

**The Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL)  
submission to the Parliament of Australia,  
Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training  
Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its Importance**

**The Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL)** promotes adult literacy and numeracy policy and practice:

- we provide leadership in Australian debate on adult literacy and numeracy practices and policy;
- we build understanding of adult literacy and numeracy issues;
- we advocate on behalf of equitable adult literacy and numeracy provision for all Australians;
- we build links between organisations and the participants and stakeholders in the adult literacy and numeracy field; and
- we work with other organisations on issues of mutual concern.

In this submission, ACAL is commenting on all terms of reference. The remarks include those from ACAL members and other stakeholders. ACAL committee members would welcome the opportunity to be called as witnesses to the inquiry to provide further information.

### Call to action

ACAL recommends the following action be undertaken at a national level to underpin the recommendations in this submission:

***Develop an Adult Literacy and Numeracy policy at the level of the Prime Ministerial office that is interdepartmental (ie - not in DESE) because adult literacy and numeracy underpins activity in all portfolios.***

### **Process of developing an adult literacy and numeracy policy**

The Australian Government should consider the commission of a credible person with relevant adult education experience and a knowledge of the adult literacy and numeracy field, supported by a reference group. The reference group should be

<sup>1</sup> Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) March 2021: Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its Importance.

comprised of adult literacy practitioners, academics with a focus on adult literacy, government officers, adult literacy researchers, employers, and relevant others. They would develop a policy with accompanying strategies and funding models for its implementation. This document should initially be circulated widely for comment and then reviewed by the established development body, resulting in a Green paper which is then re-circulated and reviewed, to culminate finally in a White paper and a funded policy document for Government action.

It is important that, as part of this process, adult literacy and numeracy practitioners and researchers, as well as others who work with people with low literacy and numeracy skills, should have an opportunity to draw on their grounded experience and expertise to contribute to the policy and accompanying strategies for its implementation.

### **Principles underpinning the policy**

1. To be literate and numerate is a human right.
2. The Australian Government accepts that free and equitable access to lifelong and life-wide basic literacy and numeracy education is a social responsibility and provides provision accordingly.
3. People's reading and writing needs encompass more than those required at work. They may involve supporting their children's education, participating in their community's activities, managing their financial affairs, dealing with bureaucracy, and undertaking leisure activities for wellbeing and enriched life experiences.
4. Ongoing literacy and numeracy development opportunities are required to ensure and increase each Australian's ability to respond to events such as pandemics, natural disasters, economic impacts, and increased online demands. As day-to-day demands change and increase, this assistance must be at all proficiency levels, not only at the most basic.
5. There is a requirement for a full range of literacy learning practices to be available post- school as a second chance at further learning.

### **Recommended content of an adult literacy and numeracy policy**

1. **Access to training opportunities to develop all aspects of adult literacy and numeracy.** This includes literacy and numeracy in various contexts for various

purposes, encompassing personal, social and community literacy and numeracy in addition to the expansion of literacy and numeracy for new and for existing work, including both industry- based and an academic pathway.

Currently, the Australian Government funds two types of adult literacy and numeracy programs: one oriented to help the unemployed access work and the other to upgrade literacy and numeracy work skills. These programs should continue and be expanded to include provision at lower levels than currently on offer.

People also need to improve their literacy and numeracy skills for other purposes, and these require additional strategies, funding and programs. Research demonstrates that social inclusion programs supporting general literacy learning for life not only builds confidence, informed citizenship and better health but also strengthens individual economic opportunities, and benefits families, and the whole community. This provision has a wider economic benefit besides productivity.

2. **A range of modes is required to ensure all aspects of adult literacy and numeracy need are addressed.**

These modes include face-to-face classroom and small group classes, as well as distance and blended learning modes as an equity of access issue for those who cannot utilise other forms of provision. At all times literacy and numeracy should be led by experienced and qualified teachers. Individual assistance is also required and should be available in both educational institutions and in the community.

Research demonstrates that the attainment of post school qualifications at a range of levels is crucial. Early school leavers and those with poor exit results need a second chance opportunity to attain the literacy and numeracy skills required for a range of educational pathways, not only competency-based VET and workplace training.

Nationally, adult literacy and numeracy education and second chance school exit equivalence are mainly situated within VET. Public VET provision has always played an instrumental role in supporting marginalized learners but in recent years this has meant a move to competency-based training (CBT) which is not appropriate for most of these learners. The types of training methodology should

fit the purpose, context and needs of the learners. This does not necessarily mean a move from VET being an integral part of LN provision but a recognition that CBT is not appropriate for the low literate adult learner or the early school leaver re-engaging in education to undertake further learning.

3. **The continuation of the Reading-Writing Hotline** to direct inquirers to available support and follow-up. The Reading Writing Hotline is a valuable service linking potential learners to teachers and mapping the availability of provision across Australia and the gaps that exist. This service needs to be continued.
  
4. **The renewal of the adult literacy and numeracy workforce that would support research-informed, contemporary design and delivery of programs that are responsive to the literacy and numeracy demands experienced by adults.** This could involve a review and re-writing of TAE80113 by adult literacy experts, as well as include the re-introduction of a range of undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications that support teacher initial training and retraining. Due to the increasing costs of education, the re-establishment of practitioner scholarships overseen by literacy experts would be appropriate. In the past, adult literacy practitioners and those supervising volunteers were required to hold specific qualifications in adult literacy and numeracy. These included qualifications offered by registered training organisations (RTOs) and universities. The knowledge base that an adult literacy and numeracy practitioner requires includes a strong foundation in adult education theories, and contemporary understandings of literacy and numeracy, adult teaching methodologies, the policy contexts of adult literacy and numeracy provision, multi-literacies that recognise and incorporate ongoing changes in everyday needs such as digital, visual, and media literacies, and online and distance good practice. There also needs to be funded opportunities for action learning among practitioners. In the light of universities opting out of this training area, it is necessary for the TAE80113 to be reviewed and re-developed or for university provision to be stimulated.
  
5. **A funded resource centre that collates new research in the field as well as good practice materials, publishes them** and, in the case of materials, makes them

available free or for sale. A competitive educational environment is not conducive to best practice in adult literacy and numeracy. Practitioners require incentives and opportunities to share resources and instructional strategies. Currently in Australia, this role largely sits with volunteer peak bodies which are not funded to meet the demand. To future-proof the Australian adult literacy and numeracy workforce, which is aging and not being renewed sufficiently because of casualisation and lack of opportunity to gain higher education qualifications, a funded resource centre is required. A dedicated adult literacy and numeracy resource centre would benefit the field providing advice to government, teachers and industry. In addition, a national database of Australian best practice free materials should also be available for learners and teachers, in the style of BBC Skillswise.

6. **Updated research into the Australian field of adult literacy and numeracy is required.** Gaps in research should be addressed by funded projects, including desk-top reviews of evidence-based good pedagogical practice in adult literacy and numeracy across contexts; longitudinal studies of learner progress and what works; ethnographies of adult literacy learning through established good practice across contexts and types of provision; action research involving practitioners; and, evaluations of program funding that includes more than specified literacy and numeracy learning, such as important 'soft outcomes' that underpin lifelong learning.

