

Adult & Community Education Newsletter



Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga 2026: Finding Our Voice

Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga is a nationwide celebration of lifelong learning, its power, and the difference it makes to individuals, whānau and communities across Aotearoa.

Held from 7–13 September in 2026, the week recognises adult learners, educators and the many organisations creating opportunities for people to learn, grow, connect and participate more fully in their communities.

This year's theme, Finding Our Voice – Ko tōku reo, ko tōku ohoho! (My language or voice is my awakening power), reflects the important role learning can play in helping people find the confidence, knowledge and skills to have their say.

It is a particularly relevant theme in an election year. Having a voice means being informed, understanding the issues that

affect us and our communities, and having the confidence to participate and speak up. It is also about self-determination and recognising the strength that comes when individual voices are brought together.

Throughout this edition of the newsletter, we share stories from across Aotearoa that show lifelong learning in action and the many different ways people are finding, strengthening and sharing their voices.

ACE Aotearoa acknowledges each of the organisations involved in Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga. Thank you for getting involved. Each of the stories we have featured offers a different take, and without exception, each organisation thanked ACE Aotearoa for the funding that made their activities possible.

Aotearoa Chinese Culture Club

The Aotearoa Chinese Culture Club opened the door to traditional Chinese culture during ACE Aotearoa Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga, with three taster sessions giving Auckland participants the chance to try something new.

Founded in 2016 by Tiana New, the volunteer-based organisation was established to share the richness



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Whakatauki

*Waiho i te toipoto,
kaua i te toiroa.*

*Let us keep to the
closeness, not the
distance*



of traditional Chinese culture with communities across Aotearoa. Its work is centred on knowledge, aesthetics, virtue, life and connection, with a strong focus on creating opportunities for people from different backgrounds to learn together.

Over the years, the Club has delivered courses, workshops and cultural events in Auckland, Hamilton, Whanganui and Christchurch. Since 2017, the Club has worked with Auckland Council to deliver spring celebrations at Auckland Botanic Gardens and has hosted a cultural booth at the World of Cultures at Mt Roskill War Memorial Park, featuring activities such as dragon dance, classical Chinese dance, meditation, tea ceremony, traditional Chinese medicine, calligraphy and origami.

For Adult Learners' Week, three cultural partners shared their expertise through introductory sessions held in Auckland on Wednesday 9 September.

Tutors from SoulMotion Studio introduced adult learners to classical Chinese dance. Irene Zhang established the studio in 2021 after

studying in New York and designed the session to provide an accessible introduction to this distinctive art form.

Ten participants took part at the East Tāmaki studio, some trying dance for the first time and others curious to experience something new. They explored the foundations of classical Chinese dance, including posture, body form, movement, rhythm, stretching and body awareness.

Participants followed the tutor's movements, asked questions and learned more about the expressive qualities and aesthetics of the dance form. The class ended with plenty of appreciation and applause, and several participants expressed an interest in continuing their learning.

Music was the focus of the second session, led by Melody Wang from Harmony Guzheng Studio, with support from Isabella Luo. Melody has been teaching since 2009, helping students build confidence and develop an appreciation of Chinese music, with many going on to perform publicly. Sixteen adult learners joined the Guzheng Taster Class, beginning by

singing the guzheng notes before moving on to basic finger techniques and learning a short piece. For many, it was their first experience of playing the traditional Chinese stringed instrument.

The tutor team said the room was soon filled with singing, plucking, laughter and applause. By the end of the session, the group was able to play a short piece together. Seven participants indicated they were interested in continuing to learn the guzheng, with two already registering for further classes.

The third session Everyday TeaCM was led by Charlie Zhang, who introduced nine adult learners to some of the knowledge and practices behind Traditional Chinese Medicine and how its principles could be incorporated into everyday life.

Charlie explained the connections between Traditional Chinese Medicine, the seasons, food, movement and wellbeing. Participants learned about commonly available plants and

ingredients traditionally used to support health and took part in meditation, gentle stretching and simple exercises they could continue at home. A highlight was the hands-on herbal tea brewing. Charlie brought fresh herbs from his garden and demonstrated how they could be used to make a simple herbal tea. The activity proved so popular that the organisers planned to allow more time for tea brewing in future sessions.

Participants left with new knowledge about medicinal herbs and everyday wellbeing, along with herb cuttings to grow at home. Feedback also showed strong interest in learning more about Traditional Chinese Medicine and the use of everyday plants and ingredients.

Together, the three sessions gave people an opportunity to experience aspects of Chinese culture they may not otherwise have encountered, while learning new skills and connecting with others.

