

**Community Colleges Australia Student of Year Awards
Keynote Address by Joanna Maxwell, Chair, Sydney Community College
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The Learning Journey in Adult and Community Education

Thank you, Aunty Joan Bell, for your Welcome to Country. I pay my respects also to our traditional custodians. Always, was always will be Aboriginal land.

Firstly, congratulations to all the finalists. It has been a real pleasure to read through your bios and see the range of interests and skills, your different career stages. All the different motivations for adult learning and your achievements in your various fields. Bravo!

The roots of adult education in Australia were in social ventures to assist the working class and provide solutions to fill gaps in mainstream educational services. The first activities that could be classed as adult education were conducted by missionaries, keen to reform convicts. More successful were the mechanics' institutes, night classes in schools and correspondence courses that developed over the 19th century.

From these early ventures emerged union-based models, such as the Workers' Education Associations, and ultimately technical colleges, community colleges and TAFEs.

There's been a vigorous debate since the beginning, both here and overseas. Is adult education an idealistic attempt to awaken people? Or a way to backfill gaps in formal education? Is it to enrich people's lives? Or is it vocational and workplace training, which has become an increasing focus in these times of the learning economy?

You will probably be relieved that I am going to avoid a discussion of the theories behind all of this and jump straight into the practical roles of adult learning in our changing world.

Imagine for a minute that it's around 1900 or so. The world is a very different place. Your pathway through life is probably laid out for you, and it is likely all one way - first some learning, then a pre-determined job, then (but only for some of you) a few years leisure at the end.

In those times, you generally had one go at formal learning and often did the same work for life. Retirement was a very new concept - our first pensions were introduced in 1908 when only about 4% of the population were over 65. The average life expectancy in 1900 or so was 47 for men and 50 for women.

Maybe you were lucky enough to access one of the forms of adult education then - something at the mechanic's institute perhaps. Of course, the odds of that went down tremendously if you were female.

Let's fast forward now.

As you know, our world today is very different to our grandparents' world, let alone that world of 1900.

More years have been added to the average lifespan in the last 100 years, than in all preceding millennia, combined. This amounts to over 30 extra years of life and Australia now has the 3rd highest life expectancy on the planet, averaging about 84, a little more for women.

And we continue to add years to our lifespan at the rate of about one month a year - and we are adding healthy years at an even faster rate. So we are remaining healthy and engaged for far longer than was once the case.

My niece is about to have her first child and that boy will have a 50/50 chance of healthy living to 105.

And this longevity bonus is happening at a time when the career trajectory and types of work we are doing are also changing.

The days of 'one job for life' are already long gone. We now have casualisation of the workplace, the gig economy, trends like the great resignation and remote working. The type of work we do is also changing - it's often said that half the jobs we do today did not exist 15 years ago. I sometimes question the 'half' but it is clear that new fields of work are being created all the time, and many traditional jobs are disappearing.

These significant social shifts are not always given much focus in the day to day and amid more immediate challenges.

But it's clear that as we live longer, healthier lives, people will need to sustain longer working lives and to periodically upskill and reskill and become flexible and adaptable as the world of work continues to change. They may even dip out of work to do more intensive retraining so as to change careers. Perhaps more than once.

We are already seeing young people spend longer in post school training or education and planning for a life with several careers or fields of work. The demand for vocational training throughout working life is high and this will only increase over time.

Looking at the motivations of our finalists and their different career stages is also evidence of these trends. You are all ahead of the curve....

One of the really interesting things about adult education is that it is a choice. Unlike school education, there's no law that says you have to learn anything as an adult. That said, of course almost no-one actually goes through adult life without learning new things, and ongoing vocational learning has so many benefits - better job prospects and career advancement, the ability to switch direction in your work as needed or desired, adapting to new technologies, staying current and competitive in the changing job market and increased earning potential, to name just a few.

Of course, vocational education doesn't have to be accredited or even formal. We learn so much from casual courses, conferences, books and workmates.... Any learning that engages your mind, exposes you to new ideas and perspectives and offers you new skills will be helpful. And in many cases, a focus on open explorations rather than rigid assessments can bring huge benefits to the learner.

Sometimes vocational learning starts as something else entirely. In my career change book I wrote about a woman called Jan, who studied jewellery making at community college over her midlife years, to satisfy a longstanding interest in creating beautiful things with her hands. As her main career as a diversional therapist lost momentum in her 60s, she started selling her jewellery at markets. Now in her 70s, this small business continues to offer her income and a great deal of life satisfaction and purpose.

I also stumbled into a new career through a hobby short course. Many years ago I did a WEA weekend course on travel writing. That led to my first published article, on climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, then I became interested in writing more seriously and over time, I learned more writing skills through a series of community college short courses and used this to work my way into a new career as a journo and book writer.

And as Jennifer mentioned, I ended up teaching journalism at Sydney Community College.

I have taught vocational courses to adults throughout my career - I taught law at university in my thirties, ran a corporate training business for many years and developed and ran short courses in business, journalism and creative writing for over twenty years.

Vocational learning of all kinds is a vital part of our lifelong career path and will only become more critical as we travel through the 21st century.

But I am equally as passionate about non-vocational adult learning.

My college is a specialist in running these kind of short courses and it's very clear that they have myriad benefits - exposure to new ideas, enhanced creativity, self-confidence, developing satisfying hobbies, pursuing personal interests, learning valuable life skills, problem solving and much more.

And this brings me back to my original point - that we are living 30 years longer than we used to. I've mentioned some of the implications of this for lifelong education in a vocational context, but it is at least equally as important for us to keep learning things from a personal point of view.

Sure, an extra 30 years means we may well have time and may need new activities to occupy this extra time, particularly if we choose to retire from work at some point. But I am not just talking about that.

In my mainstream work with older Australians, I have learned so much about the realities of later life. Did you know that there is strong research that shows having a sense of purpose or meaning in your life makes you happier, healthier - and adds an average of 7 and a half years to your lifespan?

And it is now clear from research that education itself is a stronger indicator of longevity than is wealth. It is more important...

We also know that mental activity is a big part of staving off memory loss, even dementia - provided you are learning new things - many studies are showing this including very recently a large 10 year study from China.

Another recent study took this even further - people in their 80s spent six weeks learning three new skills of their choice, at the intensity of an undergraduate university course load - they ended up increasing brain capacity over only six weeks to that of a 50-year-old. So, they got back thirty years of capacity in six weeks. I'm not suggesting we all rush out and enrol in engineering or medicine or law degrees, but it's clear that if you use your brain to learn new things through life, it will repay you - big time.

And where better to learn new things than at your local community college?

To conclude, adult learning encourages a longer and more sustainable working life and higher levels of mental capacity, health and happiness - less depression, less dementia, more life satisfaction. There is a

real connection between mental stimulation and the ability to live independently throughout later life rather than in residential care. All forms of lifelong learning have huge benefits for the individual, the community and our economy.

So, if you want to live a long, happy, healthy life that includes a satisfying and sustainable career, maintaining your independence and having a sense of purpose and meaning, the prescription is clear: Keep on learning!

About Joanna Maxwell: Author, teacher, lawyer and policy adviser Joanna Maxwell is the [Chair of the Board](#) of Sydney Community College; Director, Age Research with the Australian Human Rights Commission; and a member of the NSW Government [Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing](#) (MACA). She is the author of [Rethink Your Career in your 40s, 50s and 60s](#) (HarperCollins/ABC Books) and a frequent media commentator on career reinvention and older Australians. She holds a Master of Laws, a Master of Education and a Cert IV, Training and Assessment.