

PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

2020-21



Adult
Learning
Australia

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Adult Learning Australia
45 Moreland Street
FOOTSCRAY VIC 3011

ph: (03) 9689 8623
email: info@ala.asn.au
www.ala.asn.au

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ADULT LEARNING AUSTRALIA

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is the largest national peak body for adult and community education (ACE).

ALA's mission is for equitable access to lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians.

ALA has members in all states and territories of Australia – reflecting the diversity of sector, and located in urban, regional and remote areas.

ALA exists to provide leadership, communication, professional development and advocacy for ACE practitioners to advance quality services for all adult learners.

ALA recognises that learning occurs through informal and non-formal approaches, as well as through the formal education and training systems.

ALA maintains international relationships with the adult education sector through its membership of, and participation, in the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) and the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic Adult Education (ASPBAE).

In 2020, ALA celebrates its 60th anniversary.

WHAT IS ACE?

Adult Community Education (ACE) is the fourth sector of education in Australia with approximately 2,500 organisations across the country including neighbourhood houses, community learning centres, community resource centres, community colleges, as well as adult education institutions such as the Centre for Adult Education and the Adult Multicultural Education Services.

Other organisations that offer ACE programs include Universities of the Third Age (U3A), libraries, community sheds and Indigenous cooperatives. ACE organisations are independent and community-based adult education providers.

Small amounts of government investment combined with volunteer support and user fees provide significant social and economic outcomes for the Commonwealth.

In Australia, ACE providers offer personal enrichment learning with most also offering adult basic education in language, literacy, numeracy and other foundation skills. A significant minority (between 300–500) provide formal vocational education and training (VET). ACE providers who have extended into formal VET are largely concentrated in Victoria and NSW.

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.

The ACE sector is recognised for its ability to engage jobseekers in foundation and industry skills programs as a 'soft point of entry' to vocational education and training, often working with the jobseeker to address a broad range of barriers impacting on employability.

ACE programs build community capacity, enhance social cohesion and promote health and wellbeing. They foster skill development by providing vocationally focussed education and training programs and pathways.

ACE organisations have a strong presence across Australia, particularly in rural and regional communities, where they offer a broad range of programs and services alone or in partnership with other agencies.

In recognition of the Government's commitment to fiscal responsibility, ALA's submission recommends that the Government optimise the capability of the sector to deliver on government policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ALA recommends that the Commonwealth Government:

- develop a Lifelong Learning Policy that outlines economic and social goals; integrates efficiency and equity, and sets out roles and responsibilities for community, business and all levels of government
- recognise the economic value of higher levels of functional adult literacy through a National Adult Literacy Strategy that prioritises language, literacy and numeracy in various contexts, including the workplace, and has a strong focus on socially and economically marginalised Australians
- recognise the role of ACE through a renewed Ministerial Declaration
- fund research into the contribution of non-accredited pathway and bridging programs such as adult basic education programs, language, literacy, numeracy and digital programs
- investigate the role of ACE organisations as significant community assets that have the potential to be optimised to play a much greater role in supporting disadvantaged adults through education across Australia; particularly in rural and regional locations
- resource nationwide adult learning projects that raise awareness of climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning, and recognise ACE as a way to engage with the sustainable development goals
- investigate a systematic approach and partnerships between ACE and TAFE in order to reduce barriers to education and training, and promote a culture of lifelong and lifewide learning
- resource the ACE sector to deliver workplace orientated digital skills gap training that meets the needs of modern workplaces
- fund research into ACE models that support productive ageing, wellbeing, mental health and disability programs
- provide infrastructure funding for remote community learning access centres for communities more than 80 km from a university or TAFE campus
- resource Adult Learning Australia to provide professional development for ACE organisations across Australia on delivering high quality learning pathway/bridging programs
- continue its vital support for the ACE sector through Adult Learners Week.

OVERVIEW

LIFELONG LEARNING POLICY

Australia does not have a formal lifelong learning policy. A lifelong learning policy would acknowledge learning beyond employment and re-skilling, and highlight its role in social mobility, community building and health and wellbeing.

A formal lifelong learning policy would support Australians to reach their potential; better anticipate transitions and self-manage their health and wellbeing.

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

Recommendation: Develop a Lifelong Learning Policy that outlines economic and social goals; integrates efficiency and equity, and sets out roles and responsibilities for community, business and all levels of government.

NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY STRATEGY

The OECD's PIAAC survey, which measures key cognitive and workplace skills, found that around 44% of Australian adults lack the literacy skills required in everyday life. Of these, 1 in 7 Australians (14%) have very poor literacy skills and 1 in 3 (30%) have below-proficiency level literacy making them vulnerable to unemployment. Many more struggle with numeracy, with around 53% of the population at below proficiency levels.

