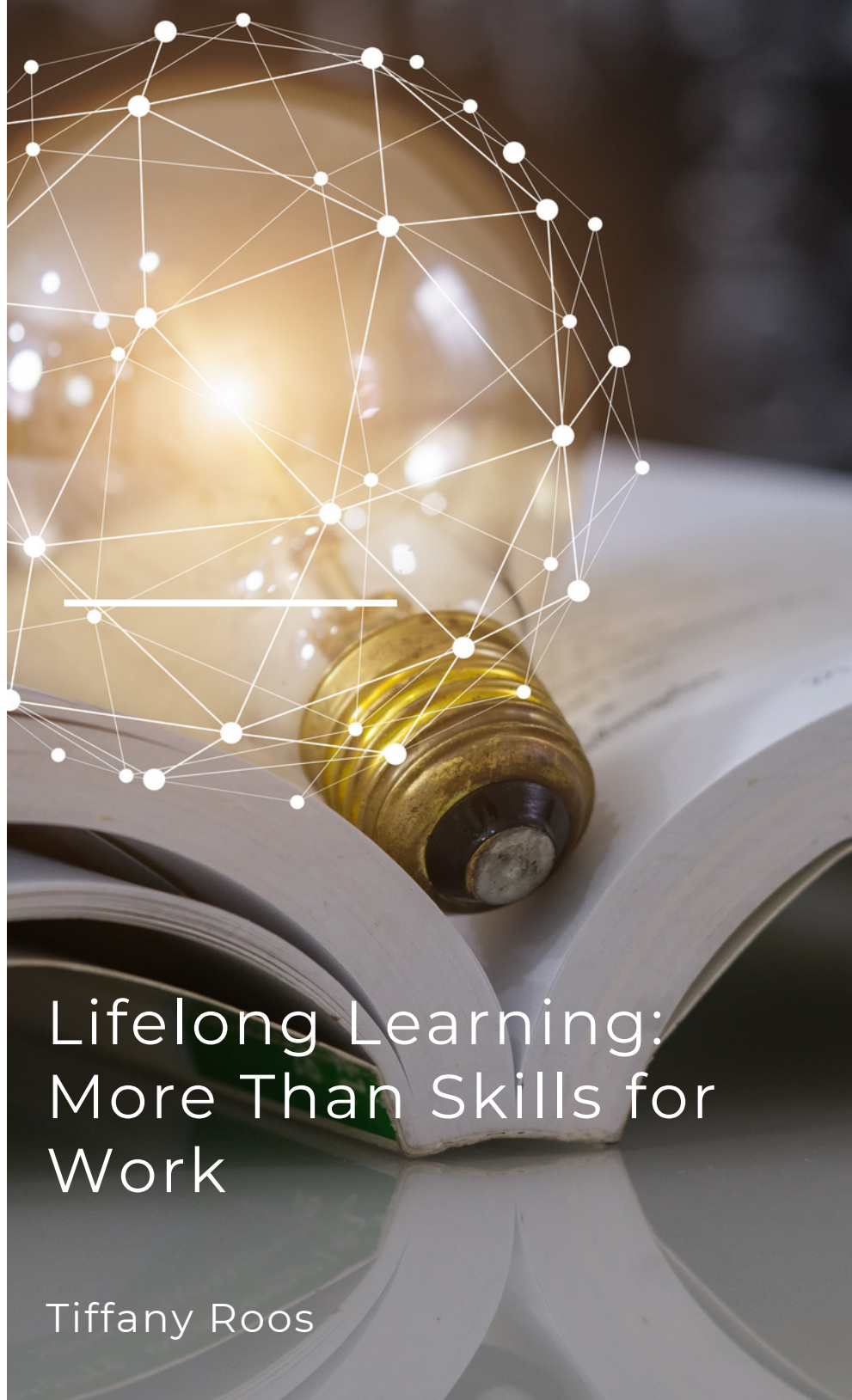


# QUARTERLY JOURNAL

NO.3

SEPTEMBER 2026  
ISSUE NO. 3



Lifelong Learning:  
More Than Skills for  
Work

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# FOREWORD

Welcome to the third edition of the WEA Sydney Quarterly Journal 2026.

