

Building character and the nation: ADF lessons for young Australians

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Thematic Series: Rethinking and Restating the Nature and Purpose of Australian School Education



Stronger Regions for a Stronger Australia

Foreword

Nations thrive when people feel safe within their borders and in their homes, and when they share a common set of values. Centuries of human endeavour and achievement, often in the face of incredible adversity, show us that the dedicated inter-generational transmission of those values builds individual character, national identity and a sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves.

The Australian Defence Force is proud of its longstanding commitment to supporting young Australians to become the best they can be. The ADF's unequivocal, deep-seated values of *Service – Courage – Respect – Integrity – Excellence* reflect ancient ideals that encourage selflessness, strength, humanity, consistency and the willingness to do what is right.

I welcome the Page Research Centre's interest in the Australian Defence Force Cadets program.

Specifically designed for young people of school age, the program comprises three Australian Defence Force-affiliated, community-based, youth development organisations: Australian Army Cadets (AAC), Australian Navy Cadets (ANC) and the Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC). In 2026, approximately 30,000 Cadets and 4,405 staff members work and learn together in 589 locations across regional and metropolitan Australia.

The Australian Defence Force Cadet Program is not just focused on promoting an interest in Defence careers; more importantly, it is a youth development program that provides young Australians with the confidence and skills to succeed in all future career paths in the community.

Set against the broader context of Australia's national education goals – and informed by the findings of a survey of former AAFC Cadets – this research paper offers a timely reminder of the critical role that we all play in modelling and building individual character and responsible citizenship.

Air Chief Marshal (Ret'd) Mark Binskin AC
Patron
AAFC Foundation

What are we who love Australia?
Let a foe from near or far
Lift a hand to wound or shame her
And discover who we are.

Extract from *The Making of a Nation*
Agnes L. Storrie (1909)

Executive Summary

This paper is the first in the Page Research Centre's 2026 Thematic Series: *Rethinking and Restating the Nature and Purpose of Australian School Education*.

Improving Australian school education policy and outcomes requires returning to first principles. Policymakers and educators must begin at the critical point at which the education of young Australians is currently determined: the national education goals. The goals have unequalled official status in education policy; however, the scale and complexity of contemporary challenges for schools, teachers and students put their real-world impact in doubt.

Australia's overarching education policy document is the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration*. Endorsed by federal, state and territory education ministers in 2019, the *Declaration* claims 'a vision for a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face'.

The *Declaration* identifies the two 'interconnected' national education goals.

Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity

Goal 2: All young Australians become:

- confident and creative individuals
- successful lifelong learners
- active and informed members of the community.

Schools and teachers are under pressure not only to improve teaching and learning but also 'to prepare young people to thrive in a time of rapid social and technological change, and complex environmental, social and economic challenges'.

Those challenges are everywhere.. Multiple reports identify:

- unsatisfactory student performance in national and international academic testing
- inconsistent and ineffective academic standards and practices across the country
- inadequate teacher training and low morale in the profession
- disengaged and psychologically fragile students, and poor classroom behaviour
- low public confidence in Australian school education

Another marker of decline was seen in young Australians' performance in the 2024 National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC). The results were the lowest since the triennial testing began in 2004:

- Year 6 students - 43% achieved the proficient standard, compared with 53% in 2019
- Year 10 students - 28% achieved the proficient standard, compared with 38% in 2019

Other research reveals young Australians' apparent disdain for democracy as a system of government, reluctance to defend this country and its way of life, and the growing appeal of extremist influencers. Unmotivated and underprepared, they are unlikely to meet national policy expectations of developing 'flexibility, resilience, creativity, and the ability and drive to keep on learning throughout their lives'.

Crucially, there is no clear line of sight from the national education goals to the *Declaration's* claim that:

Education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing **economic prosperity** and **social cohesion**.

The goals lack a sophisticated rationale to justify their selection and place them in a distinctively Australian historico-cultural context. Their generic language carries no distinctive national flavour, with the word *citizenship* used just once in the 20-page document.

By contrast, the world's most consistently successful education system prioritises a simultaneous emphasis on academic rigour and character and citizenship education (CCE) throughout primary and secondary school, with CCE having 'always been at the heart of our education system'.¹ Singapore's four Desired Outcomes of Education specify the development of 'Concerned citizens who are rooted to Singapore, are responsible to their family, community and nation and take active roles in improving the lives of others'.²

Rethinking Australia’s national education goals demands careful examination of best practice in other settings. To that end, it is helpful that the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration* encourages partnerships with external organisations that ‘can facilitate development, training and employment opportunities, promote a sense of responsible citizenship and encourage lifelong learning’.

One national youth development organisation offers an exemplar. The Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC) – affiliated with the Australian Defence Force – sets clear, unequivocal expectations for all participants. The work of the AAFC is contextualised for individuals at the organisational level, which is framed by the wider Royal Australian Air Force setting, in turn reinforcing national goals and values. The clarity of the expectations gives certainty to all members, families and other stakeholders, regardless of age, gender, background, or other characteristics. Unity of purpose and accountability to the organisation, to each other and to the wider community are both characteristics and outcomes.

Part I offers a broad description of some of the historic influences on Australian school education, particularly as these might be assumed to underpin the national education goals.

Part II describes the expectations and constraints of school education under Australia’s federal system of government, with specific reference to the subject of Civics and Citizenship.

Part III introduces the Australian Defence Force Cadets program, with its longstanding commitment to being one of Australia’s premier national youth development organisations. This paper places a specific emphasis on the historic and contemporary achievements of one branch, the Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC).

Part IV discusses the data collected in a survey of 218 former Cadets regarding their experience as school-age Cadets and the extent to which they believe the program influenced their personal development. Even taking into consideration the respondents’ membership of an alumni network (a likely indicator of a good experience), their ratings and comments were overwhelmingly positive. For example, 98% either strongly agreed or agreed with the AAFC’s claim that it provides experiences that ‘equip for life’. Responses were considered and often quite detailed. Some examples follow.

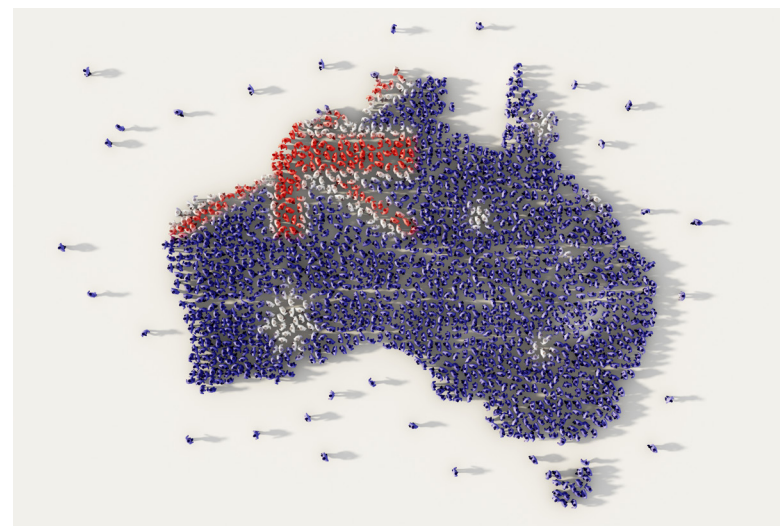
I consider my time in Cadets to be foundational in developing me into the person I am today. It instilled a deep sense of community mindedness, developed my leadership skills and was also pretty cool. I got to experience a lot of things other kids my age did not. (Female, NSW, joined at 13, served for 8 years)

One of the best times of my life, which I’ll never forget. I learnt a lot of useful skills and made some solid friends, which have lasted throughout my life. We really felt that we were part of the ADF, even though we were only Cadets. (Male, NSW, joined at 15, served 2.5 years)

My family / childhood was not great (alcoholic father who was abusive). Cadets was the one thing that kept me positive, it really gave me hope back then. (Female, WA, joined at 13, served 5 years)

Personally found failing exams and courses helped me to be a better person as an adult ... Always lived by the motto of “if you fail at something, you learn to pass it”. The AAFC had always helped me when I was a Cadet to learn how to pass something if I fail it the first time. (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 5 years)

The paper concludes with a recommendation to review Australia’s national education goals, which are too generic to transmit a serious account of citizenship, character, and national belonging. They should be restated in language that clearly and powerfully reflects the intellectual, moral and civic purposes of schooling in this country.

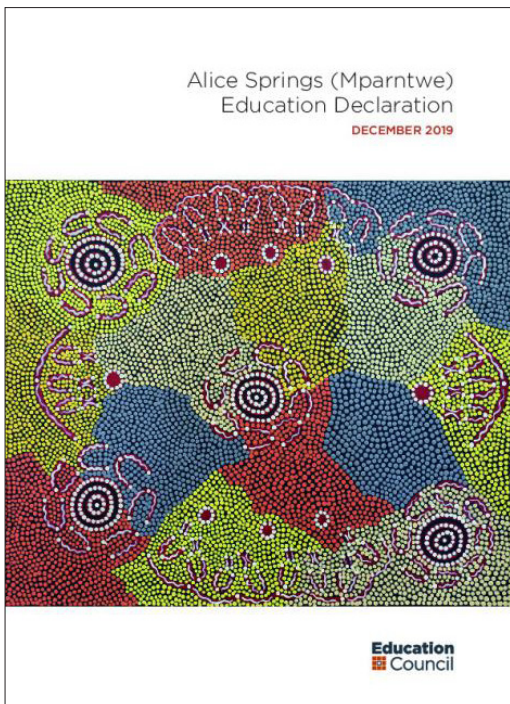


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Introduction

This paper is the first in the Page Research Centre's 2026 *Thematic Series: Rethinking and Restating the Nature and Purpose of Australian School Education*.



Education is the quintessential expression of a nation's identity and aspirations. In partnership with families and the wider community, an effective education system prioritises the inter-generational transmission of prized knowledge, skills, values, and traditions. Australia's overarching education policy document, the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration*, states that³

Education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion.

One of Australia's longest-serving education historians, Alan Barcan, described its role as 'the shaping of a human being, with the development of character and of knowledge of the great intellectual and other achievements of the human race'.⁴

Australian school education aspires – sometimes even claims – to be 'world class'. The *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration* identifies the two 'interconnected' national education goals that provide high-level guidance for state and territory education authorities, schools and teachers.⁵

Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity

Goal 2: All young Australians become:

- confident and creative individuals
- successful lifelong learners
- active and informed members of the community.

The goals have unequalled status in education policy; however, indisputable evidence of widespread challenges for schools, teachers and students puts their real-world impact in doubt.

