



The Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP
Minister for Indigenous Australians
Member for Hasluck

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Committee Members
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

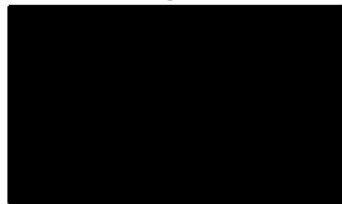
Dear Committee Members

I refer to the letter from the Hon Andrew Laming MP of 5 February 2021 inviting a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance.

Adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills are critical to improving the lives of all Australians, including Indigenous Australians. Literacy is the foundation that can lead to better health, education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families and communities. We know that low levels of literacy continues to be a barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults accessing work, fully participating in social and economic life, and impacts on opportunities for their children.

I welcome the Inquiry and look forward to seeing the Committee's report. Please find attached the National Indigenous Australians Agency's submission to the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely



The Hon ~~KEN~~ WYATT AM MP
Minister for Indigenous Australians

7 / 4 / 2021

Encl (1) – National Indigenous Australians Agency submission to the Inquiry.

National Indigenous Australians Agency Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training *Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its Importance*

Introduction

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) is responsible for whole-of-government coordination of policy development, program design, and service delivery to improve the lives of Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

NIAA also works closely across government, and with peak bodies, service providers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and communities, to ensure that Indigenous programs and services are delivering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) has primary carriage for the Commonwealth on issues relating to literacy and numeracy. NIAA works closely with DESE in developing policies and programs in this area.

Adult literacy for Indigenous Australians

The importance and impact of adult literacy

Language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) skills affect all aspects of an adult's life, and that of their children, family, and community more broadly. Society relies heavily on schools and parents to equip children with these key foundational skills on which learning and social and economic participation are built, particularly as Australian society and the economy moves to become more digital and technologically based.¹

Two to three million Australians adults lack the basic LLND skills needed for modern life.² Adults and young people who struggle with reading, writing and working with numbers are more vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion, unemployment and poor health. This is particularly true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults, whose rates of LLND skills are lower than non-Indigenous adults. It is estimated that 40 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults have minimal English literacy and that this figure can rise to as high as 70 per cent in remote communities.³ This is a significant barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accessing jobs, assisting their children and being able to fully participate in social and economic life in Australia.

The literacy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults not only affects their health, education and employment outcomes, but also impact their children's and community's opportunities and capacity to progress in their education, from early childhood, to primary and secondary education, and through to further education, training and employment.⁴

Developing the LLND skills of all Australian adults, particularly disadvantaged and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults, would provide benefits both socially and economically.⁵ Improving Indigenous adults' LLND skills is also key to ensuring an adequate Indigenous voice to inform policy decisions and action, and effective community participation and governance, including priorities on Closing the Gap and an Indigenous Voice.

¹ Charles Darwin University, 'Aboriginal Adult English language literacy and numeracy in the Northern Territory'

² PC Review on NASWD.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Korff, J 2021, *Aboriginal literacy rates*

⁵ PC Review on NASWD; Charles Darwin University, 'Aboriginal Adult English language literacy and numeracy in the Northern Territory'

While English literacy outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are continually being measured, there is limited data on the English literacy rates of Indigenous adults, as attention falls away from students once they leave school.

The only survey that measured the English literacy of Indigenous adults was the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Survey of Aspects of Literacy conducted in 1996. The survey found that 41 to 47 per cent of Indigenous adults were at level 1 (defined as having very poor skills and experiencing considerable difficulties with printed material in daily life) and that 25 to 30 per cent of respondents were at level 2 (defined as experiencing some difficulties with printed material in daily life).⁶

Indigenous languages and perspectives

Promotion of English literacy is vital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve better life outcomes, while balancing the preservation and promotion of traditional languages. Indigenous languages and Indigenous perspectives of language, play an integral role in the education, health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

For many Indigenous Australians, particularly those living in remote communities, literacy programs should be structured to teach English as a second language.⁷ Many remote communities have maintained their use of traditional Indigenous languages, with English often being the secondary or less used language. While the 2011 Census reports that 83 per cent of Indigenous Australians speak English at home, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use a distinctly Indigenous form of English that differs from the Standard Australian English used in educational settings.⁸

