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The digital imperative:

Future-proofing professional associations in Australia and New Zealand

D2L

How associations can remain essential by delivering personalised, digital-first learning experiences.

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Australia's professional associations are at a crossroads

Faced with membership attrition, the demand for new revenue streams and the challenge of staying relevant to professionals throughout their careers, these organisations must innovate to thrive.

The key to their future lies in embracing continuous professional development, upskilling and reskilling as mechanisms to unlock commercial potential and deliver enduring value to their members.

To achieve this goal, associations must evolve their learning offerings to meet the expectations of modern learners who demand flexibility in how, when and where they learn.

Associations need to shift perceptions of their indispensability, ensuring they are seen as lifelong partners rather than a stepping stone for early-career professionals. Central to this transformation is the use of technology and real-time data to enhance the member experience (MX) through personalisation.

According to the Association Sector Digital Maturity Survey from May 2024, 65% of associations in Australia and New Zealand rank MX as the number one goal of digital transformation. However, only 43% assess their organisations as "Digitally Optimised". Association executives understand the value of putting members at the forefront, but the industry's capabilities for delivering a great personalised member experience are relatively low, according to the Association Sector Digital Maturity Survey.

Commissioned by learning technology company D2L, this whitepaper explores the challenges and opportunities facing Australia's professional associations. Whether your association is considering a minor adjustment, a significant transformation, or a complete overhaul, this serves as a valuable resource to guide your association's approach.

Drawing on insights from the Real Estate Institute of NSW (REINSW), the Australian Dental Association of New South Wales (ADA NSW) and the Australia and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA), we examine how associations can achieve their strategic vision.



65%
of associations in Australia and New Zealand rank MX as the number one goal of digital transformation.

43%
of respondents assess their organisations as "digitally optimised."

Key themes of this whitepaper include:

Staying relevant

How associations can remain relevant to their members throughout their careers by delivering lifelong learning and ongoing value to everyone.

Digital first

How digital transformation enables associations to integrate their systems to improve access to real-time data to help improve the MX.

Technology is transformational

The role of an LMS in providing data-driven personalisation and content delivery innovation in an association's digital strategy.

Data-driven personalised learning

Why customising content enhances relevance, retention and engagement for associations.

Diversifying with new revenue streams

A use case from ANZCA about launching its new Perioperative Medicine course.

ROI of digital learning

Evaluating the potential benefits and risks of not adopting digital learning for associations.

The future for associations

Emerging trends that associations are embracing to remain relevant and connected to members.



The move towards value-driven membership models

One of the most critical and often challenging areas of change for associations is their membership models. A membership model is more than just a set of membership categories; it is a strategic framework where multiple elements must align to maximise the impact of an association's membership program to ensure that it stays relevant and connected to its members, whatever career stage they are at.

Associations have long generated their revenue through paid membership models; however, some are now reconsidering different membership models, including tiered options at various levels, which are both free and paid.

However, many associations inherit a membership model that is more a product of history than intentional design. For some associations, an outdated membership model may be holding them back. For others, digital transformation is required before they can integrate their systems to generate data insights that will guide their strategic direction.