Decades of reports provide evidence of inconsistent and ineffective academic standards, falling student achievement (especially in literacy and numeracy), inadequate teacher training and low morale in the profession, and unsatisfactory classroom behaviour.⁶ Public confidence in school leavers' readiness for further study, the workforce and adult life is low.

Worrying numbers of Australian students are disengaged or even fully detached from formal schooling, cannot demonstrate proficiency in literacy and numeracy, and are reporting anxiety, low self-esteem, social disconnection and other conditions that hinder their progress into adulthood. According to Professor Patrick McGorry, executive director of the mental health research, policy and education organisation Orygen, there is a strong correlation between adolescent mental health and school retention and attendance. For example, half of all people who go on to develop serious mental illness in later life have dropped out of high school.⁷

Another marker of decline was seen in young Australians' performance in the 2024 National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC), described as 'a world-class online assessment designed by education experts in the field of civics and citizenship'.⁸ The results were the lowest since the triennial testing began in 2004:

- Year 6 students - 43% achieved the proficient standard, compared with 53% in 2019
- Year 10 students - 28% achieved the proficient standard, compared with 38% in 2019

Other research points to young Australians' apparent disdain for democracy as a system of government⁹, unwillingness to defend the country and its way of life¹⁰, and the growing appeal of extremist influencers.¹¹

One of the most serious problems is the rise of anti-Semitism in Australia. A key federal government strategy involves partnering with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to enable students to 'gain literacy about contemporary antisemitism, resilience to misinformation, intercultural understanding and the capacity to act as responsible citizens'.¹² Schools are being asked to add this to their curriculum and teaching responsibilities.

Crucially, Australian education policy documents also acknowledge the value of partnerships with organisations that 'can facilitate development, training and employment opportunities, promote a sense of responsible citizenship and encourage lifelong learning'.¹³

This research paper identifies one such organisation. The Australian Defence Force Cadets program, which includes the Australian Army Cadets (AAC), Australian Navy Cadets (ANC) and Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC), is dedicated to youth personal development at training units established

throughout regional and metropolitan Australia. Using data from a survey of former Cadets, this paper reports on the experience of participants in the Australian Air Force Cadets Program (AAFC), and the extent to which respondents believe it complemented their school education and prepared them for post-school life.

A critical step towards improving Australian school education outcomes requires returning to first principles. This paper argues that policymakers and educators must begin at the critical point at which the nature and purpose of education of young Australians is currently determined: the national education goals. These require urgent renewal. Their key deficit is the absence of context. Not only must the language of the goals reflect the gravity of their intent, the goals themselves must also be solidly established within a broader historic and contemporary – and distinctively Australian – context in order to make their relevance and their application absolutely clear.

I Ancient origins

Given the critical status of the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration* in guiding Australian education policy, the absence of a succinct, unequivocal rationale for the selection of the national education goals is noteworthy. This makes it difficult to judge the historic, intellectual and philosophical foundations on which they, and the wider document, and all of the policy expectations that cascade from them, can be understood to rest. It begs the question: What belief system underpins Australian school education? Even more importantly, if the answer to that question is unclear, what is the capacity of national policy (and thus schools and teachers) to help students – in the words of the *Declaration* – 'to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are'?¹⁴

Perhaps, as poet Agnes Storrie asked in *The Making of a Nation* (1909), a useful question might be 'What are we who love Australia?'.¹⁵

Australia's two national education goals are likely indebted to ancient Greek, Chinese, Indian and Western civilisations that have long shared a belief that the purpose of education is, at its core, the formation of character. For example, if this is accepted as a near-universal human instinct, Australians might draw an historic connection with the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration's* call for students to develop 'honesty, empathy, loyalty, responsibility and respect for others',¹⁶ as well as learning to 'act with moral and ethical integrity ... have empathy for the circumstances of others and work for the common good'.¹⁷

To Aristotle (not an unabashed fan of democracy), the moral and intellectual qualities of citizens determined the character of a governing body. That is, character virtues must be cultivated deliberately in pursuit of wisdom and the common good.. The ancient Greeks 'pioneered the idea of *paideia*, the development of excellence in all aspects of human life'.¹⁸ In ancient Rome, responsibility for character formation lay with the home and the family.

The liberal-humanist approach to education – broadly represented in the Australian Curriculum – has its foundations in the ancient world. Today's eight 'learning areas' have evolved from the trivium (three language arts of grammar, logic and rhetoric) and quadrivium (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music). Arguably, much of this was about trying to make sense of the world.

Citizenship has long been associated with military service, either as a condition of it or a path to it. In Sparta, adult male citizens had an obligation to lifetime service, with boys beginning training (alongside their academic studies) from the age of seven. The premise was clear; citizens defended their territory.

Notwithstanding historic evidence of human weaknesses and flaws, the concept of a virtuous character – aspiring to a 'good life' conducted in service of others – endured through medieval times and into the Renaissance. The Enlightenment (late 17th to 18th) encouraged consideration of how character is shaped and the extent to which a

child's character would be influenced by life experiences, particularly those who were, for whatever reason, denied a traditional family upbringing.

From the 18th century, European approaches to education lost some of the classical commitment to character formation, with English public schools placing great emphasis on students' manners and social status. Academic expectations varied widely, although for the rest of the 19th century many schools continued to provide a rigorous classical education. Rugby School was a prime example, where the influential Headmaster Thomas Arnold (1828-1841) introduced new approaches to pastoral care and leadership, and was famous for saying 'First, religious and moral principle, second gentlemanly conduct, third academic ability'.¹⁹

During the Victorian era, the overriding view was that hard work, the cultivation of sound morals, and dedication to religion would be of greatest benefit to the poor and to wider society. The role of schools was to instil discipline and impart knowledge. Learning 'by heart' reflected the strong religious foundations of a rigorous education, especially in relation to literature.

In the early 20th century, a renewed focus on character formation still emphasised a sound work ethic, formal study and religious and social obligations. There was a growing emphasis on character virtues such as fairness, loyalty, and kindness.

So-called 'progressive' approaches took hold from the 1960s, underpinned by international movements that rejected traditional, generally class-based, expectations of learning and behaviour. The role of schools in developing character became less clear as young people questioned centuries-old teaching methods as well as the notion of intrinsic virtues.

In the 21st century, words like self-actualisation and authenticity have become common, reflecting a preoccupation with individual wellbeing rather than traditional ideals of community service, duty and civic participation. Globalist approaches to education, advocated by organisations such as the World Economic Forum, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), dominate curriculum development and pedagogy around the world, especially via methodologies such as '21st century competencies' (collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking). While education remains a critical vehicle for nation-building and for enhancing social cohesion, some researchers argue that 'globalisation has changed the traditional relationship between education, the nation-state, and society'.²⁰

In keeping with the Western Christian model of education, Australian schooling retains elements of the classical liberal-

humanist curriculum that supports the 'development of skills, the acquisition of insights and character formation'.²¹ A curriculum focused on the liberal arts and sciences teaches 'moral and empirical knowledge'²² which is the basis for sound reasoning, good judgment and the capacity to contribute thoughtfully to society.

A civil society requires acceptance of a balance between individual freedom and collective contribution to the public (greater) good. Acceptance of that balance – acknowledging personal responsibility as well as rights – is central to the formation of character and, consequently, a healthy democracy.

Military service enables a quantifiable measure of character formation because it constitutes a regulated responsibility – and accountability – for the public good. In Australia, where this is a voluntary undertaking, it is explained as 'The selflessness of character to place the security and interests of our nation and its people ahead of one's own'.²³ Former Chief of Army Peter Leahy has recently posed the question: 'What is our sense of being Australian if it is not about being part of a team, committing to the group and contributing to something bigger than oneself?'.²⁴

Courage, service, integrity and excellence are among many ancient concepts displayed at hundreds, more likely thousands, of Australian government and non-government schools. These mottoes include: ***Labor Omnia Vincit*** (Work Conquers Everything) - Dubbo Public School (NSW); ***Strive and Serve*** - Maroochydore State High School (Qld) -; ***Faith and Courage*** - St Brendan's School (VIC); ***Savoir C'est Pouvoir*** (Knowledge is Power) - Perth Modern School (WA); ***Ad Astra Per Aspera*** (Through Struggle to the Stars) - Woodville High School (SA); ***Esse Quam Videri*** (To be, rather than to seem) - Darwin High School (NT); ***Achieving Excellence Together*** - Chapman Primary School (ACT); ***Vivit Post Funera Virtus*** (Character lives on after death) - The Hutchins School (TAS).



II Curriculum expectations

Australia has a national curriculum – the Australian Curriculum – which is informed by the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration* and ‘sets the expectations for what all young Australians should be taught, regardless of their background or where they live’.²⁵ According to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the national curriculum ‘represents what the Australian community values as the knowledge, understanding and skills that young people should attain’.²⁶ The Australian Curriculum is three-dimensional in design, comprising

- eight Learning Areas (English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities and Social Science, The Arts, Technologies, Health and Physical Education, Languages);
- seven General Capabilities (Literacy, Numeracy, Critical and Creative Thinking, Digital Literacy, Ethical Understanding, Intercultural Understanding, Personal and Social Capability);
- and three Cross-Curriculum Priorities (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures; Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia; Sustainability).

It must be noted that Australia’s federal system of government delegates operational responsibility for schooling to the eight states and territories. Each of these jurisdictions has considerable flexibility for implementing curriculum, classroom practices, development and use of resources, and assessment and reporting. New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia have their own, distinct curricula. National consistency is not guaranteed.

An example of variation in expectations and practices is seen in the subject of Civics and Citizenship, where policy interest at federal, state and territory levels has waxed and waned for decades. While the Australian Curriculum provides content for study by students in Years 5 to 10, there is no curriculum expectation of study in this area for senior secondary (Year 11 and 12) students.

Approaches to teaching Civics and Citizenship tend to be utilitarian, focusing on the structures and processes of

government rather than highlighting millennia of cultural and socio-political movements, key publications and prominent figures that have informed the evolution of Australia’s democratic way of life. Few Australian teachers have rigorous training in this area of the curriculum.

According to one researcher, ‘civics and citizenship education still sits at the margins of schooling’, and unless prioritised, ‘even well-intentioned initiatives risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative’.²⁷

Such is the concern about student performance in this aspect of the curriculum that a House of Representatives Joint Standing Committee into Electoral Matters launched a review in 2024. The Committee’s report contains 23 proposals for reforms, including significant changes to the national curriculum and to teacher training.²⁸

Recent, overt challenges to social cohesion have highlighted the importance of character formation in Australian classrooms, one strategy being an increased emphasis on the Australian Curriculum’s General Capabilities such as Ethical Understanding, Intercultural Understanding, and Personal and Social Capability. Since 2021, the Australian Government has committed \$3 million to initiatives that build ‘individual capacity’ and challenge ‘personal and cultural attitudes that lead to intolerance’.²⁹ State and territory variations in approach, content and delivery of curriculum make it difficult to ensure nationally consistent academic expectations and practices.

