



NSW Adult Literacy & Numeracy Council

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12 March, 2021

To whom it may concern,

Re: Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Adult literacy and its importance

The NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council is a membership-based peak-body of adult literacy and numeracy practitioners, academic researchers, teacher educators, and program and curriculum managers in NSW. The Council represents practitioners who work in Commonwealth funded programs such as the Skills for Education and Employment, Foundation Skills for your Future and the Adult Migrant Education Program, as well as state funded programs and other work-based and community based programs. The Council has a long history of advocacy and role in promoting research informed practice and practice-informed research in the field of adult literacy and numeracy.

We are pleased to be able to make a submission to this Inquiry and are hopeful that the Inquiry will lead to a much needed long-term national policy on adult literacy that can guide a range of adult literacy strategies that can improve people's social and economic outcomes.

On behalf of the Council, I would welcome any opportunity to meet with members of the Inquiry panel to elaborate on the points made in this submission.

Yours sincerely

Dr Keiko Yasukawa, President

Introduction

The NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council (the Council) welcomes the Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its Importance. We particularly welcome the breadth of the terms of reference which acknowledges the importance of adult literacy not only for employability and economic productivity but for enabling quality social outcomes for all adults in Australia.

While there have been previous opportunities for providing feedback to the Commonwealth about adult literacy, they have had much narrower terms of reference that did not allow genuine contemplation for a bold, innovative and holistic policy that acknowledged the ways in which literacy interacts with all aspects of people's lives. The need for a much broader scope is evident when we consider the challenging social environment that adults have to negotiate each day, including:

- The changing state of the pandemic;
- The widespread incidents of wage theft, particularly for the most vulnerable and low-paid workers;
- Incidents of domestic violence and sexual assault in workplaces, families and communities;
- Climate change and its health and economic impact on households; and
- The proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories on social media and declining trust in public institutions.

Adults who do not have sufficient knowledge and skills to access information and negotiate and respond confidently and competently to these challenges are vulnerable. Providing educational opportunities to improve their literacy so that they can learn about these critical social issues will afford greater dignity, respect and wellbeing with which to live their lives. Public investment in helping adults achieve these social outcomes is not only worthy in and of itself, but also necessary because it will bring returns in terms of more people being able to live their lives more independently with less reliance on social services. Adult literacy is therefore a public responsibility.

Adult literacy education must be considered as part of a larger ecosystem of social policy because the impact on an adult's life from improving literacy through one avenue can impact positively in other domains of their lives. For example, an adult improving their literacy through a community based literacy program may develop greater self-confidence and self-esteem to start to help with their children's school work or become involved in community volunteering. Benefits in literacy development are far-reaching and should be understood from a lifelong and a lifewide perspective.

We urge the panellists to consider the imperatives that:

- Australia needs a bold, new national adult literacy numeracy policy.
- Literacy and numeracy must be understood as much as a basic human right as human capital.
- Literacy and numeracy programs must be responsive to the actual demands experienced by people, and must therefore be able to be contextualised to local community and individual needs.
- Free and equitable access to lifelong and lifewide education is a social responsibility.
- A policy vacuum or a partial policy solution only leads to resource waste and inefficiencies.

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- There is a need to draw on grounded experience and expertise of practitioners and researchers as well as large scale survey research to inform policy deliberations.
 - Intergovernmental approaches at all levels of government are needed across many social policy domains to deliver benefits in the most critical areas of people's lives.
 - Local communities must have voice in determining what kinds of provisions are needed because they will have the best understanding of who the adults are that need adult literacy support and for what purposes.
 - National coordination is needed to provide advice and sharing of innovations and experiences from the local initiatives.

In order to realise what is outlined, key priorities are:

1. intergovernmental understandings and stable funding commitments to a new national adult literacy policy
2. renewal of a qualified adult literacy and numeracy workforce that would support research-informed, pedagogically sound design and delivery of programs that are responsive to the contemporary literacy and numeracy demands experienced by adults; and
3. a nationally coordinated network of literacy 'mediators' (see Attachment 1) to conduct outreach, community education and referral services in local areas.

The Panellists may be aware that the Centenary Commission on Adult Education in Britain is debating visions of the future of adult education there. There is much in their work¹ that can inform the future of adult education policy, and adult literacy policy in particular, in Australia.

In the pages that follow, we have responded to the specific terms of reference of the Inquiry. However, we have attached some additional relevant documents that we had prepared and submitted for related inquiries and studies which we outline below.

1. **A Policy Position Proposal for the Australian Council for Adult Literacy.** The Council, in partnership with the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), hosted an adult literacy policy workshop "Weaving a richer narrative of adult literacy and numeracy" in 2019. This was led by Professor Joseph Lo Bianco, author of the 1987 Australia's National Policy on Languages, the first multilingual national language policy in an English speaking country, and Chief Executive of the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia until 2002. The workshop was designed to begin the work of articulating a policy position that would:
 1. Build an alternative, more incisive narrative of adult literacy and numeracy in Australia today.

¹ Centenary Commission on Adult Education. (2021). *A permanent national necessity: adult education and lifelong learning for 21st century Britain*. <https://www.centenarycommission.org/#download>

2. Assist in positioning the field more effectively within public understanding and policy settings.
3. Generate a more agentive and incisive characterisation of adult literacy learners, their experiences, life journeys and aims
4. Identify, define and examine problems requiring special attention in forging a more productive public perception of adult literacy and numeracy education.

The workshop was attended by over 60 adult literacy practitioners across Australia, as well as leading international researchers in adult literacy and education (Professor Anke Grotlüschen from Hamburg University in Germany, and Professor Ralf St Clair from Victoria University in Canada) and academic researchers from UTS and New Zealand.

From the deliberations of the workshop, Professor Lo Bianco, Keiko Yasukawa, Pamela Osmond and Vanessa Iles developed a policy position proposal which is attached (Attachment 1). This paper proposes a bold new policy, and summarises what we believe are the key problems in the current state of adult literacy, and solutions that could address these problems. We hope that the Review Panel will give close consideration to the recommendations made in this position paper.

2. The Council's submission to the **Joyce Review of VET** (Attachment 2).
3. The Council's submissions to the **Productivity Commission Review of the Skills and Workforce Development Agreement** (Attachment 3a, b).

Response to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry

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 OECD PIAAC Background Questionnaire data provides data on the literacy and numeracy levels according to selected demographic factors. The OECD reports that:

In most countries, including Australia, there are differences in skills proficiency related to socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, level of education and social background.

Differences related to immigrant background and socio-economic background are smaller in Australia than in many other countries.

The data also shows that employed people generally have higher skills levels than unemployed people and people not in the labour market, and higher educational attainment is also linked with higher levels of proficiencies.² Comparative data on Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants are not available in the public data sets.

While data from the PIAAC are useful in gaining high level insights, they are not able to provide the nuanced data needed to understand the needs of certain segments of the population. Needs assessment and analysis must be conducted using a more localised situated methodology to ensure that public money spent on literacy provision is targeted and addresses the actual needs of adults.

It is important to treat the needs and provisions of adult literacy for immigrant English language learners and adults for whom English is their mother tongue. The adult literacy needs of immigrant English language learners and first language English speakers, schooled in Australia, are very different. The method used to teach these two distinct groups is also very different.

Recommended strategies:

1. Establishment of a coordinated, inter-governmental and community based outreach and literacy mediator program (see Attachment 1) that ensures adult literacy needs are captured within local contexts and are contextualised for specific communities.
2. Ensure immigrants with low levels of English language proficiency and adults for whom English is their mother tongue have access to separate literacy provision because their needs are different.³

Cost of inaction:

1. Entrenched and systemic social and economic disadvantage.
2. Learners not having their needs met.
3. Waste of resources when not directed according to research based evidence

² Australia – Country Note <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4228.0>

³ Hammond, J., Wickert, R., Burns, A., Joyce, H., & Miller, A. (1992). *The pedagogical relations between adult ESL and adult literacy*. Commonwealth of Australia.

The effect that literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual's labour force participation and wages;

The nature of work and the structure of the labour market is dynamic. This means what it means to be 'employable' and effective in the workplace is also fluid and this fluidity needs to be reflected in the focus of and the way programs for job-seekers and workers are designed. In particular, there is recognition needed about the large proportion of jobs that are precarious in nature, the rise of the gig economy and the changing role of literacy for all workers, including professionals⁴. Not only do these changes in the economy impact on literacy demands on workers, but sources of information, advice and support that workers can access to negotiate the literacy demands associated with 'being a worker' (eg workplace rights and entitlements).

The role of unions in promoting workers' learning, such as has been successfully demonstrated in the UK and elsewhere with the union learning representatives, must be considered as a way of encouraging workers who need support to be able to seek it without fear. Workers should not be denied such support based on any ideological opposition to trade unionism.

Recommended strategies:

1. Include information (and how to access information) on the changing nature of work in the Commonwealth's Skills for Education and Employment program. This information would include basic worker entitlements (e.g. work health and safety, minimum wage) and the differences between casual and salaried work (e.g. overtime and penalty rates, access to paid leave, notice period); sources of advice and support (Fair Work Ombuds, unions).
2. Introduce, support and encourage the establishment of union learning representatives in workplaces.⁵

Cost of inaction:

1. Increased risks of wage theft and other forms of exploitation of workers who do not have access to information about their rights or who do not have adequate literacy to exercise their rights.
2. Systemic inequalities in the labour force.
3. Negative impact on businesses and employers: high turnover, workplace health and safety issues, conflicts.

⁴ Farrell, L., & Corbel, C. (2017). Literacy practices in the gig economy. DOI: https://education.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/2541423/gig-economy-literacy-working-paper-170802.pdf.

⁵ Bacon, N., & Hoque, K. (2011). Union representation and training: The impact of union learning representatives and the factors influencing their effectiveness. *human relations*, 64(3), 387-413.

Links between literacy and social outcomes such as health, poverty, ability to care for other family members and participation in civic life;

Analysis of the PIAAC proficiency data together with the background questionnaire shows the links between literacy/ numeracy levels and social outcomes.⁶ Health literacy has become a key focus in many countries including in Australia.^{7,8}

Recommended strategies:

1. Broaden the scope of subsidised adult literacy/ numeracy programs to enable broader social outcomes to be addressed.
2. Establish outreach initiatives in local communities, e.g. public libraries, local government offices, housing estates, legal aid offices, community health services to raise awareness of literacy programs that could support adults for whom improved literacy could increase their independence and quality of life.
3. Raise awareness of organisations and agencies (such as those listed in 2) about adult literacy issues that may impact on people's health, access to services and participation in community life.
4. Broaden the scope of subsidised literacy programs to enable integration of health literacy and other topics that adult learners can use to improve the quality of their life.

Cost of inaction:

1. Poor health and other social outcomes leading to preventable burden on the public health and social welfare systems.
 2. Continued stigmatisation of adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy.
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The relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development from birth to post-secondary education;

It is well-established in research that engagement in literacy is a critical factor in children's academic development. However, research based on the National Assessment of Education Progress and the OECD's PISA has found that students:

whose family background was characterized by low income and low education, but who were highly engaged readers, substantially outscored students who came from backgrounds with higher education and higher income, but who themselves were less engaged readers. Based on a massive sample, this finding suggests the stunning conclusion that engaged reading can overcome traditional barriers to reading achievement, including gender, parental education, and income. (Guthrie, 2004, p. 5)

⁶ Grotlüschen, A., Mallows, D., Reder, S., & Sabatini, J. (2016). *Adults with Low Proficiency in Literacy or Numeracy*. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 131. OECD Publishing.

⁷ Muscat, D., Morony, S., Nutbeam, D., Ayre, J., Shepherd, H., Smith, S., Dhillon, H., Hayen, A., Luxford, K., Meshreky, W., McCaffery, K. (2020). Learners' experience and perceived impact of a health literacy program in adult basic education: a qualitative study. *Public Health Research and Practice*, 30(2), e29231909. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17061/phrp29231909>

⁸ Ayre, J., Costa, D., McCaffery, K., Nutbeam, D., Muscat, D. (2020). Validation of an Australian parenting health literacy skills instrument: The parenting plus skills index. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 103(6), 1245-1251. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2020.01.012>

This means that investing in parents' / carers' literacy in order to engage them in literacy activities in the children's home environment can help children to engage in literacy themselves.^{9,10}

Internationally, there are a number of models of family literacy programs that seek to enhance family engagement in children's literacy development¹¹. Programs designed for multilingual families based on contemporary understandings of multilingualism have been shown not only to benefit individuals' but also their community's translingual literacy engagement.¹²

Recommended strategies:

1. Design and implement a range of literacy and numeracy programs targeting parents of children who want to learn more about what their children are learning in schools and who want to be able to help their children. This can be achieved through partnerships between local schools and local adult education providers, where schools can help publicise such programs and adult education practitioners can facilitate workshops. Feedback from the workshop facilitators can inform the school teachers about the range of intellectual resources that exist among the parents that the schools can tap into, as well as how they can better work with parents of the school children.
2. Integrate awareness of the significance of literacy in the home to children's literacy development in parenting classes and support programs - e.g. the importance of reading to/ with children, having reading materials in the home, the value of reading to children in the home language (if different from English), and referrals to adult literacy classes for parents who want to improve their literacy.

Cost of inaction:

1. Entrenched intergenerational educational disadvantage.
2. Limited school engagement with parents who want to have greater engagement and involvement in their children's schooling.

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;

Recommended strategies: see response to point 3.

Cost of inaction: see response to point 3

⁹ Guthrie, J. T. (2004). Teaching for literacy engagement. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 36, 1-30.

¹⁰ Clymer, C., Toso, B. W., Grinder, E., & Sauder, R. P. (2017). Changing the Course of Family Literacy. Policy Paper. *Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy*.

¹¹ Saracho, O. N. (2017). Literacy in the twenty-first century: children, families and policy. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(3-4), 630-643.

¹² Kim, S., & Song, K. H. (2019). Designing a community translanguaging space within a family literacy project. *The Reading Teacher*, 73(3), 267-279

The availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy educational programs in Australia and internationally;

The impact of adult education on people's economic and social outcomes is often not immediate, and can take 10 years or more to become apparent.¹³ This means that evaluation of impact and effect of adult literacy programs on individuals' economic and social outcomes cannot be undertaken in a point in time survey such as the OECD PIAAC which is designed to give insights into *system* impact and effectiveness.

Evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of educational programs on the lives of individuals and their community, including their workplace, requires in-depth qualitative research as well as larger scale surveys if such evaluations are to inform program, pedagogy and policy.

Recommended strategies:

1. Develop a lifelong and lifewide education policy that articulates principles and objectives of the Australian government's commitment to education as a public good, including its acknowledgement of the importance of all Australians, regardless of their age have the right to improve their literacy, numeracy, English language and digital skills to improve their social and economic outcomes.
2. Expand community outreach programs that are coordinated by the Reading Writing Hotline so that program needs within local contexts can be identified.
3. Design longitudinal studies of a cross-section of adults over a minimum of 10 years so that the longer term impact of participation in educational programs can be understood: lessons from Reder's 10 year study in Portland, Oregon USA, and current studies underway by the Leibnitz Institute in Germany that builds on the findings from the PIAAC survey.¹⁴
4. Commitment to research-informed policy and program design.

Cost of inaction:

1. Waste of public money as a result of reactive and ill-informed responses to perceived problems which could be ineffective.
2. Continued reliance on research that only provides a partial picture of the status of adult literacy needs and program impacts.

International comparisons of government policies and programs that may be adapted to the Australian experience:

Although Australia was considered as a world leader and innovator in adult basic education policy and provision in the early 1990s, there has since been a consistent narrowing of the field. Research in adult literacy policies in the English speaking of many OECD countries

¹³ Reder, S. (2008). Scaling up and moving in: Connecting social practices views to policies and programs in adult education. *Literacy and numeracy studies*, 35-50.

¹⁴ Gauly, B., & Lechner, C. M. (2019). Self-perfection or self-selection? Unraveling the relationship between job-related training and adults' literacy skills. *PloS one*, 14(5), e0215971.

suggest a similar trend¹⁵. This narrowing has resulted in the purpose of adult literacy programs being tied to employability and the production of human capital for the national economy, and responsibility has been transferred to the individual.^{16,17,18} There have been some comparative studies of adult literacy policies, however, there is a useful direction for Australia in the comparative study of adult literacy policies in Austria, Denmark, England, and Turkey, where the study showed the importance of examining issues at three levels: policy, polity (governance) and politics.¹⁹ The study concluded:

The findings can contribute to an informed and broader debate on adult skills policies in various countries. Further, they can generate research questions on how conditions at macro level (political, socioeconomic, and institutional factors) can affect the provision of basic adult education and subsequently participation patterns and skills outcomes. **This could be a first step to evaluate the effects of adult basic education policies.** Given that the lack of basic education diminishes education and life chances, basic education can be defined as a public good and part of welfare state policy. Consequently, it would be challenging to extend the current research and our understanding of literacy and basic education policies and to define them as a part of modern welfare policy (Knauber & Ioannidou, 2017). These insights as well as evidence from research on skills production regimes and inequality issues (Allmendinger & Leibfried, 2003) provide a solid ground for further research on the supply and demand side of adult literacy and basic education as well as on the interplay between institutional structures and participation patterns.²⁰

In order to begin to debate the findings and implications of this study, Australia needs to renew the research capability in adult literacy. Unlike the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) where a postgraduate university degree is the benchmark qualification for practitioners teaching in the local adult TESOL programs, the benchmark has been lowered in the adult literacy field with the introduction of training package VET qualifications and the lower qualification requirements in government programs such as the SEE program. This has led to the collapse of university adult literacy education courses, and consequently the number of active adult literacy researchers. This diminishes the capacity to produce the nuanced and in-depth qualitative studies that are needed to complement the understandings that can be gained from large scale surveys such as the PIAAC or evaluation studies of programs undertaken by commercial consultants.

¹⁵ National Adult Literacy Agency (2011). *A Literature Review of International Adult Literacy Policies*. <https://www.nala.ie/publications/a-literature-review-of-international-adult-literacy-policies/>

¹⁶ Elfert, M., & Walker, J. (2020). The rise and fall of adult literacy. Policy Lessons from Canada. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 11(1), 109-125.

