

# **DYSLEXIA IN AUSTRALIA 2025**

## **PRODUCTIVITY-FOCUSED ROUNDTABLE AUGUST 2025**

### **Implementing policies for achieving full employment and recognising dyslexia**

#### **According to current Australian Bureau of Statistics May 2025**

- The current unemployment rate in Australia stands at 4.1% or 618,600 people
- Youth unemployment (15-24 year olds) rate is 9.2%
- Underemployment rate is 5.9%
- Underutilisation rate is 10%
- Participation rate is 67%

I have never met a person who was able to work, who did not want a job! The level of unemployment in Australia is not just a productivity or social justice issue, it is a political issue. When did the Australian Government give up on full-employment? The unemployed and their children, living on unemployment payments, live in abject poverty, but we see more policies, talking and lobbying for the better off, not for the left behind.

We are told that people on unemployment benefits rotate, but this is generally not the case. In Australia there is -

- intergenerational illiteracy
- intergenerational unemployment
- Intergenerational poverty
- Intergenerational trauma
- Intergenerational incarceration
- Indigenous deaths in custody

With regard to the productivity roundtable the Prime Minister stated “improving productivity is essential to maintaining a high standard of living and creating more opportunities for all Australians, so that everyone is better off”. This task is said to be “one of the biggest challenges facing our nation. It will require the collaboration of government, industry, education providers and workforces to help solve Australia’s productivity challenge”. But what we cannot see, we cannot fix! Unless we start to see the unemployed we will not be able to fix the unemployment problem and improve the economy.

- Currently 44% of Australian adults do not have the literacy skills needed for everyday life. Rugby league star Ian Roberts said it was easier coming out as gay than it was to publicly admit how much difficulty he had with reading and writing. There is a stigma in Australia associated with illiteracy.
- For example, someone who has been a truck driver for 20 years, who when they started didn’t need to do much more than sign their name, is now expected to take part in very complex online processes and complete mandatory safety training. So the requirements of the job have changed.
- Research has found a range of reasons why people don’t develop the skills they need - particularly in the crucial years between 5 and 9 when most kids develop reading skills. Parents with low literacy: disrupted schooling, poverty, learning difficulties, eyesight or hearing problems, and family breakdown are some of the reasons why children grow into adults without reading and writing skills.

**But the most common reason for illiteracy in Australia is dyslexia. And the most common cause of unemployment, poverty and incarceration is illiteracy.**

- Dyslexia is the most common cause of reading, writing and spelling difficulties. In Canada, where students are screened for dyslexia, they found that 80-90% of children in learning support had dyslexia. It generally affects 10-20% of the population, although this differs within and between countries. Today dyslexia is estimated to affect approx 1 billion people worldwide.
- In Australia dyslexia is estimated to affect 10% of the Australian population but this is a very conservative estimate, as most individuals with dyslexia in Australia are not screened for dyslexia and are left unidentified. In other English speaking countries, where children are routinely screened for dyslexia at school, the figures are estimated to be approximately 20% (USA Canada UK)
- In Canada, screening has found that 45% of the Indigenous Inuit population has dyslexia. I suspect that the rate of dyslexia in our Indigenous population would be similar. Their ancient languages were not written down and being dyslexic had no adverse consequences and the condition was simply inherited and multiplied.
- For over 200,000 years humans communicated only through speech and memory. They have only been using symbols and written language to communicate for the past five thousand years, and in Australia only the last 200 years.
- Traditionally, before European arrival, Aboriginal languages were passed down through oral traditions, including storytelling, songs and ceremonies.
- Dyslexia did not pose a real problem until written language was widely used. Increasingly people with dyslexia are being discriminated against in the modern world as the use of written communication is becoming ever-increasingly dominant.
- Australia's estimated population (2025) is 27 million, and we would therefore expect 20% of that number (5.4 million) people living in Australia, to have mild to severe dyslexia. This number is surprising, as in Australia there is often a general expectation that people can read and write without problem (perhaps not new migrants).
- Unfortunately in Australia, children with dyslexia who perform badly in written testing at school are categorised as having SLD (Specific/Significant Learning Difficulty/Disability) or LD (Learning Difficulty). This umbrella term is used for all students who experience literacy difficulties, despite the fact that dyslexic children are average or above average intelligence.
- Unfortunately a lot of people in Australia are not familiar with the word dyslexia, as the term is not generally used.
- Dyslexia is an inherited neurobiological condition which makes learning to read and write very difficult. It is inherited via a dominant gene on the X chromosome and multiple other genes. If one parent has dyslexia, then we would expect 50% of their children to inherit dyslexia.
- The brain in dyslexic children is structured differently from birth, and thus functions differently from non-dyslexic children. In most dyslexics the right side of the brain is used for language processing, unlike non-dyslexics who engage the left side of the brain.
- The left side of the brain is considered the dominant one for language processing and is usually responsible for reading, writing and maths.
- Whereas the right side of the brain plays a key role in visual-spatial processing, creativity and emotions. It's often associated with intuition, imagination and

