20 December, 2019

To whom it may concern,

Re: Submission to Productivity Commission's National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review

The NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council is a membership based peak-body of adult literacy and numeracy practitioners, teacher educators, program and curriculum managers and researchers in NSW. We thank the opportunity to make submission to the Review of the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development. Please find our submission attached. We have limited our response to the area of **Service provision for disadvantaged groups.** Members of the Council would be very to speak further with any of the members of the Commission to elaborate or clarify any parts of our submission.

Yours sincerely

Dr Keiko Yasukawa, President

Service provision for disadvantaged groups

INFORMATION REQUEST 19

- If governments agree to extend programs to improve language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) skills, who should these programs be targeted to?

The following groups are currently not well served by existing LLND provision and should be targeted for LLND provision:

1. a number of vulnerable groups of adults, including but not limited to:

   a. adults who have been educationally disadvantaged;

   b. homeless adults who cannot access programs due to their housing status;

   c. prison inmates;

   d. adults with a disability whose educational needs are not being addressed in available programs;

   e. migrants who were not able to access the Adult Migrant English Program during their eligibility period due to other pressures of settlement, but who now have the time and resources to participate in English language learning;

   f. adults who are not eligible or are not job-seekers who want to improve their literacy and numeracy skills to help their children or grandchildren's studies or who want to develop their LLND skills to participate more fully in the community.

2. workers who need to improve their LLND skills to sustain their employment, or workers who need to retrain and require LLND skills to access and succeed in the retraining.

3. adults in remote communities, including Indigenous Australians for whom 'standard' English may be an additional language or dialect.

- What is the role of the VET sector in teaching foundational skills as opposed to other sectors, such as schools?

LLND skills are lifelong and lifewide skills; development of these skills necessarily occurs across the lifespan and in different domains of people's life. For this reason, it has been known for many years that there is no single measure or benchmark for foundational skills needed in adult life [i]. LLND development occurs as children and adults meet new demands, initially within the home when children learn to communicate their needs (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills – BICS), then in school as they learn the disciplinary literacies and numeracies of the school subjects (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency – CALP)[ii] and then the literacies and numeracies required to negotiate increasing responsibilities in other domains of their life including at work, further education and training and in their community. Thus, many students who leave school with supposedly adequate foundational skills, will find that those skills are not adequate in other domains of their life.

In addition, adult literacy practitioners are constantly made aware of many students who, for diverse reasons, emerge from school without sufficient foundational skills to

equip them for everyday life and their future vocational needs. Their struggle to master the foundational skills has often been complicated by a range of reasons including those related to emotional, health, family and psychological factors. Success in school is undoubtedly an advantage in adulthood in both human and social capital terms; therefore, in the current review, it would be fruitful to survey the adequacy and efficacy of support structures in place for English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) students and those students for different reasons who are requiring extra literacy/ numeracy support. While it may be beyond the scope of this review, issues of bullying and other negative experiences that young people may experience in school can contribute to early exits from schools, which without appropriate intervention may lead to disengagement from education and training and poor social outcomes. Many of the students who find themselves in adult basic education/ adult foundation skills programs are those who report not having had the kinds of support in school and not only had an unsuccessful experience of schooling, but also carried the shame of not learning 'the basics' into their adulthood. A significant challenge for a new policy to address is reaching those who are educationally disadvantaged but due to reasons of perceived stigma (and other reasons) are difficult to reach even when there are programs that might benefit them. Some of the stories of adult literacy learners, including in other OECD countries, will attest to the long-lasting damage that the neglect of school children's literacy and numeracy needs can have on their social outcomes, self-confidence, self-esteem and ability to set life goals.[iii] This is not surprising given language, literacy and numeracy – and increasingly digital skills, are meaning-making and communicative resources in everything we do.

While the school system ought to provide equitable access and opportunities for a good education for all children, there will always be students for whom the school system does not work. This may include but are not limited to factors related to the students' family situation, poor health, multiple relocations or some complex interactions between one or more of these. The needs of these students may not be recognised by the schools, resulting in the students' academic failure or non-completion. Therefore, relying on the school system to 'eliminate' adults who do not have adequate LLND skills to sustain them throughout their adult life will fail.