Since 1913, WEA Sydney has championed the idea that learning is not confined to a particular age, qualification or stage of life. It is a way of remaining curious, connected and engaged with the world around us.

In this edition, we turn our attention to the idea of lifelong learning itself. We explore why adult education matters beyond employment and vocational skills. While learning can certainly help people adapt to changing workplaces and technologies, its value extends much further. It can support confidence, connection, curiosity and a sense of purpose across the whole of life.

This is particularly important as our society ages and the nature of work, technology and community continues to change. Learning later in life can provide opportunities to discover new interests, develop new perspectives and maintain meaningful connections with others.

At WEA Sydney, we see this every day. Our classrooms bring together people with different experiences, backgrounds and motivations. Some come to learn a language, explore history, develop a creative skill or understand a new technology. Others simply want to keep learning and meeting people who share their interests.

This diversity is one of the strengths of adult education. Learning is not only about what we know at the end of a course. It is also about the conversations we have, the questions we ask and the perspectives we encounter along the way.

This article invites us to consider lifelong learning in these broader terms. It challenges the idea that education is primarily preparation for employment, and reminds us that learning can contribute to wellbeing, participation and a richer experience of life.

This philosophy has been at the heart of WEA Sydney for more than a century. While the subjects we teach and the world around us have changed enormously since 1913, the underlying purpose remains remarkably consistent: to make learning accessible and to create opportunities for people to engage with ideas, with one another and with their communities.

I hope this edition encourages you to reflect on your own relationship with learning, and perhaps to consider what you would like to learn next.

Thank you for being part of the WEA Sydney community and for continuing a tradition of learning, curiosity and shared discovery that has endured for more than a century.

Tiffany Roos  
Executive Director  
WEA Sydney

# Lifelong Learning: More Than Skills for Work

## *Why learning matters at every stage of life*

### by Tiffany Roos

Australia is entering a period of profound social, economic and technological transformation. Artificial intelligence, demographic change, industry disruption and evolving patterns of work are reshaping the skills people need throughout their lives (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2026; OECD, 2026).

But lifelong learning is about more than keeping pace with changes in the workplace. It is also about staying connected, capable, curious and engaged in a rapidly changing world. For many adults, learning is not simply preparation for what comes next. It is part of living well now.

## Learning Across the Whole Lifespan

One of the most important insights emerging from current research is that learning can no longer be viewed as linear. Traditional models assumed people would study early in life, enter stable employment and then apply those skills for decades. That model is increasingly out of step with the way people live and work.

Today's learners move in and out of education throughout their lives: changing careers, updating digital skills, exploring creative interests,



returning after caring responsibilities, developing new interests in later life or learning simply to remain engaged and connected (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2026).

Jobs and Skills Australia describes lifelong learning as extending beyond initial education and across entire careers. Yet it can extend further still. Learning can support participation in civic life, digital society and community life, giving people opportunities to develop knowledge, confidence and connections at every stage of adulthood (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2026; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2024).

This matters particularly as populations age. Later-life learning has been associated with wellbeing, quality of life, self-confidence, cognitive function and a sense of belonging. However, evidence varies across studies. These findings should not be interpreted as proof that learning alone prevents cognitive decline or improves health outcomes (Noble et al., 2021).

## Community Learning Matters

Not all valuable learning occurs in schools, universities or formal vocational settings. Community-based learning creates accessible, social and often low-pressure opportunities for adults to keep learning, meet people and pursue interests that may not fit within traditional education systems.

Research on community-based interventions with older adults suggests

that activities involving learning, engagement and social support can contribute to psychological wellbeing and social connection. Peer support can also strengthen confidence and motivation (Elhag et al., 2025).

Community learning can therefore be about more than the knowledge gained in a classroom. It can provide a reason to leave the house, a regular point of connection, an opportunity to meet people with shared interests and a place to continue developing a sense of identity and purpose.

