations are diverse in size and focus; however, they all offer community focussed adult learning as part of their core activity. Aside from neighbourhood houses, the sector includes telecentres, ex-Skillshares, supported employment providers, Tasmanian Learning and Information Centres (LINC)s, the CAE in Melbourne, Community Colleges in NSW and Victoria and Workers' Education Associations in SA and NSW.

Informal learning opportunities are part of the culture of ACE organisations, even for those who now offer large amounts of accredited VET. Clemans (2010) research into educational work in ACE has identified this informal educational work as both highly valuable for meeting the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged adults but simultaneously invisible and poorly valued because of its association with notions of caring and domestic labour. She cites the responses of a number of ACE centre staff who talk about interactions in the 'space' of the community provider as precursors to and enablers of participation in formal learning for disadvantaged groups. For example she quotes one ACE staff member as saying:

They won't go from the street to the ACE program. If there is not that bridging space in between, then forget it. So I think in terms of when people are disempowered for a whole range of ways and when people's confidence is down, people need to identify with others in that space or surroundings to say, 'yes, you are welcome here' (Clemans, 2010, p. 161).

Most states and territories (with the exception of the Northern Territory) have ACE policies, statements or strategies. The ACE sector has, arguably, the strongest policy and funding base in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.

Men's Sheds

The Men's Sheds movement is a uniquely Australian phenomenon that began as recently as the mid nineties and has since extended to other countries including Ireland and New Zealand. There are an estimated 1,000 sheds across Australia. Some are extensions of existing community organisations such as neighbourhood houses (see above), community health organisations or seniors organisations. Others are self managed and directed. Most charge an annual fee for membership and include a mix of practical, technical, social and civic learning activities (Golding, 2014).

Australian men learn informally in a range of environments and contexts, most notably the paid workforce. However, Men's Sheds have drawn a lot of attention from Commonwealth policy makers and some state jurisdictions because they have been highly successful in attracting a particular sub-section of the population who are poorly targeted by conventional services, even when in significant need of them (Macdonald, Brown & Gethin, 2009).

The learning that occurs in sheds is of interest to educators and education policy makers because the sub-group of men who attend sheds are often significantly under-represented in, and often resistant to, participation in both formal education and training and non-formal courses and classes.

Sheds have done particularly well where the proportion of men not in paid work is relatively high. This includes post-industrial suburban areas and retirement locations with high proportions of retired men from trade backgrounds; rural and remote men who have moved to larger towns and regional cities; areas hit by crisis and change ... (Golding, 2014, p. 119).



Volunteering

Volunteering provides significant opportunities for Australians to access non-formal learning, in the form of induction and ongoing training, and informal learning through participation in meaningful work in a community, civil, cultural or sporting organisation. The Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet provides grant funding for volunteering and fund Volunteering Australia to provide peak body support. Volunteering is also supported through policy and funding by state and local governments.

Around a third of Australians volunteer each year, and this percentage is higher in rural and regional areas. Of those who volunteer, around one third volunteer at least once a week and another quarter volunteer at least once a month. Volunteers have more connections with others in their community; are more likely to attend community events; are more likely to take on a caring role for others and are more likely to believe that others can be trusted. When asked about their overall life satisfaction, 82 per cent of volunteers reported that they were delighted, pleased or mostly satisfied with their lives, compared to 75 per cent of non-volunteers (ABS, 2011).

A 2011 survey of Australian volunteers found that four out of five volunteers were provided with training in order to do their jobs. This means that volunteering is responsible for approximately 4.8 million Australians accessing training each year (Volunteering Australia, 2011, p, 18). Some of this training will be formal in nature, particularly for technically complex or high-risk volunteer roles such as fire and emergency service workers; however, the vast bulk of volunteer training is non-formal in nature and the act of volunteering itself provides a raft of informal learning opportunities.

Public libraries

Public libraries are perhaps the oldest continuous providers of non-formal and informal learning opportunities for adults in Australia and arguably the most ubiquitous. Public libraries are funded by state and local governments. Almost ten million people or nearly half of the population are library members and many more access libraries without being members. There are an estimated 111 million annual visits to a public library each year, 10 million enquiries and more than 183 million items a year are borrowed (Australian Libraries Information Association, 2011).

