

Literate Australia: A whole life approach

Report No 1: *Taking literacy to fresh fields*

1. Introduction	1
2. New Partnerships: extending the built-in not bolted-on model	1
3. Points of Leverage	5
community development sector	6
health sector	9
finance and small business sector	11
welfare sector	14
Appendix: Talk to the ACAL Think Tank, 5 August 2004	18

Jane Figgis
AAAJ Consulting Group

1 September 2004

1. Introduction

This project was designed to investigate sectors and social agendas where improving the literacy and numeracy of their clients would enable the organisations concerned to better meet their own goals. Its purpose was to identify points of leverage for enhancing advocacy for literacy and numeracy – that is, to identify potential partners ACAL could work with to extend the built-in not bolted-on approach to literacy and numeracy.

The immediate task was to understand the potential for resonance between literacy and other social agendas. The approach adopted was to start on-the-ground, to understand what literacy and numeracy meant to these potential partners: how people in these different domains think about literacy; the language they use in talking about literacy; and the actual literacy and numeracy demands made. Later, contacts were made at the policy and more general advocacy levels.

This report is structured in line with the three outcomes expected from the project. The outcomes specified were:

- (1) a statement of the overall purpose of advocacy for adult literacy and numeracy
- (2) knowledge of potential points of leverage
- (3) knowledge of who best to target and the messages to which people will be the most receptive.

The information required for the first outcome is the subject of Section 2: New Partnerships: extending the built-in not bolted-on model. It considers in some detail the role and implementation of partnerships in advancing understanding of and commitment to adult literacy and numeracy. It considers issues which pertain to all potential partnerships and cross-sectoral arrangements.

The other two outcomes are addressed in Section 3: Points of Leverage. It contains a series of charts detailing the requested information for each sector. Each chart describes:

- what was discussed and what literacy ‘means’ in the sector
- who was interviewed
- appropriate messages and how to approach the sector
- who best to approach – taking the partnership forward
- readiness to partner.

The report has been written to provide as an on-going practical reference for ACAL as it moves gradually into new sectors to extend literacy/numeracy to new learning environments.

2. New Partnerships: extending the built-in not bolted-on model

The consultations undertaken for this project suggest a number of ‘answers’ to the underlying question about expanding the scope of advocacy. They are not inconsistent, but each comes from a slightly different vantage point and throws a slightly different light on how partnerships can work to further ACAL’s promise of *leading Australia in the development and promotion of adult literacy practice and policy*. Since ACAL will need to decide which perspectives best align with its thinking, all are noted in this section.

2.1 the value of partnerships

'Literacy Partnerships' with organisations operating to meet other social agendas were widely seen to have three great strengths:

- partners can identify individuals and groups who could profit from improved literacy and numeracy *and* provide a meaningful context in which (and for which) those individuals undertake study;
- the more advocates there are for the development and promotion of adult literacy – and the more diverse that support is seen to be – the more likely the voice is to be heard, especially by governments and the media;
- access to funding and other resources for literacy and numeracy is likely to be enhanced.

Some professionals within the adult literacy and numeracy sector added a fourth value. They expressed the view that partnerships with new and diverse groups could also serve to 'refresh' their own and their colleagues thinking about adult literacy.

The interviews conducted in this project make it clear that there is great potential for partnerships (see Section 3) and that all four strengths are available for 'capture' through them.

2.2 the advocacy message

One of the key findings of this project is just how little thought is given to literacy in the broader community – *not even* in organisations where their clients' improved literacy and numeracy would so unambiguously help them to achieve their goals and to carry out their tasks more effectively. They either do not notice the problem (because individuals have found their own ways around their limited literacy) or they circumvent it by simplifying the information to such a point that they believe literacy is no longer involved. This finding was the theme of the talk I gave to the ACAL Think Tank in Sydney on 5 August 2004. That talk is reproduced in the Appendix.

The response to that talk, however, was interesting and requires some consideration. Many people decided that the ignorance and disinterest about adult literacy needed to be countered by the literacy experts devising a short sharp sweet message about the value of literacy. Effectively, they were asking for better branding. The proverbial 30 second sell in a lift. What one interviewee would have described, had he heard the discussion, as "tying the literacy beast down": trying to tame and define it.

That is not the conclusion I draw from the findings. In fact, it is precisely because people in other sectors are uncertain about what 'literacy' means – or might mean for them – that they need to be able to see the literacy 'beast' let loose. Only then can they observe its different sides and discover the one(s) that suit their context. The bald statement about literacy that professionals use, and which is fully meaningful to them, that there are many literacies will not help the uninitiated.

