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Australian Government response to the  
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment,  
Education and Training report:

‘Don’t take it as read’: Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance

November 2023

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### Acronyms

ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACE	Adult Community Education
ACSF	Australian Core Skills Framework
DLBOTE	Disadvantaged Language Background other than English
DLSF	Digital Literacy Skills Framework
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EAL/D	English as an Additional Language or Dialect
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
JSA	Jobs and Skills Australia
LLND	Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy
MSAC	Medical Services Advisory Committee
NSA	National Skills Agreement
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
RWH	Reading Writing Hotline
SLDs	Specific Learning Disabilities
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
VET	Vocational Education and Training

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### Introduction

On 3 February 2021, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (the Committee) adopted an inquiry into adult literacy and its importance. On 22 March 2022, the committee released the final report of its inquiry, *‘Don’t take it as read’*.

The Australian Government (the Government) welcomes the Committee’s report and recognises the members for their work in delivering the report and associated recommendations.

Adult language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (LLND), often called foundation skills, are crucial to the achievement of the Government’s agenda in education and training, employment, productivity, workplace relations and social inclusion.

At the 2022 Jobs and Skills Summit, the Government committed to reinvigorate foundation skills policy and programs, in partnership with states and territories, and stakeholders.

To help guide this work, the Hon Brendan O’Connor MP, Minister for Skills and Training, established the Foundation Skills Advisory Group (the Advisory Group) in October 2022. The Advisory Group brings together foundation skills experts and representatives from peak bodies, industry, employers, unions, First Nations organisations, and state and territory governments. The Advisory Group plays a critical role in ensuring a broad range of stakeholder views are properly understood and considered.

Informed by its consultations and the expert advice of the Advisory group, the Government has delivered on its commitment to reinvigorate foundation skills policy and programs through the redesign of the Commonwealth’s foundation Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) programs and a new 5 year National Skills Agreement (NSA) which has been endorsed by state and territory governments.

In the 2023-24 Budget the Government announced the redesigned Commonwealth foundation skills program to improve access to training work and life skills for Australians aged over 15 who have left school, seeking to develop their language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills. The Government will also work closely with First Nations people and local communities through a dedicated stream of the program to deliver place-based solutions that meet the needs of First Nations individuals and communities.

In addition, the Government along with states and territories will implement a 5 year NSA from 2024 in line with a vision statement and guiding principles agreed by National Cabinet prior to the Jobs and Skills Summit. The new Agreement gives life to National Cabinet’s guiding principle to:

*ensure(s) that no Australians are left behind as the Australian economy transitions and adapts to structural change, including by providing opportunities for life-long learning and foundation skills development.*

Foundation skills reform is a key priority in the 5 year NSA. To ensure access to foundation skills training for learners with an assessed need, states and territories will provide no- or low-fee access to training through their VET and/or Adult and Community Education (ACE) or equivalent providers.

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As part of the NSA, a 10-year foundation skills strategy will be developed. All governments are working towards the development of an approach that delivers a ‘no-wrong-door’ experience for learners who have left school and are seeking foundation skills training.

The National Skills Agreement will support a coordinated effort to ensure Australian adults can access essential foundation skills training for work, career progression and successful completion of a Vocational Education and Training (VET) course or apprenticeship.

The redesigned foundation skills programs and National Skills Agreement recognise the important role of the ACE sector in Australia’s foundation skills landscape.

As well as these initiatives, the Australian Government has made ‘Broadening access to foundation skills’ one of the 10 policy areas on which the Roadmap is focused to create a dynamic and inclusive labour market in *Working Future: The Australian Government’s White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities*.

The White Paper, which was released on 25 September 2023, notes that foundation skills make a critical contribution to productivity. They also enable participation, build an adaptable workforce, and form the basis for developing specialised skills that make us more productive and engaged. The White Paper highlights initiatives underway to reinvigorate support for adult foundation skills, as well as future reform directions.

Providing stronger support for foundation skills and ensuring access for all Australians is a key priority for the Government. Through a range of reforms and initiatives, described in the following pages, Australians will have greater access to the support and training they need to build their capacity to enhance their potential.

The Government response to the inquiry was required to be tabled by 30 September 2022, within 6 months of the final report being presented. This timeframe was not met due to the flow-on effects of the 2022 federal election and subsequent change of government.

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**Recommendation 1**

The Committee recommends that, by March 2023, the Australian Government resource effective whole of community and family language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (LLND) programs that target adults with low LLND skills including in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, and other socially and economically marginalised Australian communities.

