

ACE outcomes – following suit?

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Abstract

Over the past twenty years there have been three major studies of outcomes of adult and community education in Victoria: *Community learning: the outcomes report*, Kimberley, H., TAFE Board, Melbourne 1986; *Outcomes and pathways in adult and community education*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Adult, Community and Further Education Board, Melbourne 1995 and the *ACE Longitudinal Study*, Walstab, A., Volkoff, V., Teese, R., Adult, Community and Further Education Board, Melbourne 2005, 2005 and 2006.

Governments at both federal and state levels have risen and fallen over those twenty years, policies about ACE have changed, as have the structures overseeing ACE government funding, which has increased exponentially since 1986, and is more closely aligned with VET policy. Yet there is considerable congruence in what ACE was and is achieving and how it is and was valued by its students. This paper looks at the similarities and differences in these three studies that have reported outcomes of ACE in Victoria over those twenty years.

Introduction

In 1986, the first investigation of the outcomes of adult, community and further education (ACE) showed that 38% of participants proceeded to further education and 33% who were not in the paid workforce three years previously had gained employment (Kimberley 1986). This meta-analysis of the three major ACE¹ outcomes research projects conducted in Victoria, *Community learning: the outcomes report* (Kimberley 1986), *Outcomes and pathways in adult and community education* (ABS 1995) and the final report of the ACE longitudinal study, *ACE makes a difference: building pathways, providing opportunities & creating outcomes* (Walstab, Volkoff and Teese 2006) explores to what extent ACE outcomes followed suit over this twenty year period.

¹ It should be noted that the term 'ACE' was not in Victorian policy usage until the later eighties. For simplicity this paper will use the term for earlier participation.

Research purpose

Community learning: the outcomes report (Kimberley 1986)

Since the beginning of the eighties, increased TAFE support and the establishment of Regional TAFE Boards have been important factors in the development of community based provision of TAFE courses. As an avenue of mutual access, TAFE to the community and the community to TAFE, Community Providers have now become an integral part of TAFE provision. (Kimberley 1986)

There were three main thrusts to the research: documentation of employment and further education outcomes for ACE participants, documentation of skills developed through ACE that might be used for educational and vocational purposes², and documentation of participants' perceptions of their own educational and vocational development. The research was unique in at least two respects: there had been no previous research into educational and vocational outcomes of ACE and the research documented outcomes over a three year, retrospective period (Kimberley 1986).

Outcomes and pathways in adult and community education (ABS 1995)

The aim of this research was to demonstrate the extent to which Australians are using ACE to increase employment opportunities, participate in further study, develop personal and practical skills, strengthen family life or enhance participation in community life (ABS 1995).

Its objectives were to:

- *develop a profile of 1992 course participants which includes information about their age, sex, educational background and other characteristics*
- *determine the extent to which adult and community education has helped participants to improve key competency skills necessary for workforce participation*
- *trace the educational outcomes and pathways of 1992 course participants to determine whether other adult and community education courses have been completed or educational qualifications studied towards [sic].*
- *explore whether adult and community education improved employment opportunities for participants, particularly for the unemployed*
- *understand the personal benefits that adult and community education can provide and benefits to families and communities. In particular, to understand how such benefits can lead to other outcomes (eg. education and employment outcomes).*
- *understand how adult and community education has improved participants' language and communication skills, particularly for English as a Second Language (ESL) and Adult Basic Education students*

² This notion can now largely be expressed in different terms. It should be noted that this study was conducted prior to the 'competency' era, prior to the use of the term 'transferable skills' and prior to Mayer's identification of 'key competencies'

- *examine whether people experience different outcomes and pathways depending on their characteristics, such as age, employment status and what type of course they were enrolled in 1992 (eg. Adult Basic Education, ESL, Access, Vocational Education and General Adult Education)*

(ABS 1995)

This study was commissioned by the Victorian Adult, Community and Further Education Board (ACFEB) with funds from the Department of Education, Employment and Training.