There is also ample research that shows that when literacy and numeracy skills are not used in social practices, they are lost: 'use it or lose it'; on the other hand, engagement in literacy and numeracy practices helps to maintain and develop those literacy and numeracy skills acquired through education and training. Longitudinal studies provide compelling evidence of this[iv], and importantly, analysis of data from the recent OECD PIAAC data suggests that there is a correlation between *engagement in literacy and numeracy practices* and *social outcomes*, even among those who exhibit low levels of proficiencies in literacy and numeracy[v]. Thus, together with understanding the skills proficiencies of adults, we must also understand whether their skills are being productively utilised.

What research suggests is that consideration for improving the LLND proficiencies of adults in Australia needs to go beyond focusing on the assessed proficiency levels as the only primary source of information about the needs of adults with low LLND proficiencies. While much has been made of poor performance in the reporting of the literacy and numeracy skills proficiency data in Australia and elsewhere, for example in the most recent and earlier OECD adult skills surveys[vi], those types of data alone cannot tell us what the actual LLND needs are for those scoring at the lower levels.

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As argued above, unless adults themselves are perceiving and experiencing the need
to improve their LLND skills in order to participate in social practices – work,
community or family life – they will not invest in LLND programs, even if more
programs are made available. The 'needs' expressed by the government or even the
training providers through curricula and training unit descriptors are necessarily
generic because they are not based on the individuals' broader needs and aspirations.
Many adults with low proficiency levels in LLND may not readily relate to broad
statements of LLND skills.

Work undertaken by the European High Level Expert Group on literacy as well as
UNESCO on the *literate environment* has much to offer.[vii] A *literate environment*
refers to the extent to which, in any given social environment, there is "something
interesting and/or necessary to read, or situations that required reading and writing in
any form, as well as material and infrastructure available, such as books, newspapers,
paper …."[viii]. This concept is also being extended to a concept of the *numerate
environment* and a literate or numerate environment is experienced by individuals in
terms of:

- the *demands* that the practices may make on the adult.

- the *opportunities* the practices may offer to the adult engaged in them.

- the *supports / resources* offered, or conversely the *barriers* existing (or put up)
  within these practices, and cultures more generally, that impede the adult's
  numerate [or numerate] development.[ix]

This means that if the workers are employed in labour that makes minimal demand on
their LLND skills, and the few demands they are unable to negotiate on their own are
negotiated by a more skilled co-worker who acts as a literacy or numeracy *mediator*,
then those workers will not necessarily perceive a demand for further LLND skills in
their workplace. Equally someone who does not have the LLND skills to make
meaning of their home utility bill but whose family member has those skills would not
necessarily see the need to take action to improve their own LLND skills.

None of this means that adults with low LLND proficiencies would not benefit from
greater access to LLND programs. What it suggests is that adults will need to -

- perceive the *demand* for improved LLND skills themselves, and/or
- experience something which they could see as an *opportunity* to improve their
  LLND skills, and
- feel confident that there is *support and resources* to enable them to participate
  in learning.

It is important to note that what adults perceive as *supports and resources* are not
limited to those that an education and training provider can offer; they are wide-
ranging and include transportation access to get to class, economic resources (eg
transport cost, organising care of family members if they are normally carers, tuition
during paid worktime for meeting workplace LLND demands), and safety and social
support (encouragement from family and community, lack of stigma). Absence of any
of these could be perceived by the adult as a *barrier* to participation: that is, an
individual's agency and commitment to learning is influenced by the complex
interactions of the ways in which they perceive the affordances and benefits of
learning, the way they perceive themselves to be positioned as adult learners and the

extent to which they believe they have any control in their life circumstances. Thus, if they feel adults are labelled as failures or as impediments to the nation's economic growth and therefore mandated to attend LLND training, they will likely not be fully invested in their learning.[x]

Initiatives are therefore needed to enhance the literate and numerate environments so that adults could recognise and experience the actual demands upon them and opportunities for improved LLND with support and resources to help them meet these demands and realise the opportunities. In other words, policies aimed at developing a more literate and numerate adult population are more likely to succeed if they are developed in tandem with social policies aimed at reducing social isolation and other factors that may limit individuals' capacity to access supports and take an active role in the community.