**The Australian Government supports this recommendation.**

All Australians, regardless of their socio-economic status and location, should have access to foundation skills training. These are core 'learning to learn' skills that give people greater access to education and training, a career, engagement in lifelong learning, and the broader community.

The redesigned Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program, announced as part of the 2023-24 Budget expands eligibility to include all Australians aged over 15 years who have left school and have an identified LLND need. It also includes measures to better support learners, including access to non-accredited training for people who will have their learning needs better met in a less formal way, and the ability to fund LLND training on a project basis.

In addition, the redesigned program includes a dedicated stream of delivery for place-based and First Nations-led training for First Nations peoples. This will provide foundation skills training by First Nations community organisations in partnership with Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) or ACE sector providers to deliver whole of community training. Tailored non-accredited and accredited training will be delivered through a variety of models that meet community and learner needs. Grant funding will be provided for long term projects designed in partnership with the community.

The new National Skills Agreement (NSA) aims to ensure adults who seek to improve their foundation skills have access to training by adopting a 'no wrong door' approach.

Through the NSA, the Government has announced \$142 million to improve foundation skills training capacity, quality and accessibility.

This will enable states to deliver additional foundation skills training through the ACE sector or equivalent to better support the Australians who it difficult to engage with mainstream education.

By December 2024, the Government will develop a 10-year national foundation skills strategy in collaboration with state and territory governments. The strategy will identify critical actions to strengthen the foundation skills sector, which may include support for the development in foundation skills workforce, investment in foundation skills training resources, cooperative work on foundation skills assessment tools, and a national suite of activities to better reach cohorts with diverse and complex needs.

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The Government will also continue to deliver a range of other programs that support foundation skills.

- As part of the October 2022-23 Budget, the Government partnered with state and territory governments to establish a \$1 billion 12-month Skills Agreement to deliver 180,000 Fee-Free TAFE and vocational educational places from January 2023. This includes Certificates I and II level courses for people who have left school, to develop foundation literacy and numeracy skills. The Government is continuing to partner with states and territories by committing a further \$414.1 million to deliver an additional 300,000 Fee-Free TAFE places across Australia from January 2024.
- The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is a free service for migrants and humanitarian entrants to improve English language skills and settle into Australia. A new business model for AMEP will be implemented from January 2025 to provide greater flexibility and enhanced client and teacher support.
- The Government also provides funding to the Reading Writing Hotline, Australia's national telephone referral service for adult literacy and numeracy. The Hotline receives around 4,000 calls a year and provides information about courses, teachers and tutors, websites and resources, and access to workbooks online.
- Career Transition Assistance (CTA) is a voluntary program tailored to support job seekers who are aged 45 years and older. The program is designed to improve employability skills, including building functional digital literacy, identify existing and transferable skills, and assist participants re-enter the workforce or change career.
- Employability Skills Training provides tailored support for job seekers aged 15 years and over to develop their core skills, explore career options and build industry specific skills needed for successful participation in employment.
- The new Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP) delivered by the National Indigenous Australians Agency supports First Nations Australians to attain improved work readiness, foundation skills and job-specific skills. This may include language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy services.
- The Digital Connectivity Project is providing digital literacy training to up to 25 communities and town camps in regional and remote Northern Territory. This project coincides with the digital connectivity uplift that supports communities with no, or substandard, digital connectivity. The training will improve digital literacy skills by educating community members on how they can stay connected and safe online, and how to access government services.
- The Be Connected Program aims to support Australians aged 50 years and over, to keep safe online and navigate evolving technology.
- The New Jobs Program Trial will provide community-based organisations and local governments in targeted Community Development Program (CDP) regions with the opportunity to develop and test local approaches to jobs that support some CDP participants to move off income support into paid employment.

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**Recommendation 2**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government immediately fund the broadening of data collection by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the 2022 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey and ensure all subsequent PIAAC surveys are appropriately funded, to include:

- oversampling of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, including those living in very remote areas, and the immigrant populations
- samples in sufficient numbers to provide statistically reliable results not only for Australia as a whole, but also for each state and territory.
- samples in sufficient numbers to provide statistically reliable results for all age groups, including extending collection to a younger cohort (15 years) and an older cohort (66-74 years).

The Coalition of Peaks and the National Indigenous Australians Agency must be consulted in considering how to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations in the PIAAC surveys.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community workers must, where possible, be trained and resourced to conduct PIAAC interviews in their communities.

**The Australian Government supports this recommendation.**

The Government recognises the important role of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) PIAAC survey in supporting our understanding of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skill levels in Australia.