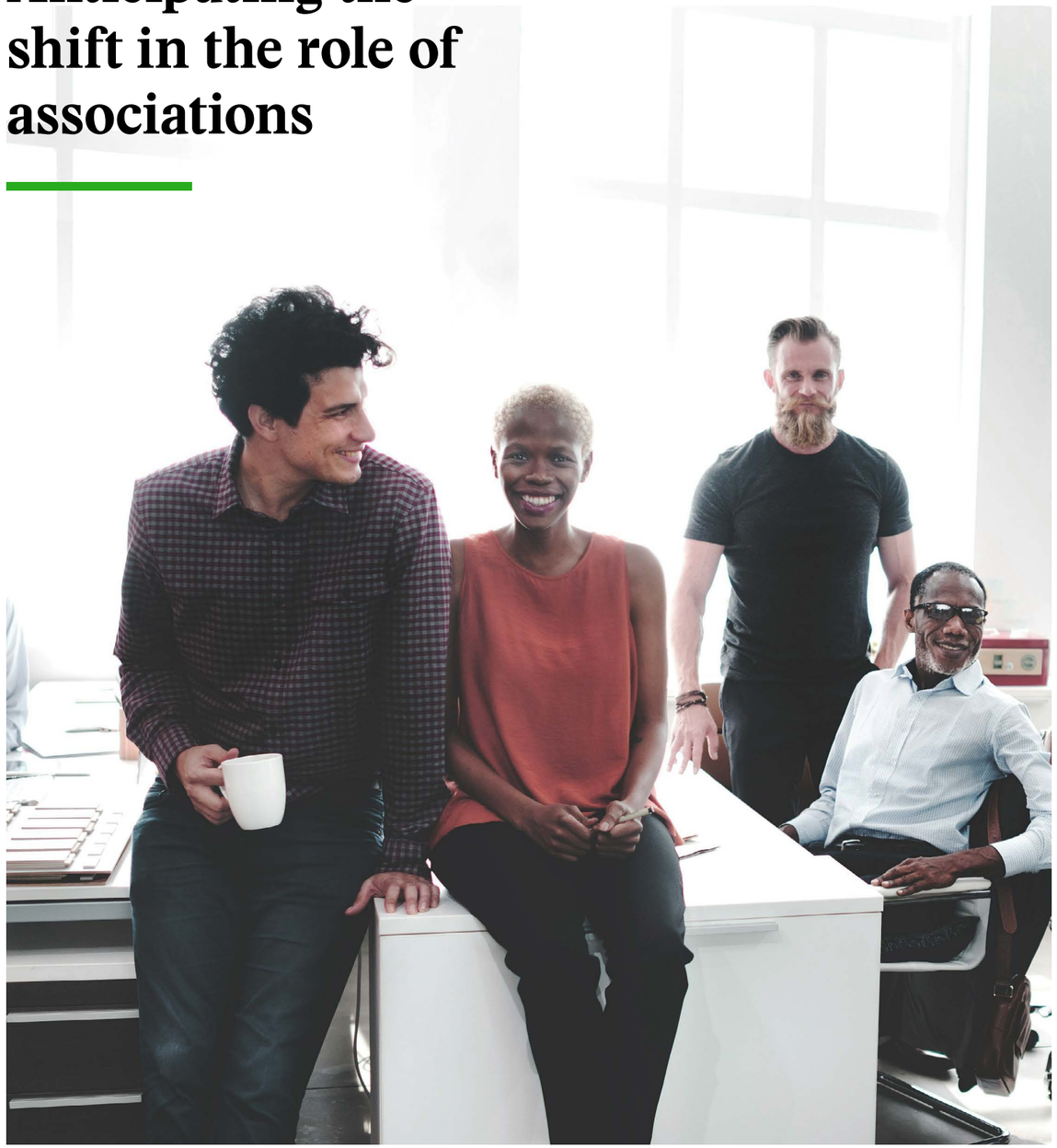
Associations leveraging real-time data effectively can stay relevant and competitive to members. By understanding member needs, they can personalise professional development journeys, improve engagement and uncover new revenue opportunities.

A move towards value-driven models that prioritise community building, knowledge sharing and inclusion fosters a sense of belonging and purpose, transcending the traditional transactional approaches preferred by associations in the past.

There is no doubt that the financial sustainability of associations is critical to their long-term success, and diversifying their revenue streams is the best way to achieve this. Education has become a significant revenue stream for many associations, and a strong, engaging education program is seen as a key benefit that can help deliver more value to members.

OUTLOOK

Anticipating the shift in the role of associations



Staying relevant with lifelong learning

Professional associations exist to support their professions and members, providing opportunities for career development, advocacy and community building.