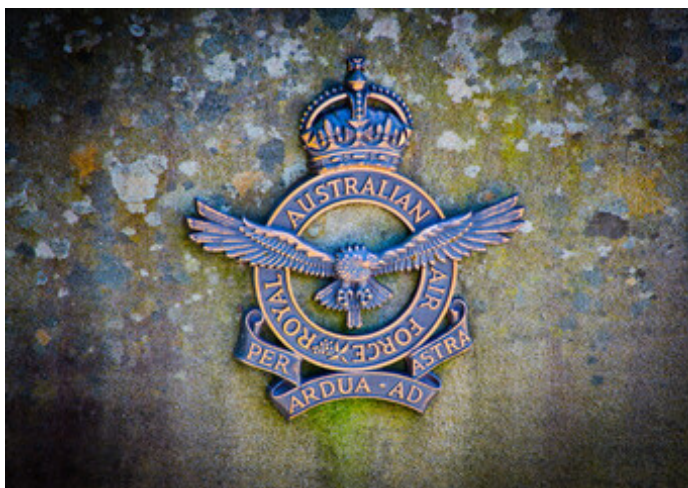
By contrast, the world’s most consistently successful education system prioritises a simultaneous emphasis on academic rigour and character and citizenship education (CCE) throughout primary and secondary school, with CCE having ‘always been at the heart of our education system’.³⁰ Singapore’s four Desired Outcomes of Education include this one: ‘Concerned citizens who are rooted to Singapore, are responsible to their family, community and nation and take active roles in improving the lives of others’.³¹

III A national youth development organisation – the AAFC

Within the unique context of the Australian Defence Force, and specifically designed for young people of school age, sit three ADF-affiliated, community-based, youth development organisations: Australian Army Cadets (AAC), Australian Navy Cadets (ANC) and the Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC). In 2026, approximately 30,000 Cadets and 4,405 staff members work and learn together in 589 locations across regional and metropolitan Australia.

Sponsored by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), the Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC) has evolved over 85 years to become one of Australia’s premier youth development organisations, all programs delivered by volunteers, community-based and focused on ADF customs, traditions and values.³²

Whilst the RAAF and the AAFC are very closely connected, they are not the same organisation. The AAFC is not a formal part of the RAAF, and neither the Cadets nor most of their instructors are members of the RAAF. The relationship is more of a sponsored partnership, with the AAFC managed by the Australian Defence Force Cadets program, which reports to the Vice Chief of the Defence Force. The level of sponsorship is greater than funding and resourcing alone as it enables AAFC access to RAAF Bases, and occasionally RAAF aircraft, and the RAAF provides guidance on aviation and leadership training.



From the ATC to the AAFC

A critical need for RAAF air and ground crew during World War II led to the establishment of the Air Training Corps (ATC) in 1941. Teenage boys were recruited to support the war effort, with the potential to join the RAAF when they turned 18. The emphasis on aviation training, ‘air mindedness’ and ‘technical skills’ eased the transition to service life for those who decided to join up, and it enhanced the opportunities of those wanting to pursue other aviation-related careers. Of about 30,000 boys who joined the ATC, about 13,000 later served in the Australian Defence Force.³³

After 1945, the focus shifted from military recruitment to national objectives that fostered citizenship, discipline (including ceremonial drill), teamwork and leadership skills in young Australians. This peacetime renewal was also designed to encourage young people to consider careers in Australia’s growing aviation sector as well as in the RAAF.³⁴

Prominent Australians have worked their way through Cadet programs, including former Governor General Sir William Deane and former Prime Minister John Howard.

A national directorate was established to manage all state and territory branches of the Cadet programs in 2000. The Air Training Corps (ATC) was renamed the Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC), with effect from 2001.

Female Cadets

Many years of appeals to the Australian Government – including a letter from Queensland schoolgirls to the RAAF – finally led to the admission of the first female Cadets in 1982. Notably, the decision had been made by the early 1970s to disband the Cadet program, but the new federal government elected in 1975 reversed that plan (renaming it AirTC) and introduced the necessary legislation following a policy statement by the then Minister for Defence. In 1980, the Chief of the Air Staff approved the appointment of women as officers and instructors, and the entry of females gave the Cadet program new impetus. Not only did membership increase, but the push for gender equality brought better support for women pursuing careers in aviation.³⁵

Jeff’s Cadets

One of the strongest public advocates for Cadet-style youth development programs was former Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett. Premier Kennett saw opportunities to develop programs, similar to those used with the ADF Cadets, to assist and guide young people, particularly those lacking direction at home and within the community. Based in part on his own experience as a Cadet, he backed proposals for community service for young Australians and argued that structured training could build self-discipline, leadership and civic responsibility in young people, and improve social cohesion and an understanding of common values in the community.³⁶

The program was officially a Victorian Youth Development program, introduced in 1997, to assist secondary students develop leadership and community service skills through participation with emergency and volunteer organisations, including the AAFC. Colloquially referred to as ‘Jeff’s Cadets’, the state government provided funding to deliver ‘life skills and work experience’ to secondary students.

The Victorian program has delivered benefits across a broad range of participating enterprises, including Emergency Services, Defence and community organisations. Leveraging the links to schools, Victoria has offered VCE/VCAL credits, first aid and rescue accreditation, a range of employment pathways, recruitment into volunteer emergency services, and investment in training facilities that serve those communities.³⁷

Cadets WA

The Western Australian state government has also provided sponsorship and funding for the three ADF Cadet programs (Army, Navy and Air Force), in addition to programs operated by the WA Police, SES and St Johns organisations, among others. Cadets WA is administered through the Department of Communities, with many of the programs operating within schools. In 2026, the WA Government committed just under \$20m over five years to extend the program to cover additional operational support, facilities and activities. The Department of Defence provides uniforms, training frameworks and national Cadet administration. Since its inception in 1996, Cadets WA has brought a range of positive outcomes to over 100,000 young people, especially through a focus on practical competencies that assist with employment and career development.³⁸

Challenges and modernisation

A huge setback for the AAFC in recent times was the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021). As with school closures, the loss of face-to-face contact had negative consequences. Weekly training parades were suspended and major activities – particularly flying training – had to be cancelled, with units turning to online video and virtual instruction. Although the increased use of digital learning platforms and the development and implementation of STEM-focused training led to new strategies and some positive outcomes, Cadet numbers fell drastically. A phased recovery program was implemented once restrictions were lifted; this immediately reinvigorated community interest and the popularity of the AAFC program increased. Indeed, the training pause ultimately gave the AAFC an unanticipated opportunity to rethink and modernise the whole program delivery strategy.

The 21st century AAFC

Soundly based in the Air Force context, and operating with over 10,000 Cadets and about 2,300 adult staff across Australia, the vision of the AAFC is now **To be Australia's exemplar youth development organisation**. The mission is **To inspire and develop young Australians, with a focus on air, space, and cybersecurity environments**.

A *Cadet Learning Continuum Review* conducted in 2023 led to a more holistic approach to training delivery for both adult instructors and Cadets. Implemented from 2024, the

modernised Vision and Mission focus on young people's learning in an aviation, cyber and space environment, not just for themselves but as encouragement to contribute to Australia's success.

Substantial investment in the Cadet programs has enabled the introduction of emerging technologies such as Cyber Security, Space and Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS). The AAFC established a Remotely Piloted Aircraft Training School in 2024. This offers opportunities for Cadets to not only gain exposure to the RPAS environment, but also to training that can lead to Australia's Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) remote pilot licences. Furthermore, the new AAFC Cyber Security program offers extension programs for Cadets who have an interest in these areas. The inclusion of these new technology programs complements current programs, offering a broader base from which Cadets can develop and manage their experience. In keeping with developments in education technology across the world, the AAFC Learning Hub incorporates three major components: the Cadet Learning Curriculum, the Cadet Program and the Adult Program.

Today's AAFC members study in a structured learning environment that highlights practical experience and personal development within an Air Force setting. Learning outcomes are broadly consistent with the approach taken by Australian secondary schools.³⁹

The wider Air Force context ensures a focus on self-discipline, confidence, citizenship and service. While some Cadets go on to join the RAAF, other areas of Defence, or the aviation / aerospace sector, the knowledge and skills they develop are designed to serve them well for post-school life, study and careers in other industries.

AAFC Strategy 2030

Community expectations of youth development programs are high. Clarity of purpose and organisational accountability are critical. The AAFC has driven change to meet those expectations and to strengthen 'how we train, support and empower young Australians, backed by modern systems and a clear alignment with Air Force direction'.⁴⁰

A strong youth development organisation empowers young Australians and provides them with the support, skills and tools to become responsible and successful citizens. To achieve this, the AAFC uses the aerospace, cyber and space environments as the 'tools', and leadership, self-reliance and resilience as the 'skills', all of which are developed through sustained relationships and positive outcomes between Cadets and adults.

The AAFC vision is to be 'the best youth development program in Australia' and the mission is 'to inspire and develop young people in the air and space environments to achieve and maximise their potential to contribute to Australia's success'.⁴¹

Thus, the AAFC is contextualised for individuals at the organisational level, against the wider RAAF backdrop, and as a contributor to national goals.

The Air Force Cadets Strategy 2030 provides a 'roadmap to a future that's resilient, relevant, and ready'.⁴² There will be ongoing refinements to the curriculum as well as upgrades to training systems, as part of 'fostering resilience, relevance, and leadership in aerospace, technology and innovation'.⁴³



Industry Support

This research paper has explained that Australian education policy advocates partnerships with external organisations ('communities, business and industry') that 'can facilitate development, training and employment opportunities, promote a sense of responsible citizenship and encourage lifelong learning'.⁴⁴

As the 21st century unfolds, Australia's Defence and Aerospace industry is expanding, with high-calibre young adults needed in a range of trades, engineering, program management, information technology, and other parts of the workforce.

Collaboration between the Australian Air Force Cadets Foundation and the Defence and aerospace industry (including technology enterprises) is key to establishing the roadmap to the future for young Australians. Strategic planning and investment means that Cadets have invaluable opportunities such as:

- Industry visits
- Presentations by industry representatives
- Engagement between Cadets and industry at major events such as the Avalon Airshow
- Careers Expos at various Wings around Australia
- Sponsorship of the International Air Cadet Exchange Program and the Flight Simulator Program

Approximately 50 companies and organisations support the AAFC, including sponsoring activities that otherwise could not be funded by public monies.

