

Who are Australia's Adult Learners?

Participation in adult education and training is a common experience for adult Australians today. Four out of five people over 21 have taken an adult education course at some time in their lives. One out of four Australians aged 18 and over has taken a course within the last year.

While men and women appear equally likely to have taken a course in the last year, participation by older people declines sharply. This is due in part to the fact that a great deal of adult education and training today is work-related. Over half the courses taken are provided by an employer, union or industry association.

Participation is very strongly influenced by a person's previous educational experiences and their employment. Those with higher formal qualifications are more likely to participate in adult learning, will take more courses and spend more time learning:

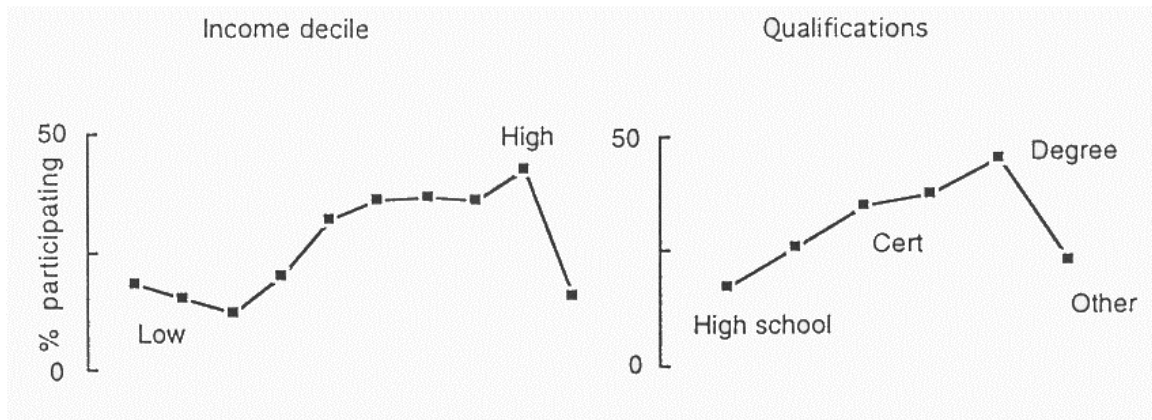
Who participates in adult learning?

Some Australians are more likely than others to enrol in adult education and training including those who are younger, better off, better educated, employed fulltime and working in the higher status occupations.

- About a third of those under 55 had taken a course in the last year, compared to less than a tenth of those over 55, reflecting the impact of courses taken at work
- Nearly half (45%) of those holding a degree, a third of those with a certificate or diploma and a quarter of those with a trade certificate had participated. Among people with no post-school qualification, 17% had undertaken some activity.
- The participation of the fully employed is markedly higher than for those not in the workforce. Some 38% of fulltime employed reported said they had taken a course, compared to 28% of part-time employed, 25% of unemployed people and 10% of those not in the workforce.
- About a third of those born in Australia had taken a course, compared to 20% of those not born here.

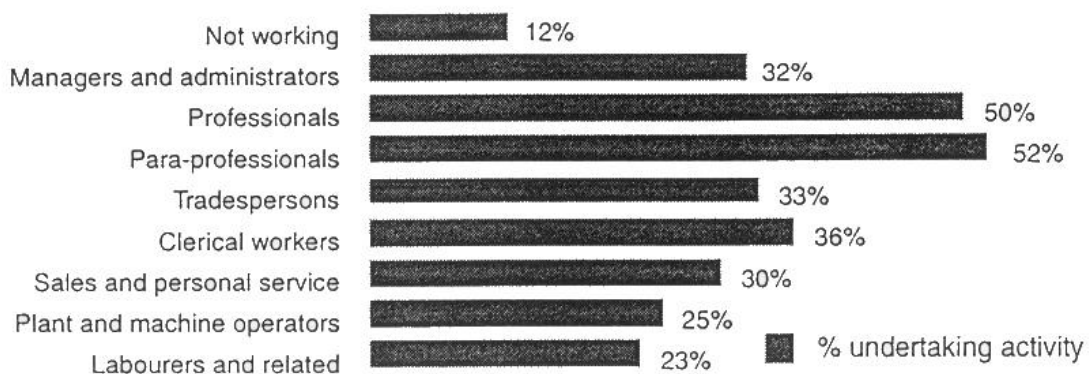
Thus opportunities to undertake adult education and training appear to be unevenly distributed. Participation in adult education and training also increases with personal income decile. The poorest and the most wealthy in the nation are less likely to undertake a course

Participation rate, income and qualifications



Professionals and para-professionals are more likely to have taken activity than other occupational groups with some 50% in each group having taken an activity in the last year.

