



# Neighbourhood Houses as Social Infrastructure: Local Practice, Global Relevance

Freyja Louise Dixon

Victorian Skills Authority Fellowship, 2026

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# 01

## Acknowledgements

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### The Awarding Bodies

The Fellow sincerely thanks the Victorian Skills Authority (VSA) for providing funding support for the ISS Institute and for this Fellowship.

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## **Fellow's Acknowledgements**

A special acknowledgement is extended to Uwe Gartenschlaeger, my former manager and mentor, whose support was instrumental in enabling this Fellowship. At the time of my travel, Uwe was serving as President of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) and Director of DVV International, and he played a key role in facilitating my meetings, introductions and conference participation in Germany.

Uwe is widely respected across Europe, Asia and internationally for his leadership and contribution to adult education and lifelong learning policy. Reconnecting with him through this Fellowship was both professionally significant and personally meaningful. I am also deeply grateful to Uwe and his wife, Kirsten, for their warm hospitality in Bonn, which made my time in Germany all the more memorable.

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I also thank Jo Binns, my friend and former colleague in Laos, who has been a constant source of encouragement and a valued sounding board throughout the Fellowship.

This work has been undertaken with every family of the Debney Meadows Community Hub firmly in mind. This community is strong, resilient and full of potential, yet continues to carry the weight of systemic inequity, housing instability and disruption not of its own making. This Fellowship stands as both a tribute to that strength and a call to action: that families in Flemington and Melbourne's Inner West deserve not only recognition, but genuine investment, dignity and long-term stability.

Finally, thank you to my partner Liam, for his support and for caring for our daughter, Indie Lou, which enabled me to undertake and complete this Fellowship during her early years of life.

# 02

## Executive Summary

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In times of community disruption, traditional systems of learning - classrooms, courses, certificates - are not what sustain people. What sustains people is informal, relational, lifelong learning: knowing who to ask for help, how to navigate systems, how to organise, and how to belong. UNESCO describes lifelong learning as “a principle that shapes education systems and a practice embedded in daily life” (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022). Lifelong learning is therefore not simply an educational process, but a social one.

International adult education leaders reinforce this view. Uwe Gartenschlaeger, former President of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), argues that “adult education is more needed than ever” and that there is “no solution without adult education” to the interconnected challenges of migration, climate transition and social cohesion. Yet, he also notes that adult learning remains structurally undervalued, with education funding still overwhelmingly concentrated on formal schooling (Gartenschlaeger, 2024).

Neighbourhood Houses embody this broader and more holistic definition of learning. They demonstrate that learning is not a simple transaction, but a whole-of-life, whole-of-community process. The Victorian Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board recognises their critical role in supporting learners often labelled “hard to reach” - people facing structural barriers to formal education who are more likely to engage

when programs are delivered through trusted, place-based relationships (ACFE Board, 2020).

This Fellowship examined how this locally embedded, relational work can be better recognised, funded and strengthened through global lifelong learning frameworks. Drawing on the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) framework, the Marrakech Framework for Action and international practice in adult and community education, it explored how neighbourhood-based learning could move from short-term programs and projects to recognised social infrastructure.

International fieldwork in Germany - including consultations with the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), DVV International and local Volkshochschulen (adult education centres in Germany) - revealed a consistent insight: in strong lifelong learning systems, adult education functions as social infrastructure. It is publicly supported, embedded in local places and sustained over time. Learning is understood not as something confined to formal institutions, but as something produced through families, neighbourhoods, workplaces, cultural spaces and civic life.

At the same time, practice in Victoria revealed both the strength and the fragility of neighbourhood learning ecosystems. These ecosystems are the interconnected places, relationships, organisations and supports that enable people to learn across

their everyday lives - including neighbourhood houses, schools, libraries, community hubs, cultural spaces, social services and the trusted relational networks that link them together. While these partnerships and place-based relationships make learning possible in contexts of housing upheaval and social disruption, the work remains under-recognised and precariously funded.

A key reason for this precarity is that much of the relational labour that enables participation is invisible in current data and policy frameworks. In Victoria, these frameworks are shaped not only by ACFE's reporting and compliance system for pre-accredited learning - which measures activity primarily through student contact hours, enrolment categories and audit-ready documentation - but also by the compliance requirements attached to VET delivery, where recognition is tied to unit completion, assessable competencies, qualification pathways and strict audit regimes. While these systems are essential for accountability, they capture only what can be counted: discrete hours of delivery, completed units of competency and evidence of assessment. They do not capture the slow, trust-based engagement, outreach, crisis navigation, cultural brokerage and cross-sector coordination that make participation in both pre-accredited and accredited training possible in the first place.

When this foundational relational work does not appear in the data, it is not recognised in policy terms and therefore not funded in any sustained way. This gap between what is measured and what is required directly contributes to the fragility of neighbourhood learning ecosystems.