What might be useful are some guidelines about literacy messages for potential partners. I have a few general suggestions drawn from the interviews (specific messages appropriate to the individual

sectors are presented in the tables of Section 3). This is not a complete protocol but may be a useful start:

- the messages should not be negative, not refer to statistics about people with limited literacy (this is explored in more detail in the talk reproduced in the Appendix but, fundamentally, no one quite believes the horror statistics!). The exception to this advice is in discussions with ANTA and DEST where a reminder that there will be another IALS may be quite appropriate;
- the messages should powerfully convey that literacy/numeracy experts know how to improve peoples' literacy/numeracy and, in terms of partnerships, that teaching and learning in a meaningful context is known to be especially effective – in other words, the partnership context further increases the likelihood of significant progress;
- the messages should paint a picture of aspirational literacy/numeracy – that everyone can be stretched from where they are – not a remedial one. The spiky profile concept is a nice one: it makes it easy to grasp the idea that a weakness in literacy and numeracy is as normal as any other gap in our skill/knowledge set; at all cost avoid painting people with poor literacy and numeracy as pitiable;
- the messages should not try to define literacy.

One of the interviewees, who had some experience in this area, effectively summed up the communication task in saying, “you know, our experience is that engaging potential partners is a three step process:

- in the first step, they become aware that what they do and care about is related to literacy;
- in the second, they come to understand how literacy learning could work in tandem with their goals;
- and finally ways are found so those in need can access quality education/training.”

It is a not a bad framework for monitoring the advocacy process.

2.3 on implementation

A number of issues were raised during the course of this project which ACAL will need to consider in taking forward its strategy for engaging other sectors with its literacy goals.

- connections between policy advocacy and on-the-ground service provision

My experience in talking to people working directly with clients – whether the client is expected to better manage money or write letters or become an effective governor of a community organisation – is that partners want a direct practical relationship with a literacy expert who will work with them on-the-ground to provide contextualised literacy/numeracy programs for identified individuals.

¹ a study I recently came across points out that in Canada among people who tested at the Level 1 (the lowest level) in IALS, only 20 percent rated their skills as poor and 57% rated them as excellent. Further, 90 percent of the people who tested at Level 2 rated their prose reading skill as good or excellent. [Susan B Sussman, August 2003 *Moving the Markers • New Perspectives on Adult Literacy Rates in Canada* p 91 <http://www.literacy.ca/public/moving/moving.pdf>]

A partnership strategy also involves approaches at the policy level with government and the leadership in the social sectors to garner resources and to promote a broad understanding of the Big Picture.

Neither front alone will suffice. Especially at this relatively early stage, potential high profile advocates in any sector will need acquire hard evidence from on-the-ground literacy programs operating effectively and beneficially in their sector before they can become convincing and daring advocates.

All three groups in the adult literacy/numeracy sector will need to be thoroughly involved in this two-front strategy. The three are: the ACAL Executive; the affiliate Literacy Councils in each State/Territory; and the professionals who provide the literacy/numeracy tuition. It is essential that the contribution each can make to policy and to practice is understood and that there is no hint of a hierarchy of worth. It will be ACAL's responsibility to ensure that the connections amongst these contributions is made coherent, that the whole becomes bigger than the sum of its proverbial parts.

□ the funding paradigm

It will come as no surprise that the one consistent source of pessimism about the potential for literacy partnerships I encountered in the interviews came from the frustration so widely felt about project funding – short term support for initiatives and ideals that are supposed to endure. This is a widespread problem. Linda Shohet expressed it well in a sentence that followed a description of 'health learning groups' that had been operating extremely effectively in Canada but which stopped once its funding stopped:

One of the greatest challenges for the health literacy field in all its endeavours, including health, is to [be able to] work within a policy framework that provides stable (non-project based) funding for models that have been found effective².

□ 'joined up' government

No one disputes either the value or the importance of removing 'silos' of activity because, as one person I spoke so nicely put it, "problems don't hunt alone; they hunt in packs". Initiatives to 'join up' government are taking place at many levels: from Ministerial and Senior Executive to local agencies coming together for small and specific programs.

This establishes a useful structure for literacy initiatives: existing cross-sectoral arrangements into which literacy logically slots. But I was constantly cautioned that ready-made partnerships rarely, if ever, exist. We are still at too early a stage in joined-up government. Each collaborative ambition needs to be constructed afresh. This is also, perhaps especially, true within the rubric of lifelong learning.

□ measuring literacy outcomes

Occasionally in the interviews I broached this subject because I was aware that establishing suitable monitoring protocols is an issue ACAL believes it will need to grapple with. This project

² Linda Shohet 2004 'Health and Literacy: Perspective' *Literacy and Numeracy Studies* 13 (1) pp 65-83

was not a suitable vehicle for exploring that problem. Outcomes were too distant from the issue at hand: interviewees were focused on the beginning of the process of involvement with literacy.

