



Australian Social Trends

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Adult learning

In 2006–07, four out of five Australian adults engaged in some form of learning.

Fostering 'lifelong learning' has become increasingly important as Australia's population ages. Governments and workplaces alike have identified a need to boost labour force participation in order to increase economic growth. Learning is one way of increasing people's capacity to work by providing the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to successfully enter, remain in, or return to work. Differences in skill sets tend to be reflected in access to job opportunities and in people's pay.

Access to learning contributes to a socially inclusive Australia. Informal learning (which may include using a library or accessing reference material on the Internet) is particularly important to support disadvantaged adults who may face barriers in accessing more structured learning opportunities.¹ People may choose to learn out of interest in a particular subject or to help achieve a goal such as finding a job or being promoted.

Types of learning

Almost three-quarters (74%) of 25–64 year olds did some type of informal learning in the 12 months prior to interview in 2006–07. This was a much higher rate than participation in non-formal learning (30%) or formal learning (12%). One in five adults did not participate in any of these forms of learning.

All three types of learning are increasingly facilitated by information technology. Almost half (48%) of the 25–64 year olds who had accessed the Internet at home in the 12

Data sources and definitions

This article uses data from the topic on adult learning included in the 2006–07 Multi-Purpose Household Survey. It also draws on data from the 2005 Survey of Education and Training. The article focuses on people aged 25–64 years. Unless otherwise stated, the data relate to the 12 months prior to interview in 2006–07.

Adult learning includes formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Formal learning is structured, taught learning in institutions and organisations (including workplaces) which leads to a recognised qualification.

Non-formal learning also refers to structured, taught learning. It differs from formal learning in that it does not lead to a recognised qualification. Examples include work-related courses and private lessons.

Informal learning refers to unstructured, non-institutionalised learning activities that are related to work, family, community or leisure, such as using the Internet.

Larger households need more income to finance the same standard of living as smaller households but there are economic advantages for larger households since household resources, especially housing, can be shared. *Equivalising* adjusts actual income to take account of the different needs of households of different size and composition, resulting in *equivalised household income*.

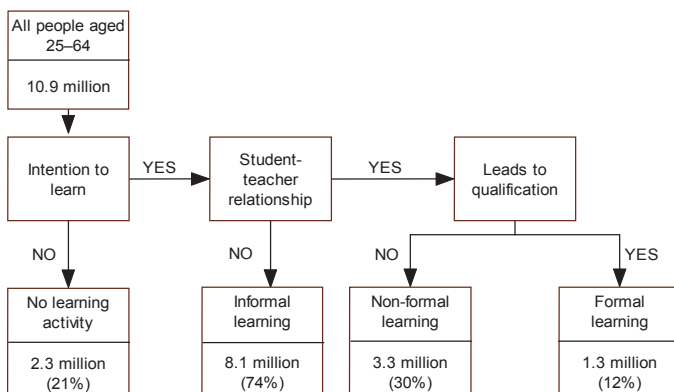
months prior to 2006–07 had done so for educational or study purposes, up nine percentage points from 2004–05. Using computers or the Internet was the second most common type of informal learning (after reading reference material), with 5.8 million 25–64 year olds using this method to learn. (See also *Australian Social Trends 2008*, Internet access at home, pp. 201–206.)

Who is most likely to participate in learning?

...young men and women

Younger people were more likely to participate in formal learning, with those aged 25–29 years reporting the highest formal learning participation rate (25%). There was a noticeable decline after age 29, with a participation rate of 16% for 30–34 year olds. Not surprisingly, people aged 60–64 years (the oldest group surveyed) had the lowest rate of participation in formal learning (3%).

Classification of learning(a) — 2006–07



(a) Categories are not mutually exclusive so components do not add to totals.

Source: *Adult Learning, Australia, 2006–07* (ABS cat. no. 4229.0).

Participation in learning by age groups — 2006–07

Participation in the 12 months prior to the survey

Age group (years)	Participated		Participated in informal learning	Did not participate in learning
	Participated in formal learning	in non-formal learning		
	%	%	%	%
25–29	24.9	30.9	77.3	16.3
30–34	15.7	33.5	75.2	18.0
35–39	13.1	33.2	76.1	18.3
40–44	9.9	32.0	74.3	20.8
45–49	11.3	32.2	77.6	18.7
50–54	8.8	32.1	74.6	21.7
55–59	4.5	26.9	72.1	24.2
60–64	2.6	18.7	64.2	34.0

Source: *Adult Learning, Australia, 2006–07* (ABS cat. no. 4229.0).