¹⁷ Allatt, G., & Tett, L. (2019). The employability skills discourse and literacy practitioners. In L. Tett & M. Hamilton (Eds.). *Resisting Neoliberalism in Education: Local, National and Transnational Perspectives*, Policy Press.

¹⁸ Furness, J. A., & Hunter, J. (2017). Adult literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand: Policy, potential and pitfalls. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 22, 66-77

¹⁹ Ioannidou, A., & Knauber, C. (2019). Adult Literacy and Basic Education Policies in a Comparative Perspective: Selected Findings from four Country Cases. *Andragoška spoznanja*, 25(3), 125-140.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 138.

Recommended strategies:

1. Promote research capability in adult literacy by supporting postgraduate level teacher education qualifications in adult literacy education to renew the adult literacy workforce and create pathways for interested graduates to pursue research degrees.

Cost of inaction:

1. A situation where Australia loses its research capacity in adult literacy and relies on international research to inform policy.

Conclusion

Effective initiatives for improving the literacy (and numeracy, English language and digital skills) of adults require an ecological policy perspective, taking account of the individual and societal importance of adult literacy. In particular, discussions about adult literacy cannot take place within the VET or even education policy deliberations alone, nor at the Commonwealth and state jurisdictional levels without involving local government authorities.

Due to the long policy vacuum in adult literacy, much coordination and cooperation has lapsed between the wide range of experts and stakeholders needed for informed policy renewal. We urge the panel to recommend that available expertise be brought together from the field of adult literacy, for example the Reading Writing Hotline, research agencies such as the NCVER and ACER, provider representatives, national and state professional peak bodies such as ACAL and the state bodies such as ourselves, as well as academic researchers and teacher educators in adult literacy to map the ecosystem of adult literacy and to bring in other stakeholders into the discussion.

With our contacts with international researchers and practitioner organisations, we would also be happy to assist in identifying some international experts who may be able to assist this important work. Members of the Council will also welcome the opportunity to speak directly with members of the panel to clarify and expand on any of the information and ideas that we have presented.

A Literacy and Numeracy Policy for Adult Australians: a position paper from the Australian Council for Adult Literacy

October, 2020

Prepared by Dr Keiko Yasukawa and Professor Joseph Lo Bianco, with Pamela Osmond and Vanessa Iles for the Australian Council for Adult Literacy.

The paper originated from a forum on 2 October, 2019: Weaving a richer narrative of adult literacy and numeracy led by Professor Joseph Lo Bianco. The forum was held as a preconference of the annual conference of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy Conference, hosted by the NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council in partnership with the University of Technology of Sydney. The meeting was attended by over 60 adult literacy and numeracy practitioners, teacher educators and researchers from across Australia and New Zealand, with leading academics from Canada and Germany.

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Executive summary

Australia is in urgent need of a national policy on adult literacy and numeracy. This policy must enshrine the principle of literacy and numeracy as a basic human right, and access to free and equitable provision of lifelong and lifewide literacy education as a social responsibility. Children are assured their right to education through federal and state education policies; however, there are many adults who are speakers of English as their first language who have not had the benefit of schooling or who did not succeed in school and need a second chance in education in order to improve their ability to negotiate their everyday needs, gain employment, support their family and be an active member of their community. A new national framework is needed that acknowledges the breadth and diversity of adult learner needs that must be addressed.

Australia needs a radical rethinking about adult education that includes much more robust learning opportunities in areas such as adult English, languages, literacy, numeracy and skills in general; however, this paper focuses on the arguably most neglected area: that of adult literacy and numeracy, and argues for a bold new national lifelong and lifewide adult literacy and numeracy policy. The policy vacuum has led to serious problems including resource wastage and inefficiency, economic and social cost to Australians, inadequate and inequitable access to provision, a large range of unmet needs and lack of much needed renewal of the adult literacy workforce and research.

While the problems are great and require a significant shift in how we understand policy responses to adult literacy, the task is not insurmountable. There is much intelligence and experience in the Australian field of adult literacy practice and research that is waiting to be summoned for this work.

The paper recommends a policy founded on an intergovernmental approach that connects the national policy with local response and responsibility, and in so doing, enables a single framework to facilitate responsiveness to the diverse and specific needs and demands in local contexts. It also suggests the necessity to transgress the traditional boundaries between education policy and broader social policies to maximise the range of social outcomes that are known to be associated with improved literacy.

In order to realise what is outlined, key priorities are:

1. the renewal of the specialist qualified 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; and
2. a stable and sustainable intergovernmental funding commitment.

Preamble:

Free access and provision to literacy and numeracy education must be enshrined in national policy as human right and social responsibility for all Australians. While education policies ensure the embedding of literacy and numeracy development throughout children's schooling, there is no national policy guaranteeing the right of adults in Australia to access support and educational programs to improve the literacy and numeracy they need for negotiating their everyday life, participating in the community and employment, and maximising literacy and numeracy acquisition for their children. Ensuring that all Australians are able to manage the literacy and numeracy demands they encounter in their life is a social responsibility because society benefits when more people are able to actively participate in and contribute to the life of their communities. We call upon the Australian government to initiate a policy process to address the critical gap in a lifewide and lifelong literacy and numeracy policy for adults.

The Issues:

The basic education needs of a large number of adults in the Australian population are not currently being met. This is particularly true for Indigenous Australians.

The Reading Writing Hotline¹, the national referral, information and advisory service for adults needing support with their literacy needs, reports that since 1994 they have received over 160,000 calls and in 2019, over 4000 calls from, or on behalf of, adults seeking information about programs to help them improve their literacy.² Well-established research findings that adults with literacy needs are reluctant to seek support due to the social stigma that is attached to poor literacy³ suggest that the figures from the Hotline are an underestimation of the actual level of needs. The callers to the Hotline have themselves acknowledged the 'shame' they felt when they asked for help.⁴ This evidence highlights a number of intersecting issues which need to be addressed by a national policy.

1. Literacy and social outcomes

The problem is not as much a shortage of programs as it is a problem of the lack of access to the diversity of programs necessary to meet the variety of purposes for which adults are seeking to improve their literacy and numeracy. The Commonwealth Government has for a long time funded programs for job-seekers, for example the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program, and the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) for recently arrived migrants. Recently the Government has introduced funding for four years for a Foundation Skills for Your Future Program targeting employed and recently unemployed adults and apprentices, addressing a gap created when the Government discontinued the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program. These are all necessary elements of literacy and numeracy provision and must continue; however, there is an absence of secure funding for community-based provision for Australian adults whose literacy and numeracy needs are related to other forms of important social outcomes linked to their community life. The need to attend to the link between literacy and numeracy and social outcomes is borne out in research, including one from the OECD.⁵

¹ <https://www.readingwritinghotline.edu.au/>

² <http://www.nswalnc.org.au/ACAL%20Conf%20PDF/ilesACAL2019.pdf>

³ Beder, H. (1991). The stigma of illiteracy. *Adult Basic Education*, 1(2), 67-78.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Grotlüschen, A., Mallows, D., Reder, S., & Sabatini, J. (2016). *Adults with Low Proficiency in Literacy or Numeracy*. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 131. OECD Publishing.

While the Australian Government has invested a large amount of public money in order to participate in three OECD sponsored international adult literacy surveys, including the most recent Survey of Adult Skills associated with their Programme of International Assessment of Adult Literacy (PIAAC), scant attention has been paid to what the survey results are actually able to tell us (and an acknowledgement of what it cannot).⁶ One serious neglect in the policy discussions is that of the findings from the Background Questionnaire which have shown that there is a strong correlation between low proficiencies in literacy and poor social outcomes, including health, participation in the community, trust in others and income.⁷

A new policy is needed to (re)build and introduce flexible programs that can cater for the critical social needs of learners. Failure to attend to these needs has both individual and social consequences: adults whose quality of life is limited by their lack of access to education and who may need to draw on welfare services to manage. The Government has a responsibility not only to increase the human capital for the Australian economy but to improve social outcomes of people for a more equitable and active citizenry.

2. Access to provision

As mentioned already there are adults who suffer from the social stigma attached to poor literacy and who are not able to simply sign up for a program even if they have people who can help them find a suitable program. The idea of going back to an educational institution can be a serious emotional barrier for many whose experiences in school were negative, and for people who have experienced social exclusion in other ways.⁸ Again, this issue disproportionately impacts Indigenous Australians, as a result of long-term systemic disadvantage.

The Reading Writing Hotline has been an invaluable national resource not only by providing referrals for adults with literacy needs, but also by synthesising the inquiry and referral data to identify areas of need and looking for ways of linking services, such as sharing successful models of delivery, creating networks of literacy providers and providing learning resources where no available provision exists to provide the more integrated support that many learners need. While the Hotline must continue their exemplary work, this service organisation itself recognises that there are likely to be a large number of adults who, despite the Hotline's public awareness campaigns, do not know about the Hotline or are reluctant to approach them because that would require a phone call to someone they do not know about something that is very difficult for them to discuss.⁹

What is needed to complement the Hotline's telephone referral and information services is local, on-the-ground community outreach undertaken by adult literacy and numeracy professionals who can mediate and act as an intermediary for individual adults to access the support they need, for example, to help fill out a government form or to help their children with homework. The mediators would build relationships not only with local adult education providers, but also with staff employed in Centrelink offices, local court houses, public libraries, schools, public housing offices, women's

⁶ The Productivity Commission in its *Interim Report for the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review* (2020) acknowledges "The Survey of Adult Skills runs only every 10 years, limiting timely comparisons and, as a population survey of the overall stock of skills, it may be difficult to meaningfully assess changes over time" (p. 96), a comment that we agree with.

⁷ Grotlüschen, A., Mallows, D., Reder, S., & Sabatini, J. (2016).

⁸ Morris, A., Hanckel, B. & Yasukawa, K. (2017). *The perceptions that homeless people and those at risk of homelessness have of literacy classes*. Institute for Public Policy and Governance, UTS.

⁹ Buddeberg, K. (2019). Supporters of low literate adults. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 38:4, 420-432.

refugees and other government and non-government agencies and organisations that offer services that interact with the lives of adults needing support in negotiating their everyday needs.

A policy supporting a national network of community-based literacy/ numeracy mediators would be a wholistic solution to a complex set of such needs and use local knowledge and resources to enable adults with literacy/ numeracy needs to access targeted support. A network structure would ensure that local solutions can be shared nationally and adapted in other areas as appropriate, avoiding both a 'one-size-fits-all' approach that fails to fit any of the needs and re-invention of workable solutions already developed elsewhere.

3. Wastage of investment

As mentioned above, the Commonwealth Government has invested heavily into Australia's participation in the PIAAC and the earlier OECD adult literacy surveys. However, measures needed to address significant findings from the survey, namely the links between literacy and numeracy proficiencies and social outcomes, has had little investment. A similar criticism has been made in other countries, including Canada, where it has been said that 'It does not seem sustainable to continue to invest significant money and time in the surveys but not have a means to follow through on the information so expensively produced.'¹⁰ The Australian taxpayers would expect a return on the investment that the Government has made on their behalf to participate in expensive surveys such as the PIAAC.

The findings from initiatives like the PIAAC should lead to the development of curricula and programs and a professionally educated workforce to address the literacy/ numeracy needs not currently captured by the employability and workplace oriented programs. Otherwise, Australia will continue to see similar results in future surveys, with attention only given to how Australia ranks in skills relative to other OECD countries rather than being concerned about how the data can be used to strengthen social cohesion, active citizenry, equity and wellbeing. Moreover, poor literacy and numeracy, especially when they are combined with socio-economic disadvantage, have been found to have intergenerational effects; thus, positively investing in addressing needs for the current population of adults will have benefits for their children and future generations.¹¹

4. Changing understanding of literacy (and numeracy)

Despite the early seminal study, *No single measure: A survey of Australian adult literacy*¹², from which the researcher concluded that:

These findings also reinforce the view that remedial education must be interpreted much more broadly than extra help with the technical skills of reading and writing. Adults, and presumably adolescents, with literacy difficulties have fewer opportunities to know how their world works. Literacy should incorporate knowing how to read the world. (p. 49).

Literacy in adult education provision has been increasingly focused on skills, highlighted by the term *foundation skills*¹³ that has emerged in the last decade, and the development of a training package¹⁴

¹⁰ Sr Clair, R. (2016). Plus ça change – The failure of PIAAC to drive evidence-based policy in Canada. *Redaktion Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, 39(2), 225-239.

¹¹ Hanemann, U. (2015). *Learning Families: Intergenerational Approach to Literacy Teaching and Learning*. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. Feldbrunnenstrasse 58, 20148 Hamburg, Germany.

¹² Wickert, R. (1989). *No single measure: A survey of Australian adult literacy*. Department of Employment, Education and Training.

¹³ Perkins, K (2009) *Adult literacy and numeracy: Research and future strategy*, NCVER, Adelaide.

¹⁴ <https://training.gov.au/Training/Details/FSK>

to define what is officially valued as literacy and numeracy. Nobody disputes that literacy and numeracy involve skills; however, literacy and numeracy is what people *do* with a range of semiotic (meaning-making) resources to communicate and make meaning¹⁵ and, as the quote from *No Single Measure* says, it is about how people learn to ‘read the world’. ‘Reading’, moreover, is becoming increasingly multimodal, involving not only printed texts, but also digital texts using various visuals and graphics as new technologies for communications have become more widespread.

Digital literacy skills have increasingly become a focus in discussions about foundation skills due to the increased use of the internet and online platforms by service providers and government to provide information. The current COVID-19 pandemic clearly highlights the disadvantage, isolation and health risks people experience without the skills, resources and access to information communicated digitally. It is not uncommon to hear adults who are not confident in their literacy saying:

*I can read, but I don't know how to fill forms out, I don't know how to put the words you know what I mean. Like I can read, but some words I don't know what they mean.*¹⁶

The challenges for these people are multiplied when the forms are required to be filled out online, and there is no physical office where they can receive help. The Reading Writing Hotline reports that form filling appears to be a major barrier for many adults accessing services.

To overcome these barriers, the current policy framing of adult foundation skills must be expanded to reflect the flexible and highly contextualised responses needed in an environment where the demands for individuals are continually changing. The focus on *supply* of skills through provision, rather than understanding and responding to the *demands* experienced by individuals will not serve individuals or the community well.¹⁷

Since the emergence of adult literacy as a field in Australia 40 years ago, a critical principle has been lost: the understanding and ability among program providers to respond to the reality that many adult literacy learners are seeking to improve their literacy and numeracy in order to become more educated in a number of personally meaningful ways.¹⁸ That is why the term Adult Basic *Education* had been used to refer to the field for many years and which is a term that still resonates with many practitioners. Learners may be seeking to gain greater independence in their everyday life (dealing with government offices, landlords, medical appointments), help their children with their school work, challenge themselves to make up for what the schools they attended failed to teach them as well as to improve their chances of getting a job or succeeding in further education. The current

¹⁵ Barton, D., Hamilton, M., Ivanic, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. Routledge.

Yasukawa, K., Rogers, A., Jackson, K., & Street, B. V. (Eds.). (2018). *Numeracy as social practice: global and local perspectives*. Routledge.

¹⁶ Morris, A., Hanckel, B. & Yasukawa, K. (2017). *The perceptions that homeless people and those at risk of homelessness have of literacy classes*. Institute for Public Policy and Governance, UTS.

¹⁷ Mallows, D., & Lister, J. (2016). Literacy as supply and demand. *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung Journal for Research on Adult Education*, 39(2), 343-356. DOI 10.1007/s40955-016-0061-1

¹⁸ Osmond, P. (2016). What happened to our community of practice? The early development of Adult Basic Education in NSW through the lens of professional practice theory. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*. 24(2), 3-23.

policy discourse and government funding focus regard adult literacy and numeracy primarily as a vehicle for employability, a diminished discourse familiar in other OECD countries as well.¹⁹

Policy priorities

Adults can experience literacy and numeracy demands and barriers in multiple sites and multiple facets and stages of their lives. We outline below some of the ways in which the problems identified above can be addressed.

1. Increasing program diversity

Adult literacy and numeracy programs can be grouped under the following broad categories:

- Community-based adult basic education programs designed locally around the needs of the learners
- Job-seeker programs
- Workplace programs
- Programs for recent arrivals
- Programs for Indigenous Australians for whom English is an additional language
- One-one tutoring
- Learner support in a vocational setting
- Early school leaver programs
- Education programs in correctional centres
- Community outreach.

Currently the Commonwealth supports the SEE program for job-seekers, the AMEP for recent arrivals and Foundation Skills for Your Future for employed and recently unemployed adults, but the other programs are reliant on varying degrees of state funding. A national policy is needed to acknowledge the full range of these categories of programs and ensure funding is available to support them; adults with literacy and numeracy needs should not be caught in the middle of funding policy struggles between the different jurisdictions.

All of the programs should be conceived and designed through a broad lens on their programmatic outcomes in both the lifelong and life-wide dimensions.²⁰ At a time when an increasing number of jobs are insecure, job-seeker programs need to be teaching adults not only the job-searching, application and interview skills, but also the critical literacy and numeracy skills to be able to ensure that they understand the conditions attached to a job and can exercise their workplace rights, so they are treated fairly and respectfully in the workplace.²¹

Moreover, in the context of globalisation and fast changing communication technologies, literacy and numeracy education for work needs to address the new and profound role that literacy and numeracy assume in the contemporary workplaces. Workplace texts are no longer limited to what workers produce or use in the course of performing workplace tasks, but they shape and constrain

¹⁹ See for example, Allatt, G., & Tett, L. (2019). The employability skills discourse and literacy practitioners. In L. Tett & M. Hamilton (Eds.), *Resisting neoliberalism in education: local, national and transnational perspectives* (pp. 41-54). Policy Press.

²⁰ Reder, S. (2020). A lifelong and life-wide framework for adult literacy education. *Adult literacy education: The International journal for literacy, language and numeracy*, 2(1), 48-53.