ACE makes a difference: building pathways, providing opportunities & creating outcomes (Walstab et al 2006)

This project, the final of three stages over a three-year period, measured the ACE sector's impact, effectiveness and community reach by addressing the broad questions, "Does ACE make a difference (and, if so, how do we know?); "For whom does ACE make a difference?" and "What is it about ACE that makes a difference?" (Walstab *et al* 2006) preceding projects were reported as *A Community-Studies Approach to Researching Strategic Issues in ACE* (Walstab and Teese 2005) and *ACE connects! Pathways to Education, Employment and Community* (Walstab, Volkoff and Teese 2005).

It sought to identify patterns of participation in relation to a range of socio-economic and demographic variables and to provide data on learners in ACE and their experience of study. It aimed to measure individual and community benefits which might accrue from participate in ACE over the longer term. In particular:

- *identify patterns of participation in relation to a range of social and demographic variables*
- *track students' destinations (including some of the priority learner groups identified in the Ministerial Statement on ACE, 2004)*
- *identify long-term outcomes and benefits of participation in ACE (Walstab et al 2006).*

This study was commissioned by the Victorian Adult, Community and Further Education Board (ACFEB).

Limitations of this analysis

The analysis undertaken for the purposes of this paper was constrained by a number of limiting factors. First, each of these studies was conducted in a different policy environment, with correspondingly different emphases and expectations. Second, neither of the latter two studies set out to replicate a predecessor. There are major divergences as well as striking similarities among purposes (explicit and implicit) and the focus of each survey instrument. Analytical frameworks developed in response to the research interest of contemporary government policies meant that some questions on similar topics were phrased such that viable comparisons could not be made among sets of responses. Even where very similar data was collected, the findings selected for reporting purposes varied from one project to the next.

In the first two studies (Kimberley 2006, ABS 1995) there was greater interest in the contribution of ACE participation to family life and community involvement. In the second two studies (ABS 1995, Walstab *et al* 2006) there was greater emphasis on course completion and learner pathways as the ACE policy and funding became more structured and more closely aligned with the vocational education and training (VET) agenda.

This analysis is based primarily on compatibility of investigative interest. As such it includes comparisons among those variables that are similar even if not identical. These include comparable socio-economic and demographic information about ACE participants and among educational, vocational individual and community outcomes.

Policy context

In 1986, when the first ACE outcomes study, *Community Learning: the Outcomes Report*, was conducted, ACE was described as 'community based provision of TAFE'. That small proportion of provision that was government funded was regulated by the TAFE Board and administered by Regional TAFE Boards. TAFE policy reflected the context manifested by the Cain Government's *Social Justice Policy* of 1986 which stated in relation to education and employment,

... when we move to increase participation rates in secondary and post-secondary education, we want to ensure that those groups currently under represented get improved access to those education and training places.

When we develop employment programs, we want to ensure that those who have been non-earners for extended periods, (e.g. women who have been rearing children), are not excluded but are positively catered for. (Quoted in Kimberley 1986)

The primary aim of the TAFE Aims and Objectives Statement of 1985 was stated as,

The aim of TAFE is to provide post-secondary education and training which are easily

accessible and which enable individuals to obtain qualifications, knowledge and skills for vocational and/or personal development purposes. (Quoted in Kimberley 1986)

Two secondary aims were,

1. *To develop and provide a wide range of programs relevant to identified needs*
2. *To provide the opportunity for individuals to overcome educational disadvantage.*

(Quoted in Kimberley 1986)

The 1995 research, *Outcomes and Pathways in Adult and Community Education* (ABS 1995), was undertaken in a fundamentally different environment. The value of ACE had been confirmed by parliamentary legislation in 1991 to establish the Adult, Community and Further Education Board, separate from coeval establishment of the State Training Board responsible for vocational education and training, and the ACE/MOVEET Working Party in 1993.