There was much less variation across age groups in non-formal learning, however participation did decline for people aged 55–64 years. Older people were much more likely to continue to participate in informal learning than in other forms of learning, with the rates of participation only slightly lower than younger people. The exception was people aged 60–64, who had noticeably lower participation rates in informal learning compared with other age groups.

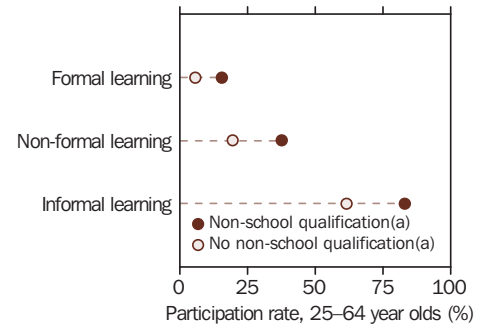
Women were slightly more likely to participate in formal learning (12% of women compared with 11% of men). While participation in formal learning generally declined with age, the exception was people aged 45–49 years, who had a higher participation rate than those aged 40–44. The participation rate for women aged 45–49 years (13%) was noticeably higher than for men of this age (9%), in contrast to the other age groups where there was little difference between the participation rates of the two sexes. This increase for the 45–49 age group may reflect women preparing to return to the workforce, or to increase their responsibilities at work, after absences due to family commitments.

A higher proportion of men (32%) than women (29%) participated in non-formal learning. Men were more likely to participate in non-formal learning in all age groups except in the 55–64 year age group. Men were also slightly more likely than women to participate in informal learning (76% compared with 73%).

...those who already have educational qualifications

People aged 25–64 with higher education qualifications are likely to participate in all forms of learning, particularly formal and

Participation in learning by education, 12 months prior to survey in 2006–07



(a) Non-school qualifications include, for example, a degree, diploma or certificate. People whose level of highest non-school qualification could not be determined have been excluded from the calculations.

Source: *Adult Learning, Australia, 2006–07* (ABS cat. no. 4229.0).

non-formal learning. Over half (55%) of those who had a Bachelor degree or higher had participated in formal or non-formal learning in the 12 months prior to survey in 2006–07, compared with 42% of those who had an Advanced diploma or below, and 24% of those without a non-school qualification.

The differences were less marked, but still apparent, for informal learning – 89% of people with a Bachelor degree or higher had done some informal learning, compared with 79% of those who had an Advanced diploma or below and 62% of those who did not have a non-school qualification.

...people with high incomes

People aged 25–64 with high incomes were more likely than those on lower incomes to participate in non-formal and informal learning. Almost half (46%) of the people in the highest quintile of equivalised weekly household income participated in non-formal learning in the 12 months prior to interview in 2006–07, compared with 15% of those in the lowest quintile. About 84% of people in the highest quintile participated in informal learning compared with 60% of those in the lowest quintile.

There was no significant difference in participation in formal learning between people in the highest income quintile and those in the lowest, although the reasons for recent participation varied. People in the highest income quintile most commonly participated in formal learning to try to get a better job, while for those in the lowest quintile the most common reason for participation was to try to find a job.

...people born in Australia

The rate of participation in formal learning was the same (12%) for people born in Australia and those born overseas. People born in Australia had higher participation rates in non-formal learning (32% for Australian born and 27% for overseas born) and similar rates of participation in informal learning (75% and 72% respectively).

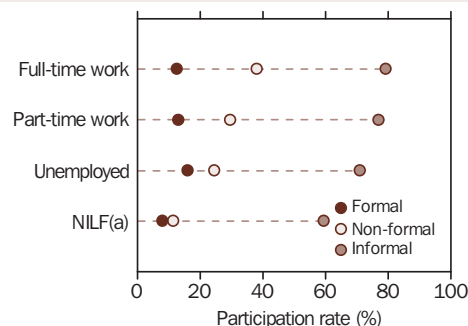
Labour force status

People who were already employed were more likely than unemployed people or those not in the labour force to have participated in some type of learning. Participation rates were similar for full-time and part-time workers (84% and 82% respectively) while people not in the labour force were the least likely to participate in learning (62%). Participation in non-formal learning was particularly low (11%) for people who were not in the labour force, who would not have had the opportunity to participate in the types of non-formal training courses offered in the workplace.

About three-quarters (76%) of unemployed people participated in some form of learning. Interestingly, unemployed people and employed people had similar levels of participation in formal learning (16% and 13% respectively). Half (50%) of the unemployed people who had participated in formal learning in the previous 12 months had done so in order to get a job.

