

Pre-budget submission

2017–18



Adult Learning Australia

Adult Learning Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Australian Government's 2017–2018 Budget.

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is the national peak body for adult and community education (ACE). We are a not-for-profit entity with both organisational and individual members in all states and territories who reflect the diversity of adult and community education.

The learner is the central focus of our attention. We believe that learning occurs through informal and non-formal means, as well as through the formal education and training systems.

In 2017, ALA celebrates its 57th anniversary.

Our vision

Lifelong and Lifewide Learning for all Australians

Executive summary

Adult and community education (ACE) is an undervalued community asset. Relatively small amounts of government investment in the sector produce significant and positive outcomes for Australian governments. The sector is characterised by high levels of volunteerism, low overheads, strong community 'ownership' and a focus on the most disenfranchised and disadvantaged learners.

ACE is a discrete fourth sector of education in Australia, the community based, owned and managed not for profit sector, committed to providing accessible learning opportunities for adults in local communities that meet their needs and support place-based community development.

There are at least 2500 ACE providers in Australia, all of which provide personal interest learning. Most also provide adult basic education in literacy and numeracy and other foundation skills. A significant minority (300–500) provide formal vocational education and training (VET).

ACE collectively delivers in four key areas:

1. Personal interest (informal/non formal learning activities)
2. Adult basic education (non formal and formal)
3. Formal VET
4. Pathway learning (non formal to formal)

Formal VET and pathway learning were both a focus of the 2008 Ministerial Declaration on Adult Community Education.

The 2008 *Ministerial Declaration on ACE* acknowledged that:

ACE offers highly supportive pathways into learning, further education and training, and work and, as a result, is well-placed to engage those with low levels of educational attainment. Participation in non-accredited education and training for example, can serve to build the self-esteem, motivation and confidence many struggling to engage require to move into further education and training or employment.

ACE has a unique capacity to adapt to a rapidly changing industrial, demographic and technological environment, and to engage, assist and support second chance learners with skills and workforce development.

The ACE sector is diverse, innovative and resilient. It relies on the goodwill of thousands of volunteers, committed community workers and adult educators. ACE transforms people and communities.

With an increased focus from government, the ACE sector could deliver stronger outcomes, particularly for socially and economically marginalised groups including Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander peoples, rural and regional Australians and communities left languishing in the rust belt areas of the nation.

The literacy challenge

There is a significant literacy challenge in Australia that ACE providers are responding to:

- Approximately 44% of Australian adults have literacy levels low enough to severely affect their ability to carry out everyday activities, get and keep a job and engage in the social and economic life of their community.
- Almost 54% of Australian adults struggle to grasp many of the essential financial basics of everyday life, such as paying bills and Internet banking.

This means that around 15 million Australian adults are vulnerable to unemployment and social exclusion due to low literacy and numeracy levels.

Family literacy and closing the gap

According to the *Closing the Gap* report recently presented in parliament by the Prime Minister, the literacy and numeracy results for school children have remained inconsistent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across age cohorts and jurisdictions.

Policies around Indigenous education tend to focus on interventions with children – assuming that children learn in isolation from their parents and communities. However, literacy is a social and cultural practice. Children learn from their families and communities, so it's important to integrate the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders adults and children.

Remote Indigenous communities often lack the basic infrastructure of literacy such as libraries; public Internet, books and magazines. Responses often focus on centrally developed and administered VET curriculum for jobs that may not exist in those communities or bridging programs that fill an arbitrary gap. Meanwhile, where the infrastructure does exist, often local sites of adult learning practice such as youth centres, neighbourhood houses, community centre or men's sheds, they rely on short-term grants and/or fundraising

The 2008 Ministerial Declaration on ACE recognised that:

Individuals who lack foundation skills ... face serious limitations in their capacity to enter and survive in the modern workplace, let alone progress beyond low skilled or low paid work.

ACE adult basic education programs cover literacy, numeracy, basic computing skills and other foundation skills such as communication, problem solving and self-presentation and management skills that are offered with a high level of support. These programs may be non-formal / non-accredited or formal / accredited in nature.

There is no ongoing data collected on adults involved in non-accredited basic education programs delivered by ACE providers. However, we do know from research conducted in 2007 that thousands of Australian adults participate to:

- improve their self-confidence
- build their capacity to interact with the wider community
- develop pathways to further training or employment.

This study also found strong continuing demand for non-accredited community language, literacy and numeracy courses, and suggested this should be acknowledged through funding support.

What is the cost?

The World Literacy Foundation calculates the cost of 'illiteracy' to a developed nation at 2% of GDP. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2016 Australia's GDP (current prices) was 1,689.035 (billion), which would set the cost to Australia at \$34 billion.

A report released by the Australian Industry Group (AI Group) *Tackling Foundation Skills in the Workforce*, indicated that 93% of the 300 employers surveyed identified that low levels of functional literacy and numeracy negatively impacted their business.

The cost to business in terms of lost productivity and profitability due to low literacy and numeracy includes, for example, costs related to:

- incorrect processing of forms, orders or refunds
- poor communication with customers
- finding adequately skilled staff
- resolving internal problems
- issues arising from miscommunication or misunderstandings
- absenteeism due to stress or needing to deal with financial issues.

Advances in technology also drive the need for continual learning. To remain in or re-enter the modern workforce, Australians need to be able to use new technologies. In addition, the Internet is an increasingly important tool for social inclusion, allowing people to remain in contact with family and friends, pursue interests and build communities of interest.

According to UNESCO, 'education improves understanding of new technologies and facilitates their diffusion and implementation – factors which also promote economic growth'.

Low levels of literacy severely limit a person's ability to 'access, understand and apply health-related information and messages. This results in poor household and personal health, hygiene and nutrition' (WLF 2015). By allocating sufficient and appropriate resources and support to adults with health issues (including mental health) through ACE is potentially an effective preventative measure.

While some of ALA's previous recommendations have been advanced, particularly in terms of seniors and digital literacy, there's still more to do.

Recommendations

Adult Learning Australia proposes that the Commonwealth should:

Maximise positive outcomes from the ACE sector by formally acknowledging ACE as a significant contributor to education and training provision and in terms of attracting disengaged learners through a renewed Ministerial Declaration on ACE.

Ensure the next Commonwealth Skills agreement with the States and Territories articulates a specific role for locally focussed, not for profit ACE organisations.

In the 2017–18 Federal Budget, the Commonwealth should:

Ensure adults with barriers to learning are given the opportunity to develop the literacy and numeracy skills they need to build their confidence and contribute to our diverse and changing society through innovative ACE programs.

Investment: \$5,000,000 over 2 years

Fund a national professional development program to develop the skills of adult literacy tutors and volunteers working in ACE organisations.

Investment: \$1,500,000 over 2 years

Support a national family literacy strategy that focusses on socially and economically marginalised Australian communities; particularly Aboriginal Torres and Strait Islander communities.

Investment: \$3,500,000 over 2 years

Provide access and equity in adult education by ensuring there is a community learning centre in every Australian community of more than 500 people more than 80 km from a university or TAFE campus.

Investment: \$15,000,000 over 3 years

Build on Adult Learning Australia national oversight role of ACE by funding ALA and Adult Learners' Week on an annual and ongoing basis.

Investment: \$500,000 per annum

Commission Adult Learning Australia to research the capacity of adult education in Australia to contribute to a 15-year plan to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and to provide recommendations to the government on how adult education can be strategically developed and funded to make a significant contribution.

Investment: \$500,000

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