interpreting non-verbal cues. The right brain helps you decode the meaning behind someone's posture, facial expressions and other physical cues. It is also involved in recognising and appreciating musical rhythms and patterns.

- This creates learning difficulties at school for children who are dyslexic, as they learn best in multi-sensory ways, not written.
  - Often with the aid of a behavioural optometrist and multi-sensory tuition, children with dyslexia can be taught to read and write. But unfortunately it remains difficult for most.
  - It is therefore no surprise that very few students with dyslexia manage to go to University, regardless of the fact that they are of average or above average intelligence and have lots of abilities including creativity. This may change with improvements in technology and AI helping people with neurodiversity.
  - Many people with dyslexia, especially those from higher socioeconomic groups, go on to live very successful lives. 40% of all self-made millionaires are dyslexic.
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- But usually dyslexia is associated with poor academic, economic, vocational, health and stress-behavioural problems and outcomes. So this cannot simply be a concern for the education system. Studies show a very strong connection between dyslexia, academic under-achievement, trauma, substance abuse, homelessness, mental health issues, incarceration and suicide.
  - Often people who have dyslexia also have dyscalcula (40% of dyslexics can't do maths and this affects their ability with money/finances) dysgraphia (a neurological learning disability that affects a person's ability to write and express ideas on paper) and dyspraxia (affects motor skills and co-ordination- developmental coordination disorder DCD) These conditions can also coincide with ADHD, ODD and Autism etc.
  - Understanding and supporting individuals with the 4D's is essential for fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment.
  - Dyslexia is recognised in Australia under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and under the Human Rights Commission. (It is not covered by NDIS)
  - We have noted that dyslexia is the most common cause of reading, writing and spelling difficulties as well as many behavioural difficulties, caused by the anxiety of not being able to read or write.
  - Prisons in the UK have found approx 70% of inmates could not read or write effectively and 65% struggle with basic numeracy skills. In Australia it is estimated that 60% of prison inmates are unable to read or write.
  - The economic costs of undiagnosed dyslexia in the EEU alone have been the subject of numerous studies, and run into billions of Euros per year.
  - Globally people with dyslexia are being underserved - educationally, socially, economically and politically. Dyslexia is associated with poor academic, economic, vocational and health outcomes.
  - Many dyslexic children experience low self-esteem due to constant struggles with academic performance. They can also often experience stress and anxiety over their academic struggles, leading to social isolation and loneliness.
  - Dyslexic children can also often suffer trauma at school, because they do not know why they can't read or write. This can lead to behavioural issues.

- Dyslexia is not a developmental condition, although dyslexic children who suffer trauma in their early years will also usually have developmental issues, which will affect their learning outcomes.
- Some countries have passed a series of legislation to promote better identification of people with dyslexia and to protect their rights in education, employment and access to public services
- Dyslexia is a social justice issue as it is connected to the human right of literacy and disproportionately impacts children who are indigenous and/or live in poverty as they go undiagnosed and untreated.
- Early screening and identification, and subsequent interventions for children with dyslexia mitigates poor outcomes and dramatically improves positive life results.