Despite a high regard for the PIAAC, Australia had to temporarily withdraw from the current round to ensure high cyber security standards for the collection of personal information are maintained for the safety and security of survey participants. The Government is continuing to engage with the OECD and will actively consider participation in future rounds of PIAAC.

Given the temporary withdrawal from PIAAC, and the need for an evidence base, as part of the 2022-23 Budget, the Government announced a new *National Study on Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Skills* to be designed and delivered by Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA).

This new study consists of four elements:

- a survey of Australian adult literacy and numeracy skills
- a feasibility study into how to best collect the literacy and numeracy levels of First Nations people
- analysis of administrative data to gain insights into skill levels for priority groups
- working with stakeholders to gain agreement on a common definition of digital literacy/skills.

Work on the study has already begun, with JSA releasing a discussion paper on 4 April 2023 to seek stakeholder input on the intent, design, and desired outputs of the study. As a result of feedback received, the survey of literacy and numeracy skill levels of adult Australians will be undertaken using the OECD's Education and Skills Online tool, accompanied with an Australian background questionnaire to capture demographic information.

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Reliable results for persons aged 15 years and over are expected to be available at the national, state and territory level in early 2026.

In August/September 2023, JSA consulted with over 120 providers, non-government organisations and governments who hold administrative data on the literacy and numeracy skills of priority groups. JSA is now considering data assets that could be explored further to gain insights on the skills of priority groups.

Advice for a feasibility study to best collect the literacy and numeracy levels of First Nations people is being sought from Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, such as the Coalition of Peaks, as well as the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and the Northern Territory Government.

JSA is also working with the Future Skills Organisation (FSO) to understand digital literacy in the workplace with a view to working with the FSO and other stakeholders to scope out and gain agreement on a common definition of digital literacy/skills.

The evidence base provided by the new national study will enable governments, education and training providers, peak bodies, employer and industry bodies, academics and researchers and the community sector to better understand people's needs, and target policies and programs to address them.



**Recommendation 3**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government provide ongoing funding for a new Australian Adult Competencies Survey to be conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics at the mid-point of each Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) cycle, with consultation on development to begin by March 2023 and the first survey to be conducted in 2026.

The new Australian Adult Competencies Survey must be:

- comparable with the Committee's expectations for future PIAAC surveys and provide statistically reliable data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including those living in very remote areas, for the immigrant populations, by state and territory and for all age groups
- developed in consultation with the Coalition of Peaks, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, other peak bodies including the Australian Council for Adult Literacy and Adult Learning Australia, and the states and territories.

**The Australian Government supports this recommendation.**

The Government supports the need to provide ongoing funding supporting the evidence base for foundation skills and will work with relevant agencies to facilitate the collection and utilisation of this data. Please refer to Recommendation 2 for more information.

**Recommendation 4**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government provide subsidised assessment and treatment for specific learning disabilities under the Medicare Benefits Scheme by March 2023 for all Australians.

**The Australian Government notes this recommendation.**

Doctors provide clinically relevant medical services to patients. There is already a range of service items and payments available under the Medicare Benefits Schedule, which can be used to assess and treat patients who may have learning disabilities. These include time-tiered general attendance items that are designed to allow doctors to use their clinical judgement to promote the flexibility and responsiveness that is essential to support the smooth operation of general practice in Australia.

Doctors use their clinical judgement and experience to provide quality services for very short, focused treatments for straight forward medical condition(s) through to long consultations that address the needs of patients with multiple or complex care needs. Where a patient requires specialist assessment or management of complex medical conditions, a treating general practitioner can refer patients to a specialist or consultant physician who has access to a range of consultation items to manage complex conditions.

Requests for new and amended medical services proposed for public funding under Medicare are subject to a rigorous, transparent and evidence-based systematic review conducted by the Medical Services Advisory Committee (MSAC). MSAC is an independent scientific committee comprised of individuals with expertise in clinical medicine, health economics and consumer matters. Information on the MSAC process is available at: [www.msac.gov.au](http://www.msac.gov.au). Applications can be made by the medical profession or industry and others with an interest in seeking Government funding.

**Recommendation 5**

The Committee recommends that the Treasurer refer to the Productivity Commission an inquiry into the accessibility, affordability and sustainability of Australia's early childhood education and care system. The inquiry must consider the proposal to expand access to preschool by having children attend preschool for two years before primary school, and report no later than March 2024.

**The Australian Government supports this recommendation.**

The Government recognises the importance of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and has tasked the Productivity Commission (the Commission) to undertake an inquiry into the ECEC sector. The Commission commenced this inquiry on 1 March 2023 and will provide a final report to the Government by 30 June 2024.