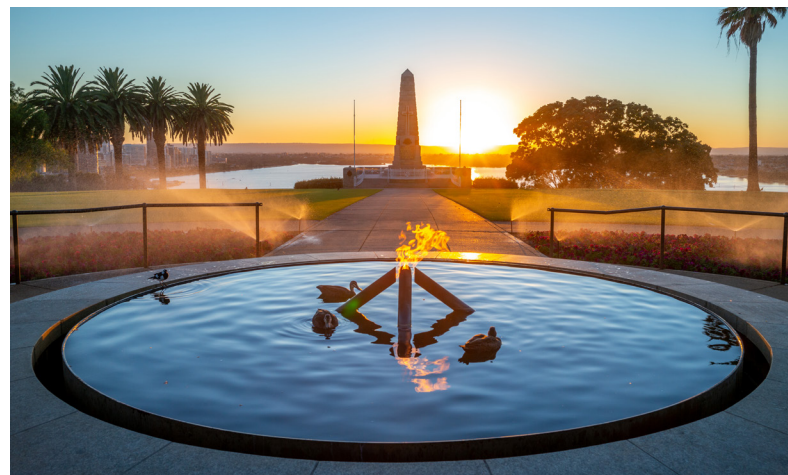
Building Character and the Nation

National values are inextricably linked to national identity, making a cohesive approach to both of these essential. On the basis of its affiliation with the Australian Defence Force, the AAFC fosters and promotes particular values such as respect, integrity, service, excellence and courage. These values reflect both the ADF and Australian society more broadly; the importance of the connection between the two in building individual responsibility, citizenship and pride in being Australian cannot be overstated.

Like other similar organisations, the AAFC is committed to helping young Australians to develop the skills, values and attitudes that will build not only individual character but strengthen the Australian nation. The same core themes resonate throughout the program, pointing to the importance of becoming responsible citizens, developing leadership and workplace skills, and contributing to the community. These skills prepare the Cadets for entry to a wide range of post-school options, including further study, business, government, emergency services, and the military.

The AAFC makes a very practical contribution to enhancing Australia's national identity. Given that Cadets come from a range of geographic, socio-cultural and other backgrounds across Australia, training activities bring them together with a distinctive, shared purpose. This builds unity among young Australians through cooperation and encouraging national pride.

Showing respect for this nation's traditions includes participating in ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day Ceremonies. The proud tradition of military service – specifically through the connection with the Royal Australian Air Force – means wearing the uniform and honouring past members' service.



IV Survey of former members of the Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC)

This research paper focuses on Australian’s national education goals, particularly as they are expressed through the overarching education policy document, the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration*. Preparing young Australians for post-school life is a goal shared by both the AAFC and national education policy, particularly in relation to citizenship (referred to in the *Declaration* as becoming an ‘active and informed member of the community’).

This section reports on the findings of a survey of former Cadets. Administered through the AAFC Alumni Network, this survey enabled the collection of feedback from former AAFC members regarding their experience and the extent to which they believe it complemented their school education and prepared them for post-school life. A copy of the survey is available at Appendix B.

It must be noted – and is emphasised later in this section – that the sample may be skewed towards the positive given that respondents have elected to join the Alumni Network.

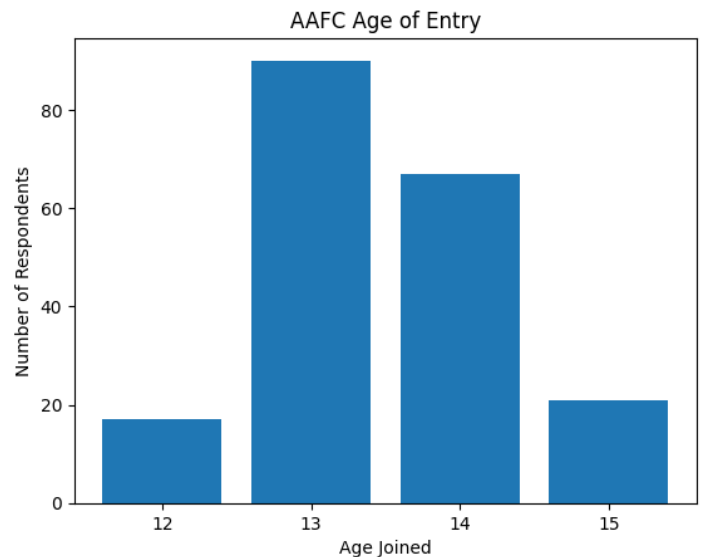
The survey attracted 218 responses, equating to just over 10% of those registered with the AAFC Alumni Network. None of the 12 survey items was mandatory; therefore, the number of responses to each item varies slightly.

Of the 12 items, five offered respondents the opportunity to provide firsthand, written feedback. While not all comments could be reproduced in this paper, the intention was always to give them prominence. All respondents were anonymous, but some broad demographic information is provided with their comments: gender; location of the unit where they spent most time; age at which they joined; length of time served as a Cadet (noting that this does not include any subsequent time in staff roles). For any who subsequently joined the Australian Defence Force, this is noted in the bracketed details.

Joining age

The Australian Defence Force Cadets program is open to young Australians of school age; they must be at least 12 years and 6 months old when they join, and they ‘age out’ at 18. The nationwide Cadet joining period runs from 01 October to 31 March each year. Some AAFC squadrons may already be at capacity or fill up quickly and are closed to applications before 31 March.

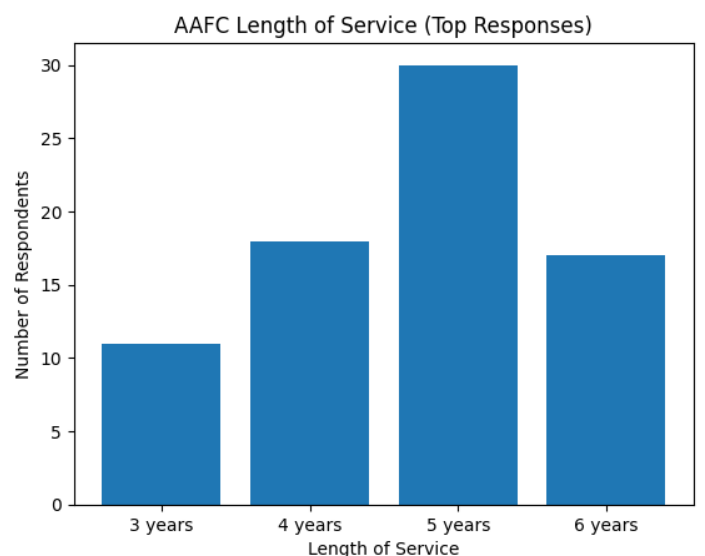
The following graph shows the ages at which respondents commenced their time with the AAFC.



Within the Air Force context, the AAFC offers a highly structured youth development program that includes regular assessment of Cadet program content and military knowledge and the possibility of promotion through the ranks.

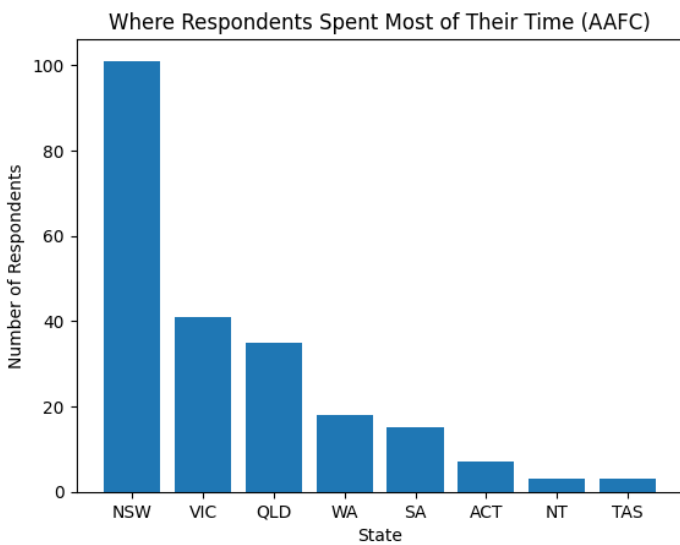
Length of membership

The length of engagement depends greatly on the other activities and commitments of Cadets, including schoolwork, sports and part time jobs. Those who stay on to 18 have the opportunity to become senior Cadet leaders. After completing their time as Cadets, some return as volunteers.

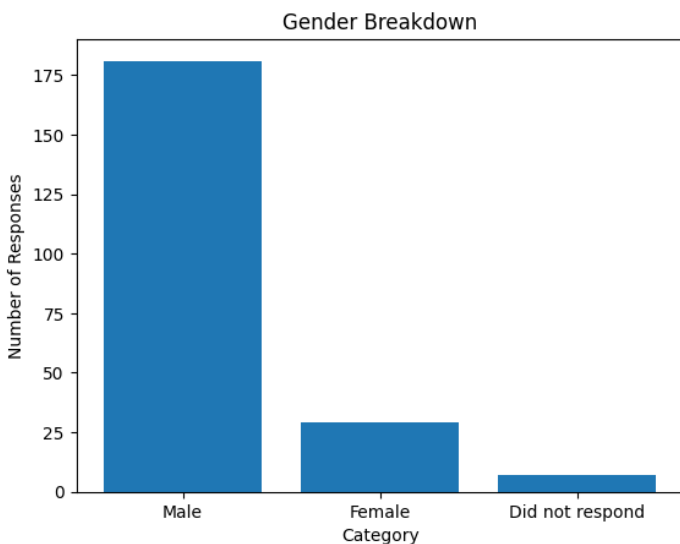


Location of membership

As is true of the other branches of the Australian Defence Force Cadets, the AAFC operates across regional and metropolitan Australia. This graph indicates the state or territory where former Cadets who responded to this survey served most or all of their time. As is evident, the jurisdictions with the highest populations also have the highest proportion of Cadets.

