

## WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT

# Adult and community education in Australia



## A LONG HISTORY

The beginning of adult and community education (ACE) can be traced back to the late 19th century. Organisations like Mechanics Institutes and Schools of Art established lending libraries, courses and lectures for ordinary men and women interested in ongoing education at a time when formal education was the right of a privileged few.

Over the next century, as schools, universities and vocational education flourished, adult education continued to offer learning for personal improvement and interest through a growing network of organisations around the country.

## PART OF THE EDUCATIONAL ECOSYSTEM

Today ACE is the fourth sector of education in Australia with approximately 2,500 organisations across the country including:

- Neighbourhood Houses
- Community Learning Centres and Hubs
- Community Colleges and Adult Education Institutions
- Universities of the Third Age (U3A)

Other organisations that offer ACE programs as part of a broader range of activities include:

- Libraries
- Community Sheds
- Indigenous Cooperatives

## ACE IS DISTINCTIVE

ACE offers a diverse range of courses and classes for adults in local communities, including:

**Personal enrichment courses** such as health and wellbeing classes, language or parenting courses, hobby or leisure activities. According to the ABS around 1.1 million Australians undertook these kinds of classes in 2016–2017.

**Adult basic education courses** for people wanting to improve foundation skills such as English language, literacy, numeracy, and basic computing. These can be stand-alone or a stepping stone to more formal qualifications.

**Vocational education and training** has become a feature of ACE over the last two decades as more adults take up retraining as a pathway to further study and work. ACE organisations currently provide around 9% of total VET enrolments in Australia, achieving consistently good outcomes.

ACE is different from formal educational institutions. It offers:

- Small classes in friendly community based settings
- The flexibility to develop courses and classes that meet the needs of the local community
- Staff experienced in working with disadvantaged learners and with diverse student groups
- Learner centred approaches to teaching that aim to engage and motivate adults to continue learning
- An inclusive environment that encourages all adults no matter their age, gender, culture, ability or previous educational experience to take part in learning
- Strong connections with other human services providers in the local community enabling them to accommodate and support students with particular needs.

## CHANGING PROFILE OF ACE

From its beginnings providing education to working men and women, today's ACE learners are more diverse. While personal enrichment programs attract more adults with graduate qualifications, ACE also attracts

- **Unemployed adults**, who are drawn to ACE for industry and foundation skills
- **Early school leavers**, who are disenchanted with mainstream education and are looking for an alternative pathway to work or further learning
- **New migrants**, who want to build their language skills
- **Semi-retired and retired workers**, who are interested in building digital skills or maintaining health and wellbeing
- **People with disabilities**, who want a positive and accessible setting to learn new skills or connect with others.

## GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

The Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education defines the commitment of all Australian governments to the ACE sector and recognises its value in engaging socially and economically marginalised groups to participate fully in their communities and the economy.

## LEARN MORE

**Adult and community education**

<https://ala.asn.au/adult-community-education/>



**Adult Learning Australia**

*Lifelong and  
lifewide learning  
for all Australians*