In positioning lifelong learning as social infrastructure, this research offers a locally grounded and globally informed model for strengthening resilience, equity and participation in communities experiencing profound change. The term 'social infrastructure' is used to describe the combination of tangible and intangible elements that make lifelong learning possible. The tangible elements include physical places, staffed programs, childcare, technology and the accessible community facilities where learning occurs. Equally

essential are the intangible infrastructures: trusted relationships, partnership networks, bicultural brokerage, outreach, crisis navigation and the slow relational work that holds communities through disruption and creates the conditions for learning to occur.

The term 'infrastructure' is used deliberately because it signals that these systems require the same long-term planning, maintenance and investment as any other essential resource. Internationally, strong adult learning systems recognise that both the concrete and the relational scaffolding of learning must be nurtured, built and funded. The Fellowship demonstrates that without resourcing both dimensions - the physical and the relational - neighbourhood learning ecosystems become fragile, and the communities they support are left without the foundations required to participate fully in education, work and civic life.

# 03

## Fellowship Background

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While lifelong learning is increasingly referenced in policy, much of the work that enables adults to access and remain engaged in learning continues to sit outside formal education systems and remains structurally undervalued. Neighbourhood Houses and Learn Local providers play a critical role in supporting people experiencing migration, housing instability, poverty, digital exclusion, trauma and interrupted education. Yet the relational, place-based work that makes participation possible is rarely recognised or securely funded as essential infrastructure.

This disconnect is particularly visible in Melbourne's inner west, where large-scale public housing renewal and community displacement are intersecting with broader pressures - rising cost-of-living, digital exclusion, insecure work and the lingering impacts of the pandemic - to produce increasing social fragmentation. As these changes intensify, community-based organisations are being asked to do more, often absorbing the social and emotional impacts of structural decisions while operating with limited long-term support.

It was within this context that the Fellowship was undertaken.

The purpose of the Fellowship was to examine how other parts of the world recognise, resource and sustain lifelong learning as civic and social infrastructure, and to explore how these approaches might inform the positioning of Neighbourhood Houses within Victoria's learning system.

Specifically, the Fellowship set out to explore:

- How international lifelong learning frameworks conceptualise learning as a whole-of-life, whole-of-community process
- How adult and community education are embedded in governance, funding and civic structures in other contexts
- How cross-sector, place-based collaboration is formally supported
- How these approaches could strengthen and legitimise neighbourhood-based learning in Victoria

Drawing on the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), the Marrakech Framework for Action and international adult education practice, the Fellowship aimed to translate global insights into a local, practical and place-based framework - the Inner West Learning Neighbourhood. This model seeks to strengthen, coordinate and make visible existing learning ecosystems across Flemington, Kensington, North Melbourne and Ascot Vale.

In doing so, it positions lifelong learning not as an optional program, but as essential social infrastructure - fundamental to resilience, equity and participation in communities experiencing profound and ongoing change.

## How a Neighbourhood House Built a Learning Ecosystem: The Debney Meadows Community Hub

The local context informing this Fellowship is grounded in the establishment of the Debney Meadows Community Hub, located within Debney Meadows Primary School (DMPS), beside the Flemington public housing estate in Melbourne's Inner West. Within a single postcode exists an extreme contrast between inner-city affluence and structural disadvantage.

Eighty-five per cent of students at DMPS are from migrant or refugee backgrounds - predominantly Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean - and the majority of families live in public or community housing. Many parents have experienced interrupted education, trauma and significant settlement challenges. Overcrowding, single-parent households, limited digital access and language barriers are common. In this context, educational inequity is not abstract; it is lived every day.

In 2022, an independent school review found that DMPS was not meeting its literacy and numeracy improvement goals. Teachers observed that children were entering Prep and other year levels with significant developmental delays, reduced stamina for learning and difficulty with self-regulation. While parents were eager to support their children's education, they often lacked the resources, confidence, language and familiarity with Australian systems to do so. Kensington Neighbourhood House (KNH) recognised that the barrier was not willingness - it was access, trust and supported pathways into learning.

In response, in 2023 KNH secured major philanthropic funding from the William Buckland Foundation to establish a Community Hub within the school for a four-year period. Importantly, the Hub is not delivered by one organisation alone. While coordinated by KNH it operates as a partnership coalition of twelve government and non-government organisations, transforming it from a stand-alone project into an interconnected system of support.

The Hub has since become a shared, relational space where learning, belonging and practical support sit together. In this context, social infrastructure refers not just to the physical space of the Hub, but to the relationships, trust, networks and coordinated supports that enable participation, wellbeing and stability.

A learning ecosystem, in turn, is the interconnected web of people, organisations, spaces and pathways that support lifelong learning across informal, non-formal and formal settings. Through its partnerships, programs and relational work, the Hub operates as both social infrastructure that stabilises community, and a learning ecosystem that enables growth, participation and progression.