The right to literacy is an inherent part of the right to an education. All adult Australians, regardless of their employment or social status, should be supported to fully develop their language, literacy and numeracy skills.

Modern workplaces require workers with high levels of language, literacy and numeracy, and the capacity to problem solve in technology-rich environments. Today Australians need proficiency in complex modes of

communication and high levels of digital literacy. A lack of language, literacy, numeracy digital skills impacts all aspects of an adult's life and has intergenerational effects on families, children and communities.

In order to compete in the global knowledge-based economy and to maintain the level of prosperity and social cohesion that Australians need and expect, a national adult literacy strategy as part of a broader lifelong learning policy must be at the forefront of public policy.

Recommendation: Recognise the economic value of higher levels of functional adult literacy through a National Adult Literacy Strategy that prioritises language, literacy, and numeracy in various contexts, including the workplace, and has a strong focus on socially and economically marginalised Australians

RENEWED MINISTERIAL DECLARATION

The Commonwealth and all state and territory and ministers with responsibility for education endorsed the first national Ministerial Declaration on ACE in 1993. Updated statements were subsequently endorsed in 1997, 2002 and finally in 2008.

The Ministerial Declaration expresses a commitment to the value of ACE in developing social capital, building community capacity, encouraging social participation and enhancing social cohesion. It also acknowledges the role of ACE in responding to changed industrial, demographic and technological circumstances.

In 2008, the Ministerial Declaration called for ACE to become more vocationally orientated by supporting disadvantaged adults into and through the VET system. There have been significant changes in the education and training environment since 2008 but no update to the Ministerial Declaration on ACE.

Recommendation: Recognise the role of ACE through a renewed Ministerial Declaration

NON-ACCREDITED PATHWAY AND BRIDGING PROGRAMS

A policy approach that is solely focussed on the skills required by industry fails to recognise the importance of learning in helping adults to adapt to and manage changing roles at work, in families and in their communities.

Non-accredited and foundation skills training mitigates deep and persistent disadvantage. It responds to the growing rate of change in our society and brings about strong social returns in terms of productivity, community participation, political awareness and active citizenry.

Many adult learners gain an interest in further accredited training or employment as a secondary outcome of engagement in a non-accredited or non-formal learning program.

One of the key strengths of the non-accredited model is that enables people to learn that they are capable of succeeding in a formal learning setting, which enables them to consider new possibilities.

Recommendation: Fund research into the contribution of non-accredited pathway and bridging programs such as adult basic education programs, language, literacy, numeracy and digital programs

OPTIMISE THE ACE SECTOR

The ACE sector is a significant community asset that has achieved great results re-engaging adults into education programs and supporting adults with low level language, literacy and numeracy. However, the sector has the potential to be optimised to play a much greater role in supporting disadvantaged adults; particularly in rural and regional locations.

ACE organisations also play a significant role in VET for high proportions of learners who are disadvantaged, disengaged, unemployed, have a disability or did not complete Year 12 (or equivalent).

In some communities, the ACE sector represents the only 'on-the-ground' providers of post-compulsory education, and is therefore critically important in terms of addressing access and equity beyond urban centres. It is a significant community asset with the potential to be optimised to play a much greater role in supporting adults and workplaces with their training needs; particularly disadvantaged adults in rural and regional locations.

Research should be undertaken immediately across

the ACE sector in Australia to fully map the dimension and nature of non-formal and formal adult literacy and learning programs that are running and the current staffing models in place.

Recommendation: Investigate the role of ACE organisations as significant community assets that have the potential to be optimised to play a much greater role in supporting disadvantaged adults through education across Australia; particularly in rural and regional locations

ADULT EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Adult education programs delivered in local ACE settings throughout Australia could help us meet the complex challenges to our environmental systems by developing the knowledge, skills, understanding and values we need to respond in emergency situations and participate in decisions about the way we do things, locally and globally, to improve quality of life without damaging the planet.

Educating for sustainability means offering adult learning programs that are:

- relevant at a local level
- culturally appropriate
- learner-centred
- collaborative and participatory
- self-sustaining.

They also provide opportunities for creative and critical thinking that meets individual community needs and are both empowering and supportive.

Recommendation: Resource nationwide adult learning projects that raise awareness of climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning, and recognise ACE as a way to engage with the sustainable development goals

SYSTEMATIC APPROACHES TO ACE & TAFE

Effective ACE and TAFE partnerships are a crucial way of enabling a wider share of the community to engage in education programs.

