



**Adult Learning Australia**  
*Lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians*

# **National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy**

## **Submission**

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Adult Learning Australia is the national peak body for adult and community education in Australia. Our mission is for equitable access to lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians.

By “lifelong” we mean learning across the lifespan including into the senior years. By “lifewide” we mean learning that assists adults to gain and keep employment, participate as citizens in our democracy, manage homes and families and manage their health and wellbeing including ageing positively.

Our members consist of community-based providers of adult education including neighbourhood houses, community colleges, community learning centres, literacy networks and individuals who share our mission.

# Executive Summary

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is the national not for profit national peak body for adult and community education (ACE) in Australia and has been operating for more than 59 years. Our mission is for lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians.

ACE plays a particular role in regional and rural Australia in many small towns and places as it is often the only 'on the ground' provider of adult literacy, informal education services and post compulsory education in the locality.

ACE is an undervalued community asset which, with increased profile and coherent policy and funding approaches, could further support the VET systems' performance in relation to improving access, participation and outcomes for people who are living in regional and remote areas of Australia.

ACE offers pathways into learning and work and must be strengthened and supported to get more people living in RRR areas into higher education and vocational training.

Mapping education and learning infrastructure and programs in the RRR areas could help identify gaps and better inform planning and policy.

Innovative and sustainable models that invite partnerships across sectors should be encouraged with incentives.

Subsidies for accommodation, travel home, computers and internet could lessen the financial burden on students.

Learner support might include study groups, peer support or mentors to help mitigate social isolation.

Access to continuous professional development and support for educators will help them better understand the needs of RRR students.

Working in collaboration with indigenous services in RRR areas would help enable culturally appropriate sensitivities with ATSI learners.

Funding Pilots or Start Ups by young students and graduates in RRR locations through business incubators or social enterprises might encourage new approaches.

The learning communities model could be modified and adopted as a whole of community approach in RRR areas.

# Key Questions from the Framing Paper

The Regional Education Expert Advisory Group is seeking responses to the following key questions. Specifically, we are looking for practical steps to overcome the five challenges facing students from RRR backgrounds.

## **Challenge A: There are fewer study options available in RRR areas**

1. What opportunities exist to expand options for further study in RRR areas?
2. What potential is there for universities, vocational training providers and other service providers to better work together in RRR areas, including opportunities to expand service offerings and better support articulation between VET and higher education?

## **Challenge B: Relocating RRR students face significant financial, emotional and social challenges**

3. What financial supports work best for students from RRR backgrounds, including those who choose to relocate?
4. What forms of support might be useful in helping students from RRR backgrounds to continue with their tertiary study?
5. How can universities assist RRR students to feel like they belong on their campus?

## **Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education**

6. What actions would help to raise aspirations and support informed career choices for students from RRR backgrounds?

## **Challenge D: RRR often experience multiple forms of disadvantage**

7. What practical steps can be taken to support RRR students who experience multiple forms of disadvantage?
8. How can we better support Indigenous people from RRR areas to access and succeed in tertiary education?

## **Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas**

9. How can tertiary education providers further stimulate economic growth in RRR areas?
10. What actions would further strengthen and increase the attractiveness of regional universities?
11. What policies would attract more metropolitan and international students to study at RRR areas, including regional universities and campuses?

## **Challenge F: Implementing and monitoring a national strategy**

12. Would there be value in establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner to oversee the Strategy and, if so, what should their role be?

13. How should success be measured? What goals and targets, including for tertiary education attainment, should be considered both at a national and individual community level?

## About ALA

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is the national peak body for adult and community education (ACE) and has been operating for 59 years. It is a not-for-profit entity with both organisational and individual members in all states and territories across urban, regional, rural and remote communities, who reflect the diversity of adult and community education.

Our mission is lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians. The learner is the central focus of our attention. We believe that learning occurs through informal and non-formal means, as well as through the formal education and training systems.

## About ACE

Adult and community education (ACE) is a discrete fourth sector of education in Australia that is not for profit and community based. Research shows that ACE providers offer a platform for disengaged and/or disadvantaged adults to:

- Transition back into learning
- Develop basic skills for work
- Improve language, literacy and numeracy
- Pathway into formal learning programs
- Develop social connections and participate in community.

According to the ALA [ACE Environmental SCAN update, 2017](#), there are at least 2,500 ACE providers in Australia, all of which provide personal enrichment learning. ALA records suggest that around half of these are in RRR areas.