The Terms of Reference of the inquiry ask the Commission to make recommendations to support affordable, accessible, equitable and high quality ECEC that reduces barriers to workforce participation and supports children's learning and development, including considering a universal 90 per cent childcare subsidy for all families.

The Commission has also been asked to consider interactions with existing and planned Commonwealth, state and territory ECEC policy settings and funding.

ECEC is a partnership between governments, with preschool delivery primarily a state and territory government responsibility. The Government provides a funding contribution to state and territory governments to support universal access to 15 hours of quality preschool each week (or 600 hours a year) for every child in the year before they start school.

In addition, the Government's Preschool Reform Agreement, which commenced in 2021, maintains a commitment to universal access, and includes an ambitious new reform agenda that will help ensure children are receiving the full benefit from their preschool year. It has a focus on improving preschool participation and outcomes including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and disadvantaged children.

The Government also supports year-before-school education through the childcare system. Recent investments to increase the childcare subsidy will expand access to preschool education.

The Government is also developing an Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) to shape its vision for the future of Australia's children and families. Recognising how critical the early years are for children's development and continued success over their lifetime, the Strategy will aim to deliver the best possible outcomes for Australian children, including engaging parents and carers in early literacy and numeracy skills development for young children. The Strategy will also help the Commonwealth create a more integrated, holistic approach to the early years and better support the education, wellbeing and development of children in Australia. It will seek to support improved coordination between Commonwealth programs, funding and frameworks impacting early childhood development.

**Recommendation 6**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government commission an independent review of the student with disability loading to determine whether it adequately reflects the costs of providing a high-quality education to all Australian school students with disability. The review must report no later than March 2023.

**The Australian Government notes this recommendation.**

The National School Resourcing Board (the Board) undertook such a review in 2018.

Further data and evidence are required to make a persuasive case for any change to the Student with Disability Loading in the Schooling Resource Standard model. The Government is working with jurisdictions to address a lack of national data and reporting on the participation and outcomes of school students with disability. Further work is also required to develop a consistent national understanding of inclusive education, to understand how existing funding is being spent, and to understand the most effective interventions and strategies to achieve quality outcomes for this cohort. Work in this regard is underway as part of the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*.

**Recommendation 7**

The Committee recommends that, as part of the new National School Reform Agreement, commencing in 2023, the Australian Government seek the agreement of the states and territories to ensure funding for schools is based on student enrolment rather than attendance.

**The Australian Government notes this recommendation.**

The Government provides recurrent funding to state and territory governments and school authorities on the basis of the number of students enrolled on the annual school census day in August.

Students in non-government schools must also attend at least one day in the 20 school days leading up to and including census day. Schools may submit applications to have students who do not attend during the reference period included where special circumstances exist.

Under the *Australian Education Act 2013*, state and territory governments, as approved system authorities for government schools, can distribute funding according to their own needs-based funding model.

The Government has committed to engaging with state and territory governments to identify and agree on priority areas of reform for the next National School Reform Agreement when the current agreement (2019 - 2023) expires.

On 29 March 2023, an Expert Panel was established to undertake a review to inform the development of the next National School Reform Agreement (the Review). To provide time for the Review to occur, the current agreement will be extended for 12 months to 31 December 2024, subject to agreement by First Ministers.

Development of the next Agreement, which will commence in 2025, will be informed by the findings of the Review and the Productivity Commission's Review of the current Agreement, as well as in negotiation with states and territories.

**Recommendation 8**

The Committee recommends that, as part of the new National School Reform Agreement, commencing in 2023, the Australian Government seek the agreement of the states and territories to:

- require a proportionate number of qualified English as a second or additional language (TESOL) educators to be provided, on an ongoing basis, to the number of enrolled English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners in schools
- undertake an appropriate and consistent EAL/D assessment for EAL/D learners in Australian schools, with the results of the EAL/D assessment, along with the number of qualified TESOL educators in schools, to be published alongside NAPLAN data on My School
- implement a replacement to the language background other than English identifier in the index of community socio-educational advantage that better identifies EAL/D learners for the purposes of school resourcing.

**The Australian Government notes this recommendation.**

Please refer to Recommendation 7 for information on the development of the next National School Reform Agreement.

The low English language proficiency loading in the Government's recurrent funding model provides extra funding on top of the base amount for students. Currently, a student attracts the low English language proficiency loading if they are identified by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as a student with a disadvantaged language background other than English (DLBOTE). ACARA identifies a student as DLBOTE if:

- the student is identified as having a language background other than English
- at least one of the student's parents completed school education only to year 9 (or equivalent) or below.