²¹ Yasukawa, K. (2018). The workplace as a site for critical numeracy practice. In K. Yasukawa, A. Rogers, K. Jackson, & B. V. Street (Eds.). *Numeracy as social practice: global and local perspectives* (pp. 225-240). Routledge.

work practices and workers' identities in particular ways.²² Workplace literacy and numeracy needs are expected to increase with new technologies that characterise Industry 4.0 even in jobs that traditionally did not place complex literacy and numeracy demands on workers, for example, assembly line workers in factories. Research in the technology's impact on work and in literacy suggests that work practices will be increasingly mediated by text, not only in routine ways to meet various compliance requirements, but to manage the social organisation of work and promote creativity and innovation²³. Adult literacy and numeracy education will clearly have an expanding role to ensure workers are prepared for these new forms of work.

Both job-seeker and workplace focussed programs can be provided with a broader brief than just the individuals' immediate employment and workplace needs to improve their literacy and numeracy in other dimensions. It is well acknowledged that the skills of the future workforce will include, for all workers, the so-called 'soft skills' such as problem solving and communication: qualities that are encompassed in the concept of education. This is the education (rather than training) that job-seekers need to develop.

For workers, especially in lower paid work, access to education is limited (by time, location and cost), and a literacy and numeracy program held in the workplace increases their access. This can be particularly valuable in remote areas with significant Indigenous populations, and where there is no other educational provision, such as in the mining industry or in Indigenous ranger programs. Research studies show that workers who access work-based literacy and numeracy programs that are broader in scope can contribute not only to workplace effectiveness and productivity, but to the individuals' confidence and wellbeing, as well as to their family's and community's wellbeing.²⁴

It is in the areas of community-based adult basic education programs and community outreach that urgent policy support is required. The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated not only the health impacts but also the serious societal impact of adults not being able to access or properly interpret information about symptoms and precautionary steps they needed to take.²⁵ Programs that address issues that matter to adults such as health literacy, understanding the Australian school system and what their children are learning, tenants' rights, and workers' rights would have benefits not only to the adult learners but to their family, community and society at large. Such programs need to be designed organically in response to identified needs, and do not all need to be subjected to the

²² Farrell, L, Newman, T., & Corbel, C. (2020). Literacy and the workplace revolution: a social view of literate work practices in Industry 4.0. *Discourses: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1753016>

Karlsson, A-M., & Nikolaidou, Z. (2016). The textualisation of problem handling: lean discourses meet professional competence in eldercare and the manufacturing industry. *Written Communication*, 33(3).

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088316653391>.

²³ Farrell, L, Newman, T., & Corbel, C. (2020). Literacy and the workplace revolution: a social view of literate work practices in Industry 4.0. *Discourses: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1753016>

²⁴ Alkema, A. (2019). Hīnāture: Upskilling Māori and Pacific Workplace Learners. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 27(1), 1-16.

Gallo, M. L. (2004). *Reading the World of Work. A Learner-Centered Approach to Workplace Literacy and ESL*. Krieger Publishing Company.

Te Maro, P., Lane, C., Bidois, V., & Earle, D. (2019). Literacy, achievement and success in a Māori tourism certificate programme: reading the world in order to read the word. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 38(4), 449-464. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2019.1648576>

²⁵ Coronavirus myths, surface transmission, Vitamin D and Aboriginal interpreters in the ABC Radio National Health Report. <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/healthreport/coronavirus-myths-surface-transmission-vitamin-d/12567166>

resource-intensive accreditation processes for most other programs in VET. This reduces the administrative burden needed for design and delivery, while increasing the relevance and value for the adult learners.

Even with an extensive network of literacy and numeracy professionals, it is likely that some communities will not be able to sustain the presence of an education provider that can meet the needs of the community. However, a nationally designed and coordinated distance education program that is responsive to the needs of the community is a viable solution if these communities are connected to the network.

2. Creating positive literate and numerate environments

Adults have a right to feel free of social stigma about their literacy/ numeracy needs. It is a social responsibility to create an environment where adults can access support and opportunities to overcome barriers they are experiencing in addressing literacy and numeracy demands in their life. Australian communities must nurture all adults' engagement with meaningful literacy and numeracy practices. In each of the social contexts adults find themselves, they can experience demands, opportunities, support and/or barriers for engaging in and developing their literacy and numeracy practices. The practices may involve paying a utility bill, or interpreting instructions for taking medication, or helping their child with homework. The skills and practices involved in each of these contexts are different and, rather than focusing on ensuring the *supply* of skills that are reliant on pre-determined curricula and training packages, appropriate provision driven by *demand* for skills, knowledge and new practices should be the focus, especially in community-based programs as explained in the previous section.²⁶

The local communities in which adults live can be examined as literate and numerate environments: contexts that can afford demands, opportunities and support for literacy and numeracy development or barriers.²⁷ Such an analysis requires adult literacy/ numeracy professionals located in local communities who have developed knowledge of the demographics and cultural considerations of the community and the kinds of needs adults may have, and who have information on adult education, literacy and numeracy programs, both non-accredited and accredited, that community members can access. Such professionals will need to be able to provide support for immediate needs (e.g. Can you help me read this letter I just received from Centrelink), listen to the literacy/ numeracy needs and demands they experience, make an initial assessment of the adult's needs and the kind of program that would be suitable for them, give advice on opportunities available in the community to further develop their literacy and numeracy and refer them to appropriate programs if they wish to enrol in a literacy/ numeracy program. They can also serve as the local advisory point for employers or service providers who are experiencing difficulties working with or reaching adults with poor literacy and numeracy. In remote communities they may help build long-term workforce capacity by supporting experienced locals with skills and qualifications. In short, what is needed is a network of community literacy and numeracy mediators who are given visibility in the community as offering a free, accessible service for people with literacy and numeracy needs, and for people seeking to improve their work environment and services for people with low literacy

²⁶ Mallows, D., & Lister, J. (2016). Literacy as supply and demand. *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung Journal for Research on Adult Education*, 39(2), 343-356. DOI 10.1007/s40955-016-0061-1

²⁷ Easton, P. (2014). Sustaining literacy in Africa: Developing a literate environment. Paris: UNESCO. Evans, J., Yasukawa, K., Mallows, D., & Kubascikova, J. (forthcoming). Shifting the gaze: from the numerate individual to their numerate environment. *Adult Literacy Education: The International Journal of Literacy, Language, and Numeracy*.

and numeracy proficiencies. They would also act as a 'resource hub' to provide appropriate literacy and numeracy learning materials for those wanting to learn in their home environment.

The mediation service suggested above could be established under an intergovernmental agreement between the Commonwealth, states and territories and local governments. It would be a service that has wide-reaching benefits for the local communities, giving reasons for it to be supported by a range of local services including, health and housing as well as education and employment. The local services should have autonomy to initiate locally relevant and meaningful initiatives (e.g. a local family literacy campaign, a monthly family numeracy workshop) but should be networked with the Reading Writing Hotline as the central hub so that ideas could be shared and adapted in different local areas.

3. Adult literacy and numeracy workforce renewal

Adult literacy and numeracy professionals may find themselves working in diverse contexts each requiring innovation, pedagogies and curriculum suitable for the specific context and interactions with multiple stakeholders. As already discussed, there is a diverse range of different kinds of programs where adults' literacy and numeracy needs can be addressed.

It is not surprising then that adult literacy and numeracy education has become a professionalised field with most well-established providers requiring their literacy and numeracy teachers to have a specialist postgraduate qualification. 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, and the policy contexts of adult literacy and numeracy provision. The knowledge base requires more depth as well as breadth than what the current TAE training package qualifications can offer. As mentioned already, literacy and numeracy teachers' contexts go beyond VET delivery and the teachers are required to recontextualise the 'content' and pedagogy for each new learner group and program context. However, there has been little investment in the renewal of this workforce.

A large section of the specialist qualified workforce that has served large providers has retired or is nearing retirement so that a crisis in workforce planning is imminent. Moreover, reduction in stable employment opportunities due to contestable funding means that adult literacy and numeracy teaching is no longer seen as a viable career path for people entering the teaching profession. This in turn has reduced demand for specialists so that many university programs offering the specialist qualifications have closed.²⁸ It is telling that there is currently almost no specialist adult literacy teacher education offered anywhere in Australia. This in turn reduces the pedagogical currency of the field, as well as the research capability in the field that could lead to practice, research and policy interacting and informing each other.

While there are enduring and strong ethical principles that underpin adult literacy and numeracy education, the field must be continually renewed in response to changes in the community demographics, workplace practices and services that adults will encounter and new pedagogical insights from research. For example, where once the field primarily served learners for whom English was their mother tongue, a much larger group of adult literacy and numeracy learners are multilingual. There are extra complexities and cultural sensitivities when working with speakers of Aboriginal English, or with Indigenous learners who speak English as an additional language, yet are

²⁸ Although professionals in the field are aware of the critical need for workforce renewal, it is difficult to provide definitive evidence of this due to the lack of regular, systematic collection of workforce data in the field, and in VET nationally. The deregulation of the VET sector, including literacy and numeracy has exacerbated the problems of accessing workforce data: e.g size, qualification levels, experience.

not served by "migrant" English programs.²⁹ Teachers must be afforded the benefit of contemporary understandings of multilingualism and pedagogies that draw on the strengths of multilingual learners.³⁰

Incentives for people to gain qualifications to work in this field are urgently needed. The LLN Practitioner Scholarship scheme that the Commonwealth Government established, and which ran between 2010-2014, is an example of a successful incentive. New investment is needed in the renewal and expansion of this workforce, particularly if the policy solutions proposed in this paper are to be taken up.

4. Adult literacy and numeracy for the post-COVID recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of people with low levels of education and English literacy. As already mentioned, research has found that many adults in these groups have difficulties accessing and interpreting information to keep themselves safe and well, some due to poor English literacy skills and some due to poor digital skills or access. Some do not have the critical literacy skills to recognise mis-information about the virus.

There have also been reports of parents who struggled to help their children with home-schooling due to their lack of knowledge and understanding of the work that their children had been set to do.³¹ During the pandemic, the Reading Writing Hotline has had numerous calls from desperate parents such as that of one mother:

*Natasha is a young single mother trying to educate her children at home however, she is unable to help them. Her literacy level is too low to be able to access an online TAFE literacy course.*³²

Even after the pandemic is over, there will no doubt be other situations such as severe weather patterns which require people to access critical information digitally.

The need for Australia to invest in education and training for a large proportion of the population has been recognised by employers and the Government. Those who have lost their job will need to increase their employability in new jobs, and those who have been seeking work will need to position themselves even more strongly in the competitive labour market. This anticipates a greater

²⁹ Malcolm, I. G. (2011). Learning through standard English: Cognitive implications for post-pidgin/-creole speakers. *Linguistics and Education*, 22(3), 261-272.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2011.02.006>

³⁰ Choi, J., & Ollerhead, S. (Eds.). (2017). *Plurilingualism in Teaching and Learning: Complexities Across Contexts*. Routledge.

Creese, A., & Blackledge, A. (2015). Bilingual translanguaging: A pedagogy for learning classroom and teaching. *The Modern Language Journal*, 94(1), 103-115.

Garcia, O., & Li, W. (2014). *Translanguaging: language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave MacMillan.

³¹ "Home schooling during coronavirus overwhelmed many parents". *ABC News* 22 May 2020.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-22/mem-fox-on-the-struggles-of-home-schooling-during-coronavirus/12275934>

Migrant parents in Australia face challenges posed by home learning model amid coronavirus pandemic. *ABC News* 17 April 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-17/migrant-parents-face-challenges-during-coronavirus-home-learning/12154036>

³² Iles, V. (2020). Adult literacy in the time of COVID. *AVETRA A-News*, August.

number of young people and older people who are having to retrain and who will enrol in VET courses, many of whom will require literacy and numeracy support to complete their course.

Even amongst those who are employed, some significant economic restructuring can be expected, much of it already underway under the guise of Industry 4.0 as mentioned earlier, but likely accelerated in the post-COVID recovery. This will lead to new forms of literacy mediated work practices in many low-paid jobs in industries – for example, assembly work in manufacturing - where literacy has not featured strongly as a core skill.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the critical need for adult literacy and numeracy provision in the community, education and training institutions and in the workplace to assist in the economic recovery and to address some of the vulnerabilities of people with poor literacy and numeracy in emergency situations. There will be an even greater need for adult literacy and numeracy professionals with contemporary understandings of literacy and numeracy to support these learners as well as to upskill workers in the economic recovery of the country.

The Policy Process

1. Wider stakeholder representation

In the absence of a comprehensive adult education policy, Australian adult literacy and numeracy programs have largely been framed by VET policies for the last four decades. This has meant that opportunities for input into much needed new policy directions in a range of areas including adult English, languages, literacy and numeracy have been restricted to occasions when there is a VET policy review. Action needed for much more robust and sustainable provision in adult education has been difficult to argue within the VET policy framework. While the recent Joyce Review of VET did generate some welcome recommendations for language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) skills provision, it has been difficult to find spaces to raise those issues and possibilities outside the VET policy framework.

VET providers, especially large public providers such as TAFE, are important sites of literacy and numeracy provision. TAFE literacy and numeracy teachers are well placed to provide services such as literacy and numeracy learner support for vocational courses. TAFE institutes also employ professionals such as student counsellors, disability support officers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education officers and community outreach officers who facilitate both internal and external support for students that is critical for students' success. However, as already mentioned, many adults with literacy and numeracy needs will not, on their own, take the initiative to enrol at TAFE or other providers. Their enrolment will involve a longer process possibly supported by someone who may be a family member, an employer, staff in a women's refuge, social worker or another person the adult trusts.

Discussions within the VET policy arena limits the range of stakeholders that are needed to inform a good adult literacy and numeracy policy. Moreover, policy discussions need to occur at all levels of government from the local communities up to the national level in order to gain an understanding of the range of possible solutions that would work in different contexts, and to secure ownership of a new policy at every level of government. The NT *Whole of Community Engagement Initiative*³³ is an example of such a wider stakeholder representation outside of the narrow VET context.

³³ *Whole of Community Engagement (WCE) Initiative Final Report 2017*, prepared for the Australian Government Department of Education and Training, Darwin, Charles Darwin University.

2. Role of practitioners, researchers and teacher educators

Stakeholders who have been marginalised in recent policy processes are adult literacy and numeracy practitioners, researchers and teacher educators. Practitioners, more than anyone else, have knowledge of who the learners are, their needs and aspirations and the issues they face. They undertake the work of addressing the learners' needs in the policy context of their work. While large scale research studies, such as those from the OECD are often cited in government policies, in-depth scholarly research investigations that have been undertaken in local teaching and learning contexts are rarely used, even though they can provide another dimension to what the large scale survey studies can tell us. Similarly, the views of teacher educators are not taken into account when debating qualification levels of teachers.

Excluding those with professional and scholarly knowledge of the field is counterproductive to developing sustainable and evidence-based policy in adult literacy and numeracy. As stated earlier, adults' literacy and numeracy needs are highly contextualised and shaped by their local contexts; there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Literacy and numeracy education can afford benefits for the individuals, their community and the health of the Australian society and economy. It then means an inclusive policy process is urgently needed that acknowledges the expertise and insights of a wide range of stakeholders, including practitioners, teacher educators and academic researchers.

Conclusion

The paper has shown that adult literacy and numeracy needs in Australia are not homogenous: they are diverse because there are many different demands for literacy and numeracy that are experienced by people, and there is no single approach to meet these demands.³⁴ Moreover, the literacy and numeracy demands that adults experience are fluid and unstable due to socio-economic and technological changes, including the increased use of robotics and artificial intelligence in the way services are delivered in the community. It is likely that the nature of the economy and the labour force will face major changes over the next few years, increasing the need for retraining and reskilling, including in the nature of workplace literacy and numeracy. However, a nationally coordinated and networked approach that mobilises action at the local community level can deliver programs that meet the actual literacy and numeracy demands experienced by the community members. Such a network will have adult literacy professionals facilitating connections between the existing local adult literacy program providers, local service providers (e.g. health, housing, employment), schools, libraries and businesses to build a cooperative and locally relevant set of solutions to meet community needs.

Each local 'node' of the network will have qualified adult literacy professionals leading the community initiatives while also directly supporting adults with literacy needs through referrals to suitable provision or acting as literacy mediators to help them meet urgent needs. By building local knowledge the adult literacy professionals working at the local 'nodes' can make a case for new programs as demands for them become evident. These may be non-accredited programs, for example, an environmental literacy program on what to do in a bushfire emergency, or a family literacy and numeracy program developed with cooperation from the local school.

The Reading Writing Hotline as an established and successful service would be best placed to be the national coordinating body for this network. The Hotline can coordinate resource development and sharing, as well as monitor and map the kinds of literacy demands identified and the successes of

³⁴ Yasukawa, K., & Evans, J. (2019). Adults' numeracy practices in fluid and unstable contexts – an agenda for education, policy and research? . *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung Journal for Research on Adult Education*, 42(3), 343-356, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40955-019-00145-z>

initiatives longitudinally. A national networked approach coordinated by an established and effective service like the Reading Writing Hotline will be able to leverage the support of other established networks such as the Be Connected providing Digital Literacy Assistance³⁵ and extend this to literacy and numeracy assistance.

A new bold and visionary lifelong and lifewide adult literacy and numeracy policy is needed in Australia. Such a policy would benefit not only the Australian economy, but the health and wellbeing of individual adults, their family and community. In order to realise what has been outlined, key priorities are:

1. the renewal of the specialist qualified adult literacy and numeracy workforce that would support the research-informed, contemporary design and delivery of programs that are responsive to the literacy and numeracy demands experienced by adults; and
2. a stable and sustainable intergovernmental funding commitment.

³⁵ Funded by the Good Things Foundation.



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The Hon Steven Joyce
Chair, Vocational Education and Training Review
25 January 2019

Dear Mr Joyce,

On behalf of the NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council, I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Vocational Education and Training Review. Our Council is the peak professional organisation for adult literacy and numeracy professionals, including teachers, education managers, community outreach teachers, teacher educators and researchers in NSW.

Our submission focuses on priorities in the area of adult literacy and numeracy/ foundation skills. If you and your committee have questions or seek clarification about any aspect of our submission, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'K. Yasukawa'.

