Adult Learning Australia

Submission to:

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

5 March 2021

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About

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) has been in operation for more than 60 years and is the largest national peak body for adult community education in Australia. ALA exists to provide leadership and professional development that advances quality services for all adult learners.

ALA is a not-for-profit entity with both organisational and individual members in all states and territories who reflect the diversity of adult learning and community education, including community learning centres, community colleges, neighbourhood houses, Aboriginal learning cooperatives, TAFEs and other adult education institutions.

ALA is a trusted long-term leader in the field of adult learning and community education. We believe in the power and potential of adult learning and community education to transform lives and to affect both social and economic change. ALA values and promotes the benefits of learning in all of its forms, and is an active advocate in state, territory, national and international communities.

Our vision is for equitable access to learning for all Australians to support social cohesion and economic prosperity.

Context

A parliamentary inquiry into adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in Australia has been called by the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training based on previous work by the Committee on [Education in remote and complex environments](#) handed down in November 2020.

Terms of reference

- 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, if yes, consideration of appropriate remediation programs which might address this

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

Adult literacy in Australia

"I was finding it harder to get work. I was dealing with agencies and there was always 50 health and safety forms to fill out before you could swing a hammer."

(34 year old boilermaker Samuel who has struggled with his literacy since he left school at 15)

Adult literacy and numeracy policy in Australia is largely driven by international surveys, which started in the 1990s with the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and now with the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). These surveys quantify and measure what it means to be literate in particular ways. For example, PIAAC measures proficiency in information processing skills (i.e. literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology rich environments) and provides data on the skills and competencies of people aged between 15–74. PIAAC data excludes people living in non-private dwellings, such as hotels/boarding houses, and those in very remote parts of Australia (ABS, 2013).

Proficiency, as described and measured by PIAAC, is a blunt tool to inform government policy, and especially troublesome when comparing data over time. Some consideration of other ways to gather data that offer a deeper analysis of the characteristics of adults with low literacy and ways to identify successful interventions are needed. However, PIAAC does help us to broadly understand some aspects of adult literacy and numeracy in Australia.

PIAAC links proficiency with the probability of being employed and securing a better income. The data also shows that those with high proficiency are able to make the most of the opportunities created by technological change, and those struggling are at greater risk of losing out (OECD, 2016).

The most recent PIAAC data indicates that a significant percentage of Australian adults have low literacy (43%), numeracy (54%) and digital skills; impacting around 'three million or one-fifth of working aged Australians' (OECD, 2017).

Particularly vulnerable groups are:

- people aged 45+
- people not in the labour force[1]
- Indigenous Australians; particularly in remote areas[2].

Women also performed poorly in numeracy relative to men.

The data shows that there is a significant mismatch between the literacy, numeracy and digital skills people have and those required to participate in work, education and training, and society.

The way forward

- **Commission research that provides a deeper analysis of the characteristics of <u>all</u> adults with low literacy and numeracy, and explores regional differences in terms of place and population cohorts**
- **Commission research that identifies and provides a framework for broader deployment of successful interventions.**

A whole of government approach

Australia is a signatory to the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes a target to ensure that 'all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy (UN, 2015). Getting the domestic policy settings right for foundation and LLND skills education and training in Australia is key to meeting this commitment. However, a report by the Australian Coalition for Education Development (2019) identifies that:

> Australia has taken a whole of government approach to addressing the SDGs but as yet does not have a clear national plan for implementing the goals nor any financial commitments to do so'.

Ireland's National Adult Literacy for Life Agency (2020) also emphasises a whole of government approach as 'critical to providing a coordinated framework to re-examine the policy approach to supporting adults with unmet literacy and numeracy issues'.

The European Union's Upskilling Pathways (2016) report recommends a learner centred approach to adult literacy development that is based on individual need,

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[1] Not in the labour force comprises all persons not currently employed or unemployed, irrespective of age. Not everyone classified this way are voluntarily economically inactive. Some want to work but they do not satisfy the criteria for unemployment (ABS).

[2] Those in very remote areas were not surveyed and therefore not represented in the data (ABS).

flexibility, validation and recognition, support, guidance and follow up. It highlights the need for coordination and partnerships with public and private stakeholders across a wide array of portfolio and policy settings beyond education and training.

A national strategy

In 2021, the Productivity Commission's National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review reported that while there is a wide range of language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) programs, they are just keeping pace with 'the flow of school leavers and new migrants who lack adequate LLND skills'.

Leadership and a comprehensive whole of government policy approach in collaboration with state and territory governments and stakeholder organisations are vital.

The Productivity Commission (2021) recommended that:

> A national LLND skills strategy would bring together measures to improve school education, 'second-chance' learning in the VET sector and the other adult education services delivered by public and private providers.