The latest data (2018-19), shows all of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are under threat. Of the 141 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, 123 are in use or being revitalised or revived. Only 12 traditional languages are relatively strong, along with two new Indigenous languages – Kriol and Yumplatok/Torres Strait Islander Creole⁹

The 2016 ABS Census indicated there were 64,000 speakers of Indigenous languages (just under 10 per cent of the Indigenous population).¹⁰

The use of Australian Indigenous languages at home decreased between 1991 and 2016 from 16 to 10 per cent. There has been a proportional increase in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait people speaking English at home in the same period.¹¹

For people who spoke an Indigenous language as their main language at home, the proportion reporting speaking English 'Well' or 'Very Well' increased from 73 per cent to 85 per cent between 2001 and 2016, noting the definition of 'well' was subjective.¹²

In addition, speakers of an Indigenous language, particularly those in remote locations who do not speak English well, are likely to be speakers of more than one Indigenous language.¹³ For example, in Ngukurr (Northern Territory) the community broadly uses Kriol as its main day-to-day language. However, within the community it is common that Kriol speakers are also speakers of

⁶ ABS Data, 1996

⁷ Korff, J 2021, *Aboriginal literacy rates*,

⁸ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework, 2020

⁹ National Indigenous Languages Survey, 2020

¹⁰ ABS Data, 2016

¹¹ ABS Data 2016

¹² ABS Data, 2001 & 2016

¹³ D Angelo, C O'Shannessy, J Simpson, I Kral, H Smith, and E Browne. Australian National University, Well-being and Indigenous language ecologies (WILE): A strengths based approach, 2019.

other traditional languages, including Alawa, Mangarrayi, Marra, Ngalakgan, Ngandi, Wubuy, Rembarrnga, Ritharrngu/Wägilak and Warndarrang.¹⁴

The ABS Census only allows for one language other than English to be listed, so the occurrence of multilingualism is not reflected in Census data. The ABS does not have bilingualism data disaggregated by communities, but for Census respondents overall: 85 per cent of people who spoke an Indigenous language at home reported speaking English well or very well, while 11 per cent reported they did not speak English well at all.¹⁵

Speaking traditional language has benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in learning contexts, and is an asset in terms of employment prospects and income-generating opportunities, particularly in the fields of arts, crafts and cultural activities. The 2020 National Indigenous Languages Report found that throughout the early years of education, lessons delivered through a child's traditional Indigenous language, with a gradual and staged transition to English as a second language, has been demonstrated to improve access to education, as well as English literacy.¹⁶

The importance of promoting and practicing Indigenous languages is acknowledged and endorsed by all governments through the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which includes a target that by 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.¹⁷

In assessing these issues in the context of Indigenous Australians it is important to consider remoteness and the impact that this has on outcomes. This includes multi-linguistic environments and the effectiveness of current measures and frameworks to adjust and be adapted to these settings and how this impacts on outcomes.

The Office for the Arts (part of the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications), has responsibility for managing Indigenous languages.

Early childhood and development of children's literacy

Childhood is an important time for healthy development and learning, and for establishing the foundation blocks of future wellbeing. While a positive start in life helps children to reach their full potential, a poor start increases the chances of adverse outcomes for the individual. Reading regularly with children from a young age stimulates patterns of brain development and strengthens parent-child relationships. This, in turn, builds language, literacy, and social-emotional skills.¹⁸

For most children, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the home is the main influence on child language and cognitive development in the early years. Research has found that children developmentally vulnerable on school entry, were more likely to perform poorly on literacy and numeracy tests later in their schooling.¹⁹

Low adult literacy negatively impacts on children's participation and attainment in education, it is important that future efforts to improve literacy outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children also focusses on the literacy skill of parents and the home learning environment.