#### **Further reading and references**

ACAL response 1 March 2021 to Improving industry engagement and qualifications, Skills Reform Consultation - Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government (attached)

BBC Skillswise <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/skillswise>

Macquarie University Reading Clinic <https://www.mq.edu.au/about/campus-services-and-facilities/hospital-and-clinics/reading-clinic>

Mitchell Institute Victoria University <https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute>

Reading Writing Hotline <https://www.readingwritinghotline.edu.au/>

The Peter Underwood Centre Tasmania <https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre>

**Term of Reference 1: The relationship between adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills and socio-demographic characteristics, particularly migrant status, First Nations status and individuals living in households that have experienced intergenerational unemployment.**

The Australian Council for Adult Literacy warns the inquiry that focusing solely on cohorts such as migrants, First Nations peoples and unemployed people is not conducive to addressing Australian adult literacy and numeracy. Australian adults from all socio-economic groups and backgrounds should be included in the discourse. Any adult who needs to improve their literacy skills so they can confidently undertake everyday tasks required for independent living should be considered, acknowledged, and provided with the opportunity.

The following information is based on ACAL knowledge and information received from members. It reflects the experience of adult literacy and numeracy teachers and other stakeholders across Australia.

#### **Addressing stereotypes:**

- Literacy and numeracy issues for adults are not confined to any one cohort or any socio-economic sector of society.
- LN issues are not confined to migrants:
  - Many Australians, including native English speakers, did not complete their schooling. This is a barrier to completing everyday tasks which require literacy and numeracy skills.
  - Many Australians, including native English speakers, did complete their schooling but have not developed literacy and numeracy skills to a level that allows them to independently and confidently complete everyday tasks.
- LN issues are not confined to unemployed people or those experiencing intergenerational unemployment: Many employed adults who were schooled in Australia have literacy and/or numeracy needs.
- LN issues are not confined to First Nations Peoples: without adequate research it is not clear how many adults across Australia would benefit from improved LN levels.
- Data around the extent of literacy and numeracy needs across socio-economic sectors is not current.
- Adult literacy needs are not confined to those in the community who are identified as disadvantaged. Adult literacy needs are also not confined to those with the lowest

literacy needs. As a society, it would benefit Australia to recognise and provide for literacy assistance at all literacy levels. Different literacy tasks require different levels and types of literacy – even an adult who is competent in day to day literate activities can face new challenges when different tasks are required. This is particularly important in terms of new technologies and new ways of interacting with the world.

### **Migrant status:**

ACAL notes that adult literacy issues are not confined to migrants. It is concerning that the inquiry has pre-selected cohorts based on stereotypical views of adult literacy. It is a myth that Australian adult literacy issues are mainly associated with people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

ACAL members have contributed the following information:

- Over an English as a Second or Other Language career of 35 years, one teacher of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) reported that most migrant students say they are studying to improve their lifestyle (socio-demographic) and employment options.
- Students from migrant backgrounds often appear to encourage their children to excel and pursue further schooling. Many want their children to study and send them to tutors to assist their studies. Some parents however cannot afford to pay for extra tutoring for their children even though they would like to.
- Conversely, one teacher reported that in her personal experience her parents focussed solely on surviving financially and paying off a mortgage. They were unable to contribute to home-based learning nor support school projects or extra-curricular activities. There were no books in the house during her early childhood. She noted: 'Then to add to the issues, Dad would expect us to be proficient in all types of literacies as we schooled in English – things like legal documents, dealing with Centrelink, and other child-traumatising events!'
- First generation migrants may come from backgrounds of torture and trauma and interrupted schooling. These impact learning language and learning literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills as an adult.
- Migrants or refugees from non-literate societies and oral traditions need time to develop the first foundations of acquiring English language literacy, such as holding a pencil and tracing the alphabet.

- Migrants to Australia are well served by the AMEP. However, access to ongoing educational opportunities beyond AMEP and over an extended period, ideally lifelong learning, would be beneficial.

This information illustrates that cohorts and individuals vary significantly and a link between socioeconomic levels and migrant literacy is not useful.

*ACAL suggests the committee seek further information from a peak body associated with English language acquisition such as The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA).*

### **First Nations Peoples:**

What ACAL knows about adult literacy in relation to First Nations Peoples:

- First Nations Peoples in regional and remote communities experience disproportionate disadvantage due to:
  - Lack of technology
  - Internet connectivity issues
  - Phone connectivity issues
  - Physical distance to classes
  - Physical distance preventing visiting teachers
  - Lack of infrastructure including electricity, postal services, study spaces, transport
  - Inability to access study resources including books and computers
  - Time needed to travel
  - Differing time zones impacting participation
  - Scarcity of trained teachers
- National data reporting the literacy needs of First Nations Peoples is not current. Data about the LN levels of First Nations Peoples was excluded from the last Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) report. There will not be data about the literacy levels of First Nations Peoples in the next PIAAC survey. Evidence in the detail needed to answer this question is not available, and program and policy design and evaluation continues to be uninformed.
- There is currently no known First Nations Peoples led RTO specialising in LLN. Australia requires programs that increase the number of First Nations Peoples owned and led training organisations. Building the workforce capability of First Nations practitioners



could also be provided by offering scholarships to train literacy specialists to work within their own communities, if this is desired by First Nations Peoples.

- The *Literacy for Life Program* provides a model for empowering communities to take control of their own LLN learning. They report that more than 40% of Aboriginal adults have low literacy.

ACAL is not able to make recommendations about if or how data should be collected, nor how to address First Nations Peoples' literacy needs.

*ACAL suggests the committee seek further information via direct consultation with First Nations Peoples.*

### **Individuals living in households that have experienced intergenerational unemployment:**

ACAL notes that although intergenerational unemployment is an issue to be addressed at a societal level, not all unemployed persons have literacy needs, and conversely, not all Australian adults with literacy needs are unemployed. Many of the examples provided to ACAL were linked to intergenerational disengagement with education. There may be two different factors to be considered and the question therefore arises as to whether this inquiry should be looking at unemployment or disengagement with education as a significant factor, or both.

ACAL members have contributed the following information to illustrate links between adult literacy and intergenerational unemployment, and between adult literacy and intergenerational educational disengagement:

- A teacher reported working with a young mum who was questioned about why she hadn't taken her baby to the health clinic for the 18-month check-up. The student responded that she didn't know what '18 months' meant. The teacher saw this as indicative of intergenerational parenting issues impacting on numeracy and literacy for everyday use.
- A teacher reported that some students lack a desire to learn because they haven't experienced someone in their household getting up and going to work or going on to further study. They require extra support with simple life skills such as filling forms, keeping an appointment, and knowing how to be ready for an appointment.

- An academic stakeholder told us there is a clear association between poverty, disability and other indices of social disadvantage, and school failure, which causes young adults to leave school with limited literacy. The posited reverse relationship, that adult literacy causes unemployment and poverty, is similarly complex. In some contexts, there may be a linear relationship, but not necessarily. Certainly, limited literacy restricts employment opportunities.
- A teacher provided an example that illustrated the motivational impacts of intergenerational disengagement with education. When talking to a parent and an early school leaver, the parent did not encourage or support the young person to remain at school. The teacher saw this as raising questions around educational leadership in the home when the leaders in families are lacking the experience or personal motivation themselves to educate. The teacher considers this to be a factor leading to a significant number of disengaged youth unaccounted for in the educational system.
- An academic stakeholder noted that there are excellent and sufficient reasons for improving literacy levels in terms of individuals' life choices and life satisfaction, but social outcomes are complex.
- A language specialist told us there is a connection between adult literacy, numeracy, problem solving skills and socio-demographic characteristics, but socio-demographic characteristics are not causative factors. They are merely indicative of groups in society who are likely to face disadvantage. There are many reasons why individuals may have low literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills and the reasons differ between individuals.
- A teacher told us her students who are from low literacy backgrounds do not have an understanding on how to assist and encourage literacy at home. In her literacy classes she provides strategies and ideas on how to foster literacy in children at home.
- An academic reported that while low levels of literacy can be found amongst every section of the population, it is much more likely to be found among groups which suffer from other forms of socioeconomic disadvantage and discrimination. In international studies, it has been shown that this association is not accidental, and that low levels of literacy play a major part in the continuation of disadvantage across generations.
- The Reading Writing Hotline reports that 82% of callers are not eligible for the Commonwealth Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) Program. This suggests only 18% of callers are in receipt of unemployment benefits.

