

4 March 2021

Standing Committee on Education,
Employment and Training
Parliament House
PO Box 6061
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Via email: ee.reps@aph.gov.au



Dear Committee Secretariat

Re: National Parliamentary Inquiry into Adult literacy and its importance

The NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) works with and for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. This is a timely inquiry. People from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience low levels of literacy and this compounds disadvantage, particularly as it presents a significant barrier to people accessing supports and essential services.

I am pleased to provide two reports to assist the committee in its deliberations.

In partnership with the Reading Writing Hotline, NCOSS recently released a new report entitled, *Helping Clients Fill in Forms* (attached). The report highlights the digital and other literacy hurdles facing people in NSW which is making filling out basic forms for essential services impossible for this vulnerable cohort.

COVID -19 has increased unemployment and the demand for community services. As more adults require support due to unemployment, community organisations are increasingly taking on the role of 'literacy mediator' to support clients to access government support services. This role is unfunded and is placing increasing pressure on the already stretched resources of community organisations.

The report explores the views of community service organisations that assist people on the ground who are seeking access to supports and essential services. The research found:

- 92 per cent of respondents believe the literacy and numeracy challenges faced by their clients prevented them from improving their quality of life; and
- 100 per cent of respondents report that digital literacy is a barrier for their clients accessing services.

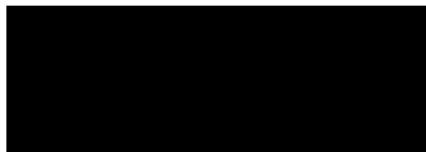
The report highlights that many people in our community struggle with low levels of literacy, and that increased digitisation of government services is a compounding factor. It points to the need for government agencies to adhere to requirements for plain English and easy access material; to simplify hardcopy and online forms and application processes through co-design initiatives; and for greater recognition of and funding for literacy mediator roles performed by community organisations.

The second report that may be of interest to the committee is *A Wave of Disadvantage Across NSW: the Impact of the COVID-19 Recession*¹ (attached). This report, commissioned by NCOSS and a coalition of NSW peak bodies, includes original modelling by Equity Economics on the impact of the COVID-19 recession on NSW communities. It highlights that rising unemployment will particularly impact groups and locations already experiencing disadvantage; and that it will lead to increases in children and young people at risk of neglect and disengagement from education and a drop in educational attainment. For example, the modelling in the report estimates that mean NAPLAN scores in Year 9 maths could fall by 23.6 points (3.5 per cent) in 2021 compared to 2019 results.¹

It is therefore imperative that early intervention and prevention programs focusing on literacy and numeracy skills and ensuring educational engagement are undertaken to ensure that lifelong impacts on participation in the workforce and broader health and well-being are addressed.

I hope that these reports assists you in your Inquiry. If you require further information I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these and related matters.

Yours sincerely



Joanna Quilty

Chief Executive Officer

NSW Council of Social Service

¹ Equity Economics (2020), *A Wave of Disadvantage Across NSW: Impact of the Covid-19 Recession*, A Report Prepared for the New South Wales Council of Social Service, Sydney. Find at https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-WAVE-OF-DISADVANTAGE_-COVID-19_Final.pdf