Three pre-accredited ACFE courses are delivered through the Hub:

- Moving Ahead with Technology (Farnham Street Neighbourhood Learning Centre) - digital literacy for everyday and school/workplace needs.
- Community Canteen (KNH) – food handling and hospitality skills linked to a culturally appropriate school Debney Meadows Primary School canteen in partnership with Cultivating Community.
- Boost Your Micro-Business (KNH) - enterprise skills linked to a weekly markets stalls at weekly Community Grocer market, an affordable fruit and vegetable market at the school.

These pathways from informal to non-formal to formal learning reflect international best practice (OECD, 2025). The ACFE Board likewise recognises that neighbourhood-based partnerships are essential for reaching learners who experience systemic barriers, enabling families to address multiple needs in one trusted location.

In recognition of this success, the Hub received the ACFE Learn Local Partnership Award in 2024.

## Forced disruption: when communities are destabilised

On 24 September 2023, the Victorian Government announced that all 44 public housing towers in Melbourne would be demolished and redeveloped. Three towers in Flemington and North Melbourne were identified in Phase 1, and residents have since been relocated, with demolition planned for 2026. During this period, demand on the Hub intensified rapidly.

KNH responded by:

- employing a social worker
- establishing a Women's Wellbeing Group
- co-designing a monthly Help Hub with legal services and council

In October 2025 alone, more than 80 residents attended a Help Hub session, supported by 15 services and 6 support workers. The most common issues related to housing instability and relocation.

This period revealed a fundamental truth: in moments of forced disruption, Neighbourhood Houses are not simply learning providers - they are critical social infrastructure. They stabilise communities, coordinate support, and hold relationships together at the very moment systems are fracturing. It is this stabilising role that makes an ongoing learning ecosystem possible. The question is not whether Neighbourhood Houses can function as Learning Neighbourhoods, but whether systems will recognise, value and fund the infrastructure that already exists.

## Threats to the learning ecosystem

The Hub shows what is possible when learning is embedded in place and trust. However, this ecosystem is fragile. Current core funding runs only to 2026. Without sustained investment in coordination and staffing, the partnerships and pathways developed through the Hub could quickly unravel.

The value of this relational work has been thrown into sharp relief during the current housing upheaval. As families face relocation and

uncertainty, the Hub and its partnership model have become indispensable in supporting residents, coordinating responses and advocating for their rights. Yet a profound contradiction remains: the Hub is absorbing the social and operational consequences of major government decisions without being recognised - or funded - as part of the essential infrastructure required to respond to them.

This misalignment is particularly striking given that Victorian policy frameworks consistently articulate a commitment to lifelong learning, equity and collaborative, place-based practice. 'Skills First' a Victorian government training program subsidising courses and skill sets emphasises access to foundational skills, pathways into further training and closer alignment between community-based learning and broader opportunity. The 'Education State' agenda and the Department of Education's vision explicitly position learning as a lifelong endeavour and highlight inclusion, wellbeing and partnership as core priorities.

Despite this stated policy appetite, decisions in adjacent policy domains - particularly housing and urban development - minimally consider the impact on the social ecosystems that sustain community learning and wellbeing. These ecosystems are the very assets Melbourne celebrates: places where belonging, diversity, participation and lifelong learning are woven into everyday life. Neighbourhood Houses are central to this civic fabric, providing trusted, relational spaces that hold communities together through both stability and disruption.

And yet, even as their role becomes more critical, the sector is under significant strain: the peak body Neighbourhood Houses Victoria has launched a state-wide "Keep Our Doors Open" campaign calling for an additional A\$11.7 million in annual funding to prevent the closure of 200 houses and address the fact that almost half have been operating in deficit. They are expected to deliver lifelong learning pathways, wrap-around support, outreach to vulnerable communities, ACFE engagement and crisis navigation, often

without stable, place-based funding to sustain the partnerships and trust underpinning these outcomes.

This contradiction sits at the heart of this Fellowship. The Hub is not only demonstrating what a learning ecosystem looks like in practice; it is exposing the gap between policy intention and system architecture. Without systemic recognition and sustained investment in the social infrastructure that enables learning, the ecosystems government frameworks seek to advance remain deeply vulnerable, particularly at times of greatest community need.

# 04

## Research Aim & Methodology

The Debney Meadows Community Hub demonstrates what is possible when learning is embedded in relationships, trust and place. At the same time, its precarity reflects a wider systems issue: neighbourhood-based learning is essential yet structurally undervalued.

The Fellowship therefore sought to:

- Examine how lifelong learning is embedded as infrastructure in international contexts
- Explore how cross-sector, place-based collaboration is recognised and resourced
- Investigate the relevance of frameworks such as UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities and the Marrakech Framework for Action
- Translate these insights into a Victorian model: the Inner West Learning Neighbourhood

### Methodology: Learning from Global Systems, Translating to Local Impact

The Fellowship adopted a comparative, relational and practice-based methodology combining international fieldwork, expert consultation and local co-design.