Adult and Community Education (ACE) comprises Neighbourhood and Community Houses, Community Learning and Resource Centres, U3As, Community Colleges, Men's Sheds, Aboriginal Community Controlled Education Providers, Worker Education Centres, and Adult and Further Education programs in many TAFEs and community organisations who offer learning opportunities to adults.

Many ACE providers offer adult basic education in language, literacy, numeracy, or other foundation skills and some provide accredited training or partner with regional

training organisations. These programs offer pathways into work or further vocational learning.

According to the National Centre for Education Research (NCVER), VET Student Outcomes survey undertaken in 2018, around 9% of all adults participating in government-funded accredited adult basic education programs do so at ACE Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).

### **ACE in RRR Australia**

ACE plays a particular role in regional and rural Australia in many small towns and places as it is often the only 'on the ground' provider of adult literacy, informal education services and post compulsory education in the locality. Students from outer regional, remote and very remote regions are represented more in ACE VET providers (19%) compared to all other VET providers (14%) according to the [ALA ACE Environmental Scan](#) (p.5).

Not-for-profit ACE organisations are significant contributors to the economies of regional and rural communities. They exist in towns with smaller populations that can't sustain a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or university campus with a wide scope of delivery and where the education market is too small to attract private for-profit operators. They supplement the work of a TAFE or university in other communities.

Many ACE organisations also offer adult basic education in language, literacy, numeracy, digital literacy and foundation skills (both accredited and non-accredited). These programs offer pathways into work or further vocational learning. Around 9% of all adults participating in government-funded accredited adult basic education programs do so at ACE Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).

Educational disadvantage in RRR Australia is significant and growing. Adult education is required not just for vocational and further purposes, but also to allow participants to complete foundation level reading, writing, mathematics and general education.

ACE is an undervalued community asset which, with increased profile and coherent policy and funding approaches, could further support the VET systems' performance in relation to improving access, participation and outcomes for people who are living in regional and remote areas of Australia.

ACE providers are often multi-functional, operating as local community connectors and learning activity hubs that bridge and bond social and cultural capital. To enable ACE to get more people living in RRR areas into higher education and vocational training, and to enable their success, the ACE sector must be supported and strengthened.

The important role that ACE providers play as capacity builders in learning, literacy and skill development and in providing pathways to higher education and VET in RRR areas must be recognised in the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy.

ACE is playing an important role in educating many adult Australians in RRR areas; particularly people who are disadvantaged in learning but there is more primary research required to determine the full impacts of ACE. Support from governments is required to sustain and grow the ACE effort in education to enable them to be an effective part of the RRR solution.

## Response to Questions

The suggestions below respond to the questions identified in the Framing Paper. The responses have been collected from ALA members living and working in RRR locations across Australia. The breadth and depth of our collective response is limited by the incredibly brief timelines for submissions provided by the Department of Education.

In 2013, ALA released a report on [The Role of Adult and Community Education in Regional and Rural Australia](#). ALA could make a more comprehensive response if presented with a longer timeframe and/or respond to specific issues, if given the opportunity.

### **Challenge A: There are fewer study options available in RRR areas**

#### ***What opportunities exist to expand options for further study in RRR areas?***

ACE organisations have a strong presence in rural and regional communities and tend to offer a broad range of programs and services alone or in partnership with other agencies. They provide access to post compulsory education and lifelong learning. Services commonly include childcare, social support, information hub, learning and education programs, art and crafts, job services, emergency relief and community interest groups. Some operate social enterprises such as cafes, catering,

recycled clothing stores, garden maintenance, cleaning and repairs etc.

ACE programs build community capacity, enhance social cohesion and promote health and wellbeing. They foster skill development and provide vocationally focused education and training programs and pathways. ACE enables inclusive learning by recognising that there is a broad spectrum of learners with individual needs and preferences. ACE learning programs are highly focused and offered in a friendly, flexible and supportive environment.

There is potential to build on the ACE sector to be the first point of contact, provide face-to-face support, improve access, participation and outcomes for people who are disadvantaged, or who come from a low skill base and want to undertake further study. For example:

- Establishing pathways into learning could include the formation of study groups and face-to-face gatherings as a starting point, which can then support students to continue study or re-enter study through higher education and VET programs and activities.
- Some workplaces and organisations have the capacity to support RRR students to do training on the job. However, in this scenario workplaces and organisations may need support to network with relevant universities, RTOs and ACE providers, and also receive additional funding to this end.
- Bridging the gap as VET becomes more limited as TAFEs streamline – with an increase in visiting teachers/trainers to deliver on specific dates, when ongoing delivery is not viable but needed.