Partnerships work better within a local context and good practice means finding solutions to local and regional

education and training needs. However, sometimes there are competing interests and not enough incentive or understanding about how the partners can effectively collaborate. These barriers could be resolved through shared goals, regular and ongoing interaction and increased awareness of the 'other' sector's programs, pathways and processes. The success of a partnership often involves finding ways to resolve the differences in funding requirements as well as understanding of each other's operational requirements.

There is variability in the quality, scope and sustainability of TAFE and ACE collaborations across Australia. A regional planning approach would improve participation and success in VET for disadvantaged learners' and allow for greater coordination and collaboration between the TAFE and ACE sectors and industry.

Recommendation: Investigate a systematic approach and partnerships between ACE and TAFE in order to reduce barriers to education and training, and promote a culture of lifelong and lifewide learning.

DIGITAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR THE WORKPLACE

The Committee for the Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) has reported that 40% of current jobs have a high probability of being replaced by automation in 10 to 15 years (CEDA, 2015). Similarly, PwC calculated that 5.1 million jobs, or 44%, were at risk of digital disruption and that the pace of technological change is a concern for growth according to Australian CEOs (PwC, 2015).

While some occupations may cease to exist – another impact of technology on the workplace relates to the reshaping of tasks and activities that people perform within their roles (BCA, 2017; AlphaBeta 2015; OECD, 2016; FYA, 2017).

AlphaBeta (2015) reported on the uptake of automation and technology by Australia's business sector and the likely impact this will have on productivity and employment. Their findings indicate that most jobs will change rather than disappear as a result of technology.

Further, they reported that in the past 15 years Australian workers have reduced the amount of time they spend on 'physical and routine' tasks by around two hours. As the use of technology and automation becomes more pervasive in workplaces around Australia, there has also been a shift in the type of tasks that workers perform within their existing roles.

"Most of that change isn't coming from the loss of physical and routine jobs. Rather, it comes from workers switching to different tasks within the same jobs, as machines take over an increasing load of the repetitive routine work" (AlphaBeta, 2015, p. 7).

Workplace automation does not selectively affect some workers – all workers are impacted. However, it has been argued that as technology displaces some traditional job skills, new work demands emerge (Dundon & Howcroft 2018). And there has been extensive growth in the proportion of jobs requiring digital literacy skills. Ai Group (2018) reports that 'increasing use of digital technologies at work is raising the demand for new skills.'

Workers across occupations need to acquire generic digital skills in order to effectively use new technology in their daily work.

AlphaBeta (2015) reveal that this has resulted in retail workers spending less time at the register and more time helping customers; bank employees spending less time counting banknotes and more time giving financial advice; teachers spending less time recording test scores and more time assisting students; factory workers spending less time on the assembly line and more time optimising production and training other workers.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has identified that 'across nearly all industries, the impact of technological and other changes is shortening the shelf-life of employees' existing skill sets' (WEF, 2016, p. 3). And even if we accept that many jobs will be redefined rather than lost – a radical redefinition of a role may result in job losses anyway, as some workers will not have the new skillsets required for the role.

Given that the landscape of work in the future is largely unknown and with new media, science and technology moving rapidly, a broader more holistic approach to building digital literacy skills is required that caters for the needs of the workplace while supporting low skilled and entry-level staff to enter or remain in the workforce.

Recommendation: Resource the ACE sector to deliver workplace orientated digital skills gap training that meets the needs of modern workplaces

ACE MODELS THAT SUPPORT WELLBEING

Over a decade ago, Adult Learning Australia (Cross 2005) identified four actions to take the nexus between structured adult learning and better health to another level, by:

- promoting a holistic and positive attitude toward health
- promoting a holistic understanding of the role of structured learning
- developing better research around the wider benefits of structured learning for all adults and around the value of preventative health strategies
- building administrative bridges between health and education.

Further, Cross (2005) highlighted the considerable role the ACE sector played in terms of keeping Australians healthy and identified 'the standard programs offered by typical community education providers' that promoted wellbeing including programs that focussed on problem-solving dilemmas, good nutrition, meditation and building self-esteem.

In 2008, the UK Foresight Report highlighted the importance of lifelong learning in terms of maintaining wellbeing. Lifelong and lifewide learning recognises that individuals learn throughout their lives; that learning takes place in different settings – formal, non-formal and informal – and that learning can occur simultaneously.

The Foresight Report further identified five actions people could take to improve their wellbeing:

- Connecting with your community
- Being active
- Taking notice of the world around you
- Continuing to learn
- Giving to others

The distinctive nature of ACE fits neatly with Foresight's identified actions. The evidence that ACE has a strong positive impact on health and wellbeing comes from direct responses from participants in ACE programs and from well established research into the links between learning and wellbeing.