#### Phase 1 - International fieldwork

- Attendance at the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) Conference and Grundtvig Awards in Leipzig, Germany



Figure 1. Uwe Gartenschlaeger & Freyja Dixon at Grundtvig awards

- Meetings at the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (Hamburg)
- Engagement with DVV International and site visits to Volkshochschulen (VHS) in Germany
- Exploration of connections between adult learning, skills and cohesion at a Federal (Bonn) TVET Institute

Across these contexts, a clear pattern emerged: in strong lifelong learning systems, adult education is treated as embedded, relational and publicly supported infrastructure.

### Phase 2: Expert consultation

Professor Bruce Wilson and Associate Professor Robbie Guevara (RMIT) assisted in translating international frameworks to the Australian context, reinforcing the centrality of trust, partnerships and place in lifelong learning ecosystems.

### Phase 3: Local co-design

- Presentation and reflection on relevance and applicability from Steering Committee and key stakeholders of the UNESCO GNLC framework to the Debney Meadows Community Hub Steering Committee and key stakeholders

This ensured the Fellowship did not impose a model, but rather made visible and strengthened systems that already existed.



Figure 2. EAEA Conference Leipzig

# 05

## Fellow Biography

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Freyja Dixon is a community development and adult education practitioner based in Melbourne's Inner West, with a strong focus on lifelong learning, migrant and refugee communities, and place-based, cross-sector collaboration. She currently works at Kensington Neighbourhood House, an ACFE-funded Learn Local provider, where she leads the design and coordination of integrated, community-led learning and support initiatives.

As part of her role, Freyja established and manages the Debney Meadows Community Hub, located within Debney Meadows Primary School in Flemington. The Hub has become an award-winning example of partnership-based, place-based learning practice in Victoria.

Prior to this role, Freyja worked with DVV International (Germany's leading adult education organisation) and partnered with RMIT University and UNESCO on an adult education project in Laos. These experiences gave her first-hand insight into international approaches to lifelong learning, community education and knowledge exchange. The Fellowship has enabled her to reconnect with these international networks and place her local work in Melbourne into a broader global movement advocating for learning as a human right and a foundation for inclusive, democratic societies.

# 06

## Fellowship Findings

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The findings of this Fellowship confirm that the work occurring at the Debney Meadows Community Hub, and across Neighbourhood Houses more broadly, is not merely program or course delivery. It is the construction and maintenance of a learning ecosystem, where trust, belonging and relational support enable pathways that formal education systems don't always reach.

Through three interconnected phases - international research, local expert translation, and community co-design - the Fellowship revealed why neighbourhood-based partnerships must be understood as essential learning infrastructure, and why they are simultaneously powerful and precarious.

Despite its demonstrated impact, the Hub's collaborative model remains vulnerable. Four persistent, systemic challenges emerged consistently throughout the Fellowship's findings:

1. Institutional silos: Government departments remain fragmented (education, housing, health, employment), despite overlapping community needs, leading to duplicated work and missed opportunities for holistic support.
2. Policy rigidity: Rigid funding and accountability structures constrain locally led innovation and responsiveness.
3. Resource limitations: Neighbourhood Houses face severe financial precarity; partnership coordination and social support work are rarely funded sustainably.

4. Scaling challenges: Place-based models are powerful but hard to scale without sacrificing the very relationships that make them effective.

These systemic issues frame all three of the following phases.

### Phase 1: International Research

#### Comparative international insights - Germany

The German adult education system offers a contrasting model that highlights both the strengths and vulnerabilities of the Victorian context.

Germany's modern adult education system emerged from three foundational 19th-century movements:

1. Worker-led demands for education as a tool for emancipation,
2. Socially conscious industrialists seeking to upskill labour,
3. Universities aiming to extend legitimacy to an expanding middle class.

From this, the Volkshochschulen (VHS) system developed - publicly funded, municipally anchored adult learning centres. Today, approximately 850 VHS centres operate across Germany.

VHS centres resemble Neighbourhood Houses in practice - cooking classes beside English language groups, seniors learning alongside newly arrived refugees - but differ fundamentally in structure.

VHS are:

- legally mandated,
- municipally funded,
- embedded as permanent public infrastructure,
- coordinated through state associations and The German Adult Education Association, otherwise known as DVV.

This creates stability but introduces rigidity.

As Sasha Rex, Head of Policy at DVV explained:

We try to offer individual pathways for every learner, especially for disadvantaged groups, but our government still thinks in very formal columns and boxes. This makes it difficult to recognise the competences people bring from life experience or migration.

By contrast, Victorian Learn Locals, particularly Neighbourhood Houses, maintain high flexibility, responsiveness, and trust. But this flexibility comes with financial vulnerability, especially for the partnership-based and social work that scaffolds ACFE courses.

This contrast demonstrates the key insight of the fellowship:

- Victoria has flexibility without stability. Germany has stability with limited flexibility.
- Neighbourhood Houses offer a model that could combine both.

