

20/12/19

To the Commissioners,

Please accept this initial submission for consideration as you prepare your Interim Report on the topic of the Skills and Workforce Development Agreement.

As set out in the published Issues Paper, we understand the Australian Government is considering ways to better meet the training needs of disadvantaged groups, including improving access to Foundation Skills training for 'second chance' learners.

The work of Literacy for Life Foundation is particularly relevant to the current study, as we have partnered with local Aboriginal communities to lift the foundational literacy skills of almost 250 Aboriginal adults since 2012, delivering community-led literacy Campaigns in 11 locations across Australia.

The Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign's success relies on its non-accredited, community development approach, which empowers communities to take control of delivery from the outset. This is not possible for accredited formal courses provided by Registered Training Organisations, which helps explain their high attrition rates.

The retention rate of participants across all Literacy for Life Foundation locations is currently 63%. In some communities it has been as high as 86%. In contrast, in 2014 the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) reported the completion rate for Certificate One courses by Indigenous students in NSW – which are aimed at people with minimal 'foundation skills' including English language literacy – was 13.2%, and lower in remote regions such as the ones where Literacy for Life Foundation has been operating.

The NCVER has examined the approach of Literacy for Life Foundation in detail and identified it as best-practice in the 2017 report: *Enhancing training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners*

The report is available online:

<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/enhancing-training-advantage-for-remote-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-learners>

This submission draws on material from a number of sources, in particular Literacy for Life Foundation's contribution to the 2019 Joyce Review and information recently put forward for consideration by the Productivity Commission in its work developing an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.

In conclusion, Literacy for Life Foundation and its partners, including the Lowitja Institute, University of New England and University of New South Wales, are in the process of finalising a three-year study of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign. We would welcome the opportunity to share the findings of this study with the Productivity Commission as soon as results are available, most likely in the first quarter of 2020.

Yours Sincerely

Professor Jack Beetson  
Executive Director  
Literacy for Life Foundation

## Recommendations

The Literacy for Life Foundation's achievements illustrate a path to improvement regarding effective delivery of Foundation Skills training for Aboriginal adults with low English language literacy. We would like the current study to consider the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Work with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other appropriate agencies (for example, Commonwealth Department of Education and Training and NCVER) to collect and publish comprehensive and robust data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult literacy levels and their impact on VET system access, retention and completions. Literacy for Life Foundation recommends the Productivity Commission take immediate steps to ensure adequate sampling of Aboriginal communities in the next Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey so there is a baseline against which future program success can be measured.

Recommendation 2: The Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign's positive results rely on its non-accredited, community development approach, which empowers communities to take control of delivery from the outset. This is not possible for accredited formal courses provided by Registered Training Organisations, which helps explain their high attrition rates. Literacy for Life Foundation strongly recommends the Productivity Commission take note of this in its study and in potential recommendations for reform. Foundational learning funding and policy should prioritise approaches that work, with a focus on rigorous and regular evaluation that demonstrates student progression against the Australian Core Skills Framework. All evaluations should have community-led components, to further enhance the accountability of the recommended approach.

Recommendation 3: Literacy for Life Foundation has faced numerous funding challenges to maintain and expand the reach of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign. We have no doubt the already positive results achieved to date could have been improved if they had been underpinned by more stable funding. Government support has been sporadic, stitched together from a patchwork of sources, including NSW Department of Family and Community Services, NSW Department of Education, NSW Aboriginal Housing Office and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, to name just a few. Literacy for Life Foundation recommends the Productivity Commission prioritise the identification of viable, dedicated funding that can allow Aboriginal adults to effectively improve Foundation Skills.

Recommendation 4: Work with Literacy for Life Foundation, its evaluation partners and other relevant parties at the local, regional, state and national level, to explore potential models for a national Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign as a way of helping to create viable VET and employment pathways for the significant number of Aboriginal adults with low literacy.

### Further Information - What we do

Literacy for Life Foundation ([www.lflf.org.au](http://www.lflf.org.au)) is an Aboriginal organisation that aims to raise the level of literacy among adults in the communities with which it works, using a three phase 'whole-of-community' model. This model was originally developed for countries where low rates of adult literacy are similar to those in Aboriginal communities. It has been significantly adapted for use in Australia and each new Campaign involves co-design by the local community. In Phase One, a community development process is utilised to build local leadership and commitment and continues for the duration of the Campaign. The aim of this phase is to actively involve the community as a whole in the process of building a social culture which lifts the value of literacy and learning. Approximately three months after Phase One begins, the six month literacy course starts within Phase Two, which includes 64 basic reading and writing lessons using a simple audiovisual method. Phase Two runs for up to three months and lessons are delivered by local facilitators trained for this work. Once people complete the lessons, they continue with Phase Three over a further three months. This consists of 'post-literacy' activities to consolidate their confidence and literacy skills gained in Phase Two, enabling them to access pathways into further useful community work, further learning, including vocational training, as well as employment.

Since 2012, this model has been deployed in eleven communities, ten in NSW and one in Central Australia. At the time of writing, the Literacy for Life Foundation database included household survey data gathered from over 1,300 adults. Of these, 385 had taken part as students in the Campaign, in class groups averaging 15 per group. By the end of 2019, almost 250 adults have graduated from the Campaign, the majority with significantly improved literacy. The Campaign has also employed and trained over 50 local Aboriginal staff to work as organisers, facilitators and survey workers.

At the time of writing, Literacy for Life Foundation is preparing a number of pilot proposals that aim to build on positive results achieved so far and extend the application of the community-led model. Relevant examples include proposed pilots that will include delivering LLND training in remote communities and for Indigenous inmates within prisons.

#### Low English language literacy among Indigenous adults<sup>1</sup>.

As a result of the work it has been doing since 2012, and the research undertaken prior to that by the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health/Lowitja Institute, Literacy for Life Foundation has identified the absence of detailed local level data on Aboriginal adult English literacy rates as a factor that has major implications. First, while it is not mentioned in Close the Gap targets, the English literacy proficiency of Indigenous adults is a key factor in the achievement of virtually every one of these targets, as it is for the outcomes of every program aimed at reducing disadvantage and building the capacity of people and communities to live well. This is increasingly recognised in concepts such as 'health literacy', 'financial literacy', 'legal literacy', and 'governance literacy'. But, as the last of these should alert us, it goes to the question of the limits of community-control and self-determination, since the ubiquitous use of highly-literate language and text within government, and the almost total lack of government officials and legislators with any proficiency in one or more Indigenous languages undermines the possibility of the majority of Indigenous 'voices' ever even being heard, let alone listened to. Second, and following on from this, the high level of text-based English literacy involved at every stage of most evaluation processes means that a lack of English proficiency presents a major barrier to undertaking genuinely participatory evaluation at a local level.

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on a paper from the ARC research team (Lin et al), currently under review by the Australian Educational Researcher.

The extent of this problem, however, remains hidden from view, due to an almost complete data vacuum. While the English literacy outcomes of Indigenous children are constantly measured and debated, as evidenced in discussions around NAPLAN and school achievement in the Closing the Gap policy framework, attention falls away once these children leave school. In fact, there is almost no reliable national data on English literacy rates among Indigenous adults. This data scarcity is not only true of the adult Indigenous population. Robust, contemporary estimates of English literacy levels in the adult Australian population are scarce. The main source since 1997 has been the Australian component of a series of three international adult literacy surveys, the Survey of Aspects of Literacy (SAL) in 1996 (McLennan 1997), the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) in 2006, and the Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) conducted in 2011-12. Each of these surveys provide national and state level estimates but sample size constraints mean that recent and reliable data on Australian Indigenous rates of adult English literacy are not available. The 1996 SAL reported 41-47% of Aboriginal adults were at 'Level 1' (defined as having very poor skills and experience considerable difficulties with printed material in daily life) and another 25-30% were at 'Level 2' (defined as experiencing some difficulties in using printed material in daily life) (McLennan 1997). The more recent surveys have not reported any findings on Aboriginal English literacy, and the ABS report on 2011-12 PIAAC said that discrete Aboriginal communities had been specifically excluded from the sample (ABS 2013).

As an indicator of the potential magnitude of this issue, Literacy for Life Foundation has worked with its academic partners to produce estimates of the level of English language literacy in eight Aboriginal communities in NSW with which it has been working since 2012. These estimates use both self-report data from household surveys conducted by local researchers and objective assessments by professional literacy advisers using the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). In the household survey, 800 of 1,177 adults (n=68%) reported low or very low English-language literacy levels, including 50% of people who said they had finished Year 10. This casts doubt on the value of school completion data which is used, for example, in Close the Gap reporting, as an accurate predictor of adult literacy rates. Results further show that while self-reported low literacy was prevalent in the population studied, there was also a significant overestimation, with adults who have completed Year 10 nearly 17 times more likely to overestimate compared to people who only complete primary school. The most important finding is that, while English literacy as it is ascertained through self-report among Aboriginal adults in north-western NSW is a significantly greater problem than it is in the population as a whole, the actual extent of the problem is also being underestimated because of systematic overestimation of self-reported English literacy levels.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) said, in relation to the most recent PIAAC survey results, that PIAAC Skill Level 3 was the minimum level required by individuals to meet the complex demands of work and life in modern economies (SCOTese, 2012, p. 4), a view which has also been expressed in the Productivity Commission's own publications on adult literacy. Although some literacy academics consider this a matter of debate, it is still necessary for effective planning and policy development to make some estimates of how many people operate at the lower levels, especially at Level 1 and below, since they are clearly the ones who will face most challenges dealing with the world of text. Literacy for Life Foundation has been informed that negotiations between the OECD and the Australian Government are already underway regarding the next iteration of PIAAC, planned for 2021, but at this stage there is no indication that results for localities or for Indigenous adults will be reported.



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#### Further Material – Supplied as Attachment

#### Evaluation Report – Collarenebri, Intake 1

University of New England evaluation of Literacy for Life Foundation's first intake of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in Collarenebri, September 2019.

- Includes data on adult literacy levels in Collarenebri and outlines how Campaign assisted students to make significant literacy gains, with results mapped to the Australian Core Skills Framework.

#### Case Studies (Photos)

Featuring Literacy for Life Foundation students 2012-2019

- Includes examples highlighting employment and further education opportunities created as a result of involvement in effective Foundational Skills training.

#### Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) - Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future

Submission from women in Boggabilla and Toomelah, NSW, Produced with the University of New England and Literacy for Life Foundation, November 2018

- Produced for the Australian Human Rights Commission and includes the views of Aboriginal adult students with low literacy from the communities of Boggabilla and Toomelah, NSW.



LITERACY FOR LIFE FOUNDATION  
ABORIGINAL ADULT LITERACY CAMPAIGN | YES, I CAN!

