

The Hon Scott Morrison MP  
Prime Minister  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

29 May 2020

Dear Prime Minister

### **Improved Adult Literacy – Critical for the Regeneration of Australia**

Australians with low literacy, numeracy and digital skills are vulnerable to social isolation and unemployment as jobs disappear in the face of technological change, globalisation and COVID-19.

We welcome the steps taken by the Australian Government in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the provision of a range of programs to help our communities through these changing and uncertain times. Effective planning and implementation of the COVID-19 recovery process is crucial for our nation's future. However, the recovery roadmap must recognise the economic value of higher levels of adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills; particularly for socially and economically marginalised Australians.

All Australians, regardless of their employment status, must be supported to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills in order to achieve productivity gains and ensure they can live healthy, autonomous and full lives. Adults need sufficient literacy to comprehend health information, understand government information and services, get job ready and maintain a connection during this time of social distancing. However, the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey, which measures key cognitive and workplace skills, found that around 44% of Australian adults lack the literacy skills required in everyday life. PIAAC's data suggests that of these, 1 in 7 Australians (14%) have very poor literacy skills and 1 in 3 (30%) have below-proficiency level literacy making them vulnerable to unemployment. Many more struggle with numeracy, with around 53% of the population at below proficiency levels. And while there has been much commentary on the scale of the problem, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the urgency of finding comprehensive solutions.

The Australian Government's Foundation Skills for Your Future Program is a step in the right direction and initiatives of this nature should form part of an integrated National Adult Literacy Strategy. The Program could be further enhanced by an increased focus and investment in a qualified and highly skilled practitioner workforce as Australia currently does not have enough skilled practitioners to meet the growing needs in this area.

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) and the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) are calling on the federal government to commit to a National Adult Literacy Strategy that establishes a framework for increasing the level of adult literacy by 20% at PIAAC 2031/32.

Literacy is an investment in the future. Addressing literacy inequality will ensure a fairer and more productive Australia post COVID-19. **ALA and ACAL are calling for the Australian government to develop and resource an evidence-based National Adult Literacy Strategy as part of its COVID-19 Roadmap to Recovery that:**

1. Includes a comprehensive audit of the current provision of adult literacy education programs around Australia (both accredited and non-accredited education programs) that
  - identifies and evaluates effective interventions in adult literacy education including community based programs
  - explores family literacy for Indigenous and other socially and economically marginalised Australian communities
2. Addresses the national skills shortage of qualified adult literacy educators and builds the capacity of the workforce, including professionals and volunteers.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters with you or your delegates to ensure that together we can regenerate the socio-economic health and well-being of Australians and Australia, post COVID19.

Should you have any queries regarding this letter, please contact CEO, Jenny Macaffer at Adult Learning Australia: mobile 0488 030 073 or email: [j.macaffer@ala.asn.au](mailto:j.macaffer@ala.asn.au).

Yours faithfully,



Annette Foley  
ALA President



Jo Medlin  
ACAL President

Cc:

The Hon Josh Frydenberg MP  
Senator the Hon Michaela Cash  
The Hon Dan Tehan MP  
The Hon Paul Fletcher MP  
The Hon Stuart Robert MP  
The Hon Andrew Gee MP  
The Hon Greg Hunt MP  
Senator the Hon Anne Ruston  
The Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP  
The Hon Steve Irons MP  
The Hon Karen Andrews MP  
National COVID-19 Coordination Commission

### **Adult Learning Australia (ALA)**

ALA is the national peak body for adult and community education (ACE) providers. ALA's mission is for equitable access to lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians. Our members include community learning centres, community colleges, neighbourhood houses, community resource centres, libraries and Aboriginal learning cooperatives. These community-based organisations offer a diverse range of personal enrichment learning programs, adult basic education in language, literacy, numeracy, digital and other foundation skills, and pre-accredited and accredited training. Our members are located in all states and territories of Australia – reflecting the diversity of sector. Our organisation maintains international relationships with the adult education sector through its membership of, and participation, in the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) and the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic Adult Education (ASPBAE). In 2020, ALA celebrates its 60th anniversary.

### **Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL)**

ACAL is the national peak body for adult literacy and numeracy practitioners, researchers, and organisations. Since 1976 ACAL has advocated on behalf of equitable adult literacy and numeracy provision for all Australians. ACAL aims to build understanding of adult literacy and numeracy issues and promote adult literacy and numeracy policy and practice.