Participation by occupation (% undertaking activity)

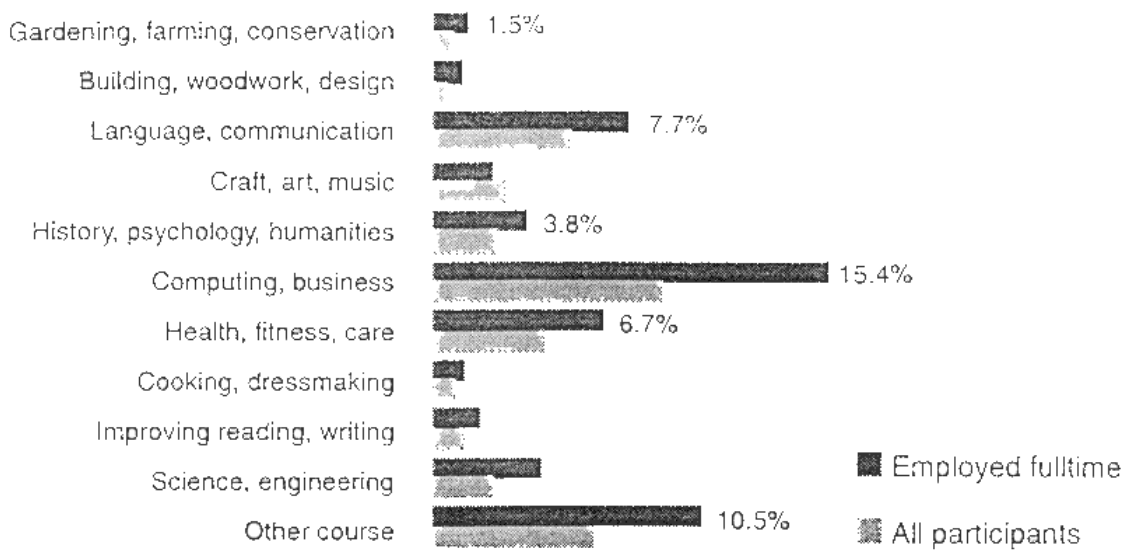


What do they learn?

The most common types of courses taken in the last twelve months were in the areas of computing and business, language and communication, and health, fitness and care. Around a million people are estimated to have done non-credit computing and business courses in the last year.

Some occupational groups favour certain types of courses. While most occupations reported taking a business or computing course, over 60% of managers and clerical or administrative workers reported such activity. Professionals took relatively more courses in the health area. Those learners not in the labour force took relatively fewer computing and language or communication courses than employed learners, and were more likely to take traditional adult education offerings such as craft, art and humanities subjects.

Type of course (% of courses undertaken)