## **What can we do in Australia?**

- Increase public awareness and acceptance of dyslexia, disseminate current knowledge of dyslexia to educators, policymakers, and especially parents of children with dyslexia
- Screen all students in all schools for dyslexia (preferably Year 1)
- Provide interventions/support/accommodation for all dyslexic children.  
This would include -
  - behavioural optometrists for eye tracking issues
  - psychologists for students who have experienced trauma
  - multi-sensory tutoring programs (Easyread, Davis, Orton-Gillingham, Betsy Sewell)
  - access to technology, internet, mobile phones, AI etc
- 4. Provide mentors and vocational/employment pathways at end of schooling.

## **WHAT CAN WE DO IN AUSTRALIA?**

### **Implementing policies for achieving full employment and recognising dyslexia**

This would meet the Goals of the Productivity Roundtable for submissions of productivity boosting ideas by being -

1. in the National interest
  2. budget neutral/positive
  3. specific and practical
  4. And most importantly fair!
- Human Rights are a set of principles concerned with equality and fairness. These include the right to life, the right to a fair trial, freedom from torture and inhuman treatment, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the rights to health, education and an adequate standard of living.
  - Governments have a particular responsibility to ensure that all people are able to enjoy their rights. They are required to establish and maintain laws and services that enable all people to enjoy a life in which their rights are respected and protected.
  - The right to education says that everyone is entitled to a good education. Governments have an obligation/responsibility to provide good quality education facilities and services to all their people, including people who have dyslexia.
  - Not all education has to be taught using writing. Not one size fits all. Some students learn best when the information is provided in audio format. In the USA there are

regional schools that specialise in teaching dyslexic students and centres for dyslexia. In India and Indonesia students with dyslexia are taught in separate classes for a term or two until they have caught up with their peers. Australia is already achieving some great results with learning on country/cultural appropriateness strategies.

- Literacy is the foundation in our modern society for success in education, work, and daily life. It encompasses the ability to read, write, listen, speak, and seek critical skills, that allow individuals to communicate, process information, and engage with the world around them. And employment ensures an adequate standard of living. We can make Australia a luckier and fairer country if we offer everybody who wants a job, suitable employment.
- Employers who are willing to take on an unemployed person could be subsidised with their forfeited unemployment benefit. Also students, who do not have contacts, should be helped to obtain an apprenticeship placement, and again their employer could be paid their youth allowance as a subsidy. All employees should be paid a minimum/award wage
- Employment services and Centrelink should recognise illiteracy, neurodiversity and poverty and serve the needs of the unemployed. People cannot just be directed to a website to read and write and fill out forms. Often families, living in poverty do not have computers or internet or phone plans. And we already know they can't afford to drive and have limited access to private and public transport.
- The homeless will need temporary accommodation until they can find employment and support services will be needed, which address their situation. Again their unemployment benefit could be used as a subsidy to an employer.
- The incarcerated should be offered a proven literacy/numeracy and skills program whilst imprisoned. It is most important that they have a relationship with a mentor or buddy. When released they will need temporary housing until they are on their feet. And their unemployment payment can subsidise their employment or be used to set up a business.
- For students with dyslexia, acquiring literacy skills can be particularly challenging and this will probably greatly impact their learning in various subjects, depending on their individual strengths and needs. These challenges can affect their confidence, engagement, and academic progress. Understanding the specific difficulties that students with dyslexia face in literacy and implementing effective instructional strategies and support is essential for helping them reach their full potential. A Naplan result is not always the best method of measuring a student's success.
- A commitment to recognising neurodiversity and supporting inclusive, accessible and equitable education and employment for all is essential to: **Australia becoming the lucky country for all!**

### **1. Increase public awareness and acceptance of dyslexia, disseminate current knowledge of dyslexia to educators, policymakers, and especially parents of children with dyslexia.**

- Dyslexic students in Australia are generally not recognised as dyslexic in the education system and finding out your child may have dyslexia can be scary, but it's better to know when there's so much you can do about it.
- School halls are a great place to get started and engage the local community.