Tiana said support from ACE Aotearoa

had helped the Club make the sessions available to a wider group of people.

"Thanks to ACE Aotearoa for selecting us for their support. It really helped us build a bridge between Chinese culture and the wider community.

"This provided an opportunity for people to step in, see, learn, appreciate and be inspired by Chinese culture. We warmly welcome our wider community to join our classes, do not be afraid and do not be shy. The Traditional Chinese Culture is divinely inspired and contains profound wisdom to a lifestyle that is artistic, healthy and reflective. We are here to provide a welcoming and supportive environment where our whānau can try something new and different, explore this rich cultural heritage and be inspired by what they discover. If you missed our sessions this year, we look forward to welcoming you to Adult Learners' Week 2027!" Tiana said.



Finding Your Voice Through the Stories That Made Us



Stories of identity, culture, migration and belonging were at the heart of a special storytelling workshop held as part of Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga 2026.

The Stories That Made Us: Finding Your Voice Through

Storytelling was a two-hour workshop for adults presented by Laenye Productions on Sunday 13 September at Botany Library. Open to complete beginners, the workshop brought together a group of people from different backgrounds for an intimate and supportive exploration of how our own experiences can become stories worth sharing.

Laenye Productions began as a theatre production company focused on Spanish-speaking and Latin American communities, created to promote Latin American culture and give others the opportunity to learn more about it. The organisation became a registered charitable trust in 2021 and has since delivered theatre productions at venues including

Basement Theatre, as well as workshops, community conversations and performances at community events.

Matías Avaca, one of the co-founders and co-directors of Laenye Productions, described the organisation as a small endeavour that has been able to make a big impact.

An important part of its work has been using theatre and comedy to explore more serious issues, including mental health, migration and the challenges people can experience around identity and belonging.

"We use comedy with intention and meaning," Matías said.

That same philosophy underpinned The Stories That Made Us. Rather than teaching people how to perform, the workshop was designed to help participants recognise the value of their own stories and find the confidence to give them a voice.

Matías developed the workshop structure, drawing on storytelling and improvisation exercises he has used in previous workshops. For this Adult Learners' Week session, the workshop was facilitated on behalf of Laenye Productions by collaborator Ambika Kumar.

The session began with an introduction to storytelling and activities designed to help everyone feel comfortable. Participants were then encouraged to tap into childhood memories and consider the moments and experiences that shaped them.

From there, they explored how to choose a moment to write or talk about, structure a story, identify what made it interesting and think about how their story could connect with other people.

Matías said creating a safe environment was central to the workshop. Theatre and workshop techniques were used to encourage participation, but there was no pressure on anyone to perform.

"It's really about exploring together," he said.

The group format allowed participants to explore themes including identity, culture, belonging, language and migration. The intention was not to restrict what people could talk about, but to create space for stories connected to lived experience, family, culture and the moments that shape who we are.

Participants came together in a storytelling circle where they could share a moment from their lives, listen to others and respond in a supportive environment. The result was an interactive learning experience shaped as much by those

listening as by those telling their stories.

Feedback from participants and Botany Library staff was very positive, and Laenye Productions was very happy with the outcome. The experience has also encouraged the organisation to explore whether similar workshops and community learning activities could be offered again in the future.

For Matías, one of the most rewarding parts of the work was helping people reconnect with stories they may have forgotten and finding others who genuinely wanted to listen.

"Our own stories can sometimes seem ordinary to us," Matías said, "but sharing them can help us discover something about ourselves and recognise moments from our past that continue to influence who we are and where we are going."

Matías said Laenye Productions is grateful to ACE Aotearoa for supporting the project, and to Botany Library and Auckland Libraries for hosting the workshop and helping make it accessible to the community.



Community Learning, Creativity and Connection

Hamilton City Libraries marked Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga with a programme of community learning, creativity and connection across several of its branches.

For Waiwherowhero St Andrews Library, this was the third year of involvement. What began with activities such as Reading Together in the Poipoi Mahara Memory Care collection and seed library has grown into a strong focus on sharing mātauranga Māori and community knowledge.

One of the most visible outcomes has been the library's tukutuku community wall. The project began during Adult Learners' Week two years ago, when community members were invited to learn raranga and tukutuku and create designs based on six traditional Māori patterns. Further sessions followed, and the completed works were brought together into a community wall launched in February 2026.

Kay Huia, Ringa Tohu Community Library Lead at Waiwherowhero St Andrews Library, said the wall reflected around 18 months of community learning and captured the stories of Hamilton City's seven libraries and the people who contributed to it.