3. Points of Leverage

The intent of this section is provide ACAL with the information which will allow it to take up the consultation and even individual conversations where I left off. I have tried here to organise the rich array of qualitative material so that it is easily for future reference. The result is a series of charts – one for each of the principal sectors canvassed – and dot points. There are four charts:

- Community Development Sector
- Health Sector
- Finance and Small Business
- Welfare

Two points of clarification.

1. assigning some individuals and organisations to a particular sector was not always a straight-forward decision. Many boundaries are fuzzy, particularly in community development where many other social agendas have come to operate at the community development level. The ‘problem’ actually reinforces the reality of joined up problems needing cross-sectoral partnerships. As it turns out, the exact placement of individuals and organisations in these charts is of little moment.
2. each chart has an entry: LINK WITH ANTA STRATEGY AND NATIONAL ACTION PLAN . An attempt has been made by the ACAL Executive to link the consultations in this project with “Shaping Our Future- Australia’s national strategy for vocational education and training”. The translation of potential cross-sectoral collaboration into the national action plan is a critical step for ACAL in taking its partnership strategy forward.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

<p>WHAT WAS DISCUSSED – WHAT LITERACY MEANS TO THEM</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ by and large, people who help communities to develop the capacity to understand, demand, design and provide services that meet their own needs, and whom I would have thought would be very sensitive to the basic skill levels of community participants, had mostly neither noticed nor thought about the levels of literacy and numeracy in the people they were dealing with. ▪ this, in part, is because most adults with literacy/numeracy difficulties find ways around them and, especially, the whole reason for joining together in communities (geographic or otherwise) is to share the available resources, to 'distribute' the capabilities across the group. ▪ interviewees recognised that there were lots of 'mechanisms' within the processes of strengthening communities and sustaining them that intersect with literacy and numeracy. Examples included: taking minutes appropriately; producing community newsletters; unpacking the legal language of constitutions – all which might come under the rubric of 'institutional literacy' ▪ the 'learning communities' concept, in principle, includes the basic skills of members of the community ▪ the whole-of-government approach of Tasmania Together (and its 20 year perspective) is "making things happen". What they have done with literacy is to set up a Reference Group under VET which is particularly focused on designing benchmarks – the whole Tasmania Together approach is to rigorously seek indicators. 	
<p>APPROPRIATE MESSAGES: HOW TO APPROACH THE SECTOR</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 'social inclusion' and 'civil society' are the ideas which should be used to introduce (to underpin) any discussion of literacy and numeracy. It is the language which they will respond to because the people who currently get involved in community activity are, it is thought, the ones who do not have literacy/numeracy problems. But inclusion of all is a the fundamental principle of civil society: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>one of the most critical points about community capacity building is that if you are talking about the social and economic well-being and development of a community, you have to bring everyone along... everyone. Think about that</i> ▪ it would be most useful to emphasise the 'aspirational' aspects of improved literacy and numeracy and to stay well clear of the there-are-people-in-your-community-who-have-deficits if for no other reason than that's not how they see themselves. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>It is very painful for them to talk about literacy..... it's a word you have to be very careful about using. There is a lot of stigma attached to it – it stigmatises."</i> <p>Here the Birmingham idea of spiky profiles is particularly attractive.</p> ▪ one advocacy message that community groups and ACAL might join on is the whole problem of short term funding for projects (both literacy and community). This was mentioned specifically by some interviewees in this sector (and the welfare sector). It corresponds to my personal view that project funding for a year or two is the single greatest barrier to achieving long term social and educational (and resulting economic) outcomes. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ an issue to be alert to in looking for partners for literacy advancement through the mechanism of community building. There is an unease in the sector that communities are sometimes being co-opted to do governments' bidding. This is particular likely where governments use local organisations (through tendering) to deliver services the government has deemed appropriate: the community is not being asked to identify the directions it thinks best but to carry out pre-determined activities and be accountable only to outsiders. ▪ the possibility of a research program: One interviewee raised the possibility that some social networks in a community informally improve people's 'school' literacy while others actually debase/decay it.. There may be scope to follow through on this with people who do research on community networks and information flows ... it would be interesting for someone to check whether literacy enters into the indicators of social capital (and why not) 	
<p>WHO BEST TO APPROACH: TAKING PARTNERSHIPS FORWARD</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ this is a sector brimming with networks. My suspicion is that many of the electronic ones are more vehicles for communication than powerful coherent voices for the network members - perhaps as befits local 'bottom-up' approaches. But it would be as well to keep track of them; they have conferences where it may be useful to speak to encourage interest in literacy/numeracy and spark some alliances: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Learning Communities Catalyst: http://lcc.edu.au o Community Builders.nsw: http://www.comunitybuilders.nsw.gov.au ▪ well known and respected voices in community building indicated that it would "make sense" for them to advocate for literacy "it is a thread that could be added to the discussion".. ▪ Tasmania Together is genuinely intending that the state will look very different in 20 years time. There may be real potential to devise a coherent literacy partnership within its ambit – although it needs to be understood that at this time the focus on aligning existing government agencies and the existing benchmarks for literacy is largely schools focused. Then again, they are only three years into this 20 year ambition, and the verdict (mostly) is that they are managing to join up government agencies. The ACT is also said to have an ACT-wide planning program. ▪ it might be interesting to identify and partner with [the good] developers of new sub-divisions or the re-invigorating of old ones who actually try to build social community as they are building physical communities. These will do visioning with residents which can very well accommodate the question 'where does learning fit in here?'. In a number of communities (this may be especially the case in rural and regional Australia) local libraries can have a profound influence on the development of literacy and numeracy skills. But, again, this seems to be a matter of the energy and imagination of people on the ground, not an easily marshalled national (or state) resource. 	
<p>READINESS</p>	<p>this is quite a diverse sector. What makes it attractive is that strengthening communities is the thrust of much government policy and is likely to remain so. It may fit easily into some of ANTA's national action plan</p> <p>there are over-arching organisations of different cohesiveness but which provide reasonable initial</p>	