- How can regulatory, program and funding arrangements for foundation-level skills and education be improved? Can the schooling and VET sectors be better linked?

Firstly, following our response to the previous question, more effective regulatory, program and funding arrangements for foundation-level skills and education would need to take into account the environments in which adults with low literacy and numeracy proficiencies reside. This includes taking account of the full *linguascape and linguistic repertoires* in the individuals' communities, that is understanding what are the range of languages being used and how they are being used in the communities. Only then can there be any useful assessment of whether there is likely to be a *demand* for improved LLND skills, and if so, what kind of provision would respond to these demands, thereby being perceived by the adults themselves as *opportunities* for LLND development. Such assessments of the environment require skilled community outreach workers who are connected to, and trusted in, these communities. One approach to promoting LLND skills development in communities is to train community literacy and numeracy mediators[xi], outreach officers or organisers who not only support community members to negotiate their immediate LLND demands, but also points them to opportunities for education and training and other activities that may lead them to developing their LLND skills.

Secondly, workplaces have an increasingly important role in supporting LLND skills development as the nature of work and technologies at work change. It is therefore important to provide incentives for workplaces to be perceived by their workers as supportive literate and numerate environments in which they could see demands, opportunities, support and resources for LLND development. Unions have for a very long time played important roles in promoting learning in general, and literacy and numeracy learning in particular in workplaces. In the UK and other parts of the world, there are designated Union Learning Representatives who help their workers access training; this system is a less threatening way for workers to arrange for participation in training than being told by their employer to do so.[xii] Creating a supportive literate and numerate environment has also been found to be critical in literacy and numeracy programs for retrenched workers who need to access VET courses to be retrained into jobs in a new industry; here too the unions have historically played a role in organising the workers to participate in such programs.[xiii] The importance of having skilled, effective and trusted mediators/ organisers cannot be underestimated; in order for adults with low levels of LLND proficiencies to participate in learning, they will

need to feel that they are not singled-out or set up to experience failure, particularly if they are experiencing the threat or reality of losing their job.

Thirdly, there needs to be allowance for a diversity of programs. While quality is critical, including in terms of teacher qualifications, safe and well-resourced infrastructures, and defensible curricula and pedagogy it may not be necessary or appropriate for all programs to be formally accredited according to the VET framework. In some instances, accreditation requirements could compromise the responsiveness to identified community needs both in timeliness and in the ability to deliver a program carefully tailored to the identified needs. Program providers who employ highly qualified and experienced teachers are able to design programs targeting the authentic needs of the learner groups, and indeed find the 'work arounds' they have to do when constrained by the requirement to use standardised training packages to be unproductive.

Fourthly, there needs to be a recognition of the different needs of beginner English language learners and learners who may have low levels of literacy and numeracy but for whom English is their dominant language. Putting these students in the same class is not conducive for either group.

A fifth point is that LLND skills are context-dependent: literacy and numeracy and digital skills are used differently in different contexts, and programs need to be context-sensitive to ensure learners can see the benefit of their learning to the specific context of their investment in learning. But it is also important to recognise that the contexts themselves are fluid and unstable due to changing patterns of work, privatisation or outsourcing of aspects of social services, increasing use of online platform and reduction in face to face human interfaces for accessing social services, decline in some traditional industries and emergence of new industries, to name a few. Many of these changes demand greater self-reliance on individuals to access and verify information, particularly in relation to online privacy and security. This requires critical literacy and numeracy, in addition to having the procedural skills such as 'filling out forms' and making online payments.[xiv]

- How can funding arrangements between governments better support more efficient, effective and accessible services for disadvantaged groups?

As mentioned above, there is a need for funding for non-accredited courses that can be designed and delivered in a timely manner to meet an emerging need. Such programs can in some situations create pathways for the individuals to continue into accredited education and training. The greatest challenge is to better identify the actual needs of people who are 'hard to reach' and provide supportive opportunities for them to develop their LLND for purposes with which they can identify. This means that there needs to be productive cooperation between people in communities - such as the community organisers/ literacy and numeracy mediators, and education and training providers who are prepared to work where the needs are, rather than rely on these learners to navigate through a heavily bureaucratic set of procedures. Thus funding must be extended to programs that might be delivered in or near, for example a large public housing estate, community centre, public libraries, and women's refuges.