This year, the library continued its tukutuku and raranga learning and added a koikoi-making session, facilitated by Pouwhenua staff member Harley Pitihira. The after-hours session was designed to make participation easier for people working full-time and included karakia, a blessing of the koikoi. Tukutuku sessions began during Adult Learners' Week and

continued into Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori, creating a natural link between the two celebrations.

On International Literacy Day, 8 September, the library also hosted a shared Reading Allowed session, morning tea and digital literacy activities for the community.

Other Hamilton libraries also joined in. Manga-o-Nua Hillcrest Library,



currently operating from a pop-up space at Hamilton Gardens following a fire last year, hosted a grief café, explored online learning sessions using PressReader, Yarn and Yak gatherings, and launched a seed library with a community seed swap.

Te Kete Aronui Rototuna Library also took part, offering a beginner



computer-aided design and 3D printing class in its Auaha Makerspace.

A special part of the week for Te Koopuu Maania o Kirikiriroa Central Library was recognising two long-serving volunteers. Peter Elliott, who has supported English language learning, and Jean Masters, who has taught sign language, were

acknowledged for 19 years of service to the library community.

Across the week, the activities reflected the many ways libraries support adult learning, from digital skills and literacy to cultural knowledge, creativity and simply bringing people together to learn from one another.



Learning Grows in the Garden

For Kaipātiki Project, learning happens naturally when people come together, get their hands dirty and share what they know.

That was the idea behind the organisation's Garden Volunteer Welcome Day at Hobsonville Point, held on 9 September as part of Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga 2026.

Kaipātiki Project is a Tāmaki Makaurau-based environmental organisation working to create a more sustainable future for people and nature. More than 1,000 volunteers give their time to the organisation each year, working across a wide range of projects in the bush, streams, native plant nursery, gardens and compost hub.

Some volunteers come every week, while others may only come once. Whatever their involvement, learning is an important part of the experience.

Blanka Ros from Kaipātiki Project said volunteers could learn everything from preparing a garden bed and improving soil to sowing seeds, working in a greenhouse, composting and growing food.

The organisation's approach is based around regenerative gardening. Chemicals are avoided, with volunteers instead learning about practices such as companion planting, building healthy soil and thinking about the garden as a complete ecosystem.

Importantly, that knowledge does not stay in the

community garden. Volunteers often returned home inspired to apply what they had learned to their own gardens and food growing.

But gardening was not the only reason people volunteered.

Blanka said some volunteers came because they wanted to spend more time outdoors or had retired and were looking for new ways to use their time. Others were ESOL learners who found volunteering provided a relaxed and natural environment in which to practise their English.

The garden became an informal learning space where people could share language and knowledge while working alongside others.

For Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga, Kaipātiki Project decided to turn the focus onto the volunteers themselves and what they had gained from being involved.

Five volunteers were interviewed and asked questions including: Why do you volunteer? What have you learned? What is the most surprising thing you have found in the garden?

"Every time we ask these questions, we get different answers and we learn something new," Blanka said.

Each interview was turned into a short video, which was brought together and shared with volunteers in the garden on 9 September. With no building available, the screening was kept simple, with the videos shared via WhatsApp so they were easily accessible to the community.

The event was also an opportunity to welcome people interested in volunteering, while also recognising those who had contributed their time and knowledge over many years.

Blanka said sunshine poured across Engine Bay Garden on the morning of 9 September, as more than 20 new and regular volunteers came together to celebrate Adult Learners' Week. Over a relaxed morning tea, people shared food, stories and reflections, creating a warm and lively atmosphere.

"Conversations flowed easily between gardening, food and life experience. Volunteers talked about the freedom to make mistakes in a safe and supportive environment, and how enjoyment makes learning feel natural. They exchanged cooking ideas from different cultures, some connected through conversation in Mandarin, and everyone recognised how much they learn from one another across generations and backgrounds.

"There was a real sense of warmth, gratitude and belonging throughout the morning. Volunteers thanked the team and each other, reminding us that Engine Bay Garden is much more



than a place to grow food. It is a community learning space where people share knowledge, build confidence and discover the joy of learning alongside others," Blanka said.

One participant summed up the spirit of the day: "Thank you for creating this opportunity for the community to connect and learn together."

The Voices from the Garden video created as part of the event can be found on <https://kaipatiki.org.nz/>



Finding Our Voice in Ōtautahi

Adult Learners' Week 2026 gave Adult and Community Education providers in Ōtautahi a new way to share the voices and stories that sit at the heart of lifelong learning.

Inspired by this year's theme, Finding Our Voice – Ko tōku reo, ko tōku ohooho! the ACE in Ōtautahi Communities of Practice Network, made up of 18 ACE providers across the city, created a special podcast series featuring learners, tutors and organisers.