***What potential is there for universities, vocational training providers and other service providers to better work together in RRR areas, including opportunities to expand service offerings and better support articulation between VET and higher education?***

Undertaking a mapping exercise of the learning infrastructure and programs in the RRR areas will help identify gaps and inform better planning and policy development.

Encouraging innovative and sustainable models that invite partnerships and sharing across the sector can also provide beneficial results. For example:

- By appointing regionally dispersed individual adult educators; ACE providers, universities and TAFEs, could provide much needed face-to-face support, plus combine this with on-line tutoring
- Regular meetings could be held over funded regional weekend intensives, to provide stronger mutual learning among RRR students
- In the context of a remote indigenous community, ACE providers would do well to familiarise themselves with, and develop relationships with local workplaces and organisations to identify relevant VET and higher education courses which could support the existing local economy
- Sharing resources and infrastructure amongst providers and with other services in the community sector e.g. TAFE institutes have considerable assets that are consistently underutilized but could be used by the community sector to provide programs.

### **Challenge B: Relocating RRR students face significant financial, emotional and social challenges**

#### ***What financial supports work best for students from RRR backgrounds, including those who choose to relocate?***

Moving home and relocating to undertake studies can be one of the most stressful life events, particularly if a person is moving from a remote area to a regional centre where they have little or no family or contacts. Not only can it be financially costly but it can also impact on a person's health and wellbeing and contribute to a sense of loneliness and social isolation. Some suggestions include:

- Subsidies for accommodation, travel home, computers and internet expenses
- Financing weekend gatherings among RRR study groups
- Providing links to study buddies, peer support or mentors.

#### ***What forms of support might be useful in helping students from RRR backgrounds to continue with their tertiary study?***

Maintaining learner interest in continuing studies requires learner support. Studying online in particular can be very isolating and difficult. Some possible responses include:

- Funding on-line tutors who can have facetime/skype sessions with RRR students
- Funding social and emotional wellbeing programs and counselling for life challenges that contribute to drop out situations for students
- Providing professional development for VET and education practitioners so that they better understand the need of RRR students
- Offering one-on-one tutoring or two-on-one tutoring e.g. [ITAS](#) and also group tutoring has functioned effectively to support Indigenous students undertaking VET certificates in Education Support. Furthermore, a visiting lecturer visiting to facilitate blocks of students has functioned effectively – the lecturer has been able to build relationships and trust with students, and mentorship and motivation to students as they work through their study
- Offering mobile learner support staff
- Providing learners with opportunities for peer support and mentoring and subsidies for accommodation, travel and internet/computers
- Ensuring good technology access at low or no cost. It may also include partnerships with councils, libraries and ACE venues that can provide free access to wifi and or computers.

***How can universities assist RRR students to feel like they belong on their campus?***

If you feel like you don't belong anywhere, that you just don't fit in with the people around you, it can be isolating and emotionally difficult.

- RRR students may find it challenging to travel alone, and may want to travel with family or with a partner. In particular, ATSI community members may face a range of challenges if they are off 'country'
- Supporting RRR students to find appropriate accommodation may be needed. Student support services may provide assistance but identifying other nearby resources for alternative social contact includes local libraries or ACE centres and joining local community groups

- Provide incentives, support and training for educators to improve their local knowledge about teaching and learning applications for RRR locations
- Investigate possible country city exchange programs
- Develop relationships with providers of social wellbeing programs including ACE and community health to establish access and support
- Increasing the connectedness to and ownership of schools, education and learning in RRR communities should form a central approach in a response strategy
- Ensure emphasis on both soft and hard skills for both students and educators.

### **Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education**

#### ***What actions would help to raise aspirations and support informed career choices for students from RRR backgrounds?***

It is critical to provide information and help students navigate their way through the system of different types of providers so they can identify the right course and institution for them.

- More opportunities to visit cities and experience vocations that they may otherwise never be aware of or it could include some sort of student exchange program
- More people travelling to RRR centres to share their worlds and inspire young people to start investigating other vocations
- Higher profile for ACE in VET as a meaningful alternative to University, rather than a second choice
- Opportunities to self identify strengths and potential and to build self knowledge and informed decision making so you can do your best and make your unique contribution
- Stronger (more) partnerships with articulated pathways between ACE, VET and Universities would streamline and value add for students and providers

- Many new graduates are not sure of the kind of job they are seeking and are settling for underemployment or casual work. Jobs might be mismatched to their skill levels, or they may have limited knowledge of the existing job market or lack confidence in their abilities.