Dr. Keiko Yasukawa, President, NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council

1. The Review will have regard to VET funding, policy and regulatory settings and how they can be optimised to support both school leavers and workers to maximise the achievement of relevant skills and employment outcomes from the VET sector.

Australia needs a lifelong education policy. The opportunities and right to access education and training throughout one's lifetime should be both promoted and made visible in policy in a society where rapid technological change and globalisation are requiring people to continually learn new knowledge and skills in order to contribute productively to the economy and in civic life. Adult literacy and numeracy is foundational to all forms and areas of learning, and therefore the field is in need of a supporting policy.

2. It will examine skills shortages in VET-related occupations, in particular any tension between VET outcomes and the needs of industries and employers, and what might be done to better align these.
3. It will consider expected changes in future work patterns and the impact of new technologies and how the VET sector can prepare Australians for those changes and the opportunities they will bring.

See point 8 regarding the need for a renewed workplace adult language, literacy and numeracy program.

4. The Review may consider the flexibility of qualification structures, particularly for mid-career workers, and for industries seeking rapid deployment of new skills.

As discussed under point 6, the need for flexibility of qualification structures in adult literacy and numeracy/ foundation skills is critical. Adult literacy and numeracy is not an industry and there is no 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum or training package that is appropriate for all of the diverse learners and their diverse needs. Over standardising the curriculum means that individual learners' needs will not be adequately met.

5. The Review may have regard to community perceptions of the effectiveness of the VET sector and the accessibility and utility of information about VET options and outcomes, both for employers and students, including information linking training options to employment outcomes.

It is crucial that governments – both Federal and states – do everything possible to restore public confidence in Australia's VET system. There are large numbers of young adults in Australia who, for a range of reasons did not finish secondary schooling or had an unsuccessful educational experience. There are also older adults who have a personal and/ or economic need to develop their English language, literacy and numeracy

in order to address changing demands and opportunities in their lives. These adults all deserve a quality post-secondary education system that they can trust and access.

6. It may review whether additional support is needed for vulnerable cohorts, including those currently unemployed and at risk of unemployment, or those with low literacy and numeracy skills.

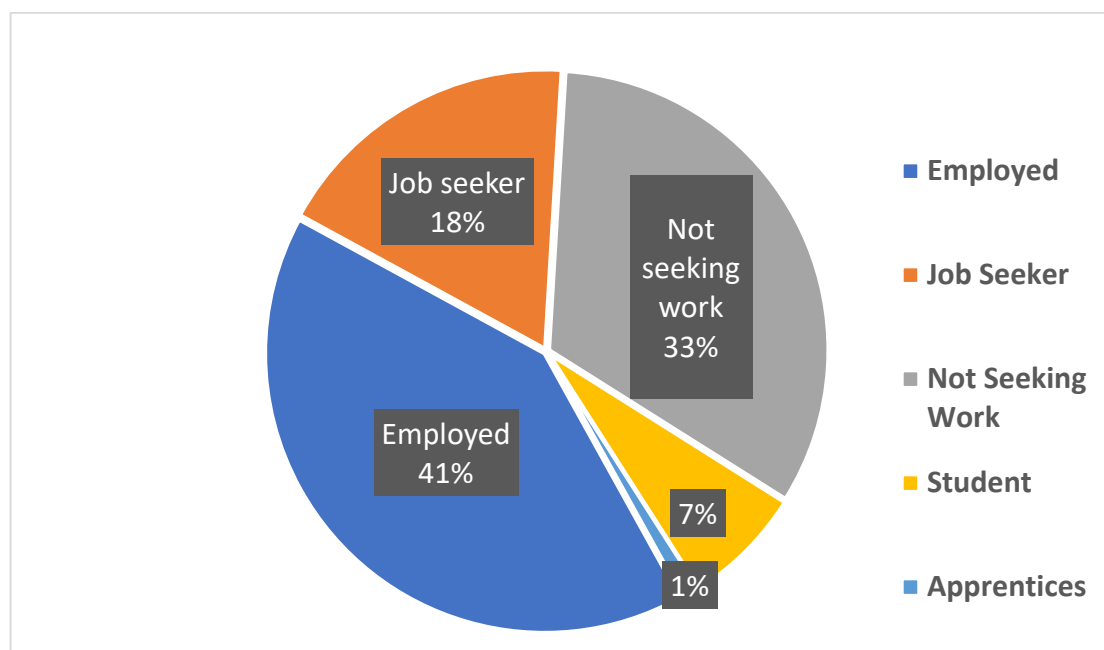
There is no question that additional support is needed for vulnerable cohorts, including those currently unemployed and at risk of unemployment, or those with low literacy and numeracy skills.

Historically, very little information has been collated concerning the clients (and potential clients) of language, literacy and numeracy provision in Australia. However, statistics collected on the callers to the Reading Writing Hotline provide some important background information in considering the needs of such adults¹. The Reading Writing Hotline is a national, Commonwealth funded phone service for adults who are seeking information related to adult literacy. The Hotline's statistics therefore represent a national sample of adults who feel that their literacy and numeracy skills are not adequate for their everyday functioning in the personal, social and/or work domains and who are therefore seeking appropriate LLN services. The Hotline has collected demographic information on its callers since its inception in 1974, and has demonstrated patterns that have remained very consistent in many important aspects, such as gender (predominantly male), age (predominantly 25-40 yrs) and language background (predominantly English speaking background).

The following statistic in particular is relevant to the argument the NSWALNC has made concerning the gap in provision.

¹ Iles, V. *Working together to improve literacy: Reading Writing Hotline and libraries*, Conference presentation, ACAL, 2018, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jJPqEPyDjmsGyLCY8jsmFsoVrSeO20DH/view>

Employment Status of callers (2016- 17 reporting period)



The graph shows that only 18% of callers are jobseekers who can be referred to a SEE program. While there is insufficient funded provision available other than the SEE program for jobseekers, 33% of callers are not seeking work and a further 41% are already employed. There is a paucity of programs to which the Hotline can refer such callers.

Adults with low literacy and numeracy proficiencies

A further important statistic is related to the ratio between callers from an English as the first language (L1), and English as an additional language background. In the period reported, 81% of callers were from an English as L1 background, showing that there is a significant number of adults whose literacy and numeracy needs are not explained by their first language.

Another statistical source of information about the state of adult literacy and numeracy is the results of Australia's performance in the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (SAS). Most of the media and industry reports have focussed on how Australia was placed in the international league tables (5th in literacy and 15th in numeracy among the 34 participating countries)². However, what has attracted less focus and which is arguably of equal if not greater significance, is what the SAS results can tell us about the social outcomes of the not insignificant proportion of those surveyed who demonstrated low literacy and numeracy proficiencies³.

² OECD, 2016, Skills Matter: Further Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, viewed 8 December 2018 at http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Skills_Matter_Further_Results_from_the_Survey_of_Adult_Skills.pdf

³ 'Some 12.6% of adults in Australia attain only Level 1 or below in literacy proficiency ... and 20.1% attain Level 1 or below in numeracy At Level 1 in literacy, adults can read brief texts on familiar topics and locate a

Analysis undertaken by international researchers on the self-reported data of SAS participants who were assessed as having low proficiencies found that:

*Although, they are more likely than the rest of the population to exhibit certain characteristics, such as lower levels of educational attainment, lower rates of employment or more disadvantaged backgrounds, adults with low literacy are found among all socio-demographic groups and in all walks of life. For most outcomes, levels of engagement in literacy practices appear to be as strong predictors as proficiency, indicating the importance of encouraging more intense use of these skills both in and outside of work. Adults with low proficiency are considerably less likely than their more proficient peers to participate in formal or non-formal adult education or training programmes, which is mostly due to the socio-demographic and employment characteristics of this population. However **the lower participation rates among the low proficient adults does not appear to be a consequence of their lack of motivation as much as of the presence of various obstacles to participation, such as lack of time and the cost of training.** ⁴ (emphasis added)*

In this study, Australia was found to be among the three top countries where the variation in the degree of participation in adult education and training (both formal and informal) between those with higher literacy proficiencies and those with lower proficiency was the greatest – suggesting that those most in need are not accessing and participating in education and training. In addition to participation in education and training, literacy and numeracy proficiencies have been found to be correlated to other important social outcomes:

The link between higher literacy and such social outcomes as trust in others, participation in volunteer and associative activities, belief that an individual can have an impact on the political process, and better health is stronger in Australia than in most other countries⁵.

Thus access to adult education and training, and in particular literacy and numeracy development not only affords benefits to those individuals whose literacy and numeracy proficiencies improve, but have critical implications for social cohesion and democracy in Australia.

The appendix contains two case studies that provide a human face for these statistics. The first is a story selected and abridged from a collection

single piece of specific information identical in form to information in the question or directive. In numeracy, adults at Level 1 can perform basic mathematical processes in common, concrete contexts, for example, one-step or simple processes involving counting, sorting, basic arithmetic operations and understanding simple percentages'. From OECD, 2013, *Australia: Country Note – Survey of Adult Skills First Results* accessed 8 December 2018 at https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20Australia_final.pdf.

⁴ Grotlüschen, A. et al. (2016), *Adults with Low Proficiency in Literacy or Numeracy*, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 131. Accessed 8 December, 2018 at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jm0v44bnmnx-en>

⁵ OECD, 2013, *Australia: Country Note – Survey of Adult Skills First Results* accessed 8 December 2018 at https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20Australia_final.pdf.

of such student stories published by the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC)⁶. The second is a story written by an adult literacy learner on the theme of 'educational journeys'.⁷

Other priority areas

In addition to ensuring that the needs of those with the lowest literacy and numeracy proficiencies are met, there are other types of needs that require urgent attention. These include the needs of adults in 'low skilled' jobs who may have completed secondary or higher education but whose skills levels have declined as a result of lack of use. This group of workers is identified as being at high risk of unemployment when their jobs become redundant due to technological changes or overseas outsourcing. Another area of need is critical literacy and numeracy among workers in precarious employment or underemployment, or in workplaces where there are no worker representatives to educate workers about their rights and how to exercise them. It is clearly not enough to help people find employment if workers are not supported in continuing to develop skills in response to changing needs and forms of work. There are ways to involve workers in the identification and planning of workplace training and education. A new approach to workplace literacy and numeracy provision is needed.

Greater understanding and suitable program options are needed for young early school leavers who have dis-engaged from mainstream schooling for diverse reasons. Partnerships between VET providers with schools and social service providers can ensure that young adults' welfare as well as further education and training are supported through appropriate educational and social services, without the common social stigma attached to young people who do not complete their schooling.

7. The Review may seek out case studies of best practice in VET, and consider whether specific trials should be undertaken to test innovative approaches likely to deliver better outcomes.

There are many cases of 'best practice' in adult literacy and numeracy delivery in NSW and in other Australian states. We list below references to some of the research of literacy and numeracy programs undertaken in the last decade that have analysed the salient features that make these case studies of 'best practice'. The programs that are discussed include: accredited programs in TAFE; community based adult literacy programs in Aboriginal communities; non-accredited community based programs for refugee women; young urban Aboriginal learners re-engaging with the school curriculum in a community centre; ESL learners in a labour market

⁶ Bowen, T. 2011, *A Fuller Sense of Self*, Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council, Springvale South.

⁷ NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council 2004, NSW adult literacy students write - Blue Sky Bicycle and other journeys, NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council, Sydney.

program; and integrated literacy and numeracy provision in vocational courses. Although the programs are varied in contexts, what they all illustrate about successful engagement and outcomes in adult literacy and numeracy programs include:

- The ability of the teachers to build connections with the learners and among the learners;
- Programs that can be tailored in outcomes, content and pedagogical approach so that the learners themselves can see and make connections with the particular demands for literacy and numeracy development in their life contexts;
- Programs where learners have ready access to a range of services (counselling, health, accessibility, career advice, childcare) and resources (library, canteens);
- Teachers who have both pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge and expertise to teach literacy and numeracy to adults;
- Teaching and learning contexts that encourage and support teachers to exercise agency and risk-taking in order to address their learners' diverse needs and contexts.

NSW case studies

Balatti, J., & Black, S. (2011). Constructing learners as members of networks. In *Vocational Learning* (pp. 63-76). Springer, Dordrecht.

Boughton, B., Chee, D. A., Beetson, J., Durnan, D., & LeBlanch, J. C. (2013). An Aboriginal adult literacy campaign pilot study in Australia using Yes I can. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 21(1), 5-32.

Chodkiewicz, A., Widin, J., & Yasukawa, K. (2010). Making Connections to Re-engage Young People in Learning: dimensions of practice. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 18(1), 35-51.

Ollerhead, S. (2012). Checkmate or stalemate? Teacher and learner positioning in the adult ESL literacy classroom. *TESOL in Context* 5, 3, 1-13.

Widin, J., Yasukawa, K., & Chodkiewicz, A. (2012). Teaching Practice in the Making: Shaping and Reshaping the Field of Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Teaching. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 52(1), 9-38.

Other Australian case studies

Bauer, R. (2018). Adult literacy and socio-cultural learning at Pina Pina Jarrinjaku (Yuendumu learning centre). *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 58(1), 125.

Black, S., & Yasukawa, K. (2011). Shared delivery: integrating ELT in Australian vocational education. *ELT journal*, 66(3), 347-355.

Choi, J., & Najar, U. (2017). Immigrant and refugee women's resourcefulness in English language classrooms: Emerging possibilities through plurilingualism. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 25(1), 20.

McHugh, M. (2011). Crossing the academic-vocational divide. *Fine Print*, 34(1), 12-16.

Skewes, J., Bat, M., Guenther, J., Boughton, B., Williamson, F., Woollorton, S., ... & Stephens, A. (2017). Case Studies of Training Advantage for Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Learners. Support Document. *National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)*.

8. The Review should have regard to the scope and outcomes from any previous or forthcoming reviews, consultation to date, and inputs made by industry and peak groups.

Of direct relevance to this Review are the recommendations from the recent OECD report: ***Building skills for all in Australia: policy insights from the survey of adult skills***⁸. The report made eight key recommendations to strengthen Australian adults' 'basic skills':

1. Increase participation of women in STEM fields by breaking down gender stereotypes and encouraging women to enter these fields.
2. Strengthen the focus on mathematics throughout secondary education.
3. Identify students in post-secondary VET who are at risk of low basic skills and provide targeted initiatives to support them.
4. Ensure that literacy and numeracy skills are part of the quality criteria in post-secondary VET.
5. Encourage post-secondary VET providers to address weak literacy and numeracy skills.
6. Reach out to disconnected youth and prevent dropout at earlier stages of education.
7. Use pre-apprenticeships to help NEETs re-enter education and training, and to find employment.
8. Improve access to childcare facilities for young mothers. (pp. 10-11)

While recommendations 1 and 2 go to issues beyond what VET alone can address, they highlight the criticality of how VET is positioned. VET options, including 'second chance' education for early school leavers, is not well known nor understood by many schools. There is a need for government initiatives to more effectively shift public perception of VET so that VET is seen as an integral part of Australia's commitment to lifelong education. This would be imperative in being able to address recommendations 3, 6 and 7.

⁸ OECD (2017), *Building Skills for All in Australia: Policy Insights from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264281110-en>

Recommendations 4, 5 and 6 are significant in ensuring quality pathways and support for people needing to further develop their literacy and numeracy to succeed in VET qualifications and to participate more effectively and fully in civic life. There is a need for deliberations involving a range of stakeholders (VET learners, classroom teachers, managers, professional peak body representatives, and researchers) to review and deliberate on what should be 'quality criteria' in VET. Quality is important in different ways for different stakeholders, but currently they do not sufficiently attend to what matters for learners and the capacity to support them in achieving a broad range of outcomes that VET ought to be able to help them achieve. As mentioned earlier, quality teachers are necessary for quality educational experiences and outcomes. Although teacher education programs for school teachers have undergone a major reform⁹, and university teaching standards have been tightened¹⁰, quality of teaching in VET continues to be undermined by the minimalist requirements in pedagogical knowledge and expertise (Cert IV in TAE). Investment in the learning of teachers is a necessary investment in order to achieve quality teaching and learning. Graduate entry adult literacy and numeracy teaching qualifications are not viable as full-fee paying programs as long as teachers in the field continue to be engaged as casual teachers. The teaching workforce in the field is currently heavily reliant on teachers who were qualified when the cost of their adult literacy and numeracy teaching qualification was subsidised through CSPs, the state provider (eg TAFE) or through the more recent (but now discontinued) scholarship initiative for adult LLN practitioners. Without renewal of the workforce with recently qualified teachers, the field will fail to be informed by new knowledge and empirical studies that are needed for continuous improvement.

Recommendation 8 as well as the need for provision of other services (health, financial and library) should be considered as minimum requirements for all VET providers.

The adult literacy and numeracy field has been dismayed by the elimination of a source of targeted Commonwealth funding for workplace literacy and numeracy improvements. The Australian Industry Group has been advocating for a restoration of the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) programme funding, echoing concerns of their own members about the impact of workers' low literacy and numeracy levels on productivity. As workplaces demand new skills and work practices, the need for targeting workplace literacy and numeracy funding will continue

⁹ E.g. the establishment of AITSL, and new guidelines for the accreditation of teacher education programs in Australia, encompassing different levels of teacher standards from Graduates Teachers to Lead Teachers, supervised practicums and a final year Teaching Performance Assessment.

<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards>

¹⁰ Refer to TEQSA Higher Education standards. <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/higher-education-standards-framework-2015>

to exist. The report from the former Centre for Literacy in Canada ***Embedding literacy and essential skills in workplace learning: breaking the solitudes***¹¹ provides a useful framework to review the previous WELL program and to commence discussions about a new model. Of particular importance is the 'situated-expansive model' of workplace programs that affords workplace innovation by engaging both the employers and the workers in the design of programs.