The low English language proficiency loading, as implemented is 10 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) base per student amount. It is estimated the low English language proficiency loading accounts for 0.2 per cent of Government recurrent school funding expenditure in 2023. The Government will provide an estimated \$65.5 million under the low English language proficiency loading in 2023. The low English language proficiency loading is estimated to grow, on average, by 5.5 per cent per year from 2018 to 2029.

ACARA convened a national Project Working Group in 2020 to investigate EAL/D students' English language proficiency for national reporting purposes. Changes made to reporting on the My School website will need to be agreed jointly by all jurisdictions. ACARA provides freely available information and resources to support teachers to implement the Australian Curriculum. Following endorsement of Version 9 of the Australian Curriculum by Education Ministers on 1 April 2022, ACARA is reviewing the EAL/D materials for teachers that are currently published on their website.

**Recommendation 9**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government deliver:

- in consultation with the Department of Health, a national campaign to raise awareness of specific learning disabilities (SLDs) among medical and education professionals, employers and the broader community that provides information and resources about the signs and symptoms of SLDs and where individuals and families can go for assessment and support
- in consultation with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment, peak bodies and key stakeholders, a national campaign to destigmatise and raise awareness in the community about the challenges people with low language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (LLND) skills experience, the benefits of improving LLND skills, where people can receive support and the education options available to them.

**The Australian Government supports this recommendation in principle.**

On 31 August 2022, National Cabinet agreed a vision statement and guiding principles for longer-term vocational education and training (VET) reform under a new National Skills Agreement, which would:

*ensure(s) that no Australians are left behind as the Australian economy transitions and adapts to structural change, including by providing opportunities for life-long learning and foundation skills development.*

As part of the new National Skills Agreement, the Government and state and territory governments will work in cooperation to develop a 10-year national foundation skills strategy by December 2024. Actions arising from the strategy may include a national suite of activities to better reach cohorts with diverse and complex needs.

Foundation skills also empower people to develop strong skills to use digital platforms including to navigate deceptive design of digital interfaces, protect themselves from online harm, engage positively with media, identify misinformation, access trustworthy and timely news services and make the most of government services.

The Government provides support in these areas through a range of initiatives and programs. These include the eSafety Commissioner, which provides critical information and tool kits for Australians on digital literacy skills to enable a safe and positive online experience, and *Be Connected*, a program that offers non-accredited digital literacy programs through community-based organisations, such as public libraries and Men's Sheds that target older Australians.

**Recommendation 10**

The Committee recommends that, by March 2023, the Australian Government:

- ensure that all Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) participants are taught by specialist teachers with degree or post-graduate qualifications in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)
- commence an evaluation of the recent AMEP reforms that considers whether there have been any changes in learning outcomes for program participants since AMEP was split into two funding streams.

**The Australian Government supports this recommendation.**

In June 2023, the Government announced a new business model for AMEP, to come into effect from 1 January 2025.

Under the new business model, teacher qualification requirements will be consistent with the Committee's recommendations.

AMEP will move to a single national curriculum - the English as an Additional Language (EAL) Framework. This will provide national consistency for AMEP delivery and the opportunity to develop teaching and learning resources that can be shared across providers.

The EAL Framework requires that for EAL accredited courses, training and assessment is conducted by qualified Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) teachers.

The Government notes that the Corrigendum to the Committee's report includes a replacement paragraph 4.35. This acknowledges that the two tuition/funding streams referenced in Recommendation 10 (pre-employment English and social English) were introduced in 2017 and are not part of the recent AMEP reforms.



**Recommendation 11**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government:

- by March 2024, ensure that all Registered Training Organisations provide English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners with instruction from specialist teachers with degree or post-graduate qualifications in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)
- by March 2023, conduct a review of options for improving curriculum and assessment requirements for adult EAL/D learners in accredited courses, in consultation with the Australian Skills Quality Authority, Adult Migrant English Program providers, and TESOL and adult education specialists
- by March 2023, update the Australian Core Skills Framework to include the Pre-Level 1 supplement and incorporate the Digital Literacy Skills Framework to ensure users have a single reference document.

**The Australian Government supports this recommendation in principle.**

The Government recognises the importance of a high-quality workforce to support delivery of a range of different qualifications and courses in the VET sector, and the need for appropriate support for EAL/D learners depending on their needs and the courses they are undertaking.

The Government notes that RTOs delivering English language courses (such as Certificates in Spoken and Written English or English as an Additional Language) must be delivered by teachers with TESOL qualifications.

As noted in the response to Recommendation 10, teacher qualifications under the new AMEP business model will be consistent with the Committee's recommendations on AMEP.

