

Submission to the Productivity Commission - Building a skilled and adaptable workforce

Attached papers -

1. Dyslexia in Australia 2025
2. Increasing productivity by decreasing unemployment
3. "Closing the Gap" and Dyslexia
4. Education, Artificial Intelligence and Dyslexia
5. Dyslexia and the Right to Literacy

How can we build a skilled and adaptable workforce if we do not see the people in Australia with Dyslexia who struggle with literacy, or those who experience intergenerational unemployment and struggle to obtain gainful employment?

It is estimated there are approximately 5.4 million Australians who have Dyslexia. 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 approximately 1 billion people worldwide. In Australia Dyslexia affects approximately 20% of our population and potentially the same for our workforce. If people with Dyslexia are able to gain employment, it is usually at a lower level than their abilities. Dyslexia is an inherited disability which affects how the brain works in obtaining written language skills. Dyslexic children use the right side of the brain to learn to read and write, unlike non-dyslexic children who use the left side. It is not because they are slow learners. They are usually average or above average in intelligence. Their difficulties are often masked, as their oral skills are generally superior. In current western society we rely heavily on written English language. Without access to written language, people with Dyslexia can struggle to survive! Studies show a very strong connection between Dyslexia, academic under-achievement, trauma, substance abuse, homelessness, mental health issues, incarceration and suicide.

Currently there are approximately 1 million people living in Australia who are unemployed. This includes both adult and youth unemployment. Anthony Albanese said that "improving productivity is essential to maintaining a high standard of living and creating more opportunities for all Australians, so that everyone is better off". For those struggling to get by on income support, a decent job is a life-changing pathway out of poverty for them and their families. Over half a million Australians, including younger and older workers, people with disabilities including Dyslexia, and parents with children, are trapped on unemployment income-support long-term due to the lack of appropriate entry level jobs and training pathways. If we are going to ensure that everyone who wants a job can find one, we need to fix our employment services system so it supports Australians to connect with the right job and an improved TAFE system which provides accessible and consistent training pathways.

Unfortunately, in Australia there is –

- intergenerational illiteracy (44% of Australian adults don't have the literacy skills for everyday life)
- intergenerational unemployment (985,000 living on unemployment benefits)
- intergenerational poverty (985,000 living on unemployment benefits)
- intergenerational trauma (1 million Indigenous people 2025)
- intergenerational incarceration (First Nations people make up 3.3% of the general population but 33% of people in prison)
- Indigenous deaths in custody (602 First Nations people have died in custody since the Royal Commission in 1991)

No-one would disagree with the premise that all children have the right to literacy and the right to thrive in Australian schools. It is a human right. Surprisingly, most State education

departments have removed the word Dyslexia from their vocabulary, thereby making Dyslexia invisible. There are currently approximately 850,000 dyslexic students who continue to go unrecognised and unsupported. Currently they are placed in Learning Support with the slow learners. But Dyslexic children require a different kind of literacy support called multi-sensory structured learning (MSL). Currently higher socio-economic dyslexic families access this literacy support outside of school, while disadvantaged/Indigenous students remain left behind. Schools need to teach literacy for all and it is not difficult or expensive. Public school education was meant to be a great equaliser and overcome some of the unfairness of life!

It is therefore no surprise that very few people with Dyslexia go to University, regardless of the fact that they are of average or above average intelligence, and have lots of abilities including creativity. They usually end up in low paid jobs or unemployment, living in intergenerational poverty for their whole lives. With identification, the right literacy programs, accommodations, technology and AI, Dyslexic children will no longer be sentenced to a life of poverty and disadvantage.

In fact, a 2007 study from the Cass Business School London, found that more than a third of the US entrepreneurs surveyed identified as Dyslexic. In 2018 EY also published a report on the value of Dyslexia – it found that dyslexic strengths such as visualization and logical reasoning align with the changing needs of business. They often talked about a skills gap that showed a need for creative, different thinkers to make sense of the rapid change and the disruption we are facing in the world today. Dyslexic individuals have a range of natural strengths that make them ‘hard wired’ to step right in and fill this gap. In the past, the level of reading skills, writing ability, organisation and rote learning required to be successful, underpinned our education system. But a student’s knowledge can just as adequately be reviewed through a presentation, rather than in writing done under timed conditions. It is just as valuable for students to discuss and demonstrate their understanding as it is for them to rote learn a response and regurgitate it in writing. Some would argue these skills are more relevant for a 21st century model of education.