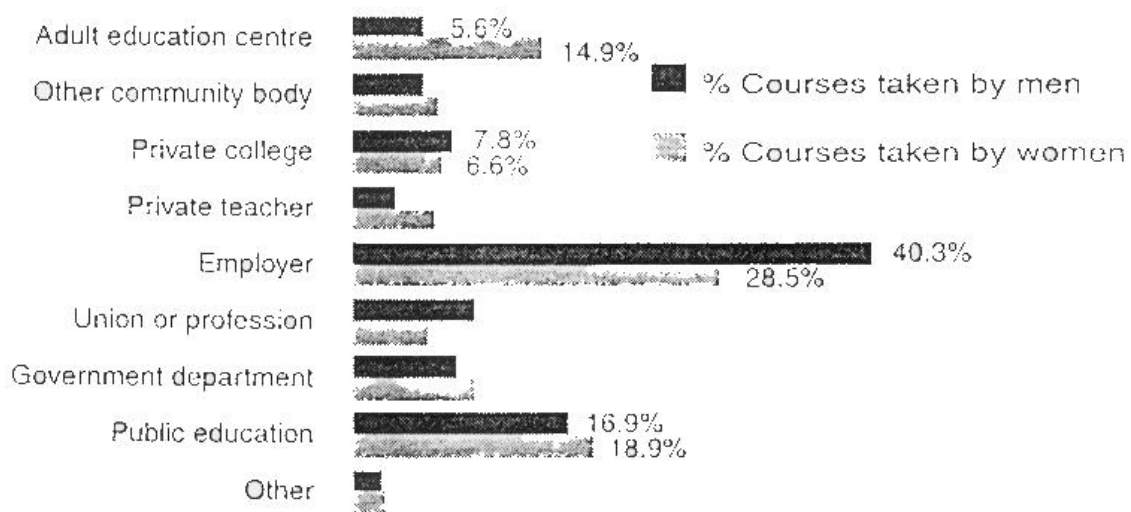


Where do they learn?

Courses are offered at a variety of providers. The outstanding feature of participation revealed by all recent surveys is the extent to which employment provides opportunities for training. Of all courses taken in the last year, over half were employment or industry-based (57%) and an employed person is three times more likely to have undertaken a course with their employer than for a part-time employee. Other courses were provided by adult education centres or community bodies (12%), public education institutions (12%), private colleges or teachers (10%) and government departments (8%).

Women are more likely than men to have taken a course in an adult education centre or public education institution such as a TAFE, a government department or community body. This is consistent with earlier surveys showing that women are three times more likely to use an adult education centre than men.

Provider of course, and sex of participant



Men are clearly more likely to participate in courses run by employers, unions or industry bodies. Some 40% of courses taken by men are provided by employers, compared to 28% of those taken by women.

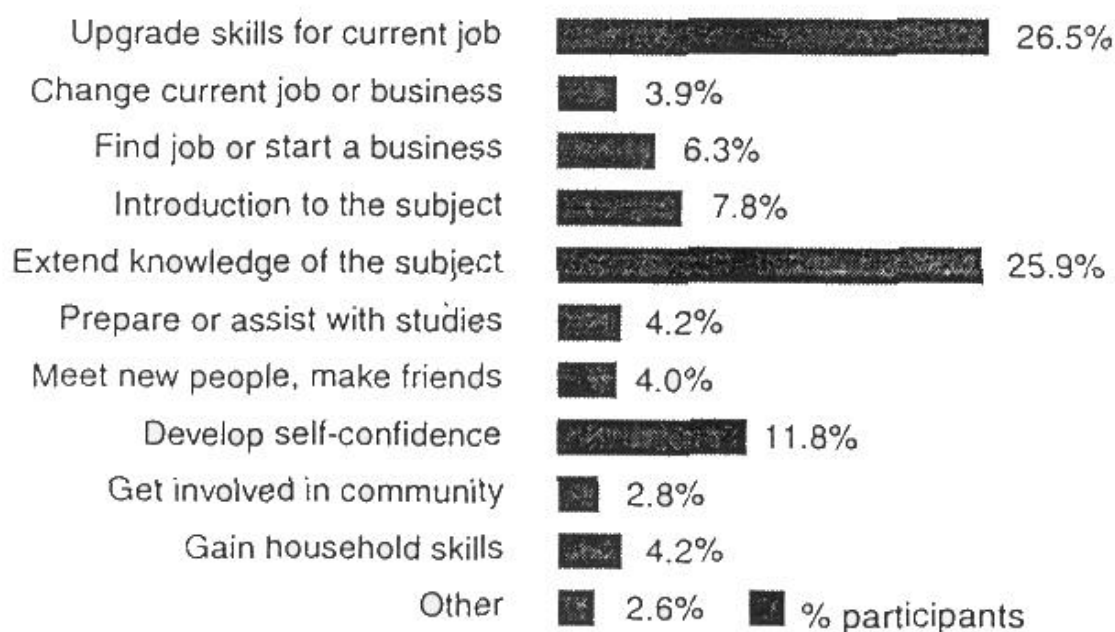
The use of providers depends somewhat on the occupation and employment status of those participating. Employer-provided courses are clearly important across all occupations, but they provided half of all courses taken by managers and professionals, who also made most use of unions and professional associations.

- Public education (which includes TAFE and university), adult education and community bodies provided most courses for those not working.
- Adult education centres were, relative to other groups, used more by managers, clerical, sales and personal service workers.
- Private colleges were used relatively more often by sales/personal service workers and para-professionals.