The *Standards for RTOs 2015* set out the requirements for RTOs delivering nationally recognised training, including that an RTO's training and assessment can only be delivered by a person who has one of the specified training and assessment credentials, such as the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. The Standards are designed to provide RTOs with a level of flexibility when employing trainers and assessors and other staff, including through enabling RTOs to engage people with a diploma or higher-level qualification in adult education to deliver training and assessment.

RTOs must ensure training delivery on the ground is of a high standard and meets the diverse range of learner and employer needs (including ensuring training to First Nations learners is provided in a culturally appropriate way and First Nations learners are culturally safe). Reforms are currently underway to better support RTOs to achieve this goal.

These reforms include revising the Standards for RTOs to ensure they are clear and outcome-focused and developing a Blueprint for the VET Workforce to support, grow and retain a quality VET workforce. These reforms will be supported by work to help build RTO capability and capacity, including developing tools and resources and supporting continuous improvement.

**Recommendation 12**

The Committee recommends that, by March 2023, the Australian Government establish a sustainable, ongoing funding model for the Literacy for Life Foundation to deliver Yes, I Can! campaigns in more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

**The Australian Government supports this recommendation in principle.**

The Government supports better access for First Nations people to language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy training.

The National Indigenous Australians Agency and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations provide funding to the Literacy for Life Foundation for its work with First Nations communities. This supports many Closing the Gap targets, including those that relate to children, given the intergenerational impact of parental literacy on children.

In addition, the redesigned SEE program includes a First Nations led stream involving the delivery of whole of community LLND skills training by First Nations community organisations in partnership with RTOs or ACE sector providers through place-based grants.

This delivery stream will help to ensure more effective delivery to First Nations Australians, committing to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap priority reform areas by working in partnership with First Nations peoples and local communities to develop place-based solutions, as well as improving cultural capability in all services.

Establishing a dedicated First Nations led delivery stream reflects the importance of tailored, co-designed, place-based training for First Nation Australians and the greater cost of delivery, particularly in remote Australia.

The Government is keen to explore a range of service delivery models to ensure tailored and flexible provision of LLND skills, assessment and training that meet local community needs.

The Government will consult on the implementation of this dedicated stream in early 2024. The implementation will be supported by the evaluation of the *Foundation Skills for Your Future Remote Community Pilot program*, and the outcomes of consultations on the *Future delivery of foundation skills training in remote Australia*.

**Recommendation 13**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government work with the state and territory governments to develop and implement a national strategy by March 2023, to renew the adult language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (LLND) education workforce.

The national workforce strategy must be developed with input from all sectors currently involved in the education and training of adult LLND educators and delivery of adult LLND education, and provide for:

- clear career pathways for aspiring LLND educators
- updates to the Standards for Registered Training Organisations to reflect best practice in LLND education and the Australian Government's renewed emphasis on systematic phonics instruction in schools
- the strengthening of existing specialist adult LLND and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) courses, and encouragement of vocational education and training (VET) providers and universities to offer these and other specialist courses
- scholarships and fee support for VET and university students to undertake specialist adult LLND and TESOL courses
- subsidised access to professional development and initial training programs with multiple entry points that build skills and knowledge, and support pathways to full qualifications, as appropriate.

**The Australian Government supports this recommendation in principle.**

The Government recognises the availability of a highly qualified teacher workforce is a key contributing factor in enabling people to access foundation skills training.

As part of the National Skills Agreement, the Government and state and territory governments will work in cooperation to develop a 10-year national foundation skills strategy by December 2024. Action arising from the strategy may include elements such as support for the foundation skills workforce and investment in quality foundation skills training resources.

Teacher shortages, and the issues which underpin them, are not unique to the foundation skills workforce, and significant commonalities exist with the broader VET workforces. In close collaboration with state and territory governments, the Commonwealth is developing a VET Workforce Blueprint, which will examine attraction, retention, career pathways and succession planning for VET practitioners, including specialist foundation skills educators and other specialist roles.

Work is also underway with the states and territories to revise the *Standards for RTOs 2015*. Revisions to the Standards will consider where existing requirements around foundation skills may need to be strengthened.