EVALAUATION REPORT | COLLARENEBRI, INTAKE 1  
NOV 2018-SEPTEMBER 2019

DR FRANCES WILLIAMSON  
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of 2018, the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF) was undertaking its third and fourth intakes of the literacy campaign in nearby Walgett. Close family and cultural ties with Walgett meant that those in Collarenebri were aware of the campaign and the work of LFLF. Impressed with the reported outcomes in Walgett, the Collarenebri Community Working Party lobbied Aboriginal Affairs, NSW to contact LFLF about the possibility of a campaign in their community. The Executive Director (ED) then began a series of visits, sometimes accompanied by the then National Campaign Manager (NCM) and the Walgett Campaign Project Officer (CPO) to canvas community attitudes to a potential adult literacy campaign.

As with many smaller Aboriginal communities, Collarenebri experiences historic intracommunity conflict. This situation, undoubtedly a legacy of colonisation, meant that in early community consultations, some expressed doubts the campaign would work. The ED and Walgett CPO spent time with representatives of the two key community organisations – the Community Working Party and the Local Aboriginal Land Council discussing the campaign model, in particular community ownership and the need for constructive working relationships among all stakeholders. After a time, agreement was reached and partial funding was provided by the Department of Family and Community Services, NSW with a contribution by Prime Minister & Cabinet, Western NSW. However, the need for careful and ongoing diplomacy meant the initial preparatory work for the campaign took longer to complete. Further delays resulting from workload constraints from the concurrent campaign in Walgett necessitated an extension on funding. After more than six months of groundwork, the Collarenebri Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign was officially launched on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2019. At the time of writing, a second intake of students have joined the campaign and funding is being sought for a third intake for 2020.

This report evaluates the first intake between November 2018 and September 2019. The report examines both outcomes and processes, identifying key impacts such as:

- ⇒ student participation and retention
- ⇒ literacy gains
- ⇒ psychosocial benefits

- ⇒ staff capacity development
- ⇒ community cohesion

It also analyses strengths of this particular campaign and areas for future improvement. Ethical approval for the work was granted by the University of New England and additional resourcing and support for the evaluation was made possible by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant.

## 2. EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Evaluation has been embedded in the development and implementation of LFLF's Aboriginal adult literacy campaign from the outset. The report presented here is a continuation of a process of Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology that the Foundation began with the first pilot intake of students into Yes, I Can! in Wilcannia in 2012. Key qualitative and quantitative data which the evaluation is based on is the result of field trips to Collarenebri during 2019. These trips were used to meet with and interview staff, students and local organisations, and to take part in campaign activities, including observing and participating in some lessons. Field trip data has been supplemented by regular phone/email contact with staff, and reviews of the LFLF documentary evidence, including funding agreements, attendance records, assessment reports, minutes of campaign meetings, examples of student work and the written reports of local and national staff and consultants.

The depth and breadth of data informing this evaluation and the high level of community participation in its collection and analysis goes some way to addressing recent concern from the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community that '...too often, evaluations of key Indigenous reforms have been of limited usefulness for Indigenous people and policymakers. The evidence about what works, including for whom, under what circumstances, at what cost, and why, remains scant' (Empowered Communities 2015, p.90).

The approach taken to balance depth (that is, the implementation context and local issues) and breadth (the transferrable experience of the campaign under evaluation expressed in

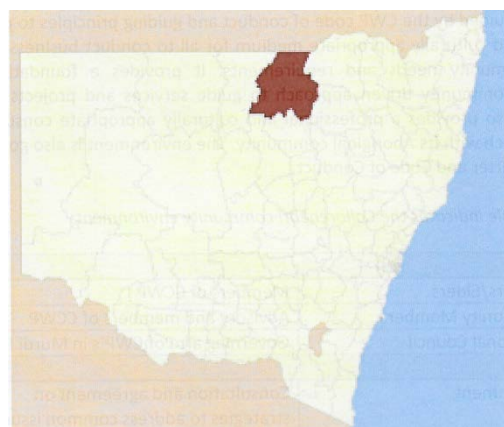


terms of what worked well and why and what didn't work so well and why) also provides valuable insights for LFLF that can be used to inform the foundation's ongoing and future operations<sup>1</sup>.

### 3. BACKGROUND TO COLLARENEBRI AND THE LITERACY CAMPAIGN

Collarenebri is a small town located on the bank of the Barwon River in north-western NSW.

It is approximately 75km north-east of Walgett and 140km west of Moree. Collarenebri is one of 16 communities in the Murdi Paaki Region, an area LFLF has been working in since 2012. The modern-day township occupies traditional lands of the Gamilaroi Nation and the name of the town is taken from the Gamilaraay word 'galariinbaraay', which means 'place of flowers'. Carved trees and other cultural sites around Collarenebri (e.g. Collymungle) attest to the traditional and ongoing significance of the place for the Gamilaroi Nation.



Today, Collarenebri has a population of 650 of which 42.1% are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ABS, 2016). Among the Aboriginal population, the average age is 26 years. Unemployment is high at more than double the state average due in part to the significant decline in economic activity from drought and the collapse of some rural industries. Similarly, educational outcomes are relatively poor with over 40% of people not completing year 12 schooling. Health outcomes for people living in Collarenebri are also poorer than the state average (NSW Government, 2018a) and people frequently need to travel to larger regional towns such as Walgett or Moree to access essential medical and allied health

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<sup>1</sup> A note on objective evaluation:

As evaluator I bring both insider and outsider perspectives. I have previously been engaged by LFLF as a CPO, trainer and technical advisor and have been part of the Australian Research Council - funded longitudinal impact study of the campaign. I have also been involved in staff training and monitoring of internal student assessment in Collarenebri over the course of 2019. These 'insider' roles have allowed me to develop the relationships necessary to effectively undertake PAR. However, I maintain an objective perspective as I have not been directly involved in the day to day running of the Collarenebri campaign.

services such as obstetrics and podiatry. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of transport into and out of the town. Such patterns of relative disadvantage are well-recognised and have been recently strongly correlated to geography with studies consistently finding that, for Aboriginal Australians, there is a clear gradient of disadvantage by remoteness (Biddle, 2009).

In early 2019, when the Collarenebri campaign began in earnest, much of NSW and in particular, far western NSW was in the grip of a severe and protracted drought. In my first visit, Greens MLA David Shoebridge, local elders and campaign staff attended a meeting at the Barwon River weir, a place long associated with local livelihoods and the transmission of knowledge and culture. That day, the temperature in the middle of the dry riverbed exceeded 53 degrees. Locals reported their taps running dry, lamented the fact that their children under the age of five had never known the river running and expressed concern and anger at the presence of diseased fish floating belly-up. The connection of the river's health to the spiritual health and functioning of the community was all too apparent. This was the reality that the literacy campaign and staff were working within.

At the same time as work was beginning in Collarenebri, the Literacy for Life Foundation was planning new campaigns in very different regions. Having implemented campaigns in north-western NSW since 2012, LFLF began groundwork for campaigns in the urban fringes of Sydney (Campbelltown) and in the remote Central Australian community of Ltyentye Apurte. This was the first time the foundation was to run simultaneous campaigns in three geographically, culturally and linguistically distinct communities. In addition to this, LFLF had more staffing changes at the national level with a new National Campaign Manager (NCM) taking up the position in September 2018 and the relatively experienced Walgett Campaign Project Officer (CPO) who was slated to implement the Collarenebri campaign resigning. As a result, a new CPO was appointed towards the end of 2018 and was on the ground in Collarenebri from early 2019.

The extent of low English literacy in Collarenebri

As part of the campaign model, each community undertakes a household survey (HHS). The household survey is the chief means by which the local staff 'socialise' the campaign and

assess need for the literacy classes. Overall, approximately 90 households were visited during the two-week survey period (December 2018). Seven households declined to take part. Of the remaining, a total of 154 adults (15 years and over) completed a survey, as detailed in Table 1, below. Based on the 2016 ABS Census and local information, the numbers of households approached during the survey period represents close to 100% coverage.

Collarenebri Household Survey Coverage, 2018

|             | <b>M</b> | <b>F</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|-------------|----------|----------|--------------|
| Individuals | 67       | 87       | 154*         |
| Households  | N/A      | N/A      | 90           |
| Declined    | N/A      | N/A      | 7            |

Table 1: Collarenebri Intake 1 HHS data

\*2016 ABS Census lists 148 Aboriginal people over the age of 15 resident in Collarenebri. This is most certainly an undercount.

The two charts below detail the educational background of the 154 adults surveyed. The overwhelming majority (84%) had not completed high school. Despite this, nearly a third of those surveyed said they could read and write ‘very well’ (‘A’ on the LFLF self-assessed literacy scale) and only 18% assessed their literacy at either ‘not very well’ (C) or ‘not at all’ (D), the usual target levels for the literacy campaign.

Educational Background of Household Survey Respondents

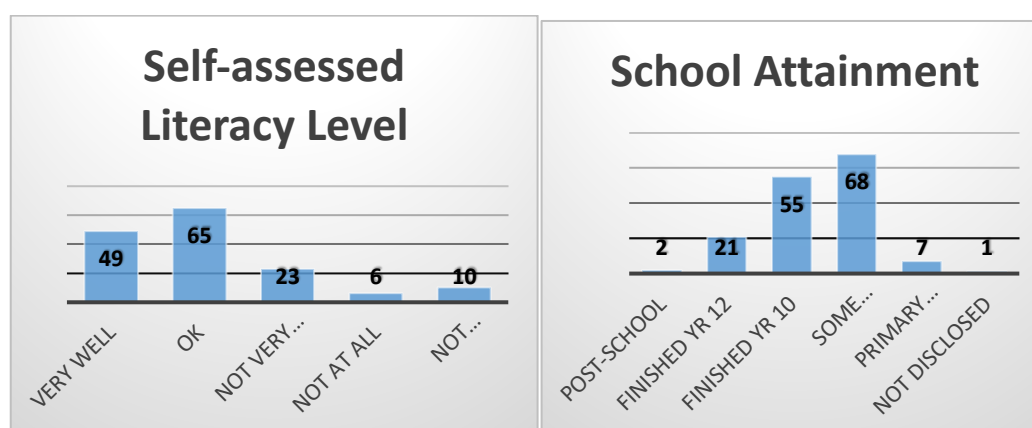


Chart 1: Self-assessed literacy from the household survey

Chart 2: Highest school attainment from the household survey

Part of the discrepancy is likely due to the propensity of people to overestimate their literacy level. This is particularly so when people have achieved up to year 10 schooling (see Lin et al., 2019). Comparison of self-assessed literacy and ACSF scores of starters in intake 1

also confirms this (see section 4.3). As a result, it is safe to conclude that low English literacy is far more prevalent in Collarenebri than the results of the HHS indicate.