In this report, the aims of ACE are described as:

- Providing educational opportunities for all adults
- Extending beyond providing education to individuals to assisting them to develop towards their full potential in work, family and community life.
- Promoting a democratic society through actively involving ACE participants in decisions about the management, content, style and delivery of their learning
- Responding to the Training Reform Agenda of 1987 through contributing to the establishment of competency based standards.

This last was seen to be causing some tension between “the new vocationalism and ACE’s traditional provision of ‘liberal education’.

The 2004 ACE policy environment was very different from 1986 and 1995. The ACFE Board had been in operation for thirteen years, information about learners in ACE was included in the national VET data collection, competency standards underpinned all accredited courses and ACE providers were included in the Australian Quality Training Framework.

The Ministerial Statement 2004, *Future Directions for Adult and Community Education in Victoria*, expresses government objectives for ACE as a series of desired outcomes. These included:

- Stronger communities through increased skills of adults and communities
- Increased responsiveness to diversity and increased skills for priority learners leading to greater community involvement
- Increased involvement, satisfaction and training for volunteers
- Delivery of ACE in line with government priorities and better measures of the benefits of ACE for learners and communities.

Scope of studies

Community learning: the outcomes report

The research explored ACE provision in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of TAFE (now the Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council of Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE)). Participants from 15 providers participated in the survey.

Outcomes and Pathways in adult and community education

The intended scope was national but was limited in practice to Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia, the only states where ACE providers held reliable enrolment data from 1992. Participants from 100 providers participated in the study. Data was amalgamated. While an analysis for each state formed part of the study, this was only available to the state concerned. I am currently unable to locate the Victorian analysis.

ACE makes a difference: building pathways, providing opportunities & creating outcomes

This study explored participation in ACE in four “study regions” in Victoria determined by ABS collection regions: Eastern Metropolitan Study Region, Northwestern Metropolitan Study Regions, Bendigo Study Region and Ballarat Study Region. These approximately aligned with five ACFE regions: Eastern Metropolitan, Northern Metropolitan, Western Metropolitan, Grampians and Loddon Mallee. Participants from 43 ACE providers participated in the study.

Methodologies

Survey Sample

Community learning: the outcomes report

The sample constituted the fifteen ACE providers that held enrolment data for 1983. These centres were a mix of small (9) and large (6) and were scattered throughout the whole region which encompassed inner suburban, outer suburban, semi-rural and rural localities. Strata sampling and systematic sampling were used to select and analyse the sample. Eleven of the fifteen providers received TAFE funding towards provision of some programs. The fifteen ACE providers included in the study mailed the survey to their own 1983 enrollees, a total of 1,442 ACE participants, which constituted approximately ten per cent of the estimated 1983 enrolments in ACE providers in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of TAFE. No follow up action was taken to increase the response rate.

Responses were received from 311 participants of which 300 were analysed (23.3% response rate). 77% of respondents were enrolled in an ACE program while the remaining 23% participated in the ACE Centre in other capacities.

Case studies also constituted an important part of this research but findings are not included in this paper.

Outcomes and pathways in adult and community education

The sample of centres was chosen to ensure that there was a representative mix of centres in each state in terms of whether they were:

- located in or outside of a capital city
- small, medium or large centres in terms of the number of courses offered or the number of participants
- balanced in terms of the socio-economic status of the location of the ACE centres

Questionnaires were posted to participating centres for distribution to 1992 participants as follows:

- NSW 33 centres 784 questionnaires sent to centres
- Vic 34 centres 610 questionnaires sent to centres
- SA 33 centres 340 questionnaires sent to centres
- Total 100 centres 2,734 questionnaires sent to centres

2,388 responses were included in the analysis.

Discussion groups also constituted an important part of this research but findings are not included in this paper.

ACE makes a difference: building pathways, providing opportunities & creating outcomes

ACE participants were drawn from ACE providers across five ACFE regions, three metropolitan and two rural (Northern Metropolitan, Eastern Metropolitan, Central Western Metropolitan, Loddon Mallee and Central Highlands Wimmera).