This would require a comprehensive audit of the current provision of adult language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) education programs around Australia (both accredited and non-accredited).

The way forward

- Develop a whole of government national adult LLND strategy, in collaboration with the states and territories and key stakeholders that is targeted and resourced.
- Complete an audit of the current provision of adult LLND education programs around Australia (both accredited and non-accredited).
- Commission research that includes longitudinal data that tracks student progress over time through non-accredited and accredited foundation and LLND skills programs to effectively measure outcomes.

Adult community education

While data on accredited/VET foundations skills and LLND programs are readily available, many successful LLND initiatives that target hard to reach, disadvantaged and disengaged cohorts are delivered through Adult Community Education (ACE) programs. ACE programs are community-focussed and non-formal; however, a significant minority of community education providers are also registered training organisations.

Formal literacy and numeracy programs and vocational programs that embed literacy and numeracy skills are important but experts also recognise that:

> [L]earners with very low-level skills benefit from stand-alone, face-to-face delivery methods, without any vocational contextualisation. This is particularly the case for the large proportion of adults with low skills who are not working or actively job seeking.
>
> For adults who have given up on being part of the labour market, motivations for participating in literacy and numeracy programs may include wanting to support their children with learning, wanting to attain a drivers licence or simply wanting to remove the social stigma of illiteracy.
>
> At this enabling level, learners need to focus on very basic skill acquisition around learning to read and write before they can begin to use these skills in other more contextualised learning.

<div align="right">(ALA, 2011; Roberts & Wignall, 2011)</div>

Some examples of community based and locally responsive non-formal literacy and numeracy programs are outlined below:

- Zoe Support (Mildura VIC) offers family day care so young mums can participate in their literacy, numeracy, vocational and life skills programs. This is vital in an area where the teenage birth rate is over twice the Victorian average.
- ACE Community College (rural NSW) offers a driver education program that embeds literacy and numeracy development, delivering practical outcomes in an area where public transport is limited and having a driver licence is important if you want to work, study, socialise or access local services such as seeing a doctor or attending the hospital.
- Moe Life Skills Community Centre (VIC) offers a range of pre-accredited LLND programs tailored to individual needs, offering opportunities for unemployed people in the Latrobe Valley.
- Capricorn Community Literacy (QLD) is a volunteer program that offers free literacy tutoring to community members. Similar services are offered through local libraries such as the Redlands Libraries in QLD.
- Junction Community Centre (SA) offers one on one literacy support for adults with learning difficulties, lack confidence or from CALD backgrounds.
- Tauondi Community College (SA), which is managed by Aboriginal people for the benefit of Aboriginal people, offers foundation skills development and other literacy and numeracy support services.
- Warlpiri Education Training Trust (NT) offers learner-centred, grass roots programs that build literacy and life skills (Bauer, 2018).
- Read Along Mums and Dads and other literacy programs operating in Loddon prison (VIC), and administered through the Friends of Castlemaine Library, connecting fathers with their children and stimulating literacy development for both.

The ACE sector is an enabler of inclusive learning and facilitates access by offering learning programs in friendly, community settings that cater for adults of varying abilities and backgrounds.

ACE is a gateway for all adults to return to learning at any stage along the learning time line, no matter their age, gender, culture, ability or previous educational experience or attainment. The sector recognises that there is no 'traditional student', only a spectrum of learners with their own needs and preferences to be taken into account (ALA, 2020).

ACE providers are community owned and managed, not for profit organisations that have adult education as a primary focus. ACE providers are highly networked within their local communities; particularly with human services providers (ALA, 2020).

ACE providers have strong expertise in delivering basic adult education (including language, literacy, numeracy and digital programs) that offer pathways into further learning and work, as well as essential life skills. Many ACE providers also provide or partner with social and community services to support learners through life challenges or barriers to learning.

Around Australia

> Australian ACE provision is diverse and tailored to the local community in which it operates. It is also influenced by state and territory governments who have primary responsibility for ACE. There are significant differences in how each jurisdiction views and funds ACE.

(ALA, 2020)

- In Victoria, there is a formal network of community education (ACE) providers referred to as Learn Locals. These organisations deliver funded community-based, pre-accredited adult literacy, numeracy and employability skills programs. There is also a broader ACE sector that includes the Learn Local network, some of which are also registered training organisations.
- In NSW, a network of community colleges offer a range of non-formal ACE literacy and numeracy programs in local communities. Most community colleges are also registered training organisations.
- In SA, there is an identifiable sector of ACE providers; however, a new government 'purchased services' model strongly focussed on employment outcomes has significantly reduced the number of ACE adult literacy and numeracy programs.
- In the ACT, there are ACE grants for community programs that develop employability skills and LLND for adult learners.
- In QLD, ACE program grants prioritise programs that offer access to foundation skills and pathways into further learning, community participation and work, and are delivered by a wide variety of organisations including community, government and privately owned entities. There are also volunteer literacy programs in community organisations and libraries.

