

Victorian Government Royal Commission into Mental Health ALA Submission 2019

Introduction

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Victorian Government Royal Commission into Mental Health. Please find additional comments included below.

Background

The Victorian Government Royal Commission into Mental Health is the first of its kind in Australia.

The Royal Commission has been tasked with providing a comprehensive set of recommendations on how to best support Victorians with mental illness, including Victorians at risk of suicide. It will also play a major role in raising public awareness about mental health as an issue.

About ALA

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is the national peak body for adult and community education (ACE). We are a not-for-profit entity with both organisational and individual members in all states and territories 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.

In 2019, ALA celebrates its 59th anniversary.

Lifelong and Lifewide Learning

Resilient and inclusive communities are nourished by a culture of lifelong learning, which enables them to live more productively in a diverse, multicultural society, enjoy the full benefits of citizenship and solve complex social and economic problems.

Lifelong learning recognises that learning occurs continuously throughout life. It helps people deal with new challenges and respond to ever-changing cultural, social

and economic circumstances by developing their skills, knowledge and capacity to think critically.

Lifewide learning recognises that learning can occur simultaneously in all learning contexts (home, community, workplaces and institutions) and different learning settings (formal, non-formal and informal).

Lifelong and lifewide learning provides a framework that supports people to:

- Reach their potential
- Better anticipate transitions
- Self-manage their health and wellbeing.

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.

There are at least 2,500 ACE providers in Australia, all of which provide personal enrichment learning. Many provide adult basic education in language, literacy, numeracy and other foundation skills.

ACE programs build community capacity, enhance social cohesion and promote health and wellbeing. They foster skill development and provide vocationally focussed 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 focussed and offered in a friendly, flexible and supportive environment.

Survey Questions

Are there any additional themes that should be included in the terms of reference for the Royal Commission into Mental Health?

1. Structural inequalities and the WHO social model of health
2. Lack of literacy, language and numeracy skills and impact on mental health

3. Role of Adult and Community Education.

(http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/).

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions about the Royal Commission into Mental Health?

ALA recognises that mental health is a complex issue and that it can be compounded by drug and alcohol issues, family violence, disabilities, lack of employment and homelessness or insecure and unsafe environments. It can also lead to social alienation and disengagement. Having a safe and secure place to live and access to social support and local community learning centres can significantly contribute to individual wellbeing and provide a touchstone for social connectedness, continuity and opportunity. The role of Adult and Community Education (ACE) in supporting mental health reform must be acknowledged.

ACE and Mental Health - Further Comments

The ACE sector provides a wide range of community learning and social opportunities that complement primary and community mental health services which enable people to stay healthy and active in community life.

Many ACE providers are already engaged with people who have chronic mental health issues. Often their programs or facilities are the main point of social contact for individuals who may be otherwise stigmatised in the wider community. ACE staff and volunteers can provide a familiar, friendly and safe environment, with low cost programs, including access to learning new skills, computer and adult literacy, personal and cultural development, as well as providing pathways to education, training and employment. They can also offer opportunities for people with mental health issues to work as a volunteer in community learning spaces to engage and learn.

ACE providers often work with, or alongside, key health providers to offer specific programs. For example: Recovery College program in NSW; Farnham Street Neighbourhood Learning Centre and McAuley Community Services for Women in Victoria developed the [Marvellous Mental Health program](#).

Community Based Adult Learning, Health and Wellbeing Forum

In October 2016, ALA held a forum in Canberra entitled, 'Community Based Adult Learning, Health and Wellbeing, that explored the role of ACE in supporting equitable and effective mental health (MH) reform and to stimulate debate among ACE sector peaks and our peers in the field of community mental health.

This forum built on the findings of research undertaken by ALA and partners, to produce a report entitled [The Role Of ACE in Supporting Equitable Mental Health Reform](#). The research was based on a literature review and an analysis of case studies that have been particularly effective in terms of social inclusion for people with mental health issues.

Key themes from this research indicated that:

- Many ACE organisations have the skills and expertise to provide low cost programs that support adults with mental health issues to participate in community life and minimise social isolation
- ACE programs can help to reduce the symptoms of some mental health disorders for some participants
- ACE programs can provide pathways to skill development, employment and to mainstream education options for some people with mental health issues
- Strategic partnerships between ACE organisations and community mental health care providers can help to ensure adults with mental health issues are engaged in socially meaningful activities
- Allocating sufficient and appropriate resources and support to adults with mental health issues through ACE is potentially an effective preventative measure
- Community learning partnerships of various kinds are necessary to support people with mental health issues
- Developing ongoing and enduring, rather than one-off project-based, community-learning partnerships is an important sustainability factor.

Recommendations

1	The Royal Commission must identify and respond to the key structural inequalities that reinforce mental illness and ensure an integrated approach using the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) social determinants of health
2	Mental health needs to be included in education policies, as the starting point for the development of such policies
3	Cross-government departmental collaboration must be undertaken in support of mental health and wellbeing in Australia, particularly in the areas of health and education
4	Community learning partnerships must be a key strategy for Australia to become an, ‘inclusive learning society’. Building strong and effective partnerships between community education and community health networks will enable the full benefits of learning to be achieved across a wide range of areas including education and training, health, social services and will support workforce development

5	Preventive measures outlined by policymakers for mental ill health must neatly align with principles of social equity and support for vulnerable groups in our society – principles that are already fully incorporated into ACE practice
6	The significant role of ACE in supporting people with mental health issues must be acknowledged. ACE is often a gateway for learners who need access to foundation skills and who may be disengaged, disadvantaged or facing learning barriers
8	Lack of literacy, language and numeracy skills further compounds mental health issues. The 2011/12 PIAAC survey found that 44% of Australian adults lack the literacy skills that they need for work and to cope with everyday life. People must be supported to successfully navigate the choices available to them to improve their access to high quality mental health and community services
9	Further research is required to explore the role of referral agencies and social prescription in maximising the potential of ACE programs in supporting people with mental health issues
10	ALA and the ACE sector must be included in any future consultations about mental health reform in Victoria.

In Closing

Lifelong and lifewide learning opportunities provide for a range of individual health benefits, improving human, social and economic capital. When someone has a decent place to live, in an area where they can access mental health services and community supports like neighbourhood houses and local learning centres, their chance of staying well and connected is increased. Access to good community infrastructure and programs can enhance people’s stability, make it easier to receive care and treatment and encourage opportunities to be healthy active citizens.

Attachment : [The Role Of ACE in Supporting Equitable Mental Health Reform](#)

Contact

Jenny Macaffer | Chief Executive Officer
 Adult Learning Australia
 45 Moreland St, FOOTSCRAY VIC 3011
P: (03) 9689 8623 | **M:** 0488030073
E: j.macaffer@ala.asn.au