- Dyslexia brochures (these should also be in audio format for dyslexic parents).
- Material on school website should also be in audio format.

## **2. Screen all students in all schools for dyslexia (typically Year 1)**

- Early identification and treatment is the key to helping individuals with dyslexia achieve in school and in life.
- Dyslexia can easily be tested online for free on platforms like [lexercise.com](https://www.lexercise.com). It takes about 5-10 minutes on a computer and can easily be administered by a teacher's aide.
- A more comprehensive/expensive educational psychologist report is usually not needed, as all dyslexic students can learn to read and write using a multi-sensory tutoring program. Some schools are already using these programs.

## **3. Provide interventions/support/accomodation for all dyslexic children**

This would include -

### **a) Behavioural optometrists**

- For students who are having vision problems. May be covered by medicare?
- Some countries (Canada) offer tax deductions for dyslexia interventions/support and allowances for those on income support.

### **b) Psychologists for students who have experienced trauma**

- Get mental health care plan from GP and use medicare system

### **c) Multisensory tutoring programs (Easyread,Orton-Gillingham, BetsySewell, Davis)**

- Most people with dyslexia will need help from a teacher or tutor, trained in using a multisensory, structured language approach. It must include a systemic and explicit method that involves several senses (hearing, seeing, touching) at the same time. It is usually one on one, as students require immediate feedback and progress at their own pace. With early screening and intervention students can be on track with their classmates within 6 months.
- We already have literacy departments in schools who can facilitate this
- Easyread is a not for profit organisation and has an impressive 100% success rate in teaching literacy online. It can also diagnose some reading issues like tracking. It uses a new approach called trainertext visual phonic cues which helps the child progress in 15 minutes per day. It is a neurological view of reading and spelling and amazing results can usually be seen in weeks.