The sample of centres was chosen to ensure that all potential client groups were represented in the sample.

Examples of those of specific interest to the study would be men and women with poor literacy and numeracy skills, those without experience of post-school education or training, the unwaged or those at risk of retrenchment or redundancy (particularly in "at risk" industry areas) and specific equity groups. (Walstab et al 2006)

Centres selected also exhibited the defining qualities of the ACE sector – its localism, accessibility, responsiveness and community base.

A representative sample of students across the range of ACE providers in each of the chosen regions was invited to participate in the study, having been selected using random sampling techniques.

3,047 participants in 43 providers undertook a classroom-based survey between May and September 2004. Of these, 846 were surveyed by telephone in May 2005. In May 2006, 646 of the 2005 respondents participated in a second telephone survey.

Focus groups were not conducted as part of the longitudinal study.

The Survey Questions

Demographic data

All survey questionnaires included questions about:

- Sex
- Age
- Cultural background
- Educational background
- Employment status for Year 1 of the 3 year period (i.e. 1983, 1992, 2004)

Learner expectations/motivations

The 1995 and 2006 studies included questions about learner expectations about ACE whereas the 1986 study was interested in the question of why learners chose to participate in ACE.

Skills development

All three studies included questions about skills development in the areas of:

- Self-confidence
- Learning skills
- Work skills
- Communication skills
- Finding a job
- Community involvement
- Leisure activities
- Communication

They also asked about other gains such as:

- Communicating with people
- Working with others
- Ability to do business
- Using technology
- Planning for future work
- Managing one's life

Employment outcomes

The three studies all gathered information about employment status at the end of the three year period and the contribution ACE had made to getting a job, getting a better job and becoming self-employed.

Educational outcomes

The three studies all gathered information about participation in education at the end of the three year period.

Community outcomes

The three studies all gathered information about involvement in volunteering and community work at the end of the three year period.

Personal outcomes

The 1986 and 1995 studies placed more emphasis on personal outcomes such as making new friends, making decisions and coping with change.

Family outcomes

The 1986 and 1995 studies gathered information about family outcomes such as parenting, family relationships, skills for use in the household and assisting children with schooling.

Findings

Profile of ACE participants

Sex

	% Kimberley (1986)	% ABS (1995)	% Walstab <i>et al</i> (2006)
Female	88	75	79
Male	12	25	20

The number of males participating in ACE has increased from 12% in 1983 to 20% in 1992 to 25% in 2004.

Age

	% Kimberley (1986)	% Walstab <i>et al</i> (2006)	% ABS (1995)
Age 15-29	7.3	21	Age 15-24 7
30-39	29.3	16.5	25-34 17
40-49	33	24	35-44 26
50-59	14.3	21	45-54 22
60+	13.7	17.5	55- 15
			64 12
			65+

ACE participants have got younger – and older.

In 2004 21% of participants were aged less than 30 years compared with 7% in 1983.

In 2004 21% of participants were aged 50-59 years compared with 14% in 1983.

In 2004 17% of participants were aged over 60 years compared with 14% in 1983.

These trends appear to be more pronounced for males than females.

Language background

ACE is attracting more participants whose language background is not English. This increased from 16% in 1983 to 28.5% in 2004.

Education Level

26% of the 2004 cohort had completed Year 12 compared with 32% in 1983. There was a pronounced difference in Year 12 completion among the 2004 cohort between metropolitan areas (31%) and regional Victoria (22%).

Workforce Participation

More ACE participants are in the paid workforce in 2004 (67%) compared with 1995 (47%) and 1983 (46%).

Outcomes

Personal Outcomes

Comparisons among personal outcomes or capabilities are only possible between the 2004 and 1983 ACE studies as the 1995 study report clusters the variables into the Mayer key competencies (ABS 1995) and asks a general question about personal outcomes which makes its findings incomparable with the findings of the other two studies.