#### 4. OUTCOMES

##### 4.1 Enrolment and retention

One of the key outcomes of this campaign has been the high participation rate. In past campaigns, LFLF have limited enrolments to around 20 participants for each intake as this is considered by the Cuban advisors and local staff to be the maximum number that the local facilitators can effectively manage. Despite receiving well over 20 EOIs in past campaigns, the cap of 20 students has never been challenged as the average conversion rate of EOIs into actual starters (as of the close of week 3 – LFLF’s ‘census’ date) has hovered around 50%. As the Table 2 shows, 31 students were still enrolled in the Collarenebri class after week 3, representing an uptake of 67% - well above the foundations’ average to date. The local Campaign Coordinator described the enthusiasm in the Collarenebri community for the campaign, saying ‘the people are really ready for it – for class. They’ve grasped the opportunity to learn with both hands’ (interview, February 2019).

Participation and retention by gender

|                 | Male | Female | Total |
|-----------------|------|--------|-------|
| EOIs (enrolled) | 17   | 29     | 46    |
| Started         | 10   | 21     | 31    |
| Withdrew        | 5    | 9      | 14    |
| Graduated       | 4    | 12     | 16*   |
| Retention       | 40%  | 57%    | 51%   |

Table 2: Collarenebri intake 1 participation and retention rates by gender

\*one student while completing both phase 2 and 3 did not meet the literacy requirements to graduate and is continuing into intake 2

Part of the high participation can be explained by the determination of the local staff in following up each and every person who had expressed an interest via the initial HHS some months earlier. This formal process usually involves the coordinator engaging in a ‘yarning’ style interview with prospective students and targets those people who self-assessed as having low to very low English literacy during the HHS. In effect, this process for confirming EOIs is as much a socialisation tool as it is a recruitment tool. After dedicated instruction in this process as part of a three-week onsite training prior to the commencement of Phase 2,

all the local staff felt confident to take on the responsibility for conducting the EoI interviews. The participation of the facilitators in addition to the coordinator proved particularly effective in gaining enrolments. Two of the local facilitators had high standing in the community and so they were well-placed to communicate key information about the campaign classes and garner a high level of community buy-in.

Of course, the challenge with high participation is maintaining sufficient support for each student to maximise retention and progression. Despite this campaign not being fully funded, LFLF decided to maintain three full-time classroom facilitators (the usual being two) in recognition of the challenge of the large class. Under the guidance of national staff, these three facilitators divided up the students, each taking responsibility for the support and monitoring of a smaller group of students with whom they had a particular bond. This strategic support meant that the majority of those students who were able to, completed Phase 2.

As Table 2 shows, a total of 14 students withdrew from the campaign resulting in a retention rate of 51%. While this figure is below the campaign average to date, it is still above completion rates for TAFE NSW for Certificate 1 and 2 levels, which for 2017 sat at 48% across the state (NCVER, 2019)<sup>2</sup>. Nine students withdrew during Phase 2 (Yes, I Can! classes) and another five in Phase 3 (Post Literacy). The majority of the withdrawals were for reasons beyond the control of the campaign and local staff such as relocating to another town for personal reasons and pre-existing complex mental or physical health conditions.

#### 4.2. Attendance

Despite the slightly lower retention rate for this campaign, attendance across Phase 2 classes was strong. The average number of lessons attended for all starters was 47 out of 59, or 79%. This figure rose to 96% for the 22 students who completed Phase 2 lessons. The high attendance rates are in large part due to the efforts of the local staff. It is evident that early on, the CPO recognised the challenge of maintaining momentum and engagement in a large class. Just over a month into the literacy classes, the CPO reported that:

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<sup>2</sup> TAFE completions in the state's remote areas have been much lower than this in previous years (Williamson & Boughton 2019)

We've had a really good response from students, especially with regards to coming to catch up. They're very diligent and most Thursdays we have more people turn up than we are able to cater for! And to encourage good attendance, we've started giving out certificates to people who have 100% attendance so far, which has definitely piqued people's interest! That said, we are starting to see a couple of students drop off, so I will make sure we're communicating with them and finding out what we can do to support them to come back to class (email, March 2019).

The local initiative of formally recognising those with 100% attendance bolstered motivation. A total of 17 students finished Phase 2 lessons with a perfect attendance record. Similarly, the pattern of attendance was strong with the average number of students on any given day in Phase 2 at 19.5 or 68.5%<sup>3</sup>. Chart 2 illustrates the pattern of attendance across the 12 weeks of Phase 2.

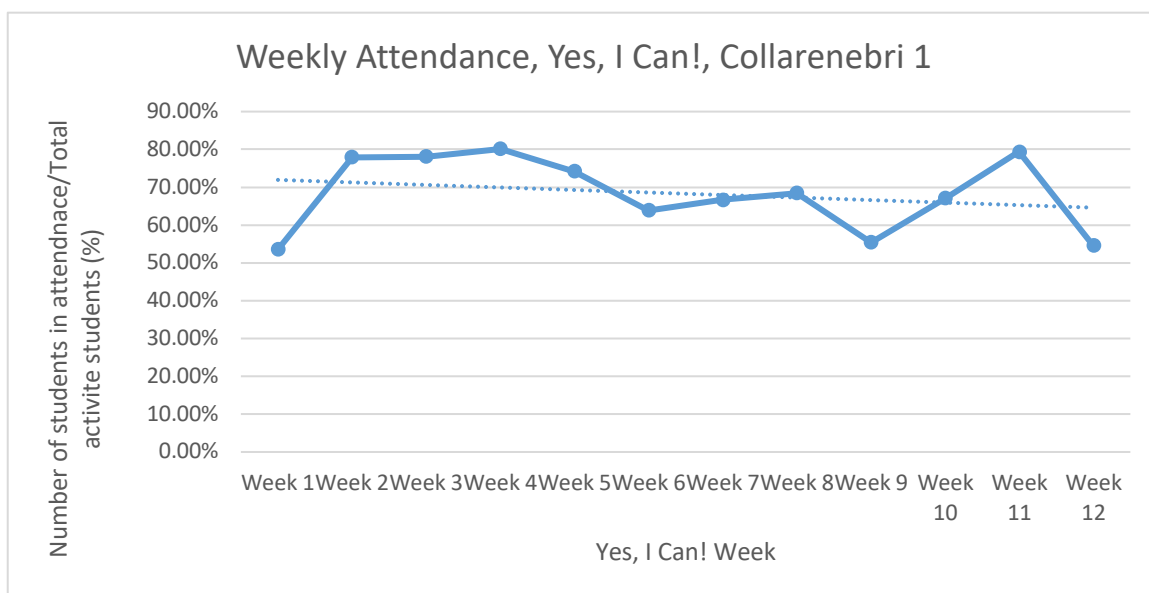


Chart 2: Pattern of attendance across the 12-week Phase 2

As can be seen, by week 2 a pattern of strong attendance was achieved. While there were dips in attendance from time to time due for instance to issues finding childcare for a number of the primary carers in class, attendance remained around 65-80% of active students for much of Phase 2.

<sup>3</sup> The number of students in attendance is expressed here as a percentage of 'active' students; that is, starters minus withdrawals.

### 4.3 Literacy gains

Another strong feature of the first intake of the Collarenebri campaign is the literacy gains achieved by the majority of students. By way of context, Table 3 shows the self-assessed literacy levels of the 31 starters alongside the more objective literacy pre-test results conducted in week 4 of Phase 2 using the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF).

Literacy context of Collarenebri intake 1 starters

| Self-assessed literacy (SAL) level | A       | B       | C       | D           | Total No. SAL                  |
|------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|-------------|--------------------------------|
|                                    | 2       | 18      | 9       | 2           | 31                             |
| ACSF pre-test                      | Level 3 | Level 2 | Level 1 | Pre-level 1 | Total ACSF pre-tests conducted |
|                                    | 0       | 2       | 11      | 11          | 24                             |

Table 3: Comparison of SAL level and ACSF pre-test results for intake 1, Collarenebri

As was mentioned in relation to the self-assessed literacy levels collected in the HHS, it is clear that many students overestimated their English literacy. Almost half the class commenced at Pre-Level 1 on the ACSF and 91% were at level 1 or Pre-level 1. In real terms, this means that the vast majority of the class required significant support to read or write a simple sentence, comprehend and complete a form and follow written instructions. They also experienced difficulties in daily tasks involving literacy such as banking and shopping.

While the literacy level of most students indicates that the campaign did a good job at targeting those most in need and suited to the Yes, I Can! classes, the high proportion of Pre-level 1 students presented a particular challenge for the inexperienced classroom facilitators to manage. There were also two students with physical conditions requiring ongoing one-on-one support from the facilitators. One student was profoundly deaf, and another student was recovering from a stroke and his fine and gross motor skills meant a staff member needed to sit with him throughout each lesson.

Adding to the challenge of high numbers of high support students, there was no full-time onsite YIC technical advisor as is usually the case in LFLF literacy campaigns. As mentioned previously, this campaign was not fully funded and securing a third YIC beyond the

resources of LFLF. In previous campaigns, it has been possible to have a YIC Advisor work across two campaigns but the distances between the three concurrent campaigns in 2019 rules this out as an option. This meant that the CPO took on the tasks of supporting and monitoring student progress and training and overseeing the local facilitators' daily lesson preparation and delivery. The CPO was well supported in this additional role by onsite visits and regular phone calls and emails by more experienced LFLF staff and management.

Despite these constraints, the literacy outcomes achieved by the students are outstanding. Table 4 summarises the results of pre-training and post-training literacy assessment using the Australian Core Skills Framework undertaken by an external assessor. The pre-training assessment took place in week 4 of Phase 2 and the post-training test was conducted in week 9 of Phase 3; that is, after almost 6 months of participation in the literacy campaign.

