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Australia's adult literacy crisis

Rugby league star turned actor Ian Roberts recently hit the news when he confessed he had only properly learned to read at the age of 36. Roberts, the first openly gay player in the league said coming out as gay was a breeze in comparison to publicly admitting how much difficulty he had with reading and writing.

'I was so ashamed and embarrassed about it. I was basically illiterate,' he told ABC radio interviewer Julian Morrow recently.

Luckily for Roberts, a teacher found him help.

Roberts' story and the statistic that around 44% of Australian adults don't have the literacy skills needed for everyday life was no doubt shocking to many but it's no surprise to people involved in teaching adults. And experts agree that this statistic is most likely higher because literacy levels in remote parts of Australia are not included in the data.

'Learning how to write and read was almost like a rebirth. This whole other world opened up. It was incredible.'
Ian Roberts

The national Reading Writing Hotline which refers adults for help with literacy and numeracy saw a spike in calls during COVID. Vanessa Iles, Manager of the service says the 4000 callers to the Hotline each year are just the tip of the iceberg. 'There are a lot of people out there who are flying under the radar.'

Jo Medlin, President of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy agrees. 'I think a lot of people are not putting their hand up to having problems because of the social stigma. It takes a lot of courage to admit that you've been through the school system in Australia and you can't read and write. That's a huge step.'

This sense of shame is the reason people keep their secret to themselves and often develop creative ways of avoiding exposure.

'You notice examples of people hiding their difficulties all the time. For example simple things like using public transport. if you're waiting at a bus stop sometimes people will say "Excuse me, I can't read the 24-hour timetable, is this the right bus?" And of course the standard is "Can you read this for me? I have forgotten my glasses" – that's common too,' Jo says.

COVID was a confronting event for people with low

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ADULT
LEARNING
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Lifelong and
lifewide learning
for all Australians

Message from the CEO



We urgently need to grow and develop the adult literacy workforce if we are going to increase the range, quality and number of programs in our communities and workplaces.

Missing out on essential literacy skills as a child at school should not be a life sentence. We need to do more to raise public awareness and shake off the stigma so that people who struggle with their literacy no longer feel ashamed about asking for help. Because hiding it limits people's opportunities.

The current Parliamentary Inquiry into Adult Literacy is an opportunity to raise awareness and influence public policy. We've outlined a range of recommendations in our submission, which we've drafted through discussions with stakeholders, research and with input from our members. I'm hoping that the inquiry marks the beginning of a new public conversation about why and how Australia's low rates of adult literacy affect us all.

But the help has to be there in the form of trained staff. We urgently need to grow and develop the adult literacy workforce if we are going to increase the range, quality and number of programs in our communities and workplaces.

We know the impact that improving literacy has on people's lives, which is why ALA's Learning Changes Lives Foundation has prioritised its grant funding this year to focus on adult literacy. Applications are now open for our Literacy Changes Lives small grants program. We are looking to fund inspiring, innovative and effective community education approaches that help adults develop their literacy, and that really make an impact on the lives of adult learners.

Too often discussions about adult literacy revolve around skills for work, which limits the impact to economics rather than empowerment. Forging alliances with other agencies involved in adult education and social justice is our best way forward. We need to tackle this issue as a community because it affects so many people, not just individuals, but families, workplaces and our society in general.

This year ALA is leading a co-ordinated effort to shine a light on the prevalence of low literacy among Australian adults and to convince policy makers and the government that we need national leadership to take action and recognise that lifelong learning and literacy go hand in hand.

ALA is also working closely with our colleagues and partners in the international arena. In June this year the Adult Education in Global Times International Virtual Conference will kick off with ALA hosting a pre-conference building on the Literacy Changes Lives theme.

Beginning preparations for the seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII) in 2022 are also taking place and ALA is working with our partners at the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) to prepare for civil society input. This conference provides UNESCO member states with opportunities to compare and develop their approach to adult learning and education. Australia is a signatory, so this is an opportunity to encourage the Australian government to learn from other countries and improve their policies and practices.

2021 is already playing out as a busy year but ALA is up for the challenge. Adult learning is about the type of society we want to create, sustain and live in. Different approaches to learning are needed throughout life and the provision of learning opportunities for all, including the unreached and the excluded. This requires a whole of government approach together with key public and community organisations, facilitators of adult learning and the adult learners themselves.