As we move into an information age, libraries have moved in focus from being primarily providers of access to written texts, to facilitators of learning. The work of public libraries on intergenerational learning programs, and on digital and information literacy has strong and often under-estimated impacts on the broader community, particularly in disadvantaged communities. The combination of a welcoming environment, professional staff, free or low cost Internet access and a focus on the joy of reading, provide the ingredients for adult literacy development. 'The public library as education provider is often seen as an honest broker – in marketing terms its brand is strong – and this can and should be exploited' (O'Beirne, 2012, p. 205).

University of the Third Age

The University of the Third Age has a strong and growing presence in Australia. The U3A movement was started in France and then developed in the UK before arriving in Australia in 1984. Today there are an estimated 250 U3A groups in Australia and over 85,000 members.

U3As are community-based self directed and self-funded clubs designed to provide affordable learning opportunities to people in the 'third age'. Australian U3As follow the British model, as developed by Cambridge University Social Historian, Dr Peter Laslett. While each U3A is different, most adhere to the principles outlined by Dr Laslett, in his statement – *The University of the Third Age in Cambridge: Objects, principles and institutional form* which included the following:

- Those who learn shall teach and those who teach shall learn, and there shall be no distinction between the two.
- There shall be no qualifications for membership, and no awards, degrees or diplomas shall be given.
- The emphasis shall be on learning for the love of it, and shall include an emphasis on the values of making things and improving skills of all kinds.
- There shall be no payment to any person (member or non-member) for teaching or providing a service to members except in the case of reimbursement for such expenses as travel, photocopying, etc.
- The curriculum of a U3A shall be determined by the needs/preferences of members and according to the resources available to it.

Laslett advised against seeking or receiving government funding support, because he saw it as undermining the independence of the movement, and to a significant extent, U3As in Australia have remained self funded. However some statewide networks have been supported by state governments for specific purposes such as advertising, recruitment and insurance (Lamb & Browne, 2014).

The policy bias against community-based non-formal learning

The philosophical underpinning of education and training policy in Australia is Human Capital Theory born out of neo-classical economics. Human Capital Theory views investment in education as a rational behaviour that has a direct line to particular benefits; increased wages for the individual, improved productivity for the nation. Using this approach, government investment needs to be justified on the grounds of its 'return on investment' in relation to workforce participation and productivity. Measurability and transparency become essential to any argument for government support.

Within this context, qualifications, and units of competency due to their atomised nature, have emerged as a de facto means of determining progress in education. Using the achievement of formal qualifications or units as a measure, a direct line is then drawn between completion and employment participation to determine the value of the training. The impact of particular qualifications on wages is also used to justify the balance of public versus private share of costs with individuals being asked to pay for a higher proportion of the cost of qualifications that return higher wages.

A number of writers have pointed out the flaws of Human Capital Theory as the sole means of determining the value of education. For example, feminist educators point out that the relationship between 'learning' and 'earning' is not nearly so direct for women, who are more successful educationally, but who don't achieve the same economic rewards as their male counterparts with equivalent qualifications (Blackmore, 1992) and who, in some instances, have a negative return on investment from training (Pocock, Skinner, McMahon & Pritchard, 2011). Similar patterns have also been identified for Indigenous Australians, non-Australian born immigrants and new graduates (Clemans et al., 2013).

Other researchers have criticised Human Capital Theory for ignoring basic principles of supply and demand. For example Clemans et al., (2013) point out that the Northern Territory and Western Australia both have 'low levels of educational achievement but, nevertheless, have high levels of employment outcomes due to the nature of industry demand' with other regions of Australia showing the opposite pattern (p. 16). In a related point, others identify that qualifications are largely symbolic and are often used to screen potential applicants on socio-economic and cultural grounds, rather than as a genuine reflection of skills (Blackmore, 1992; Marginson, 1993).

Despite these limitations, in a world of increased demand for learning across the lifespan, and ever-greater demands for public service accountability for expenditure, the human capital narrative has become so compelling that it is hard for approaches whose research evidence comes from another theoretical base to gain traction.

