

## Adult learning and civic participation

Adult learning has many benefits – both economic and social. It improves wellbeing, builds social networks and develops bonds of trust. It also has a role to play in building civic participation.

Civic participation means getting involved and taking action to make a difference. In a healthy democracy, people work together to create a strong and cohesive community. Indicators of a healthy democratic society include:

- voting in elections
- trusting government, democratic structures, people and institutions
- being law abiding
- volunteering.

Offering meaningful opportunities for people to participate in their communities builds a sense of belonging. Through civic participation, we learn to value different opinions, attitudes and beliefs. It raises our awareness of social issues; opens our minds to new possibilities and helps us to create a better future.

In order for people to be actively involved as citizens, they need to feel they belong, not just to their network of family, friends or local community, but to a much broader array of groups that make up society as a whole.

Sociologist Robert Putnam, coined the phrase 'bridging social capital' to describe social networks that develop between groups of people from diverse backgrounds so that they feel a shared sense of identity and develop reciprocal trust. It's the glue that binds people together in a cohesive society.

### BARRIERS TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Everyone has the right to shape the community they live in or society more broadly. However, people who are discriminated against, disenchanted with the political system or disempowered by it may be unaware of their rights as citizens to participate in the political and social life of their communities.

Some people face barriers that prevent them from making a positive contribution. These barriers include: poor education, low socio economic status, social isolation or low literacy.

Adults with low literacy are less likely to engage in activities that demand proficiency in reading and writing including committee membership and volunteering. Low adult literacy is also linked with high levels of informal voting. The Australian Electoral Commission has identified informal voting is largely due to a lack of understanding of the voting process or difficulty understanding and interpreting the ballot paper instructions.

Adults with low levels of education are more likely to be incarcerated. While criminal behaviour is affected by a host of interrelated factors such as low income, poor parenting and a lack of stable housing, research also shows that education mitigates the impacts of all of these. Physical isolation during incarceration also leads to social isolation and political disenfranchisement.

Prison rehabilitation programs with an emphasis on civics, literacy and learning reduce re-offending rates.

The language, norms and behaviours of civic participation are developed informally and transmitted in families from one generation to another. But for groups of people who have been systematically marginalised from civic and political processes, these skills and values need to be explicitly taught and learnt.

### THE ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION

Australia, like most modern democracies, faces increasing challenges including adjusting to globalisation, and adapting to demographic shifts including its ageing population. This will require stronger civic institutions, re-invigorated political processes and higher levels of literacy.

Civics and citizenship education can support groups of adults who are under-represented in Australian civic and political life; women, Indigenous Australians and Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Accessible and affordable adult education is a significant builder of bridging social capital by breaking down cultural barriers, dissolving differences and promoting understanding amongst diverse students of various ages, abilities, genders, races, religions and nationalities.

### ACE AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Adult and community education (ACE) builds civic participation: as a provider of basic adult literacy programs; as a potential site for civics and citizenship programs and as a generator of trust, tolerance and community building. ACE is open to all and appeals to socially and economically marginalised learners, who are under-represented elsewhere in the education system.

The effectiveness of ACE as a builder of civic capacity lies in its accessibility. While it remains low cost and easy to access, there are likely to be strong returns in terms of civic participation. ACE personal enrichment programs with their emphasis on improving community wellbeing and foundation programs with their focus on improving literacy and language enable people who are disadvantaged to more actively participate in their communities.

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