Jenny Macaffer, CEO



Modern workplaces demand higher levels of literacy than in the past. Photo: Workers by IFAtched CC BY 2.0

(story continued from p. 1)

literacy. Forced into isolation and with community services closed, many people were cut off from helpers. 'Before COVID people would go to the local library or community centre and get assistance. But during COVID it was like "What do I do now?"; Jo says.

Vanessa says that fear of exposure of a problem they had worked hard to hide prompted many callers to seek help. 'We got calls from a lot of people who had managed to keep their inability to read and write secret from their families and kids, who rang us panic-struck because suddenly they were expected to be involved in home schooling.'

In non COVID times, triggers include the birth of a child, the prospect of a promotion at work or death or separation from a helper. Vanessa says that rising standards of literacy required at work is a common reason for people to call for help. 'For example, someone who has been a truck driver for 20 years who when they started didn't need to do much more than sign their name will ring because they find that now they are expected to take part in very complex online processes and complete mandatory safety training. So the requirements for the job have changed.'

For Ian Roberts the trigger was the realisation that if he wanted to be an actor, he would have to learn his lines. And for that he needed to be able to read.

Myths about adult literacy

There's a common misconception that the only people with literacy problems are new migrants. But in 2020, 68% of callers to the Reading Writing Hotline were from English speaking backgrounds and went through school in Australia.

Another mistaken belief is that it is young people who don't have the literacy skills for work and study. 'If you listen to talk back radio you hear people reminiscing

about a golden age where everyone learned to read and write at school. But I've taught people in their 60s who never went to high school,' Jo says.

The PIAAC data bears this out with older Australians 60+ with the lowest literacy rates. And 60% of callers to the Reading Writing Hotline are men, mostly in the 44-65 age group.

So how is it that so many people who went through school in Australia are struggling to read and write?

Research has found a range of reasons why people don't develop the skills they need — particularly in the crucial years between 5 and 9 when most kids develop reading skills. Parents with low literacy; disrupted schooling, poverty, learning difficulties, eyesight or hearing problems, and family breakdown are some of the reasons why children can grow into adults without reading and writing skills.

Limited services

Asking for help is one thing, getting it is another. Government funded adult literacy services are available for jobseekers in the form of the 'Skills for Employment and Education' (SEE) program. But 82% of callers to the Reading Writing Hotline are stay-at-home parents, already working, retired or carers, so are not eligible for free adult literacy help, Vanessa Iles says.

Getting help is also complicated by where you live. Services across Australia are often piecemeal and patchy outside of metropolitan areas with some states having little or no provision. 'If someone is calling from Melbourne they have lots of options. If they're calling from a rural area it's a very different story', Vanessa says.

The existence of a national Hotline sets up expectations that help will be available. 'The model of a hotline implies that you take calls and plug people



Rugby legend Ian Roberts said it was easier to come out as gay than to publicly admit he had never learned to read properly. Photo: Nathan Hopkins, NRL photos.

into services. But we've had a huge increase in people we can't find classes for, up from 4% to 13%.'

'It can take people 10–15 years to call us and they finally ring thinking "OK I'm ready to unburden myself and deal with the embarrassment and shame." We hate saying "Sorry there's nothing for you,"' Vanessa Iles says.

Adult literacy into the future

Ros Bauer, Adult Learning Australia (ALA) Board, says that the recently convened parliamentary inquiry into adult literacy is an opportunity to influence public policy.

'Formal and accredited VET training incorporating foundation skills and offering pathways for work or further study are important but they presuppose that learners already have the literacy skills needed. How can you develop a resume or write a job application if you don't have those basic reading and writing skills?'

'The kind of everyday reading and writing that people who have lower levels of literacy need — how to read a school newsletter or an electricity bill, for example — are not the focus of accredited training.'

Learner centred programs are key. 'For people who left school early or had bad experiences of school it's a big step to come back to learning. They often come in with a mistrust of the system so programs that are

'Some people develop fantastic strategies for coping and can lead what look like successful lives. For example, tradies who rely on their wife or their partner to do the paperwork. But if they're separated all that falls apart.' Jo Medlin, President, ACAL

going to be effective are ones where the learner feels safe and supported and where the emphasis is not on pushing them through a curriculum but helping them to learn what they want to know.