While there are undoubtedly links between higher qualifications, employment and wages, not all learning pathways are direct and the human capital narrative simply can't account for the complexity of the learning journey for Indigenous Australians and for other socially and economically marginalised Australians. Nor does it offer a means of accounting for the many economic and social benefits that flow from learning other than employment and higher wages, including good health, wellbeing, social trust, and strong civil and social organisations.

The life–work binary

The human capital narrative has also led to arbitrary distinctions between skills acquired for work, which attract government support, and skills acquired for personal interest, which generally don't. Human experience is, of course, not atomised in this way. For example, numeracy skills acquired to complete a workplace task are likely to be similar to numeracy skills developed for a personal interest, such as paying off a loan or for civic purposes, such as maintaining the financial records for a local sporting club. The 2006 ACE longitudinal study of Victorian learners, highlights this disconnect between vocational intent and vocational outcome. The study found that while 68 per cent of those who were unemployed in 2006 reported that their study had taught them skills to help them get a job, when asked what motivated their study, the highest responses were to 'improve well being and confidence' (93% agreement) and to 'meet new people and share a learning activity' (89% agreement), and to 'develop new interest or activity' (82% agreement) (Walstab et al., 2006).

The work–life binary also assumes that personal skills such as the ability to manage one's own health and wellbeing or to cope with change, have no bearing at all on workforce participation and productivity. This view, which permeates public VET policy making, sits in contradiction to research on the learning needs of the modern workforce which suggests that 'management of self' is essential to productivity in a globalised knowledge-based economy (Kalantzis & Harvey, 2002). Nonetheless, the human capital narrative and the use of qualifications as units of measurement has led to personal development or life skills learning falling on the 'private benefit' side of the ledger and learning for work, existing on the 'public benefit' side of the ledger.

As identified above, a significant body of qualitative and longitudinal research exists about the relationship between non-formal community-based learning and workforce participation, particularly for disadvantaged groups (McGivney, 1999; Birch et al., 2003; Walstab et al., 2006; Beddie & Halliday-Wynes 2009). An emerging body of research is also showing strong links between non-formal learning and health and wellbeing outcomes, (Aldridge, 2009; Putnam, 2007; Fujiwara, 2012) with obvious productivity implications and the potential to impact growing health budgets. However, many policy makers still appear to remain uncomfortable with the locally determined, diverse and person centred nature of community-based non-formal learning, even for groups such as Indigenous Australians, and adults who live in pockets of intergenerational poverty and low skills, for whom the outcomes from formal approaches are often very poor.

The policy case for community-based non-formal and informal learning

If policy makers are willing to look beyond human capital theory to other ways of measuring outcomes and recognising value, then a very strong case can be made for government support of non-formal courses and informal learning environments.

Cost effectiveness

Community-based non-formal learning is cost effective. As Delors envisaged, government's role in relation to non-formal and informal community learning is as an *enabler* rather than an *owner or provider*. Adult Community Education organisations due to their high levels of volunteers, peer and co-learning models and history of gathering fee for service income provide a leveraged model, which limits the financial impost on government.

Access and equity

Despite its obvious benefits for disadvantaged learners, the vast majority of non-formal adult learning is offered on a fee for service basis or through the workplace in the form of professional development. As a result it is more likely to be accessed by:

- full time workers over part time workers and the unemployed,
- adults with higher level qualifications over those with lower level qualifications,
- those in large companies over those in small and medium enterprises.

Non-formal personal interest learning is also more than twice as likely to be accessed by people living in areas of relatively high socio-economic status than people in areas of disadvantage (ABS, 2013b).

In other words, those who need access to non-formal learning the most, are the least likely to have access to it, either because they are not in a position to pay for it or they are not employed in the type of job or organisation that provides ongoing professional development.

Non-formal community-based learning provides strong outcomes for disadvantaged groups; however, there are barriers to access and government policy and financial support is needed to remove these. Where governments are able to build on the base of capability of the community sector, they are able to leverage strong participation for disadvantaged groups. For example, the longitudinal report of Victorian pre-accredited training found that 'pre-accredited courses draw disproportionately on groups who are economically vulnerable' (Teese, 2012, p. 10), including adults with incomplete schooling, adults with a permanent disability and the unemployed (Teese, 2012).

