



# **Reading Writing Hotline**

**Submission to  
House Standing Committee  
Employment, Education and Training**

## **Adult Literacy and its Importance**

### **Contents**

1. **Background on the Hotline**
2. **Response to Terms of Reference**
3. **Other Significant Issues**
  - **Major Issues of Concern**
  - **Recommendations**
4. **References**

## **Background on Reading Writing Hotline**

- National referral and advisory service for adults seeking help with literacy/numeracy.
- Funded by the Commonwealth and managed by TAFENSW for the past 25 years.
- Maintains a database of all current adult literacy/numeracy providers around the country
- Unique overview of the availability of and demand for adult literacy services.
- Statistics and case studies providing a rich source of information from the “front line” of adult literacy program delivery
- In receipt of more than 4000 calls annually
- Increasingly called on to act as an information and advisory service for a wider range of stakeholders including
  - employers
  - industry groups
  - government departments
  - NGOs
  - community organisations

**Please note that all references in this submission to *adult literacy* include literacy, numeracy and digital skills.**

## Response to Terms of Reference

### 1. 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;

Of annual Hotline callers

- 40% are already **employed**
- 70% are from an **English-speaking background** and schooled in Australia
- 8% are already **studying**
- 13% **cannot find classes** they are looking for

- Lower literacy in Australia does **not** necessarily correlate with other indicators of disadvantage or migrant status. The 'typical' Hotline caller, statistically speaking, is an Australian born male aged 25-44 who left school before Year 10.
  - Hotline statistics record **demand** for adult literacy services, but this is not the same as **need** for services. Australia has around 3 million people at the lowest level of literacy, but only 4,000 call the Hotline each year.
  - Hotline call statistics only record people who know of the Hotline and are **actively looking** for literacy services; many others have LLND needs but are not acknowledging it or seeking help. Many callers report waiting 10 years before finding the courage to ring.
- Shame and embarrassment acts as a disincentive to seeking assistance with literacy particularly for those schooled in Australia.
- There is significant **unmet need** for adult literacy provision, and this is growing. Calls where there was no provision available increased 300% between 2019 and 2020. Hotline statistics indicate **no appropriate provision available** for 13% of Hotline callers nationally. In Queensland and Northern Territory this rises to 16% and 19% respectively.
- There is a lack of Australian statistics and research on adult literacy issues. International data from PIAAC study provides a snapshot but results are limited.
- Statistics are especially lacking for people in remote locations (predominantly First Nations people) as PIAAC does not cover these locations. (Shalley, 2017)

#### Case study

**Vince** is 21 and currently employed installing shutters and blind but would like to do something else and knows improving his literacy skills is key to this. As a child, Vince had a troubled home life and was frequently absent from school. When he was at school he was bullied, and so learned to hide his problems with reading and writing. "It's so annoying not being able to talk about it. It gets to you so badly, and then it gets to you wanting to do it. Not thinking you can do it. I think it will change my life a lot. If I can read and write better I'll try for a better job or an apprenticeship. Something I'll be happy in."

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

- Lower literacy may affect workforce participation, but many people with literacy difficulties are **already in the workforce**. Lower literacy may limit their ability to
  - participate in on-the-job training
  - seek promotion
  - respond to changes in the labour market
  - do further study to improve their skills.
- Literacy is not just an **individual** deficit, although it is tempting to lay blame on LLN for lower productivity. Workplace literacy demands are increasing, so that a previously 'literate' employee may find themselves subsequently unable to manage in a changing industry. Older workers may be particularly affected and may suffer shame and bullying. Truck drivers having to complete online work diaries, and garbage workers having to move to online sick leave forms are just two examples.
- **COVID** has increased issues of
  - Workers being stood down and unable to re-enter due to limited literacy
  - Unemployed workers unable to take advantage of more time and study opportunities, due to literacy barriers
  - People working in team situation unable to cope when forced to work in isolation from home
- Outcomes from participation in adult literacy classes are often not evident until some years later, or in the next generation, so evaluation of programs must have a **long-term** view (Reder, 2011)
- Formal **course completion** is not a strong indicator of literacy outcomes. Adults with life responsibilities may be unable to complete a course but will still incorporate new literacy skills into everyday activities in work and personal life.