An area that has been long neglected is a strong state and Commonwealth policy framework for adult education provision in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The current Australia Research Council funded project **Adult literacy and Aboriginal community well-being in western NSW**¹² is providing evidence of the connections between improved literacy and numeracy and improved social outcomes, particularly health. The program researched in this project and other program initiatives in Australian Indigenous communities are documented in the report ***Enhancing training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners***. This report concludes with the identification of very unambiguous need for policy action:

Beyond the Skills for Education and Employment program, the absence of an adult literacy and numeracy policy or facilitating structures in most jurisdictions adds another layer of difficulty to achieving community-based outcomes for adult learning. At the present time programs designed to build English language literacy and numeracy (outside VET or employment targets) for remote Aboriginal people simply do not fit in an existing policy or program area. (Guenther et al 2017, p. 33)

The report ***Aboriginal adult English language literacy and numeracy in the Northern Territory: a statistical overview***¹³ provides further evidence of the need for action, and clear and specific policy recommendations.

¹¹ Derrick, J, 2012, Embedding literacy and essential skills in workplace learning: breaking the solitudes, Centre for Literacy, Montreal, viewed 18 Jan 2019, <http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/sites/default/files/Embed_LES_J_Derrick.pdf>.

¹² Guenther, J., Bat, M., Stephens, A., Skewes, J., Boughton, B., Williamson, F., Woollorton, S., Marshall, M. and Dwyer, A. (2017). *Enhancing training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners*. Adelaide: NCVER.

¹³ Shalley, F., & Stewart, A. (2017). *Aboriginal adult English language literacy and numeracy in the Northern Territory: a statistical overview*. Charles Darwin University.

Appendix: Adult learners' stories

Sue's Story

I was born in the Mallee and I grew up in the area around Hamilton. I hated school. Looking back, sometimes it feels like I never went to school. It's almost like there was no school experience for me. It's all so very blurry. It was just hard for me to take a lot in. I didn't care either. I didn't think it was worth knowing. What I did learn, I think I probably blocked out. Even today I surprise myself with things that come out of my head. I wonder, where did that come from or how did I know that.

I got put into a home for girls as an uncontrollable child because I wouldn't stay at school. They had a school set up at the home but as long as you could add up, do long division, and write your name, in their view you had completed your schooling. I certainly wasn't educated. I wasn't given books. None of that was encouraged.

When I finally left there, I went downhill in terms of my mental health. Finally, a friend broke through the barrier I had created and got me help and I was encouraged to go to Southern Grampians Adult Education (SGAE). Initially, I didn't want to do it. I thought I would be a failure. I was sure I would be ridiculed because of my age. I didn't have any idea that I knew quite as much as I do know.

When I first started, as the tutors remind me, I would sit with my head bowed down. I wouldn't look at anyone. I was too scared to answer questions, for fear of being wrong. I was so frightened. I remember the first day very clearly. They needed to work out where I was, in terms of my reading and writing, so they got me to write the word CAT. I remember I shook so much you would look at that writing and think that a small child had written it. When I started I shook, and I shook, and I shook. I sat there the whole time with my head down.

I have been coming to SGAE for a few years now. I even went out and bought a computer. I am still learning how to use it. It has opened up such a new world for me. I think improvement has happened for me through a lot of encouragement from the staff. I had been told all my life that I was stupid. I was scared of failure. I had made the choice to withdraw and I convinced myself that I didn't know any better.

I suppose I have always wanted encouragement. It's interesting, just when I think I might be unable to learn anymore, I do learn more. You are never too old. The learning is endless. I absorb so much. Sometimes I wish I could go to school every day. It seems so easy to learn. It's fun too.

When you find some success in learning, you can be more open and involved in the community. Say for example with the election and voting. I

had never voted before, never, up until five years ago, which is precisely the time that I started coming here. Learning gave me the confidence to want to vote, and to be interested in doing it. Suddenly I took note of what was going on and why it was going on.

There was one activity that we did in class where we were encouraged to write a list of some of the issues that we thought our local Council should look into. So I started writing about people in wheelchairs because my Dad was in a wheelchair and my Mum is on a walker. From there, I started looking at different issues around town that should be dealt with. Before I came here I wouldn't have even thought about those issues. My mind has been opened. Previously, I could not even read the newspaper. Now I can't wait to get it. I read it as I'm having my breakfast. I can be a bit of an ogre if I'm interrupted while reading the newspaper.

I want to do further education. I would love to do my HSC. It probably sounds silly at my age but I would like to try. There is still a little part of me that is scared of looking into it because I am fearful that I won't be able to do it. But it's something I've always wanted to do. It always seems to be there in the back of my head. Maybe it's time I moved it to the front of my head, and put the steps in motion.

I would just love to see more people take that step and come to places like SGAE. You just don't know what doors can be opened for you. I know with me, when I took that first step I never dreamed I would still be here, that I would still be learning. I am a different person now. I am happy. I love to learn. I look forward to coming. I suppose over time I felt I could trust the people here. I felt safe. I had never had that. It means I have come out of myself. I can't explain it. The teachers are fantastic and that makes learning so much easier. There is a great atmosphere in the class. Now I will go home and get straight on the computer, and think to myself, I know how to do this. Sometimes I wish I could go to school every day. It seems so easy to learn. It's fun too.

A personal journey towards education

Every time I see one of those ads on the TV of someone who has won some money on a scratchy, I think of the time when I had won and lost \$50,000 because I could not read.

It was a Tuesday like any other Tuesday. I was just walking around with nowhere to go, just looking at the world go by. As I was walking I was thinking it would be a good idea to buy a scratchy. I am a superstitious person so I started to think where I should buy it, and when. But I was looking for a job, so I put my mind on that for a minute, then, I thought it was too good a day to worry about it. As I was walking along, I saw a newsagent, so I decided to go and buy a scratchy and a paper. I went in

and stood at the counter and looked at all the scratchies. The man behind the counter came over to me.

‘Can I help you?’

‘Yes’, I said. He looked at me.

He said ‘Do you want a Lotto?’

‘No’, I said, ‘I’d like a scratchy’.

He grabbed at the one dollar ones.

‘No’, I said, ‘I’d like a five dollar one.’

With an expressionless look on his face, ‘Which one? There are four types so would you like one of each type?’ he said with a painted smile on his face. Feeling a little silly, I said:

‘Can I have one of the pyramid ones?’ I had seen it on the TV. He ripped one off and handed it to me. I gave him the five dollars and went outside to scratch it. This is when I got into trouble. At this time of my life I had not started at TAFE, so I couldn’t read what to do. I looked at the scratchy and felt like a fool. I walked out of the shop. I started to walk down the road and then I said to myself ‘go back to the shop and ask the newsagent to show you how to do it’.

Feeling good, I went back to the shop. When I got there the newsagent was arguing with an old lady. I stood there and waited. It seemed to be going on forever. Someone else came into the newsagent. And in between arguing with the old lady, he served the man. I was still standing there waiting. All the time I was thinking ‘why can’t I read how to scratch it?’

So I went to the bench to look at it. I looked at it. I looked at the wall. I looked at my feet. The newsagent was arguing with the old lady again. It was too much for me. I lost it! All the years of not being able to read got to me at that one time. I went back to the counter. The newsagent was serving everyone but me. I was invisible to him at the counter. I went back to the bench. I looked at the scratchy in my hand. I looked at the people at the bus stop, hoping one of them would come in and help me. I felt like I was in a hole with no way out. It got too much for me. I just had to scratch it and be rid of it.

What happened next I will never forget. I just started scratching and before I knew what had happened, I had scratched all the squares off. On my scratchy, there were three \$50 000 squares! Yes! I had won \$50 000! Goodbye work. Hello holidays. There was a man standing beside me, and

in my euphoria, I said to him, 'I've got a winner!', then I swaggered back to the counter to show my winning ticket. I handed it to the newsagent. As I waited for him to say 'congratulations', my whole world seemed to stop as he said, 'You had \$50 000, now you haven't. You've scratched too many squares.' With a smirking smile across his face, he now explained to me how I should have played the game. I had blown it by scratching too many squares, even though it was a winning ticket.

I felt like I wanted to go into a crack in the footpath and hide. The newsagent just went on serving people. I folded the ticket in half and left the shop. Then I remembered the ad I had seen on TV for adult literacy. So here I am. No richer for the scratchy. But since I have been coming to TAFE, I have found myself with other riches – of friendship and knowledge.

Story by Mark Collyer



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Haymarket, NSW 1240

20 December, 2019

To whom it may concern,

Re: Submission to Productivity Commission's National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review

The NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council is a membership based peak-body of adult literacy and numeracy practitioners, teacher educators, program and curriculum managers and researchers in NSW. We thank the opportunity to make submission to the Review of the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development. Please find our submission attached. We have limited our response to the area of **Service provision for disadvantaged groups**. Members of the Council would be very to speak further with any of the members of the Commission to elaborate or clarify any parts of our submission.

Yours sincerely

Dr Keiko Yasukawa, President

Service provision for disadvantaged groups

INFORMATION REQUEST 19

- If governments agree to extend programs to improve language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) skills, who should these programs be targeted to?

The following groups are currently not well served by existing LLND provision and should be targeted for LLND provision:

1. a number of vulnerable groups of adults, including but not limited to:
 - a. adults who have been educationally disadvantaged;
 - b. homeless adults who cannot access programs due to their housing status;
 - c. prison inmates;
 - d. adults with a disability whose educational needs are not being addressed in available programs;
 - e. migrants who were not able to access the Adult Migrant English Program during their eligibility period due to other pressures of settlement, but who now have the time and resources to participate in English language learning;
 - f. adults who are not eligible or are not job-seekers who want to improve their literacy and numeracy skills to help their children or grandchildren's studies or who want to develop their LLND skills to participate more fully in the community.
 2. workers who need to improve their LLND skills to sustain their employment, or workers who need to retrain and require LLND skills to access and succeed in the retraining.
 3. adults in remote communities, including Indigenous Australians for whom 'standard' English may be an additional language or dialect.
- What is the role of the VET sector in teaching foundational skills as opposed to other sectors, such as schools?

LLND skills are lifelong and lifewide skills; development of these skills necessarily occurs across the lifespan and in different domains of people's life. For this reason, it has been known for many years that there is no single measure or benchmark for foundational skills needed in adult lifeⁱ. LLND development occurs as children and adults meet new demands, initially within the home when children learn to communicate their needs (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills – BICS), then in school as they learn the disciplinary literacies and numeracies of the school subjects (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency – CALP)ⁱⁱ and then the literacies and numeracies required to negotiate increasing responsibilities in other domains of their life including at work, further education and training and in their community. Thus, many students who leave school with supposedly adequate foundational skills, will find that those skills are not adequate in other domains of their life.

In addition, adult literacy practitioners are constantly made aware of many students who, for diverse reasons, emerge from school without sufficient foundational skills to

equip them for everyday life and their future vocational needs. Their struggle to master the foundational skills has often been complicated by a range of reasons including those related to emotional, health, family and psychological factors. Success in school is undoubtedly an advantage in adulthood in both human and social capital terms; therefore, in the current review, it would be fruitful to survey the adequacy and efficacy of support structures in place for English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) students and those students for different reasons who are requiring extra literacy/ numeracy support. While it may be beyond the scope of this review, issues of bullying and other negative experiences that young people may experience in school can contribute to early exits from schools, which without appropriate intervention may lead to disengagement from education and training and poor social outcomes. Many of the students who find themselves in adult basic education/ adult foundation skills programs are those who report not having had the kinds of support in school and not only had an unsuccessful experience of schooling, but also carried the shame of not learning 'the basics' into their adulthood. A significant challenge for a new policy to address is reaching those who are educationally disadvantaged but due to reasons of perceived stigma (and other reasons) are difficult to reach even when there are programs that might benefit them. Some of the stories of adult literacy learners, including in other OECD countries, will attest to the long-lasting damage that the neglect of school children's literacy and numeracy needs can have on their social outcomes, self-confidence, self-esteem and ability to set life goals.ⁱⁱⁱ This is not surprising given language, literacy and numeracy – and increasingly digital skills, are meaning-making and communicative resources in everything we do.

While the school system ought to provide equitable access and opportunities for a good education for all children, there will always be students for whom the school system does not work. This may include but are not limited to factors related to the students' family situation, poor health, multiple relocations or some complex interactions between one or more of these. The needs of these students may not be recognised by the schools, resulting in the students' academic failure or non-completion. Therefore, relying on the school system to 'eliminate' adults who do not have adequate LLND skills to sustain them throughout their adult life will fail.

There is also ample research that shows that when literacy and numeracy skills are not used in social practices, they are lost: 'use it or lose it'; on the other hand, engagement in literacy and numeracy practices helps to maintain and develop those literacy and numeracy skills acquired through education and training. Longitudinal studies provide compelling evidence of this^{iv}, and importantly, analysis of data from the recent OECD PIAAC data suggests that there is a correlation between *engagement in literacy and numeracy practices* and *social outcomes*, even among those who exhibit low levels of proficiencies in literacy and numeracy^v. Thus, together with understanding the skills proficiencies of adults, we must also understand whether their skills are being productively utilised.

What research suggests is that consideration for improving the LLND proficiencies of adults in Australia needs to go beyond focusing on the assessed proficiency levels as the only primary source of information about the needs of adults with low LLND proficiencies. While much has been made of poor performance in the reporting of the literacy and numeracy skills proficiency data in Australia and elsewhere, for example in the most recent and earlier OECD adult skills surveys^{vi}, those types of data alone cannot tell us what the actual LLND needs are for those scoring at the lower levels.

As argued above, unless adults themselves are perceiving and experiencing the need to improve their LLND skills in order to participate in social practices – work, community or family life – they will not invest in LLND programs, even if more programs are made available. The ‘needs’ expressed by the government or even the training providers through curricula and training unit descriptors are necessarily generic because they are not based on the individuals’ broader needs and aspirations. Many adults with low proficiency levels in LLND may not readily relate to broad statements of LLND skills.

Work undertaken by the European High Level Expert Group on literacy as well as UNESCO on the *literate environment* has much to offer.^{vii} A *literate environment* refers to the extent to which, in any given social environment, there is “something interesting and/or necessary to read, or situations that required reading and writing in any form, as well as material and infrastructure available, such as books, newspapers, paper”^{viii}. This concept is also being extended to a concept of the *numerate environment* and a literate or numerate environment is experienced by individuals in terms of:

- the *demands* that the practices may make on the adult.
- the *opportunities* the practices may offer to the adult engaged in them.
- the *supports / resources* offered, or conversely the *barriers* existing (or put up) within these practices, and cultures more generally, that impede the adult’s numerate [or numerate] development.^{ix}

This means that if the workers are employed in labour that makes minimal demand on their LLND skills, and the few demands they are unable to negotiate on their own are negotiated by a more skilled co-worker who acts as a literacy or numeracy *mediator*, then those workers will not necessarily perceive a demand for further LLND skills in their workplace. Equally someone who does not have the LLND skills to make meaning of their home utility bill but whose family member has those skills would not necessarily see the need to take action to improve their own LLND skills.

None of this means that adults with low LLND proficiencies would not benefit from greater access to LLND programs. What it suggests is that adults will need to -

- perceive the *demand* for improved LLND skills themselves, and/or
- experience something which they could see as an *opportunity* to improve their LLND skills, and
- feel confident that there is *support and resources* to enable them to participate in learning.

It is important to note that what adults perceive as *supports and resources* are not limited to those that an education and training provider can offer; they are wide-ranging and include transportation access to get to class, economic resources (eg transport cost, organising care of family members if they are normally carers, tuition during paid worktime for meeting workplace LLND demands), and safety and social support (encouragement from family and community, lack of stigma). Absence of any of these could be perceived by the adult as a *barrier* to participation: that is, an individual’s agency and commitment to learning is influenced by the complex interactions of the ways in which they perceive the affordances and benefits of learning, the way they perceive themselves to be positioned as adult learners and the

extent to which they believe they have any control in their life circumstances. Thus, if they feel adults are labelled as failures or as impediments to the nation's economic growth and therefore mandated to attend LLND training, they will likely not be fully invested in their learning.^x

Initiatives are therefore needed to enhance the literate and numerate environments so that adults could recognise and experience the actual demands upon them and opportunities for improved LLND with support and resources to help them meet these demands and realise the opportunities. In other words, policies aimed at developing a more literate and numerate adult population are more likely to succeed if they are developed in tandem with social policies aimed at reducing social isolation and other factors that may limit individuals' capacity to access supports and take an active role in the community.

- How can regulatory, program and funding arrangements for foundation-level skills and education be improved? Can the schooling and VET sectors be better linked?

Firstly, following our response to the previous question, more effective regulatory, program and funding arrangements for foundation-level skills and education would need to take into account the environments in which adults with low literacy and numeracy proficiencies reside. This includes taking account of the full *linguascape and linguistic repertoires* in the individuals' communities, that is understanding what are the range of languages being used and how they are being used in the communities. Only then can there be any useful assessment of whether there is likely to be a *demand* for improved LLND skills, and if so, what kind of provision would respond to these demands, thereby being perceived by the adults themselves as *opportunities* for LLND development. Such assessments of the environment require skilled community outreach workers who are connected to, and trusted in, these communities. One approach to promoting LLND skills development in communities is to train community literacy and numeracy mediators^{xi}, outreach officers or organisers who not only support community members to negotiate their immediate LLND demands, but also points them to opportunities for education and training and other activities that may lead them to developing their LLND skills.

Secondly, workplaces have an increasingly important role in supporting LLND skills development as the nature of work and technologies at work change. It is therefore important to provide incentives for workplaces to be perceived by their workers as supportive literate and numerate environments in which they could see demands, opportunities, support and resources for LLND development. Unions have for a very long time played important roles in promoting learning in general, and literacy and numeracy learning in particular in workplaces. In the UK and other parts of the world, there are designated Union Learning Representatives who help their workers access training; this system is a less threatening way for workers to arrange for participation in training than being told by their employer to do so.^{xii} Creating a supportive literate and numerate environment has also been found to be critical in literacy and numeracy programs for retrenched workers who need to access VET courses to be retrained into jobs in a new industry; here too the unions have historically played a role in organising the workers to participate in such programs.^{xiii} The importance of having skilled, effective and trusted mediators/ organisers cannot be underestimated; in order for adults with low levels of LLND proficiencies to participate in learning, they will

need to feel that they are not singled-out or set up to experience failure, particularly if they are experiencing the threat or reality of losing their job.