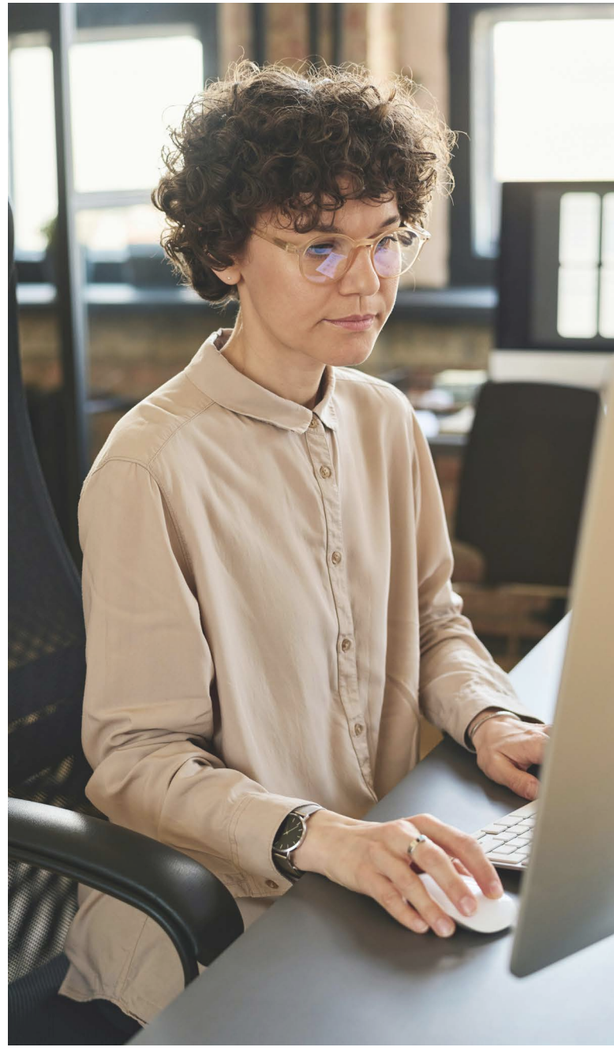
Lifelong learning is becoming a central part of their strategies. However, the way in which members prefer to learn is constantly evolving and today's professionals seek personalised, flexible and accessible learning experiences. Associations that adapt to these preferences by embracing digital transformation will secure their future relevance and financial stability.

Despite challenges like legacy systems, limited resources and skills gaps, many associations have embarked on this journey with promising results.

To remain competitive and relevant, associations are rethinking traditional models of professional development. Many are investing in learning experience platforms (LXPs) that allow for modular, on-demand content tailored to individual needs. Micro-credentialing and digital badges are gaining traction as a way to offer bite-sized learning with visible, verifiable outcomes that members can use to demonstrate continuous competence and achievement.

Additionally, associations are leveraging data analytics to better understand member learning behaviours and preferences, enabling them to curate content and improve engagement. By using insights from member data, associations can make smarter decisions about content delivery, program design and communication strategies.

Partnerships with educational technology providers, universities and industry stakeholders are also helping associations scale their learning offerings. These collaborations bring in fresh expertise and help associations stay ahead of emerging trends, such as AI in education, simulation-based training and immersive learning environments.



Ultimately, lifelong learning is no longer a "nice to have"; it is core to an association's value proposition. Those who successfully align their learning strategies with the needs of modern professionals are better positioned to attract new members, retain existing ones and reinforce their standing as essential hubs of knowledge and community in their respective fields.



The digital-first approach

The global pandemic was a catalyst for profound change, accelerating the shift to online learning and prompting associations across Australia and New Zealand to rapidly adapt. What began as a reactive move to maintain continuity has evolved into a strategic imperative of adopting a digital-first mindset. This approach places technology and innovation at the heart of educational delivery, ensuring associations can meet and exceed member expectations in an increasingly digital world.

A digital-first strategy empowers associations to be more agile, data-informed, and responsive to member needs. It supports the creation of dynamic, learner-centric experiences that are both scalable and sustainable, transforming how professional development is delivered, consumed and measured.

KEY BENEFITS OF DIGITAL-FIRST STRATEGIES INCLUDE:

Scalability

Digital platforms eliminate the limitations of geography, enabling associations to reach broader and more diverse audiences, including regional, remote and international members. This expanded reach also allows associations to scale their impact and grow their membership base without proportionally increasing resource demands.

Accessibility

Members gain the flexibility to learn on their terms, anytime, anywhere, and on any device. This ensures inclusivity for members with different schedules, learning styles and life commitments while also enhancing engagement through personalised content delivery.

Efficiency

Digital tools and learning technologies including Artificial Intelligence (AI) streamline administrative processes such as registration, certification tracking, and communications. Instructors and administrators gain access to real-time analytics and feedback, enabling continuous improvement in course content and delivery.

Data-driven decision making

With a digital-first approach, associations can collect and analyse learner data to understand behaviour, track progress and optimise course offerings. Insights from an LMS platform can guide strategic decisions, such as which programs to promote, enhance, or retire, based on actual learner engagement and outcomes.