ACAL will not engage in a deficit approach to adult literacy. We warn against an approach that 'fixing' adult literacy will 'fix' other social programs. Adult literacy is a universal human right and should be considered as such, rather than linked to outcomes that may result in key performance indicators (KPIs) and funding reporting requirements that take focus away from individual need and development.

*ACAL makes the following recommendations:*

- Funding for adult literacy development opportunities outside and additional to the VET regulated training package and accredited course system for any adult who wants or needs to improve their literacy
- A national online database of free resources for adults to improve their own literacy and the literacy of their families and networks in the style of BBC Skillswise.

#### **Further reading and references**

ACAL submission to the Joyce Review Vocational education and training review submissions | Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet ([pmc.gov.au](http://pmc.gov.au))

ACAL response 1 March 2021 to Improving industry engagement and qualifications, Skills Reform Consultation - Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government

Hughes, B., & Knighton, C. (2020). Are Transitions a Sufficient Goal for ABE Students or Programs? *Adult Literacy Education*, 2(1), 66-72.

Literacy for Life program: Literacy For Life Foundation - Aboriginal-led adult literacy charity ([lflf.org.au](http://lflf.org.au))

Mackin review: Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy ([education.vic.gov.au](http://education.vic.gov.au))

Mills et al. (2016) outline that those learners with low achievement, poor school attendance, greater school suspension and exclusion rates are those from low socio-economic status homes.

Osmond, P. 'Developing Social Equity in Australian Adult Education: Some lessons from the Past': *Developing Social Equity in Australian Adult Education* | Taylor & Francis Group

Reading Writing Hotline statistics: Reading Writing Hotline | Help with reading and writing

UNESCO Literacy ([unesco.org](http://unesco.org))

**Term of Reference 2: The effect that literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual's labour force participation and wages**

ACAL notes that improving literacy and numeracy may increase an individual's employment and wages. However, a deficit discourse, suggesting that adults with low LN are responsible for economic productivity issues is not factual and not conducive to improving Australian adults' LN levels.

There is a general understanding by the Australian Government (Standing Council for Tertiary Education Skills and Employment (SCOTese), 2012); (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020), employers (AI Group, 2016), and others, that a person's literacy and numeracy skills can affect the range and quality of their life and work prospects. This position is supported by evidence. For example, according to staff of the Productivity Commission (Shomos & Forbes, 2014), literacy and numeracy account for up to 40 per cent of the correlation between education and employment. Indeed, these authors claim that:

- lower levels of literacy and numeracy are associated generally with more limited labour market outcomes (eg. employment and wages) for workers;
- an improvement in literacy and numeracy of one skill level is likely to result in an improved likelihood of employment, with the benefit for women being more marginal; and
- an improvement in literacy and numeracy of one skill level is likely to realise a 10 per cent increase in wages for both men and women.

In terms of workers in specific industries and occupations, the New Zealand Department of Labour (2010) found that workers with low literacy and numeracy skills were less likely than their colleagues with higher level skills to perform tasks on a regular basis that required reading, writing or number manipulations in their jobs. Further, because of this lack of everyday experience at work, what skills employees have or had are likely to erode. The main industries where this study cohort were employed comprised agriculture, manufacturing, transport, retail and accommodation and food services (Vandenbroek 2019). In Australia, these industry groups comprise almost one-third of the workforce. It is also pertinent that the two largest groups (retail, and accommodation and food services) are characterised by part-time, casual and, in the case of food services, gig economy conditions.

It should be noted, however, that literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills are not merely cognitive, personal features, but rather they are practised in social environments. Trinh et al. (2016) found that, in the case studies they developed from a study of 4,234 workplaces in the United Kingdom, some employers have a 'very narrow understanding of literacy and numeracy in relation to job roles and requirements and business performance' (p. 12). That is, they did not understand the social-contextual nature of literacy and numeracy. ACAL recommends a focus on creating workplaces that are numerate and literate aware, with management and government taking responsibility for leading practices that foster access, equity and engagement.

With respect to a theoretical understanding of the effects of limited literacy and numeracy skills on groups of people, Grotlüschen et.al. (2015) suggest that the concept of vulnerability is relevant. That is, while these authors recognise that there is a 'danger' that such groups will be excluded from the workforce, this is not necessarily a certainty. For example, Kell recounted to Deasey (2018) the ways that one worker, among eight others in an in-depth study, managed his literacy difficulties in the workplace. Specifically, she noted that:

[this] man was a non-reader and I think he just accepted that he couldn't read. However, he was on all sorts of committees at his workplace. He could not write well so he had developed his own coding system to record the information so he could go back and talk to his colleagues about the issues. He was promoted three times in the eighteen months of data collection for this study. He was training all sorts of people and he was a brilliant trainer. (p. 4)

While some workers with low literacy and numeracy skills may be able to survive and even flourish in their workplaces through their coping strategies, as in the example above, their sociability and other personal attributes, it is highly likely they will not be 'protected' against changes in workplace practices. Saal et.al. (2018) found that, as marginalised groups in the United States such as women, older adults and people of colour 'advanced', numeracy competencies were critical as 'protections' against unemployment. Presumably, this finding also applies to literacy and numeracy and to similar cohorts in Australia.

ACAL members have contributed the following information to illustrate the effect literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual's labour force participation and wages:

- A teacher supplied examples suggesting that people with low levels of literacy and numeracy don't aspire to working in positions where their lack of skills will be highlighted. For example, when workers in unskilled agricultural work are required to upskill (eg a WHS course or chemical handling) they are inclined to find another unskilled position instead. They are also more likely to not hold a driver licence, which in the regional areas means their employment prospects are reduced, or they drive without a licence.
- Whilst there is a well-established relationship between literacy and individual earning potentials, and between the average literacy levels of a community and its economic well-being, the causal connection is complex and involves a range of factors other than literacy; issues such as inter-generational poverty and unemployment, health and mental health, race and gender. Providing short-term employment-related literacy and numeracy programs for such adults is unlikely to produce the solution that the rhetoric would have us believe. The relationship between literacy and productivity is much more nuanced and resistant to simplistic quantitative measurement such as is produced by surveys such as PIAAC. There is a strong argument that productivity and development of human capital should not be seen in a binary relationship to development of social and individual capital. Each reinforces the other in complex ways in development of adult literacy and basic education competence, and in developing the confidence to use newly acquired skills.
- Limited literacy restricts employment opportunities. However, this depends on the context. Furthermore, low wages are caused by complex factors and will not necessarily be remedied by an increase in literacy levels. There are many long-term unemployed or low wage adults who have adequate levels of literacy. Similarly, many workers in steady employment have low literacy skills. Underemployment, casualisation, and other structural features of the economy are much greater influences on labour force participation opportunities and wage levels.
- People who are unemployed and in low wage jobs are more likely to have low to very low literacy. However, programs ostensibly designed to assist these people into employment and higher wages have to date had little impact on either unemployment levels or the prevalence of low wages. This is because individual literacy levels are only one of many factors which play a role in the continued reproduction of social inequality. Unemployed people and low wage workers should be directly involved in the development of solutions to these problems, including the

design of appropriate literacy programs, through their own representative organisations and associations.