### Case study

**Leanne** has just started working as a family support worker but is struggling with reading and writing. LLN has always been her big challenge. She was never able to attend classes because she needed an income. Leanne started her new job 2 weeks before COVID. She's now working from home, and suddenly there's an increase in emails. "I don't want to give up but I feel like a failure." She also has to write case notes and reports. She keeps repeating "I don't want to give up the job," but she's feeling very frightened.

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

- International research confirms that improving literacy and numeracy improves **confidence and engagement with community**. Improving literacy is good for everybody.
- It is important that adults with low literacy are **not blamed** for broader social issues. Recent research shows
  - Most government information is too hard for ordinary Australians to read (The Conversation, 2021)
  - Many people need help filling in forms to access government services online (NCOSS, 2020)
- Impact of **shame and embarrassment** is significant and stops people from seeking help
  - Recognized by Productivity Commission Report (2020).
  - Keeps the problem hidden: people don't tell their boss they are struggling at work and silently drop out; they ask for classes at night so no one in small community will see them going to class.
  - Need for encouragement instead of blame
  - Effective programs are the ones where people come willingly, are welcomed, made to feel safe, given time to build confidence
  - The earlier people can improve their literacy the better their workforce and civic participation.
- Many case studies from Hotline callers document the difficulty with **everyday life events**, for example
  - avoid going to doctors
  - can't help kids with homework or read to kids
  - can't fill in forms to get assistance for essential services
  - too ashamed to get volunteer work
  - no pathways to study

#### Case studies

**Deb**, a mother in *Parents Next* programme is told that when her youngest child turns 6 in a few months she must study or will lose her parenting payment. She has very low literacy, there are no suitable classes in her area, and she is not able to access Distance classes as they do not cater for students at her level.

**Nancy** wants to complete forms to get financial and medical assistance but hasn't been able to fill them out. Her adult children are too busy to help and she is physically isolated from them. She was referred to a distance literacy program but will likely be deemed as having 'no capacity to benefit' from the program due to her low level of literacy, and therefore ineligible. She really needs a face to face class at her beginner level, but nothing is available.

#### 4. The relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development from birth to post-secondary education;

- The relationship between parents' and children's literacy is **complex**. It is important to provide a range of suitable supports rather than attributing blame to parents, teachers or schooling systems
- Successful **Intergenerational and family literacy** programs such as the NT *Families as First Teachers* program are well documented (Huggins, 2013)
- Improving children's literacy is **not as simple** as 'reading to your kids'.
  - Hotline receives many calls from parents desperate for help for their children. Many highly literate parents cannot find help for children with reading difficulties.
  - Some children need specialist support at school and cannot access this help. There is no national service to coordinate and advise.
  - Parents need explicit examples of activities to improve children's early literacy.

##### Case studies

■■■■ works as a school vaccination team leader. Parents need to provide written consent for their children to be vaccinated, and ■■■■ needed to look at the barriers for parents with low literacy. The consent process requires reading information about benefits and risks of vaccines. Parents need to understand what they are agreeing to, but this is the main stumbling block as their reading ability is too low.

■■■■ saw that the forms and explanations needed to be written in plain English but she was also keen to find any classes these parents could attend nearby. The Hotline was able to give her guidance and some contacts to call.

**Kelly:** "I'm 32 with children and I can't understand things at their school or when I have to fill out forms - that sort of thing. I've been meaning to call you for ages. When my daughter wanted me to write her name on her painting at pre-school, I had to go away and secretly look at her name on the Medicare card but the other mothers there might see me. I feel shame. I can't help her write her name. I want to read the notes from school and I want to help my kids with their reading and school work. I don't want the other mothers to know."

5. 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;

30% increase in calls to the Hotline during the COVID lockdown period.

- COVID increased the speed and extent of digitization across every aspect of life in Australia. This included education and parenting. During COVID the Hotline received more calls from **parents highly stressed** by the expectation that they would be “literacy teachers” during lockdowns.
- A **robust, diverse and sustainably funded adult literacy sector** would accommodate these literacy, numeracy and digital demands from COVID, along with others such as accessing government services.
- A range of **alternative pathways** and LLN support must be available to high school students and school leavers. Those without adequate LLN are currently excluded from VET in Schools programs, so have no pathway into VET, further study or employment. Under current guidelines, young jobseekers are pulled out of adult literacy programs to take up low-skilled casual jobs, thereby entrenching disadvantage and lack of future opportunity, and forcing them to start work and family life without the necessary skills.