Enhanced member experience

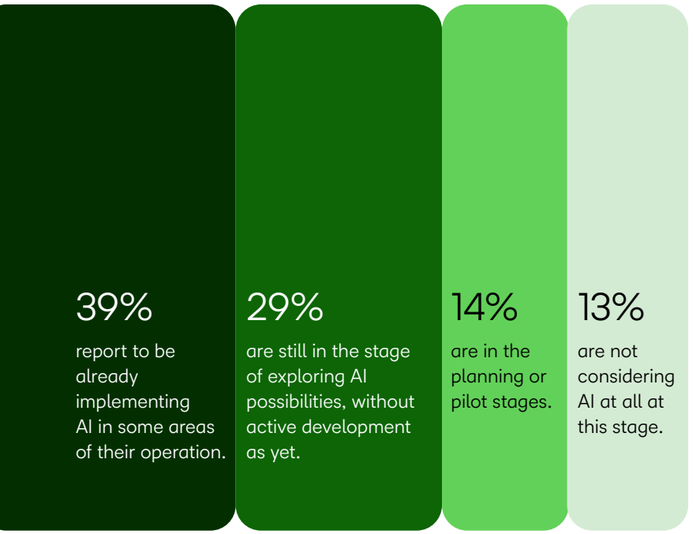
The ability to offer interactive features such as gamification, video content, discussion boards, and self-paced learning modules enriches the educational experience and keeps members more engaged throughout their learning journey.

By embedding digital-first thinking into their operational and educational strategies, associations can not only meet today's member expectations but future-proof their value in a competitive and fast-changing professional landscape.

AI adoption in associations

AI has been at the forefront of discussions around learning for several years and association professionals and members have different perspectives regarding the importance of this transformative technology, especially around training and AI.

Some associations are already using artificial intelligence to enhance their operations and member services according to the Association Sector Digital Maturity Survey. The report highlighted that associations in Australia are at various stages of AI adoption.



The primary benefits of AI identified by the Association Sector Digital Maturity report centres on improving operational efficiency, enhancing member experiences, strengthening marketing and communications and optimising data management and analytics. Together, these improvements support cost savings and more effective use of resources. Associations are actively exploring or implementing AI across a range of functions

63%

Marketing emerges as the leading area of interest, cited by 63% of organisations.

46%

This is followed by membership engagement and personalisation, as well as operations and process automation, each identified by 46%.

45%

Data analysis and insights also represent a key focus for 45% of associations.

26%

Meanwhile, customer service applications, such as chatbots, are under consideration by 26%.

22%

22% are investigating AI for the development of new products and services.

12%

12% of respondents remain uncertain about where AI might be applied, highlighting a degree of ambiguity in strategic planning.

According to the Momentive Software (formerly Community Brands) 2024 Association Trends Research Study, just 18% of association professionals say their organisation uses AI.

These findings from both of these reports highlight the diverse potential of AI within associations, with particular emphasis on marketing and operational enhancement to enhance the MX.



REINSW

Outcome-based learning for real estate professionals

The Real Estate Institute for New South Wales is the peak industry body for real estate agencies across the State, with over 2,500 member agencies and 10,500 individual members. The organisation provides advocacy, toolkits and forms to its members and supports them in compliance with legislation.

The industry is currently facing several challenges, with the key ones being the housing crisis and the need to maintain relevance to its member base. REINSW transitioned to a digital learning platform during the pandemic, enabling real estate professionals to complete mandatory training remotely. This move not only ensured compliance but also increased member satisfaction and engagement.

> Aaron Barber, general manager of REINSW, said: "Education and training is a significant source of income for the association, and we are constantly developing our training program to keep up with industry trends. We utilise our LMS for both distance learning and classroom-based learning for up to 5,000 learners annually, as well as for assessments and are exploring its application for other products and services beyond education."

REINSW is working closely with the industry regulator to ensure that CPD topics are relevant to industry needs. The goal is to provide interactive, outcome-based training that helps real estate students succeed in their careers.



Technology is transformational in learning

Technology offers associations unprecedented opportunities to both expand and enhance their offerings. However, prioritising initiatives can be challenging, especially with limited resources and content production capabilities.

