



Submission to:

The House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training inquiry into adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in Australia

Australian Coalition for Education and Development

The [Australian Coalition for Education and Development](#) (ACED) was established in 2008 and brought together 15 civil society organisations in Australia working on education and development in Australia and overseas, with a particular focus on contributing to the then Education for All movement.

The purposes of ACED are:

- to develop a common advocacy agenda amongst members for education as a human right and as a tool for international development
- to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially as related to education and lifelong learning, and equity and access, and in particular SDG 4
- to affiliate with the Global Campaign for Education (GCE).

All ACED members are committed to increasing Australian aid to education, and supporting the education of disadvantaged children and adults in Australia and around the world. ACED member organisations are non-government and not for profit. ACED has been an active participant in a range of consultations with both the Global Partnership for Education, the Global Campaign for Education and the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic Adult Education (ASPBAE) on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

ACED is pleased to provide this written response to the Australian Parliamentary Inquiry on Adult Literacy and its importance. ACED strongly believes that low adult literacy and numeracy levels have significant negative impact on the life and livelihoods of many Australians. As explained by the Parliamentary Committee Chair, Mr. Andrew Laming MP, 'many adult Australians have poor literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills and this may limit their ability to participate fully in employment, education and training, and social and civic life.' (Department of House Representatives, 2021). Introducing this inquiry Mr. Laming said, 'The Committee is interested in hearing how measures to improve adult literacy can foster greater labour market participation, increased productivity, improved education outcomes for children, and improvements to individuals and to individual and community well-being.' (Department of House Representatives, 2021).

Recommendations

In previous statements ACED has called for Lifelong Learning to be seen as a central component of Sustainable Development Goal 4 and that the Australian Government is responsible for ensuring lifelong learning opportunities for all. ACED therefore calls on the government to:

1. Develop a National Lifelong Learning Policy that highlights the need for all Australians to learn and continue learning throughout life in order to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Ensure that the formal policy clearly outlines economic and social goals; integrates efficiency and equity; and sets out roles and responsibilities for community, business and all levels of government. It must emphasise the life-skills required and the inter-connected pathways between learning opportunities.

2. A National Adult Literacy Strategy should be a key foundation of a National LLL policy; one that prioritises language, literacy and numeracy (LLN), in various contexts, including a funded workplace LLN program and a national family literacy program that is focused on socially and economically marginalised Australian communities, and
3. Renew the Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education, and outline strategies to support Adult and Community Education organisations as they continue to deliver opportunities to many Australians, including disadvantaged learners.

Declaration of support for Adult Learning Australia submission

ACED would also like to declare our support for the submission made to this inquiry by Adult Learning Australia. We specifically would like to highlight:

Provision

- That includes a whole of government approach to the commitment to Lifelong Learning as enshrined in ADG4.
- That addressing adult literacy and numeracy needs to be viewed in the context of the LLL and Education system.
- That Adult and Community Education (ACE) needs to be identifiable within the LLL and Education system.

Proficiency

- To support the above provision, Australia needs to have data about the links between the ACE sector and the different needs identified.

Professionalism

- The need for a skilled workforce to support provision.

Inquiry Terms of reference

The inquiry will examine adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in Australia, including:

- 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 effect that literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual's labour force participation and wages;
- Links between literacy and social outcomes such as health, poverty, ability to care for other family members and participation in civic life;
- The relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development from birth to post-secondary education;
- 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 consider appropriate remediation programs which might address this;
- 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.

Australian context

The last OECD Survey of Adult Skills (or PIAAC) which measures adult skills and competencies in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments indicated that approximately 53% of working age Australians have difficulty with numeracy skills; 46% of Australian adults have difficulty with reading skills, and 13% are classified in the lowest literacy category (ACED, 2019). In its recent budget submission, Adult Learning Australia identified that low literacy, numeracy and digital skills are 'impacting around three million or one-fifth of working aged Australians' (OECD, 2016). ALA also asserts that 'the data on adult literacy and numeracy tells us that there is a mismatch between the literacy, numeracy and digital skills people have and those 'required for broad participation in work, education and training, and society' (The Conversation, 2021)'.

In 2020 the limitations of low adult literacy and numeracy levels in Australia were starkly apparent as home schooling was applied as a solution to support children no longer able to attend school. Many parents were unable to provide home schooling due to their own low literacy and numeracy.

The review of relevant literature confirmed that a range of social, health, economic, and technical factors can impact learning at home. Parents and caregivers play a crucial role in remediating educational disadvantage, however, the level of education, socio-economic status, and capacity to provide home learning support and resources for students is lower among parents of educationally disadvantaged students (Cowden, Mitchell & Taylor-Guy, 2020). ACED recommends that more studies that focus on literacy and numeracy as part of making this educational disadvantage not just of the children and the family but to highlight the parents more explicitly.

International context

In 2019 ACED called for greater attention to provide education for 21st century life skills such as critical analytical skills, problem solving, conflict resolution, communication and community building. In the ACED Spotlight Report, it was proposed that "these skills need to be incorporated into training for employment programs and that the latter need to be more realistic in relation to the actual jobs available in the market in each partner country" (ACED, 2019). ACED suggest that these learning and training programs "should be pitched to the large majority of youth and adults that are currently not enrolled in TVET programs" (ACED, 2019).

