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Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Prime Minister for Social Inclusion

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Speech

Speech to the Pre-ACAL Conference Forum

Pre-ACAL Conference Forum Crowne Plaza, Surfers Paradise Queensland

This is the land of the Bundjalung people the traditional owners and I pay my respect to their elders past and present and honour their culture, traditions and wisdom.

I am very pleased to be here this morning to open the Pre-Conference Forum for the 2008 Australian Council for Adult Literacy Conference.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today about the importance of adult literacy in our community and the place it has in the Australian Government's Social Inclusion Agenda. This is an agenda that aims to ensure that all Australians have the opportunity to share in our nation's prosperity.

I was especially pleased to be invited to open this forum, as adult learning is an area in which I have particular interest and expertise. Before I entered Parliament in 2002, I was working in infants, primary and secondary schools before moving into adult and community education and TAFE. I was actually a member of ACAL in the late 80s and 90s, and in fact received an award during International Literacy Year (1990) for my adult literacy involvement. I still support and train some local literacy and language tutors who are working with new arrivals and ex-prisoners – so you can see this is something that I have carried with me into my new role as Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion.

My experiences have brought me face to face with the disadvantages experienced by those people in our society with poor levels of literacy and numeracy. They reinforce for me the importance of language, literacy and numeracy skills in providing the essential foundation to allow individuals to live full, independent, healthy and productive lives.

This pre-conference forum is focused on the significant implications of the findings of the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey undertaken by the ABS in 2006, and released in 2007. The survey, as we all know, was part of an OECD international survey, and explored each participant's ability to use printed material found at work, at home and in the community.

About 9000 people, aged from 15 to 74 participated in the survey in Australia, which assessed skills across the five domains of prose, document and health literacy skills, numeracy and problem solving.

Australia's results across all skill domains ranged in the middle of all countries included in this round of the OECD survey (Italy, the US, Canada, Bermuda, Norway and Switzerland)

The ALLS has highlighted significant literacy and numeracy skills deficits in the Australian adult population. You know, better than I, the details of the analysis – but about 48.7% were assessed as having poor or very poor literacy and numeracy skills, while 70% were classified as having poor problem solving skills.

Literacy and numeracy deficits are most pronounced among the unemployed and those not in the labour force – are we surprised? Those not in work had the highest proportion assessed at Level 1 or 2 for prose (63%) and document (6%) scales, while for numeracy the unemployed had the highest proportion assessed at level 1 or 2 (73%) For the health literacy and problem solving scales, the unemployed and those not in the labour force had the highest proportion assessed at Level 1 or 2 (75% and 84%) respectively.

For you who are intimately involved in the provision of adult literacy, language and numeracy services and research around this important domain of adult education, I am sure there are salutary lessons in these results that you will be giving close consideration to today.

For government too, there are important implications. As a new government, with an explicit policy agenda that is about enhancing social inclusion, we are thinking very seriously about the cross-portfolio emphasis that should be placed on investing in literacy, language and numeracy skills.

We acknowledge the huge potential that learning has to empower individuals and society. Learning doesn't stop when we reach 18, 21 or 25; lifelong learning helps all of us to adapt, grow and respond to the world around us and improve our capacity to contribute to it.

Social inclusion goes to the heart of what we are as a society and what our job as a Government might be. How do we make sure that people don't fall through the cracks? How do we make a tangible difference to people facing entrenched disadvantage? How do we change things so that all Australians, regardless of where they live or who they are, can participate in the social and economic life of the nation? And how do we expand our notion of the national community so that more people can feel included within it?

Social Inclusion is about recognising that economic prosperity in and of itself is not enough: it is central to the work of government to make sure that this prosperity leaves no one behind.

We have defined five underlying principles of our social inclusion agenda:

To be socially included, we believe that all Australians must be given the opportunity to:

secure a job;

access services;

connect with family, friends, work, personal interests and local community;

deal with personal crisis; and

have their voices heard.

Let me wrap some of the narrative around these principles. This is much more than welfare to work reform – it's about valuing and engaging with those who have been effectively parked on social security payments or live on the margins of society over a long period of time, and giving them chances and choices.

It is just so obvious how important language, literacy and numeracy proficiency is in this agenda.

Enhancing adult literacy skills also supports future generations by increasing literacy in the family, maximising children and young people's potential, and ensuring that joblessness and disadvantage are not perpetuated in households and carried across generations.