Find out more about REINSW's Brightspace journey

The key is to focus on areas that deliver the most significant impact:

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (LMS)

An LMS acts as a cornerstone of digital transformation. It enables associations to:

- **deliver personalised learning experiences**
- **track member progress and performance**
- **offer certifications and badges to recognise achievements**
- **provide micro-learning with short, focused modules for upskilling**
- **integrate with other systems for seamless data management and even identify new revenue streams**

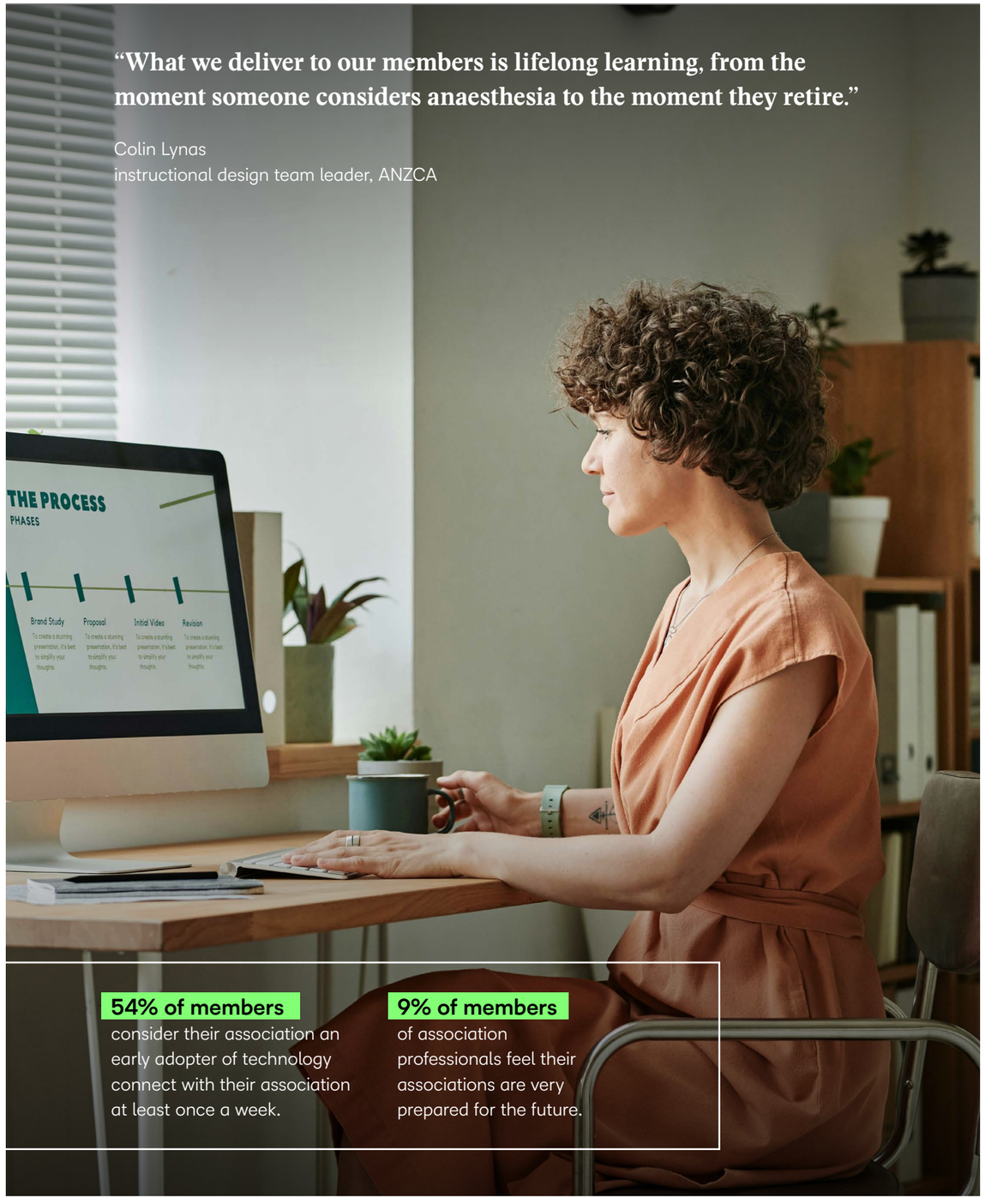
CONTENT INNOVATION

Interactive and multimedia-rich content, such as videos, simulations, AI and gamified modules, engages learners more effectively than traditional formats. Associations like REINSW and the Australian Dental Association NSW branch (ADA NSW) are experimenting with these formats to make training more engaging and impactful, particularly for their younger learners.