Thirdly, there needs to be allowance for a diversity of programs. While quality is critical, including in terms of teacher qualifications, safe and well-resourced infrastructures, and defensible curricula and pedagogy it may not be necessary or appropriate for all programs to be formally accredited according to the VET framework. In some instances, accreditation requirements could compromise the responsiveness to identified community needs both in timeliness and in the ability to deliver a program carefully tailored to the identified needs. Program providers who employ highly qualified and experienced teachers are able to design programs targeting the authentic needs of the learner groups, and indeed find the 'work arounds' they have to do when constrained by the requirement to use standardised training packages to be unproductive.

Fourthly, there needs to be a recognition of the different needs of beginner English language learners and learners who may have low levels of literacy and numeracy but for whom English is their dominant language. Putting these students in the same class is not conducive for either group.

A fifth point is that LLND skills are context-dependent: literacy and numeracy and digital skills are used differently in different contexts, and programs need to be context-sensitive to ensure learners can see the benefit of their learning to the specific context of their investment in learning. But it is also important to recognise that the contexts themselves are fluid and unstable due to changing patterns of work, privatisation or outsourcing of aspects of social services, increasing use of online platform and reduction in face to face human interfaces for accessing social services, decline in some traditional industries and emergence of new industries, to name a few. Many of these changes demand greater self-reliance on individuals to access and verify information, particularly in relation to online privacy and security. This requires critical literacy and numeracy, in addition to having the procedural skills such as 'filling out forms' and making online payments.^{xiv}

- [How can funding arrangements between governments better support more efficient, effective and accessible services for disadvantaged groups?](#)

As mentioned above, there is a need for funding for non-accredited courses that can be designed and delivered in a timely manner to meet an emerging need. Such programs can in some situations create pathways for the individuals to continue into accredited education and training. The greatest challenge is to better identify the actual needs of people who are 'hard to reach' and provide supportive opportunities for them to develop their LLND for purposes with which they can identify. This means that there needs to be productive cooperation between people in communities - such as the community organisers/ literacy and numeracy mediators, and education and training providers who are prepared to work where the needs are, rather than rely on these learners to navigate through a heavily bureaucratic set of procedures. Thus funding must be extended to programs that might be delivered in or near, for example a large public housing estate, community centre, public libraries, and women's refuges.

As suggested above, this requires interweaving adult LLND policies into the fabric of broader social policies. If providers, particularly smaller community-based providers,

are required to seek small pockets of funding from different jurisdictions and sectors, this will be judged as barriers and disincentives. Program funding must be as seamlessly and efficiently delivered to providers as possible.

One specific area of funding that is becoming an area of acute need is in the renewal and development of a skilled and qualified LLND teaching workforce. The disestablishment of the Commonwealth adult LLN Practitioner Scholarship scheme (2010-2014), university courses specializing in adult LLN teacher education programs have collapsed. It is critical that this field receives an injection of funding to renew itself and to strengthen and broaden its scope of work. Adult LLN, like all areas of education should be informed by specialized knowledge and pedagogical models, as well as current international research; the Certificate 4 in Training and Education does not address the requisite knowledge required in this field. Like the field of adult English language teaching, the appropriate standard would be a postgraduate degree that includes specialist subjects in adult LLN theory and pedagogy.

Recommendations

In summary, we make the following recommendations:

1. Prioritise program development and funding to:
 - a. adults who have been educationally disadvantaged;
 - b. homeless adults who cannot access programs due to their housing status;
 - c. prison inmates;
 - d. adults with a disability whose educational needs are not being addressed in available programs;
 - e. migrants who were not able to access the Adult Migrant English Program during their eligibility period due to other pressures of settlement, but who now have the time and resources to participate in English language learning;
 - f. adults who are not eligible or are not job-seekers who want to improve their literacy and numeracy skills to help their children or grandchildren's studies or who want to develop their LLND skills to participate more fully in the community.
2. Develop and introduce a program for training literacy and numeracy mediators/organizers who help individuals in their immediate environments with their LLND demands, and who also encourage and broker education and training opportunities for them.
3. Create LLND learning centres with well-qualified LLND mediators in communities. Such centres can serve as informal non-threatening environment to assist those not ready for classes with higher LLND demands.
4. Design LLND policies within a broader socio-ecological perspective so that the full economic and social benefits of LLND development are achieved for the individual and their community.
5. Invest in renewing and expanding a well-qualified adult LLND workforce.

We believe that building a policy that embrace these recommendations would restore principles of equity and access into Australian VET and workforce development policy and practice.

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- ⁱ Wickert, R. (1989). *No single measure: a survey of Australian adult literacy*. Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training.
- ⁱⁱ See for example, Cummins, J. (2017). BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction. *Literacies and language education*, 59-71.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See for example, Furlong, T. & Yasukawa, K. (Eds). (2016). *Resilience: Stories of Adult Learning*. Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) and the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL); Barton, D. et al. (2007). *Literacy, lives and learning*. London: Routledge; Schuller, T. et al. (Eds). (2004). *The Benefits of Learning: The Impact of Education on Health, Family Life and Social Capital*. London: Routledge.
- ^{iv} Reder, S. (2009). Scaling up and moving in: Connecting social practices views to policies and programs in adult education. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 16(2)/ 17(1), 35–50; Reder, S., & Brynner, J. (Eds.). 2009). *Tracking adult literacy and numeracy skills: findings from longitudinal research*. New York: Routledge.
- ^v Grotlüschen, A., Mallows, D., Reder, S., & Sabbatini, J. (2016), "Adults with Low Proficiency in Literacy or Numeracy", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 131, OECD Publishing, Paris. Online: http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/adults-with-low-proficiency-in-literacy-or-numeracy_5jm0v44bnmnx-en
- ^{vi} For example, the OECD Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey, and the recent OECD Programme of International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).
- ^{vii} EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012). *Final Report: September 2012*. Online: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf; UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) (1997). *Literacy, Education and Social Development*. Hamburg: UIE.
- ^{viii} p. 82, from Lind, A. (2008). *Literacy for all: making a difference*. UNESCO. See also EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012). *Final Report: September 2012*. Online: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf, and Mallows, D & Litster, J. (2016) Literacy as supply and demand. *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, 39(2), 171–182 . doi: 10.1007/s40955-016-0061-1.
- ^{ix} p. 22 from Evans, J., Yasukawa, K., Mallows, D., & Creese, B. (2017). Numeracy skills and the numerate environment: Affordances and demands. *Adults Learning Mathematics: An International Journal*, 12(1), 17-26.
- ^x See for example the research on investment in language learning: Darwin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity and model of investment in applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 36-56.
- ^{xi} Baynham, M. (1995). *Literacy practices: Investigating Literacy in Social Contexts*. London: Longman.
- ^{xii} See for example, <https://www.tuc.org.uk/union-reps/learning-and-skills/union-learning-reps-ulrs>. And Yasukawa, K., Brown, T. & Black, S. (2012) Workplace literacy and numeracy learning: An opportunity for trade union renewal in Australia?, *International Journal of Training Research*, 10:2, 94-104, DOI: 10.5172/ijtr.2012.10.2.94
- ^{xiii} Keating, M. (2012). Developing Social Capital In 'Learning Borderlands': Has the Federal Government's budget delivered for low-paid Australian workers? *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*., 20(1), 5-24.
- ^{xiv} See for example, Yasukawa, K., & Evans, J. (2019). Adults' numeracy practices in fluid and unstable contexts—An agenda for education, policy and research? *Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung: Journal for Research on Adult Education*. DOI: [10.1007/s40955-019-00145-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40955-019-00145-z)



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17 July, 2020

To whom it may concern,

Re: Submission to Productivity Commission's National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review on their Interim Report

The NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council is a membership-based peak-body of adult literacy and numeracy practitioners, teacher educators, program and curriculum managers and academic researchers in NSW. Our field is what the VET policy currently calls Foundation Skills, and which the Joyce Review calls LLND. We thank the opportunity to make submission on the Interim Report from the Commission's Review of the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development. We note that we did make a submission when the Review first commenced, and we also made a submission into the Joyce review (attached).

Our response to the Commission's recommendations and information requests are limited to only those most relevant to our field. One additional comment that we would like to make concerns the observation made in the Commission's Interim Report, but not addressed in the Recommendations, about the 'persistent concern' (Interim report, p. 13) about teacher quality and minimum qualification level (Certificate 4 TAE). The area of Foundation Skills or LLND serves some of the most vulnerable student groups and requires highly professional and well-qualified practitioners to address these students' needs. Although the need to integrate and embed LLN development for all learners in all VET courses has been recognised, the strategy of simply including an additional unit in the Certificate 4 TAE was misguided and is inadequate. This has been shown to be a retrograde step for the VET sector in general, as was argued by this Council¹ and many others at the time. Employment of specialist LLN teachers by VET providers not only assists those learners who struggle with the LLND demands of their course, but it can improve VET teachers' pedagogies, for example through modelling the design of learner-friendly student notes, assessment tasks and being attentive to learner needs.²

There is an urgent need for workforce renewal and growth, and incentives for people who want to work in the LLND area in VET to gain the appropriate postgraduate qualification. It is also important that the quality assurance process assures that every RTO offering VET qualifications up to

¹ NSW Adult Literacy & Numeracy Council 2018, 'Response to PwC's case for change in the TAE training package', http://www.nswalnc.org.au/doc/Submission%20to%20PWC%20Skills%20for%20Australia_TAE_030418.pdf.

² Ivanic, R., Edwards, R., Barton, D., Martin-Jones, M., Fowler, Z., Hughes, B., ... & Smith, J. (2009). *Improving learning in college: Rethinking literacies across the curriculum*. Routledge.
Black, S., & Yasukawa, K. (2013). Disturbing the pedagogical status quo: LLN and vocational teachers working together. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 8(1), 44-59.

Certificate 4 level has the capability within their organisation to address the LLND needs of students enrolled in VET courses; this is essential if the Australian VET sector is to mitigate against the risk of another VET fee-help like scandal. Related to this is the need for a regular and systematic collection of teacher qualification levels nationally.

We hope the issue raised above, and the feedback attached will be duly considered by the Commission in their final deliberations.

Yours sincerely

Dr Keiko Yasukawa, President

Interim findings, reform directions and information requests – *response from the NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council*

Progress against the NASWD

INFORMATION REQUEST — ROLE OF COMPETITION IN THE VET MARKET

- *What role should competition play in meeting users' needs, including the quantity, type and quality, and regional accessibility of VET services?*
- *How should the efficiency of the VET market be measured?*
- *What is the appropriate (and exclusive) role of public providers, and why?*
- *Are additional consumer protection arrangements required to support a well-functioning VET market? What are the costs and benefits of different models of consumer protection established by governments, including ombudsmans' offices?*

While competition may be a key principle in the current VET policy, it is important to note that courses designed to help adults improve their English language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills are not, and should not be subjected to the market-logic because as acknowledged by others in their December 2019 submissions (for example, Adult learning Australia³, Business Council of Australia⁴, The Tasmanian Government⁵), as well as the Joyce Review, LLND is an enabler for effective learning in VET courses and in the workplace. In order to succeed in VET and in the workplace, adults must have the LLND skills to negotiate the administrative and financial demands of being a student, the academic demands of learning the content of the courses, the assessment demands in the course, and the wide range of communication and numeracy demands in the workplace. When measuring 'efficiency' of the VET market, the effectiveness of necessary learner support that ensures not just timely completions, but quality completions must be considered.

³ https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/248703/sub012-skills-workforce-agreement.pdf

⁴ https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/248767/sub016-skills-workforce-agreement.pdf

⁵ https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/248813/sub032-skills-workforce-agreement.pdf

One of the features of public VET providers (in particular, TAFE) that must be acknowledged is the pathway and the range of foundation courses and support services that are provided as an integral part of their social compact, for example:

Outreach to Foundation Skills to Certificate 1, 2, 3 courses to Certificate 4 & Diploma courses, supported by LLND learner support throughout as needed, as well as other student support services – counselling, disabilities consultants, Aboriginal student support, library, canteen

The above enables widening the participating in VET that many smaller or private providers can/ do not invest in. This means TAFE providers and other providers are not on a ‘level playing field’ in a competitive VET market.

Consumer protection in VET must include the provision of adequate and wrap-around support so that no student is left unsupported:

The start of a student’s transition into the institution commences with the provision of advice, guidance and support provided to the student during the enrolment process and commencement of their study program. Chittick (2017) observes that inadequate levels of support, together with uncertainty around the levels of academic preparedness during the enrolment and admission process, have a direct impact on feelings of competence and ability. The outcome of which is an almost immediate decline in engagement as students in this position are deterred from their learning.⁶

Whilst productive cooperation between providers may produce innovative approaches to provision in regional and sparsely populated areas, the promotion of a competitive training market serves to stifle such innovation. This is particularly so in the difficult area of LLND provision, with its need for flexibility and diversity.

INTERIM RECOMMENDATION 2.1 — INFORMATION ON VET SYSTEM PERFORMANCE

Australian, State and Territory governments should develop improved performance measures to provide a more complete picture of system performance. Any future sector-wide performance framework should better measure:

- total VET activity
- the contribution of VET to developing the foundation skills of Australians
- skills obtained through the VET system when students do not complete a course
- students’ longer-term labour market outcomes.

⁶ Van der Bergh, C. & Secombe, K. (2020). Bridging the gap: an investigation into developing strategies to improve student engagement, retention and learning outcomes. *AVETRA April 2020*
https://www.avetra.org.au/data/Research_today_April_2020.pdf

On the contribution of VET to developing the foundation skills of Australians, we can say the following. VET has a critical role in developing the foundation skills of Australians. It has long been widely accepted that foundation skills are very often best developed in real-life contexts, with the VET context offering a particularly rich literacy and numeracy context. Moreover, many VET students enter their training with LLND skills that are not adequate or appropriate to that training. Therefore, VET offers a unique opportunity to contribute to the development of the foundation skills of Australians. However, this requires planning and investment. In the past, well-resourced and supported specialist LN teachers formed an integral part of many TAFE systems, but as funding has been progressively withdrawn, this provision has become in many places tokenistic. For most private VET providers, it is a financially insurmountable issue.

As well as contributing to the LLND skills development for successful VET course outcomes, LLND programs delivered through the VET system can lead to important social outcomes including employment, health, participation in the community and trust in others as indicated in the OECD commissioned paper on the links between low literacy and numeracy and social outcomes⁷. These are not only benefits for individuals but are public benefits that mean fewer people on welfare dependencies, greater social cohesion and a larger active citizenry. In the context where there are so many sources of information of variable authenticity and reliability, it is critical, especially in relation to health, scientific, financial and legal information that all adults have the LLND skills to be *media literate* to be able to critically appraise both the information they access and its source. There is a crucial role for public, lifelong and lifewide education in helping adults to know who they can trust and what they can do to check information from sources they are unsure of. The opportunities for adults to develop the LLND skills to more confidently seek information, assist children with their learning, volunteering in the community and exercising their legal rights (e.g. against domestic violence, discrimination) are important for individuals, their families and communities in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

While it is important to know that efforts in VET in this area are well spent, measuring the effectiveness is, of course, non-trivial. However, longitudinal study suggests the benefits from LLND learning may take up to 10 years to surface in employment outcomes or further study⁸. Moreover, in a volatile labour market some adults may need to undergo substantial retraining at some stage in their life; this may require developing new LLND skills or refreshing what they have learned but have not been using in practice.

As well as VET's contribution to foundation skills development, one should also consider the contributions foundation skills provision makes to VET and industry. Without the learner support provided in TAFE providers, many VET learners will not achieve outcomes. This is

⁷ Grotluschen, A., Mallows, D., Reder, S. & Sabatini, J. (2016). *Adults with low proficiency in literacy or numeracy*. OECD. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jm0v44bnmnnx-en>

⁸ Reder, S. (2019). Developmental trajectories of adult education students: Implications for policy, research, and practice. In D. Perin (Ed.), *Wiley handbook of adult literacy* (pp. 429-450). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

acknowledged by industry as evidenced by submissions from the Australian Childcare Alliance⁹ and Hospitality NT¹⁰.

INFORMATION REQUEST – CAREER GUIDANCE FOR STUDENTS

What changes could be made to ensure school students have appropriate career information and advice?

Based on the experiences of teachers working in the foundation skills area, it seems evident that there is a need to for effective alternatives for 15/16 year olds who now must stay at school until year 12 but who have disengaged from learning as it is not meeting their needs. We understand that often calls to the Reading Writing Hotline by teachers and community workers on behalf of groups of young adults disengaged from high school with no appropriate age appropriate literacy learning materials and who acknowledge that their low literacy is one of the main barriers to them participating in VET. Research suggests that:

More resourcing of careers advice in schools, particularly access to individualised advice; [and]

Exercise caution in out-sourcing employment services and apprenticeship intermediary services to for-profit companies, or at least institute additional monitoring activities.¹¹

A new agreement to guide policy

INTERIM RECOMMENDATION 2.2 — A NEW PRINCIPLES-BASED AGREEMENT

Australian, State and Territory governments should negotiate a new, principles-based intergovernmental agreement. Such an agreement should commit governments to developing an efficient, competitive market driven by the informed choices of students and employers. The agreement's principles should include:

- centring policy on the consumer, including information provision for informed choice
- equitable access
- recognition of fiscal sustainability and the stability of funding
- transparency about where funding is allocated, including detailed information on course subsidies, costs and the size and nature of funding to public providers
- efficient pricing and delivery
- designing incentives to increase the likelihood of eliciting training

⁹ https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/248833/sub046-skills-workforce-agreement.pdf

¹⁰ https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/248798/sub023-skills-workforce-agreement.pdf

¹¹ Smith, E., & Foley, A. (2020). Young futures: Education, training and employment decision-making in nonmetropolitan areas. *AVETRA April 2020* https://www.avetra.org.au/data/Research_today_April_2020.pdf

INTERIM RECOMMENDATION 2.2 — A NEW PRINCIPLES-BASED AGREEMENT

- competitive neutrality between public and private provision
- neutral, but not equivalent, treatment of the VET and higher education sectors.