The evidence is clear -having a strong foundation of language, literacy and numeracy in families and across communities helps break the cycle of intergenerational social and economic disadvantage. By enhancing literacy skills among adults we promote their active participation as citizens, we develop strong sustainable communities, and we help ensure their involvement in local decision-making and democracy.

The ALLS survey found that people with low language, literacy and numeracy skills tend to be clustered in the lower socio-economic groups.. The survey also highlighted the connection between literacy levels, educational attainment and workplace outcomes.

So, what are the policy implications for the Australian government? We are currently supporting a range of targeted initiatives that you are familiar with, including the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program, the Adult Migrant English Program, and the Workplace English Language and Literacy Program. Each of these offers training and support to different groups in the community and each has a strong track record of improving language, literacy and numeracy skills.

We recognise that early intervention is critical in this debate, but acknowledge that while tackling language, literacy and numeracy problems in schools and pre-schools is a significant part of our ' Education Revolution' addressing these same issues in the adult population is just as important.

Improvements in language, literacy and numeracy skills in the wider community will play a crucial role in achieving the goals of the national reform agenda of COAG. As the Australian population ages, and with continuing social, demographic, technological and workplace changes, we need to help those people who, for whatever reason, don't have adequate skills to take up work, training or community opportunities.

I know you will be familiar with the National Reporting System—the NRS—a nationally recognised mechanism for measuring and reporting outcomes of adult English language, literacy and numeracy provision, which has been in use in government programs for more than 10 years. I know too that there are some here who have expressed concern about the NRS.

However, Ascertaining the language, literacy and numeracy skills and needs of adults requires a very sophisticated reporting tool which can fulfil a variety of purposes and satisfy a range of prospective users. Such a tool needs to reflect and promote good educational practice, be fair to participants, and be valid, reliable and functional. The National Reporting System was developed to meet these needs.

The Australian Government has now released the Australian Core Skills Framework—the ACSF—which, in many ways, is the heir to the National Reporting System. The ACSF describes and measures English language, literacy and numeracy skills, measuring performance in the five core skills of learning, reading, writing, oral communication and

numeracy.

The ACSF retains the technical strengths of its predecessor and with even broader applications can be used in any context where people work, learn and communicate.

For example, it could be used to benchmark a person's performance in each of the core skills. Or it could identify core skills needed in a particular workplace through the detailed descriptions provided. It could also map curricula and support curriculum design.

The Australian Core Skills Framework will be an invaluable tool for adult literacy specialists and others involved in education and training.

Its development and release demonstrates the Australian Government's commitment to the Council of Australian Government's outcome of reducing the gaps in foundation skills among adults. I would like to acknowledge the efforts and hard work of everyone who has contributed to its creation.

Policies to promote Social Inclusion, at their core, are about opportunities for participation and choice, building capacity within individuals and communities and giving those who for whatever reason have no voice, the opportunity to have their voices heard and the issues acknowledged. While our focus in the immediate term is about breaking cycles of disadvantage by tackling intergenerational unemployment we are also committed to doing something to help the literary and cultural impoverishment that comes with living in households where families struggle to make ends meet and have few opportunities for interaction, problem solving and those other measures of competence – health literacy, financial literacy, digital literacy, numeracy, language and technology that assists in being able to access services.

This is where the government's 'joined up' agenda for social inclusion will come into its own – making the connections between good health outcomes with pre-natal and early childhood health and well being, improving school attendance and retention rates, strengthening community resilience and supporting those who are always seen to be 'at the margins' to be included, valued and recognised. We see this as an assets - based approach, rather than a deficit measure – look at what we've got, how we can build on people's experience, and strengthen their learning through practical application of the skills and capacities that will help them get by fundamental principles of experiential adult learning.

For us, a job is an important spring board – it brings much more than some financial independence but also provides opportunities for networking, building friendships and strengthening self worth. But, we also recognise that the character of work has changed so much in the past twenty five years. The low skilled jobs have almost disappeared, and we have a statistical bubble of people who have been made redundant from one job, and haven't been able to find steady work, or who are under-employed because they haven't had the chance to up-skill. So, unlike the previous government we don't believe that work is the only acceptable outcome. Ours is not an agenda of work at all costs.

However, we can't ignore the OECD data which shows that jobless people are one of the most disadvantaged groups and low educational attainment is directly related to this disadvantage^[1]. Within OECD countries, less than 50% of people that did not complete upper secondary schooling have jobs, while more than 80 per cent of people with a university or tertiary degree are employed.

