

**Thematic issue of RELA:**

**Rethinking and promoting adult learning and education (ALE) in ubiquitous workplaces: challenges and concerns**

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There is no doubt about how the nature of work and how the space and place of work are changing. Change creates the context within which day-to-day work now takes place. Acknowledging and accepting the challenging nature of this context can be a crucial step towards successful navigation of a shared labour environment by both employers and employees. Changes and the challenges associated with these in the workplace may include class, gender, ethnicity, age and many other factors. The social and economic vulnerability of marginalised individuals has been dramatically accentuated and adult learning and education (ALE) should play a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion and inclusion (Boeren et al., 2020). ALE should be at the forefront in embracing diversity, promoting equity and empowering adult learners by enabling them to develop competences, which they can put to valuable use.

The current labour market is significantly characterised by geoeconomic fragmentation, demographic shifts, green transition, technological advances and economic uncertainty (World Economic Forum, 2025a; 2023; 2020). The neoliberal logic of commodification has caused profound changes in workplaces resulting in increased job competition, fewer opportunities for long-term employment, ever-increasing performance-based pressures for individuals. According to Becker et. al. (2021) neoliberalism is likely to cause elevated loneliness by reducing individuals' social connection and by increasing competition for resources. Human capital, competitive theory and signalling theory all drive individuals to compete for limited labour resources (Gerhardt & Montgomery, 2024). Precarious employment (e.g., gig, part-time, temporary, pseudo self-employment) can shape work attitudes, learning practices and behaviours. New forms of employment require individuals to be flexible (Filiz, 2020) in order not to compromise their wellbeing. All these constraints have been exacerbated by Covid-19 (Fassin, 2022).

The volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) working contexts require both employers and employees to display adaptivity to deal with the plethora of changes they encounter (Frie et al., 2024; Niessen & Lang, 2021; Pulakos et al., 2000). This impacts those who inhabit or try to inhabit these spaces. Some may feel more alien to these spaces than before and others entering such employment landscapes may feel overwhelmed in navigating these constantly changing waters. As a result, individuals may react differently ranging from total acceptance of change to resistance and even withdrawal. Creating an organisational culture in which informal workplace learning is being valued should be a

priority to support individuals and encourage their professional development and careers in new employment settings (Lokhtina & Faller, 2024).

Early careers (18-to-24-year-old) are emerging as the most stressed demographic in the workplace with almost a quarter of respondents (23%) feeling stressed, and almost all (98%) dealing with symptoms of burnout according to the Cigna International Health's 2023 survey of almost 12000 workers (Carnegie, 2023). Burleigh (2025) reports for Forbes, that 1.2 million recent university graduates (2023/24) in the U.K. competed for just 17,000 open roles. It is no surprise therefore that recent research by Randstad (2024), indicates that early careers will remain in a career post for 1.1 years, significantly lower than previous generations. Based on the Labour Force Survey, the ONS (2025) indicates that for 2024, there was an increase in the number of NEET young people aged 16 to 24 years, now 13.4%. Waworuntu et al. (2022) suggest that 40% of Gen Z and 24% of millennials want to leave their jobs in the next two years (potentially adding to NEET statistics) due to stress and job dissatisfaction.

Since 2016, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has emphasised an increased job dislocation, digital disruption and high skills instability requiring reskilling (preparing employees for new roles) and upskilling (learning new skills to improve performance) (World Economic Forum, 2025b). A 44% disruption in skills is predicted in the next five years, meaning that six in ten workers will require reskilling and upskilling (World Economic Forum, 2023). The World Economic Forum's 'Future of Jobs Report 2025' highlights the constant demand for new skills and the decreasing demand for certain others. There is a prediction that 39% of core skills will change by 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025a). Seismic shifts in labour demands impact work security, professional identities and what skills now are required for a future world. For instance, over the next three years, 92% of companies plan to increase their artificial intelligence (AI) investments (McKinsey & Company, 2025). Many are now learning to co-create using Generative AI (GenAI) tools such as Copilot and ChatGPT. Due to advancements in GenAI tools the anatomy of work and access to information have been changed (McKinsey & Company, 2025). The need of Gen Y students to be prepared for a complex world of workplaces requires academics to develop curriculum on an ongoing basis and to consider work-integrated learning opportunities as part of curriculum design (Faller et al., 2021).

Practitioners, educators and others, engaged in formal and informal employability training, work-integrated learning, work-based learning, workplace learning, and work-related learning, CPD and skills development feel the challenge of these ubiquitous spaces, and how to prepare and equip students and adults for a changing and unpredictable future workplace. Along with this, the role of universities in responding to the challenges of employability is being questioned. As pointed out by Tomlinson (2022), the value of Tertiary and Higher Education (HE) has become reducible to its utility function in facilitating economic return. The pecuniary benefits of learning programmes becomes a dominant consideration for the rectors/managers/owners of educational institutions. To avoid a performative drift in education bogged down in economic logic, the same author reclaims a more meaningful and meaning-centric approach to engage in the value of HE, working life and their inter-dynamic, especially for those making transitions to employment. With this in mind, the articulation of different forms of knowledge - theoretical, experiential, professional, practical etc. - is growing in legitimacy in university education (Sanojca & Triby, 2022). Similarly, participatory research is developing in the workplace, revealing a need for change both in the way

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knowledge is produced and in the way workplace training is viewed (Brousal & Aussel, 2022). Such collaborative processes inhibit more neoliberal views and outcomes.

ALE can help provide a resilient response to such challenges by facilitating the development of the necessary life skills and new competences among adults that help them clarify and empower their social mobility intentions, be it to move into higher-quality jobs or increase personal fulfilment or align better with career values. ALE promotes active ageing, personal fulfilment, social inclusion and active citizenship (Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st Century, 2024), and enables adult learners to increase chances to effectively address economic and socio-political challenges. As AI tools become gradually integrated into everyday life, the growing discourse on the cognitive implications of these tools has become evident. Emerging technologies (e.g., virtual reality (VR), GenAI) which are embedded in ALE have started changing the way we learn and acquire information (Ribeiro & Castro, 2025). Thus, a balanced approach to AI in educational and workplace settings can help to mitigate the negative impact of AI (e.g., cognitive offloading) by maintaining individuals' engagement in deep, reflective learning and thinking (Gerlich, 2025). If we are concerned about how to prepare and support adults for the world of work when that world is significantly changing due to technological upheaval, what is the nature of work, life and learning? We explore these challenges with the list of themes listed below.

We invite conceptual and research papers addressing this VUCA context. To guide thinking around some key themes, we suggest considering the following:

- VUCA, BANU and other concepts about unpredictable labour landscapes
- Work or professional identity amidst changes
- Changes in the way we work, e.g., remote working, co-constructing with technology and therefore questions about belonging
- How changes impact work culture
- How AI and technology impact work
- The challenges of reskilling and upskilling, especially among adults
- Emerging workforce trends
- Immigration/emigration to meet labour demands amidst growing nationalism
- Discourse for or against these systems, empires and economics
- Changes in skills and knowledge and the impact on the role of the university
- Impacts on formal and informal learning (WIL, WBL, WPL, WRL)

Papers should be submitted by 30<sup>th</sup> September 2026 via the RELA journal online system, 4000-8000 words (including endnotes and references).

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