'We know that some of the most successful initiatives, ones that work for people who are hard-to-reach and disengaged, are delivered through community education programs. These kinds of face to face, non-threatening and non-accredited programs are suited to people with low level skills and tailored to their needs.'

Ros says the first step in developing suitable services across Australia would be to find out what is available. Currently, adult and community education (ACE) literacy and numeracy programs are offered by a range of different organisations, for different purposes, by a mix of paid and volunteer staff. Mapping this would enable us to get a good picture of what's on offer, identify gaps and look for opportunities for partnerships.

Supporting those organisations who are doing it well is crucial, Ros says. And while the ACE sector is well placed to offer programs for people with low literacy, in some states and territories the sector has been dismantled. 'Support and development for not-for-profit community education would be key to any national strategy.'

But the urgent and unacknowledged issue is the lack of training available for the adult literacy workforce. And it is a problem made worse because by the imminent loss of experienced and qualified teachers who are reaching retirement age.

'We really need to focus on developing the skills of the whole gamut of practitioners working in this space — from ACE and VET teachers to volunteers and everyone



Australia's troubling adult literacy rates first entered public consciousness during World War 2 when the army became aware of the number of soldiers who struggled to read and write. Photo: Museums Victoria, Unsplash.

in between — so that we have people on the ground who can respond and assist in a meaningful way.

'ALA's vision is to deliver tailored professional development that addresses individual needs, which is crucial for a workforce that is highly casualised and under-resourced. An online professional development portal would enable practitioners to connect with others working in the field, share resources and forge links and develop a national community.'

History of public awareness

The prevalence of poor literacy amongst Australians first entered the public consciousness during World War 2. Officers in the Australian army were surprised and troubled by the rate of 'illiteracy' amongst their men. Deprived of the helpers and scribes who covered for them back at home — the wives, mothers, and siblings — and posted overseas, the numbers of Australian soldiers who had difficulty reading and writing were suddenly exposed.

The army established an Adult Education Unit to deal with the problem and noted 'how grateful the illiterates were to get this assistance.' But the benefits went both ways. An army that could read documents, decipher maps, understand navigation and follow written orders was crucial.

After World War 2, adult literacy education continued in a different form. Returned servicemen could attend Workers Education Associations, libraries and local organisations for the purposes of self-education.

Public awareness of just how many Australians had fallen through the education cracks grew in the decades that followed. Adult education advocates like Arch Nelson successfully pitched adult literacy into the government and public consciousness in the

1970s. But it wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s that adult literacy in a more organised form took off in Australia. In the process the field's early emphasis on social justice narrowed to a purely vocational focus.

According to Pamela Osmond, adult literacy teacher and author of a recently published book about the history of adult literacy education in NSW, the early decades of the adult literacy field were founded on ideals of social justice. Whatever reason someone wanted to improve their literacy — for work, social or personal reasons — all were equally valid.

But by the late 1990s, the global economic crisis had shifted the narrative so that anything that didn't contribute to economic prosperity was deemed irrelevant. 'With the economic downturn TAFE and adult basic education and adult literacy services were co-opted into the process of industrial reform and became part of the mainstream. Once adult basic education was assimilated into the National Training Reform Agenda the rest of the role was forgotten. The focus of adult literacy became workplace and training,' Pamela says.

And we've been stuck in that narrative ever since.

Join now

Being a member of ALA is a great way to support lifelong and lifewide learning in Australia and join a thriving national network of adult educators.

To find out more about all the benefits of an ALA membership, go to: ala.asn.au/join-now/



**Adult
Learning
Australia**

Mentors drive success

A learner driver mentoring program in Geeveston Tasmania is changing the lives of new drivers and their teachers.



The first time learner driver Jennifer Cameron, 38, went out driving with her sister the experience was nerve-wracking. For a start, Brazilian-born Jennifer felt like she was driving on the wrong side of the road. 'Oh my god I was very, very nervous. My sister was scared too. She was holding on to the door and the edge of her seat the whole time. Afterwards I said, "Would you like to stop and have a drink now?" and she said, "Whisky would be good."'

But Jennifer knew she couldn't give up. Without a licence, she was unlikely to find work. 'At interviews they always ask if you have a licence because they want you to be able to get around.' And she had to rely on a slow and infrequent bus service to get her to her studies in Hobart.