The conversations brought together people from Richmond Community Gardens, Literacy Aotearoa, Papanui High School and CWEA, each sharing their own experiences of teaching, learning and being part of ACE. Hosted by Erica Austin and Sam Woolf from the Ōtautahi in Practice podcast, the series captured both the diversity of individual experiences and the strength of the collective ACE voice.

For the network, podcasting was a natural fit for this year's theme. It created space for people to tell their stories in their own words and highlighted the many different pathways, experiences and connections that make up Adult and Community Education in Ōtautahi.

Released during September through Plains FM, Spotify and Apple Podcasts, the three episodes created a lasting record of Adult Learners' Week and a way for those stories to reach new audiences beyond the celebrations themselves.

Both Sam and Erica undertook the interviews and produced the series and at the end of the series, Sam had this to say.

"All three conversations were very unique and highlight the diversity of options and experiences that are available when exploring an interest

outside of traditional siloed education institutions. Each also directly acknowledges the porous network of interconnected organisations, people and culture of learning that has long existed on this land that Ōtautahi sprawls across.

"We heard stories about how learners have changed careers as a result of a conversation and healthy learning experience, and how systems that support all the facets we hold as complex individuals, open opportunities that align more strongly with a learner's goals.

"The guests clearly spoke with passion and grace about their experiences, and it was clear that they care deeply about providing quality learning opportunities for all."

Together, the conversations provided a fitting reflection of Finding Our Voice and showed the power of ACE to build confidence, connection and a stronger collective voice within our communities.

You can listen to the podcast on <https://plains.org.nz/programme/otautahiinpractice>.



Te Hiku Avaiki Nui Charitable Trust

Te Hiku Avaiki Nui Charitable Trust brought Cook Islands culture, creativity and community connection to the fore during ACE Aotearoa Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga.

Based in Kaitaia, the group was formed by Cook Islanders living in the Far North who wanted to maintain strong connections with home, share knowledge and friendship, and create opportunities to practise their language, culture, arts and traditions together.

What began as a small community group has grown steadily over the past two years. At the heart of the kaupapa is a desire to create a place where members can come together and continue doing the things they would do back home, from preparing traditional food to sharing language, prayer and cultural practices.

Language has been an important part of that journey, including pure, or prayer, and tuatua aravei anga, which is similar to a mihi mihi and provides an opportunity for people to greet, introduce themselves and connect.

As the group began sharing its arts and crafts more widely, it became clear there was also strong interest from the wider Kaitaia community. This led to workshops, community events and opportunities to sell traditional handmade goods.

The group has also worked with primary schools, including Pacific

learners who may have become disconnected from their cultural identity. These activities provide opportunities to reconnect with language, culture and family roots.

Traditional arts and crafts are a strong focus. These include making ei katu, floral crowns or head garlands worn for celebrations and special occasions; pareu, traditional fabric garments similar to sarongs; and tivaevae, the colourful and intricate embroidered or appliquéd bedspreads that are an important part of Cook Islands culture.

During Adult Learners' Week, Te Hiku Avaiki Nui held two free daytime workshops on 8 September. Learners at each session had the opportunity to create both ei katu and pareu, with many discovering new skills and growing in confidence throughout the day.

"It was an awesome event. People started off feeling apprehensive about their own skills to create and ended up gaining huge confidence by the conclusion. We shared traditional island kai at the end of the session and several learners said they would like to come back for a future session," said trustee Diane Kernan.

The shared kai included poke, a banana and coconut cream dish; maianese, a traditional potato salad with beetroot; chop suey; and rukau, a dish made with coconut milk and onions.

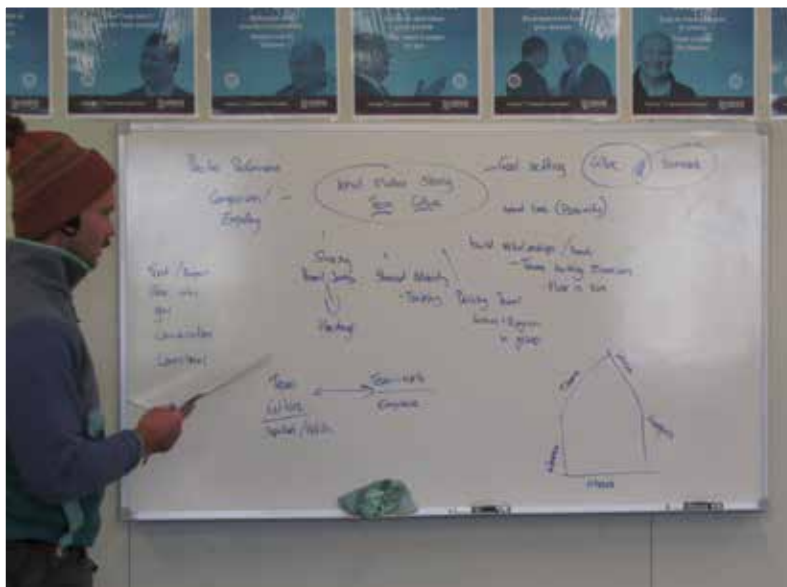
The Trust's rooms in central Kaitaia were also open throughout the week, giving people the opportunity to drop in, see what the group was doing and learn more about Cook Islands culture. Their highly visible street-front location means the group regularly welcomes people who simply walk in for a conversation or to find out more.