Improvements in:	% Kimberley (1986)	% Walstab <i>et al</i> (2006)
Self-confidence	57	86
Communication skills	65	74
Making friends	64	71
Using technology	7 ³	64
Managing life	35	62

The trend toward participants increasing personal capability through skills developed in ACE increased markedly between 1983 and 2004. While the 1986 and 2004 studies measured some common elements of improved personal capability, the 1995 study examined the acquisition of key competencies. It found that 58% of survey respondents reported that they had improved their skills in at least one key competency area as a result of doing an ACE course and, in response to the 1995 study's more general question about personal skills, 62% reported improvement.

Community Outcomes

Fewer ACE participants reported community participation through skills developed in ACE in 2004 (37%) compared with 65% in 1986.

³ Personal computers were a rarity in 1986, the year in which the Eastern Metropolitan Regional TAFE Board office acquired its first PC.

Educational Outcomes

Percentages of respondents who reported participating in further ACE courses at the end of each three-year period were remarkably similar: 1986 (42%), 1994 (42%) and 2006 (43%).

Those proceeding to study outside of ACE comprised 38% of 1986 survey participants. In 2006 14.2% of the survey sample was enrolled in providers other than ACE.⁴

Workforce Outcomes

Work Skills

In 2006, 73% of respondents reported that participation in ACE had assisted them to acquire skills helpful to their work compared with 43% in 1986.

Get Job

In 2006, 47% of respondents reported that skills learnt in ACE had helped them get a job compared with 32% in 1986.

Better Job

In 2006, 61% of the 2004 cohort reported that their ACE participation had helped them get a better job compared with 21% in 1986.

Set up/Run Own Business

In 2006, 26% of the 2004 cohort reported that they were using skills acquired through ACE to set up or run their own business compared with 9% in 1986.

Conclusion: Are ACE outcomes following suit?

There have been some marked changes in the profile of ACE participants over the last twenty years. More males are participating in ACE, more participants are under the age of thirty, or over the age of fifty, more participants are in paid employment and more have a language background other than English.

⁴ Since the sample for the 2006 survey comprised only 21.5% of the 2004 respondents, this may be a considerable underestimate.

Positive personal outcomes from ACE were strongly reported in all three studies, particularly in the areas of communication skills development, making new friends and increased self-confidence. These were considerably greater in 2006 compared with 1986. Involvement in community was an outcome for more ACE participants in 1986 than it was in 2006.

At over 40%, continuing to study in ACE rather than non-ACE providers is an outcome of ACE that has remained steady over more than twenty years.

There has been a dramatic increase in work related outcomes for ACE participants since 1986 with nearly three quarters of the 2004 respondents reporting that ACE contributed to their acquisition of skills helpful to their job compared with two fifths of the 1986 cohort. Nearly half of the 2006 cohort (three times as many as in 1986) reported that skills learnt through ACE had helped them to get a job. Nearly two thirds of the 2004 cohort reported that skills learnt in ACE had helped them get a better job.

While this meta-analysis of ACE outcomes research conducted over the last twenty years can only indicate trends, it seems fair to say that ACE is following suit, that it a 'full house' in terms of personal, educational, vocational and employment outcomes.

Indications for Further Research

Two areas for further research emerge from this analysis. The first is a closer examination of the contribution ACE makes to families, households and communities. The second is an examination of ACE outcomes in respect of employability skills which are similar to, though not identical with, key competencies. As transferable skills, employability skills include many of the capabilities reported by ACE participants over the last twenty years

Key Competencies	Employability Skills
Communicate Ideas and Information	Communication
Work with others and in teams	Teamwork
Solve Problems	Problem Solving
Use Technology	Technology
Collect, Analyse and organise Information	Planning and organising
—	Initiative and enterprise
<i>Plan and organise activities</i>	Self-management
—	Learning
Use Mathematical Techniques and Ideas	<i>Contained within the descriptions of several of the other Employability Skills</i>

(Precision Consultancy 2006)

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