Regarding equitable access and transparency about funding allocation, it is important that all levels of courses are always available. There has been a shrinkage of lower level courses, which means that learners who are not ready for the higher-level courses are denied access or set up to fail. It appears that learners in the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) programs are often inappropriately placed in Certificate III courses even when they are assessed to be ready for a Certificate I course, simply so that they can gain a subsidy. This is not a good use of public money, creates unnecessary stress for the learner and their teacher, and damages the integrity of the Certificate III qualification. If subsidies are to be tied to levels of qualifications, they need to ensure that it does not lead to the kind of practices just described.

Regarding incentives, it is crucial to consider who the incentives are paid to and the possible consequences and risks.

INFORMATION REQUEST — DESIGNING A NEW INTERGOVERNMENTAL AGREEMENT

If a new principles-based agreement was negotiated in line with interim recommendation 2.2:

- *how should it consider other educational sectors, informal training and non-government funded training?*
- *what other mechanisms to facilitate reform and improve accountability would best complement an agreement?*

The importance of non-accredited or pre-accredited training has been well demonstrated. In their previous submission, Adult Learning Australia noted " ...research in Victoria shows that pathways from pre-accredited to industry level vocational training and jobs are actually stronger than from Certificate I and IIs" (ALA, 2019)."¹²

Having a range of entry points and avenues to them is important for those needing to access foundation skills programs. It is widely known that poor literacy and numeracy attract social stigma, and this in turns acts as a barrier for adults to seek help in improving their literacy¹³.

¹² https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/248703/sub012-skills-workforce-agreement.pdf

¹³ Presentation about the Reading Writing Hotline, 2020 at <http://www.nswalnc.org.au/ACAL%20Conf%20PDF/IlesACAL2019.pdf>;
Buddeberg, K. (2019) Supporters of low literate adults, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 38:4, 420-432, DOI: 10.1080/02601370.2019.1600059

Poor literacy can affect people in the quality of and independence in their everyday life¹⁴. Therefore, investment in foundation skills provision needs to involve ‘outreach’ to those who are reluctant to disclose their poor skills level. Many adults, especially those who have experienced ‘failure’ in education in the past, are likely to respond more positively to non-accredited courses which would be less high stakes. Non-accredited courses can also be more flexible in its approach and focus, thus better able to meet the specific needs of the most in need cohorts.

Trade apprenticeship and traineeship incentives

INFORMATION REQUEST — EMPLOYER INCENTIVES TARGETING DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

What are the benefits and costs of targeting disadvantaged groups for additional incentives at the Certificate II, and Certificate III and above qualification levels?

Targeting disadvantaged groups will lead to widening participating in VET. By providing good learner support and career guidance to all VET students, they could contribute productively in the labour market and lead more fulfilling lives.

Training package development

INFORMATION REQUEST — FLEXIBILITY ALLOWED BY TRAINING PACKAGES

How could the approach to developing training packages more effectively manage the trade-offs between consistency and flexibility?

Flexibility is necessary in foundation skills; however, the current FSK training package is not flexible enough for the diversity of contexts in which foundation skills are needed. There is a need for flexibility for RTOs to develop curriculum that is suitable for the needs of their students so that students for whom the FSK is not suitable can have their needs met. Learners should not be expected to fit their needs to the training package; curricula need to be designed to address the learners’ needs: this is a basic educational program design principle. While it is important that proficiency levels achieved through different curricula can be compared, this

¹⁴ Adkins, N. R., & Ozanne, J. L. (2005). Critical Consumer Education: Empowering the Low-Literate Consumer. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 25(2), 153–162.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146705280626>;

Easton, P., Entwistle, V. A., & Williams, B. (2013). How the stigma of low literacy can impair patient-professional spoken interactions and affect health: insights from a qualitative investigation. *BMC health services research*, 13(1), 319.

can be achieved if all curricula are benchmarked against relevant proficiency frameworks, for example the Australian Core Skills Framework or the ISLPR.

Investment in public provision

INFORMATION REQUEST — INVESTMENT IN PUBLIC PROVISION

In feedback on interim recommendation 6.3, the Commission requests information on:

- *the funding, monitoring and outcomes delivered under community service obligations*
- *any changes to funding models, or other actions, that governments should undertake to address any potential breach of competitive neutrality principles in relation to VET services*
- *the funding mechanism (for example, training subsidies or block funding) best suited to efficient and effective service delivery in ‘thin markets’*
- *how future funding arrangements to promote national consistency should incorporate any additional (non-subsidy) funding to public providers, if at all.*

We are not in a position to comment on the CSO allocation or use in all the different RTOs in NSW. We have been informed that TAFE NSW have CSO and can show its benefits and applications with many and varied vocational enrolments. They have clear guidelines on the use of CSO funding and track undertake financial tracking.

CSO funding provides TAFE NSW students with the support required to support pathway students to successful completion. It also ensures support for the most disengaged and disadvantaged students. The students supported by CSO fund are supported and managed by innovative initiatives developed by the body of professionally trained LLN teachers, Outreach coordinators, Disability Consultants, Counsellors, Aboriginal Engagement Coordinators and Multicultural Coordinators.

We receive anecdotal evidence of smaller RTOs without necessary professionals to support disadvantaged learners are enrolling VET students and reaching out to RTOs such as TAFE to provide support, often language, literacy and numeracy learner support. If the principle of competitive neutrality is to apply, then the capability of RTOs to provide support for disadvantaged learners must be confirmed before they are even allowed to be part of the ‘competition’. There is currently little transparency to learners about what they can expect in terms of support for disadvantaged learners.

New developments in the VET sector

INFORMATION REQUEST — THE CHALLENGES OF ONLINE DELIVERY

- *What is the scope to increase the use of fully online delivery of VET, with what advantages, risks and policy challenges?*

INFORMATION REQUEST — THE CHALLENGES OF ONLINE DELIVERY

- *How should subsidy arrangements be configured for payments across jurisdictions for online delivery of services?*
 - *What subsidy, pricing and costing approaches are appropriate for services that have high fixed costs and low incremental costs?*
 - *To what degree could accreditation be separated from training?*
 - *What types of training are most suited to innovative models of training?*
 - *What actions would governments need to take to maximise the potential for the adoption of innovative delivery of training or new types of training?*
-

Innovative teaching is often associated with the use of digital delivery and/or online teaching and learning resources. While not denying the potential for digital delivery and materials to be effective and necessary (e.g. in the COVID situation), we caution against this very limited understanding of innovation in education and training. There are other aspects of teaching and learning that are innovative or waiting for innovation. In the foundation skills area, there innovation is needed in the instruments for and approach to programming. While the current FSK may be adequate as a framework for supporting work-oriented programs, it is not suitable for those students who are accessing literacy, numeracy and digital skills programs to increase their participation in their community and to overcome socio-cultural barriers to leading a healthy and independent life. As mentioned earlier, more informal/ non-accredited programs would be a worthy innovation in this area.

Another related innovation needed to address the LLND skills needs in the community (and to create a pathway into accredited VET programs) is in the area of community outreach. As already discussed, many adults with poor literacy are aware of the social stigma attached to poor literacy and will not themselves approach a VET provider for help. Many would prefer to hide their lack of reading and writing skills at the expense of their quality of life and are more likely to engage in informal and non-accredited or pre-accredited LN programs as an initial pathway to VET¹⁵ It follows that more accessible points of contact between adult literacy support services and adults in the community are needed. The ‘campaign’ model presented in the submission by the Literacy for Life submission¹⁶ is one model where a community organiser recruits community members to join a literacy class. This may be more suitable in smaller country towns. Another model is to have adult literacy officers working in the community as a literacy mediator/ broker/ intermediary¹⁷; that is, someone in the community who a person can go to for help in negotiating official documents (including digital documents). They could be located in, or rotate between neighbourhood houses, local shopping centres,

¹⁵ Iles, V. & Osmond, P. 2019, 'Ring, Ring. Who's still there? An analysis of callers to the Reading Writing Hotline', *Fine Print*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 3 - 7.

¹⁶ https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/248820/sub037-skills-workforce-agreement.pdf

¹⁷ Papen, U. (2010). Literacy mediators, scribes or brokers? *Langage et société*, 133(3), 63–82.

Thompson, S. (2015). Literacy mediation in neighbourhood houses. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 55(3), 477–495.

public libraries, homeless shelters or public housing estates: somewhere that anyone needing help could feel comfortable visiting. These literacy mediators could be jointly funded by the local government, local LLND program providers, the state government and be expected not only to provide the literacy support but also to advise the people who come for help where they can develop their LLND skills to gain greater independence. For LLND, this kind of investment is needed if substantial impact is to be made.

INFORMATION REQUEST — IMPACTS OF COVID-19

- *What, if any, are the likely medium and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on skill formation and the market in the VET sector?*
 - *To the extent that some cohorts face enduring displacement from the labour market, particularly younger Australians, what role beyond current arrangements should VET play in augmenting their skills and employability?*
-

Those with lower levels of literacy are locked out of the VET system if unable to access online education.

The Reading Writing Hotline has received calls during COVID from those who have lost their employment and are needing to reskill or who have identified the need to improve skills in their current job, parents of children having to home-school, and people currently enrolled in literacy and VET classes who are unable to complete their studies. The Hotline is sending out hardcopy learning resources and investing time to find tutors to work with them over the phone as there are no other alternatives. There is a need for short distance courses available to support adult learners, not just long FSK certificate courses.

A large percentage of those who accessed TAFE's free online COVID led recovery courses indicated they had LLN needs. These needs were not able to be met and may explain what has been reflected in the higher subject withdrawal rates and lower course completion rates seen in online delivery.¹⁸

There is an important role LLND education can play in the COVID recovery. However, diversity of provision types is key in improving the foundation/ LLND skills levels nationally. LLND programs based in VET, such as TAFE adult literacy programs, are important in acting as a conduit or pathway into further study in a broad range of VET programs. This dovetails effectively with LLND Learner Support programs in place to support students in vocational courses: learners are already connected with LLND teachers within the college.

But not all learners are ready to participate successfully in a formal VET context, so community based LLND is vital as a preparatory step – this can be in a variety of sites including neighbourhood centres, community colleges, public libraries, women's refuge among others.

¹⁸ Griffiths, T. (2020) Online delivery of VET qualifications: current use and outcomes. *AVETRA April 2020*
https://www.avetra.org.au/data/Research_today_April_2020.pdf

1. The Review will have regard to VET funding, policy and regulatory settings and how they can be optimised to support both school leavers and workers to maximise the achievement of relevant skills and employment outcomes from the VET sector.

Australia needs a lifelong education policy. The opportunities and right to access education and training throughout one's lifetime should be both promoted and made visible in policy in a society where rapid technological change and globalisation are requiring people to continually learn new knowledge and skills in order to contribute productively to the economy and in civic life. Adult literacy and numeracy is foundational to all forms and areas of learning, and therefore the field is in need of a supporting policy.

2. It will examine skills shortages in VET-related occupations, in particular any tension between VET outcomes and the needs of industries and employers, and what might be done to better align these.
3. It will consider expected changes in future work patterns and the impact of new technologies and how the VET sector can prepare Australians for those changes and the opportunities they will bring.

See point 8 regarding the need for a renewed workplace adult language, literacy and numeracy program.

4. The Review may consider the flexibility of qualification structures, particularly for mid-career workers, and for industries seeking rapid deployment of new skills.

As discussed under point 6, the need for flexibility of qualification structures in adult literacy and numeracy/ foundation skills is critical. Adult literacy and numeracy is not an industry and there is no 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum or training package that is appropriate for all of the diverse learners and their diverse needs. Over standardising the curriculum means that individual learners' needs will not be adequately met.

5. The Review may have regard to community perceptions of the effectiveness of the VET sector and the accessibility and utility of information about VET options and outcomes, both for employers and students, including information linking training options to employment outcomes.

It is crucial that governments – both Federal and states – do everything possible to restore public confidence in Australia's VET system. There are large numbers of young adults in Australia who, for a range of reasons did not finish secondary schooling or had an unsuccessful educational experience. There are also older adults who have a personal and/ or economic need to develop their English language, literacy and numeracy

in order to address changing demands and opportunities in their lives. These adults all deserve a quality post-secondary education system that they can trust and access.

6. It may review whether additional support is needed for vulnerable cohorts, including those currently unemployed and at risk of unemployment, or those with low literacy and numeracy skills.

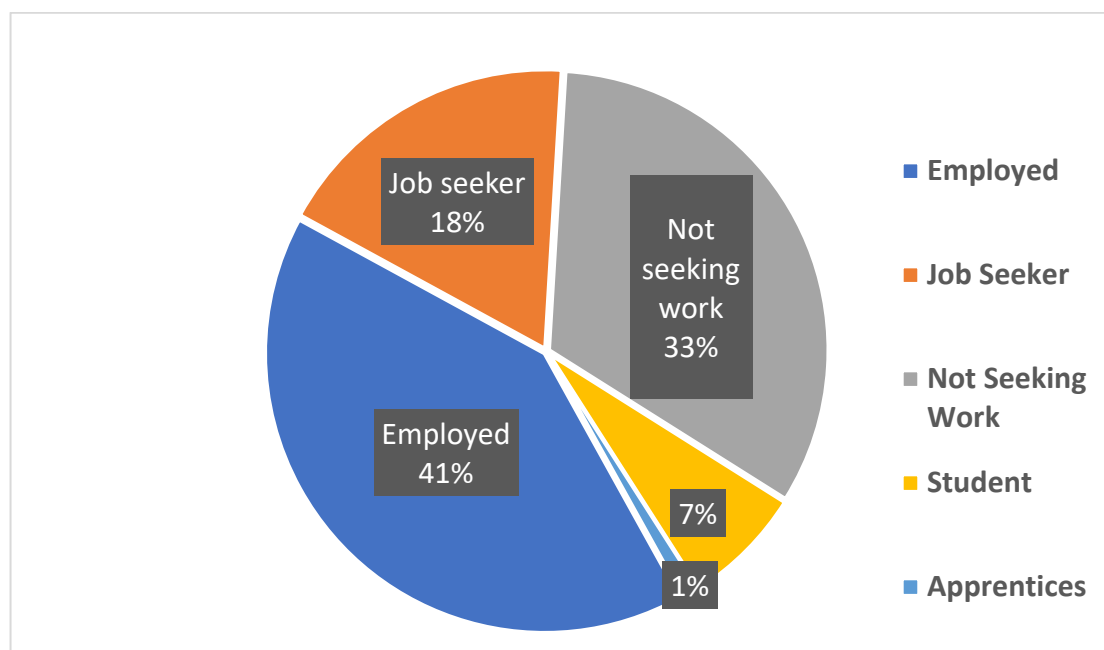
There is no question that additional support is needed for vulnerable cohorts, including those currently unemployed and at risk of unemployment, or those with low literacy and numeracy skills.

Historically, very little information has been collated concerning the clients (and potential clients) of language, literacy and numeracy provision in Australia. However, statistics collected on the callers to the Reading Writing Hotline provide some important background information in considering the needs of such adults¹. The Reading Writing Hotline is a national, Commonwealth funded phone service for adults who are seeking information related to adult literacy. The Hotline's statistics therefore represent a national sample of adults who feel that their literacy and numeracy skills are not adequate for their everyday functioning in the personal, social and/or work domains and who are therefore seeking appropriate LLN services. The Hotline has collected demographic information on its callers since its inception in 1974, and has demonstrated patterns that have remained very consistent in many important aspects, such as gender (predominantly male), age (predominantly 25-40 yrs) and language background (predominantly English speaking background).

The following statistic in particular is relevant to the argument the NSWALNC has made concerning the gap in provision.

¹ Iles, V. *Working together to improve literacy: Reading Writing Hotline and libraries*, Conference presentation, ACAL, 2018, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jJPqEPyDjmsGyLCY8jsmFsoVrSeO20DH/view>

Employment Status of callers (2016- 17 reporting period)



The graph shows that only 18% of callers are jobseekers who can be referred to a SEE program. While there is insufficient funded provision available other than the SEE program for jobseekers, 33% of callers are not seeking work and a further 41% are already employed. There is a paucity of programs to which the Hotline can refer such callers.

Adults with low literacy and numeracy proficiencies

A further important statistic is related to the ratio between callers from an English as the first language (L1), and English as an additional language background. In the period reported, 81% of callers were from an English as L1 background, showing that there is a significant number of adults whose literacy and numeracy needs are not explained by their first language.

Another statistical source of information about the state of adult literacy and numeracy is the results of Australia's performance in the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (SAS). Most of the media and industry reports have focussed on how Australia was placed in the international league tables (5th in literacy and 15th in numeracy among the 34 participating countries)². However, what has attracted less focus and which is arguably of equal if not greater significance, is what the SAS results can tell us about the social outcomes of the not insignificant proportion of those surveyed who demonstrated low literacy and numeracy proficiencies³.

² OECD, 2016, Skills Matter: Further Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, viewed 8 December 2018 at http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Skills_Matter_Further_Results_from_the_Survey_of_Adult_Skills.pdf

³ 'Some 12.6% of adults in Australia attain only Level 1 or below in literacy proficiency ... and 20.1% attain Level 1 or below in numeracy At Level 1 in literacy, adults can read brief texts on familiar topics and locate a

Analysis undertaken by international researchers on the self-reported data of SAS participants who were assessed as having low proficiencies found that:

*Although, they are more likely than the rest of the population to exhibit certain characteristics, such as lower levels of educational attainment, lower rates of employment or more disadvantaged backgrounds, adults with low literacy are found among all socio-demographic groups and in all walks of life. For most outcomes, levels of engagement in literacy practices appear to be as strong predictors as proficiency, indicating the importance of encouraging more intense use of these skills both in and outside of work. Adults with low proficiency are considerably less likely than their more proficient peers to participate in formal or non-formal adult education or training programmes, which is mostly due to the socio-demographic and employment characteristics of this population. However **the lower participation rates among the low proficient adults does not appear to be a consequence of their lack of motivation as much as of the presence of various obstacles to participation, such as lack of time and the cost of training.** ⁴ (emphasis added)*

In this study, Australia was found to be among the three top countries where the variation in the degree of participation in adult education and training (both formal and informal) between those with higher literacy proficiencies and those with lower proficiency was the greatest – suggesting that those most in need are not accessing and participating in education and training. In addition to participation in education and training, literacy and numeracy proficiencies have been found to be correlated to other important social outcomes:

The link between higher literacy and such social outcomes as trust in others, participation in volunteer and associative activities, belief that an individual can have an impact on the political process, and better health is stronger in Australia than in most other countries⁵.