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes the Sustainable Development Goal target 4.6 which is to ensure that 'all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy (UN, 2016). As Australia is a signatory to the Agenda getting the domestic policy settings right for foundation skills education and training in Australia is key to meeting this commitment (ACED, 2019).

- **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**

Adult education is a basic human right across the world. Adults who have basic literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills have limited access to decent work, basic income and experience greater insecurity in their employment. For those adults and their families who have socio-demographic characteristics such as migrant status, First Nations status or have experienced intergenerational unemployment are more likely to have low literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills. Often they have a personal and community history of barriers in society and education systems such as language, conflict trauma, racism, low income and employment expectations. Adult education changes lives. Access to relevant and appropriate learning opportunities for adults will enable individuals, families and communities to transform their everyday lives and their futures.

Published in 2019 the 4th Global Report on Adult Learning and Education has found that “between and within countries, there remain deep and persistent inequalities in ALE (Adult Learning and Education) participation, with many vulnerable groups excluded and seemingly off the radar of policy-makers. Migrants and refugees, older adults, adults with disabilities, those living in rural areas, and adults with low prior educational attainment are among the groups facing the greatest barriers to participation in ALE,” (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2019).

- **The effect that literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual’s labour force participation and wages**

In their submission to the Response to the Productivity Commission’s Interim Report: National Agreement for Skills, Adult Learning Australia (2020) reports that the previous Workforce Development Review undertaken by the Productivity Commission (2014) showed that:

- Higher literacy and numeracy skills are associated with better labour market outcomes (both employment and wages).
- An increase in literacy and numeracy by one skill level is associated with an increased likelihood of employment of 2.4 and 4.3 percentage points for men and women, respectively.
- An increase in literacy and numeracy skills is associated with a similar increase in the probability of employment.
- Up to 40% of the association between education and employment is attributable to literacy and numeracy skills.

ACED reiterates that improved adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills will enable individuals to access decent work, better incomes and positive futures.

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

In the 2019 Spotlight Report ACED made recommendations for two foundation actions to be taken by the Australian government that would provide the necessary strong national policy and strategy that would improve adult literacy and numeracy in Australia.

- A National Adult Literacy Strategy should be a key foundation of a National LLL policy; one that prioritises language, literacy and numeracy (LLN), in various contexts, including a funded workplace LLN program and a national family literacy program that is focused on socially and economically marginalised Australian communities, and
- A National Policy on Lifelong Learning (LLL) that would be a core component of SDG 4. Such a policy would highlight the need for all Australians to learn and continue learning throughout life in order to face the challenges of the twenty-first century. A

formal policy would also clearly outline economic and social goals; integrate efficiency and equity, and set out roles and responsibilities for community, business and all levels of government. It would emphasise the life-skills required and the inter-connected pathways between learning opportunities. If we are to truly 'leave no one behind', then quality educational opportunities need to be accessible at all ages and stages of life (ACED, 2019).

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

Below are a selection of policy and programs from Europe. ACED would be happy to provide further examples.

European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) Manifesto: The power and joy of learning

https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/eaea_manifesto_final_web-.pdf

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) proposes, with this manifesto, to create a Learning Europe: a Europe that is able to tackle the future positively and with all necessary skills, knowledge and competences.

In this manifesto the EAEA adult learning is promoted as the key to addressing inequalities across countries and regions. Adult learning enables the engagement of people in 'deliberative democracy' and with growing digitalisation demands new skills are required in adult hood.

European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience: EAEA response

<https://eaea.org/2020/07/13/european-skills-agenda-big-step-forward-for-european-adult-learning-and-education/>

In its response to the European Skills Agenda EAEA has highlighted two actions that are applicable for Australia.

- Life skills have been made a separate flagship action (Action 8) in the Skills Agenda. The Agenda acknowledges the crucial role of life skills for strengthening a sustainable, socially equitable and resilient Europe.
- A benchmark has been set on digital skills that also includes adults not in the workforce. The European Commission says that by 2025, 70% of adults in Europe aged 16-74 should at least have basic digital skills.

DVV International Reactions to Corona Pandemic: Expert reflections

<https://www.dvv-international.de/en/our-work/reaction-to-corona-pandemic/expert-reflections>

'DVV International has asked experts, practitioners and opinion leaders from different regions of the world how they assess the position and task of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) during and after the Corona crisis.

The answers from the Global South, especially, show how the pandemic deepens the division of society into rich and poor. This concerns not only access to health services, but also to education – both formal and non-formal'.

DVV International Capacity Building for ALE staff

<https://www.dvv-international.de/en/ale-toolbox/teaching-and-training>

Learning and Work Institute

[Essential & life skills - Learning and Work Institute](#)

'Literacy, numeracy, digital, financial capability, health literacy and citizenship are central to people's job and career prospects and ability to be active and engaged in their communities. Over time, economic and social changes, and the advance of technology, are increasing their importance.

The Coronavirus pandemic highlights that people who don't have good essential skills are likely to face difficulties in finding and sustaining jobs. They are also at risk of exclusion from essential public services and social interactions which now take place online, including everyday tasks such as grocery shopping, catching up with friends and family, and accessing non-emergency healthcare such as GP appointments'.

Summary

ACED looks forward to discussing our submission and the deliberations of the The House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training inquiry into adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in Australia.

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