Adult literacy development

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

The *National Foundation Skills Strategy* (2011) identifies the role played by non-formal 'education and training' in building confidence in learning and in providing a pathway into pre-vocational training,

education or employment and makes the commitment that 'Australian governments will continue to support purpose-built community-based approaches to delivery through the ACE sector' (p. 16). However, most of the goals of the strategy (and therefore, the related funding) are based around formal competency-based training in the VET system, aimed at 15–64 year olds who are already in the labour market. The only strategy around ACE commits to 'initiatives to strengthen foundation skills *pathways between* the ACE, VET and higher education sectors and workplaces' (p. 23) rather than to enhancing or growing the sector itself. ACE is therefore not recognised as a generator of literacy skills, but as a first point on a journey to the real business of centrally determined accredited Foundation Skills training.

The research into adult literacy development cited above indicates that the most effective learning is applied in context and not centrally proscribed. Community-based informal and non-formal learning provides this highly effective, locally contextualised learning. This is put succinctly by Shore:

Like it or not, uses of literacy and numeracy cannot be generalised across cultures, nor taught as isolated technical skills (even though they can be taught as distinctive routines or procedures). Meanings depend upon the social context in which they are embedded (Shore, 2010).

The above opens up questions about the best approaches to building literacy across an entire population and the efficacy of putting so much public resource into one aspect of learning, that is formal, competency-based training. As Tusting states:

As soon as one begins to think in these terms, it becomes clear that the vast majority of learning that people engage in occurs outside formal institutions ... this raises questions about the current focus of most education research and funding on formally accredited provision (Tusting, 2003, p. 7).

While it is difficult to extrapolate across countries and cultures, it is worth noting that those countries with the highest literacy levels, notably the northern European countries, all have strong traditions of publicly funded community-based, non-formal lifelong learning.

The ageing population

Australia's population is ageing and there is an increasing demand from government and individuals themselves to stay in the workplace longer and to remain active and independent in retirement. These goals will require a renewed commitment to lifelong learning in all of its forms.

Qualifications play a particular role in assisting the young to gain a foothold in the workplace and establish a career; however, older workers demand different learning opportunities and environments. From age 55 onwards, participation in formal study drops off significantly. While 37 per cent of the 15–54 age group are engaged in formal study (either full time or part time) this drops to only 5 per cent of the 55–64 age group (ABS, 2013b). A number of states have recently restricted access to publicly funded VET for 'career shifting' providing a further disincentive to participation in formal learning for this group.

A number of researchers have identified that older people are often more interested in acquiring skills than qualifications (see Schuller, 2009). When studying in the formal VET system they demonstrate a preference for 'subject only' or mixed field programs (Anlezark, 2002) and they are more likely to nominate broader goals including self-development as a reason for studying.

As people age, there is a gradual shift away from financial gain and employment motivation (including studying as a job requirement, and studying to get a job, to increase earnings or to try for a better career), and an increased focus on study for personal interest reasons (Anlezark, 2002, p. 12).

The false binary between 'learning for work' and 'learning for life' becomes even less helpful for older adults who are seeking to build on an existing knowledge base to make transitions between full time and part time work, and into work that is more senior friendly.

The 55–64 year old group are now being asked to spend between 5 and 15 additional years in the paid workforce. Once retired, they are being asked to contribute to productivity through care of grandchildren and voluntary work. They also need to manage their health and wellbeing to achieve the above and reduce their dependence on health services. These demands are being made in an environment where their access to formal education is already very low, costs are increasing and funding for career shifting is being reduced.

The *Turning grey into gold* report produced by the ‘Inquiry into the economic contribution of senior Australians’ suggests that lifelong learning in the community should be at the heart of the Australian Government’s response to an ageing population. Recommendation 20 reads: ‘The federal, state, territory and local governments invest in the expansion of community-based education for older people’. There are also recommendations around digital access and volunteering which sit neatly within the role of ACE organisations. The report suggests that community-based education leads to more innovative and adaptable workers and more satisfying personal lives (Department of Treasury and Finance, 2011, p. 29).