So when Jennifer heard that her local community centre in Geeveston ran a program that paired learner drivers with mentors she immediately signed up.

Dr Lauren McGrow runs the JumpStart program at Geeveston Community Centre, one of 18 Learner Driver Mentor programs across Tasmania. Geeveston, notable for its starring role in the ABC series *Rosehaven*, an hour by car from Hobart, is on the cusp of the south west wilderness area.

'Mentors get a lot out of it. They love seeing their learners get their Ps. Mentors also improve their own skills because they're constantly thinking about the rules and their own driving.'

Dr Lauren McGrow, Jumpstart

While the town is a magnet for tourists and people interested in alternative lifestyles, it has its fair share of people disadvantaged by unemployment, family breakdown or mental health issues. And those without a car or a licence are even less likely to find work and are more isolated, Lauren says.

The program is for people who don't have the money or the people in their lives who can take them out on the road.

'Jumpstart is really important to places like this. Geeveston is a remote town and public transport is shocking. If you don't have a licence or a car and your job is not in town it's really difficult. You end up having to hitchhike or rely on lifts from other people, or sometimes you stay home,' Lauren says.

When Jennifer met her mentor Paul for the first time her worries about driving with a stranger evaporated. 'We had a talk and I felt good about him.'

But Jennifer didn't think she'd ever get used to driving on Australian roads. 'At the start I was a bit lost because it's very different here. In Brazil you do a short course to learn the rules and you do a test on a computer and start driving, but not on the street, at a training venue.

'I've been very lucky to get Paul as my mentor. He is very patient and calm. He explains things well, "Do this, do that, go slowly." Sometimes I go fast. If I do something wrong sometimes I say, "Did I scare you?" and he says, "Not yet." He's a good person to learn with.

'When I do something right he says "You did a good job." So I know I am learning and that makes me more confident. He is more confident with me too and is happy that I'm doing things right. I am much more relaxed now when I'm driving.'



Without a licence, older people can find themselves stranded and vulnerable after their partner and driver dies.
Photo: mrmelais CC BY-NC 2.0

They spend one or two hours each week driving to local towns and have plans to travel further afield.

Jennifer is planning to go for her probationary licence in June and is excitedly saving for a car.

Her sister feels safer with Jennifer behind the wheel too. 'I drive her to Hobart and back again and she doesn't hold on like she used to.'

Simon Hill, 55, has been a Jumpstart mentor for three years. 'I saw a poster advertising Jumpstart up on the board in the local shopping centre. I thought "Geez that sounds like something worthwhile". I got a motorbike licence when I was 16 and my car licence when I was 18 and it changed my life. At the time I was living in a remote area of England and it was always a challenge to get instructors to come out and teach you.

'The best thing is helping learners to enjoy the freedom and independence that a drivers licence gives you. With a licence if you want to go anywhere or do anything you can do it to your own timetable, not the bus company's.'

For Simon, good mentoring is all about helping learners believe in themselves. 'If I take someone out and they say "I'm a bad parker" I say "You're not a bad parker, you just haven't practised enough. I've done it for 35 years."

'Our community centre is a place that brings people together with a focus on lifelong learning and building connections between people.'

Dr Lauren McGrow, Jumpstart

'And it's very satisfying. 'There's something to be said for that moment when you see everything start clicking. One minute you see your learner is afraid and thinking they can't do it and the next minute you see it dawn on them, "I can do this." There's a certain amount of joy in that. And there's joy and excitement for me when I take them to the test and they pass.

'I didn't think I'd have the patience for it that I have. I try to put people at ease. You have to have a good sense of humour too. I say to the learners, "The only time you have to worry is when I grab the "Oh Jesus" rail." And that makes them laugh. Driving is fun. I enjoy it and hopefully I can pass that on.

'It's really good to pass on years of experience and help people be a little safer on the road. I try and make it something enjoyable even though you have to take it seriously.

'I remember the first time I drove on my own. You have to get past the fear, the sweaty hands on the steering wheel and enjoy the fact that all of a sudden you're in charge and you can put your foot down and go where you want.'

Lauren says Jumpstart takes learners of all ages. People as young as 17 or as old as their late 60s, jobseeker and retirees, have gained their licences through the program.