**Recommendation 14**

The Committee recommends that, by March 2023, the Australian, state and territory governments jointly develop and, by March 2024, implement a national language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (LLND) strategy based on the model recommended by the Productivity Commission and the recommendations presented in this report, ensuring that:

- input from all sectors currently involved in the delivery of adult education guides the strategy
- a national adult LLND distance education scheme is established
- adult and community education is supported to meet demand in all jurisdictions, including by:
  - building the capability of the sector to deliver sustainable non-accredited LLND programs through ongoing professional development delivered by Adult Learning Australia
  - funding the sector to deliver sustainable non-accredited LLND programs
  - resourcing and supporting the sector and relevant peak bodies to work with industry and business to co-design and deliver customised workplace adult literacy programs
- there is consistency in the delivery of best practice pedagogy, assessment and data collection in corrections education
- the diversity of learner’s starting points and needs is recognised and supported
- all programs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are developed and delivered in ways that are consistent with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap
- an adult LLND information hub is established to support the delivery of best practice LLND education across all sectors
- the strategy reflects a policy commitment by the Australian Government to inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning, in keeping with Sustainable Development Goal Four.

**The Australian Government supports this recommendation in principle.**

As part of the National Skills Agreement, the Government and state and territory governments will work in cooperation to develop a 10-year national foundation skills strategy by December 2024. Action arising from the strategy may include support for the foundation skills workforce, investment in foundation skills training resources, cooperative work on foundation skills assessment tools, and a national suite of activities to better reach cohorts with diverse and complex needs.

The Government recognises the importance of the ACE sector in delivering flexible and tailored support to people who may find it difficult to engage with mainstream education. As part of the new Agreement the Commonwealth provides an additional \$77.27 million to states and territories to deliver foundation skills training through the ACE sector (or equivalent).

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The reforms to Commonwealth foundation skills programs announced in the 2023-24 Budget placed a greater emphasis on the needs of learners, by delivering training where people are located, and in a manner suited to their needs. This includes the First Nations led delivery stream under the redesigned SEE program that will deliver place-based support for First Nations Australians. Projects are expected to be long term and designed in partnership with the community to deliver tailored non-accredited and accredited training through a variety of models that meet community and learner needs.

The redesigned SEE program will help the Government meet its commitment to the Closing the Gap Priority Reform 3 to improve mainstream institutions and the services they fund to be culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The new approach also supports Closing the Gap Priority Reform areas 1, 2, 3 and 4 and support Closing the Gap Targets 5, 6, 7 and 17.

In July 2022, the Government introduced a new Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP). This is a \$42.8 million per year program which aims to assist First Nations Australians to improve their work readiness, foundational skills and job specific skills. This may include language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy services. Services funded under ISEP are driven by First Nations community needs, identified regional priorities, as well as the needs of the individual, to complement existing available services.

**Recommendation 15**

The Committee recommends that, by March 2023, the Australian Government ensure that:

- there are safeguards in place to ensure that mutual obligation requirements for the JobSeeker Payment do not penalise Australians with low language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (LLND) skills for being unable to navigate online systems
- all Australian Government forms and resources use a plain English approach that utilises Easy Read as set out in the Australian Government Style Manual
- all Australian Government agencies mandate the use of Australian Government guidelines in the design of all forms, and ensure that all digital forms meet the requirements of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
- all Australian Government agencies provide telephone support lines for people who are unable to attend physical service centres
- the Australian Government establish funding for community organisations to assist Australians with low LLND skills with form filling and literacy mediation
- the Reading Writing Hotline is appropriately resourced to maintain a database of form filling and literacy mediation services, and to provide advice to Australians with low LLND skills on where they can access these services
- relevant Australian Government agencies provide proactive and accessible information about help that is available during disaster recovery
- adult and community education providers be supported to reconnect learners who have become disengaged due to pandemics and natural disasters, such as floods and bushfires, particularly in rural and regional areas, through targeted community-based education programs and access to appropriate resources to cope with ongoing challenges.

**The Australian Government notes this recommendation.**

Mutual obligations

Workforce Australia introduced a Points Based Activation System (PBAS) that provides participants with greater choice and flexibility to meet mutual obligation requirements. Providers must consider the personal circumstances of each participant and tailor their points requirement to reflect those circumstances.

Participants who are undertaking the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) for 15 hours or more per week or Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) are considered to be fully meeting their PBAS target and the minimum Job Search Requirement is reduced to zero for the duration of these Activities.

If participants do not meet their mutual obligation requirements, the compliance system includes strong safeguards that provide protection to vulnerable participants, so they do not face penalties if their requirements are not appropriate for their circumstances.

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There are safeguards in Workforce Australia to support individuals with low language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (LLND) skills. Individuals self-managing online have the option to move to a provider at any time and seek support from the Digital Services Contact Centre.

When individuals enter the employment assistance system, Services Australia conduct an initial assessment, which can identify job seekers with lower levels of language, literacy, numeracy and/or digital literacy skills. These job seekers can be referred for additional assessment to ensure appropriate assistance is in place, and to an appropriate employment services provider. The job seeker may be identified as benefiting from training such as SEE and AMEP. Additionally, a file note is recorded which can inform decisions about compliance and ensure consistency in support for vulnerable job seekers.

