

Celebrating 65 years of Adult Learning Australia 1960 – 2025

CEO anniversary message

Reimagining lifelong learning

Happy 65th Birthday to Adult Learning Australia (ALA)! This milestone marks six and a half decades of championing the transformative power of adult learning, promoting opportunities that enable individuals to thrive and communities to flourish. Since its inception in 1960 as the Australian Association of Adult Education (AAAE), ALA has stood as a beacon of hope and possibility, advocating for lifelong learning as a cornerstone of personal and societal development.

Our journal, the Australian Journal of Adult Learning (AJAL), also marks this 65-year milestone, having grown from a humble stapled, typewritten publication in 1960 into a respected platform for research, reflection, and professional dialogue. We thank all contributors, presenters, and academics who have enriched our journal and professional development programs over the years.

Reaching this milestone is a profound opportunity to honour the achievements of the past while looking ahead to inspire future endeavours. Central to ALA's work has always been the voice of adult learners and educators themselves. Their experiences, perspectives, and stories guide our advocacy, shape our programs, and remind us why

lifelong learning matters. By listening to and amplifying these voices, we ensure that learning remains relevant, inclusive, and empowering for all.

Renewing our commitment to lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is more than an educational principle; it is a pathway to empowerment. As we celebrate 65 years of ALA, we are reminded of the need to recommit to this vision. Lifelong learning embraces the diverse ways in which adults acquire knowledge, skills, and understanding throughout their lives. Whether it's formal education, workplace training, community engagement, or self-directed exploration, adult learning enriches lives and fosters resilience.

As the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) reminds us, lifelong learning is “the foundation for transforming education systems, building just and inclusive societies, and achieving sustainable futures”. In alignment with UNESCO’s Transforming Education statement (2022), we affirm that lifelong learning must be inclusive, flexible, and human-centred, ensuring that everyone, at every stage of life, can learn, participate, and thrive.

Renewing our commitment means advocating for policies and practices that ensure all Australians, regardless of background, have access to lifelong learning opportunities. It means addressing barriers such as financial constraints, geographical isolation, and systemic inequities that prevent many from fully participating in learning. It also involves promoting flexible and inclusive approaches to education that cater to the unique needs of adult learners, including those second chance learners returning to learning later in life, those navigating career transitions, and those pursuing personal growth.

Reimagining ourselves and our communities through lifelong learning

The 65th anniversary of ALA invites us to reimagine the role of lifelong learning in shaping a better future. In a rapidly changing world marked by technological advancements, shifting workforce demands, and political and global challenges, lifelong learning is more relevant than ever to ensure vibrant active democracies. By reimagining lifelong learning, we can harness its transformative power to create more inclusive, sustainable, and innovative communities.

To reimagine lifelong learning is to embrace its potential as a tool for social justice and human rights. Adult learning plays a crucial role in addressing inequality, fostering civic participation and democracy, and building social cohesion. Through education, individuals gain the skills and confidence to participate fully in their communities and advocate for their rights. Communities, in turn, become stronger and more inclusive as they are enriched by diverse perspectives and collective knowledge.

It is also about reimagining learning environments. Traditional classrooms are no longer the sole domain of education. Neighbourhood houses, community centres, libraries, outdoor locations, workplaces, and digital spaces all serve as vital hubs for learning. By expanding the spaces and methods of lifelong learning, we can ensure it remains accessible and relevant to the needs of a diverse population.

Rediscovering the joy, purpose, and possibilities of learning

Amid the demands of modern life, it is easy to lose sight of the joy and purpose that learning brings. Yet, learning is inherently a source of curiosity, connection, and personal fulfillment. As we celebrate 65 years of ALA, it is an opportunity to rediscover the transformative possibilities that learning offers not just to an end, but as an enriching and joyful process.

Stories of adult learners remind us of the profound impact that education can have on individuals' lives and their families and friends. From a second-chance learner finding a new career path to a community elder discovering digital literacy, or an Aboriginal young person engaging with culture, these journeys illuminate the joy and purpose that lifelong learning brings. By amplifying these stories, we can inspire others to embark on their own learning journeys and rekindle the passion for discovery that resides within all of us.

The possibilities of learning extend far beyond individual enrichment. Lifelong learning drives innovation and economic resilience. It equips individuals with the skills needed to adapt to changing industries and fosters entrepreneurial thinking. Moreover, it enables communities to address complex challenges collaboratively, drawing on a wealth of collective knowledge and creativity.

Shaping a Future Where Learning is Accessible, Inclusive, and

Transformative

As we look to the future, ALA's mission remains clear: to promote and support a future where learning is accessible, inclusive, and transformative for all. This requires a concerted effort from governments, educators, employers, and communities to prioritise lifelong learning in their policies and practices.

Advocacy will play a critical role in shaping this future. Policymakers must recognise the economic and social value of lifelong learning and invest in adult and community education (ACE) programs. These programs provide wrap-around support for disadvantaged and vulnerable learners, enabling them to overcome barriers and achieve their goals. ACE also complements and enhances other educational sectors, such as schools, TAFE and University, by offering soft entry points and flexible and localised learning opportunities.

Partnerships are equally vital. By collaborating with local organisations, community groups, and industry, we can expand the reach and impact of lifelong learning initiatives. Shared resources, knowledge, and expertise can create a more integrated and supportive learning ecosystem for adult learners.

Finally, a future of accessible lifelong learning requires embracing innovation responsibly. Technology has opened new avenues for education, from online courses to virtual reality training, artificial intelligence, and digital collaboration tools. While AI offers great potential to enhance learning experiences, personalise support, and expand access, it also brings challenges around data privacy, cyber security, and ethical use. By remaining aware of both the opportunities and risks, we can ensure that AI serves as a valuable tool, one that adds to, but does not define, the value of lifelong learning. Through thoughtful and inclusive use of technology, we can make learning more flexible, engaging, and secure, reaching individuals who may have been excluded from traditional education and learning

Celebrating 65 years and beyond

As we celebrate 65 years of Adult Learning Australia, we honour the legacy of those who have championed lifelong learning and acknowledge the countless lives transformed through adult learning and community

education. We extend our thanks to the many members, board members, staff, and workers who have contributed to our journey, as well as our partners, collaborators, and the governments whose support, including through initiatives like Adult Learners Week, has enabled our work, though we know there is still much more to be done.

In this milestone year, we also celebrate the impact of the Adult Learning Australia Foundation Ltd, trading as the Learning Changes Lives Foundation, which has been endorsed as a Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) since 1 July 2017. Through this Foundation, we continue to provide scholarships and support that enable adults facing disadvantage to re-engage with learning and transform their lives.

As we reflect on our past, we look ahead to the potential of lifelong learning and the opportunities it can bring for individuals and communities. Let us renew our commitment to lifelong learning, reimagine ourselves and our communities through its transformative power, and rediscover the joy, purpose, and possibilities that learning brings to life. Together, we can shape a future where learning is accessible, inclusive, and transformative for all.

Jenny Macaffer

CEO 2016 - current