'We give a lot of support to our mentors. Mentors are paired with someone they would never normally meet in ordinary life. They spend a lot of time one-on-one in a vehicle and they begin to talk and share and form a bond and the mentor imparts their values and ethics and the driver feels very supported by them. It happens quite naturally and beautifully.

'In more traditional communities they have rituals around young people becoming adults where older



Rahman is learning to drive with mentor Linda at Geeveston Community Centre.

people open up the way to adulthood for younger people and I think that this is what happens in our driver program.

'Sometimes mentors will come and say to me "You wouldn't believe the things that that young person is telling me" and I say "It's great that they are so open with you, it shows how much they trust you." Some mentors stay in touch with their drivers over many years. Mentors often feel that they have watched young drivers grow up. They've watched them get their licence and move into jobs and they're very proud of the young people. So mentors get a lot out of the process.'

And the experience opens up learning opportunities for mentors, Lauren says. They improve their own driving skills and knowledge as well as often getting involved in a broader range of activities run out of the community centre.

For people who get their licence later in life the benefits are enormous, Lauren says, particularly people who relied on someone else to do all the driving. 'If you don't drive and your primary partner has died you can be very vulnerable because you are so isolated and dependent on other people.'

One 60-year-old woman who had relied on her husband to drive found herself stuck in a very remote region after he died. Instead of moving away, she

'It is good to be able to give something back and I know from my own experience how influential having a license is in opening up all sorts of opportunities in your work and social life.'
Simon Hill, Jumpstart mentor

decided to stay put and get her driver's licence and signed up for Jumpstart. Her story is not uncommon, Lauren says. And she sees big changes.

'Life really opens up for them and they can make social connections they couldn't before. They can travel from remote and isolated towns to places like Huonville and Hobart to join associations and clubs that meet every week. It helps people to build relationships and they develop new confidence. To be an older person and learn new skills keeps them open to life and its possibilities. They grow and change.

'So having your licence and mobility builds resilience in older people. It can change your self-perception too. You have learnt a new skill and it's not been easy but you've done it. And it's something that for 20 or 30 years you have not had the guts or the opportunity to do but now you can, so it shows people a new side of themselves.'

Getting your licence late in life is a powerful lesson, Lauren says. 'You are not the person you thought you were, you can access things inside yourself that you didn't know were there. It's so important to know that life can open up in new ways in all phases of life, even if you are a much older person.

'Having a good experience of education is so important to many of our learner drivers especially those who didn't like school. When they have a good experience with a mentor teaching them they think "Hey I can take on more learning."

'There are so many educational opportunities for Tasmanians but they are mostly centred in Hobart and Launceston. So if you have no easy access to the cities you're going to be locked out of so many things. Having a licence gives people confidence and access to so much more.'

Getting somewhere

A rebranded certificate course oriented to the needs of adult learners is giving hope in rural Victoria.



Back in 2017 Felicity Williams, CEO of The Centre for Continuing Education in Wangaratta was listening to a young man in a community meeting sharing the story of his struggle with addiction and how important adult education had been in getting his life back on track.

It was a lightbulb moment for Felicity. 'He said that doing an education program gave him hope. And it brought home to me how important it is to think about learners as whole people and how we need take a human centred approach rather than an educational one if we are going to help people make changes in their lives.'

Traditional foundation education programs aimed at disadvantaged learners like the Certificate in General Education for Adults (CGEA) with its focus on literacy, numeracy and digital skills seemed inadequate to the task Felicity had in mind.

'Our approach was to offer something much more, something that would help people build self awareness and skills for living a better life as well as work skills such as creative thinking and teamwork.'

In 2017 she developed the concept of the program she called 'Getting There'. 'I handed it to our VET team and said "Put this over the CGEA and make it happen".'

'We take things for granted that are huge achievements for other people. If you never volunteered for the school canteen because you were really worried about your numeracy skills but then you develop the confidence to do it, that's a big deal.'
Felicity Williams, CEO, The Centre

The 6 month course is now offered at Wangaratta, Broadford, Mansfield, Yea, Seymour and Benalla.

Felicity is very proud of the result. 'Getting There is a flagship program that underpins my vision for The Centre. We don't just provide education, we support the whole person. We look at each person's circumstances, we look at the risk factors they are facing, and we provide learning opportunities and wrap around support to protect them. And we have trainers who are really gifted at engaging our learners who bring the material to life.'