*ACAL makes the following recommendations:*

- More workplace literacy programs are available not only for those workers who may be struggling to meet with their current literacy and numeracy demands but to skill workers to meet future needs in a changing economy.
- Additional learning opportunities to improve their literacy and numeracy skills outside the workplace should be made available to these workers as it is recognised that such learning takes considerable time (Reder, Gauly & Lechner, 2020).
- Employers and training staff appreciate that literacy and numeracy development is a social as well as a cognitive phenomenon in any particular setting, and learning opportunities that encompasses a modern and research-based view of literacy and numeracy must be offered.
- Workers be supported to understand that learning is a life-long process and be given opportunities to succeed and develop confidence in their own abilities to develop new knowledge and skills.
- Workplaces be encourages and facilitated to engage with LLN experts to create workplaces that are numerate and literate aware. This would be achieved by using plain English in all texts (verbal and written), LLN appropriate signage and process instructions, multi-lingual documents, and LLN awareness training for management, in addition to support for those with LLN gaps.

#### **Further reading and references**

ACAL response 1 March 2021 to Improving industry engagement and qualifications, Skills Reform Consultation - Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government (attached)

AIGroup (2016). Low literacy and numeracy skills plaguing employers. Retrieved from <https://www.aigroup.com.au/policy-and-research/mediacentre/releases/cb2c00d2-9506-e611-80d0-00505680033d/>

Deasey, S. (2018). Literacy as social practice - how nine men managed their literacy difficulties in the workplace. Retrieved from [https://valbec.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/fp\\_2018-01\\_body.pdf](https://valbec.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/fp_2018-01_body.pdf)

Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government (2020). Foundation Skills for your Future. Retrieved from <https://www.dese.gov.au/foundation-skills-your-future-program>.

Grotlüschen, A., Buddeberg, K., Redmer, A., Ansen, H. & Dannath, J. (2019). Vulnerable Subgroups and Numeracy Practices: How Poverty, Debt, and Unemployment Relate to Everyday Numeracy Practices.

Reder, S., Gauly, B. & Lechner, C. (2020). Practice makes perfect: Practice engagement theory and the development of adult literacy and numeracy proficiency. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11159-020-09830-5.pdf>

Saal, L. K., Gholson, M., Machtmes, K. & Machtmes, R. (2018). Associations between adults' numeracy skills and employment status: an analysis of PIAAC's US dataset. Retrieved from

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335146786\\_Associations\\_Between\\_Adults'\\_Numeracy\\_Skills\\_and\\_Employment\\_Status\\_An\\_Analysis\\_of\\_PIAAC's\\_US\\_Dataset](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335146786_Associations_Between_Adults'_Numeracy_Skills_and_Employment_Status_An_Analysis_of_PIAAC's_US_Dataset)

Shomos, A. & Forbes, M. (2014). Literacy and Numeracy Skills and Labour Market Outcomes in Australia: Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper. Retrieved from <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/literacy-numeracy-skills/literacy-numeracy-skills.pdf>

Standing Council for Tertiary Education Skills and Employment (SCOTese). (2012) National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults. Retrieved from <https://www.dese.gov.au/skills-information-training-providers/resources/national-foundation-skills-strategy-adults>

Tu, Trinh et al. (2016) Impact of poor basic literacy and numeracy on employers: BIS research paper number 266. Retrieved from <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/25449/1/BIS-16-36-impact-of-poor-basic-literacy-and-numeracy-on-employers.pdf>

Vandenbroek, P. (2019). Snapshot of employment by industry. Retrieved from [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/FlagPost/2019/April/Employment-by-industry-2019](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2019/April/Employment-by-industry-2019).



**Term of Reference 3: Links between literacy and social outcomes such as health, poverty, ability to care for other family members and participation in civic life**

The Australian Government has recognised the need for adults in this country to improve their literacy and numeracy skills through funded programs such as the National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, (DESE), 2020a), the Foundation Skills for your Future (DESE, 2020b) and the discontinued Workplace English Language and Literacy program (UNESCO, 2013). However, these initiatives are employment-focused and the support for non-employment-oriented literacy and numeracy provision is minimal across many parts of Australia. This area of need is largely viewed nationally as a State and Territory responsibility with limited take-up of that role by States and Territories. Examples of such neglect include in the Northern Territory and Queensland where the Reading Writing Hotline has reported serious gaps in provision. For example, the Reading Writing Hotline recently reported on a call from a registered training organisation in Queensland regarding a young First Nations mother with low literacy who has been told she must study or will lose her parenting payment. She lives well away from any classes in central Queensland.

As well as documenting the economic costs of limited literacy, Cree, Kay and Steward (2012) identified social costs globally. In terms of health, they claimed that 'literate people demonstrate better hygiene practices, have better access to preventive health measures (such as vaccination and medical check-ups) and can acquire better nutritional knowledge to feed their families' (p. 5).

A more recent study of health literacy involved a systematic review and qualitative synthesis of 34 studies by Liu and colleagues (2020). These authors found that inadequate health literacy is associated with 'difficulties in comprehension of health information, limited knowledge of diseases and lower medication adherence, which contribute to poor health, high risk of mortality, insufficient and ineffective use of healthcare, increased costs, and health disparities' (p. 1).

In a 2021 article, however, Liebe has questioned many approaches to understanding health literacy, recommending instead that broader social factors in people's lives be considered when addressing this issue. This point was similarly made by Kelly (2019) where she outlined a number of models where adult literacy practitioners and health personnel work collaboratively to improve the health literacy and numeracy of Australians in need. In addition to health literacy being seen as an important area of study and education for people with low literacy and numeracy skills, drawing on the work of Grotlüschen et al.

(2019, cited in Gal et al. 2020), the German Government identified three other areas that were relevant for understanding literacy practices and for underpinning surveys in the years 2016-2026. These were financial, digital and political (civic). Gal et al. claim that 'recurrent' research findings show that improving literacy and numeracy skills that focus on marginalised groups lead to these wider benefits of learning and thus, not only economic, but also social outcomes such as those identified by the German Government.

ACAL members have contributed the following information to illustrate the links between literacy and social outcomes:

- We have a subculture of people with low literacy because they are not able to participate fully in areas that literate people take for granted. The respondent described a client who had her children removed from her care because she lacked the LN skills to manage their medications.
- These connections are well established in PIAAC surveys, however, the key message from the data is that low literacy scores are correlated with social deprivation along a number of dimensions, rather than the assumed causal relationship (e.g. St Clair 2014). The recent PIAAC survey contained a wealth of data that related to issues such as public and civic participation, but that remained un-examined in the public and policy sphere, while the focus in the media and the public imaginary was on literacy's relationship with productivity.
- Many people do not know how to access services or do not know what is available. Moving access to government services online is traumatising for individuals - especially the elderly, so they do not access services that may be available, hence impacting on their ability to care for others or themselves. My Aged Care and MyGov have constantly been a problem for individuals in our local community and this is due to a lack of literacy (especially digital) skills.
- People with low literacy are unable to read personal health basics such as medicine doses, referral letters, or the advice of medical practitioners. They are often wholly reliant on external organisations to meet the basic requirements of housing maintenance as they are not able to read instructions for tasks such as repairing tap washers.