ACSF pre vs post-training results

|                | <b>Pre-training<br/>(N=24)</b> | <b>Post-training<br/>(N=17)</b> |
|----------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Level 2        | 2                              | 8                               |
| Level 1        | 11                             | 9                               |
| Pre-level<br>1 | 11                             | 0                               |

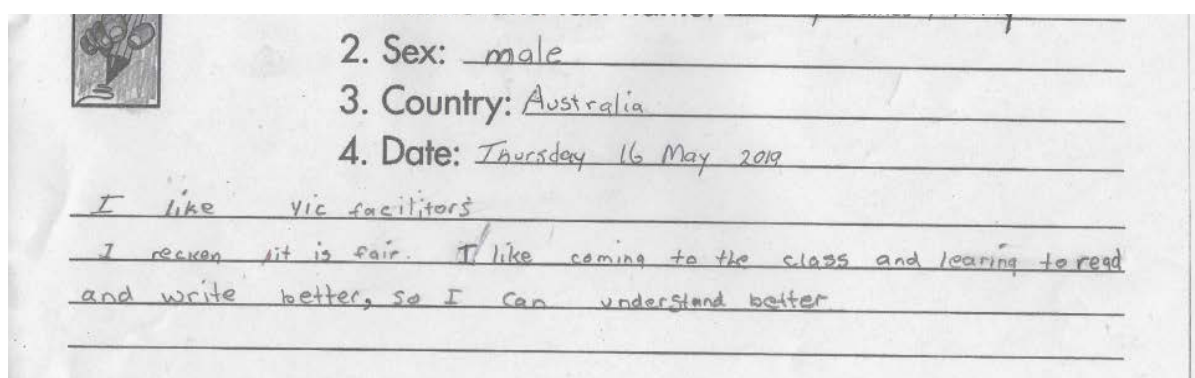
Table 4: Comparison of pre and post-training assessment results

The post-training results show that all students operating at below level 1 had moved up a whole level on the ACSF; that is, no students remained at Pre-level 1. Furthermore, 13 out of 14 students or 92% recorded improvement on at least one indicator and three students progressed two levels in reading and learning indicators. All but one student with pre and post training results improved in the learning domain. This is significant as acquiring the identity of a learner and being able to consciously apply learning strategies are the foundations upon which effective learning in any area are built. In terms of progression in the macro skills of reading and writing, 78% of students moved up a level in reading and 71% in writing. These results are closely related to the high student attendance in this



campaign<sup>4</sup>. Over 85% of those students with ACSF pre and post-training scores attended 100% of the lessons and the average number of lessons attended by these students was 58 (out of a possible 59).

While the numbers are compelling, it is important to bring to life the significant gains the students made in their English literacy. Below are two examples of work done by one student. The first sample was written as part of the internal assessment and is the student's evaluation of the Yes, I Can! literacy classes. While clear and mostly accurate, the text conveys only the simplest opinion with little sense of the writer's identity.



2. Sex: male

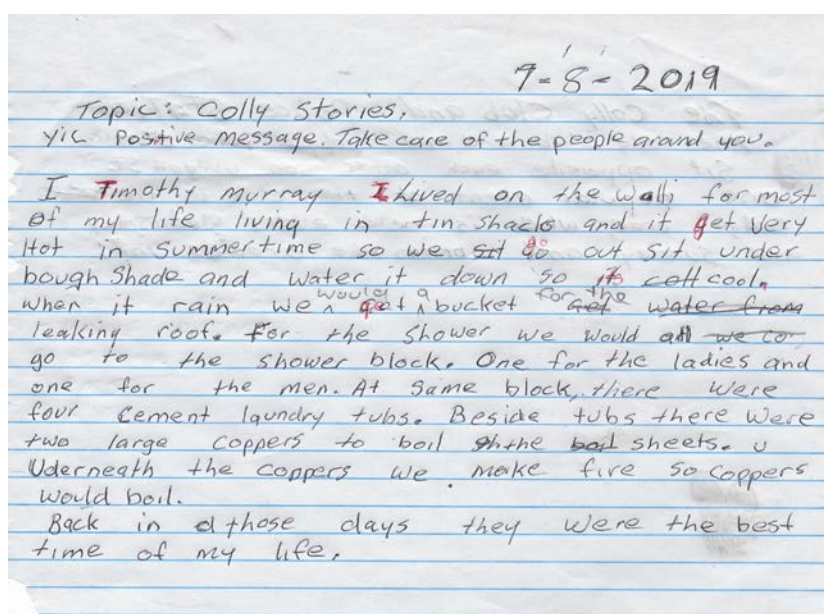
3. Country: Australia

4. Date: Thursday 16 May 2019

I like vic facilitors

I reckon it is fair. I like coming to the class and learning to read and write better, so I can understand better

Weeks later, the same student produced the following piece of work as part of a creative writing workshop. It was written sitting by the weir and shows the student's developing command of written language to communicate important personal memories and events.



7-8-2019

Topic: Colly Stories,  
vic Positive message. Take care of the people around you.

I Timothy murray I lived on the wall for most of my life living in tin shacks and it get very hot in summertime so we sit out sit under bough shade and water it down so its cold. when it rain we would get a bucket for the water from leaking roof. For the shower we would all we to go to the shower block. One for the ladies and one for the men. At same block, there were four cement laundry tubs. Beside tubs there were two large coppers to boil the bath sheets. Underneath the coppers we make fire so coppers would boil. Back in those days they were the best time of my life.

<sup>4</sup> The number of lessons attended in phase 2 has recently been shown to correlate strongly with the likelihood of literacy improvements. This is one of the findings of the Australian Research Council funded longitudinal study into the impact of the literacy campaign, jointly conducted with LFLF, Lowitja, UNE and UNSW.

While this student had not met the required literacy standard by the end of intake 1, he has since gone on to enrol in intake 2 and the CPO reports he is one of the most regular attendees in the class.

Student perceptions of literacy gains were also strongly evident in interviews and corroborate the more objective data presented above. A typical comment by students was 'I've learned to read and write and understand words I couldn't do before. I can pick up a book now and read' (male, 57 years). Other students reported being able to read newspapers, spell better and read the signage in supermarket aisles. Another comment by a student highlights the impact the campaign can have on home literacy practices. This father of three young daughters remarked 'I know I've improved 'cause we're fightin' over the home readers now' (male, 50 years).

#### 4.4 Psychosocial gains

Closely linked to literacy gains is a tangible improvement in self-confidence and self-esteem. This finding has been consistent in previous evaluations as well as recently published studies (e.g. Boughton & Williamson 2019; Williamson & Boughton 2019). Interviews with staff and students provide countless descriptions of the transformation of withdrawn people into more confident and engaged members of the community. In one such example, staff reported that a female student came into class early one morning 'with the biggest smile on her face' and told them she had been able to help her son the night before with his homework – 'very proud, she was'. In another example staff recounted the story of B, a man in his mid-40s who had been confined to his home for many years following the death of his only brother in a car accident. Before the campaign, when visitors went to the home he shared with his grandmother, he would retreat to his room. But a few weeks into campaign classes, B was the first to the classroom each morning, helping staff to prepare breakfast. According to his grandmother, 'the campaign was the only thing that's gotten him out of his comfort zone'. Most significantly, after several months of silently acknowledging others, B began initiating morning greetings. No one recalls ever having heard him speak before. And while throughout the literacy classes, B remained reluctant to read his work aloud or have his writing checked and corrected, this student developed independence and confidence as a result of improved literacy. Staff and family report 'he's

able to do his shopping better; he can recognise words on the list and match them to words at the shop’.

Other students also cited growing independence as an impact in their own lives of the literacy campaign. A young woman said ‘I feel independent now. Like I can do things on my own; I don’t need people to

help me. I can send messages without asking my other half ‘what’s this word and what’s that word?’’. She also felt that the campaign had given her the capacity and confidence to take the next step in her life. She went on to explain that ‘if it wasn’t for Literacy for Life, I wouldn’t have my café - getting’ it up and runnin’. Like learning how to do the course, reading’s the main part. I’m moving forward to go to TAFE to do my Barista course and OH&S Food Health and Safety course’ (female, 28 years).

#### Student profile

MB began campaign classes as a shy and reluctant student. With several young children, one of whom is in foster care, she had many demands on her life. Early on her attendance was quite poor and she was quick to blame others, saying that staff hadn’t picked her up. After nearly pulling out twice, one of the facilitators spoke to her and explained that they were going to give her a chance to catch up and that she should come for her kids. After that, she attended class every day and was always positive. She particularly enjoyed the games in Post Literacy. She’d never played trivia before and when the ‘Know Your Town’ trivia lesson was held; it was the first time staff saw a really genuine smile on her face. According to the CPO, ‘she was laughing and talking trash - it was great!’

MB went on to achieve all the goals she set for herself in Lesson 1: she got her license back, bought a car and graduated from the literacy campaign. Her next goal is to get a job. Below is the speech MB gave at the intake 1 graduation:

*Hi Everyone,*

*My name is MB. I would like to thank you all for coming along today to help us celebrate our ‘yes I can graduation’. I’d also like to say thanks to our facilitators for helping us all come this far. The YIC program was happy and fun to do, it helped me to read and write better then I use to, before the YIC program I could not read my kids news letters or my own mail. I use to get 1 of my family members to read it to me.*

*I’m also proud of my mother M for doing the YIC program with me she’s also graduating today. I’m also happy for all the other students that’s made it this far. Congratulations everyone. WE DONE IT!!*

This is true also of another student who gained the confidence through the literacy campaign to go on to a driver training course. The coordinator reported that ‘we’ve got S going for her L’s at Birrang now,

and she wouldn't have been confident enough to do that in the past, so that's a sign that it's working'.

The psychosocial gains of the literacy campaign are not only experienced by students. The staff of this intake also reported changes in their sense of self. The youngest of the three facilitators who was painfully shy at the start of the campaign now perceives herself as 'someone who has something to say and can be listened to' (CPO report). After volunteering to write and deliver a speech at the community BBQ following the end of Phase 2, she commented 'I wouldn't ever have imagined being like this'. Another facilitator for whom the campaign was her first paid employment remarked that the campaign had 'ruined her'. She now knows she cannot return to her previous life and has taken on the position of secretary of the Collarenebri Community Working Party as well as applying for work with the Australian Electoral Commission in upcoming NSW Land Council elections. Both these women claim that learning to deliver lessons in front of their own community has given them the skills and confidence to take on more in the community.

#### 4.5. Strengthening community cohesion and empowerment

The final impact this report details is at the community-level. The first intake of the literacy campaign in Collarenebri functioned as a rallying point for the whole community. Staff and community leaders emphasised the solidarity that resulted from the campaign. The coordinator remarked that the classes 'broke a lot of barriers, with people sitting side by side that don't usually talk outside of class'. One of the facilitators, herself a community leader and member of the Community Working Party said that 'the whole course has helped to bring the community together. The community was becoming quite divided, but this has helped to mend rifts. It's not back to where it once was, but it's getting better' (facilitator, Post Literacy evaluation report). This sentiment was echoed by a local leader who said in his speech at the graduation of intake 1 students:

I was proud of the program and I am even a lot prouder today, to see all you people that started from scratch, started from way back, to finally be here today. This is the first time that I can remember for a long time, that Collie has come together, united, on one thing. We hope there is more of it.

These comments are particularly significant given the doubts some in the community had before the campaign begun about the ability of Collarenebri to overcome divisions and work together to implement the literacy campaign.

Further evidence that the literacy campaign and in particular the 'Red Shed' in which classes were held became a community hub can be seen in the numbers of services and organisation that interacted with the campaign over the 9-month period (see Table 5 below).