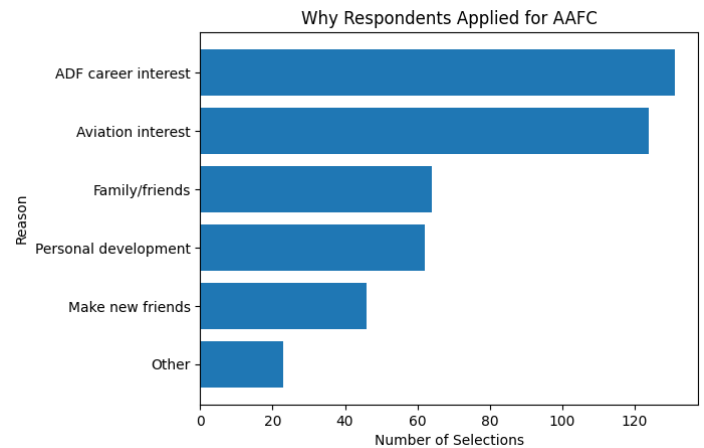


Gender of survey respondents



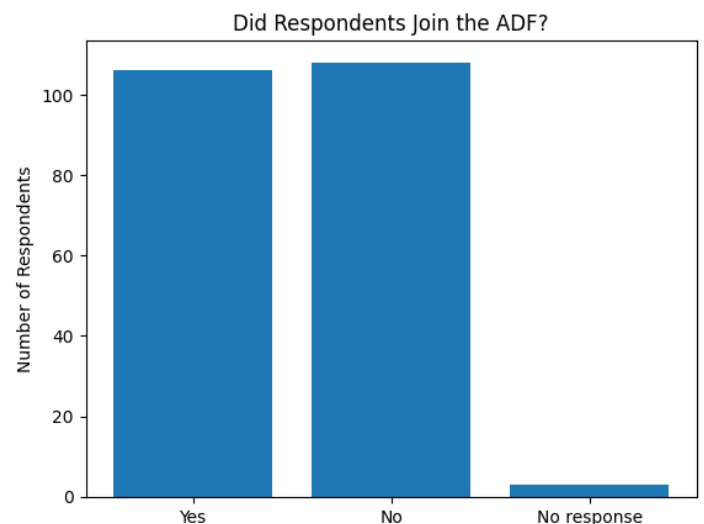
Motivation for applying

The Australian Defence Force Cadets program has clear objectives. It aims to be an 'exemplar youth development program' by providing rewarding opportunities to learn and build character in an ADF-affiliated environment. Other aims include enhancing the inter-generational connection between the Australian Defence Force and the community that it serves, and encouraging interest in Defence careers.



Post-school and post-AAFC career

Given that one aim of the AAFC program is to encourage interest in joining the Australian Defence Force, former members were asked about their post-Cadet career choice. Notably, the numbers show an almost even split between those who did and did not go on to a military career.



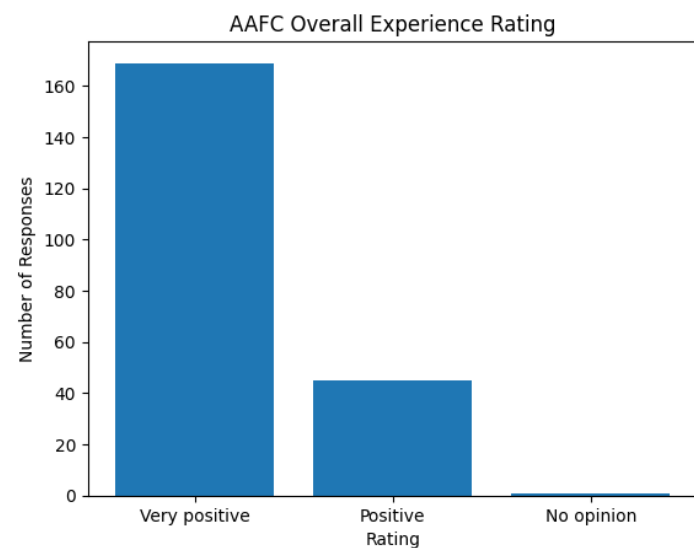
Set me up for my Defence career as an Avtech. Great life lessons, teamwork, friends, and learned resilience. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 6 years, ADF)

It gave me the fundamentals for life in the ADF. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 6 years, ADF)

Skills learnt, friendships made and exposure to military life was invaluable. Leadership and mentoring skills learnt played an active role in my career in the defence force and civilian life. The Cadet staff served as significant role models in my upbringing. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 6 years, ADF)

Overall experience with the AAFC program

As noted earlier in this section of the paper, most survey respondents came from the AAFC Alumni Network. Logically, Cadets who had a negative experience would be less likely to join such a group. Even taking this into consideration, the ratings were overwhelmingly positive. Of the 218 responses, 156 included a comment.



There's no other organisation like it, meeting like-minded people, staff that care and volunteer in order to run cool activities, opportunities and experiences. (Male, QLD, joined at 12, served 6 years, ADF)

The most outstanding thing that I think we bring to youth is the positive role models that they are exposed to with their AAFC experience - regardless of what rank/position/length of service. As a former Police Officer, we teach CDTs to become "decent people". We certainly provide excellent leadership training and experiences that simply cannot be achieved in other youth organisations, but I still firmly believe that our best outcome is equipping our young people with resilience and life skills. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, ADF, current AAFC staff)

I rate my experience with ATC/AIRTC/AAFC from 1957 to 2004 as very positive in providing me with unlimited opportunities for personal development and to contribute, not only to the AAFC and RAAF, but to civilian life, benefiting not only me, but my employer, local community and ultimately as a self-employed business consultant in a niche area of food safety management. (Male, SA, joined at 16, ADF)

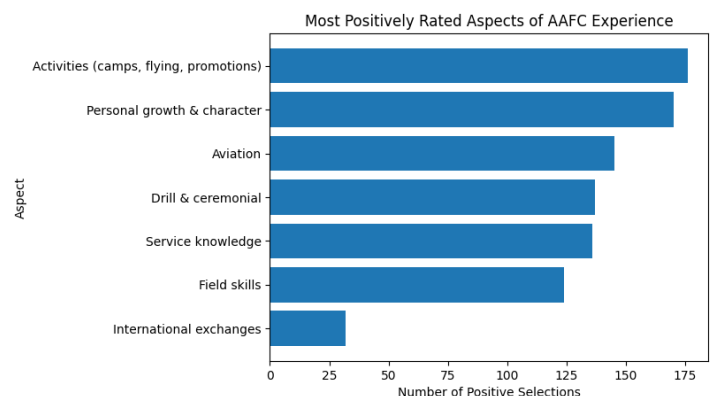
I joined at a time when I could have easily fallen into a destructive lifestyle. The flight commander was a retired RAAF Chaplain who not only ran the flight along military lines; he mentored and counselled Cadets in all manner of situations encountered in their lives. (Male, QLD, joined at 14, ADF)

Cadets taught me pride, respect and manners - values that sadly appear to be lacking in youth today, and not just in Australia. (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 2 years)

The experiences I had in the AAFC indeed pushed me further than I would have ever thought, pushing me to do things I would never think to do or would have done, and giving me opportunities that were unique in the sense that I wouldn't get them anywhere else. I fondly remember commanding a section in field activities, or activities during training weekends/GST's, taking initiative, improvising, and doing things on the go. (Male, SA, joined at 14, served 4 years)

Specific aspects of the AAFC experience

Former Cadets were very positive about the range of activities in which they could participate. It should be noted that a small number of Cadets get the opportunity to travel overseas on international exchanges, so most exposure to the exchanges is through interactions with international youth who travel on exchange to Australia.



The AAFC claims to provide experiences that ‘equip for life’ and ‘will push you further and make you the best version of yourself’. How would you rate your experience in this regard?

As the following graph shows, the majority (209) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that this was their experience. Three disagreed strongly, two disagreed and two chose No opinion. Of the 218 respondents to the survey, 170 provided further detail to support their rating. Again, the authors acknowledge that former Cadets who would be most likely to disagree would also be least likely to join the AAFC Alumni Network.

One former Cadet, who gave the reason for joining the AAFC as ‘Forced by my parents’, wrote:

I made friends for life across multiple generations & there are skills I learnt in the AAFC I use daily. (Female, Qld, joined at 14, served 6 years)

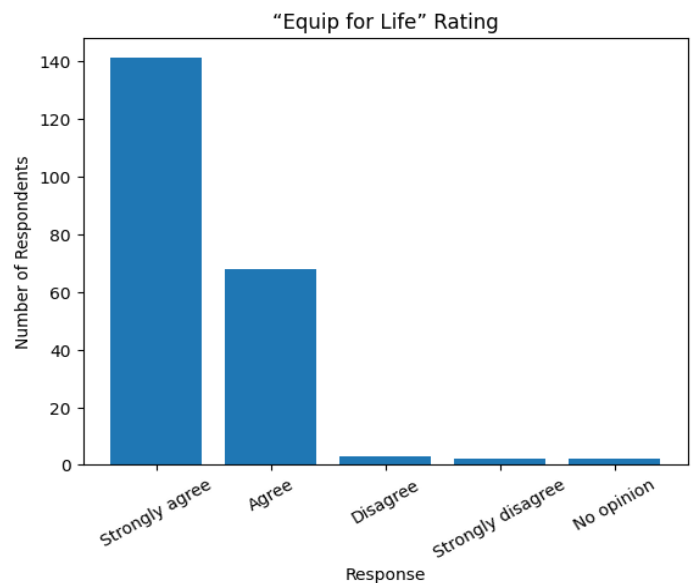
Another, who recalled being ‘a bored teenager in a small town’, joined at 13 because he ‘heard about it and thought it was cool’. He served 10 years as a Cadet and later as a staff member, concluding now that ‘I would not be the man I am today without the AAFC’.

Yet another described himself as ‘a shy introverted kid when I first started’, but he believes that ‘Cadets definitely broke me out of my shell and equipped me with the leadership and public speaking skills, but most importantly the confidence required to apply those skills. The instructors and officers taught me about resilience, toughening up in the face of adversities and setbacks, accepting that I’m not perfect and can make mistakes, but also providing guidance on how to improve.’ (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 6.5 years)

One respondent attributed multiple benefits to his AAFC experience:

Provided the base for my life and experience as a first responder police officer for 17 years, and then moving to a CEO for a number of professional industry-based associations. Provided a sense of belonging and tenacity - I believe this prevented me from suffering PTSD and developed the leadership skills I transferred and used in business. I now own and operate my own business employing 12 staff and contractors. I believe that Cadets should be mandatory for all young people. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 5 years)

One of the best times of my life, which I’ll never forget. I learnt a lot of useful skills and made some solid friends, which have last throughout my life. We really felt that we were part of the ADF, even though we were only Cadets. (Male, NSW, joined at 15, served 2.5 years)



Others wrote:

100% agree. It gave me so many life skills, understanding of possibilities! (Female, WA, joined at 13, served 5 years)

The skills and maturity I gained from the AAFC has positively impacted my career and personal life. (Male, Qld, joined at 13, served 5 years, ADF)

Everything we do in the AAFC helps us to become better members of society. (Female, Qld, joined at 14, served 6 years)

Excellent skills learned for the military and life in general. Make great friends as well. (Male, Qld, joined at 12, served 6 years, ADF)

The AAFC gave me opportunity to put myself out of my comfort zone in a safe environment which helped in my future career where it gave me knowledge that I can succeed in things that I might find difficult or out of my comfort zone. (Male, NSW, joined at 12 years of age, served 6 years, ADF)