¹⁴ National Indigenous Languages Survey, 2020

¹⁵ ABS Data, 2016

¹⁶ National Indigenous Languages Report, 2020

¹⁷ Closing the Gap National Agreement, 2019

¹⁸ Australia's Children Report, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020

¹⁹ Council on Early Childhood, 2014

Primary and secondary schooling, and pathways to further education

As parents and care givers are the first teachers of children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults play a key role in ensuring children's school readiness.²⁰

Education is not limited to the school. The ability of a parent or adult care giver to act as the educator and engage with a child's education such as reading to them creates an environment outside of the school that demonstrates the importance of education to children. Although the school environment and the parent's ability to engage with the school may support a child's want to attend, it is also important that this is extended to the home environment.

Research into the impact of a parent's education and literacy level on their child's development, and educational and employment achievement shows:

- Parents' education level significantly predicted educational and occupational success of the child up to 40 years later.²¹
- Children from families where the mother was from a higher socio-economic status (SES) background compared to mothers from a mid SES background, showed greater growth in their vocabulary and speech development.²²

Further education, employment and economic outcomes

Foundation skills, such as LLND, are essential for work-readiness and employment. People with low levels of literacy and numeracy are less likely to be employed or more likely to be employed in low-skilled insecure work and at greater risk of redundancy.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are increasingly pursuing lower level qualifications as a result of lower LLND skills. These lower level qualifications are often a necessary passport to more employment-enhancing qualifications, but they do not provide a strong pathway into jobs on their own. These lower-level qualifications also do not adequately contribute to the Closing the Gap targets, which are focussed on higher level qualifications (Certificate III and above).²³

The language barrier created by English not being a first language can present a challenge when accessing mainstream education. Prospective students with low English literacy are sometimes unable to complete the relevant application forms, and education providers are often unable to assist students. This prevents students from being able to enrol in and complete further education and training, limiting their employment prospects. More work needs to be done to ensure that students are better supported to access further studies, and that training methods are tailored appropriately to meet the needs of Indigenous students.

There is a lack of national or state adult literacy policy that consequently impacts across all cohorts including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults²⁴.

In terms of employment outcomes, in the 2016 Census, 47 per cent of Indigenous Australians aged 15 to 64 years were employed, compared with 72 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians.²⁵ In 2016, the unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over was 18 per cent, compared with 7 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians.²⁶

²⁰ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework, 2020

²¹ Dubow, Boxer & Huesmann, 2009

²² Hoff, E. 2003

²³ Joyce Review, 2018.

²⁴ Joyce Review, 2018.

²⁵ ABS Census 2016

²⁶ ABS Census 2016

While Indigeneity is not a key determinant of employment participation, Indigenous job seekers on average face more barriers to employment than non-Indigenous job seekers. Lower educational attainment and LLND skills is considered a major barrier facing Indigenous Australians²⁷. Other barriers to employment include poorer health, a higher prevalence of mental illness and disability, lack of stable accommodation, limited access to transport, criminal convictions, or residence in outer regional, remote or very remote localities.

Education and skills attainment is an important factor in determining employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians. The employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians narrows as education levels increase. For instance, the employment rate in 2016 for young Indigenous Australians aged 18–29 who had completed Year 12 was between 1.5 and 3 times the rate for those without Year 12 qualification, depending on gender and remoteness locations.²⁸ Young, employed Indigenous Australians with Year 12 qualification were more likely than early school leavers to be employed full time, and be in a skilled occupation.²⁹

There was effectively no gap in the 2016 employment rate between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians with a Bachelor degree or above (around 83 percent employed for both).³⁰ In 2019, 78.2 per cent of Indigenous undergraduates were in full-time employment four months after completion, outperforming non-Indigenous undergraduates (72.1 per cent).³¹ Over the medium-term (three years after finishing their degrees), employment outcomes for Indigenous undergraduates are comparable to non-Indigenous undergraduates. Finally, Indigenous undergraduates earn more than non-Indigenous undergraduates immediately upon graduation, in 2019, median full-time salaries of \$65,200 compared to \$62,600 for non-Indigenous graduates.³²

NIAA administers a number of programs that generate employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in regional, rural and remote areas. Through the Indigenous-specific employment programs: Vocational Training and Employment Centres initiative; Employment Parity Initiative and Tailored Assistance Employment Grants, support and mentoring is provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to address work readiness, learn new skills and commence employment. Under the Tailored Assistance Employment Grants program career pathways such as cadetships and school-based traineeships are also offered. A number of providers and employers participating in these Indigenous-specific employment programs are able to offer literacy and numeracy training to participants as part of work readiness when needed.