The evidence for the links between low literacy and numeracy skills and social well-being has been documented for many years yet the Australian governments are not currently responding to this situation.

*ACAL makes the following recommendations:*

- Community provision be funded and established across Australia and particularly in those States and territories where the need is most dire, to meet this gap.
- Adult literacy practitioners be supported to access professional development and courses that focus on social-contextual approaches to literacy and numeracy as well as cognitive development approaches (renewal of expertise in the LN workforce is urgently required).
- Adult literacy practitioners work closely with social agencies to develop programs that meet local needs.

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**Term of Reference 4: The relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development from birth to post-secondary education**

Information about parents and carers who are seeking to increase their family literacy skills.

ACAL acknowledges that parents and carers with low literacy can experience difficulties supporting education and providing a literacy-rich home environment. However, it must be acknowledged that many parents and carers who experience literacy barriers strive to provide an experience that allows their children to thrive, often to overcome the barriers their own literacy presents and to ensure it does not become an intergenerational issue.

For example, ACAL members shared these experiences:

- An academic told us there is no simple or causative relationship between parent and child literacy. Her own grandfather never went to school (he taught himself to read in English and write in limited contexts). His son had two doctorates.
- A teacher wrote about witnessing parents do 'whatever it takes' to give their children a good education: they take enormous pride in when their children 'are doing well' as they themselves, in many cases, did not have the opportunity to obtain an education.
- Teachers noted that parents with low literacy often enrol their children in after-school tutoring, which comes at a cost: however, every opportunity is explored to give their children a solid education. Unfortunately, the parents themselves stay behind in their learning development but this is often not viewed or experienced as missing out themselves as they pride themselves in the children's achievements. Some parents cannot afford to pay for extra tutoring for their children even though they would like to.
- A teacher described an adult literacy student who complained about their child's teacher and the way maths was taught. After much discussion it was found that she didn't understand the homework and it made her feel inadequate.
- A teacher explained that she is currently working with five women who have joined an adult literacy class to improve their ability to help their children or children in their care. They all describe themselves as 'struggling with literacy' but are 'desperate' to read to their children, help with homework, and become role models for their own children and other parents facing literacy barriers.

ACAL makes the following recommendations: To assist parents and carers, ACAL calls for access to free literacy classes for adults that are

- needs based (not training package or accredited courses)
- strength based (treat adults with dignity and are based on adult learning principles)
- available nationally
- taught or led by qualified LN experts
- available in convenient locations (tailored to local need)
- accessible (considering childcare facilities, transport options, flexible hours and other adjustments for individual and local need)
- encompassing of different types of literacy experiences to develop all aspects of adult literacy, as well as the capacity to assist with homework and read to children (eg financial literacy, community literacy, health literacy, personal literacy, digital literacy).

#### The risk of perpetuating intergenerational literacy issues

In instances where parents or carers are not able to provide supported literacy experiences, there is a risk of intergenerational literacy issues. This is often paired with intergenerational disengagement from education.

ACAL members often become aware of intergenerational disengagement from education and intergenerational literacy issues. For example:

- A teacher reported that students who are from low literacy backgrounds often do not have an understanding on how to assist and encourage literacy at home. In the literacy classes she provides strategies and ideas on how to nurture children's literacy.
- A teacher told us in remote First Nations communities there has been concerted efforts on the part of the Commonwealth to ensure children get to school and remain in school. The appointment of the Yellow Shirts or School Attendance Officers as part of the Australian Government's Remote School Attendance Strategy are experiencing success in combatting low attendance levels at remote schools. However, programs such as these miss a crucial aspect of raising overall community LLND skills. There is little emphasis placed on raising the literacy levels of parents.

- ACAL has contacted the NT Government on several occasions with concerns that adult literacy is not featured in reports such as *Closing the Gap* and therefore funding is not being provided to adult literacy which underpins all aspects of development, and, importantly, family literacy.
- A teacher told us that in 20 years working with employed remote community participants in LLND programs, it is clear that the lack of stress on the application of LLND skills post-schooling and for previous generations can result in disengagement from employment and community life. Parents are the role models for the application of LLND skills in the real world. Failing to support parents and community leaders in the development of their LLND skills results in the risk that the efforts being made at the school level drift into irrelevance.
- A teacher told us literacy issues among parents, grandparents, carers and extended family members are a factor undermining the ability of children to thrive in school, not just because of obvious issues like helping with homework, or encouraging and supporting a culture of reading in the home. It is also because adults with low literacy may also be struggling with associated issues such as housing availability and income security. These problems can disrupt children's school attendance and engagement.
- A teacher told us that migrants are initially well served by the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). However, access to ongoing free literacy classes may improve life chances and educational outcomes for their families. There are few opportunities for ongoing education when AMEP hours are complete, particularly if participants then become engaged in work or caring responsibilities.

*ACAL makes the following recommendations: In addition to the free classes called for above*

- Access to literacy skill development in early parenting courses where required
- Increased information around basic strategies to increase children's literacy opportunities targeted at parents and carers
- National mechanisms for adult literacy practitioners to work with agencies to provide free literacy assistance to parents and carers including:
  - pre-schools, childcare, and schools
  - health professionals
  - community associations
  - libraries

- other agencies in the family and carer field
- A national online data base of free resources for parents and carers to improve their own literacy and the literacy of their families and networks in the style of BBC Skillswise.

**Further reading and references**

Hughes, B., & Knighton, C. (2020). Are Transitions a Sufficient Goal for ABE Students or Programs? *Adult Literacy Education*, 2(1), 66-72.

Literacy for Life program: Literacy For Life Foundation - Aboriginal-led adult literacy charity ([lfff.org.au](http://lfff.org.au))

The Productivity Commission's review of the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development

Reading Writing Hotline statistics: Reading Writing Hotline | Help with reading and writing

UNESCO Literacy ([unesco.org](http://unesco.org))

**Term of Reference 5: Whether changes to schooling in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 will have a disproportionate impact on the skill development of those children of parents with lower literacy and numeracy levels, and, if yes, consideration of appropriate remediation programs which might address this.**

When parents or carers have low literacy levels children are always at risk of missing out on early literacy foundations that would be developed in a literacy-rich family environment. However, ACAL suggests that Australia needs programs that identify who needs assistance regardless of parent education or their literacy and numeracy levels.

Rather than focussing on children, ACAL encourages the inquiry to consider the impact of the COVID-19 experience on both the learning experiences of adult literacy learners, and also the impact on the confidence and self-esteem of adults who were challenged by the role of supporting children during that time.

Many callers to the Reading Writing Hotline report they struggle to manage the higher literacy demands of applying for government assistance for drought, bushfires, floods, and COVID19. These callers need to read large amounts of new and confusing material, complete unfamiliar forms, and engage with online services. Many parents also struggle to help children with schooling when they do not have strong literacy and numeracy skills themselves. The Hotline tells us that failing to meet these needs will have serious ongoing consequences.