I was able to draw on Cadet experiences during early job applications. I ended up in the AIC and am now a CEO of a global NfP - I credit Cadets with this path. (Female, VIC, joined at 13, served 6 years)

The AAFC provided me with the structure and stability I needed during the difficult teenage years where school and family dynamics were not as stable. A clear pathway of progression, based on effort provided me with a basis for a long career in the aviation industry. Without the AAFC, I would not be in aviation today. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 7 years)

Fostered an interest in service and enforced that I was capable of doing a job in a traditionally male dominated field (policing). (Female, NSW, joined at 14, served 3 years)

Helped me get my first job as I could write it on my resume, and it helped me with interview processes and self-management entering the work force. (Male, WA, joined at 12, served 6 years)

Skills learnt, friendships made and exposure to military life was invaluable. Leadership and mentoring skills learnt played an active role in my career in the defence force and civilian life. The Cadet staff served as significant role models in my upbringing. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 5 years, ADF)

Incredible for development, teamwork, learning from others, responsibility, new experiences, meeting people from different walks of life. (Female, NSW, joined at 15, served 3 years)

Skills obtained in AAFC advance training prepared me for university life, and my quick elevation in the professional world post uni. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 5 years)

So much of what I learnt in Cadets has been applicable to my current career as a manager and team leader. Additionally, it also steered me in the direction of working in public service. (Female, NSW, joined at 13, served 8 years)

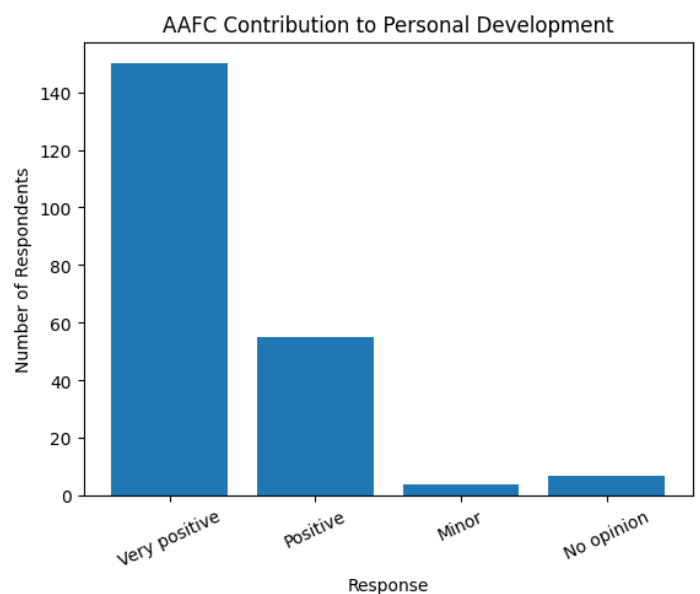
AAFC made me the person I am now and is one of the most defining elements of my teenage years. (Male, Qld, joined at 13 years, served 5 years, ADF)

The biggest thing I benefited from in AAFC was clear communication and providing briefings and instruction with confidence. I went into the construction industry and in this industry you need to stand up for yourself, be confident and brief large teams. You also need to ensure your instructions are clear. (Male, NSW, joined at 14, served 6 years)

I joined the NSW Police Force after leaving Cadets. Joining Cadets was the best thing I did as a teenager. It gave purpose and I developed many skills I wouldn't have otherwise developed. I made numerous friendships many of which I still have to this day and I'm 49 now. (Female, NSW, joined at 14, served 5 years)

The AAFC program claims that 'Cadets will be encouraged to adopt a range of attributes, skills and behaviours that will benefit them well into the future', with a focus on developing 'character and good citizenship'. How would you rate the AAFC's contribution to your overall personal development?

Critical to my life success, ADF career and personal attributes. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 6 years, ADF)



My experience as a Cadet instilled in me self-reliance, respect, dedication, diligence, resilience, teamwork and service to Australia, duty and to honour the sacrifices of our forebears and the heritage we have inherited from them to preserve and protect. Whilst I completed high school my scholastic achievement was average; however I excelled at every facet of Cadets. This followed through into my RAAF training and post service I went off to university and completed a Master of Business Administration. I own and operate my own business now ... If I did not have the opportunity to be in Cadets, I am certain that my life would have gone in a completely different and less positive direction. (Male, Qld, joined at 13, served 3 years, ADF)

My family / childhood was not great (alcoholic father who was abusive). Cadets was the one thing that kept me positive, it really gave me hope back then. (Female, WA, joined at 13, served 5 years)

My time in the AAFC developed my attention to detail, leadership skills, organisation skills, respect for authority, respectful and tactful questioning of authority, and communication skills; all of which have improved my professional abilities, character, and made me into the man I am today. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 6 years)

The development of personal discipline is a solid foundation for life - supporting your fellow Cadets leads to helping your friends, your family, your neighbours & generally doing the right thing. (Male, VIC, joined at 15, served 3 years, ADF)

The AAFC values worked into my character, and these have shown through in my adult life. These skills/behaviours would probably not be as strong if it wasn't for the AAFC. All these attributes have contributed into the person I am today. (Male, NSW, joined at 12)

My Cadet background has enabled me to develop my life and my career as I wanted. I am a naturally quiet person, but Cadet service enabled me to become a leader and mentor across a range of endeavours. (Male, VIC, joined at 14, served 6 years)

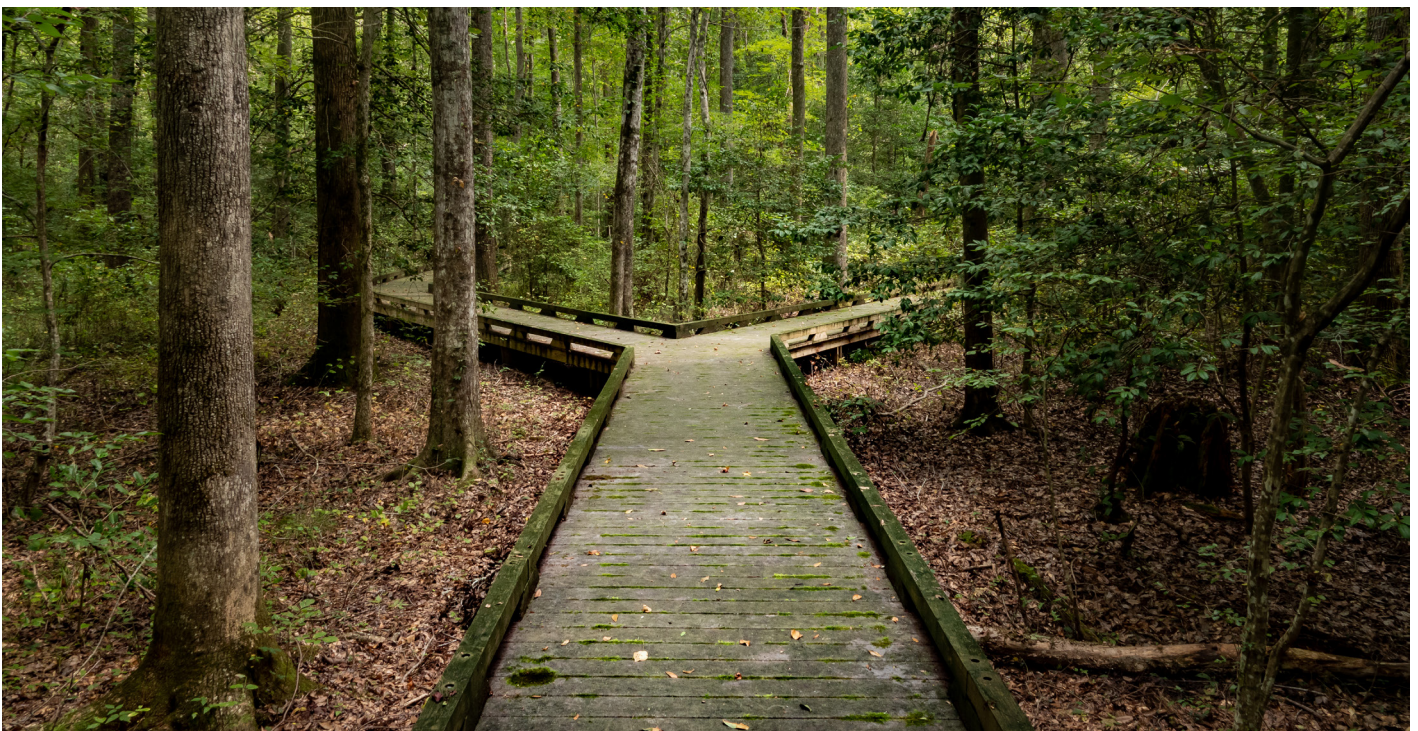
I consider my time in Cadets to be foundational in developing me into the person I am today. It instilled a deep sense of community mindedness, developed my leadership skills and was also pretty cool. I got to experience a lot of things other kids my age did not. (Female, NSW, joined at 13, served for 8 years)

Improved and developed all of my skills - not just those related to a career in the military. (Male, Qld, joined at 16, served 3 years, ADF)

Cadets allowed me to develop in a safe and supportive environment. The promotion courses I attended provided a clear and sound understanding of the roles and responsibilities which I was aiming for. (Male, WA, joined at 14, served 10 years)

Definitely a stronger person, more confident in public speaking, able to manage a team. Can take criticism and feedback. (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 5 years)

Being a part of the AAFC shaped who I am today as a person. It gave me all the practical foundations that I needed to be a good young adult. Cadets will always be a cornerstone in my personal story. I would like to say that the leaders of my squadron when I went through the AAFC really impacted me. They were great role models, and I strived to be like them when I was older. I will always be truly grateful for them. Things they once said to me still stick with me to this day. (Female, NSW)



Attributes, skills and behaviours

As might be expected, there is some commonality across AAFC and national education policy regarding young Australians' development of 'attributes, skills and behaviours'. Australia's two national education goals, as published in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration*, are supported by references to confidence and resilience, for example. Other material refers to a wide range of attributes, skills and behaviours such as 'honesty, empathy, loyalty, responsibility and respect for others'; resilient; 'act with moral and ethical integrity'; and 'work for the common good'.

Former Cadets ranked the AAFC foci by positive impact, as shown in the graph below, with the top two scoring 98% favourability – **Responsibility** and **Teamwork**. **Leadership** scored next highest (97%), with **Self-Discipline**, **Confidence** and **Communication / Presentation** all attracting a positivity rate of 96%.