Health outcomes

There is a two-way relationship between health and literacy. People with low literacy and education tend to have poorer health, fewer opportunities, lower incomes and reduced employment prospects. In turn, poor health is associated with lower educational attainment. Conversely, education can create opportunities for better health.

²⁷ Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, Productivity Commission, 2020

²⁸ Snapshot: Indigenous Employment, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 11 September 2019: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-employment>.

²⁹ Snapshot: Indigenous Employment, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 11 September 2019: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-employment>.

³⁰ Snapshot: Indigenous Employment, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 11 September 2019: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-employment>

³¹ Universities Australia submission to HORSCIA Inquiry 31 January 2020: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Indigenous_Affairs/Indigenousopportunities/Submissions

³² Universities Australia submission to HORSCIA Inquiry 31 January 2020: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Indigenous_Affairs/Indigenousopportunities/Submissions

This remains even after controlling for job characteristics, income, and family background, demonstrating that literacy and other education policies have the potential to substantially improve health. Health policies can also help to improve education outcomes for Indigenous Australians³³.

Health outcomes are also influenced by a person's ability to use a wide range of materials and resources to build health knowledge and support informed health decision making.³⁴ More action can be taken to improve health as a determinant of literacy and education. Health issues such as poor vision and hearing loss can negatively impact Indigenous students' literacy levels. Early detection and management to address these health issues can be managed by Government to support access to education.

³³ Cutler & Lleras-Muney 2007

³⁴ ACSQHC, 2013

Examples of Adult literacy programs assisting Indigenous Australians in Australia

Literacy for Parents

Established in 2018, Literacy for Parents is a strengths-based program which delivers adult literacy training to young parents under the age of 25 to enable pathways into employment, training and education. The program promotes positive parenting by empowering parents to enhance their engagement in their children's schooling. In 2019, Literacy for Parents delivered its adult literacy training to 40 parents and guardians across four sites (Maningrida, Ngukurr, Yuendumu and Larapinta).

Families as First Teachers

Families as First Teachers (FaFT) is an early learning and family support program that provides parenting and early intervention strategies to families to increase the capacity of parents to participate in their child's learning. The program provides early literacy and numeracy skills to children and parents in a safe, welcoming and culturally appropriate manner. In December 2019, there were 1,876 children participating in 34 FaFT programs across 37 sites in the Northern Territory.

Both the Literacy for Parents Program and Families as First Teachers Program are administered by the Northern Territory Department of Education.

Community Development Program (CDP)

Administered by NIAA, CDP is a remote employment and community development service. CDP supports Indigenous job seekers to build skills (including literacy and numeracy) to address barriers to employment and contribute to their communities through a range of flexible activities. CDP is designed around the unique social and labour market conditions in remote Australia. At 31 January 2021, 13.6 per cent of CDP participants, the majority of whom identify as Indigenous, had identified literacy/numeracy barriers. Where low English language proficiency is identified as a potential barrier, the service provider may refer the CDP job seeker to:

- the Skills for Education and Employment program
- the Adult Migrant English Program
- relevant state or territory government programs
- the Reading Writing Hotline Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources.

Yes I Can!

Yes I Can! is a community-controlled adult literacy campaign for Indigenous adults. Managed by the Literacy for Life Foundation in partnership with local Indigenous community-controlled organisations, the program operates in New South Wales and the Northern Territory. The program was delivered in three phases:

- raising community awareness of the importance of adults literacy and its role in improving social and economic wellbeing
- 13 weeks of intensive basic literacy classes, delivered by trained and local facilitators
- 12 weeks of additional activities to consolidate and build on basic literacy skills.

Over 250 participants across 11 communities have graduated from the program. Every graduate has a post-literacy pathway plan to assist with their further training aspirations and employment opportunities. Graduates also have the health literacy to improve theirs and their community's health outcomes. A key contributing factor to student success included increasing community literacy levels in a safe, supportive and locally run environment, emphasising existing research which has found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students require safe and culturally appropriate environments to succeed in their studies.