## **The Vision of a Learning City - learning embedded in daily life**

During consultations at the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in Hamburg, Raul Valdes Coter, Chief Programme Coordinator emphasised that the core strength of the Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) lies beyond its branding, but in its conceptual shift: lifelong learning must be seen as the organising principle of civic life. As he explained:

A Learning City is not a project. It is a culture change - one that connects learning to the way people live, work and participate in society.

This understanding is consistent with UIL literature, which positions lifelong learning as both a system and a social practice (UNESCO UIL, 2022; 2019). Learning Cities integrate learning into public spaces, workplaces, local governance, neighbourhood hubs, and digital and cultural life - not merely formal education institutions.

This was striking because it mirrors precisely what is already happening through Kensington Neighbourhood House and the Debney Meadows Community Hub. Learning at the Hub is not treated as a discrete activity; it is woven into:

- family wellbeing
- employment pathways
- housing & health advocacy
- navigating government systems
- social connection
- parenting, digital literacy and everyday life

The Hub exemplifies what UNESCO describes as “learning in all contexts of life”, where learning is “embedded in relationships, community identity and civic participation.”

In this sense, the learning ecosystem already operating in Flemington and surrounding suburbs is functionally a Learning City, even if it is not formally recognised as one.

## **Policy alignment through the Marrakech Framework for Action**

Nicolas Jonas, Leader of the cluster on the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) and coordinator of the Marrakech Framework for Action at UIL, highlighted the strategic importance of the Marrakech Framework for Action (2022) - the global roadmap adopted by 149 countries, including Australia, at International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) VII. It calls on governments to prioritise adult learning as a pillar of sustainable development.

The Framework mandates:

- integration of adult learning into national education systems

- recognition of adult education as fundamental to achieving SDGs (especially 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, 16)
- expanded financing, shifting from fragmented project funding to systemic investment
- monitoring through the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE)

This has significant implications for Victoria and for Learn Locals. Learn Locals are not peripheral;

- they are central actors in the global adult learning agenda.
- Their work aligns directly with what Australia has already committed to through CONFINTEA.
- Lifelong learning cannot be delivered through schools alone - it requires community-based institutions with relational depth.

Jonas emphasised that GNLC provides the framework that connects local practice (like the Hub) to global goals, giving legitimacy and visibility to place-based learning ecosystems. It also provides the branding that can entice local government to commit to the framework.

## Skills are developed throughout life, not in a straight line

Valdes Cotera emphasised that learning must be understood as lifelong and lifewide - extending across all ages, life stages and social roles.

UIL's research into "Skills Throughout Life" argues that skills are not linear, nor confined to early adulthood. Instead, they are developed and redeveloped during moments of transition:

- migration
- parenthood
- job loss or job entry
- settlement
- housing instability
- ageing
- trauma recovery
- community disruption

This framework maps directly onto the lived realities of families at Debney Meadows. The Hub is not simply preparing people for employment, it is strengthening:

- resilience
- confidence
- parenting capability
- civic literacy
- digital skills
- language and communication
- community belonging

These are the foundational capabilities UNESCO identifies as prerequisites for participation in society and the economy.

In many ways, the Hub is delivering the exact form of "skills throughout life" that UIL argues should be publicly funded and structurally embedded.

## Data, evidence and the role of GRALE

Jonas underscored that adult learning gains political traction when supported by strong, credible evidence. The Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) provides empirical proof that adult learning contributes to:

- improved employment outcomes
- better physical and mental health
- greater civic and democratic participation
- stronger social cohesion and community resilience
- reduced inequality

This is particularly relevant in Victoria, where the value of adult learning is often measured through discrete outputs (course enrolments, completions) rather than broader societal outcomes. Current data systems capture what can be counted - programs delivered, attendance numbers, student contact hours - but not what actually enables learning: the relationship-building, trust work, crisis support, outreach, cultural brokerage and cross-sector navigation that neighbourhood educators undertake daily. Measurement largely sits with Learn Local providers and Neighbourhood Houses,

who report through ACFE systems, with occasional supplementary research undertaken. However, this research is limited, fragmented and not embedded within a statewide evidence strategy. As a result, the wider community-building impact of adult and community education remains only partially visible in policy.

GRALE's evidence base aligns strongly with what is emerging at the Debney Meadows Hub:

- increased parental confidence improves student learning
- community connection reduces isolation and loneliness
- digital inclusion improves economic and social mobility
- access to legal, housing and health services stabilises family circumstances
- wellbeing support increases capacity to engage in learning
- trust in institutions improves through relational engagement

Jonas emphasised that strong, credible evidence is vital if adult learning is to gain political traction and influence funding and policy settings. Applied to the Victorian context, and to the emerging model at the Debney Meadows Hub, his insight reinforces the need for robust evaluation. This includes not only demonstrating impact locally and connecting Neighbourhood Houses to international evidence and advocacy networks, but also establishing clear next steps: identifying what should be measured, how to capture relational and place-based impact, and how to build the external relationships with funding bodies and policymakers who must understand and trust this evidence. Developing this shared measurement approach is therefore a central priority for the Fellowship's future work.