One former Cadet – now serving in the ADF – commented:

It was the first true development of my leadership, responsibility, service over self. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 6 years, ADF)

One who did not subsequently join the ADF wrote:

Initiative is something I definitely benefited from in my Cadet service. As well as leadership and confidence. The sense of belonging and mateship is amazing. When I was in AAFC there was no nationalism, but there was patriotic pride. I think there was a good balance between the positives and negative of patriotism without it becoming toxic or exclusionary patriotism. (Male, NSW, joined at 14, served 6 years)

Numerous respondents reflected on their character formation, with many referring to confidence – arguably an attribute that can be most challenging for a teenager to develop. For example:

I do not give up, that is what I learnt in the Cadets. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 3 years)

Of immense value were the various promotion courses that I completed in the AirTC. As an inherently shy kid, I was required to exert myself in a team environment. We were taught all the basics of presenting a lesson, leading a group, performing under stress and applying self-discipline. Added to these general experience skills, the opportunity to complete flying training up to unrestricted pilot's licence was a game changer in my life and to some extent mapped out my future. (Male, TAS, joined at 14, served 4 years, ADF)

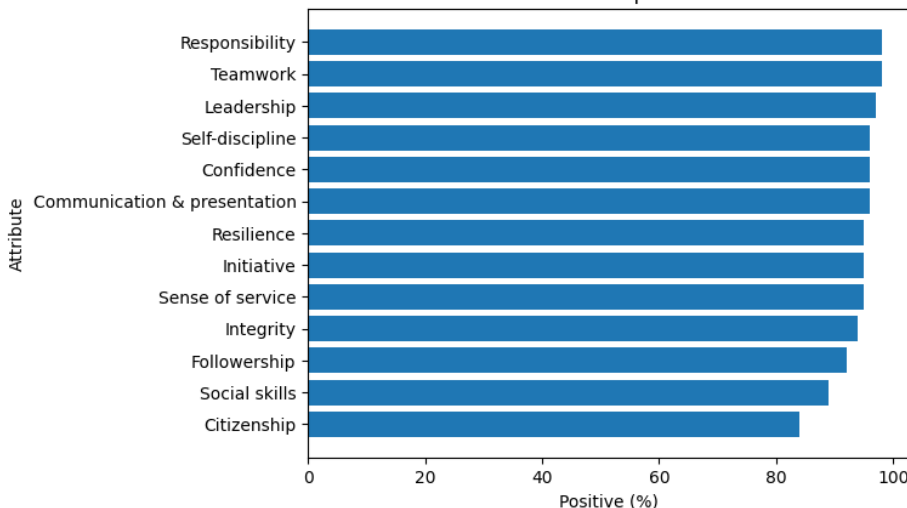
Made me a more confident person willing to do what is right regardless of the situation. (Male, Qld, joined at 12, served 6 years, ADF)

I went from being very shy to being very confident. (Male, ACT, joined at 13, served 6 years)

My time as a Cadet cemented positive values of integrity, fairness and honesty amongst other positive traits. My participation in Cadets, gave me an early interest in politics and a sense of unwavering patriotism for Australia. (Male, Qld, joined at 13, served 4 years)

Helped me become the person I am today who takes pride in serving and helping others. (Male, WA, joined at 12, served 6 years)

AAFC Personal Development Outcomes



One respondent, who did not join the ADF, summarised his experience as follows:

My Cadet years were invaluable in my personal development and stood me in great stead in my adult life. I carry with me to this day the values that my Cadet years instilled in me. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 5 years).

I have always found the development of character and good citizenship was the most important aspect. (Male, Qld, joined at 14, served 4 years)

Participate in community service activities, and do adventurous things like camping, flying or living on bases. (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 5 years, ADF)

Service and commitment to society and being a role model and mentor to others were instilled in Cadets during training and developed through the shared experiences. (Male, Qld, joined at 14, served 3 years)

I think that the general approach of developing character, respect and doing your best have served me immensely in life. (Male, NSW, joined at 14, served 6 years)

Cadet opportunities to interact with their local communities as representatives of the RAAF and ADF provide an excellent citizenship development aspect to AAFC membership. (Male, SA, joined at 13, served 10 years)

I was always encouraged in the AAFC to always demonstrate good character - both in and out of uniform. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 7 years)

Cadet opportunities to interact with their local communities as representatives of the RAAF and ADF provide an excellent citizenship development aspect to AAFC membership. (Male, SA, joined at 13, served 10 years, ADF)

I have always been a person of good standing in the community and have had to keep that good standing for my work life. I believe Cadets were a huge part of that. (Male, NSW, joined at 14, served 4 years)

My time as a Cadet developed behaviours that I've carried through my adult life. (Male, NT, joined at 12, served 7 years)

I had a very positive experience and time with AAFC and look back on it fondly. The AAFC definitely prepared me for my civilian life; it showed me how stepping up and being responsible and accountable gets you places in life. (Male, NSW, joined at 14, served 6 years)

Reflecting on your experience of the AAFC as well as your school education, what comments can you make about their respective influence on your personal development?

Of the 218 respondents, 145 answered this question. While 28 considered that their Cadet training contributed more than their schooling to their personal development, four were of the opposite view. Ten survey participants believed their school and Cadet experience were complementary. The remainder did not address the question directly.

Secondary school education personal development can be hit and miss, and there are only a few schools that can invest into it as much as the AAFC. I gained so much more from the positive experiences and influences in the AAFC than in school. The AAFC probably contributed 90%+ to my personal development compared to my school experience. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 9 years)

Intertwined and complimentary experiences. Can't split them apart. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 10 years)

For school education it did not change much. However, in regard to work, extracurricular, general life, communication, confidence, etc Cadets has shaped who I am today. I wanted to join the RAAF as an officer because of Cadets and only went to university because of this reason. Unfortunately, I did not join but I am successful in my chosen field in the private sector, and I attribute my success to all the skills I developed and gained whilst in Cadets ... I strongly believe that youth of today and individuals from my own cohort that have not experienced Cadets lack a lot of skills for the real world. (Female, NSW, joined at 15, served 3 years)

Cadets helped more with confidence and supported school education. (Male, NSW, joined at 14, served 5 years)

Obviously, the foundation for all success depends upon a rigorous and varied school education of excellent quality. That provides the basic building blocks of an adult life. What did the AAFC contribute to the foundation for me? AAFC added the spice and fireworks to the main meal. It provided accessible and practical application to the theories I was learning in school. The AAFC help me conceptualise theories from the books into life. (Male, VIC, joined at 14, served 6 years)

AAFC experience augmented the skills I developed through school. My key takeaways from school were mainly academic, whilst the skills I gained through AAFC were more practically based. (Male, VIC, joined at 14, served 6 years)

I was lucky enough to have been in a school-based unit, so it was very closely linked. Both had a huge impact and worked hand in hand with each other. (Male, QLD, joined at 14)

I found a community in the AAFC unmatched by my school or sports teams - I relished the structure and team it created. (Male, NSW, joined at 16, served 3 years, ADF)

School had nothing to do with influencing my young adulthood. This organisation has had an immense impact on my life, and I frequently think back to moments I had as a teenager while in the AAFC. (Male, SA, joined at 14, served 10 years, ADF)

The AAFC had a greater influence on my personal development than school alone. While school provided foundational knowledge, the AAFC developed practical skills, leadership, and discipline that school could not. (Male, NSW, joined at 12, served 8 years)

The AAFC commitment to providing service to the community through ANZAC services, interactions with Defence and aviation in general ensured that I was consciously aware of my own personal responsibilities to our society. I found that I was significantly more aware of this over people of my own age in school that did not have this connection. (Male, QLD, joined at 13, served 7 years)

Challenging and rewarding, an additional branch of my childhood education. I will encourage my children to consider AAFC and a Defence career. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 5 years)

My school education developed my academic skills and knowledge, but my Cadet time enabled me to more readily apply my skills and knowledge to my career and the non-academic aspects of my life. (Male, VIC, joined at 14, served 5 years, ADF)

'My school experience left me physical and emotionally scarred and self-aware from extensive physical and verbal bullying. Had I not had the AAFC, I honestly can say I would not have the confidence to express myself, seek challenges and have the true confidence and faith in my own abilities.' (Female, NSW, joined at 15, served 5 years)

I wish that my experiences at school were more informed by my experiences at Air Force Cadets. Without question Cadets made me a better student. (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 4.5 years)

AAFC contributed to my personal development much more, and earlier, than my school education. I was leading small groups at 14 as a LCDT/CCPL, opportunities not available to me at school. (Female, NSW, joined at 13, served 7 years)

All schools should support the reintroduction of school Cadets to reinforce respect and commitment to our country.' (Male, SA, joined at 14, served 2 years, ADF)

My school was nothing compared to the AAFC. It was instrumental in my formative years. (Female, NSW, joined at 13, served 7 years)

School for me felt more about learning to be social and network with people on top of the core educational learning. The AAFC to me felt more about solidifying and training oneself e.g. discipline, selfless service, leadership skills etc. as well as being around people who had a mutual interest and networking that way. (Male, Qld, joined at 15, served 5 years)

They both had many positive contributions, but overall Cadets gave me more opportunities for personal development - particularly leadership and being able to put it into practice. (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 3 years)

School didn't offer much in terms of developing those personal attributes listed. Cadets was the primary place in which I developed them. (Female, NSW, joined at 13, served 8 years)

I consider my time in the ATC (Air Training Corps - predecessor of the AAFC) was the major contributor to my success in business and life generally. (Male, WA, joined at 14, served 4 years)

I gained so much more from the positive experiences and influences in the AAFC than in school. The AAFC probably contributed 90%+ to my personal development compared to my school experience. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 9 years)

I was never very academically minded, but the discipline of Cadets taught me to see learning as a step to something better - a better version of myself, and consequently a better quality of life. (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 2 years)

The AAFC was very complementary to my school education. It provided more depth to my learning and development. It also made me a better student and looking back has made me a better citizen as I'm now a staff member delivering and developing the attributes the AAFC instills in the youth of Australia. (Male, NSW, joined at age 12.5, served 6 years)

No other activity that I was involved in as a young person had anywhere near the impact on me than the experience of the AAFC. (Male, TAS, joined at 14, served 4 years)

The foundational skills I learnt as a Cadet gave me a head start into adulthood that very few youth organisations can match. (Male, NSW, joined at 14, served 5 years)

I firmly believe that the AAFC actually provides a far superior level of personal development to that provided by the normal education system. It has been my long experience that CDTs are far better developed in their Personal Development aspects, and it shows almost regardless of their educational achievements. (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 6 years, ADF)

AAFC had a tremendous impact on my life in my high school years, in that it enabled me to develop resilience, leadership skills, and initiative far beyond what schooling was able to teach me. The regimented nature of the organisation encouraged developing respect and teamwork, while there was always an encouragement to stick my hand up and take on more responsibility for myself and other Cadets if I so desired. I think this experience is unique to Cadets, and something that is hard to develop in adolescence elsewhere. (Female, NSW, joined at 14, served 3 years)