Summary of community groups and local organisations involved in the literacy campaign

| Organisation/service   | Involvement  |
|--|--|
| Collarenebri Community Working Group                                     | Co-designed the Post Literacy program  |
| Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service                                       | Regular attendance at Community Advisory Committee meetings; had student visit their centre in Walgett, presented sessions during Post Literacy  |
| Collarenebri Central School  | Provided computer rooms for computer classes   |
| NSW Aboriginal Land Council  | Deputy Chair (Anne Dennis) ran sessions in Post Literacy on the Aboriginal Education Consultancy Group (AECG), the Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) and effective communicating with the local school. |
| The NSW Ambulance Service and Collie Ambos                               | Ran Post Literacy sessions on diabetes, strokes, heart attacks and asthma.   |
| Western Aboriginal Tenancy Advice and Advocacy Service                   | Ran session on tenant rights as well as a one-on-one clinic.   |
| Lifeline   | Conducted a session on budgeting   |
| Murray Darling Basin Authority and Commonwealth Environment Water Office | Ran a Post Literacy session on river management and facilitated a class excursion to the Gwydir Wetlands.  |
| National Association for Loss and Grief (NALAG)                          | Did a session on grief and loss during Post Literacy   |
| St John's Ambulance  | Delivered a basic first aid course   |
| Aboriginal Civil Legal Aid Service                                       | Discussed consumer rights, focusing on loans   |

Table 5: List of organisations interacting with staff, students and the wider community through the literacy campaign.

That the campaign was able to attract a high level of support and buy-in from local and non-local service providers went a large way to dispelling a common view that 'people don't normally show an interest in Collie' (staff interview, June 2019). By investing in the community, the literacy campaign encouraged others to do so. The corollary of this is that the people of Collie seem more willing to invest in their future. According to one of the facilitators and community leader, the campaign and in particular Post Literacy (Phase 3)

‘has given people the confidence to know that they can speak up if they choose to – it’s an option’.

## 5. CAMPAIGN PROCESSES

### 5.1 What worked well

In this section of the evaluation, I focus attention on characteristics and processes that contributed to the outcomes detailed above.

#### ⇒ Staff capacity and commitment

The onsite team consisting of CPO, coordinator and three facilitators, while inexperienced in running a literacy campaign brought considerable capacity and commitment to their work. The coordinator and one facilitator had broad previous work experience and skills which they quickly applied to the new context. The CPO was well-grounded in the mass literacy campaign model<sup>5</sup> and used this knowledge effectively. The other two facilitators had an aptitude for teaching which served them well in the early weeks of the campaign.

This solid foundation was significantly strengthened by an exceptional work ethic. In the Phase 2 intensive training in which staff learn how to deliver the Yes, I Can! Literacy lessons, the facilitators took it upon themselves to practice lesson delivery and reread the lesson plans after hours. It is an expectation that facilitators are always two lessons ahead of the students but by early May, one of the facilitators had watched and prepared all the lessons in the 12-week course. It was evident that the local staff felt the need to establish their authority and legitimacy as the classroom teachers. The coordinator explained the pressure in these terms: ‘The Collie mob are a tough audience and you don’t get a second chance with them’.

Classroom staff were also clearly committed to the learning experience of each student. They regularly went overtime on their afternoon lesson preparation sessions, striving to find the ‘right way’ to present lesson content to each student. This often led to lengthy and robust discussions about the learning styles of different students. To accommodate

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<sup>5</sup> The CPO undertook a substantial study of the campaign for her Masters thesis. See Weitzel (2018).

individual student needs, the facilitators and CPO also devised supplementary teaching material and homework worksheets. These were gratefully received by students.

The CPO also demonstrated exceptional commitment and diligence in her role. She maintained meticulous records and lists to ensure the smooth running of the campaign. She also created new processes for data management and ongoing analysis and feedback which allowed her to quickly identify and act on issues as they arose. Most significantly, when it became clear there was to be no full-time onsite Yes, I Can! Advisor deployed to Collarenebri, the CPO set about acquiring the knowledge and advice which allowed her to be more effective in the classroom. Most of this work was undertaken after hours.

⇒ Staff relations

The commitment of the local team was arguably only sustainable because of the collaborative, respectful and supportive workplace environment the CPO created. Open and frank communication between staff members was facilitated by weekly staff meetings as well as daily 'mini meetings'. These regular formal meetings were a forum for the transparent and timely addressing of issues. Following the three-week training prior to the commencement of Phase 2, the CPO employed the tool of critical reflection, which is an integral part of the mass campaign's popular education approach, to great effect. This allowed all to have their say, be respectfully heard and solutions to be suggested and tested. This strategy was particularly helpful in managing an ongoing 'personality clash' between two of the staff members which in less collegial workplaces could have threatened to derail the campaign as this extract acknowledges:

We have had quite a few old rivalries and issues flare up in the last few days between the staff. I think I need to get everyone in for another extra team meeting and action reflection session. I might lead a frank conversation about the Working Well Together rules and how they apply to us as staff. I think it might also be relevant to have some conversations around being positive and constructive in the workplace, rather than negative and divisive. Mostly I just want to get across how important it is for us to focus on the good. Perhaps I'll get them to do an exercise where they each have to write down 1 positive thing about everyone else on the team (CPO fortnightly report, July 2019).

The CPO also deployed critical reflection as a training tool, assisting the facilitators to identify areas of improvement in their own lesson delivery. This was highly effective, and the facilitators grew in confidence and capacity very quickly. Regular group critical reflection also fostered a genuinely collaborative and inclusive workplace in which all staff were involved in decision making. This highly collegial and well-functioning environment helped the staff maintain a high standard of lesson delivery and student support throughout the campaign.

⇒ Ongoing training and support

In addition to the phase based ‘block’ training<sup>6</sup> new staff undertake, the CPO sought and received the equivalent of two hours/week additional training. This partly reflects the conscientiousness and drive of the CPO and partly the reality of not having a trained and experienced staff member occupying the role of YIC Advisor. The training which began in week three and took place by phone and email focused on how to diagnose and meet the literacy needs of the students as this correspondence with one of the trainers shows:

[CPO] and I are working on how to get literacy improvements despite this large group and without a full-time trained YIC advisor. There’s no silver bullet but the focus is on Ds and Cs to shift them hopefully one level. Once we have the ACSF scores it will be easier to target those most in need. If we can do this, I’m hopeful there’ll be improvements in literacy as well as maintain retention (email correspondence, March 2019).

Training was also key to helping the students consolidate their new literacy skills in Phase 3 (Post Literacy). In addition to 4 days of training around Post Literacy curriculum development and lesson planning, the CPO again initiated further training to develop her knowledge around scaffolding literacy tasks as she felt student engagement and attendance in Post Literacy was suffering. The perceived value of the training can be seen in the extract below:

I really enjoyed the initial training and found it really helpful. I felt like I walked away from that training with a really clear idea of the task at hand and found it quite easy to implement

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<sup>6</sup> Pre-deployment training (Phase 1)  
YIC training (Phase 2)  
Post Literacy training (Phase 3)



most of the strategies we discussed in the training. I also found the mid-PL Zoom session really helpful and morale boosting (Post Literacy staff written evaluation, October 2019)

⇒ Community consultation and collaboration

Perhaps the key component of LFLF's Aboriginal adult literacy campaign model is the community ownership. However, the process by which the community comes to feel empowered by and in charge of the literacy campaign is not an automatic one. Despite having a truncated Phase 1 (to be discussed in the next section), this intake was socialised very well, and the community and local organisations mobilised to support the campaign.

The main way this was achieved was through effective regular local steering committee meetings. Known as the Community Advisory Committee or CAC, this group met in the campaign classroom space monthly and drew broad support from existing community leadership, the local medical service, a representative from Centacare and campaign staff. Particularly noteworthy in this intake was the high number of campaign students who attended these monthly meetings, learning about minute taking and other procedural matters as well as having a wider forum in which to speak and be heard.

But perhaps the way in which these meetings contributed to community cohesion and buy-in the most was the process of co-design of the Post Literacy program undertaken in early May. The CPO supported by the local staff convened two meetings in one week with the purpose of seeking direct input and views on priority areas for the Post Literacy program. These areas are what LFLF refer to as the 'domains of impact' and are a strategy for targeting impact of the campaign in 8 areas of people's daily lives. Figure 1 below shows the collaborative curriculum design process at work. The tally marks next to each domain refer to votes for that particular area by those assembled.

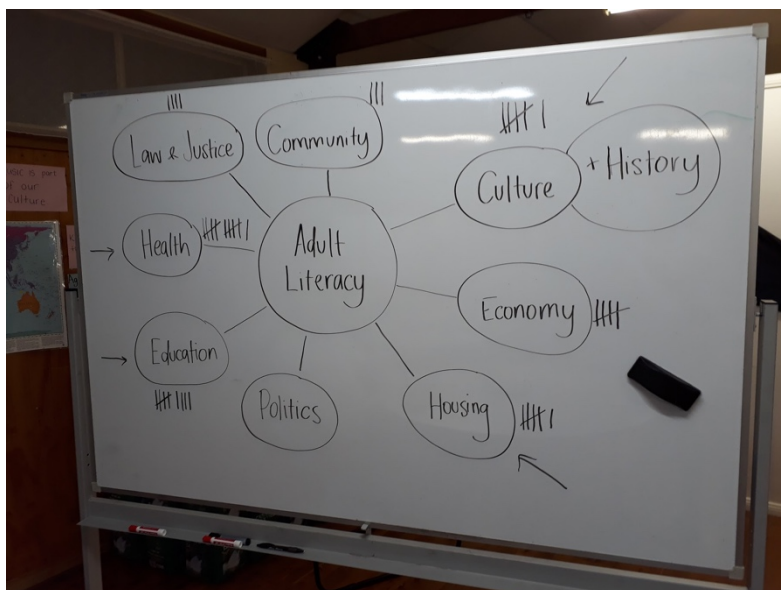


Figure 1: photo of brainstorming board at CAC meeting, May 2019

The meetings provided an opportunity for the staff to explain to community members and services how and why low English literacy impacts so many areas of people's lives. Where initially there was some confusion, by the end of the meeting the people there had a much better understanding of the implications of low literacy and more importantly, what they as a community could do about it. This co-design process no doubt contributed to the sense of empowerment and cohesion the community experienced as a result of the literacy campaign.

## 5.2 Areas for improvement

This section highlights lessons learned from this first Collarenebri intake that may be of value for planning future campaigns.

⇒ Better forward planning, including contingency planning

Phase 1 in which the community is socialised to the campaign model and mobilised to support the campaign suffered from unavoidable staffing changes. A similar situation arose regarding the YIC Advisor role which as indicated earlier, was beyond the resources of this campaign to fully address.