**Case study**

**Mary**, a young single mother, trying to educate her kids at home during COVID lockdown. Mary had just started a TAFE literacy course however had limited access to data and one laptop shared between three children. The children at school had priority for use of the computer and doing literacy classes on her phone to several hours a day was too difficult. Mary had to stop studying.

## 6. The availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy educational programs in Australia and internationally; and International comparisons of government policies and programs that may be adapted to the Australian experience.

- Availability of provision **varies greatly** between states and territories,
  - Tasmania funds a comprehensive strategy (26TEN) which includes a network of local literacy coordinators.
  - Victoria has a strong funded network of local providers of accessible community-based adult literacy provision
- Impact and effectiveness of adult literacy provision has not been widely measured since academic research capability and funding has been lost. Accurate assessment of levels, outcomes and effectiveness is challenging as lack of sensitivity in assessment pushes away the most vulnerable learners.
- No **central point for information** and advice about adult literacy issues, such as the Adult Literacy Information Office (ALIO) which operated from 1979 to 1999 as a cross-sector resource agency and professional development centre for NSW. The Hotline increasingly fills this role *de facto* on a national scale but is not funded or adequately staffed to do so.
- Currently no coherent Australian adult literacy **policy** which addresses needs of all learner groups and stakeholders.
- Increasing numbers of calls to the Hotline represent **groups of people** rather than individuals needing assistance (over 200 groups in 2020). Examples include:
  - community service representing youth at risk of homelessness where literacy is the main barrier
  - government department representing a group of Indigenous rangers struggling to complete their required Cert II
  - maternal health care nurse representing new parents experiencing difficulties with form filling
  - high school teacher requesting age appropriate literacy materials for 16- & 17-year old students with beginner literacy levels
  - community service worker representing victims of domestic violence looking for literacy and numeracy classes to improve women's independence
  - support worker for adults with intellectual disabilities who wish to access

### Case Study

**David:** "I have lots of young people coming in, all around 16 years old who have difficulties with reading and writing. They have access to an online course in Year 10 level but it's not working. We have to sit down with them and help. It is very slow. We are youth workers - not teachers. "

- Lack of **equity** in adult literacy services across the country.
  - Metro, regional and remote locations have vastly differing provision.
  - Prison programs have been decimated.
  - Lack of suitable provision shuts out many of the lowest level learners.
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- **Distance literacy** provision unavailable for many who need it e.g. people with mobility and transport issues, carer responsibilities, chronic health conditions, mental health issues
  - Totally lacking in many state jurisdictions
  - Available for AMEP and SEE program participants, but only for those at higher levels
  - Beginners not catered for: need paper-based postal program with phone support
- Online literacy programs **not helpful** for most of those with literacy problems, due to:
  - lack of digital skills
  - inability to afford devices or data
  - nobody to help with troubleshooting

There is a clear opportunity to fill this gap delivering adult literacy programs via **free-to-air TV**, particularly since education is part of the charter of the ABC and it has been very active in fulfilling this role in the past.

- Australia was internationally regarded as **world leader** in adult literacy during the 1980's and 1990's (Osmond, 2021) but decades of policy change have obliterated these achievements. Infrastructure, resources, teaching workforce and a research base all need to be rebuilt.
- **Indigenous people in remote locations** who need English literacy are especially disadvantaged.
  - Many speak English as a second or third language, but are not eligible for AMEP program
  - English language programs focus on migrants and settlement programs and are thus culturally unsuitable
  - Programs for jobseekers (SEE) don't address the language learning needs of Aboriginal English speakers
  - CDP programs lack skills and workforce to support literacy needs
- Support and promotion of **literacy "mediators"** in community organisations has been demonstrated to be a successful strategy to complement class provision and address cycles of disadvantage (Thompson 2015)
- Internationally, **Ireland and New Zealand** have broad-ranging policies and coordinating agencies, which may be useful models to consider.

## Case studies –First Nations adults

### Employee

**Josie**, an Aboriginal woman working in aged care worried about losing her job. She needs to do training at work but can't do the reading and writing. Josie wants to keep job but doesn't want to tell her boss about her low literacy. "She thinks I am telling lies. We get on and joke around – she wouldn't believe how I can't read and write".