All members of the group are volunteers, and the Adult Learners' Week sessions were offered free of charge. Funding from ACE Aotearoa helped cover the cost of materials, making it easier for people to take part.

The workshops also created new connections within the community and generated interest in future learning opportunities, including sessions focused on preparing traditional Cook Islands food.

For Te Hiku Avaiki Nui Charitable Trust, Adult Learners' Week was an opportunity to keep Cook Islands culture visible, strengthen connections between generations and welcome the wider community into a space where knowledge and traditions could be shared.

It reflected the spirit of ACE Aotearoa Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga: creating accessible opportunities for people to learn together, share knowledge and build stronger connections within their communities.



Creating Opportunities Through Connection: Teaching that Makes a Difference

At Rolleston Prison, one tutor is demonstrating how education, when built on connection, culture and high expectations, can create meaningful change.

James Harvey delivers the Kick for the Seagulls (KFTS) programme, an education and rehabilitation initiative developed in Aotearoa. Now in its third year at Rolleston Prison, and its second year under James' leadership, the programme combines literacy and numeracy development, with sport, health and personal growth.

Learners work towards a New Zealand Certificate in Foundation Skills (Level 2) through a structured programme that runs four days per week 9:00am to 2:00pm. Participants complete 320 learning hours over 16 weeks, combining classroom learning with physical activity and personal development.

The programme is voluntary, with learners choosing to participate. Demand is strong, with 22 applications already received for the next intake. There are currently 12 learners enrolled, supported by two mentors who have previously completed the programme.

Mark Doyle, Learning and Interventions Delivery Manager at Rolleston, said the programmes success lies in the strength of the partnership between the Department of Corrections, the Sir Graham Lowe Foundation and 'Universal College of Learning' (UCOL) who deliver the programme at Rolleston. UCOL is a publicly funded vocational education provider based in the Manawātū region, with a long history of delivering practical, industry-focused learning opportunities across New Zealand. Through a wide range of certificate, diploma and degree programmes, UCOL works closely with communities and industry partners to support personal growth, skill development, and meaningful pathways into employment and further education.

Built on principles that challenge thinking

Kick for the Seagulls is based on the '12 Dynamic Principles'

developed by Sir Graham Lowe. These principles form the foundation of the programme and encourage learners to challenge their thinking, take responsibility for their actions and back themselves.

Principles include:

- **Principle 4:** There is no such thing as can't: Ask for help and cultivate an attitude that removes excuses and breaks through perceived limits.
- **Principle 7:** Never die wondering: Be prepared to back your dreams, discover your full potential and seize opportunities by having the courage to ask and to act.
- **Principle 8:** Kick for the seagulls: Dare to think differently and think outside the square and believe in your ability to create positive change.

These inspiring foundations are woven throughout the learning experience. They provide a practical framework that encourages learners to think beyond their current circumstances and focus on future possibilities.

For James, these principles align closely with his own teaching philosophy.

Holding a Bachelor of Sport and Exercise and working professionally as a sports therapist, he believes his background in sport and health is a key contributor to the programme's success.

"Sport is a universal language. It provides common ground and a shared experience for learners from all walks of life. By using sport as the medium, we're able to create a deeper, more connected and more meaningful learning experience."

That philosophy shapes every aspect of the programme.

A learner-centred approach in a complex setting

Working in a prison environment presents unique challenges, but James has established a learning space where learners feel safe, respected and motivated to engage.

The day begins with a yoga session before learners move

into classroom-based activities. Fitness testing, goal-setting exercises and practical field-based learning are integrated throughout the programme before learners return to classroom work later in the day.

The structure provides consistency and clear expectations. Learners are expected to maintain high behavioural standards and regular attendance. Participants cannot remain on the programme if they receive misconduct charges while in prison and are limited in the number of absences they can take.