### Recommendation:

While LFLF's ability to plan ahead is somewhat curtailed by the year to year funding cycle, this has always been the case and therefore, contingency planning should be embedded in

the planning of each campaign and at the phase level. This includes 'catch-up' schedules for staff who join campaigns outside the usually training program.

⇒ Inconsistency in the internal assessment process

As a result of not being able to fully resource the YIC Advisor role, several different LFLF staff members, including the CPO were involved in assessing the students at the end of Phase 2. Despite establishing a process for 'handover', there was some misunderstanding among the local staff.

Recommendation:

LFLF should work towards securing a full time YIC advisor (who is not the CPO) who can be on site for the entire Phase 2 period before commencing new intake.

⇒ Realistic workloads

As was stated earlier, the CPO was obliged to work overtime to complete necessary tasks such as lesson planning for Phase 3 (Post Literacy), administrative tasks and email/phone correspondence.

Recommendation:

With the high attrition rate of CPOs in the past, managing workloads is crucial for the retention of experienced and skilled staff. Properly staffing each campaign with a minimum of a project officer (CPO) and classroom-based advisor (YIC Advisor) should be a priority.

⇒ Transition from Phase 2 to Phase 3

The last area for improvement involves the transition of students and local staff from Phase 2 to Phase 3. Phase 3 or Post Literacy did not enjoy the same level of participation and attendance as Phase 2. The average daily attendance was around 9 and on the least attended days, only 3 students came. While there is often a dip in attendance as students adjust to the less structured environment of Post Literacy, the lull in this campaign persisted through much of Phase 3.

Recommendation:

As Post Literacy is the phase in which newly acquired literacy skills are consolidated, it is vital that students attend Phase 3. LFLF might consider not taking a break between Phase 2

and 3, being clearer with students that the campaign is a 6-month commitment and finally, retaining facilitator involvement in the interest of continuity.

## 6. CONCLUSION

On the morning of Friday 13<sup>th</sup> September 2019, approximately 80 assembled at the Collarenebri Town Hall. Sixteen students from the first intake of the Collarenebri Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign were graduating. Several students and locals had been there since the day before setting up tables, hanging banners and making last minute preparations. On the day of the event, local staff worked with the Collarenebri Central School preparing a beautiful meal for the occasion. As each student proudly stepped onto the stage to receive their certificate, family and friends cheered and cried with pride. All agreed 'it was the kind of day Collie needs more of' (local leader, graduation speech).

This report has highlighted the main outcomes of the first intake of LFLF's adult literacy campaign in the small north western NSW town of Collarenebri. Chief among these are the outstanding participation rates and literacy results. 31 students enrolled in the campaign with 22 completing the Phase 2 (YIC) literacy classes and 16 of these going on to graduate. 92% of students with pre and post-training ACSF scores improved on at least one literacy indicator. By the end of the campaign, no student remained at ACSF Pre-level 1. Staff and students alike reported a range of other benefits including greater confidence and voice and the community as a whole felt more united as a result of the campaign. These results are even more significant given the campaign was not fully funded. Through the engagement of many local services and agencies in Post Literacy, this intake has also shown that the substantial investment LFLF makes in this usually neglected section of the community not only works in its own right but also provides the opportunity for other agencies to do likewise. By all accounts, this has been a highly successful campaign.

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Wilcannia: Literacy for Life Foundation Graduate Doddie Currie is now working at the youth drop-in centre.

Enngonia: Graduate Taryn completed a Certificate 3 in Early Childhood Education and Care (TAFE) and is now working with Regional Enterprise Development Institute.

Enngonia: Graduate William Cubby got his driver's license and secured employment. His partner Stephanie also graduated and got her driver's license. The couple have two boys and were able to get more involved with the local school.

"I want to give my kids a head start. I want to see them do better than what I done," he says.

"Most of us can read and write a lot better now. We've gone through the classes together and the community is working together better. People are talking to each other more and it's helping them to stay out of trouble better."



Brewarrina: Mother and daughter Lavina (left) and Annie Wright (right) are both Literacy for Life Foundation graduates. Lavina got a job driving the bus for the local pre-school and Annie has completed two TAFE courses and plans to enrol in another. She does occasional work at the aged care home.

"I had no shame going back to learn. I got by with support from friends and it was great to have my daughter complete the course with me. She was very quiet and shy before the course, unlike me, but now is much more confident and very talkative!" - Lavina

Bourke: Graduate Craig went from being a student in the classes to becoming a Literacy for Life Facilitator, working with the adult literacy Campaign to teach the next intake of students. He is now working on a project upgrading the main street in town.







Brewarrina Graduates reading to  
children

Boggabilla + Toomelah  
Graduation 2018

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**Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices)**  
**Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future**

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Submission from women in Boggabilla and Toomelah, NSW  
Produced with the University of New England and Literacy for Life Foundation  
November 2018

**“Stand strong, together for better”**



November 2018

Australian Human Rights Commission  
Level 3, 175 Pitt St  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

### **Wiyi Yani U Thangani Submission**

On behalf of Literacy for Life Foundation, I am pleased to present this submission for inclusion in the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Project.

The Report contains views of women involved in Literacy for Life Foundation's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in the communities of Boggabilla and Toomelah, New South Wales.

It has been noted that Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) builds on the legacy of the 1986 *Women's Business Report*. It is also relevant that 2018 is the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Toomelah Report*.

The *Toomelah Report*, released in June 1988, was the culmination of a wide-ranging Inquiry into the social and material needs of residents of Toomelah, Boggabilla and nearby Goondiwindi.

The Inquiry uncovered extensive racism and shone a spotlight on its damaging impact. It found the people of the Aboriginal community of Toomelah were being denied basic rights most other Australians take for granted.

While there have been some hard-won improvements, the fight for basic rights continues today.

Data collected by Literacy for Life Foundation shows 74% of Aboriginal adults surveyed in Boggabilla and Toomelah self-assessed as having low literacy. They have been denied the level of education needed to read to their children, fill out forms or understand instructions on a medicine bottle.

Nationally, it is estimated between 40-70% of Aboriginal adults have low English language literacy.

As you will see in the following pages, lifting literacy has a ripple effect, creating positive change in areas such as health, school education, employment and community safety. And while literacy rates remain low, achieving any real progress in these areas will be very challenging, if not impossible.

The women of Boggabilla and Toomelah who are quoted in this Report are using literacy as a tool to empower. They are empowering themselves, each other and their communities.

Yours sincerely,

**Patricia Anderson AO**

Director – Literacy For Life Foundation

# Table of Contents

- 1. Acknowledgments ..... 4
- 2. About..... 4
- 3. Executive Summary ..... 4
- 4. Background ..... 5
- 5. Introduction ..... 6
- 6. Confidence and Fulfilment ..... 6
- 7. Making Adult Literacy a Priority..... 8
- 8. Empowerment Across Generations ..... 10
- 9. Trauma and Postnatal Depression..... 11
- 10. Racism ..... 11
- 11. Isolation..... 12
- 12. Sustainable Programs..... 12
- 13. Specific Suggestions..... 13
- 14. The Power of Women ..... 15
- 15. Conclusion ..... 15

## 1. Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Gomeroi land on which these interviews took place, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

I would also like to thank all the women for sharing their stories and life experiences with me. It is a privilege to get access to your life stories. My sincere appreciation and thanks for being generous with your knowledge and experience.

Dr Rose Amazan

University of New England

## 2. About

This Report was commissioned by Literacy for Life Foundation as a submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission's Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Project. It aims to convey the views of women from the communities of Toomelah and Boggabilla, New South Wales. The women who took part were interviewed by the principal author, a University of New England (UNE) researcher, on a visit of several days to the communities in September 2018. The author has recently joined the UNE team that conducts ongoing evaluation of Literacy for Life Foundation's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign. Some additional material was provided by Literacy for Life Foundation staff.

## 3. Executive Summary

Most of the women that participated in this Report were part of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign that has run in Boggabilla and Toomelah from 2017 until 2018.

Many issues were discussed, using the questions that appear on the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Project website as prompts. Topics included the women's challenges, goals and the dreams they have for themselves, their families and their community.

A key point that came across was the wish for women and girls in the communities to fulfil their full potential. Increasing the confidence and self-esteem of women was also central. The respondents see this as an essential part of standing up and being heard.

As staff, students and community supporters of Literacy for Life Foundation's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign, there was also a strong focus on literacy. In particular the women said that building their literacy has been very useful for them, making it possible to take several steps forward.

It is recommended that more women and girls are given the same opportunity.

**“My beautiful sisters, nothing is impossible. Don't give up on your trainings. Just keep telling yourself that you're a strong black woman. Keep going.”**

## 4. Background

Literacy for Life Foundation is Aboriginal-run not-for-profit that teaches basic reading and writing skills to Aboriginal adults with low literacy. The organisation uses a community-wide campaign approach, engaging local Aboriginal staff and taking direction from local Aboriginal leadership.

Since 2012 The Foundation's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign has run in eight communities in New South Wales, with 207 students graduating.

Sixty percent of Literacy for Life Foundation graduates are Aboriginal women.

The Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign targets adults aged 15 years and over (including exempted out-of-school youth) with a literacy level at or below level one on the Australian Core Skills Framework.

This demographic is at greater risk of substandard housing, poor health, early mortality, minimal vocational qualifications, long-term unemployment, poverty, domestic and community violence, substance abuse and harm and arrest and incarceration. Their children and grandchildren are also at the greatest risk of poor school attendance, below benchmark performance in literacy and numeracy tests and of leaving school before Year 12.

It is estimated 40 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults have minimal English literacy, a figure that rises to as high as 70 per cent in some remote areas.

Literacy for Life Foundation aims to achieve a significant lift in adult literacy levels in Aboriginal communities, with positive flow-on effects in areas such as employment, school education, justice, community safety, health and wellbeing.

### Boggabilla and Toomelah

Literacy for Life Foundation began work in Boggabilla and Toomelah in February 2017, in partnership with the Toomelah Local Aboriginal Land Council and the NSW Department of Family and Community Services. The Foundation was initially contacted by the Department to assist in overcoming some of the barriers and challenges emerging with the roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, particularly difficulties faced in the communities due to very low levels of adult literacy.

By December 2018, forty-one students from Boggabilla and Toomelah will have graduated the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign. Twenty-eight graduates (68%) are women.

The communities of Boggabilla and Toomelah are located on Gomeri Country in the northern part of NSW. Boggabilla is just 10 km south of the Queensland border town of Goondiwindi, on the Macintyre River. Toomelah is an Aboriginal community a further 13 km south-east along the river. According to 2011 census data prepared for Aboriginal Affairs NSW, there are 123 Aboriginal households in the two communities and a combined Aboriginal population of 600. Of these, 360 people are aged 16 and over.