- In WA, adult literacy and numeracy support is provided through Read Write Now (RWN), which is a volunteer mentoring program funded by the Department of Training and Workforce Development and sponsored by North Metropolitan TAFE. RWN tutors complete four week of training. Other LLND support is provided through local government authorities to entities such as community resource centres.
- Libraries Tasmania hosts 26TEN, which is part of a 10-year strategy to engage the broader community and private sector in improving adult literacy and numeracy through its grant program.

At a local level, many ACE providers work in partnership with industry to design locally-based education programs that build workplace LLND and employability skills. For example, Gippsland Employment Skills Training in Victoria designed a program for local employer Flavorite Hydroponic Tomatoes to open up work opportunities for unemployed people in the Latrobe Valley. These types of programs offer a natural extension to the federal government's Foundation Skills for your Future workplace program.

Adult Learning Australia previously maintained a database of adult community education providers, many delivering non-formal LLND programs, which filled an important gap in adult LLND provision. Funding for this activity ceased in 2015, however with adequate resources ALA could update this important data.

The way forward

- Recognise the role of adult community education in supporting adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy by renewing the national Ministerial Declaration on ACE.
- Map and update a database of adult community education providers, to fill the gap in LLND provision in Australia.
- Implement strategies that facilitate complementary partnerships and collaborations between and amongst adult LLND providers i.e. VET, TAFE and community providers.

"I was worried that since I'd been at school there'd been a lot of changes. I started going to Bridging Literacy and Numeracy at Zoe Support because I needed to catch up, particularly with computers and new technology.

"What I want my son to know is that … you can have a good life no matter what happened to you in the past.'

"I was learning a lot not just from the teacher but from the other ladies in the group because we talked a lot together during the course. It's like we were family.'

Indigenous and family literacy programs

Children's experiences of and success in school, is significantly impacted by the educational experiences of their parents and grandparents' (ALA, 2014).

Parents with low levels of literacy and numeracy and negative experiences of education struggle to support their children to develop their literacy and numeracy. This is particularly the case for Indigenous families and children.

It's important to develop a strong understanding of the social and cultural structures of Indigenous Australians and the potential for the extended family to influence the literacy and numeracy development of its young people.

(ALA, 2014)

Policymakers need to pay attention to how LLND skills and know-how are acquired through socialisation and learning as a lifelong process.

The ACE sector, with its emphasis on locally developed, easy to access programs in non-formal and welcoming environments is in an ideal position to partner with schools and other stakeholders to develop and deliver family literacy programs.

Examples include community learning centres delivering whole-of-community adult education and family literacy programs such as in Yuendumu in the Northern Territory; the Better Beginnings family literacy program in WA and the Brotherhood of St Laurence's national HIPPY program. However, there are many other community-based programs achieving strong local outcomes in this area.

Adult LLND education including community-based programs and family literacy programs that target Indigenous, CALD and other socially and economically marginalised Australian communities must be identified and evaluated.

In New Zealand, ACE provision is acknowledged and resourced for the role it plays in reaching vulnerable groups (including Māori and Pasifika people) within their own communities. Provision covers basic adult education, adult literacy and numeracy (including financial, workplace and digital literacy), tikanga and te reo Māori (cultural practices) and English language programs.

ACE in New Zealand has been instrumental in educating for cultural revitalisation, raising political and environmental awareness, and assisting adult learners to become proactive, engaged citizens.

Confidence in and acknowledgement of the ACE sector was endorsed in New Zealand's 2020 budget, which included a $16 million boost for ACE and operational support for the peak body.

> "I would never have had the confidence to apply for further training. I thought I was dumb.".

(Greg, a driver with Nidjalla Waangan Mia
Aboriginal Health Centre)

The way forward

▪ Identify and evaluate adult LLND education including whole of community and family literacy programs that target Indigenous, CALD and other socially and economically marginalised Australian communities.

The practitioner workforce

Australia does not have enough skilled practitioners to meet growing LLND needs. In a largely casualised workforce, there is a general lack of enthusiasm to undertake qualifications, without the assurance of full-time employment.

Building and maintaining the workforce

Adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy need to be 'taught by people with the appropriate skills' (Perkins, 2009). However, the full extent of the adult LLND workforce is not completely visible and often pathways into the profession are not consciously made. There are also limited options to pursue higher qualifications in this area.