These expectations help prepare learners for employment and further education opportunities.

James focuses on creating a positive learning culture where learners feel supported while also being accountable for their own progress.

"My goal is to provide a positive learning experience and create a safe, enjoyable learning environment. If learners can have a positive experience with education, that can become the foundation for a lifelong journey of learning, self-development and creating new opportunities for themselves."

His teaching draws on real-world examples and practical application. Learning activities are adapted to suit different learning styles and abilities, helping learners engage with literacy and numeracy in ways that feel relevant and achievable.

Building belonging and confidence

A defining feature of the programme is the strong sense of belonging it creates.

James actively fosters whanaungatanga within each group, encouraging learners to support one another and celebrate success together. Tuakana-teina relationships are evident throughout the programme, particularly through the involvement of learner mentors.

One of those mentors is Hayden, who completed the programme last year.

Hayden said the structure and support provided through the programme helped him develop confidence in areas he previously found difficult.

"I've always struggled with numeracy and literacy," he said. "The programme has provided really good support for me."

He values the structured environment and the opportunity to continue learning.

"We're all in the same boat. I'm hoping this will help when I leave. It's provided me with some really good health and life lessons."

For Hayden, one of the biggest changes has been increased confidence.

"I now have the confidence and ability to talk to new people."

As a mentor, he sees his role as helping others navigate challenges as well as supporting James with insights into prison life that can influence what is happening within the classroom.

"I wanted to become a mentor to pass on the lessons that I learned," he said. "I want to keep on learning, and I'm pleased that I'm putting my time to good use while I'm in prison."

Creating pathways for future success

While learners gain a Level 2 qualification, the programme's broader goal is to develop employability skills and positive habits that support long-term success.

Literacy and numeracy sit alongside goal setting, communication, teamwork, time management and personal responsibility.

Mark believes James plays a significant role in the programme's success.

"James is the value-add that we have," said Mark. "He goes above and beyond and brings integrated sport into the learning. He exemplifies the programme."

Mark said Rolleston's completion rates are among the strongest in the country and attributes much of that success to James' ability to connect with learners and maintain high standards.

The programme has also recently undergone a significant redevelopment by UCOL, which invested substantial resources into creating a more consistent and cohesive learning experience.

A culture of learning

Current learner David appreciates the way the programme is inclusive and combines physical wellbeing with academic learning.

"It builds mental health through yoga as well as numeracy and literacy learning. There's great camaraderie, and James is incredibly knowledgeable."

David is also studying towards a Bachelor of Arts majoring in psychology and sociology and is currently achieving A grades across his university papers.

Diagnosed with ADHD shortly before entering prison, he said both the structure of prison life and access to medication have given him a new perspective.

During the visit, David learned he would become a mentor for the next programme intake, something he had been hoping to achieve. He is looking forward to supporting future learners and helping them succeed.

A lasting impact

The impact of the programme is not always immediate, but it is significant.

Learners leave with stronger literacy and numeracy skills, increased confidence, improved wellbeing and a clearer sense of direction. Many develop a more positive relationship with education and begin to see further opportunities for themselves.

James Harvey's practice reflects a combination of professional expertise, cultural responsiveness and genuine care. Through sport, health and education, he has created an environment where learners can challenge themselves, support one another and build the foundations for a different future.

In a setting where education can be challenging to deliver, the Kick for the Seagulls programme demonstrates what is possible when learning is grounded in connection, belonging and high expectations.

As James said, creating culture and setting expectations are the cornerstones of learning.

Talking in Circles

In Kaiwaka, a small rural settlement on the edge of the Kaipara Harbour, a simple idea has grown into something quite special. What started as one person looking for connection has become a long-running talking group that brings people together to learn, share and build confidence.

Wayne Freeth moved to the area without knowing many people and, like others in rural communities, felt the isolation that can come with that. With a background in Toastmasters (TM), he wanted to find a way to meet others while also keeping up his interest in public speaking.

Wayne was keen to make local connections, and while there were TM Clubs in locations both north and south, they were 60 kilometres away.

Wayne tried to form a new TM Club locally. He advertised for interest and met up with another person with TM experience and offered a short course in public speaking. Only four enrolled which was not the 20 needed to form a club.

Rather than let it drop, those four people decided to keep meeting anyway. They began getting together every second Monday in each other's homes, keeping things informal and sharing responsibility for the sessions.

That small group has grown over the past eight years. Today, around 12 people form the core of the group. Meetings are still held in members' homes, and each host sets the topic and shapes the agenda. That flexibility has become a real strength, allowing the group to evolve naturally and reflect the interests of those involved.

