

Submission to the Review of Indigenous Training and Employment by Adult Learning Australia

About Us

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is the peak body for Adult and Community Education (ACE) in Australia, with both individual and organizational members in every state and territory of Australia. Our mission is to achieve equitable access to Lifelong and Lifewide Learning for All Australians. Indigenous Adult Education is one of Adult Learning Australia's eight key areas of its policy platform.

Terms of Reference

Our response is confined to the following section of the Terms of Reference:

- 2) Key drivers of "training for trainings sake" including:
 - a) The means by which training that is not connected to the employment market is being delivered
 - b) The forces driving Indigenous people into training courses that are not connected to the employment market
 - c) The cost of delivering training programmes that are not connected to the employment market.

There is a range of reasons why Indigenous people might seek out training that is not directly connected to the employment market. These are:

English Language Literacy

Adults with low literacy want to improve their literacy and numeracy for a range of reasons besides getting paid work, including accessing services, assisting children with their schooling, contributing to family and community or simply removing the stigma of illiteracy.

We don't actually know the levels of English language literacy amongst Indigenous adults. The recent Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey included data by state, gender, place of birth and age but not by Indigenous status. We know that around 1 in 7 Australians (13.7%) have very poor literacy skills (ABS, 2013). We also know, from the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, that Indigenous children are currently 2½ years behind their non-Indigenous peers in literacy and numeracy. We can extrapolate from this that Indigenous adults are similarly over-represented amongst the group of Australians with low literacy and numeracy.

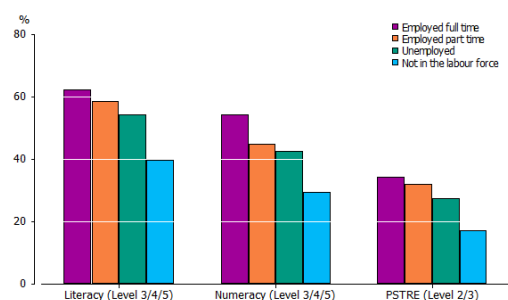
Funding for essential adult literacy and lifeskills education comes from the same source as Vocational Education and Training. Because it has no *direct* relationship with a specific employment market, (although it has a powerful indirect relationship with all employment), it is often dismissed as "training for training sake". It frequently has to compete (unsuccessfully) for funding for immediate industry skills gaps. It is often held up to ridiculous standards, with programs considered a failure if, for example, they don't move an adult who has had limited primary and secondary schooling and a range of other barriers, through to proficient English language literacy in 6 - 12 months part time study.

Not in the labour force / not looking for work

Many Australians, including Indigenous Australians are not working and not looking for work. They are either in ill health, pre-occupied with caring (parenting and family) responsibilities or have given up all hope of being accepted into the labour market. For this group, access to high quality, targeted Vocational Education and Training is not enough because they have no short-term goal to re-enter the workforce to motivate their learning. However, these Australians cannot simply be left behind. Most want to learn, and stand to gain much more than any other group in Australia if they do.

Australians who have given up on work, can and do change their minds if they are provided with a 'soft', local point of entry to learning, are able to develop their generic skills and confidence or complete an incomplete primary or secondary education. The task is significant. The PIAAC survey indicated that adults not in the labour force have much lower levels of literacy than those who are unemployed, who in turn have much lower levels than the employed.

Proportion at each skill level, literacy, numeracy and Problem Solving in Technology Rich Environments, By labour force status—2011-12



Source: ABS 4228.0 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011-12

Intergenerational attitudes to learning and work

Australia's VET system is focused on the employed and the unemployed looking for work. However, literacy is intergenerational with the skills of one generation impacting strongly on the other. Parent's (and grandparent's) experiences of and achievement in education have the most profound effect on their children's success of all other factors.

Whole of community and whole of family approaches are needed to support children with their schooling and VET studies, and to normalize education, training and lifelong learning in Indigenous communities. UNESCO promotes family literacy as a holistic approach that contributes significantly toward the education of women and children. Family Literacy programs are common across the OECD, particularly for Indigenous communities, but with a few notable exceptions (such as the HIPPY program run by Brotherhood of St Laurence), family literacy programs have been remarkably absent from Australian approaches to education.

Some good international models are the *Whānau Ara Mua* (Families Moving Forward) program in New Zealand and the Toyota Family Literacy Program in the United States. These models include the explicit aim of building up the skills of the adult participants to the point where they are able to pursue paid work or further education and training. They also have strong social capital aims of connecting adults to their children's schools and their broader families and communities. In the case of the *Whānau Ara Mua* (Families Moving Forward) program, it takes into account the specific learning needs of Indigenous families and communities.

Not all adult learning is jobs related

Indigenous Australians (both employed and not employed) also engage in learning for cultural affirmation, social well-being, community capacity building and social enterprise building. Skills for 'place' development are particularly important in areas of thin labour markets, including non-mining footprints where the bulk of Indigenous Australians reside.

Summary

It is ALA's contention, that Indigenous Australians and other marginalized Australians enroll in inappropriate entry level VET programs as a substitute for a desperate lack of appropriate lifelong learning, literacy and lifeskills programs developed and delivered at the community level. Further, we contend that entry level VET is an ineffective and expensive substitute for properly constructed, community based literacy and lifeskills programs.

Recommendations from ALA

- 1) Community-based adult literacy, numeracy and lifeskills programs for Indigenous adults should be funded separately from the general Vocational Education and Training system.
- 2) Community-based adult literacy, numeracy and lifeskills programs for Indigenous adults should be held to a more appropriate set of quality indicators and accountabilities than the mainstream VET system.
- 3) All Australian schools with a high population or proportion of Indigenous students should have a comprehensive family literacy program.
- 4) ABS surveys of literacy, learning and participation should include Indigenous status as a data category so that progress can be measured.