

History of the Festival of Adult Learning Ahurei Ākonga



Late
1980s

The origins of the [Festival of Adult Learning Ahurei Ākonga](#) can be traced back to the **late 1980s** when the American Association for the Advancement of Education (AAAE) initiated the idea of celebrating adult learning on a wider scale. The initial focus in the United States was on organising a Congressional Breakfast for exceptional adult learners, supported by activities for AAAE members.

1990

In 1990, during the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, governments established ambitious goals, including universal access to and completion of primary education and a 50% reduction in the adult illiteracy rate by 2000. However, when governments reconvened in Dakar ten years later, progress was insufficient, with 113 million children lacking access to primary education and 880 million illiterate adults, mostly women.

1992

In 1992, Adult Learners' Week was launched in the United Kingdom, inspiring other countries to adopt similar celebrations. Australia, South Africa, and Jamaica recognised the success of Adult Learners' Week and implemented their versions in 1995. In 1998, New Zealand joined this movement by dedicating a week to honour adult learners, aiming to encourage increased participation in lifelong learning.

1997

A significant milestone occurred **in 1997** when CONFINTEA V, UNESCO's fifth International Conference on Adult Education, held in Hamburg, Germany, endorsed the concept of a global week to celebrate adult learners. Representatives from Aotearoa New Zealand were among the attendees, and their participation contributed to the official adoption of the idea by the United Nations General Assembly in 1998.

1998

In 1998, the Adult and Community Education Association of Aotearoa New Zealand (ACEA) and the National Resource Centre for Adult Learning and Community Education (NRC) collaborated to organise the week's activities. The event included a special celebration in the parliament's great hall, where "Starting Off," a resource for tutors and students, and Te Kete, an information resource resulting from CONFINTEA V, were launched. Te Ataarangi and its co-founders, the late Kāterina Mataira and Ngoi Pēwhairangi, received a certificate and citation of acknowledgment. Regional ACEA branches across the country also participated in various activities to acknowledge the week.

1999

Building on the success of these early initiatives, ACEA took on the national coordination of Adult Learners' Week **in 1999**, in collaboration with the UNESCO National Commission in Wellington and the NRC. A special committee was formed to initiate and coordinate national activities throughout the year, fostering learning and cooperation between countries and agencies involved in adult education. This momentum spread globally, with organisers in more than 40 countries hosting learning festivals.

In September 1999, Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga took place, encompassing the UN-designated Adult Literacy Day on September 8.

2002

In 2002, ACE (Adult and Community Education) Aotearoa, as a newly incorporated society, assumed the responsibilities of ACEA and NRC, continuing the organisation of Adult Learners' Week under the name He Tangata Mātauranga.

International Literacy Day and Adult Learners' Week serve as mobilisation initiatives in many countries, playing a pivotal role in national adult learning policies. They celebrate individual and collective achievements, using these experiences to stimulate demand for learning and promote wider access to adult education.

2018

In 2018, Adult Learners' Week Mātauranga underwent a rebranding and was renamed the Festival of Adult Learning Ahurei Ākonga. This renaming reflects the ongoing commitment to celebrate and promote adult learning in Aotearoa New Zealand.

today

Today, the Festival of Adult Learning Ahurei Ākonga, with its rich history and international recognition, serves as a platform to mobilise and advocate for adult learning policies while celebrating the achievements of individuals and communities. It takes place in various accessible and familiar venues, creating opportunities for adults to engage in learning and encouraging a lifelong thirst for knowledge.

Did you also know that some 40 countries also celebrate adult learning through festivals or Adult Learners' Week? [Click here to find out more about international activities.](#)