Not surprisingly, participation in formal learning for employed people generally declined with age, with 23% of 25–29 year olds participating (the youngest group surveyed) compared with 4% of 60–64 year olds (the oldest group surveyed). However,

Participation in learning by labour force status, people aged 25–64



(a) Not in the labour force.

Source: *Adult Learning, Australia, 2006–07* (ABS cat. no. 4229.0).

International comparisons



A survey on lifelong learning was conducted in a number of European countries in 2003. The 2006–07 Australian survey is similar to the European survey.

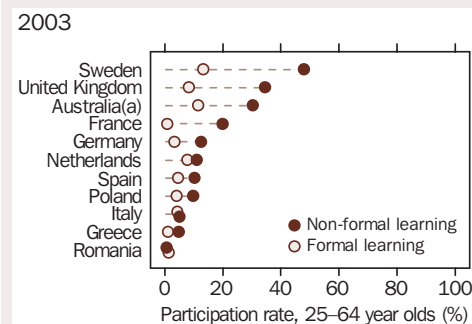
Participation rates for adult learning in Australia are relatively high compared with selected European countries, although Australia's participation rates are not as high as those in Sweden.

Sweden had the highest reported participation rate for formal learning (13% in 2003). The participation rate for the United Kingdom was 8%. Australia's participation rate for formal learning was 12% in 2006–07.

Almost half (48%) of Sweden's population had participated in non-formal learning in 2003. The next highest participation rate was for the United Kingdom (35%). Australia's participation rate was 30% in 2006–07.

Different levels of non-response to the survey in different countries may affect the capacity to make comparisons.

Participation in learning, selected European countries and Australia



(a) 2006–07 for Australia.

Source: *Adult Learning, Australia, 2006–07* (ABS cat. no. 4229.0).

for other types of learning there was much less difference in participation between the youngest age groups and the oldest, suggesting that non-formal and informal learning are particularly important in fostering lifelong learning among employed people, potentially helping to maintain the skills and employability of older workers. Participation in non-formal learning by employed people varied from 34% to 39% for all the age groups from 25 to 59 years, falling to 27% for 60–64 year olds. Participation in informal learning by employed people was close to 80% for all age groups in the 25–59 year range, falling to 73% for 60–64 year olds.

Of the 3.3 million employed people who participated in formal or non-formal learning in the 12 months prior to survey in

2006–07, and whose occupation was known, 31% were professionals, 16% were clerical and administrative workers and 15% were managers, partly reflecting the occupations in which people are concentrated. Professionals was the most common occupation for employed people in 2006–07 (accounting for 20% of employed people), followed by clerical and administrative workers (16%) and technicians and tradesworkers (15%). Managers was the fourth most common occupation for employed people (13%).

The most common industries for these participants to be employed in were health care and social assistance (16%), education and training (12%) and public administration and safety (10%).

Why do people participate in learning?

Technological innovation and changes in consumer demand, as well as new work practices, have led to changes over the last 20 years in the types of jobs that are available (a shift from goods-producing industries to service industries is one example) and in the skills required by workers. Work-related reasons were the most common reasons for people to undertake either formal or non-formal learning.

The main reasons that people aged 25–44 years gave for most recently taking part in formal learning were to get a better job or promotion (32%), to get extra skills for their job (19%) or to get a job (14%). Work also played a big part in reasons for participating for people aged 45–64 years, but this group was more focused on increasing their skills than on gaining promotion. Over one-quarter (26%) of 45–64 year olds said the main reason they had most recently undertaken formal learning was to get extra skills for their

job, followed by the training being a requirement of the job (17%) and getting a better job/promotion (17%).

There was little variation between the two age groups in the main reasons they had recently participated in non-formal learning. The fact that it was a requirement of the job was the most common reason for both age groups (38% for those aged 25–44 years and 34% for those aged 45–64 years), followed by gaining extra skills for the job (25% for each age group).

While work-related reasons were by far the most common for both formal and non-formal learning, personal reasons played more of a role in the decision to take part in non-formal learning. For both age groups, personal interest and personal development were ranked in the top five reasons for participation in non-formal learning. The fact that gaining a better job or promotion was the most common main reason for formal education but not the other types of learning suggests that formal qualifications were seen as important for promotion.

The Survey of Education and Training provides some information on the outcomes of work-related training. In 2005, 48% of employees² who had completed work-related training courses at some time in the past while they were not working, said that this training had helped them to get a job. Adult employees² reported that the skills they acquired through almost 90% of the work related training courses completed in the year prior to the survey were transferable to jobs other than the one they were in at the time of training and that 7% of the courses had helped them get a pay rise or promotion.