[Disclosure: ACAL is a stakeholder of the Reading Writing Hotline. An ACAL executive member has a seat on the RWH Steering Committee].

ACAL asks the commission to expand the Terms of Reference to include the experiences of adult literacy learners rather than just their children. An ACAL survey of Australian literacy practitioners in 2020 reported on adult literacy learners and their experiences as described by literacy teachers. With respect to adult literacy learners, the research found:

- A lack of access to internet services and computer hardware were serious issues.
- An inhibiting factor to full participation by students was their requirement to spend time dealing with other responsibilities (eg childcare).
- Student anxiety was a significant issue.
- The wellbeing of students, which underpinned their ability to learn, was important.



- Learners needed alternative times and modes for learning, including mailed learning materials to compensate for unreliable internet connectivity or when there was no access to digital forms or where digital skills were a barrier to learning.
- In some cases, it was important to seek help from family members as appropriate and refer students to wider care (eg student counsellors, social workers, and government and charity aid organisations which provided food).
- not all students participated in online learning during the lockdown. As one teacher concluded, 'In some cases it was simply not possible to deal with the students' circumstances, and in others, only limited help was possible'. This was particularly the case for students with high literacy needs.

ACAL members provided the following contributions to illustrate this issue:

- The biggest hurdle to overcome is digital literacy. For students who already have low literacy, it is almost impossible to engage them in online or blended learning, unless they have had extensive training via face to face classes first. Students from families who have experienced intergenerational unemployment may have a mobile phone, but it may not have network access. Even young adult students who always have a phone or device with them are not comfortable to use their cameras or audio for remote learning. It is therefore very difficult to engage them in class discussions or offer feedback for their progress.
- Australians with low literacy, numeracy and digital skills face social isolation and unemployment as jobs disappear in the face of technological change, globalisation and COVID-19. Effective planning and implementation of the COVID-19 recovery process is crucial and must recognise the economic value of higher levels of adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills, particularly for socially and economically marginalised Australians. All Australians, regardless of their employment status, must be supported to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills to ensure they can live healthy, autonomous and full lives.
- A teacher told us that they had 36 young adult students aged 15 to 17 who had been exempted from school. Until the lockdown in March 2020, most of these students were attending regularly. When the lockdown commenced, although they ensured that all students had remote access, only 17 students were actively engaging in remote learning. When students could return to campus, with only three weeks of the semester program left, 28 students returned. While they were not able to support completion for

all students, they supported them to pathway to a new program as much as possible. Several of the disengaged students were still seeking alternative programs in 2021: there is a strong concern that the lockdown has had a long-term impact on them.

- A teacher told us that they lost a significant number of learners with low level literacy when lock down started in March 2020. Mail-outs were prepared and delivered to learners by express post. Unfortunately, many could not engage online and so could not get the learning support they needed. Some moved to other regions to get family support. Some stayed home due to health issues, even prior to the lockdown. Remote learning was not effective when students did not have anyone at home to support them.
- A member explained that there is an unmet demand for literacy skill development for parents of young children and older people who need a wider range of literacy skills to negotiate a world of online engagement which requires a greater variety and higher level of literacy than in previous years when many transactions were carried out face to face. Parents were very challenged during the pandemic shut down period when their children were learning remotely - this caused high levels of stress amongst the parents, the teachers, and the students.

The impact of COVID-19 social distancing and periods of isolation have drawn attention to the previously hidden issues faced by parents in assisting children with homework and providing literacy experiences, as described in the ACAL response to *Term of Reference 4, The relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development from birth to post-secondary education*. Many parents require additional skills and strategies to assist their children and to support them.

ACAL makes the following recommendations:

- Introduce policies that increase advantage across all social factors. For example, improving and increasing public housing, increased support through the community health system, more case workers, more family support programs, access to literacy experts via libraries, more early childhood education programs, and increasing literacy classes for adults.

- Access to free literacy classes that are not focussed on employment outcomes and that are needs and learner centred, independent of training packages and accredited courses (ie not CBT training).
- A national online data base of free resources for adults across Australia to access in the style of BBC Skillswise.
- Increased digital access for adult learners.

**Further reading and references**

Adult Literacy and Numeracy Teaching experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 Isolation Period –; ACAL study by Ann Kelly:  
COVID-19 teaching-learning experiences Conversation Starter (attached)

**Term of Reference 6: The availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy educational programs Australia and internationally.**

Lack of appropriate programs to meet demand.

Currently there is insufficient availability of different types of programs within Australia to meet demand. The Reading Writing Hotline (RWH) found that during the 2019/2020 financial year not only was there a 30% increase in phone calls to the line from the previous year but there was increase in no appropriate class provision available from 3% to 13%. The RWH also found that 81% of callers looking for a class were not eligible for the main federally funded program on offer, the SEE program, as they were not classified as jobseekers looking for work. Another significant point is that 71% of the callers were from an English-speaking background and therefore require literacy rather than language support. This indicates the need for additional provision of literacy rather than language learning.

Reasons for the lack of appropriate programs.

Current federal provision sits within the policy document the *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults (NFSSA)*.

- The Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program. This provides language literacy and numeracy skills for jobseekers looking for work with provision concentrating on workplace training. There is no publicly available data to indicate its effectiveness. This program fits under NFSSA 3.2 (2012, p. 14) with three stated objectives but programs appear to meet only one partial objective, that is, a pathway to work. SEE does not provide a range of choices tailored to meet the goals of the participants nor does it provide alternative pathways to further training. It provides only one pathway to VET and does not provide skills for the participants to contribute wholistically to their community as active citizens. SEE provision, especially in South Australia and New South Wales, uses the Foundation Skills Training Package (FSK) which supports outcomes in industry training packages and general workplace communication. There appears to be minimal SEE provision in some states such as Queensland and the NT.
- Foundations Skill for Your Future (FSFYF). This is a new program and it is too early to ascertain its success. However, it is a concern that once more there may not be data that will be made available. FSFYF fits under NFSSA 3.3 (2012, p. 17). The priorities are those in which the Workplace English Language and Literacy Program (WELL) used to sit. That program is discussed below.

State provision:

- There is intermittent delivery in the states and territories with some states and territory governments considering language literacy and numeracy provision as a federal issue even though funds have been allocated to this provision via federal financial relations such as the COAG Transitions to Skills and Attainment Partnership Agreement. Each state has discretion regarding the use of allocated funds with no delivery occurring in some states.

Historical provision:

ACAL notes that historically successful programs were discontinued or changed without reference to outcomes or to best practice. Decisions have been largely bureaucratic and have lacked input and consultation with LN experts, teachers, and participants. Adult LN provision funded by the Commonwealth has largely ignored information from the field.