This is increasingly important in a society where loneliness and social isolation remain significant concerns. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identifies social participation and engagement as important dimensions of social support and wellbeing, while the National Institute on Aging notes that meaningful social connections are important to health and wellbeing as people age (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2026; National Institute on Aging, 2024).



UNESCO's work on learning cities similarly recognises the importance of making lifelong learning a reality at the local level and creating communities in which people of all ages have opportunities to learn (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2024).

## Beyond Skills for Jobs

Much of the current public conversation about adult learning centres on reskilling for emerging industries, digital capability and productivity growth. These are important priorities. Australia needs adults who can adapt as industries, technologies and occupations change.

Jobs and Skills Australia identifies rapid technological change, demographic change and shifting labour-market requirements as important forces shaping adult learning. The OECD has also highlighted the need for stronger and more inclusive adult-learning

systems as skill demands change (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2026; OECD, 2019).

However, focusing solely on employment outcomes risks narrowing the true value of learning across adulthood.

People pursue learning for many reasons: to build confidence, explore creativity, remain mentally active, connect with others, contribute to community, develop new interests and maintain a sense of purpose and identity. For many adults, particularly those beyond the traditional working years, these motivations can be at least as important as vocational advancement.

The case for lifelong learning is therefore both economic and human. People need opportunities to adapt to changing work, but they also need opportunities to grow, participate and remain curious throughout their lives.



## The Human Skills Economy

Technology is changing the skills people need, but it does not make human capabilities less important. In many settings, it increases the value of capabilities such as analytical thinking, creativity, adaptability, communication, collaboration and curiosity.

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 identifies analytical thinking as the most sought-after core skill among surveyed employers, followed by resilience, flexibility and agility, leadership and social influence. Creative thinking, curiosity and lifelong learning are also expected to increase in importance through to 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Recent OECD research similarly finds that social and emotional skills are associated not only with employment and job satisfaction, but also with educational attainment, health, wellbeing and civic participation (OECD, 2025).

This is particularly relevant in an age of artificial intelligence. The OECD argues that people need a combination of foundational, digital and complementary skills, including teamwork, autonomy, problem solving, creative thinking, communication and emotional intelligence, to thrive in increasingly digital environments (OECD, 2026).

The future of lifelong learning may therefore depend less on delivering isolated qualifications and more on creating flexible environments in which people can continue to develop practical knowledge alongside confidence, agency, creativity and connection.

## A Shared Responsibility

Lifelong learning cannot rest solely on individuals. Jobs and Skills Australia argue that meeting Australia's future adult-learning needs will require support from individuals, employers and the broader system (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2026).



Similarly, the OECD has identified financial and time barriers to adult learning and argues that policy settings need to support broader and more inclusive participation (OECD, 2019).

If learning becomes essential for navigating economic and social change, access to learning opportunities must also become more equitable. That means employers

investing in workforce capability, governments supporting accessible pathways, education providers offering flexible and welcoming models, and communities valuing learning across all stages of life.

Community education has a particular role to play here. It can provide an entry point for people who may not see themselves as traditional students, and it can make learning feel relevant, social and achievable.



## Reimagining Lifelong Learning

The future of lifelong learning should not be reduced to employability alone. It should encompass economic participation, personal growth, civic engagement, creativity, social inclusion, wellbeing and lifelong curiosity. Research increasingly supports a broad view of the capabilities adults need to participate fully in work, community and society (OECD, 2025; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2024).

In many ways, lifelong learning is becoming one of the defining capabilities of modern society, not because people need to know

everything, but because they need the confidence and opportunity to keep learning as the world changes around them.

For some, that may mean learning new digital skills or preparing for a changing career. For others, it may mean learning a language, exploring history, making art, developing a new creative practice, strengthening confidence or meeting people with shared interests.

The challenge ahead is not simply building a more skilled workforce. It is building a more connected, adaptable and resilient society in which people have opportunities to keep learning throughout their lives.



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