



Community Adult Literacy Foundation Inc

Introduction

The Community Adult Literacy Foundation (CALF) is a Western Australian charity incorporated under the *Associations Incorporation Act 2015*. CALF's objective is to: provide benevolent relief to adults - through improved literacy and numeracy.

CALF was established in 2004, initially for the purpose of acting as a safety net in the event State Government funding was withdrawn for Read Write Now, an initiative which provides one-on-one tutoring by volunteers for adults wishing to improve their literacy skills. CALF has recently expanded its objectives to include a broader focus on supporting adult literacy initiatives in WA. However, the extent of the problem is daunting and until CALF is able to be registered as a public benevolent institution type charity, and attain deductible gift recipient status, its ability to seek additional resources and support programs is limited.

Scale of the Literacy Problem

Although current statistics are scarce, the scale of the problem of poor literacy in adults cannot be overstated. Almost 44% of Australian adults struggle to read and navigate the range of texts they must interact with daily, such as completing forms, navigating a website (including government services) and understanding written instructions.¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicate that across all categories of literacy competence, only around half of the population has the minimum level of literacy required to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work..²

¹ State Library of Western Australia, *Literacy Matters: State Library of Western Australia Literacy Strategy 2017 – 2027*, available at https://www.slwa.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/Literacy_Matters.pdf.

² See, for example, Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Summary Results, Australia 2006* (cat. no. 4228.0) available at [https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4228.0Main%20Features22006%20\(Reissue\)?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4228.0&issue=2006%20\(Reissue\)&num=&view=.](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4228.0Main%20Features22006%20(Reissue)?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4228.0&issue=2006%20(Reissue)&num=&view=)

Factors compounding the Problem

Stigma and shame

All of the CALF board, and almost all of CALF's members have firsthand experience in tutoring adults seeking to improve their literacy. That adults with poor literacy skills bear immense shame and stigma is incontrovertible and a primary factor in preventing people seeking help to improve their literacy skills. All CALF members could provide examples of the extraordinary lengths those with poor literacy will go to disguise the fact that their literacy skills are lacking. Thus, the scale of the problem goes largely unnoticed and unaddressed.

Affordability of accessing services

The link between poor literacy and low income is well established.³ CALF members with adult literacy tutoring experience can all speak of students who not only cannot afford to pay for formal courses, they also cannot afford *not* to work in order to attend courses.

For those with learning disabilities this problem is compounded further by the high cost of assessment. For example, a standard assessment for dyslexia costs approximately \$1,800 which is out of reach for too many.

Gaps in services

CALF recently engaged with the authors of the Literacy Matters Strategy,⁴ to ascertain where the main gaps in literacy services for adults exist. These gaps are, unfortunately, many and large. Together, our organisations have identified the following groups as being poorly supported by way of literacy services:

- i. aboriginal communities;
- ii. prisoners and their families, particularly when transitioning back into mainstream society;
- iii. young people aged 15-25;
- iv. school leavers with disability;
- v. adults who progressed through the Australian schooling system but who nevertheless graduated with low levels of literacy;

³ Above, n 2.

⁴ Above, n 1.

- vi. those for whom English is a second language; and
- vii. learners in regional areas.

Lack of training

Teacher training for those who specialise in adult literacy is virtually non-existent and there is no longer a career path in this field. In WA, the main source of adult literacy support is the Read Write Now program. While the program receives some State Government funding, it relies entirely on volunteer tutors. Tutors receive some training but resources including training videos are in urgent need of updating.

Lack of coordination at State Government level

There is no single government Department or agency with responsibility for improving adult literacy, and thus no Ministerial accountability for improving outcomes for the almost 50% of the population who lack the literacy skills to meet the demands of everyday life.

By way of illustration, WA's only official, published literacy strategy, the Literacy Matters Strategy is prepared and coordinated by the State Library which falls under the Minister for Culture and the Arts. Education and Training, however, is a different portfolio under a different Minister. Aboriginal Affairs, Corrections, Disability, Citizenship and Multicultural Interests, local libraries and Volunteering all fall under different Ministers again.

The lack of coordination and accountability means

- there is no oversight and no departmental responsibility for initiation, coordination and funding of adult literacy programs,
- funding for adult literacy programs is scant and precarious. often relying on individual organisations begging for grants on an annual basis and dependent on volunteer tutors.
- Inadequate and uncertain funding has led to short term approaches which are often do not or cannot meet the learners needs.

In summary, there are simply more barriers to learning, and more gaps in the services provided than there are support programs. The initiatives which do exist tend to be piecemeal and rely heavily on volunteers. In other words, once you have left school,

unless you are a recently arrived migrant or in jail, there is almost no help available. The Read Write Now program is excellent, but adults with poor literacy need and deserve more than an hour a week of a volunteer's time.

Addressing the problem of poor adult literacy

The (WA) Literacy Matters Strategy is a sensible document and it contains practical, medium-term strategies including the development and implementation of a five-year action plan with meaningful indicators which measure improvements in literacy outcomes. CALF is supportive of such a strategy but questions the achievability of this while the issue of disparate Ministerial responsibility and the attendant uncertainty as to funding remain unaddressed. It is CALF's submission that the following three initiatives would be instrumental in addressing the problem of poor adult literacy:

- i. Single Ministerial responsibility including proactive programming and funding to address the identified gaps in services and other factors compounding the problem of poor adult literacy.
- ii. Federal and State Government commitment to a long-term strategy to improve adult literacy.
- iii. A national approach with programs consistent and transferrable across states and accessible in regional areas. This should include funding for IT support systems and administration to enable programs to operate more easily.⁵

Just as the health system supports patients with as much care as is needed to achieve good health, so too should an education system support learners with as much support as is needed to achieve good literacy health, that is, a level of literacy which enables, at the very least, confident participation in everyday life.

⁵ See, for examples, Ireland's program model at www.nala.ie.