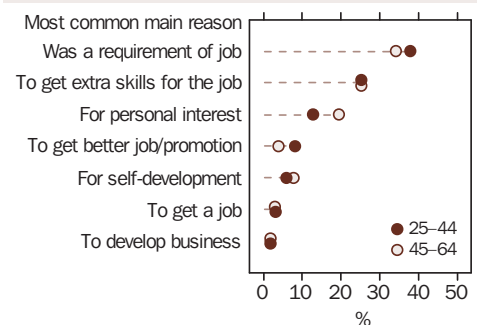
What do people study?

Consistent with the prominence of work-related reasons for undertaking learning, management and commerce was the

Main reason for participating in most recent formal learning, 2006–07



Main reason for participating in most recent non-formal learning, 2006–07



Source: ABS 2006–07 Adult Learning Survey.

most popular field of study for those who participated in either formal or non-formal learning in the 12 months prior to interview in 2006–07. Over one in four (29%) adults who had participated in formal learning studied management and commerce, followed by society and culture (22%) and health (12%). Similarly, the main fields of the most recent non-formal learning were management and commerce (26%) and health (24%).

Obstacles to learning

While all informal learning is based on the person having an intention to learn, it covers a wide range of activities including reading; using computers or the Internet; watching television; visiting libraries; and learning from family, friends and colleagues. This means that informal learning can have advantages in that it offers learning opportunities that are flexible, convenient and suit people's lifestyles. Many of the activities done as part of informal learning are also either free or relatively cheap. Non-formal and formal learning, on the other hand, may present obstacles in terms of time spent, the timing and location of classes and cost.

Almost one in five people who participated in formal or non-formal learning in the 12 months prior to survey in 2006–07 experienced difficulties undertaking training. More women (22%) than men (17%) had difficulties. Of those who participated but experienced difficulties, the most common main difficulty for men was that they were too busy at work (44%), while the most common difficulty for women was that they were too busy at home (29%). Other difficulties included the cost and timing of courses. There were one million Australians who wanted to participate in formal or non-formal

learning but did not. Their reasons for not participating were similar to the difficulties cited by those who did participate.

The cost and time required to study may be a factor in the choice to study part-time. Almost three-quarters (74%) of the one million adults who were studying for a non-school qualification in 2005 were doing so part-time.

Are we participating in learning more than we used to?

The proportion of people aged 25–64 years who were enrolled to study for a non-school qualification increased from 8% in 1997 to 10% in 2005.

The proportion of 25–64 year olds who were in, or marginally attached to³, the labour force and who participated in work-related training also rose, up from 35% in 1997 to 40% in 2005.

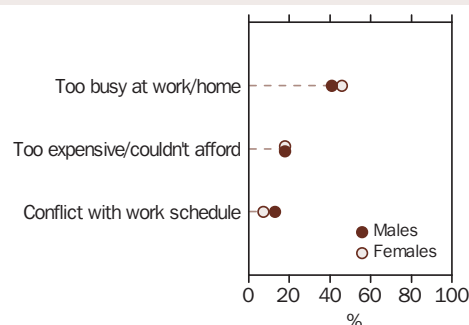
Conclusion

Learning is a key aspect of social and economic development. There are some differences in the characteristics of people who participate in learning, such as higher income and higher initial qualifications, compared with those who do not. Older people are much more likely to participate in non-formal and informal learning than formal learning. With an ageing workforce, non-formal and informal types of learning assume greater significance in maintaining the skills and employability of older workers.

Endnotes

- 1 Kearns, P 2005, *Achieving Australia as an inclusive learning society: a report on future directions for lifelong learning in Australia*, viewed 25 March 2008, <http://www.ala.asn.au/members/Kearns_Report_Achieving%20Australia%202005.pdf>.
- 2 Excluding owner managers of incorporated enterprises. These are people who work in their own incorporated enterprise, that is, a business entity to its members or owners (a limited liability company). They are technically employees although they are more similar in characteristics to self-employed people.
- 3 People who are marginally attached to the labour force are those who were not in the labour force in the reference week of the survey, wanted to work and were either actively looking for work but did not meet the availability criteria to be classified as unemployed, or were not actively looking for work but were available to start looking for work within four weeks or could start within four weeks if child care was available.

People aged 25–64 who wanted to do formal/non-formal learning: main reason did not participate, 2006–07



Source: *Adult Learning, Australia, 2006–07* (ABS cat. no. 4229.0).

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