Social capital, health and wellbeing

Community-based non-formal and informal learning build social capital. A 2012 UK study found that the greatest dollar value of adult education programs was found in ‘better social relationships’ (57%) while a further 13 per cent of the dollar value could be attributed to ‘improvements in health’. The same survey found that 19 per cent related to ‘greater likelihood of finding/staying in a job’ and 11 per cent to ‘a greater likelihood that people will volunteer on a regular basis’ (Fujiwara, 2012).

Community-based learning activities provide what sociologist Robert Putnam calls ‘bridging social capital’. Putnam makes a distinction between ‘bonding social capital’; that is, social interaction within families, social and cultural groups, and ‘bridging social capital’; that is, social interaction with people who are socially, culturally and economically unlike you (Putnam, 2007). In an increasingly culturally diverse, globalised economy and society, bridging social capital is important in order to have social stability, support networks and trust in public institutions.

There is strong research evidence to support the contention that participation in learning reduces social isolation therefore leading to better health. Social isolation has been shown repeatedly to predict mortality and serious morbidity, with the size of the risk of social isolation compared by some researchers with that of cigarette smoking (House, 2001).

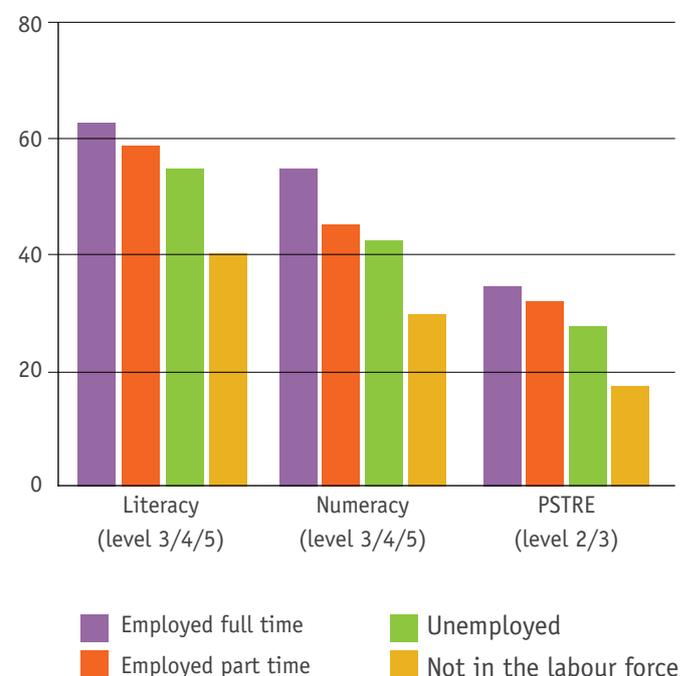
The 2008 Foresight Report from the UK found that learning is one of five ways to wellbeing. Hammond and Feinstein (2006) found that participation in adult learning has positive effects in terms of smoking cessation, taking exercise and improvements in self-rated health and wellbeing. Learning activities for older people in care homes have been found to increase quality of life, as well as reduce health and social care costs (Aldridge, 2009).

Adults outside the labour market

The narrowness of the human capital narrative has led to an almost exclusive focus within Australian education and training policy on those already in the labour market. Those Australians who are not working and not looking for work are either in ill health, pre-occupied with caring responsibilities, permanently retired or have given up all hope of being accepted into the labour market. There is currently no national policy or strategy and only limited, ad hoc Commonwealth education programs available for the millions of Australian adults who are not in the labour market, despite this group having the lowest literacy skills (see figure 1). For this group, vocational education and training is a poor fit because they have no short-term goal to re-enter the workforce to motivate their learning.

Proportion at each skill level, literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology rich environments, by labour force status: 2011–12

Figure 1



Source: ABS 4228.0 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011-12

These Australians cannot simply be left behind. Aside from ethical considerations, there are three significant economic imperatives to invest in learning opportunities for adults with low literacy skills who are not in the labour market.

Firstly, the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency has recommended a national goal of 69 per cent workforce participation in order to facilitate continued economic growth (AWPA, 2013, p. 174) which is four per cent higher than the current level of approximately 65 per cent (ABS, 2013c). Further, that this goal cannot be met through immigration or through matching the skills of the unemployed with those required by employers alone. Those outside the labour market will need to be actively included (AWPA, 2013, p. 71).