For example:

- Eligibility criteria has changed and narrowed over the years for entry into the main federally funded language literacy and numeracy programs. Prior to the SEE program, the Language Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) provided delivery for more than just jobseekers as the eligibility criteria was wider. Even though participants needed to be registered with Centrelink not all participants needed to be on receipt of a benefit.
- Provision nationally has narrowed over the years from a range of courses and programs to meet the needs of different student groups. There used to be numerous suitable courses especially for learners with low literacy, including non-competency-based training. These courses helped improve the quality of learner lives with health and financial literacy as well as increased confidence. This change and the dearth of now suitable programs has not been due to these programs being ineffective but due to a change in government priorities to that of workplace training as a step into employment.
- The Literacy and Numeracy Training (LANT) program and Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) that preceded the SEE and LLNP programs separated language teaching from literacy teaching. LLNP and SEE include both literacy streams and language streams of delivery. Literacy program participants had their own dedicated program: now they do not. The amalgamation of the two streams into one program is problematic. These changes were not made according to evidence based best

practice. Literacy and language are usually separated in teaching provision due to theories around first and second language acquisition requiring different assessment processes, different methodologies, and different teaching qualifications. Language reporting pre and post assessments are usually against the International Second Language Proficiency Rating (ISLPR) while literacy is against the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). The students would also be enrolled in different qualifications. However, some providers without the required theoretical understanding and teaching expertise, or insufficient numbers of participants, combine learners of the two streams into one class often enrolled into incorrect qualifications and creating likely learner dissatisfaction. Research is required to understand this impact.

- WELL used to be the main program under priority 3.3. This program commenced in 1991 and was discontinued just two years into the NFSSA. This was a well-respected and well-utilised program. One of the main reasons for its discontinuance was the inability to determine successful workplace outcomes due to a lack of delivery performance measures integrated into the program from its commencement. An attempt to retrofit this was unsuccessful. The IT system had not been supported for years and outcome measurements seeking ACSF increments did not suit the program. Incremental increases in literacy improvements may occur usually after 100 hours (or more) of engagement but the average delivery for WELL participants was 40 hours. Research was underway for a return of investment indicator for industry and consideration of the best steps to indicate how successful the program was when it was discontinued. DIIRSTE, the department responsible for the program at the time, reported that: 'The majority of employees and employers are positive in their assessment of the programme with:
  - 78 per cent of employers rating WELL as either effective or highly effective in meeting their business needs; and
  - 79 per cent agreeing that important aspects of employee job performance had improved as a result.

ACAL members have contributed the following information on the availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy educational programs Australia and internationally:

- Availability: The Reading Writing Hotline maintains a current and accurate national database of literacy programs. This is much more accurate than any response from state bureaucracies that the committee could source. Moreover, they are well placed to highlight the gaps in provision as they relate to the demand of the callers to the Hotline.
- Impact and Effectiveness: this is only likely to be established in a meaningful way by longitudinal studies. To date, no such studies have been carried out in Australia, however, results of a USA study provides useful information (Reder, S. 2013; Reder, S 2020). They indicate that end-of-course data is not a useful indicator.
- Availability and impact and effectiveness have decreased over the last 30 years as we keep reinventing the wheel. We know that non coercive, learner centred, flexible community-based class provision, alongside workplace programs, and also prison programs, all work - but slowly (it takes about 4 years of FULL TIME school for children to reach basic literacy levels yet government funding expects adults to progress in weeks). We need well -resourced classroom based educational programs for adults who didn't get adequate schooling, all with structured pathways into other programs. We also need more pastoral and community based approaches, where literacy programs offer basic skills alongside literacy and support the students to progress into other training. These programs were present to some degree in the 1980s, and were dismantled in the following decades, in the name of 'reform'.
- A teacher explained that this year there has been an influx of adults with very low literacy and numeracy skills into VET training. The number had been decreasing in recent years, which may have been due to alternative programs, or employment. We have had to refuse some students on the basis that their LLND skills are so low we are unable to offer effective support for them in classes. Funding for literacy classes means we need to have around 20 students in a class so we are unable to support students who can't read the 100 most common words and can't respond to basic questions independently.
- A teacher reported that they currently have 18 students at low levels of literacy (ACSF 1 and 2), who are fully engaging in face to face classes and are committed to their learning, demonstrating that it is very important that we continue to offer face to face classes for this learner cohort.
- Adult literacy and numeracy programs have suffered badly under the push towards entitlement funding models and the privatisation of VET education. These programs are

more difficult to access and are of lower quality than they were previously. Labour market programs such as the SEE program are difficult for people with LLND needs in regional areas to access because the referral process is very problematic. The role of Job Actives in this program is full of conflicts of interest as they are paid to put people into work. In fact, the privatisation of the unemployment sector has badly impacted adult LLND because it has created a perverse conflict of interest that punished the person with low literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills. They require LLND skills but are forced onto other programs that benefit the Job Active and not the client.

- A stakeholder described a 7 year partnership with a regional council on a workplace LLND project. The program has received no Commonwealth funding to date. The core skills program was first piloted as an LLN program. Based on its successful integration of life skills, relevant workplace skills and language, literacy and numeracy, it was expanded to every remote community in the council area. The foundations of the original core skills program were built upon to viably implement a system that supports staff to meet the requirements of their position description. Programs where employers drive LLND skill development across remote communities are the key to supporting the development of LLND skills in the remote context. The key is to work with community members who are engaged and able to become skilled leaders in the community now and into the future.
- One stakeholder described a prison system offering offenders a wide range of adult literacy and numeracy units. The student cohort is a uniquely disadvantaged group of adult learners from diverse and challenging backgrounds, many of whom have suffered from lower levels of educational attainment and poor or non-existent work experience.
- Since adult literacy education was made the responsibility of the formal technical and further education system in the 1970s, there has been a slow but inexorable move to define 'literacy' as a skill in the same way that a trade is a skill. It is not. Literacy is the foundation of all education, not just vocational education and training. Helping adults who have low literacy and numeracy to acquire it is a highly specialised form of adult education, which is recognised internationally as having its own professional history and knowledge base. Adult literacy and numeracy education at the lower levels does not sit comfortably inside the competency-based VET system, and the results speak for themselves.



- Re-engagement programs post-school should provide literacy that encompass those areas missed at school and should not be tied to a school curriculum but have a futures perspective and provide opportunities to pursue further training other than VET. Mc Gregor et al. (2014) research into alternative schools and programs found that:  
a single-minded focus on credentialing for current employment carries serious long-term risks for the socio-economic well-being of all young people, but especially for those who are already marginalised and/or disadvantaged. Rather than recognising the gaps in their educational history, such an approach reinforces a deficit view of these young people as being incapable of challenging intellectual work. Educating for individual and national economic livelihood is necessary and meaningful but we suggest that it should be shaped by a futures perspective and be part of a broader educational framework...once young people find themselves outside of the [school] system, they are faced with the challenge of finding programmes and alternative sites that deliver more than a short-term skills/employment, (p. 612).

*ACAL notes that the ToR do not include adult literacy in the Australian prison system and recommends the Committee seek information from experts in that field, for example, Australasian Corrections Education Association (ACEA).*

*ACAL makes the following recommendations:*

- Decision making for future delivery and changes to delivery be based on consultation with experts in the field, rather than bureaucratic or economic streamlining.
- Address the lack of wholistic literacy provision catering for the goals and needs of Australians other than workplace industry training in the VET sector.
- Low level literacy training that is not competency-based training is required. This should include areas related to health and financial literacy to meet the demands of everyday life, build social inclusion and individual and community resilience.
- A range of courses, programs and levels are required to meet the various literacy needs of the population.

- Non-industry related pathways are required for those who have left school without adequate academic literacy to undertake further training where their goals are not VET related.
- Re-engagement programs post-school should provide literacy that encompass those areas missed at school and should not be tied to a school curriculum but have a futures perspective and provide opportunities to pursue further training other than VET.
- Academically rigorous research is required to understand Australian adult LN needs and how to address them.