DATA-DRIVEN PERSONALISED LEARNING

Data analytics allows associations to understand member preferences, predict needs and tailor offerings. This approach enhances the MX by delivering relevant content and fostering deeper engagement.

ANZCA



The digital learning strategy

There seems to be a growing correlation between member satisfaction and a perception that their association is an early adopter. According to the Momentive Software 2024 Association Trends Research Study, 54% of the members who consider their association an early adopter of technology connect with their association at least once a week. However, only 9% of association professionals feel their associations are very prepared for the future.

Investing in digital learning yields significant returns for associations, including:

INCREASED MEMBER RETENTION

Personalised, high-quality learning experiences build loyalty.

REVENUE GROWTH

Offering premium courses and certifications generates additional income.

OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY

Automation reduces administrative burdens, freeing resources for strategic initiatives.

Conversely, failing to adopt a digital learning strategy risks obsolescence. Members may seek alternative providers and associations could lose their competitive edge.

Find out more about ANZCA’s support of the lifelong learning journey.

Diversifying to create new revenue streams

The Australia and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) launched the Chapter of Perioperative Medicine (POM) in late 2023 as a distinct medical specialty, building on its established leadership in anaesthesia and pain medicine to offer surgical care beyond the operating theatre. This initiative aligns with the college’s broader ethos of lifelong learning, supporting clinicians from the earliest stages of training through to retirement.

The technical foundation of the program includes Brightspace as the LMS, integrated with ANZCA’s bespoke CPD platform. Since February 2024, the POM course has adopted a hybrid delivery model, combining 40 hours of self-paced online learning via Brightspace with onsite clinical assessments at accredited hospitals.

> “The biggest benefit of Brightspace is how easily it allows us to design interactive and flexible learning experiences that meet the needs of our members,” said Lynas.

Though currently focused on the ANZ region, international interest is accelerating, and countries across Asia are already expressing interest in the course.

“Our Perioperative Medicine course offers a patient-centred approach to transforming surgical patients’ care, thereby improving quality and outcomes. Course participants benefit from interactive, learner-driven education delivered via Brightspace”

Amelia Che Ajid
education coordinator,
Chapter of Perioperative Medicine

ANZCA
Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists and the Faculty of Pain Medicine

Why a holistic member experience matters

As associations compete for time and attention, delivering a meaningful and personalised member experience is essential to attracting, engaging and retaining members.

Member experience encompasses every interaction a member has with an association, from the initial onboarding to how they access and engage with their benefits. These touchpoints collectively shape how members perceive and feel about the organisation.

In today's environment, where attention is increasingly fragmented, a strong member experience requires a holistic approach. Every element of the association must work together to create a compelling value proposition that not only draws members in but keeps them actively involved.

A seamless, integrated experience offers members more value and strengthens their connection to the association. The benefits include:



HIGHER RETENTION

Members are more likely to renew when they feel their needs are consistently met.



GREATER SATISFACTION

Positive interactions at each stage contribute to overall satisfaction.



DEEPER ENGAGEMENT

Addressing the entire member journey opens more opportunities for meaningful participation.

To create a holistic member experience, associations can focus on three key areas:

Personalise the learning experience

According to Higher Logic's 2024 Association Member Experience Report, **71% of surveyed members said personalisation is important**. Tailoring the learning journey to individual preferences not only makes members feel valued but also drives stronger engagement.

Associations that use automation to personalise experiences reported increased logins and activity. When associations leverage member data to deliver content and services that genuinely resonate, engagement becomes a natural outcome.

Diversify channels and benefits

Members consume information across multiple channels. Associations should meet members where they are, going beyond just a website or email list, because providing varied touchpoints help extend value and relevance across the member lifecycle.

Options include:

- Using a job board to engage members across all career stages
- Offering mobile apps to simplify access and deliver timely updates
- Supporting professional growth through learning and credentialing platforms
- Creating pathways for involvement through volunteering and mentoring programs.