## **Legitimacy and coalition building - local institutions at the centre**

Both Jonas and Valdes Cotera emphasised that the success of Learning Cities is grounded in local legitimacy, not policy directives:

“Learning Cities grow out of community buy-in.”

“UNESCO can provide recognition, but transformation depends on trusted local institutions.”

This aligns strongly with the role of Neighbourhood Houses and Learn Locals in Victoria.

Neighbourhood Houses act as:

- anchors of trust
- brokers of access
- connectors across government silos
- interpreters of systems
- holders of community stories
- safe spaces for belonging and participation

Both UIL experts stressed that Learning Cities succeed when community-based organisations:

- hold relationships with residents
- convene cross-sector partnerships
- have long-term funding for coordination
- are recognised as integral to public education ecosystems

This closely reflects the role that KNH and the Debney Meadows Community Hub are already fulfilling, though without the long-term, coordinated funding identified as critical to sustaining such models.

## **Phase 2: Local Expert Reflections - Translating Global Frameworks to Local Strategy**

Following the fellowship's international engagements, local expert consultation in Melbourne provided an interpretive bridge - translating global insights into strategies relevant to Victoria's policy and community context. Two leading Australian scholars in lifelong learning, Professor Bruce Wilson and Associate Professor Jose Roberto 'Robbie' Guevara (RMIT University), offered critical reflections on how the Global Learning Cities (GLC) framework might be adapted to the local realities of neighbourhood-based practice.

Professor Wilson, Director of the European Union Centre of Excellence at RMIT, observed that formal accreditation through UNESCO is not a prerequisite for advancing the principles of a Learning City. As he noted, “you can simply put up a sign and declare yourself a Learning Neighbourhood” - what matters is the practice of collective learning, not the label. Drawing on his extensive research into learning regions and place-based innovation (Wilson, 2019), he emphasised that the diversity of partnerships underpinning the Debney Meadows Community Hub is its defining strength. Unlike most Australian Learning City initiatives, which are typically led by municipal libraries, this model demonstrates multi-sectoral governance, spanning neighbourhood houses, schools, housing providers, legal services, councils and state departments. Such plurality, he argued, embodies the learning-city ethos promoted by UNESCO.

Robbie Guevara, President of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), reinforced this perspective, contextualising the framework within the broader intellectual history of lifelong learning. He explained that the concept of a Learning City long predates UNESCO’s adoption of the model, tracing its roots to 20th-century adult education and community development movements in Europe, including the PASCAL International Observatory and the early learning society theories of lifelong education (Guevara, 2021). In this sense, UNESCO’s GNLC provides a policy scaffold, not the genesis, of the learning-city movement - codifying principles that neighbourhood-based adult learning providers have been enacting for decades.

Both Wilson and Guevara noted that the Inner West Learning Neighbourhood represents an opportunity to operationalise these principles from the ground up. With the increasing international emphasis on capital cities joining the GNLC network, they suggested that a collaborative Inner West framework connecting Kensington, Flemington, North Melbourne and Ascot Vale, would not only align with global trends but offer a distinctive model for Australia. Guevara, underscored that this initiative situates Victoria within a broader global movement for the democratisation of

lifelong learning. Both scholars agreed to advise the partnership and assist in presenting the Inner West Learning Neighbourhood Framework to local councils, the Department of Education, and the ACFE Board.

### **Phase 3: Local Application - Road mapping an Inner West Learning Neighbourhood**

The concept of an Inner West Learning Neighbourhood does not propose fundamentally new forms of practice; rather, it reframes existing activities through the lens of lifelong learning as social infrastructure and as part of a broader learning ecosystem. In this framing, learning is embedded within relationships, place and everyday interactions, extending beyond programmatic or institutional boundaries. This perspective makes visible the interconnected contributions of diverse actors and underscores the importance of sustained, cross-sector collaboration in strengthening participation pathways and collective impact in the local area.

The Debney Meadows Community Hub exemplifies this approach, illustrating how lifelong learning operates as social infrastructure to sustain wellbeing, participation and capability during disruption. This approach extends across the connected suburbs of Kensington, Flemington, North Melbourne and Ascot Vale, where collaboration between organisations is embedded in everyday practice.

These suburbs are characterised by overlapping social, geographic and service networks, with public housing estates acting as key nodes linking them, and with families, practitioners and community organisations moving and working across place-based boundaries. Neighbourhood Houses and partner organisations already collaborate through shared programs, outreach and referral pathways. The Learning Neighbourhood model provides a unifying framework to render these relationships more visible, measurable and sustainable over time.