Why do they learn?

Reflecting the importance of employment-related courses, the two most common reasons participants gave for undertaking their most recent course were 'to upgrade skills for a current job' (25% of those participating) or 'extending knowledge of the subject' (another 25%). Upgrading skills and extending knowledge were also strongly associated with the three most common course areas of computing and business, language/communication and health and care. Among wage and salary earners, almost a quarter gave 'upgrade skills' as a reason. This factor was less important for those owning a business (10%) and negligible for those not employed.

Reason for undertaking most recent course

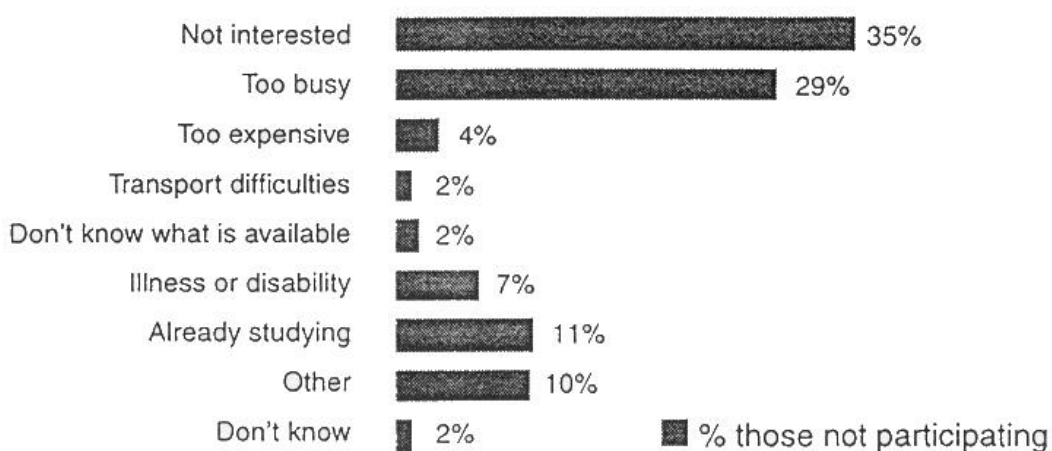


'Extending knowledge' or 'upgrading skills' are important across most providers and types of courses as well as for men and women. Thus the major focus for Australia's adult learners, largely irrespective of the course and provider, is on enhancing skills and knowledge. 'Upgrading' is more often reported for employer courses and 'changing' or 'finding a job' for public education. 'Gaining household skills' is more often reported for courses in adult education centres and 'getting involved in the community' in church or community bodies.

Why don't people participate?

Three quarters of the sample of the May ABS survey reported they had not undertaken any organised learning activity in the last year. When asked the reason for this, more than a third (37%) said it was because they were 'not interested' and another third (31%) because they were 'too busy'. Considerably fewer gave other reasons such as the cost of courses, their illness or disability and lack of knowledge of the courses available. Those who were 'too busy' were more likely to be full time or part time employees, while those who were 'not interested' were not in the labour force.

Reason for not taking any course in the last year



Adult community education

Adult community education (ACE) providers include evening or community adult education centres, neighbourhood houses and WEAs. These community owned and managed organisations have grown rapidly over recent years. A 1995 study in NSW showed that small business is likely to turn to such providers because they are local and provide short, relevant courses. The ABS survey confirms that such centres are the most significant provider for the small-business self-employed people (25% of such people) along with private colleges (25%) and public education institutions (20%). ACE provides an important means of access for women, who comprise three-quarters of the students.

Sources of information

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The survey data referred to was collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Population Survey Monitor in May 1995. Some 2400 respondents to a survey of households answered a series of questions about their participation in education and training beyond the formal study of accredited courses. Other sources of information used include the Australian adult education surveys conducted as part of the ANU International Social Science Survey / Australia conducted (MDR Evans, ANU Research School of Social Sciences, 1993; 1994) and recent studies of adult education in NSW (McIntyre, Foley, Morris and Tennant, *ACE Works: The vocational outcomes of adult and community education in NSW*, Board of Adult and Community Education, 1995) and Victoria (Outcomes and Pathways, Victorian Adult Community and Further Education Board).

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