Thus access to adult education and training, and in particular literacy and numeracy development not only affords benefits to those individuals whose literacy and numeracy proficiencies improve, but have critical implications for social cohesion and democracy in Australia.

The appendix contains two case studies that provide a human face for these statistics. The first is a story selected and abridged from a collection

single piece of specific information identical in form to information in the question or directive. In numeracy, adults at Level 1 can perform basic mathematical processes in common, concrete contexts, for example, one-step or simple processes involving counting, sorting, basic arithmetic operations and understanding simple percentages'. From OECD, 2013, *Australia: Country Note – Survey of Adult Skills First Results* accessed 8 December 2018 at https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20Australia_final.pdf.

⁴ Grotlüschen, A. et al. (2016), *Adults with Low Proficiency in Literacy or Numeracy*, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 131. Accessed 8 December, 2018 at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jm0v44bnmnn-en>

⁵ OECD, 2013, *Australia: Country Note – Survey of Adult Skills First Results* accessed 8 December 2018 at https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20Australia_final.pdf.

of such student stories published by the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC)⁶. The second is a story written by an adult literacy learner on the theme of 'educational journeys'.⁷

Other priority areas

In addition to ensuring that the needs of those with the lowest literacy and numeracy proficiencies are met, there are other types of needs that require urgent attention. These include the needs of adults in 'low skilled' jobs who may have completed secondary or higher education but whose skills levels have declined as a result of lack of use. This group of workers is identified as being at high risk of unemployment when their jobs become redundant due to technological changes or overseas outsourcing. Another area of need is critical literacy and numeracy among workers in precarious employment or underemployment, or in workplaces where there are no worker representatives to educate workers about their rights and how to exercise them. It is clearly not enough to help people find employment if workers are not supported in continuing to develop skills in response to changing needs and forms of work. There are ways to involve workers in the identification and planning of workplace training and education. A new approach to workplace literacy and numeracy provision is needed.

Greater understanding and suitable program options are needed for young early school leavers who have dis-engaged from mainstream schooling for diverse reasons. Partnerships between VET providers with schools and social service providers can ensure that young adults' welfare as well as further education and training are supported through appropriate educational and social services, without the common social stigma attached to young people who do not complete their schooling.

7. The Review may seek out case studies of best practice in VET, and consider whether specific trials should be undertaken to test innovative approaches likely to deliver better outcomes.

There are many cases of 'best practice' in adult literacy and numeracy delivery in NSW and in other Australian states. We list below references to some of the research of literacy and numeracy programs undertaken in the last decade that have analysed the salient features that make these case studies of 'best practice'. The programs that are discussed include: accredited programs in TAFE; community based adult literacy programs in Aboriginal communities; non-accredited community based programs for refugee women; young urban Aboriginal learners re-engaging with the school curriculum in a community centre; ESL learners in a labour market

⁶ Bowen, T. 2011, *A Fuller Sense of Self*, Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council, Springvale South.

⁷ NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council 2004, NSW adult literacy students write - Blue Sky Bicycle and other journeys, NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council, Sydney.

program; and integrated literacy and numeracy provision in vocational courses. Although the programs are varied in contexts, what they all illustrate about successful engagement and outcomes in adult literacy and numeracy programs include:

- The ability of the teachers to build connections with the learners and among the learners;
- Programs that can be tailored in outcomes, content and pedagogical approach so that the learners themselves can see and make connections with the particular demands for literacy and numeracy development in their life contexts;
- Programs where learners have ready access to a range of services (counselling, health, accessibility, career advice, childcare) and resources (library, canteens);
- Teachers who have both pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge and expertise to teach literacy and numeracy to adults;
- Teaching and learning contexts that encourage and support teachers to exercise agency and risk-taking in order to address their learners' diverse needs and contexts.

NSW case studies

Balatti, J., & Black, S. (2011). Constructing learners as members of networks. In *Vocational Learning* (pp. 63-76). Springer, Dordrecht.

Boughton, B., Chee, D. A., Beetson, J., Durnan, D., & LeBlanch, J. C. (2013). An Aboriginal adult literacy campaign pilot study in Australia using Yes I can. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 21(1), 5-32.

Chodkiewicz, A., Widin, J., & Yasukawa, K. (2010). Making Connections to Re-engage Young People in Learning: dimensions of practice. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 18(1), 35-51.

Ollerhead, S. (2012). Checkmate or stalemate? Teacher and learner positioning in the adult ESL literacy classroom. *TESOL in Context* 5, 3, 1-13.

Widin, J., Yasukawa, K., & Chodkiewicz, A. (2012). Teaching Practice in the Making: Shaping and Reshaping the Field of Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Teaching. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 52(1), 9-38.

Other Australian case studies

Bauer, R. (2018). Adult literacy and socio-cultural learning at Pina Pina Jarrinjaku (Yuendumu learning centre). *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 58(1), 125.

Black, S., & Yasukawa, K. (2011). Shared delivery: integrating ELT in Australian vocational education. *ELT journal*, 66(3), 347-355.

Choi, J., & Najar, U. (2017). Immigrant and refugee women's resourcefulness in English language classrooms: Emerging possibilities through plurilingualism. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 25(1), 20.

McHugh, M. (2011). Crossing the academic-vocational divide. *Fine Print*, 34(1), 12-16.

Skewes, J., Bat, M., Guenther, J., Boughton, B., Williamson, F., Woollorton, S., ... & Stephens, A. (2017). Case Studies of Training Advantage for Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Learners. Support Document. *National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)*.

8. The Review should have regard to the scope and outcomes from any previous or forthcoming reviews, consultation to date, and inputs made by industry and peak groups.

Of direct relevance to this Review are the recommendations from the recent OECD report: ***Building skills for all in Australia: policy insights from the survey of adult skills***⁸. The report made eight key recommendations to strengthen Australian adults' 'basic skills':

1. Increase participation of women in STEM fields by breaking down gender stereotypes and encouraging women to enter these fields.
2. Strengthen the focus on mathematics throughout secondary education.
3. Identify students in post-secondary VET who are at risk of low basic skills and provide targeted initiatives to support them.
4. Ensure that literacy and numeracy skills are part of the quality criteria in post-secondary VET.
5. Encourage post-secondary VET providers to address weak literacy and numeracy skills.
6. Reach out to disconnected youth and prevent dropout at earlier stages of education.
7. Use pre-apprenticeships to help NEETs re-enter education and training, and to find employment.
8. Improve access to childcare facilities for young mothers. (pp. 10-11)

While recommendations 1 and 2 go to issues beyond what VET alone can address, they highlight the criticality of how VET is positioned. VET options, including 'second chance' education for early school leavers, is not well known nor understood by many schools. There is a need for government initiatives to more effectively shift public perception of VET so that VET is seen as an integral part of Australia's commitment to lifelong education. This would be imperative in being able to address recommendations 3, 6 and 7.

⁸ OECD (2017), *Building Skills for All in Australia: Policy Insights from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264281110-en>

Recommendations 4, 5 and 6 are significant in ensuring quality pathways and support for people needing to further develop their literacy and numeracy to succeed in VET qualifications and to participate more effectively and fully in civic life. There is a need for deliberations involving a range of stakeholders (VET learners, classroom teachers, managers, professional peak body representatives, and researchers) to review and deliberate on what should be 'quality criteria' in VET. Quality is important in different ways for different stakeholders, but currently they do not sufficiently attend to what matters for learners and the capacity to support them in achieving a broad range of outcomes that VET ought to be able to help them achieve. As mentioned earlier, quality teachers are necessary for quality educational experiences and outcomes. Although teacher education programs for school teachers have undergone a major reform⁹, and university teaching standards have been tightened¹⁰, quality of teaching in VET continues to be undermined by the minimalist requirements in pedagogical knowledge and expertise (Cert IV in TAE). Investment in the learning of teachers is a necessary investment in order to achieve quality teaching and learning. Graduate entry adult literacy and numeracy teaching qualifications are not viable as full-fee paying programs as long as teachers in the field continue to be engaged as casual teachers. The teaching workforce in the field is currently heavily reliant on teachers who were qualified when the cost of their adult literacy and numeracy teaching qualification was subsidised through CSPs, the state provider (eg TAFE) or through the more recent (but now discontinued) scholarship initiative for adult LLN practitioners. Without renewal of the workforce with recently qualified teachers, the field will fail to be informed by new knowledge and empirical studies that are needed for continuous improvement.

Recommendation 8 as well as the need for provision of other services (health, financial and library) should be considered as minimum requirements for all VET providers.

The adult literacy and numeracy field has been dismayed by the elimination of a source of targeted Commonwealth funding for workplace literacy and numeracy improvements. The Australian Industry Group has been advocating for a restoration of the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) programme funding, echoing concerns of their own members about the impact of workers' low literacy and numeracy levels on productivity. As workplaces demand new skills and work practices, the need for targeting workplace literacy and numeracy funding will continue

⁹ E.g. the establishment of AITSL, and new guidelines for the accreditation of teacher education programs in Australia, encompassing different levels of teacher standards from Graduates Teachers to Lead Teachers, supervised practicums and a final year Teaching Performance Assessment.

<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards>

¹⁰ Refer to TEQSA Higher Education standards. <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/higher-education-standards-framework-2015>

to exist. The report from the former Centre for Literacy in Canada ***Embedding literacy and essential skills in workplace learning: breaking the solitudes***¹¹ provides a useful framework to review the previous WELL program and to commence discussions about a new model. Of particular importance is the 'situated-expansive model' of workplace programs that affords workplace innovation by engaging both the employers and the workers in the design of programs.

An area that has been long neglected is a strong state and Commonwealth policy framework for adult education provision in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The current Australia Research Council funded project ***Adult literacy and Aboriginal community well-being in western NSW***¹² is providing evidence of the connections between improved literacy and numeracy and improved social outcomes, particularly health. The program researched in this project and other program initiatives in Australian Indigenous communities are documented in the report ***Enhancing training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners***. This report concludes with the identification of very unambiguous need for policy action:

Beyond the Skills for Education and Employment program, the absence of an adult literacy and numeracy policy or facilitating structures in most jurisdictions adds another layer of difficulty to achieving community-based outcomes for adult learning. At the present time programs designed to build English language literacy and numeracy (outside VET or employment targets) for remote Aboriginal people simply do not fit in an existing policy or program area. (Guenther et al 2017, p. 33)

The report ***Aboriginal adult English language literacy and numeracy in the Northern Territory: a statistical overview***¹³ provides further evidence of the need for action, and clear and specific policy recommendations.

¹¹ Derrick, J, 2012, Embedding literacy and essential skills in workplace learning: breaking the solitudes, Centre for Literacy, Montreal, viewed 18 Jan 2019, <http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/sites/default/files/Embed_LES_J_Derrick.pdf>.

¹² Guenther, J., Bat, M., Stephens, A., Skewes, J., Boughton, B., Williamson, F., Woollorton, S., Marshall, M. and Dwyer, A. (2017). *Enhancing training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners*. Adelaide: NCVER.

¹³ Shalley, F., & Stewart, A. (2017). *Aboriginal adult English language literacy and numeracy in the Northern Territory: a statistical overview*. Charles Darwin University.

Appendix: Adult learners' stories

Sue's Story

I was born in the Mallee and I grew up in the area around Hamilton. I hated school. Looking back, sometimes it feels like I never went to school. It's almost like there was no school experience for me. It's all so very blurry. It was just hard for me to take a lot in. I didn't care either. I didn't think it was worth knowing. What I did learn, I think I probably blocked out. Even today I surprise myself with things that come out of my head. I wonder, where did that come from or how did I know that.

I got put into a home for girls as an uncontrollable child because I wouldn't stay at school. They had a school set up at the home but as long as you could add up, do long division, and write your name, in their view you had completed your schooling. I certainly wasn't educated. I wasn't given books. None of that was encouraged.

When I finally left there, I went downhill in terms of my mental health. Finally, a friend broke through the barrier I had created and got me help and I was encouraged to go to Southern Grampians Adult Education (SGAE). Initially, I didn't want to do it. I thought I would be a failure. I was sure I would be ridiculed because of my age. I didn't have any idea that I knew quite as much as I do know.

When I first started, as the tutors remind me, I would sit with my head bowed down. I wouldn't look at anyone. I was too scared to answer questions, for fear of being wrong. I was so frightened. I remember the first day very clearly. They needed to work out where I was, in terms of my reading and writing, so they got me to write the word CAT. I remember I shook so much you would look at that writing and think that a small child had written it. When I started I shook, and I shook, and I shook. I sat there the whole time with my head down.

I have been coming to SGAE for a few years now. I even went out and bought a computer. I am still learning how to use it. It has opened up such a new world for me. I think improvement has happened for me through a lot of encouragement from the staff. I had been told all my life that I was stupid. I was scared of failure. I had made the choice to withdraw and I convinced myself that I didn't know any better.

I suppose I have always wanted encouragement. It's interesting, just when I think I might be unable to learn anymore, I do learn more. You are never too old. The learning is endless. I absorb so much. Sometimes I wish I could go to school every day. It seems so easy to learn. It's fun too.

When you find some success in learning, you can be more open and involved in the community. Say for example with the election and voting. I

had never voted before, never, up until five years ago, which is precisely the time that I started coming here. Learning gave me the confidence to want to vote, and to be interested in doing it. Suddenly I took note of what was going on and why it was going on.

There was one activity that we did in class where we were encouraged to write a list of some of the issues that we thought our local Council should look into. So I started writing about people in wheelchairs because my Dad was in a wheelchair and my Mum is on a walker. From there, I started looking at different issues around town that should be dealt with. Before I came here I wouldn't have even thought about those issues. My mind has been opened. Previously, I could not even read the newspaper. Now I can't wait to get it. I read it as I'm having my breakfast. I can be a bit of an ogre if I'm interrupted while reading the newspaper.

I want to do further education. I would love to do my HSC. It probably sounds silly at my age but I would like to try. There is still a little part of me that is scared of looking into it because I am fearful that I won't be able to do it. But it's something I've always wanted to do. It always seems to be there in the back of my head. Maybe it's time I moved it to the front of my head, and put the steps in motion.

I would just love to see more people take that step and come to places like SGAE. You just don't know what doors can be opened for you. I know with me, when I took that first step I never dreamed I would still be here, that I would still be learning. I am a different person now. I am happy. I love to learn. I look forward to coming. I suppose over time I felt I could trust the people here. I felt safe. I had never had that. It means I have come out of myself. I can't explain it. The teachers are fantastic and that makes learning so much easier. There is a great atmosphere in the class. Now I will go home and get straight on the computer, and think to myself, I know how to do this. Sometimes I wish I could go to school every day. It seems so easy to learn. It's fun too.

A personal journey towards education

Every time I see one of those ads on the TV of someone who has won some money on a scratchy, I think of the time when I had won and lost \$50,000 because I could not read.

It was a Tuesday like any other Tuesday. I was just walking around with nowhere to go, just looking at the world go by. As I was walking I was thinking it would be a good idea to buy a scratchy. I am a superstitious person so I started to think where I should buy it, and when. But I was looking for a job, so I put my mind on that for a minute, then, I thought it was too good a day to worry about it. As I was walking along, I saw a newsagent, so I decided to go and buy a scratchy and a paper. I went in

and stood at the counter and looked at all the scratchies. The man behind the counter came over to me.

‘Can I help you?’

‘Yes’, I said. He looked at me.

He said ‘Do you want a Lotto?’

‘No’, I said, ‘I’d like a scratchy’.

He grabbed at the one dollar ones.

‘No’, I said, ‘I’d like a five dollar one.’

With an expressionless look on his face, ‘Which one? There are four types so would you like one of each type?’ he said with a painted smile on his face. Feeling a little silly, I said:

‘Can I have one of the pyramid ones?’ I had seen it on the TV. He ripped one off and handed it to me. I gave him the five dollars and went outside to scratch it. This is when I got into trouble. At this time of my life I had not started at TAFE, so I couldn’t read what to do. I looked at the scratchy and felt like a fool. I walked out of the shop. I started to walk down the road and then I said to myself ‘go back to the shop and ask the newsagent to show you how to do it’.

Feeling good, I went back to the shop. When I got there the newsagent was arguing with an old lady. I stood there and waited. It seemed to be going on forever. Someone else came into the newsagent. And in between arguing with the old lady, he served the man. I was still standing there waiting. All the time I was thinking ‘why can’t I read how to scratch it?’

So I went to the bench to look at it. I looked at it. I looked at the wall. I looked at my feet. The newsagent was arguing with the old lady again. It was too much for me. I lost it! All the years of not being able to read got to me at that one time. I went back to the counter. The newsagent was serving everyone but me. I was invisible to him at the counter. I went back to the bench. I looked at the scratchy in my hand. I looked at the people at the bus stop, hoping one of them would come in and help me. I felt like I was in a hole with no way out. It got too much for me. I just had to scratch it and be rid of it.

What happened next I will never forget. I just started scratching and before I knew what had happened, I had scratched all the squares off. On my scratchy, there were three \$50 000 squares! Yes! I had won \$50 000! Goodbye work. Hello holidays. There was a man standing beside me, and

in my euphoria, I said to him, 'I've got a winner!', then I swaggered back to the counter to show my winning ticket. I handed it to the newsagent. As I waited for him to say 'congratulations', my whole world seemed to stop as he said, 'You had \$50 000, now you haven't. You've scratched too many squares.' With a smirking smile across his face, he now explained to me how I should have played the game. I had blown it by scratching too many squares, even though it was a winning ticket.

I felt like I wanted to go into a crack in the footpath and hide. The newsagent just went on serving people. I folded the ticket in half and left the shop. Then I remembered the ad I had seen on TV for adult literacy. So here I am. No richer for the scratchy. But since I have been coming to TAFE, I have found myself with other riches – of friendship and knowledge.

Story by Mark