## **Stakeholder Reflections: Understanding Learning Beyond Education**

During a stakeholder meeting held in October 2025 at Kensington Neighbourhood House, partner organisations from across the board including education services, neighbourhood houses, community organisations, housing departments and local councils gathered to explore the UNESCO Global Learning Cities Framework. Facilitated by Freyja Dixon with Guevara presenting on the Learning Cities model. The dialogue revealed a central challenge: systems still interpret learning narrowly as education. Participants from housing and legal sectors questioned how the framework applied to their work. Yet, as discussion deepened, it became evident that lifelong learning underpins every social outcome, whether it be housing stability, employment, health, and civic participation.

Neighbourhood House managers immediately recognised that the principles of inclusion, equity, and participation were already embedded in their practice. Council representatives reflected on the complexity of working across municipal borders, while others acknowledged that community life itself transcends those boundaries. By the end of the session, all participants agreed to continue exploring the framework collectively and committed to a learning visit to the City of Wyndham, a recognised member of UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities.

The meeting affirmed that readiness already exists within the Inner West. What is now required is a shared roadmap and coordinated advocacy for systemic recognition.

# 07

## Next steps & considerations

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### Co-Designing a Roadmap

The next phase of work will be collaborative. Rather than a single organisation driving implementation, local Neighbourhood Houses should work together to co-design a shared roadmap. This approach reflects the principles of learning ecosystems and social infrastructure: the roadmap is not only an implementation plan, but a relational process that builds trust, shared purpose and collective capability across the inner west.

Several of the proposed steps have been shaped through recent discussions with partner organisations, but further consultation and endorsement will be essential. Bringing additional stakeholders - community members, local government, education partners and service providers - into the co-design process will help ensure the roadmap is both locally grounded and collectively owned.

### Proposed Next Steps

#### Co-create the Inner West Learning

**Neighbourhood Roadmap:** defining shared goals, governance principles and evaluation indicators aligned with UNESCO's Learning City characteristics and ACFE's partnership priorities. This joint development process will strengthen the ecosystem approach and ensure decisions are shaped by diverse local voices.

**Develop a joint advocacy strategy:** articulating a unified message to local and state government

that lifelong learning should be coordinated through Neighbourhood Houses, rather than confined to council portfolios. This strategy will strengthen the collective voice of Inner West organisations and position Neighbourhood Houses as central partners in local lifelong learning systems.

**Explore funding mechanisms:** identifying a blended investment model that secures long-term coordination while maintaining community governance. This includes exploring philanthropic partnerships, state and local government streams, and cross-sector contributions that reflect the shared benefits of lifelong learning.

**Strengthen shared monitoring and evaluation (M&E):** developing a robust evidence base that captures both quantitative outputs and the relational, place-based outcomes that matter most to communities. This includes documenting stories of impact, trust-building and cross-sector collaboration that are not currently visible in ACFE or VET reporting systems, ensuring that advocacy is backed by credible and compelling evidence.

### Towards a Shared Governance and Funding Model

The governance principle is clear: Neighbourhood Houses should lead collectively. Councils can enable through planning alignment and resource support, but governance must remain with community-based organisations to preserve trust, flexibility, and responsiveness. The proposed model positions:

- Neighbourhood Houses as custodians of the Learning Neighbourhood, jointly responsible for coordination and accountability.
- Councils as enablers, supporting infrastructure planning and place-based funding alignment.
- State Government as an investor, recognising coordination as an essential output.
- Community voice as integral, represented through bicultural workers and resident advisory groups.

Funding will require a layered approach, blending local government base support, state co-investment (ACFE, Skills First, DFFH), and philanthropic innovation funds. However, the focus is not on new programs but on sustaining the coordination infrastructure that already delivers impact.

UNESCO's Global Learning Cities Framework provides an international policy language, but as Professors Wilson and Guevara emphasised, recognition can begin locally. The Inner West can declare itself a Learning Neighbourhood now and refine its systems over time.

# 08

## Impacts of Fellowship

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### Personal Impact

The Fellowship reaffirmed the importance of the relational, often unseen work required to build trust and participation in contexts of disadvantage. Engaging with international frameworks and practitioners enabled me to better articulate what I had already been witnessing on the ground: that learning is not simply an academic or vocational process, but a deeply social, emotional and cultural one, especially for people whose education has been disrupted by migration, trauma, poverty or instability.

The Fellowship has:

- Reconnected me with an international community of practice in adult and community education
- Strengthened my confidence to step into leadership and advocacy roles
- Deepened my capacity to work across complexity, uncertainty and institutional boundaries
- Reinforced my commitment to collective, community-led solutions

It has also strengthened my awareness of the importance of sustainable, shared leadership and the need to build systems that are not dependent on any one individual, but are embedded within communities and partnerships.

### Professional Impact

Professionally, the Fellowship has reshaped my practice from program coordination towards systems thinking, research-informed leadership and cross-sector advocacy. I now define my role less through direct service delivery and more through creating the conditions in which learning ecosystems can take root and remain viable, supported by strong relationships, shared governance and sustained investment in the social infrastructure that underpins them.