Recommendation: Fund research into ACE models that support productive ageing, wellbeing, mental health and disability programs

ACE INFRASTRUCTURE

Australian experiences of education and training and outcomes are very much a function of where they live. Young people and adults outside the major cities are around half as likely to finish high school or to attend university as their urban contemporaries but they are more likely to complete a VET (vocational education and training) qualification.

ACE is critically important in addressing access and equity in regional and rural Australia. In New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and South Australia (SA), delivery of ACE programs is disproportionately higher in regional and rural communities, relative to delivery in capital and major cities. In many small rural communities in these states, ACE organisations are the only 'on-the-ground' providers of post-compulsory education. In other states, such as Queensland and Western Australia, volunteer and community-based organisations provide adult literacy and other informal adult education services.

While online learning has the potential to significantly reduce educational disadvantage in rural and regional Australia, learners with low skills experience very low completion rates through online learning; most need face-to-face mentoring and on-the-ground support to engage with learning.

At the same time learning providers need good local intelligence to be able to effectively reach adults in these communities. Community development will be needed to build a culture of learning and to stimulate demand amongst groups who won't automatically demand learning opportunities. Non-formal and informal learning opportunities will be needed to underpin formal study.

Modelling in Victoria has indicated a range of market and private non-market benefits attributable to the presence of even a very small ACE provider in town, including increased incomes, increased labour market participation and more efficient household management (Allen Consulting Group, 2008).

A community learning access point in geographically isolated communities would provide a supported, physical environment in which community members could access VET and higher education courses offered by providers across the country.

Community learning centres / access points could be housed within existing services such as neighbourhood houses, local government buildings, sporting and recreation clubs or men's sheds.

By building on the ACE model, the Australian Government has the ability to leverage the support of already existing volunteer and locally funded services as well as local knowledge.

Recommendation: Provide infrastructure funding for remote community learning access centres for communities more than 80 km from a university or TAFE campus

ACE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The 2008 Ministerial Declaration on ACE emphasised:

A stewardship role ... at all levels, including governments working together and providing leadership to optimise the capacity of ACE through a national approach, with jurisdictions providing policy settings and developing practical strategies that will allow ACE to flourish.

Countries with the highest levels of adult literacy and numeracy (e.g. Scandinavian countries) require higher professional skills/qualifications for educators delivering formal adult and vocational education qualifications, which are complemented by non-formal community based and workplace based programs that have different qualification requirements.

There is a role for differently qualified peer educators in community and work environments. However, they must have access to high quality, contextualised and structured professional development (PD) that builds their skills and knowledge in andragogic principles, learner engagement and retention; and learning and assessment design, etc. It should also include innovative, evidence-based teaching and learning practice that will motivate adult educators to achieve the best outcome for their learners.

Some ACE programs use volunteers to support low cost service provision, more flexible scheduling and individualised support. But pairing the least experienced, committed or trained person with someone with the lowest level of literacy is problematic.

ACE volunteers could be required to complete preservice training and given access to an ACE PD program. The ACE PD program could potentially include a mandated level of PD activity, and leadership programs and support. Optional and subsidised accredited training for eligible adult educators (for example, those located in designated priority areas) should also be considered.

In 2016, the Commonwealth Government ceased funding Adult Learning Australia for ACE policy advice, professional development for the sector and research, including support for the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, ALA's 60 year old, A-rated peer-reviewed journal.

The Australian Government's support for ACE is minimal relative to other OECD countries including New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

When Adult Learning Australia was funded by successive federal governments, it leveraged around \$3.50 for every dollar of investment through project work, sales of publications, consultancies and membership contributions.

Recommendation: Resource Adult Learning Australia to provide professional development for ACE organisations across Australia on delivering high quality learning pathway/bridging programs

SUPPORT FOR ADULT LEARNERS WEEK

Adult Learners' Week is based on the simple premise – that promoting the benefits of learning and celebrating the successes of adult learners around Australia inspires others to seek out new opportunities to learn. For 25 years, Adult Learners' Week has been supported by successive Australian governments because of its unique ability to attract:

- Adults who are not engaged in formal or non-formal learning activities either in the workplace or in the community.
- Adults who have had negative past experiences of formal education.
- Adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy.
- Adults who are ambivalent about returning to learning.
- Adults who lack of an understanding of the learning options available to them.

The Commonwealth's primary stewardship role for ACE is through its support for Adult Learners' Week activities. Intermittently, the Commonwealth has also provided direct funding for ACE programs in areas of strategic importance.

Recommendation: Continue the Commonwealth's vital support for the ACE sector through Adult Learners Week.

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Adult Learning Australia

45 Moreland St,
Footscray, 3011

ph: (03) 9689 8623

email: info@ala.asn.au

www.ala.asn.au



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