#### **Further reading and references**

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Reder, S. 2013 'Lifelong and life-wide adult literacy development', *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 18 - 21

Reder, S 2020 'A Lifelong and Life-Wide Framework for Adult Literacy Education', *Adult Literacy Education*, pp. 48-53

UNESCO on WELL: <https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/australian-workplace-english-language-and-literacy>

**Term of Reference 7: International comparisons of government policies and programs that may be adapted to the Australian experience.**

ACAL warns against adopting overseas models and implores the committee to recommend Australian research and locally based decision making. Policy borrowing and policy learning from other countries has been encouraged by the OECD. However, there is a number of concerns about the validity and reliability of such practices (Bynner, 2017; Raffe, 2003 ).

Whether or not the intent of the overseas programs is similar to Australia, that is, to increase the LLN skills to improve workforce participation primarily and hopefully, to improve LLN skills for social inclusion, citizenship and individual and community wellbeing, there are a number of issues in transferring policy and programs or 'cherry picking' (Bynner, 2017) sections of other countries policies for the following reasons:

- Cultural assumptions of what works and for whom: Australia is unique in its geographical disbursement of population; its multicultural mix; its social and educational structure; and the types of industry and businesses and therefore, its workforce requirements.
- The extent of the time and resources required to ascertain the appropriateness of international policies and educational systems and to make an informed choice around suitable programs and their educational pathways that would fit Australian requirements especially as policy and programs are active, iterative and ongoing. (Bynner, 2017; Raffe, 2003).

Research elements should include a clear indication of the aims of the policy and program, clearly outlined KPI measurements and freely available non-biased data linked to these KPIs to ascertain if the program was a success. It is important to consider whether the program will rollover and why or why not. Costs versus reach and outcomes must be assessed also. The research should include non-government sponsored, unbiased reports and academic research from peer-reviewed papers on the programs. If the program were deemed a success, consideration should be made to the ways in which the program met wider objectives of lower unemployment, better health and financial literacy, and better personal, family and community literacy outcomes.

It is very rare for a government in power to comment that a program was not successful. Evidence to demonstrate this is provided when access to the range of data is not publicly available and therefore program evidence cannot be cross checked and validated.

ACAL members have contributed the following information on international comparisons of policies and programs:

- Examples of good adult education programs still exist but almost everywhere they have been assailed by misguided economic rationalists who imagine there is a formula to apply and that cheap quick fixes exist. It is also true that across the OECD, in terms of universal and compulsory schooling, about 10-15% of young people leave school with inadequate/low literacy levels. This is not the fault of schools, or teachers, or 'wrong' teaching methods, or unrecognised learning disabilities because it is common across countries and systems. Inevitably, and for many complex reasons, some young people do not do as well at school as others. Many of them can and will learn, often to amazingly high standards, if afforded opportunities as adults to keep learning.
- The committee should appraise itself of at least some of the extensive International comparative work that UNESCO has done in this area over many decades, though what is now called the Institute of Lifelong Learning.

ACAL makes the following recommendations:

- Carefully consider and question 'policy borrowing' from international experience, and be aware that...  
*'to be used effectively in policy-making, the evidence on educational performance needs to be correctly and thoroughly interpreted in context. In order to examine the connections between a country's performance in an international assessment and its curriculum, these elements themselves must be understood within a wider set of societal relationships and norms'* (Burdett & O'Donnell, 2016, p. 113)
- Decision making for future delivery and changes to delivery be based on consultation with experts in the field, rather than bureaucratic or economic streamlining.
- Introduce an Australian adult literacy and numeracy policy to guide decision making.

**Further reading and references**

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Bynner, J. (2017) 'Youth policy borrowing across language divides', *Journal of Education and Work*, vol 30 no. 7 pp. 758-767

Raffe, D. (2003) 'Pathways linking education and work: A review of concepts, research, and policy debates', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol 5 no.1 pp. 3-19.

UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning <https://uil.unesco.org/>

### **Beyond the terms of reference**

ACAL wishes to draw this additional information to the attention of the inquiry committee

#### 1. Data collection

- Data collection on adult literacy and numeracy need and provision in Australia is inadequate.
- The Federal Government does not have a mechanism to monitor adult literacy needs.
- ACAL proposes that PIAAC is not an ideal system but is better than nothing: The Government had decided not to take part in the new round of PIAAC. After lobbying from ACAL and other peak bodies they agreed to participate but have not committed sufficient funding to deliver state or cohort breakdowns. This is unacceptable; this information is vital for identifying and addressing needs. The Federal government must either fund PIAAC adequately or develop an alternate mechanism, based on best practice and adult LN principles, to gather data.
- Once data is gathered, there must be adequate funding provided to address identified needs.

#### 2. Adult literacy and numeracy in the vocational education and training (VET) sector

As discussed in this submission, adult literacy and numeracy should not be viewed as being solely or mainly situated in the VET sector. However, in addition to extending provision beyond the VET sector, ACAL suggests that the ability of the VET sector to meet literacy and numeracy needs of VET students requires independent review to determine what is working and what is not working.

For example, TAELLN411 is a core unit of the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and is therefore completed by all VET trainers and assessors. ACAL applauds the continued requirement to raise awareness of the LLN needs of VET learners but considers a review of the inclusion of TAELLN411 in the Certificate IV to be overdue. An independent review undertaken by LLN experts is required. Issues impacting the effectiveness of the TAELLN411 unit include:

- Qualifications and experience required to deliver the unit.
- The requirement to consult with an LLN expert. There is no definition of an 'expert' and an inadequate definition of 'consult'.

- A misunderstanding about what a graduate of the unit is qualified for, with many VET trainers believing it qualifies them to teach LLN units and classes. This undermines severely the quality of adult literacy and numeracy learning within the VET system.
- Where graduates of TAELLN411 develop the skills to recognise a need for LLN expertise, there is often no one with LLN expertise available to provide assistance or advice.

#### **Further reading and references**

ACAL conversation starter: PIAAC The International Adult Literacy survey –should Australia take part? By Pam Osmond  
Conversation starter - PIAAC.pdf - Google Drive

ACAL response 1 March 2021 to Improving industry engagement and qualifications, Skills Reform Consultation - Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government

PIAAC – we need it | ACAL Australian Council for Adult Literacy

[https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/piaac-thematic-review-on-adult-learning\\_864d2484-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/piaac-thematic-review-on-adult-learning_864d2484-en)

<http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/315/Canadian-PIAAC-Report.EN.pdf>

The case for investment in adult basic education by Morgan, Kevin; Waite, Peter; Diecuch, Michele at

<http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/427364>.

Investing in Quality: A Blueprint for Adult Literacy Programs and Funders by Sierra Stoneman-Bell & Ira Tankwitt

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1v\\_F0voDHFzjMbbG4UA7Ova4sqWFs3jmy/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1v_F0voDHFzjMbbG4UA7Ova4sqWFs3jmy/view)

Developing Social Equity in Australian Adult Education: Some lessons from the Past' by Pamela Osmond, Developing Social Equity in Australian Adult Education | Taylor & Francis Group

#### **Attachments:**

ACAL response 1 March 2021 to Improving industry engagement and qualifications, Skills Reform Consultation - Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government

Adult Literacy and Numeracy Teaching experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 Isolation Period –; ACAL study by Ann Kelly: COVID-19 teaching-learning experiences Conversation Starter