Lead Trainer Lyndal Perry started her teaching career when she was promoted from flipping burgers to running training for co-workers at McDonald's. But it was her subsequent experience as a trainer at a JobActive working with people who were obliged to attend courses that was invaluable.

'I had to be really creative and find ways to connect with people, so that they could get something out of the training. I'd say "What's one thing I can help you with?"'

The relationship between trainer and adult learner is central to Getting There, Lyndal says.

'A big part of the success of Getting There is letting the students know that I am a person. I'm not a teacher standing at the front of the classroom telling them what to do. I don't pigeonhole people or stereotype them. I work with each student to ask them what their goals are, to find out who they are, what their background is, what their circumstances are and how they ended up in my classroom. I see teaching as a two-way interaction.'

It's an approach that pays off. Setting individual goals and engaging people in group discussions and activities helps to break down any resistance people might feel about returning to a classroom. Lyndal says that even initially reluctant participants are soon keen to get involved.



Lead trainer at The Centre Lyndal Perry (centre) says the relationship between trainers and learners is crucial to the success of the program.

'Building a relationship based on trust and respect is essential. In my experience, that is the main difference between The Centre's approach to education and training and larger training providers. Our courses are learner focussed, with smaller groups and trainers who understand the barriers our learners face in stepping into a training environment.

'We're not about ticking boxes, we're all about being involved in the communities where we provide training. Students who have tried the larger RTOs and feel disheartened at being a number in a classroom, thrive in our learning environment.

'Getting to know students as people is so important to good teaching. It's such a contrast to my McDonald's days where it didn't matter who you were, everybody was expected to do the same course and achieve the same outcome.'

Lyndal is proud of so many of her students. One was a woman with intellectual and physical disabilities, low literacy and numeracy whose goal was to find a job. By the end of the course she was working at a local factory. 'She still messages me from time to time telling me how happy she is.'

Another was a 19 year old single mum with undiagnosed ADHD and with two kids. 'She had a terrible time at school. I found she was really helpful in explaining things to other students. Her confidence really grew and she realised that she really enjoyed

'We have been very creative with the CGEA, which on the face of it is a very bland program. We brought the CGEA to life and that's what I'm thrilled about.'
Felicity Williams, CEO, The Centre

helping people, and wanted to pursue this as a career. After she finished Getting There she went on and completed a Certificate 4 in Disability.

'I get a lot of satisfaction out of helping people to progress. I really love my job. For me, there's no student who's too hard to work with.'

When Allirra Witherow got a job as a casual at Spotlight she rang her mum, crying tears of joy. 'It was my dream job. I have always loved sewing. I was just so excited when they offered it to me.' But when COVID hit, Allirra was let go. Even though she saw it coming, she was devastated.

It was her JobActive provider who recommended Getting There. But going back into a classroom was a challenge for Allirra, 26, who dropped out of high school in year 12 after a bout of debilitating anxiety.

'I was a bit reserved and unsure when I arrived. I didn't know what I'd get out of it.

'I expected that it would be the same type of atmosphere at school where someone at the front of the room says, "This is what we're doing" and who expected you to put your head down and get on with your work. But I was very pleasantly surprised. As I approached the door I could hear all these happy voices. The teacher greeted me and she was really warm and bubbly so it was a really good atmosphere and really refreshing. It made me feel straight away that "I'm gonna get something good out of this."

Apart from refreshing her knowledge of WHS and first aid, Allirra enjoyed projects like researching and writing about Cathy Freeman. 'It was really interesting to learn about someone whose life was so different to my own. It really opened my eyes to someone who overcame hurdles to become very successful. I found that inspiring.'



Felicity Williams, CEO of The Centre says a human centred approach to adult education is crucial.

Allirra says the course also taught her things about herself. 'I realised that I have preconceived notions about things that are often negative and wrong. This course was great. I had only one instance of anxiety and that was when we made the transition from face to face to online because I am so easily distracted at home.'

'I would definitely recommend that other people do it. Even if you don't think you'll get much out of it, there will be something to help with your employability or enlighten your world view. You'll find something to help you in one way or another.'

Allirra would love to return to Spotlight, but for now further study looks more practical. 'I think I might start my own business, doing sewing, mending and alterations. So I think my next step will be doing a business management course.'