### CDP project

Provider has a case load of 500 First Nations unemployed people. 90% of them need English as an Additional Language (EALD) classes but there are no available places. "I can't get people into the classrooms –they need community-based training. They are not doing any literacy and there is no available work in the area. Can you please let me know if there are resources available?"

### Community

**Dean**, an Aboriginal corporation staff member, works with speakers of 8 different First Nations' languages in a community of 800 people. Approximately 200 community members want to learn to read and write in English. There is no-one to help them and they have no access to phones or the internet.

### Workplace

Police officer called from an NT community 6 hrs from Alice Springs. 'I've employed an Aboriginal Police Liaison Officer, who speaks language. He can read and write his own name only. He asked me for help to learn to read and write.'

### Large employer

Queensland mining company with 40 Indigenous trainees rang to enquire about options. "What funding can we access to support trainees and apprentices?" 5 currently need help with English literacy before they can get an apprenticeship. "We want to be able to support them."

## Other Significant Issues

### Summary - Major Issues of Concern

- No coordinated national adult literacy policy
- Lack of diversity of provision types, including distance learning
- Lack of specialist qualified adult literacy workforce
- Narrow focus on programs and curriculum for jobseekers
- Limited workplace literacy provision
- Lack of provision for Indigenous learners in rural & remote areas
- No national adult literacy information hub to provide advice, resources, professional development and specialist policy advice.
- Short term funding and 'churn' of providers and courses.

### Recommendations

#### 1. Develop a National literacy policy

- 1.1. Establish a broad-based advisory group representing all sectors including teachers and researchers, to ensure policy is robust, sustainable and meets current challenges, reflecting international best practice and models in use elsewhere
- 1.2. Ensure policy addresses particular needs of Indigenous Australians and people with disabilities.
- 1.3. Re-establish an adult literacy information office providing resources, advice to government, industry and the literacy sector, and professional development for teachers

#### 2. Rebuild the literacy/numeracy workforce

- 2.1 Develop and implement a plan to build the teaching workforce via a range of strategies, with sufficient lead-time to allow universities to plan and re-establish programs.
- 2.2 Mandate specialist graduate-level qualifications for all Commonwealth funded programs including SEE
- 2.3 Reintroduce mandated specialist graduate-level qualifications for teaching Foundation Studies Training Package curriculum
- 2.4 Build capacity in regional and remote areas through a range of strategies including scholarships, mentoring, and pathway qualifications.
- 2.5 Support the research and design of national Professional Development programs (both accredited and unaccredited) to support upskilling of current teachers to meet new higher standard and to update their professional practice.
- 2.6 Make scholarships available for specialist postgraduate qualifications
- 2.7 Restore specialist qualifications such as TAE80113 to VET student loans list

### **3. Support diversity of provision**

- 3.1 Ensure funding and curriculum addresses both accredited and non-accredited, formal and non-formal training, and the needs of non-jobseekers, including part time and evening classes.
- 3.2 Review SEE guidelines to enable greater flexibility in attendance and progress, more support for those with 'no capacity to benefit' including funding for non-accredited courses.
- 3.3 Focus on development of pathway courses that build literacy and numeracy skills for those unable to access VET courses.

### **4. Support workplace literacy**

- 4.1 Expand Foundation Skills for Your Future program. Fund employers to support LLND in the workplace by releasing individuals during working hours.
- 4.2 Funding available for all individual employees wishing to improve their workplace LLN
- 4.3 Funding for employers to provide local classes for potential First Nations employees in remote locations who require pre- employment and on-the-job LLN
- 4.4 Source and collate legacy learning materials from former WELL (Workplace English Language & Literacy) program for specific industry areas

### **5. Implement a national distance adult literacy scheme**

- 5.1 Design a consistent national approach managed by an established not-for-profit RTO, in preference to leaving each state to design and deliver their own in a piecemeal fashion.
- 5.2 Ensure distance programs offer paper-based programs at all levels as well as online learning, to ensure all cohorts are included.

### **6. Establish a specific funded program for remote Indigenous learners**

- 6.1 Implement an appropriate, quality program to meet the needs of Indigenous EALD learners. The program must embrace the principles of Indigenous voice co-design, 'both-ways learning', and bilingualism where appropriate.

### **7. Ensure adequate literacy specialist representation**

- 7.1 Ensure expert literacy representation on all relevant policy, advisory and regulatory bodies such as Service Skills Organisations, Industry Reference Committees, etc.



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