Literacy for Life Foundation carries out a targeted household surveys in each Literacy Campaign location, with people asked to self-assess their literacy. In Boggabilla and Toomelah, one hundred and thirty-two of the people surveyed (73%) self-identified as having low literacy.

This figure is in line with the Foundation's findings in other Campaign locations. While national literacy data for Aboriginal adults is extremely limited, Literacy for Life Foundation estimates between 40% to 70%

of Aboriginal adults have low literacy. Using the more conservative figure of 40% would give an estimated total of 145 low literate adults across Toomelah and Boggabilla.

While it is difficult to determine the exact level of need, it is clear that low levels of English language literacy present a significant challenge for the communities.

## **5. Introduction**

Since the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign began in Wilcannia in 2012, the University of New England (UNE) has been working collaboratively with Literacy for Life Foundation as Evaluation Partner. UNE has utilised a participatory action research (PAR) framework to conduct regular independent evaluations. In September 2018, the author was invited by The Foundation to record and capture the views of women in Toomelah and Boggabilla so they could be included in the Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Project.

Ten women were involved, seven of whom shared their views for inclusion in this Report. Ages ranged from mid-twenties to late fifties. Three of the women are facilitators/former facilitators of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign, two of them are former students and the others are community members.

Major discussion themes that emerged included:

- Confidence and Fulfilment
- Making Adult Literacy a Priority
- Empowerment Across Generations
- Trauma and Depression
- Racism
- Isolation
- Sustainable Programs
- Specific Suggestions
- The Power of Women

Below is a summary of these themes, with detail provided by the women in their own words.

## **6. Confidence and Fulfilment**

There seems to be a sense of alienation or rootlessness in some of the young peoples' lives. Many of the women talked about this, for example:

“There's not really anybody or anywhere for them to go to, to talk to. There's not any programs that can deal with young women... they just don't know what to do. Young women in the community...haven't got confidence in themselves.”

However, the Literacy for Life Foundation's Adult Literacy Campaign has gone some way to addressing this, offering a point of identification and hope. Simply put, it gives many a reason to get out, and stay out, of bed in the morning.

"Well, before I started working for Literacy, I'd get up and I'd get my kids ready for school, and I would go back to sleep waiting for them to come home. That was my life, before I started working [for the Literacy Campaign]. But, coming here really helped. Yeah, like, more confidence, self-esteem, and being a role model for my kids."

Another participant echoed a similar experience:

"I'm always a shy-shy guy, don't mix and mingle very much. But since this year, I look forward to getting up and getting out of bed...to do something. Especially this [the Literacy Campaign], I can't wait for this. I think I'm here before this even starts or opens. I just like coming here because there's something to do, somewhere to go. It's like your home away from home. It just gets me outta of my home because I'm a homebody person."

Having something to do, and to look forward to, is something many in the community struggle with. Therefore, the Campaign makes a small but vital contribution. As one interviewee put it:

"They [women] just need encouragement like 'cause most of our women, they all have kids and they stay home with their babies and rear their kids, [we need] to build their self-esteem, their confidence. To let them know that they can do anything that they want to do in life. ...And encourage them to do things like go for jobs."

Many of the respondents described themselves as being shy, not well educated, as having self-doubt, lacking in confidence and self-esteem, not being outgoing, and of sticking in their own little world. However, during the Literacy Campaign and thereafter, for many a transformation occurs. One participant, a young woman who has been working as a literacy facilitator, put it like this:

"Coming to the Literacy for Life, has opened up a lot of people and they've seen it for themselves, grow with good confidence and skills. A lot of people, like, several of the boys, they said it. They got more confidence. And they actually do. 'Cause one of the boys, they're real shy and didn't really talk to anybody and now he's being on top of things. Saying hello to people he wouldn't usually to."

Another facilitator added that building literacy made people open up:

"So not only seeing ourselves come out of our own shell, we've noticed on and on, in the lessons, that people themselves have been coming out as well. As time goes by, everyone started expressing themselves."

Others in the community also observed the change and the impact of the Literacy for Life Foundation Campaign. One of the female leaders in the community had this to say:

"Some of the people that've done that course, you know beforehand, and then seeing them after, just blows you away. A few of the girls, they're even getting confidence and applying for jobs. They seem really happy when they do the course. It makes you feel so proud to see some of the young girls, you know? That they got there and then they speak to you and they

haven't spoken to you before. Really, Literacy for Life really brings a lot out of the people that do it, just brightens them up, [it] brings them out of their shell. They come a long way."

The same respondent went on to say that *"they [women] need to build their confidence because they have a lot of let-downs in the past."*

The Literacy Campaign inspired women in different ways, by taking one step at a time. As one participant put it *"I had no attempts at working, or anything. I just got tired of sitting around and gave it a go"*. Another participant added Literacy for Life had a *"big impact on my family and my own [life], my wellbeing, it really brings me out of my shell. I really cracked it, smashed it. It makes me proud of myself every time I talk about it makes me want to cry."* This participant was a stay-at-home mum with three kids and says she was extremely shy and the Literacy Campaign brought her out of her comfort zone.

Literacy for Life Foundation's Campaign *"gives them [participants] more confidence, and self-esteem and, then they feel better in themselves... where they can stand up and be heard. I'm more confident and, I'm a bit more outspoken now than I was."* It is a common theme amongst the women.

In a way, participants were expressing that the Literacy Campaign has helped them to better fulfil their potential. In other words, the usefulness of literacy as a tool to get more control over their lives. As another participant put it:

*"It's really overwhelming. So much to prove to myself, how far I can take myself. There was a lesson in there about names and what names meant. And, I had a key ring of my name and I definitely didn't think I was that person. Everything I got on my name, it was different, and I used to say "I'm not that person" and then I started reading them and realising maybe I have to be that person. I didn't believe it was me. I used to say...they got that so wrong. And then I said, and I thought, maybe I have to be that person."*

Simply put, the women are talking in terms of greater agency and control over their circumstances. It is about their ability to realise their potential and the chance to be able to do things effectively.

Another participant echoed a similar perspective, saying *"I was told by a South African worker, that [my name] means life. And so, my life. And I never thought of anything of my life until now."* She went on to say, *"a few years before I started working I read back through my report card from kindergarten. And the teacher actually wrote it out down at the bottom and said, "She is a good role model", and in that early years of my life, I looked at that there and I thought to myself, 'Ah, was this the person I was when I was a kid?' Imagine what I can do now?"*

## **7. Making Adult Literacy a Priority**

The Literacy Campaign participants who were interviewed felt the program had a big impact on them and their family. One had this to say:

*"That Literacy for Life is a nice program for 'em to run. 'Cause some of 'em might... [have problems with] read and write... And could be struggling a lot with that. Our Aboriginal people, just gets a bit too much and don't really see any other way sometimes, you know? They think it's hard for 'em, and don't know how to approach people that could help them. Like I said, that Literacy for Life is a good program for*

them. ...I've seen it with some because I've done the program myself just to get a certificate. We enjoyed it, lots of fun. Good teachers."

The same participant went on to say that, *"I didn't really know how to do a proper letter, until I've done that program. That's the best program."* Because of the Literacy for Life Foundation Campaign this participant was able to go on to do further study in TAFE.

Being literate also has a knock-on effect. By helping mothers and grandmothers, children are also benefiting. This is how one of the women put it:

"One of the other ladies said that she'd like to help her grandkids, read to her grandkids and come to this class. [The Literacy Campaign] helps the children too. The parents feel more confident in reading books and, helping them with their homework and things like that. [Parents are] more engaged with their children's schoolwork, and with their children's lives and things like that."

Thus, by increasing adult literacy, the lives of children and community members are transformed for the better.

In the Campaign, participants keep coming back to learn. This contrasts with people's experience and relationship with mainstream schooling. It suggests that, with a welcoming and supportive educational setting, distrust of schooling can be surmounted. It was not a dislike of learning, or an inherent incapability, which had previously discouraged many from finishing school. This was echoed in many of the interviews, but one woman put it this way:

"The education system don't seem to be doing really well in educating [our] kids because let's say they're in Year 7. They don't know nothing but they are still moved forward without knowing anything. And then they grow up, they fall out of school about Year 10. Then they have babies."

She felt these types of experiences have a lasting effect on people, explaining:

"There's a lot of the boys, they're really into fixing cars. But they haven't got the piece of paper to go on and get a job or because they're not the type of people to be in a classroom, sitting. They want to do hands-on stuff. And I know TAFE and all that, you have to be in a classroom for some sort of time. That frightens our community away."

The Literacy Campaign has given some women an opportunity to *"get an education all over again, catch up on what I missed out on, like, there's a lot of things I don't understand with Centrelink, anything to do with government"*. The women learned how to feel informed about issues and things that happen around them. This has motivated this participant to feel the *"need to be more involved in everything"* and to be more aware of what is going on in the community. Training people to be better information seekers is a hugely empowering legacy in its own right.

Giving people a second chance is also important *"because most of them [young women] fall, drop out of school. We don't know why but we know that they have an impact of trauma in their family, they've lost loved ones or they're going through something that has happened to 'em or and they don't get any help through school, they don't get any help through the clinics."*

It is worth noting an example that shows even those with significant health problems were keen to make reading and writing a priority when given the chance:



“Since the Literacy for Life program come into the community, it's been good. It helped a lot of people, and when we first started up in the school, we had three ladies in our class. One was diagnosed with Leukemia, and then another lady had a stroke, and then another lady, she had a stroke, a brain tumor and breast cancer in one year. We had all of those ladies in our class. One of them, she's in a wheel chair and she never, ever got to go to school, because she's got problem with her bones and she was always in Far West Hospital until she's like, 16 and she only learned how to read and write. She could not print, but come to literacy [classes], she started to print.”

This is a demonstration of peoples' will to empower themselves.

The Literacy for Life Foundation Campaign was clearly a liberating experience for many. The essence of the program is encapsulated in this story by a middle-aged woman who for the first time feels okay going to the shops, because she has learned how to read the product labels:

“I never liked going to town because you're walking into shops and you can't read and write...people look at you silly. And you automatically know that they're thinking "Oh, dumb ... dumb ..." "A little short changer, there," yeah. Well, I've had a few times in my past, you know where I couldn't explain myself properly for things I wanted. It's like as if I had to go and show them that I could say it. I can go straight to the thing that I'm looking for.”

This is an insight into both the struggles of low literacy and the surmounting of those challenges, through learning to read and write.

## **8. Empowerment Across Generations**

Lifting literacy is seen as very empowering and something that can create pride and strength across generations, by building on the legacy of elders:

“If my grandmother was here today she would be very, very proud of this program, because she was one that couldn't read or write, and she wanted to go back to school. She went back to TAFE actually. And if she known I was part of this she'd be very, very proud.”

This participant's grandmother was an Aboriginal rights campaigner and an advocate for children.