### **d) Access to technology, internet, mobile phones, AI etc**

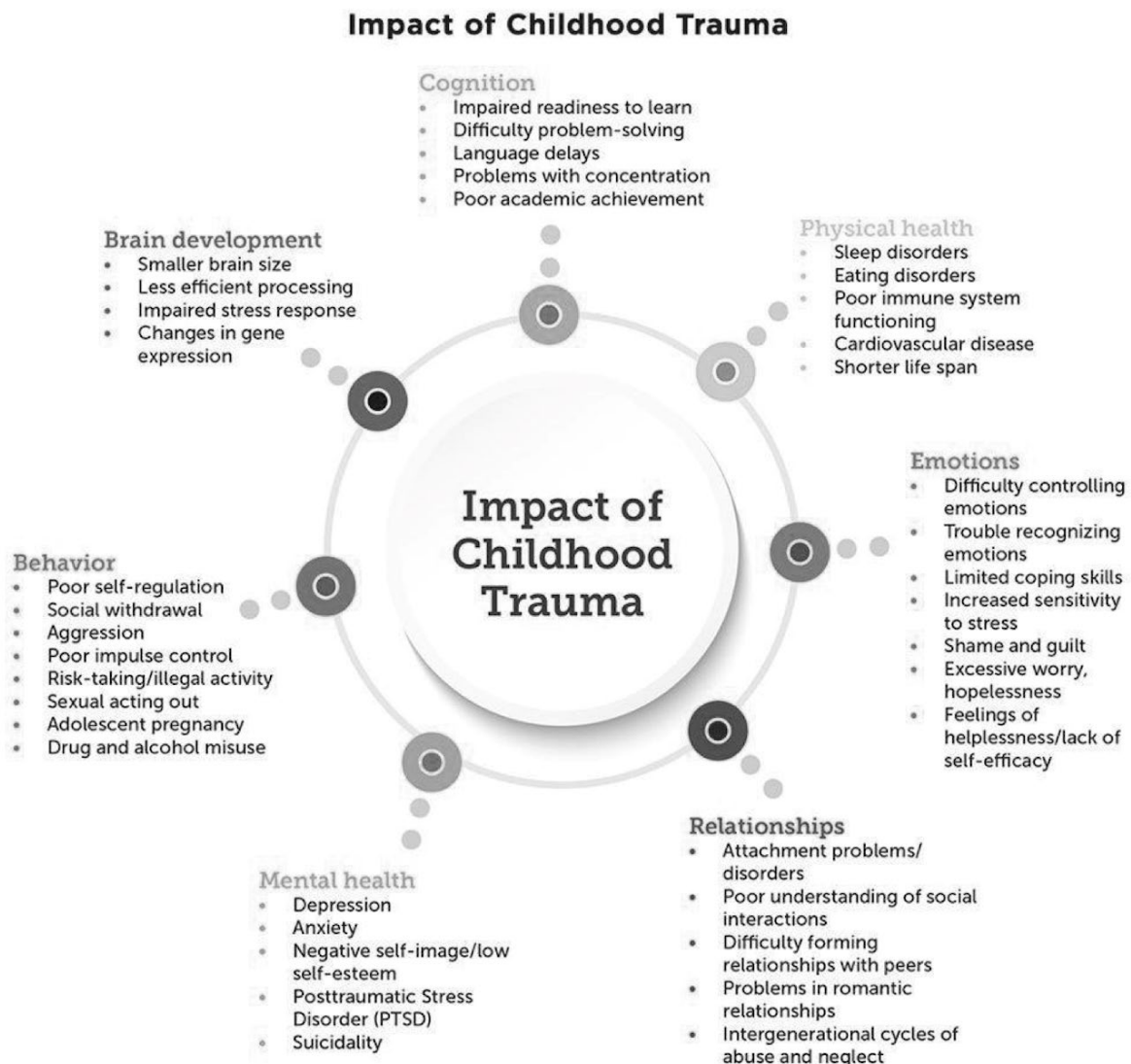
- Using accomodations to bypass the writing weaknesses so that students can produce written assignments etc using voice dictation software, reading pens etc
- Students living in poverty will need special access to technology, phones and internet

## **4. Provide mentors and vocational/employment pathways at end of schooling**

- Schools already have careers advisers who could facilitate/implement this at the community level.

## TRAUMA AND DYSLEXIA

- Dyslexia is not a developmental condition, although dyslexic children who suffer trauma in their early years will usually also have developmental issues, which will affect their learning outcomes.
- Trauma especially during childhood, can significantly impact brain development, affecting a number of regions of the brain and their functions. Experiences of adversity can lead to changes in brain structure, such as reduced cortical thickness and volume of sub cortical structures like the amygdala and the hippocampus.
- These changes can affect emotional regulation, cognitive abilities, and social development. A child psychologist is usually recommended.
- Dyslexic children can also have developmental delays with vision, which will need to be addressed before they can learn to read. This will usually require a behavioural optometrist who can improve the students tracking ability and vision.



**Figure 3.** Impact of Childhood Trauma; **Source:** (Child Trend)

# **INCARCERATION IN AUSTRALIA**

## **from Justice Reform Initiative Au**

### **Jailing is failing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.**

- It is more than 30 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Although governments accepted almost all of the Commission's recommendations many of them, such as imprisonment being the "last resort," have not been implemented.
- Governments have also failed to adequately address the underlying systemic issues which the Royal Commission identified as the cause of the disproportionate rate of First Nations incarcerations.
- First Nations people make up 3.3% of the general population but 33% of people in prison are First Nations people.
- In some jurisdictions, this is significantly higher. In the Northern Territory First Nations people make up 88% of incarcerated adults and in Western Australia, 43% of adults in prisons are First Nations people.
- The proportion of children who are First Nations who are incarcerated, is even higher. 63% of all children imprisoned in Australia are First Nations children.

