

The Adult Learning Challenge

A Policy Statement by Adult Learning Australia Inc

Adult Learning Australia Inc (ALA) is Australia's largest peak organisation for adult and community education. ALA has been in operation for 50 years and has members in every state and territory.

ALA is committed to ensuring that all Australians can access the benefits of lifelong and lifewide learning. By "lifelong learning" we mean learning beyond school throughout the adult years via the formal education system, in workplaces and through community participation. By "lifewide learning" we mean developing the skills and knowledge required to engage in meaningful work, to participate fully as a citizen in a vibrant democracy, to live in harmony in a diverse, multi-cultural and rapidly changing society and to manage ones health and personal wellbeing, particularly in the senior years.

ALA's Plan for a Learning Society

1. Develop a comprehensive National Policy and goals on Adult Literacy and Numeracy.
2. Commit to Goal 4 of the UNESCO Education for All Campaign to: "double adult literacy levels by 2015" for those with "poor" and "very poor" skills.
3. Develop a National Policy on Lifelong Learning which combines non-formal, community-based learning alongside the formal accredited VET and Higher Education systems.
4. Ensure that all policies related to the education of Indigenous children include detailed plans for ensuring that their parents and communities are meaningfully engaged in that education.

We call on all political parties in Australia to adopt and prioritise the following policy areas:

Adult Literacy

The 2006 ABS Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey revealed a sizable lack of literacy skills across most of the adult population of Australia. Approximately 40% of employed and 60% of unemployed Australians were found to have had "poor" or "very poor" literacy, and numeracy skills.

While the current federal government's recently released Foundation Skills Strategy includes an increase in funding for adult literacy and numeracy, the Australian government hasn't committed to any targets for improving the nation's adult literacy and numeracy as it has with other areas of education. As a result, it's hard to determine whether the current suite of programs is the best response or whether the country is investing enough.

Failure to focus on the literacy of the nation impacts in a range of ways across Australian life: in high levels of preventable illnesses, in communities where long term unemployment co-exists with industry skills shortages, and in communities where financial skills are so low that the Australian government has stepped in to manage the incomes of welfare recipients.

5. Make all predominantly Indigenous communities official “Learning Communities” with state of the art “learning infrastructure” such as public internet access, library services and fully funded community - managed learning centres.
6. Include a participatory democracy and civics stream within the Lifelong Learning policy which funds innovative approaches to community engagement and learning.
7. Include a strategy for building on the skills and learning of an ageing population within the National Lifelong Learning Policy.
8. Fund selected Learning Community Pilot projects in disadvantaged urban and rural contexts to test and refine strategies to foster lifelong learning, inclusion, and social justice, leading to guidelines and tools to assist communities throughout Australia.
9. Fund the Strategies of the 2007 Ministerial Declaration on ACE to ensure that a vibrant, not for profit community education sector exists in every state and territory of Australia.

A range of new and emerging 21st Century fields of knowledge bring with them their own sets of language and concepts or “literacys”. If Australia is to compete in the global knowledge economy, and maintain the level of prosperity and cohesion that we enjoy, the literacy levels of the adult population need to be at the forefront of public policy.

Non-Formal Lifelong Learning

Australia is in the difficult position of having industry skills shortages alongside a cohort of Australians unable to secure the employment they need and desire. For working Australians most of their non-formal learning occurs through their paid work. However, for those not in the paid workforce, non-formal, community based learning has a strong record of assisting the transition back into the paid workforce.

Non-formal lifelong learning also has an important role to play in maintaining health and wellbeing and “productivity” in its broadest sense for the almost one third of Australian adults who are not in paid work, either because they are unemployed, or are retired, or because they work full time doing unpaid work in the home or community.

The contemporary 21st century concept of lifelong learning adopted by OECD, the European Union, World Bank, and leading OECD countries is that lifelong learning involves all forms of learning and occurs in many contexts in society. The group of Australians with the highest formal qualifications also access large amounts of self funded or workplace funded non-formal learning. They draw on it to build their own prosperity and strengthen their own communities. However, in the absence of national leadership, not all Australians and not all communities are able to access these benefits.

Indigenous Adult Education

Much of Australia’s public policy discussion around Indigenous issues focuses on the education of Indigenous children, with the implicit assumption that children can learn in isolation from their parents and communities. Yet literacy is essentially a set of social practices which all children learn from within their families and communities as much or more than

through instruction in school. There are lost opportunities to integrate the learning of adults with the learning of Indigenous children, to the benefit of both.

Remote Indigenous communities frequently lack the basic “infrastructure” of literacy and learning such as libraries, or affordable public internet access, books and magazines. Adult education responses focus on centrally developed and administered Vocational Education and Training curriculum for jobs that often don’t exist in those communities and “bridging programs” to fill an arbitrary gap. Meanwhile, where they exist at all, local sites of adult learning practice such as youth media centres, community learning centres or men’s sheds, rely on short term grants and fundraising.

Public policy affecting Indigenous Australians is littered with references to empowerment, community ownership and community consultation, as though merely stating these things is enough. The institutions and organisations of the mainstream economy and society of Australia come with a range of “literacys”. It is impossible for Indigenous adults to engage with, let alone drive mainstream institutions such as schools, early childhood education services and health services in their communities without the literacys to do so.

Learning for Civic Participation

Resilient and socially inclusive communities rely on and are fed by a culture of lifelong learning. Australians require skills to live peacefully in a diverse multicultural society, to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship and to solve complex problems such as immigration, managing an ageing population, and moving to a lower carbon future.

Democracy consists of more than simply the right to vote. It expands to the right to understand and have input into the decisions that impact on an individual’s day to day life and that of their family. It is no accident that those countries with the highest levels of adult literacy also have vibrant democracies where participants have a range of points of engagement with civic life.

Learning that Supports an Aging Population

Australia’s future cohesion and prosperity will require us to manage the senior years more effectively. This involves skilling adults to understand and maintain good health and to remaining engaged and active. It will also include retraining for “encore careers” or developing skills for active engagement in community life and voluntary work.

Much of the public discussion around an aging population is negative. A commitment to lifelong learning, right through the senior years, treats older Australians as a resource to be built on rather than a problem to be solved.

A Strong Community Education (ACE) Sector

A strong Community Education sector is crucial to expanding learning opportunities for all Australians across the lifespan. Community providers have a key role in meeting the adult literacy challenge, expanding pathways to work-related learning and supporting social and civic participation. The ACE sector already provides some 14% of Australia’s total vocational education effort, in a unique combination with non-formal learning.

The revised 2007 Ministerial Declaration on ACE commits governments to an action plan for building ACE capacity to assist individuals manage life and career transitions, in line with COAG's Human Capital Reform agenda and its 'whole-of-life' perspective. However, there must be resources to match these higher expectations of community education providers and there must be national leadership to ensure that all States and Territories take part.

The ACE sector's philosophy - with its focus on the learner as an individual, responsiveness to personal, social or economic needs, flexible delivery and strong ethic of social justice and equity - has given real effect to the concept of lifelong learning for many citizens across a wide spectrum of Australian society and has the potential to be the platform for delivering the benefits of lifelong and lifewide learning to all Australians.

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