As suggested above, this requires interweaving adult LLND policies into the fabric of broader social policies. If providers, particularly smaller community-based providers,

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are required to seek small pockets of funding from different jurisdictions and sectors, this will be judged as barriers and disincentives. Program funding must be as seamlessly and efficiently delivered to providers as possible.

One specific area of funding that is becoming an area of acute need is in the renewal and development of a skilled and qualified LLND teaching workforce. The disestablishment of the Commonwealth adult LLN Practitioner Scholarship scheme (2010-2014), university courses specializing in adult LLN teacher education programs have collapsed. It is critical that this field receives an injection of funding to renew itself and to strengthen and broaden its scope of work. Adult LLN, like all areas of education should be informed by specialized knowledge and pedagogical models, as well as current international research; the Certificate 4 in Training and Education does not address the requisite knowledge required in this field. Like the field of adult English language teaching, the appropriate standard would be a postgraduate degree that includes specialist subjects in adult LLN theory and pedagogy.

Recommendations

In summary, we make the following recommendations:

1. Prioritise program development and funding to:
    a. adults who have been educationally disadvantaged;

    b. homeless adults who cannot access programs due to their housing status;

    c. prison inmates;

    d. adults with a disability whose educational needs are not being addressed in available programs;

    e. migrants who were not able to access the Adult Migrant English Program during their eligibility period due to other pressures of settlement, but who now have the time and resources to participate in English language learning;

    f. adults who are not eligible or are not job-seekers who want to improve their literacy and numeracy skills to help their children or grandchildren's studies or who want to develop their LLND skills to participate more fully in the community.

2. Develop and introduce a program for training literacy and numeracy mediators/ organizers who help individuals in their immediate environments with their LLND demands, and who also encourage and broker education and training opportunities for them.
3. Create LLND learning centres with well-qualified LLND mediators in communities. Such centres can serve as informal non-threatening environment to assists those not ready for classes with higher LLND demands.
4. Design LLND policies within a broader socio-ecological perspective so that the full economic and social benefits of LLND development are achieved for the individual and their community.
5. Invest in renewing and expanding a well-qualified adult LLND workforce.

We believe that building a policy that embrace these recommendations would restore principles or equity and access into Australian VET and workforce development policy and practice.

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ii See for example, Cummins, J. (2017). BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the
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iii See for example, Furlong, T. & Yasukawa, K. (Eds). (2016). *Resilience: Stories of Adult Learning.* Research
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iv Reder, S. (2009). Scaling up and moving in: Connecting social practices views to policies and programs in
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v Grotlüschen, A., Mallows, D., Reder, S., & Sabbatini, J. (2016), "Adults with Low Proficiency in Literacy or
Numeracy", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 131, OECD Publishing, Paris. Online: http://www.oecd-
ilibrary.org/education/adults-with-low-proficiency-in-literacy-or-numeracy_5jm0v44bnmnx-en

vi For example, the OECD Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey, and the recent OECD Programme of
International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).

vii EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012). *Final Report: September 2012*. Online:
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf; UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE)
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viii p. 82, from Lind, A. (2008). *Literacy for all: making a difference*. UNESCO. See also EU High Level Group
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http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf, and Mallows, D & Litster, J.
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ix p. 22 from Evans, J., Yasukawa, K., Mallows, D., & Creese, B. (2017). Numeracy skills and the numerate
environment: Affordances and demands. Adults Learning Mathematics: An International Journal, 12(1), 17-26.

x See for example the research on investment in language learning: Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity
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xi Baynham, M. (1995). *Literacy practices: Investigating Literacy in Social Contexts*. London: Longman.

xii See for example, https://www.tuc.org.uk/union-reps/learning-and-skills/union-learning-reps-ulrs. And
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xiii Keating, M. (2012). Developing Social Capital In 'Learning Borderlands': Has the Federal Government's
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xiv See for example, Yasukawa, K., & Evans, J. (2019). Adults' numeracy practices in fluid and unstable
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