

Submission to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training enquiry into and report on adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in Australia

I have been a volunteer tutor with Western Australia's *Read Write Now* (RWN) adult literacy program since 2012 and a member of the Community Adult Literacy Foundation (CALF) since 2018. My employment background was in adult education, both as a university staff member and as teacher of English as a second language. As such, I am very much aware of the issues and disadvantages facing native speakers of English with literacy, numeracy, technology and problem-solving difficulties as well as those from Non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB).

RWN provides one-on-one assistance tailored to meet students' needs rather than following a set curriculum, using adult-appropriate 'real life' learning materials (e.g. websites, Centrelink forms) whenever possible. This approach enables students to learn what they need and want to learn for employment, family responsibilities, accessing health care and other government and community services, and well as for formal adult education and training. Some of the people I have assisted have been:

- a student who left a domestic situation in which there was abuse, which had eroded the student's self-esteem. The student needed to find employment to pay for child support. The individual's aim was to complete further education and get a better job. I was able to assist the student in building self-confidence relating to learning abilities. The individual was awarded a TAFE prize on completion of a certificate;
- two NESB students whose mother tongues had sounds, an alphabet and grammar structures that were very different from those of English. One of those students successfully completed a university preparation program and enrolled at university;
- an Indigenous student who chose to travel from another regional town to attend tutorials because of the shame for the student that was associated with having literacy and numeracy difficulties in a small community. Tutorials had to be discontinued because of the student's family responsibilities.

Assisting individuals to address their learning needs is a very rewarding way for me to make an important contribution to my community. The training and ongoing support I receive from RWN, both from the Perth Office and from local volunteer co-ordinators, is invaluable in enabling me to be an effective tutor.

Statement relating to the following terms of reference:

- **The relationship between adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving and socio-demographic characteristics, particularly migrant status and First Nations status...**
- **The effect that literacy and numeracy have on an individual's labour force participation and wages**
- **Links between literacy and social outcomes such as health, poverty, ability to care for other family members and participation in civil life**

Adults with inadequate literacy skills, such as the students I have worked with, tend to be those who are in low-paid work or who are unemployed. Some of these adults speak English as their mother tongue, others are immigrants or refugees, and others are Indigenous people whose first language is not English or whose education was compromised due to disengagement (for a variety of reasons) with the school system. Many had childhoods in which reading was not encouraged in the home, often because of their parents' own issues with literacy. Others had family situations that were affected by cultural, geographical, financial, health, domestic violence or other issues which would have prevented them from fully accessing and benefiting from the traditional school system. Such situations can lead to a cycle of unemployment, under-employment and poverty that repeats itself through generations unless disadvantaged adults have access to and feel comfortable participating in fee-free literacy, numeracy and problem-solving assistance.

Statement relating to the following term of reference:

- **The availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy education programs in Australia...**

While TAFE provides valuable programs for those needing to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, some students are not yet at the TAFE beginners' level or struggle with their TAFE assignments and need one-on-one coaching. Attending a TAFE program requires a student to have large blocks of time available for classroom learning, a luxury not all adults can afford if they are working one or more jobs to make ends meet. Also, in regional areas TAFE classes are sometimes not run due to low enrolments, particularly upper-level certificate courses. People with low literacy who have English as their first language may be uncomfortable in a classroom setting that reminds them of 'failing' at school. Many immigrants need individual support while navigating TAFE and other government systems.

Recommendations:

1. In developing strategies to address adult literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and technology skills, consult with organisations such as WA's *Read Write Now* and the Community Adult Education Foundation.
2. Provide funding for professionally produced audio and video advertisements that aim to reduce the stigma associated with adult literacy and numeracy problems. These advertisements, targeting different demographics, could be used on radio, TV, podcasts, websites and other media to ensure wide coverage. It would be useful to include telephone numbers for both the Reading Writing Hotline (1 300 655 506) and WA's *Read Write Now* (1 800 018 802). Renewing advertising campaigns on a regular basis and making advertisements available on both metropolitan and regional media would make these awareness-raising strategies effective.
3. Promote access to literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and technology education through government agencies (e.g. Centrelink, employment agencies and local libraries), community organisations (e.g. community,

neighbourhood, Indigenous and other cultural services, churches, and child-care services) and employers.

4. Develop Australian on-line learning materials for adult learners with different literacy, numeracy and problem-solving needs. Instructional videos accompanying these materials would be important to facilitate student learning, particularly for those with very low literacy. There are many, many YouTube videos teaching grammar and pronunciation, particularly for NESB learners, but as far as I am aware there is no structured and easy-to-navigate learning platform addressing adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving that is available free of charge. Such a platform would be useful for students and tutors as well as for formal education providers.
5. Ensure that public libraries have appropriate Australian adult learning materials. A good example of these are short-story booklets developed by the Community Adult Literacy Foundation.
6. Provide more funding for volunteer tutor training, especially in regional areas.
7. Provide adequate funding to adult literacy organisations such as *Read Write Now* so that there is less reliance on volunteers to co-ordinate services