Create interconnected experiences

The way your association's technology is set up directly influences the member experience. When systems are integrated, associations can act on insights drawn from across the technology ecosystem. For members, this creates a unified, seamless experience where all benefits are easily accessible.

According to Higher Logic's 2024 Association Community Benchmark Report organisations integrating mentoring, volunteering, job boards or chapters into their online community saw at least **84% more logins and 50% more discussion activity**. Connecting these initiatives into a central community space not only increases engagement but reinforces the overall value of membership.

ADA NSW

Driving member growth with the younger demographic

The Australian Dental Association New South Wales branch (ADA NSW) is the peak body for dentists in NSW and the ACT, providing world-class education and training to support the growth of dentistry careers at every stage, including students, recently graduated dentists, early-career dentists, dentistry practitioners, dentist practice owners, and retirees.

"We recognised that we needed to enhance our digital workflow so that we can enable continuous learning, including reflection and self-assessment and help to understand where our members are in the knowledge-gathering phase of their careers."

Dr Cathleen Dong
clinical education principal and board director

Whilst having an impressive retention rate of 93% in 2024, there is a concern that ADA NSW's growth rate has become stagnant, and it is currently looking at different ways to encourage new member registrations. To drive member growth, particularly amongst the younger generation of dental professionals, the association plans to offer enhanced learning experiences with more modes of education delivery for its 5,000+ members.

> Jae Redden, CEO of ADA NSW, said, "Our challenge is to drive engagement amongst the digitally native younger members as they progress through their careers, as well as to connect more with all our members. We have invested in a new LMS, D2L Brightspace, to help us personalise the learning journey to provide exceptional value to all our members at every career stage."

ADA NSW offers hands-on, practical skills workshops in its advanced clinical space in Sydney, while acknowledging the demand for hybrid learning, primarily due to the needs of its regional and remotely based members.

> "Whilst there has been an increase in demand for hybrid learning due to a shift in our members' needs and preferences, the practical nature of dentistry still benefits from face-to-face, hands-on learning. We are now enhancing the learning delivery by offering online lectures and course materials digitally to prepare our learners for their practical in-person training," said Dr Cathleen Dong.

Digital dentistry is increasingly used in the dentistry sector to enhance precision, speed and efficiency in procedures like implant placement and crown preparation, which reduces chair time and improves patient outcomes. ADA NSW offers specialised digital dentistry training that includes advanced technologies like AI, 3D printing and high-definition intraoral scanning in its state-of-the-art digital learning space in Sydney.



ADA NSW has a 93% retention rate and over 5,000 members.

"We are increasingly engaging with new tools and innovative technologies that are constantly advancing in the world of dentistry, so our members can always stay one step ahead."

Claire Schifter
CPD manager

Embracing the future of learning

Australia and New Zealand's professional associations are uniquely positioned to lead the way in lifelong learning by embracing digital-first strategies. By harnessing the power of data, personalising learning pathways, and adopting blended and hybrid learning models, associations can elevate member engagement and deliver impactful educational experiences.

The insights shared by ANZCA, REINSW and ADA NSW demonstrate that the future is already unfolding. With the right learning technologies, associations can unlock new growth opportunities, build stronger member communities and deliver flexible, accessible and meaningful learning at scale.

To remain relevant and resilient in an ever-evolving world, associations must continue to innovate. Those prioritising digital transformation, personalised education, and community-building will not only thrive, but they will also redefine their value for generations to come.



The future of Australia's professional associations lies in their ability to adapt and innovate to thrive, and the emerging trends to be aware of include:

Micro-credentials

Short, focused modules that cater to busy professionals.

Artificial Intelligence

Advanced algorithms enable deeper personalisation and predictive analytics.