Systemic and entrenched discrimination in Australian Society for Indigenous /disadvantaged families.

Currently Dyslexic students face extreme challenges in obtaining an equitable education in our State school system and also in obtaining employment.

1. Students from poor families are faced with economic challenges in public State schools such as school fees, elective fees, excursions, camps, music and sport costs. Each school needs to establish an equity fund, which can assist students who come from families on social welfare and unemployment payments. Families on support should not be required to apply for special treatment. They are often illiterate and have other barriers to inclusion. There needs to be a school administrative support structure that enables this, without the need for parental intervention. These students will also be less likely to have access to a computer and the NBN. To improve equity, schools could provide academic support at before and after school care and/or provide school computers, technology, AI, free access to NBN etc to disadvantaged students at home.
2. We also need to fix our TAFE system. At the moment, you need a PHD to enrol in a TAFE course independently of an employer. The courses and application process are often incomprehensible and any prospective costs are prohibitive to an unemployed person. There also needs to be some conformity or consistency in courses offered at various campuses. Unemployed students often have to move because of insecure housing and often the course cannot be found again at a different location. They are also often not available in areas of need, so if students have to move because of housing they cannot continue in their courses. There also appears to be a lack of careers guidance counsellors and of entry level 1 and level 2 TAFE courses. Also, fee-

free TAFE is a myth for disadvantaged students as the free course places are not means tested and are usually taken up quickly by the employed. Disadvantaged students usually apply later and miss out. It is also disappointing that students cannot enrol in a Level 3 course unless they have an apprenticeship. Disadvantaged students need help in getting an apprenticeship. Apparently, the privately outsourced employment service only provides help to apprentices who already have a job, by managing their employment contracts!

3. How can you hope to find a job if you are homeless, have insecure housing or live in poverty? It would be great if we had an employment assistance program which was fit for purpose, and placed disadvantaged people into real jobs and just not punish them by cancelling their social support payments, for not reporting to Centrelink,. It cannot be expected that every unemployed person has the written skills to apply for a job, particularly on a computer. They also do not usually have computers, internet or phone plans. It is also not easy for them to “pop into an office”. They usually do not have cars or petrol or live in areas with good public transport. Most unemployed people do not even get concession fares. People who are on unemployment payments live in abject poverty! The current Jobseeker unemployment payment for adults with children is approximately \$420 per week and current Youth allowance (Jobseeker) payment is \$240 per week until your 22nd birthday. The unemployed/disadvantaged will probably never have any super, as they can't find employment and must rely on the social welfare system for the rest of their lives to provide an adequate standard of living! (Some Scandinavian countries who own their gas supplies, have free education including universities for everyone, housing and a living wage for all.)

Some countries (UK, Canada, USA) have already passed a series of legislation to promote better identification of people with Dyslexia and engage them in appropriate learning settings and to protect their rights in education, employment and access to public services.

Early screening/identification, and subsequent interventions for children with dyslexia mitigates poor outcomes and dramatically improves life results.

- **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 (typically Year 1)**
- The \$5,000 educational psychologist screens are rarely needed. A 5 minute online tool is usually all that is required and can easily be administered by a teacher's aide.
- **Provide interventions/support/accommodations for all dyslexic children**
- Dyslexic students often need a Behavioural Optometrist to correct problems with vision, including tracking and focus.
- typically require a different kind of literacy support called multi-sensory structured learning (MSL).
- Dyslexic students will need more time to do written examinations. The International Baccalaureate gives students with Dyslexia up to 50% more time to complete assessment exams.
- Students living in poverty will need special access to technology, phones, internet and AI etc. AI could be a real game changer for students/adults with Dyslexia.
- **Provide mentors and vocational/employment pathways at end of schooling**
- Schools already have careers advisers who could facilitate/implement this at the community level.
- TAFE and employment services also need to step up!