Adult LLND job roles may include 'teachers, educators, practitioners, assessors, specialists, trainers and tutors' who may teach 'foundation skills; core skills; basic skills; language, literacy and numeracy; essential skills; basic education; life skills; and further education' (Medlin, 2016). Furthermore:

Adult literacy and numeracy workers might engage with learners in the community, in their homes, in an evening college, in a local health centre, at an educational institution, in a correctional centre, at a registered educational provider, online, in a

homeless shelter or refuge, in a workplace, … outside of formal educational frameworks'.

(Medlin, 2016)

In order to sustain the literacy and numeracy workforce, we need a systemic approach that includes identifying pathways into the field as well as offering subsidised 'access to initial training programs and ongoing professional development, incorporating the appropriate theoretical and practical knowledge and skills' (Perkins, 2006).

Professional development

High quality professional development that addresses the national skills shortage of qualified adult LLND educators and builds the capacity of the workforce, including both professionals and volunteers is essential.

In Victoria, Adult Learning Australia and ACEVictoria designed and delivered for the Department of Education and Training, the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Practitioners Program (ALNPP). This 20 hour program was designed to engage and build the skills of differently qualified adult literacy and numeracy practitioners in pre-accredited contexts.

Using web-based platforms, all participants completed modules on theory, frameworks (including the Australian Core Skills Framework) and teaching practice. The platform included a community of professional practice, peer-to-peer mentoring, online forums, where participants could discuss the curriculum and its implications, interact with experts in the field and develop the confidence they needed to improve their daily teaching. The program has been very positively received by over 250 practitioners who completed the program in 2020, and continues in 2021.

''The value of ALNPP is that it's economical and practical. It offers much needed short, structured, continuous, and time flexible upskilling. I think our traditional models of PD are tired and for the most part not very useful. If most .. teachers … are working part time or casually the question is when do they get the opportunity to come together for face to face training? Most people are being squeezed by the demands of work and home. We need more programs like the ALNPP that can fit in with our busy work schedules and lives.'

The way forward

- Develop an online learning portal that outlines career pathways for adult LLND professionals and incorporates ongoing and integrated online professional development that is subsidised, accessible and scalable to meet the broad needs the workforce.
- Link communities of practice and mentoring to the online learning portal to facilitate innovation, professional conversations as well as networking and connections amongst adult LLND professionals across Australia.
- Resource and deploy a communication and marketing strategy that de-stigmatises adult LLND issues in the community through myth-busting, case studies and information.

From invisible to visible

Effective planning and implementation of the COVID-19 recovery process must recognise the economic value of higher levels of adult LLND skills; particularly for socially and economically marginalised Australians.

All Australians, regardless of their employment status, must be supported to develop their LLND skills in order to achieve productivity gains and to ensure they can live healthy, autonomous and full lives. They also need sufficient literacy to comprehend health information, understand government information and services, get job ready and maintain social connections; which is particularly important now.

Adult literacy education in Australia should empower people, especially those who are marginalised, to improve their lives beyond work and employment. However, many successful adult literacy interventions; particularly those delivered through community-based programs or with community service obligation funding, are invisible to policy-makers and therefore to many adults with low literacy. Many of these programs celebrate what a person knows without stigmatising what they don't know. This is important in combating the shame so often associated with low levels literacy and numeracy.

Recognising, optimising and including community-based approaches into a broader adult LLND strategy, combined with a visible, sustainable and appropriately qualified adult LLND workforce, will go a long way to embedding literacy and numeracy development in Australia within a lifelong learning model.

In summary

ALA is committed to achieving effective outcomes for adults with low LLND and would welcome the opportunity to further collaborate with government and other sectors to ensure disadvantaged learners and marginalised groups gain access to better social and economic prospects.

ALA can be part of the solution to help build and sustain the skills and capacities of adults with low LLND so they can participate fully in employment, education and training, and social and civic life.

We look forward to your consideration of this submission and hope to engage in more detailed discussions with the Committee on how our suggested measures might be applied.

Literacy is an investment in the future. If we are to truly 'leave no one behind' and ensure opportunities are both inclusive and equitable for all ages and stages of life then the following are three key areas that require urgent attention.

1. **Proficiency**

   Analysing the key characteristics of adults with low LLND skills and understanding what motivates people to improve their LLND skills

2. **Provision**

   Recognising, identifying and integrating adult LLND provision.

3. **Professionalism**

   Sustaining and skilling the adult LLND workforce.

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Stories

Greg: https://ala.asn.au/stories/turning-life-around/

Rebecca: https://ala.asn.au/stories/education-path-opens-for-young-mums/

Ronga: https://ala.asn.au/stories/a-taste-for-work/

Samuel: https://ala.asn.au/stories/reading-write-now/