Exposure to global frameworks such as the Marrakech Framework for Action, the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities and the work of EAEA and DVV International has enabled me to situate local initiatives - including the Debney Meadows Community Hub and the Flemington Help Hub - within an internationally recognised body of lifelong learning practice and evidence. In practical terms, this has:

- Strengthened the way I use international research and policy language in funding applications and strategic planning
- Informed the development of integrated, place-based approaches to learning, wellbeing and service coordination
- Increased my ability to translate global frameworks into locally meaningful and culturally responsive models

- Reinforced the role of learning as a tool for empowerment, recovery and community leadership

This shift has already influenced how I design evaluation frameworks, approach partnerships, and engage with government, philanthropy and research institutions.

## Organisational Impact (Kensington Neighbourhood House)

The insights gained through this Fellowship have reinforced the organisation's capacity to lead innovative, cross-sector, place-based work. The Fellowship has helped articulate more clearly what KNH is already doing, rather than proposing an entirely new direction. In particular, it has highlighted KNH's ability to:

- Respond adaptively to emerging community need
- Broker partnerships across traditionally siloed sectors
- Embed lifelong learning within relational, place-based practice
- Act as a trusted convener in periods of disruption and uncertainty

Through this lens, the Debney Meadows Community Hub is positioned as a demonstration site for an integrated, community-led learning model that has relevance beyond the Inner West.

## Broader Sectoral Impact

At a broader level, the Fellowship is contributing to an emerging shift in how Neighbourhood Houses and Learn Local organisations are discussed within the sector - from being perceived as peripheral service providers to being recognised as essential social infrastructure.

This reframing aligns with the international findings of the Fellowship and with growing advocacy efforts within Victoria, at a time when almost 50 per cent of Neighbourhood Houses are operating at a financial loss and campaigning for their survival. By connecting local practice to global evidence (including UNESCO and GRALE findings), the

Fellowship strengthens the case that:

- Neighbourhood Houses play a critical role in lifelong learning
- Their relational and coordination role must be recognised as vital enablers of equitable, community-led lifelong learning
- Long-term investment is required to sustain the ecosystems they maintain

In this way, the impact of the Fellowship extends beyond a single organisation or suburb. It contributes to a wider effort to re-position Neighbourhood Houses across Victoria and Australia as central actors in equitable, resilient and future-focused learning systems.

# 09

## Conclusion

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This Fellowship explored how international lifelong learning frameworks, particularly UNESCO's Global Learning Cities framework, can strengthen community-led learning systems in Victoria. It found that Neighbourhood Houses are already functioning as essential learning institutions, embodying equity, inclusion, intersectoral collaboration and learning across throughout the course of life.

The Debney Meadows Community Hub illustrates how informal, relational and place-based learning can open pathways into non-formal and formal education for people whose learning has been disrupted by migration, trauma, poverty or instability. These learners are not "hard to reach"; they encounter barriers that existing systems are not yet designed to fully recognise or remove. Local learning spaces such as the Hub intentionally cultivate the conditions that underpin participation: trust, belonging, language support and cultural safety. When these relational foundations are present, engagement becomes possible, revealing both the strengths of neighbourhood-based ecosystems and the limitations of current system design and measurement frameworks.

Across Melbourne's inner west suburbs of Kensington, Flemington, Ascot Vale and North Melbourne, collaboration between Neighbourhood Houses, schools, councils and community organisations is already enacting the principles of a Learning Neighbourhood. This aligns with global evidence that lifelong learning ecosystems emerge through trusted relationships, community legitimacy and shared governance, rather than through

administrative designation alone.

However, a persistent structural contradiction remains. While Victoria's ACFE system provides secure funding for course delivery, it does not resource the relational and coordination work that makes participation possible. Neighbourhood Houses deliver the outreach, navigation and trust-building that underpin ACFE success, yet this work is typically supported through short-term grants. As a result, the very ecosystems that enable meaningful learning outcomes remain fragile.

The Fellowship's Considerations & Next Steps outline how this gap can begin to be addressed through collaborative governance, strengthened monitoring and evaluation, coordinated advocacy and more sustainable funding arrangements. Together, these actions provide a pathway for moving community-led learning from short-term program delivery to recognised and supported social infrastructure.

While UNESCO recognition may eventually offer visibility, the principles of a Learning City are already evident in the inner west. The opportunity now lies in protecting and investing in the relational, place-based foundations that sustain learning, wellbeing and belonging. By recognising and resourcing Neighbourhood Houses as integral to Victoria's social and educational landscape, the state can lead nationally in community-led lifelong learning. Not by creating something new, but by strengthening what already works.

# 10

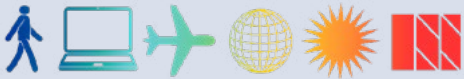
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