There's no set formula for what happens on the night. Members have tried everything from impromptu speaking and debates, to poetry, singing and role plays. One session might involve reading a play with everyone stepping into a character, well outside their comfort zone. Another might focus on a topic of local or cultural significance.

One standout evening centred on the Ventnor shipwreck off the Hokianga coast. The group hosted a panel discussion that brought together different perspectives, including te ao Māori and Taoism, through the lived experiences of two members. It became more than just a history session, it opened up a wider conversation about belief systems and cultural understanding.

The group has also taken learning beyond the lounge, organising field trips and even experimenting with a small online group. But no matter the format, the focus remains the same: creating a space where people feel comfortable to have a go.

That sense of safety and encouragement comes through strongly in member feedback. Susan talked about the honesty and willingness within the group, and the way people are open to trying new things, whether it's role play, reciting a poem or leading a session. She also pointed to the care, respect and humour that sit at the heart of the group.



Denise values the chance to practise new skills in a supportive environment and said she learns something new every time they meet. Quentin, a newer member, said it's the mix of challenge, support and camaraderie that keeps him coming back.

Others highlight the variety as a key strength. Gregg noted that the different formats—speeches, interviews, plays and facilitation—help people stretch themselves and build confidence in a practical way. He also sees value in the broader learning that comes from tackling local history and more complex topics. For him, the group has been a push to step outside his comfort zone in ways that have paid off.

There's also something to be said for the setting. As Ian put it, meeting in people's homes keeps things relaxed and less formal, even if there are still a few nerves when it's your turn. Members like John and Bill talk about the strong sense of camaraderie and the wide range of topics and activities that keep things interesting.

This group is about people backing themselves and each other. Over time, members have grown in confidence, with many now able to speak comfortably on the spot—something that once felt out of reach.

Wayne, who plans to move to Whangārei at some point in the next few years, said he will return to the area and keep his participation in the group going, it's an important part of his life. He would also consider starting a new group in Whangārei.

Rodger, a long-standing member of the group, said there are probably many people living in spots around New Zealand, both rural and urban, who would love the real learning and camaraderie that a group like this brings.

"I can't get over the development of the members that I have seen nor the range of views and knowledge our diverse group bring. I learn so much, not only factual stuff and speaking skills, but also about the other members of the group."

For anyone thinking about doing something similar, Wayne is open to sharing what he's learned and can be contacted at wayne.freeth@gmail.com

Are You Enrolled to Vote?

With the 2026 General Election fast approaching, the Canterbury Workers Educational Association (CWEA) is encouraging Cantabrians to ask themselves one important question: Are you enrolled to vote?

Through its Civic Engagement Project, the CWEA is helping reduce barriers to democratic participation by providing practical, non-partisan information about New Zealand's electoral system, voting and civic participation. The project aims to ensure more people feel informed, confident and ready to participate in this year's election.

With support from the Electoral Commission, the initiative is being led by Jennifer Leahy, Civic Engagement Project Lead, who is working with community organisations, workplaces and local groups across Canterbury. Information sessions cover topics such as enrolling to vote, understanding the voting process, what's changing for the 2026 election and how everyone can have their say with confidence. Grounded in the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the project recognises that democracy is strongest when everyone has the opportunity to participate. After all, democracy starts with one simple question: Are you enrolled to vote?

Remember:

- Your vote counts.
- Register to vote by October 4 to get an "Easy Vote" card.
- October 25 is the last day to register.
- November 7 is election day.
- Encourage your friends and whānau that live overseas to vote.
- For all election information, <https://vote.nz/>



Our People

Thank you, Mary

After more than two decades with ACE Aotearoa, Mary Gavigan has stepped down from her roles, and it is hard to imagine the organisation without her.

Mary joined ACE Aotearoa in 2004 as a contractor, initially with one job: to increase the visibility of Adult Learners' Week. Working alongside Philippa Stubbe she helped grow the week into a much bigger national celebration of adult learning, introducing a formal launch, securing funding for regional activities and building a stronger profile for ACE across Aotearoa.

As Adult Learners' Week grew, so did Mary's role. Following funding cuts to the ACE sector in 2006, communications became increasingly important and Mary became central to helping ACE Aotearoa and the wider sector stay connected, share ideas and make the case for the value of Adult and Community Education. She also became closely involved in the annual ACE Conference, helping shape programmes and themes, and bringing some remarkable keynote speakers to Aotearoa. One of her standout memories is hosting Indian educator and social entrepreneur Bunker Roy, whose work included training rural women to become solar engineers and bring electricity to their villages. His visit attracted strong media interest and remains one of Mary's highlights from her time with ACE Aotearoa.