Jessica Blanchard, 37, has struggled to find work that fits in around her husband's shift work and caring for her 10 year old son who has special learning needs. She's picked up casual work here and there but has been looking for something more permanent for the past two years.

But she's not someone to push herself forward. 'I just didn't have that confidence. I've always been shy. I always struggled at school, particularly in maths, and left at the end of year 11. And I hadn't done any study since school except RSA and food handling courses. So I was nervous to start with.'

But Jessica says the course helped to bring her out of her shell although doing things like oral presentations to a group was daunting. 'I kept putting it off and let

everyone else go first. It took me a few weeks to get up the confidence and to feel that I knew what I was talking about. But to be able to get up and speak in front of a class was terrific.'

And the work wasn't as hard as she expected. 'What surprised me was being able to successfully complete it. They really helped me improve. The extra skills I got to learn were just fantastic.'

And she learned how to handle job interviews with more confidence. 'Before the course if someone asked me in an interview if I had experience in something I would answer "Yes, I have." But now I'm able to go on and talk more and expand on what I've done.'

She credits the course with helping her get a job as a cleaner at a car dealership. 'I asked a lot of questions and I used more initiative and put more of myself into the interview. By the end of the interview I was able to negotiate my hours and they were happy to make changes to fit with my husband's shifts.'

Her new confidence with maths has paid off with home schooling her son. 'Before I found it hard to explain maths things to him. But now it is a lot easier to help him. I learned from the course that making things fun and working at your own pace is the best way to keep learning.'

Jessica has plans to continue studying. 'I started a childcare course but I needed to work so I had to put it aside. I would love to complete that. When my son goes to Special Ed school, it will relieve the pressure and I will be able to concentrate on studying.'

By the time the Getting There course came to an end Jessica was reluctant to finish.

'It was very hard to leave it. I really enjoyed it because every day I was going out somewhere and achieving something for myself.'

'People go from "I can't do anything, I'm not worth anything" to "I can conquer the world."' Lyndal Perry, trainer

ACE Update

In **WA**, the McGowan Government has invested almost \$250,000 to support 28 regional and remote Community Resource Centres in the north of the state to boost technology capacity and better connect communities.

Linkwest is about to embark on a six month professional development program for community members and community centre staff across regional WA covering topics such as communication, grant writing, governance and evaluation.

In **TAS**, 26TEN has opened up applications for its new program, 26TEN Communities: Local literacy for work and life, to improve adult literacy and numeracy in Tasmanian communities. It comes as part of Tasmania's new \$4.4 million Adult Learning Strategy which supports lifelong learning for all Tasmanians. 26ten.tas.gov.au

In **NSW**, CCA is holding a half day online ACE summit on 29 June to promote the sector's role in Australia's economic recovery with a focus on the future of foundation skills and planning the aged care workforce. Speakers and session details to be confirmed. cca.edu.au



Nationally, ALA developed its submissions to the government in response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Adult Literacy chaired by Mr Andrew Laming MP, which is now underway. ALA's pre-budget submission called for a national framework for increasing the level of adult literacy by 20% at PIAAC 2031/32 and significant investment in skilling Language, Literacy and Numeracy educators.

In the meantime, phase 3 of ALA/ACEVic's Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Practitioner (ALLNP) online professional development program for staff in Victorian Learn Locals has begun. Over 270 adult educators in Learn Local settings have completed this program to date.

ALA currently has three Board vacancies and nominations for Board positions close on 12 April. Results of the elections and new Board members will be announced at the AGM on 7 May 2021.

The Learning Changes Lives Foundation 'Literacy Changes Lives' small grants program is now open. The Foundation is calling for applications from community-based organisations for innovative and effective programs that support adults with low literacy and numeracy. Applications close 30 April 2021. learningchangeslives.org.au/grants/

Neighbourhood House Week, a nationwide initiative to celebrate the role of neighbourhood houses in the community happens across Australia from 8-14 May. This year's theme is 'Loneliness: the solution is community.' neighbourhoodhouseweek.com

The Dept of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business has announced a \$9.9 million Government-led Remote Community Pilots initiative to improve English language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) skills. dese.gov.au/foundation-skills-your-future-remote-community-pilots

QUEST

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