#### **Challenge D: RRR often experience multiple forms of disadvantage**

##### ***What practical steps can be taken to support RRR students who experience multiple forms of disadvantage?***

Through education, we want to see students achieve significant academic growth; experience increased access to opportunities; develop positive attitudes about themselves and their learning; and develop aspirations and interests that propel them forward. Combined, these factors support students to build a future of their choosing.

Currently, not every student is receiving the educational opportunities that they need to reach their potential. Of particular concern is the inequity between educational outcomes of students from different backgrounds and locations. Some practical steps to address multiple forms of disadvantage include:

- Local and regionally networked peer support, buddy system and/or mentoring programs
- Funding to get help with particular challenges, to be decided by a regional discretionary support group (such as the Hastings Education Fund does on the Mid North Coast of NSW; and the Miriam Rose Foundation does in Daly River)
- Funding and resources to allow friends and family to visit more often and vice versa
- Allocate appropriate support and resources for bridging the digital divide in RRR to enable the active participation of adult learners
- Fee free for all foundation skills courses that are a critical (mostly unrecognised) prerequisite to learning at the minimum level required by Government i.e. Cert III.

##### ***How can we better support Indigenous people from RRR areas to access and succeed in tertiary education?***

Support for Indigenous people from RRR areas has to be meaningful and provide genuine benefits. For example:

- Working in collaboration with indigenous services in RRR areas to ensure culturally appropriate sensitivities with ATSI learners. Make education programs - Aboriginal pedagogy informed the 'Blackfella' way
- Promoting studies and interest in valuing art, culture and country as much as academic studies
- Removing any barriers i.e. costs (child care, transport, housing), increasing Austudy and Abstudy, ensuring that learner support is available
- Closer consultation and involvement between ATSI and the ACE sector as a learning pathway; offering basic foundation skills and facilitating opportunities for family learning and literacy.

#### **Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas**

***How can tertiary education providers further stimulate economic growth in RRR areas?***

Community VET providers support the workforce development needs of local business and contribute to the productivity agenda. However, more needs to be done to stimulate economic growth in RRR areas. Encouraging the creation of relationships with local workplaces and organisations to identify relevant VET and higher education courses could support the existing local economy and contribute to better outcomes.

Higher education can assist by working collaboratively with community and local business in regards to:

- Funding proper face to face staff to teach in those locations and not offer all education on-line
- Providing students with accessible support and services in place, just as they do for overseas students
- Funding more work experience placements and proper support

- Funding Pilots or Start Ups by young students and graduates in RRR locations through business incubators and encouraging them to be patient investors and to try new approaches
- Investing in or partnering with social enterprises to provide opportunities for work, with ethical returns reinvested into the community
- Investment in industry development across RRR areas is needed if we want to turn this around.

***What actions would further strengthen and increase the attractiveness of regional universities?***

Developing and embracing a learning culture in RRR regions beyond the university campus and into the towns and communities can provide a wider supportive environment and further strengthen the attractiveness of the area.

- The [Footscray University Town](#) model could be modified to suit RRR locations
- [The Learning city model](#) could be considered and embraced
- Less casualised staff and more permanent teaching staff who have or build connections in RRR locations would provide a more resilient and consistent environment
- More direct support for students in these locations, so they feel they can belong to a real community of connection.

***What policies would attract more metropolitan and international students to study at RRR areas, including regional universities and campuses?***

Metropolitan and international students can help diversify RRR communities and enrich cultural development and social and economic capital.

- More supported Work Placements in RRR, more funded Traineeships, Internships etc. with proper group support
- More formal peer support and mentoring with colleagues in regional networks, forming into Communities of Practice that are properly facilitated to sustain their work.

## **Challenge F: Implementing and monitoring a national strategy**

***Would there be value in establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner to oversee the Strategy and, if so, what should their role be?***

The continuous monitoring of the implementation process will help to ensure that the strategy is kept on course.

- Absolutely, YES, appoint a Commissioner and give the Commissioner the relevant power and resources to undertake sufficient monitoring
- Ensure opportunities for feedback through consultation with the sector and relevant bodies
- Investigate successful strategies and good practice models across RRR, assess future proposals and discern which ones have sustainable prospects; trial them and amend according to outcomes.

***How should success be measured? What goals and targets, including for tertiary education attainment, should be considered both at a national and individual community level?***

Progress and challenges should be measured through various methods and reported. Choosing the right measures must include both quantitative and qualitative data. For example:

- Wellbeing reported by students
- Quality of collaborations and consultations with partners
- Number and type of jobs secured in RRR and new start-up businesses resulting
- Numbers of tenured Teaching (not Research) staff in RRR Unis, TAFEs and ACE providers.