Secondly, literacy skills are intergenerational. Parents and grandparent's experiences of and achievement in education have a profound effect on their children's success.

Thirdly, literacy (including digital literacy) serves a social and civic purpose by contributing to greater social cohesion and inclusion. Increased literacy reduces costs in the health, welfare and criminal justice systems and reduces the costs of delivering government services.

Digital literacies

The proliferation of Internet-based new technologies and the speed at which they change has made ongoing informal and non-formal learning a necessity. For those employed in the knowledge economy much of this learning will occur informally on the job. However, those outside the workforce and the many Australians in low skill jobs will need to be supported to remain on the right side of the 'digital divide'.

While there has been significant growth in Internet use amongst all groups of Australians, in 2010 the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that approximately 21 per cent of Australians did not use the Internet. This figure increases to 63 per cent for people aged over 65 (ABS, 2010).

There is a strong and growing correspondence between social inclusion and digital literacy. Those without basic computer and Internet skills are not only increasingly vulnerable in the labour market, they are also in danger of social isolation as social networks and communication move online (Chesters, Ryan & Sinning, 2013). The current Australian Government's policy, leading up to the last election (2013) was to designate the Internet as the default way that government will interact with users, other than for defined exceptions. This goal will need to be accompanied by investment in community-based non-formal learning in order for substantial groups of the Australian population to not be left behind.



Conclusion

Adult Learning Australia has an overarching policy of lifelong and lifewide learning that is more relevant in the 2014 policy environment than it has ever been. We conclude that the myriad of community-based informal learning environments and non-formal courses and classes across Australia are a highly effective means of building the general literacy, digital literacy, and the health and wellbeing of the nation, as well as keeping people in work and businesses competitive. They are essential tools of democracy and social inclusion, and will become increasingly so as the Australian population ages. They will become more important to the economy as it comes under increasing international pressure and the population becomes more culturally diverse with migration.

As Delors identified, the complex social, economic and technological challenges of the 21st Century cannot be met by 20th Century institutions alone. Qualifications and units of competence delivered through the formal VET and higher education sector are simply one tool for identifying educational value and success and the correlation is particularly weak for disadvantaged groups, including the one half of adults not in the paid workforce. It should also be noted, that

recent attempts at vocational education and training 'reform' across the country have resulted in higher participant fees and restricted access for subsequent qualifications and training, than previously. Even if Karmel's 2004 suggestion that the low cost, flexible and easily accessible VET system was an acceptable substitute for a broader lifelong learning approach were true at the time, the claim is coming under increasing strain a decade later.

The economic and social case for non-formal and informal learning responses at the community level, where people work and live is very strong, particularly for individuals and communities that have been poorly served thus far by the formal school, VET and higher education systems. It is unfair and economically counterproductive to ignore important groups in the community who are systemically and intergenerationally unable to access or maximise the benefits of formal education. These groups arguably include many Indigenous Australians, migrants, senior Australians, people who are unwell or with a disability, as well as people in communities characterised by multiple disadvantage and low educational attainment.

Recommendations

A great deal of informal and non-formal learning occurs in environments and amongst people who need little support from government. However, for all other Australians, ALA recommends that Australian governments should intervene in the following ways:

1. That a new Ministerial Declaration on ACE be developed by all Australian governments to replace the 2008 Declaration and that it outline the role of community-based non-formal and informal learning.
2. That those states and territories without a current comprehensive policy statement or action plan on Adult and Community Education develop one.
3. That the Foundation Skills Strategy be expanded to include intergenerational literacy programs in all school communities where NAPLAN results show persistent low scores in literacy and numeracy.
4. That the Commonwealth fund community learning plans for selected postcode areas that have high proportions of adults with low educational attainment. The plans would link up the learning opportunities that occur in and through voluntary and community-based organisations and across government areas.
5. That comprehensive, whole of government strategies for building on the strengths of the ageing population be developed that include community-based non-formal and informal learning.
6. That Australian governments work cooperatively to develop a Digital Literacy Strategy that ensures that no Australian is left on the wrong side of the digital divide due to lack of access to effective informal and non-formal learning.

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