Hybrid models

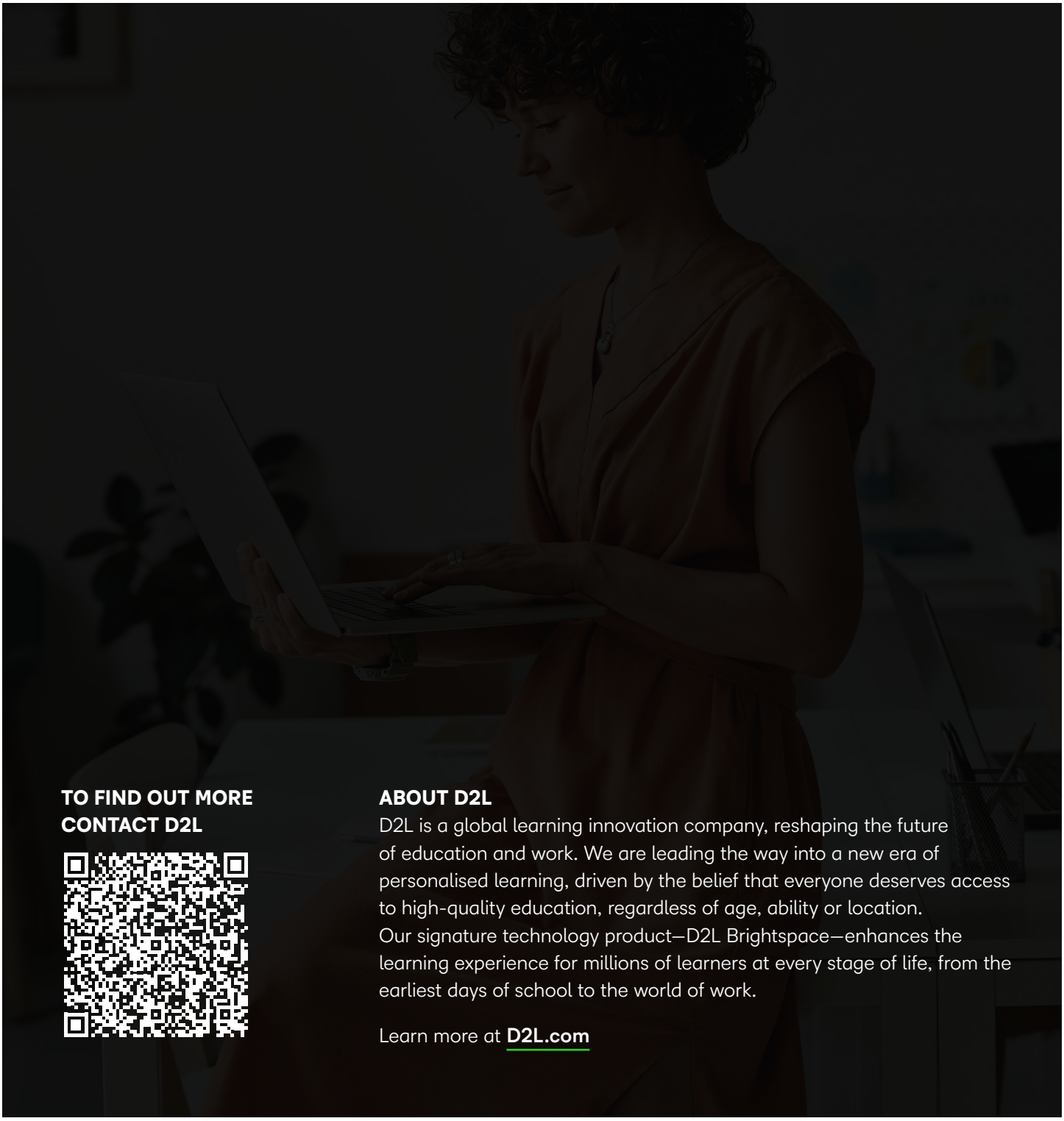
Combining in-person and online learning offers flexibility and accessibility.

Community building

Leveraging digital platforms to foster networking and collaboration with members at every career stage.

D2L can be an invaluable partner in this journey, enabling associations to deliver exceptional member experiences and unlock new revenue opportunities.

Through the insights of ANZCA, REINSW and ADA NSW, this whitepaper showcased actionable strategies for associations to stay relevant and sustainable into the future. By focusing on lifelong learning, digital-first thinking and technological innovation, associations in Australia and New Zealand can redefine their value propositions and member strategies to build a brighter future for their members and their industries.



TO FIND OUT MORE CONTACT D2L

ABOUT D2L

D2L is a global learning innovation company, reshaping the future of education and work. We are leading the way into a new era of personalised learning, driven by the belief that everyone deserves access to high-quality education, regardless of age, ability or location.
Our signature technology product—D2L Brightspace—enhances the learning experience for millions of learners at every stage of life, from the earliest days of school to the world of work.

Learn more at **D2L.com**

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