Intergenerational transmission of strength is a powerful force and it seems to be a big motivation for the women in Toomelah and Boggabilla. As one participant put it:

“Our families, past and present, elders too [have] done a lot for our community and realising and growing up with the stories that they told to us. So, we are like them, following in their footsteps and leading the way, like they did.”

Another participant had this to say:

“Our kids really drive us to do and achieve what we can, so they can see what we're doing, so they can step up so, when we're old and grey, to say 'Mum's done this, so I wanna have a go.'”

Children can then see *“how to play that role model.”*

There is real love for the community and for promoting and protecting women in the community. As one participant put it:

“I just love the community. I'd like to see our women take over Toomelah. Rise up. Just to do what our old, old grandmothers and them used to do. I just want to see our women be proud of our land, our place out here, you know? Just to do things out here, to take pride in it, in Toomelah and just keep it a good safe place, clean place.”

It is worth noting here that in the eyes of these women, empowerment is very much connected to culture and community. The individual is always seen to be empowered by, and with, the culture and community.

## **9. Trauma and Postnatal Depression**

Personal trauma was a recurring theme in the interviews:

“There's a lot of things too in the community about trauma. Our loved ones had a lot of trauma, even the women, you know and that sort of stops our community from doing things too. I know that's just not for the women but it's for everyone but, there's no help for trauma, now. We can see our people suffering because of it and we get all of these services out here but none of them actually do anything. That's just another thing on top of what we have to deal..., there's even post-natal depression.”

Postnatal depression was another strong theme in the interviews. A participant had this to say:

“You know what else, this could even have impacted even on postnatal depression. I think that is a big thing, and a lot of these young girls wouldn't know anything about that, you know? So that would be a good program to run.”

## **10. Racism**

Racism was also a common theme. Many of the women said racism contributed to their dropping out of school. As one women put it:

“The teachers just sat us down at the back of the classroom, this is in Gundi [Goondiwindi]. It was good in Bogga, when we went to school in Bogga, but once we got to Gundi school we were just put down the back. They didn't try to help with anything.”

This experience was also documented in the testimony of several witnesses in the 1988 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Toomelah Report*.

Institutional racism interacts with labour market discrimination to further disadvantage the women. As one participant put it:

“A lot of the young girls, they don't get jobs because they can't get jobs in Goondiwindi. They can't get jobs because it's a very racial place. A lot of young girls fall out of school, you know leave school.”

## 11. Isolation

There is a lack of programs to help young women, especially young mothers, with various issues (sexual assault/abuse, postnatal depression, trauma, dealing with loss, etc.). In a way, Literacy for Life Foundation tries to fill in the gaps that exist and it has become the proxy program which deals with some of these issues. Women not having the help needed to tackle some of the important issues in the community was a common theme in the interviews:

“A lot of them, being young and all, I suppose they all keep bound. There's not a lot of room for them to move to. There's no facilities. There's no preschool or schooling or day care or anything for people like them [with a young family and low literacy]. There's a lot of little ones missing out. Just to see them have a little bit more to do with school and, or education. Because they never had very much of that, I don't neither.”

Another participant flagged similar issues with young women in the community, stating:

“They don't really know much education. They don't really know what is going on. Basically, they live here, they don't go anywhere else. We have trouble with women having babies, some of them [have] postnatal depression and there's no help for that and some of them don't know where to go to get help and some of them really don't trust anyone to help them. I've seen a lot of that in the young women today.”

Another participant went on to comment on the recurrent theme of not having a strong sense of self-direction/goal setting:

“They probably, don't have anything to do in life. [They] don't really have anything set. Or think that there's nothing out there for them but drugs and alcohol. And trying to get something to hang for.”

## 12. Sustainable Programs

The women made several recommendations (women's groups, sport activities, etc.) to improve things for women and girls. However, they also acknowledged that there's a lack of sustainable programs and also a lack of communication from the different programs that already exist in the communities. As one participant put it, *“it's just that programs do come up and running and then they get shut down.”* Another participant added, *“we have a lot of service providers come out here but we don't know what they do. So it'd be good if we get people that come here and actually help and get out in the community and help our girls.”*

The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) was highlighted as one such program that came and went. New programs in the community bring hope and facilitate community members taking pride in their community – through cleaning and maintenance of facilities and houses. However, the cessation of such programs decreases the community's morale:

“It was mad when the CDEP. Everybody had appeared the same, took pride in the community, cleaning and doing maintenance. Soon that was taken and everybody went down and nothing to do. Turn to alcohol and drugs.”

It is clear there's a real issue with keeping the momentum associated with the programs after funding runs out and/or the programs leave the community. For example, the Army Aboriginal Community Assistance Program (AACAP), which operated in Toomelah in 2017-18, provided training, such as catering and carpentry. However, the participants were not able to get jobs thereafter. As one participant put it:

"When the AACAP program was here, a lot of the women and even a few men done the catering course...and carpentry. But just like a lot of our community, overall they're experienced, like our older men, they can't get jobs out of it. We live in a little community, I know, we don't want to leave this community but we need to get money at the same time."

Building sustainable programs and having ownership of these programs is critical for the morale and viability of the community. As one participant put it:

"We need to do something that's gonna stay in our community, that we're gonna bring employment to our community. And then you know, keep everything like cash flow and everything within our own community."

The same participant went on to say:

"We need stuff that's gonna be here. Run from Toomelah not other services bringing that in. We need our women to take over that Mums and Bubs and/or Women's Group [run by an external organisation], you know? We need that based here. 'Cause they're based at the school. And not many people go out to the school or trust in the school. But if we had something that's here, of our own, all the time."

For some, schools are part of their trauma, associated with negative experiences and the power structure which contributed to their current state. Thus, it is worth considering running community programs outside the structure of schools.

### **13. Specific Suggestions**

The women had specific recommendations and ideas they would like to see happen in Toomelah and Boggabilla.

In order to strengthen Aboriginal communities and to assure a good future for young Aboriginal women and girls, there is a need to keep building women's literacy skills. As one participant put it:

"If we don't know how to read and write, we won't. We need to know how to read and write to get out in the world and get a job. And a lot of people can't do that because they don't know. You gotta fill in so many forms, and they don't know how to do that. A lot of people, their mothers, their aunties or their sisters [do not know how to] do things like that."

The same participant went on to say:

"They [people with low literacy] feel ashamed in themselves that they don't know how to read and write. If you don't know how to read and write, you won't get anywhere in life. The shame factor I think is the number one on the list. I think people got more shame than confidence and self-esteem."

To keep Aboriginal communities strong, it was recommended by some of the women that more information on the good that people have done/are doing be highlighted. These stories should be made known to all, especially community members, in order to empower and uplift. They can be used as a source of inspiration for people, especially young women. As one participant put it, it is important to know *“who started what and how and show them that it is a fight to get to where they want to be. ‘Cause I didn’t know about Susie McGrady. I did not know about her until that day the hall was opened and then I felt, how amazing. More stories of their elders. What they’ve done, because most would have known in their family, but I didn’t know hers, you know.”*

Having programs for young mothers was also recommended:

“They’re home and they got babies, but when they want to go out and get a job they haven’t got that stuff so, getting them ready for when they need to go for a job interview. We could have more jobs out here for them to do. Not just to stay home and have babies. I know some of them love doing that but what happens when their kids grow up?”

Other programs, such as parenting programs, domestic violence programs, beauty courses, anti-bullying programs and mental health programs were also recommended:

“Mental health. Oh, that one is big. More programs of how to deal with people with mental illness.”

“More on that mental health, that’s what we really need is more mental health. ‘Cause lot of ‘em being suicidal and how do you talk to ‘em and things like that, you know?”

“More programs, would be better to make them [women] feel more confident, lift up their self-esteem and have them build and be a good role model. Not only for their children, but for the community.”

“Have a women’s group. A few activities just sitting around, yarning. So their stories come to the table. And arts and craft, cooking.”

“Probably for women, probably beauty [courses]. Cause not, most of them like mucking around with their hair.”

“Our women need more projects, programs in our communities for health and wellbeing. And if we’re going to be engaged and committed to stand up, stand strong.”

One of the female leaders in the community recommended having housing and land management training, saying *“we’re having trouble now with our houses and partnerships are starting to fall away. I want to try and get Literacy for Life to try and build them young women up to do...real estate or land managers, ...so they can take care of our houses here on Toomelah.”*

Being self-sufficient as a community was also discussed:

“I would like to see the women doing a veggie garden you know, or selling their veggies. Or not even that, just making up veggie packs for the community to hand out. ‘Cause it saves them a lot of money, it saves them driving. We got to drive 25km to get some food. And all our community get when we go in there like racial comments and racial looks and they don’t help us. We’ve got all this land we can use.

## 14. The Power of Women

Investment to empower women in Boggabilla and Toomelah - whether through education and/or through support services - is critical for positive transformation. The communities have more women role models than men. One woman in the community put it like this, *“women protect more, and they're more of a voice. They've got more opinion and a bigger voice. They take more action than men.”* However, lack of confidence is holding many women back from standing up, or speaking up and being heard. *“That's part of what women should be, is stand up and be heard, and fight for what we believe in.”*

Literacy for Life Foundation's Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign has created a platform for women who feel left out by the system to change their status quo and be heard. It is clear from the interviews that it is vital to get women mobilised:

“Motivated and get 'em out there, letting them know that they can do these sort of things [working, being proactive, speaking up], encourage them that they can accomplish anything. Instead of getting a boyfriend and having babies.”

Many of the women who went through the Literacy Campaign hope *“to continue to build each other up”*. Others have realised that anything is possible and are in search of their calling. *“I'm still searching, still searching what I want to be and want to do. Being something that will help others.”* Other women had hopes and dreams that their children will be able *“to bail themselves and get off the drugs and alcohol, you know? To do something with their little lives. The opportunities that they got today, we did not have. I didn't have them back in my days because the place was so racist especially going to Windi [Goondiwindi].”*

When asked what changes they would like to see regarding women's situation in the community one woman had this to say:

“How we grow up. How we get treated. How we get spoken to. But the number one thing is coming together. Once you come together, we'd be more powerful.”

These sentiments were echoed by the other women.

## 15. Conclusion

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Project is an important undertaking.

Some of the women who contributed to this submission were not born when the preceding *Women's Business Report* (1986) and Australian Human Rights Commission's *Toomelah Report* (1988) were written.

But this line, taken from page 75 of the *Women's Business Report*, in a section titled Community-based courses, is still relevant:

“By far the greatest benefit of gaining further education for most of the women who spoke with us was to have more say in what happened in their lives.”

The words of the women of Boggabilla and Toomelah contained in this submission echo that call. And their actions go beyond words. By lifting adult literacy in their communities they have provided a positive example of what is possible.