This is what has motivated us to make such important changes to the new employment services which begin on July 1, 2009. The framework for the new services is based on a long period of consultation and consideration about how we can support the 'hard to reach'. It will provide tailored individualised assistance and focus on the most disadvantaged job seekers. It will also have stronger links to training and education with 238,000 extra training places available for job seekers over the next five years under the Governments Productivity Places Program.

The accompanying \$41m Innovation Fund is an opportunity for you as practitioners to develop innovative proposals around the ALLS results and to partner with other key players who will be working to wrap services around those most in need.

It is difficult to quantify the economic costs associated with low levels of literacy, although some countries have made estimates.

Canada has recently reported that literacy problems cost their employees the equivalent of nearly \$5 billion (Australian) each year in lost earnings, and roughly \$12 billion for the nation as a whole. Basic skills deficiencies cost the Welsh economy more than \$1.2 billion (Australian) a year. Poor literacy skills in the workplace cause a range of problems including poor quality control, lost orders, bad communication and the need to recruit staff externally.

Across the UK it's estimated that poor literacy skills cost British industry more than £4.8^[2] billion.

So, low adult literacy levels impact on a country's capacity to build high-skill, knowledge-based economies and inclusive, cohesive societies. To this end, you can understand that we perceive poor literacy levels as not only a social inclusion imperative, but also a productivity imperative.

Dealing with this effectively requires going beyond the traditional focus on school-based literacy policies and initiatives.

It requires a whole of government approach to lifelong and life wide learning. Adult education, and particularly adult literacy, is important to improving a person's life chances because it's becoming increasingly rare to find jobs that don't require good literacy skills. Employers across all industries recognise the value and importance of 'employability skills' or what are sometimes referred to as 'soft skills'.

Communication, teamwork and problem solving all require language, literacy and numeracy skills, particularly in the increasingly complex workplace of the 21st century.

The links between adult literacy and numeracy and our social inclusion agenda are very clear to us in government. Part of the emphasis we have placed on our 'whole of government' efforts is to promote collaborative practice. For me, it is clear that public problem solving is now deeply collaborative, that it involves far more than government, or business and we must all have a clear understanding of what partnership approaches can and should entail. Certainly genuine collaboration entails critical management and design challenges that are difficult to operate, particularly in our federal system. But, if we are to be genuinely and systemically committed to a 'joined up' approach then we need to consider how new governance arrangements can help us deliver on our shared and ambitious agenda.

So, in our commitment to closing the gap in the life expectancy between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians there must be a serious investment in understanding the importance of culturally appropriate skills development. Minister Elliott this week announced 1400 new training places for indigenous aged care, and when we consider where that will need to be delivered and how that training can happen, it will have to be in an integrated way. Alison Reedy's article in the December 07 Literacy Link takes up this point with her article about the Certificate IV in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Care. Alison pointed out the specific and complex skills that are needed to provide care that is both culturally appropriate and quality assured.

In the same way, the Community Regeneration Program efforts of the Victorian Homelessness and Drug Dependency Program demonstrate a partnership between government, non-profit organisations and training providers that requires a different kind of skills set for the tutors, mentors and boundary riders that make up the staffing complement of that program.

More and more, we are seeing the importance of moving out of class-based training to real life, long life, life-wide

education – for us, it is about being people centred, rather than service centred in our approach. Learning through community contexts is I believe the key – making it real, relevant and appropriate. This fits so well with Rosie Wickert’s and Jenny McGuirk’s work about literacy partnerships. Other thinking around this is evident in the Glebe Youth project, the Men’s Shed movement, and Ian Falk and his colleagues work on community capacity building. The best social enterprises build the practical literacy and numeracy, problem solving; language and lifeskills into their workplaces.

However, there is an inherent challenge in all this – it is in measuring the effectiveness, and disentangling the learning outcomes from what occurs in these spaces. This requires us to think about new and different evaluation frameworks – to capture the social return on investment and to quantify the opportunity costs of not doing things this way – a challenge for another discussion!

So, whether it’s through using community arts projects for disaffected young people or in promoting peace and civil society, such as that I saw recently in Belfast, or its how the Choir of Hard Knocks learns their new lyrics, we recognise that literacy has an important place in our world.

That’s why we have to we must continue to find new opportunities to encourage adult learning as part of that agenda. We need to engage and involve everyone in our community and foster strong foundation skills to build a more inclusive, connected and prosperous society.

Good luck with your conference and thank you for inviting me to be part of it!

[\[1\]](#) OECD Employment Outlook: 2003, Towards More and Better Jobs, p 86.

[\[2\]](#) The economic benefits of improving literacy in the workplace, Conference Board of Canada, 2007

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