### **Jailing is failing the most disadvantaged.**

- The majority of people incarcerated in Australia come from circumstances where they have experienced multiple and intersecting disadvantages. There are eight social determinants that increase the likelihood of incarceration:
  1. having been in in out of home (foster) care - trauma/dyslexia?
  2. receiving a poor school education - dyslexia/cultural appropriateness?
  3. being Indigenous
  4. having early contact with police
  5. having unsupported mental health and/or cognitive disability
  6. problematic alcohol and other drug use
  7. experiencing homelessness or unstable housing
  8. coming from or living in a disadvantaged location.
- 43% of all people in prison were homeless in the four weeks before entering custody and 48% of people leaving prison expect to exit into homelessness.
- 46% of people who enter prison report being unemployed prior to their incarceration and 62% of people released from prison don't have paid employment organised.
- The fact of disadvantage cannot be used to discount the consequences of crime. However it is crucial to understand the context in which most crime is committed in order to build and implement effective policy to reduce the numbers of people in custody and strengthen genuine alternatives to prison.

### **SHAME SHAME SHAME**

### **WINNUNGA NIMMITYJAH ABORIGINAL- HEALTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES**

The Productivity Commission Report on Corrective Services released early in 2024 reveals that the ACT, yet again and shamefully, continues to lock up Indigenous men and women at the highest rate in Australia and possibly in the world. An Aboriginal

person in Canberra is 24.6 times more likely to be sent to prison than a non-Aboriginal person.

The Productivity Commission also reported that the real net operating expenditure, in 2022–23 on the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC) and community corrections was \$100.8 million and the net operating expenditure per prisoner per day in the ACT in 2022-23 was \$543.19 (\$200,000 a year per prisoner). The highest rate in Australia. This is concerning as the AMC also has the highest Aboriginal recidivism rate in Australia of 90%.

## WHATS HAPPENING IN UK PRISONS? - THE SHANNON TRUST

- The Shannon Trust was set up in the UK in 1999 to get inmates who could read, to teach those who couldn't. It is a charity and works across all prisons in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to train and inspire people in prison who can read and do numeracy to teach those who can't.
- Each year they help thousands of people in prison to learn so that they can build a different, more positive future for themselves and their families. They also work in partnership with organisations in the community to offer reading and numeracy support to those who are caught up in the criminal justice system.
- The program enables more people in prison to gain fundamental skills that they need to navigate daily life. It provides people in prison with access to education, training and rehabilitative courses that will help them to address his/her offending, gain new skills and move into employment.
- For thousands of people in prison and in the community, learning to read and understand basic numeracy can completely transform their life.
- Over 70% of people in prison struggle with reading. Some cannot read at all. Around 65% of people in prison also struggle with basic numeracy skills. Learning to read and doing numeracy transforms lives.
- It means people in prison can access more opportunities, improve their confidence and rely less on others for help. Because the programs are peer-to-peer, both mentors and learners develop key skills that can help them find future employment.
- Shannon Trust fulfils an unmet need around adult learning, supporting people who have fallen through the cracks in formal education. We know that a lot of people have had negative learning experiences in the past, so our programs are designed to be different, with no exams and no classrooms.
- The **Turning Pages** reading manuals and **Count Me In** numeracy manuals are used by thousands of learners in prisons and the community.

Not being able to read or understand numbers affects more people than you think, yet learning can be a powerful springboard into so many other opportunities.

- It makes day-to-day life easier - almost everything in prison is done by filling in forms, such as applying for a job or course in prison, requesting to move cells, or selecting meals.
- It's safer for the learner and those around them - reading enables people to read signs and instructions.
- It improves family relationships - including with children, and helps to break the cycle of low literacy and low numeracy.

- Learning to read and do numeracy is often the first step into further learning and employment, with many Shannon Trust learners seeking out further education/courses.
  - It reduces reoffending and improves communities.
- Everyone deserves the opportunity to learn and has the potential to create a positive future in which they can thrive.

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