Additional findings and observations

This survey did not ask respondents to give their age, but those who had joined the Air Training Corps (ATC) – that is, prior to its rebadging as the AAFC in 2001 – tended to identify themselves as such. While they were few in number, they tended to belong to a mixed-age group of former Cadets who had also gone on to serve, or currently serve, in a voluntary capacity with the AAFC. Their observations – comparing their own experience across generations – included concern about the changed nature of formal assessment. For example, this comment highlighted one way a former Cadet learned resilience:

Personally found failing exams and courses helped me to be a better person as an adult ... Always lived by the motto of "if you fail at something, you learn to pass it". The AAFC had always helped me when I was a Cadet to learn how to pass something if I fail it the first time. (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 5 years)

A different perspective came from another respondent:

Part of the last generation of Cadets that progressed to 20 years old under the old training curriculum. Came back as a staff member. Arguably, the old system was challenging, with exams and 3-week promotion courses, but it gave me a sense of achievement once I pass. However, I note that the extracurricular opportunities available to me as a Cadet were limited and not structured, subject to the hard work and contributions by staff members from my Wing to create these opportunities, whereas the new curriculum removes most of the stress and challenges associated with promotion and training progression, and focus more on creating opportunities and meaningful experiences outside of academic training. (Male, VIC, joined at 13, served 6.5 years)

This mirrors concerns in the wider Australian community about a perceived loss of academic rigour, particularly as measured in objective, formal assessment practices. From the 1970s, Australian education policy shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches, including a reduced emphasis on memorisation in favour of more 'experiential' and 'hands-on' learning.

Few young Australians are now required to attempt regular, objective, extended tests, across the curriculum, throughout their compulsory schooling (Years 7 - 10). There are no nationally consistent, external examinations that assess students' progress across the Australian Curriculum. Most young Australians will only experience standardised testing via the national literacy and numeracy tests (NAPLAN) in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, unless they complete a senior secondary (Year 11- 12) qualification in one of the state / territory systems that mandates external assessment in most or all academic subjects (e.g. New South Wales).

Notably, recent reforms in Australian school education invoke 'the science of learning', which rebadges traditional approaches as part of the focus on 'knowledge-rich curriculum' and 'explicit teaching'.⁴⁵

This raises obvious questions about the connections between 'old-school' expectations and a methodical focus on developing attributes such as resilience, responsibility, self-discipline, confidence and integrity. Such questions are highlighted by the global impact of artificial intelligence and the challenges for schools, teachers and youth development programs when the temptation to take the easy (academic) option can be very strong. Arguably, this is the precise arena in which a tradition of high expectations and of regard for context and culture – together with the modelling of those attributes by adults – plays a critical role.

Several respondents to the AAFC survey expressed concern about the rapid expansion in enrolments without the necessary increase in staffing and support, resulting in 'the dilution of the Cadet program and Cadet experience' (Male, NSW, joined at 13, served 14 years). Again, concerns have been raised in the wider community about the capacity of schools and teachers to deal with the increasing complexity of mentoring young Australians through school to adulthood. Resources are often stretched thinly as expectations and demand grow.

Conclusion

Young Australians need and deserve every opportunity to become the best they can be. As has been true for millennia, this requires the purposeful inter-generational transmission of the knowledge, skills, traditions and values that underpin a society. Such learning enables young learners to make sense of the world and build the confidence and competence to move forward in it.

Australian federal, state and territory governments are under intense scrutiny as they attempt to address current challenges in school education. Decades of piecemeal reforms have not brought improvements. It is time for policymakers and educators to return to the critical point at which the nature and purpose of education of young Australians is determined: the national education goals.

The current goals lack the policy heft needed for success in *'promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians'* and *'... ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion'*.

A key deficit is the absence of context. Not only must the language of the goals reflect the gravity and power of their intent, but the goals themselves must be clearly established within the broader, deeper, historic and contemporary – and distinctively Australian – context. Clarity is paramount.

Recommendations

Restate Australia's national education goals in clear, succinct language that explicitly addresses the intellectual, moral and civic role of schooling in this country. The goals should:

1. Make an unequivocal case not just for **what** students should learn and teachers should teach, but **why**. Such a rationale must acknowledge the distinctively Australian education context – including its complex challenges – in ways that enhance policymaking accountability and transparency for all stakeholders.
2. Mandate the systematic acquisition of knowledge about Australia's democratic foundations, as part of the evolution of Western civilisation, for all students throughout the compulsory years of schooling and in Years 11 and 12.
3. Ensure that this focus (Recommendation 2) is built into all school curricula and initial teacher education / professional development programs.
4. Establish clear connections between school education, the formation of individual character and a sense of belonging, and development of a conscious commitment to national values and Australian citizenship.



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Appendix A

The Making of a Nation

Not by rearing fairy arches,
Decked with flowers a day shall fade;
Not by flinging myriad banners
Forth from tower and colonnade;

Not by feasts and shows and pastimes,
Fitting though such revels be;
Not by words of adulation
Poured from lands across the sea;

Not by these — a moment's trifles,
Brilliant, but of little worth —
Not by these shall we who love her
Celebrate our Nation's birth.

Deeper, deeper, past these baubles
And this proud and high acclaim
Beats a mighty heart that quivers
At the naming of her name,

And a low and strenuous murmur,
Like a surely rising flood,
Tells the passionate awakening
Of the true Australian blood.

We who love her! We who love her!
Where and what and who are we?
Sweep your hand from Moreton Island
Till it meets the westward sea.

And from Torres Straits to Bruni,
From the Leeuwin to Mackay,
Wheresoe'er you go you'll find us;
Call us, you shall have reply.

What are we who love Australia?
This the future shall reveal;
Yet, let every heart remember
Single worth makes common weal.

Who are we that love Australia?
Let a foe from near or far
Lift a hand to wound or shame her
And discover who we are.

Not by vain and idle boasting,
Not by wild, impetuous deeds,
But by steady, high endeavour
Shall we fitly serve her needs.

Honesty in hall and household,
Honour in the public mart,
Individual worth of purpose,
Purity of lip and heart.

These our flags for her adorning,
These her wreaths of deathless bloom,
These the jewelled lamps to guide her
And her upward path illumine.

We who love her! God hath lavished
At her feet all earthly good,
Ours it is to make and keep her
Worthy of her Nationhood.

Source

Agnes L. Storrie. *Poems*, J. W. Kettlewell, Sydney, 1909, pages 157-159

The Institute of Australian Culture <https://www.australianculture.org/the-making-of-a-nation-agnes-l-storrie/> (accessed 30 March 2026)

Appendix B

Copy of AAFC Survey

1. At what age did you join the AAFC?
2. How long were you / have you been a member of the AAFC?
3. Where did you spend / are you spending most of your time with the AAFC? (ACT, VIC, WA, QLD, NT, SA, TAS, NSW)
4. Male / Female / Prefer not to respond
5. Why did you apply for the AAFC? (Select at least one)
 - a. Encouragement from family and/or friends
 - b. Interest in a career in the Australian Defence Force
 - c. General interest in aviation
 - d. Emphasis on personal development (leadership, teamwork, initiative, organisational skills, etc.)
 - e. Opportunity to meet people and make new friends
 - f. Other (please explain)
6. (Post-school respondents only) Did you subsequently join the Australian Defence Force?
Yes / No
7. How would you rate your overall experience with the AAFC?
 - a. Very positive
 - b. Positive
 - c. No opinion
 - d. Negative
 - e. Very negativePlease provide further information, if possible.
8. Which of the following aspects of your AAFC experience would you rate most positively? (Select at least one)
 - a. Service knowledge (e.g. RAAF history, organisation and culture)
 - b. Drill and ceremonial (including music / band)
 - c. Field skills
 - d. Aviation
 - e. Personal growth and character development
 - f. Activities (General Service Training Camps, flying training, promotion courses, Wing competitions, etc.)
 - g. International exchanges and activities
 - h. Other (please explain)
9. The AAFC claims to provide experiences that *'equip for life'* and *'will push you further and make you the best version of yourself'*. How would you rate your experience in this regard?
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. No opinion
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly disagreePlease provide further information, if possible.

10. The AAFC program claims that *'Cadets will be encouraged to adopt a range of attributes, skills and behaviours that will benefit them well into the future'*, with a focus on developing *'character and good citizenship'*. How would you rate the AAFC's contribution to your overall personal development?

- a. Very positive contribution
- b. Positive contribution
- c. No opinion
- d. Minor contribution
- e. No contribution

Please provide further information, if possible.

11. Thinking specifically about the following attributes emphasised by the AAFC program, how would you rate their contribution to your personal development?

	Very positive	Positive	No opinion	Negative	Very negative
Leadership					
Followership					
Self-discipline					
Confidence					
Responsibility					
Teamwork					
Resilience					
Communication and presentation skills					
Initiative					
Integrity					
Sense of service or duty					
Citizenship					
Social skills					

Please provide further information, if possible.

12. Reflecting on your experience of the AAFC as well as your school education, what comments can you make about their respective influence on your personal development?

Warren Bishop

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Warren retired from the Royal Australian Air Force in 2019 at the rank of Group Captain, after 42 years as an Aerospace Engineer. His career involved responsibility for aircraft maintenance, management of officer training, and project management of major capital acquisition projects such as the C-17. In 2007, he completed a Master of Management Studies, with a double major in Equipment and Technology and Logistics, at the University of NSW. While working as a professional engineer, he was accredited as a Fellow of the Institute of Engineers Australia, followed by accreditation as a Certified Practising Project Director by the Australian Institute of Project Management. Warren continues to serve as an Officer of Cadets in the Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC), where he manages the delivery of training to young Australians interested in aviation, cybersecurity and space programs.



Fiona Mueller

BA DipEd MEd PhD

Fiona's professional background encompasses 20+ years of teaching and leadership in secondary schools, nine years at two universities, and many years in education policy roles. Born in Darwin, she has lived in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the United States, and calls regional Australia home. During her first five years as a high school teacher, Fiona also trained as an Operations Officer with the Royal Australian Air Force Reserve, serving at 22 Squadron, RAAF Richmond, in New South Wales. Her wide-ranging, practical experience in education led to her appointment as Head of ANU College at the Australian National University and then Director of Curriculum at the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in Sydney. In 2019, the *Australian Financial Review's Power Issue* placed her among the top five most influential people in education in this country. In April 2022, she was appointed to a three-year term on the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Board as the nominee of the Commonwealth Government. Fiona is an Adjunct Fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies (Sydney), a Senior Fellow of Advance HE (formerly the Higher Education Academy) in York, UK, and the Director of Research at the Page Research Centre.



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