Job seekers whose record indicates limited literacy, numeracy or English language skills must have the opportunity to discuss the circumstances which may have impacted their compliance before a penalty can be applied. This ensure vulnerable job seekers are protected from inadvertent acceptance of financial penalties, and safeguards their income support payment from inappropriate penalties.

The points-based activation system has the flexibility to ensure the points target is commensurable for job seekers who have low language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. The points-based target can be tailored for participants' personal circumstances. Providers are required to support any participant who is unable to self-report their mutual obligation requirements.

In August 2022, the House Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services was established to inquire into and report on matters related to Workforce Australia Employment Services as per the resolution of appointment. The Committee will inquire into matters related to Workforce Australia and the employment services system more broadly as per the Committee's Terms of Reference and report no later than 29 September 2023.

The Disability Employment Services (DES) program includes a range of protections for vulnerable participants, including those with low language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. Initially a participant meets with a DES provider in person to complete a tailored job plan which includes the activities the participant needs to undertake their mutual obligations requirements (if applicable) and the assistance they need to prepare for and find a job. For participants with mutual obligation requirements Job Plans include one or more compulsory activities relevant to the participant's circumstances. The provider must take into account the job seeker's individual circumstances, including their capacity to comply with the requirements.

Under the Community Development Program (CDP) there are also protections available for vulnerable participants, including those with low language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. CDP providers develop individual Job Plans with participants to accommodate their specific needs. A CDP participant's Job Plan can include voluntary training or activities to address low language, literacy, and numeracy and digital literacy skills.

### Accessibility and assistance

Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, Government agencies are required to ensure information and services are provided in a non-discriminatory accessible manner.

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The Government appreciates the important work being done by the Reading Writing Hotline and is committed to continue funding the service. The Hotline receives approximately 4,000 calls per year and provides information about courses, teachers and tutors, websites and resources and also access to workbooks online.

The Government's Hotline received additional funding in the 2021-22 Budget to support activities which included working with governments to write in plain English.

### Disaster response

During a disaster, Services Australia (the Agency) plays a key role in processing claims and providing access to related services. The Agency circulates plain language content through a range of channels and in multiple formats to individuals and third parties in affected communities. The Agency's service delivery staff are provided with training, resources and ongoing information on to support customers, including those who have additional needs.

The Agency's website is a critical entry point for affected individuals and communities to get information about disaster assistance. Content aligns with the Australian Government Style Manual and the Agency's plain English policy. The Agency's external website is set up with text-to-speech functionality on all pages and includes videos, online tutorials and information in different languages.

The Agency also provides information via external communication channels to ensure disaster assistance information is accessible. This includes through its social media accounts, media engagement, signage in service centres and agents, and print products and supporting resources for staff and third-party organisations to use in affected communities.

Customers can lodge disaster payment claims and access related services on a dedicated Australian Government Emergency Information Line and speak with staff trained to help and if needed make referrals to additional support.

Services Australia staff are deployed into Recovery and Evacuation Centres to provide customers with information on Australian Government disaster payments and other products, payments and services. The Agency runs a multidisciplinary team that oversees the Agency's readiness for upcoming activations. The team reviews relevant documentation to ensure simple, clear and accessible communications are available.

Financial Counselling, Food Relief and Emergency Relief organisations are funded through the Department of Social Services. While not targeted to disasters, these services have provided support to individuals and communities impacted by natural disasters, for example, in response to the 2019-20 bushfires through increased emergency relief and financial counselling in impacted areas. Additionally, during flooding events across Australia in 2022 and 2023, financial counsellors were available in evacuation and community centres to provide practical information on support, including grants and insurance processes, and referrals for assistance for emergency relief, supplies and housing. Financial counselling organisations also assist individuals and communities in the recovery after a crisis with debt and money management issues and linkages to specialist supports.

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The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) publishes information on the recovery assistance available through the joint Commonwealth-state Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements and Government disaster recovery payments. The information is published on Disaster Assist's website - [www.disasterassist.gov.au](http://www.disasterassist.gov.au) – as soon as the assistance has been made available. This information complements the outreach and support provided by Services Australia.

NEMA is committed to improving accessibility across the preparedness, response and recovery continuum by supporting the development of public information tools including the Australian Fire Danger Rating System and Australian Warning System. These nationally consistent systems have been designed to demonstrate escalating risk through visual cues and calls to action, in the lead up to, and during, disasters.