Mary also remembers with pride some of the smaller moments that captured the spirit of ACE, including an Adult Learners' Week dawn service at Cape Reinga hosted by the Kaitia community, and launches on the beautiful marae in Bluff and at Te Papa with art works donated to the National Gallery by the National Centre for Adult Education on display.

Over the years, she has seen enormous change in the communications world, from paper-based newsletters and strong interest from traditional media through to digital communications, social media and a much more challenging news environment. She also helped the organisation lift the quality of its publications and promotional material by bringing professional design expertise into the mix.

But when Mary reflects on her 22 years with ACE Aotearoa, it is the people she talks about most. She said she will miss the ACE community "enormously" and describes it as a sector with a strong social justice lens, where self-determination, opportunity and community sit at the heart of the work.

"It has been a real privilege to work in that environment," she said.

Mary also speaks about missing the ACE Aotearoa team who have always had a shared sense of purpose.

"The ACE sector attracts people who have joy and passion for the work they do," she said, and that sense of like-mindedness has been one of the things she has valued most.

ACE Aotearoa CEO, Hannah Pia Baral, said that Mary has been a mainstay of ACE Aotearoa for more than 20 years. Her creativity, commitment and ability to tell the stories of ACE have helped shape the organisation we know today.

"I loved working with Mary. She was the ultimate professional and always had her finger on the pulse of what's going on in the sector, and she brought that strategic thinking into her work. Many of our conference themes came from Mary's deep understanding of what's happening in Aotearoa. We will miss Mary and know that she will continue to be that positive influence in all her future engagement. I am sure that everyone within the ACE community wishes Mary well for the future," said Hannah.



ACE Environmental Scan 2025

Adult Learners' Week He Tangata Mātauranga is a time to celebrate the Adult and Community Education sector. It is for every single educator, kaiako, tutor, manager and for decision-makers who are committed to lifelong learning that improves people's lives. Through adult learning, learners gain confidence. They enter employment or progress in their careers. They reconnect with their communities and cultures. They explore personal interests they never would have before. The sector has always known this is transformative work with real value. Now there is sector-wide data behind that work.

The ACE Environmental Scan 2025 is a piece of research that shows the impact and value of ACE in Aotearoa. It is the third scan of the sector following earlier editions in 2019 and 2021, and it draws on survey responses from 110 ACE providers, Tertiary Education Commission data and international literature. It gives us the most comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the sector's most recent reach, outcomes and challenges.

A snapshot of findings shows us that:

- Over 90,000 learners enrolled in ACE in 2024 alone – and the real number is likely significantly higher. *There is no national register of ACE learners in Aotearoa. This estimate is based on TEC and ACE Aotearoa data only and does not capture extensive non-funded provision or learners outside ACE Aotearoa's membership network.*
- 82% of providers said improved confidence and self-belief is a main learner outcome
- 49% of providers said their learners progress to further study or training
- 46% of providers said their learners found employment.

The scan also shows ACE reaches every territorial authority in Aotearoa, which means ACE can be found everywhere.

You can find out more about the findings and this important piece of work at www.aceaotearoa.org.nz/news

Submission on Proposed Changes to 2027 Funding Determinations

ACE Aotearoa, together with the ACE Sector Strategic Group (ASSG), has submitted feedback to the Ministry of Education on proposed changes to the 2027 funding determinations.

While the submission responded to the specific proposals, it also used the opportunity to call for a broader discussion about the policy, funding and system settings needed to strengthen Adult and Community Education in Aotearoa. The submission reinforced ACE's role as an accessible, community-based pathway into foundation learning, further education, employment and community participation.

Key points included a call for a full refresh of ACE policy and funding, consideration of wider learner eligibility including the expansion of the definition of domestic student to include migrant workers, removal of the current Mix of Provision requirement for established providers, and better ways to measure and recognise ACE's contribution to the Tertiary Education Strategy.

ACE Aotearoa also proposed the development of a national Lifelong Learning Strategy, with digital capability recognised as a core foundation skill, and highlighted the scale of foundation learning needs across Aotearoa.

The submission also sought practical changes to make delivery easier for providers, including simpler access for secondary school learners attending ACE outside school hours, clearer subcontracting approval processes and greater support for digital access.

ACE Aotearoa will continue to advocate for stronger recognition and investment in the sector, and for further discussion with the Ministry and the Tertiary Education Commission about the contribution ACE can make to New Zealand's future workforce and communities.

Learn more on www.aceaotearoa.org.nz/who-we-are/ACE-sector-steering-group