	<p>leverage – the sector has attracted very capable people.</p> <p>it is apparent to those involved that literacy and numeracy are relevant to their aim of building and sustaining strong and inclusive communities, although advancing those skills has not been a focus of their attention or activity thus far.</p>	
LINK WITH NATIONAL VET STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN	<p><i>Strategy Objective 3:</i> Communities and regions will be strengthened economically and socially through learning and employment</p> <p><i>Action Plan Priority 5:</i> Conduct targeted research to complement and strengthen regional and community development initiatives across Australia</p>	

HEALTH SECTOR

<p>WHAT WAS DISCUSSED – WHAT LITERACY MEANS IN THE SECTOR</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ by and large public health professionals have opted to step around problems of inadequate literacy by relying on the social marketing technique of focused (and sustained) campaigns. Two examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>We keep it simple. we use as few words as possible. short sentences. no word more than two syllables ... a lot is visual. We've basically stopped using brochures. Brochures are an out-dated idea although some departments are still doing brochure after brochure.</i> <i>We bring the messages down to their level and try to make them really vivid</i> <p>when asked about all the misleading information people are subject to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>We've taken the view that we don't want to be the voice of negativity. We just keep sending out our message – for example, that vegies are cheap and easy to prepare. There are others (like Choice) who do talk about the misleading stuff that is being put out, but we don't. People don't actually react to that well.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ it is important to note that this view means that health professionals do actually recognise that there is a literacy problem in Australia – it is just that these people do not see it as a problem they are in a position to do something about. In fact, a social marketer said <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>It is intriguing to think about what we could do not only to bring messages down to their level but to actually improve people's literacy. I like that idea.</i> ▪ it should also be noted that there are parts of the health sector which have a good record of working cross-sectorally (with justice, housing, transport, etc). ▪ the exception to the we-will-just-send simple-messages-out was the Central Australian Remote Health Development Service (CARHDS) which delivers training (including WELL) out in communities to Aboriginal Health Workers since they are expected to deliver increasingly sophisticated clinical services. There is enough flexibility that tutors can engage others in the community in learning opportunities if they are interested. In a sense, however, this is 'employee' learning rather than connecting literacy learning to health clients. CARHDS also has a program on governance and management for members of the remote Health Councils and Health Centres management which they categorise as community capacity building. 	
<p>APPROPRIATE MESSAGES: HOW TO APPROACH THE SECTOR</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the health sector is so stretched that anything that looks like non-core business is not likely to be received, initially, with much enthusiasm. ▪ the trick will be to convince organisations and individuals that literacy experts could provide a service that would, in the long term, improve health outcomes <i>and</i> not make any extra demands on the health professionals. So the case for what literacy experts could do must be sharp and compelling and done in accordance with the way health/medical issues are defined by the sector ▪ as background but could present the evidence acquired in Canada and the United States (and perhaps elsewhere) which links poor literacy with poor health. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o For example, Canadians with low literacy skill strain the system through inappropriate use of 	

	<p>health services including emergency care [Movement for Canadian Literacy, Sept 2003 www.literacy.ca which also quotes a US study conducted by the Journal of the AMA patients with lowest literacy levels had average annual health care costs of \$12,974 compared to \$2,969 for the overall population].</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o there is also the recent report from the prestigious National Academies in Washington: <i>Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion</i> 2004, available from national Academies Press, Washington DE http://www.nap.edu . <p>I've called this kind of information <i>background</i> because on its own it will not prove that literacy programs could either work through the sector or would actually improve outcomes.</p>	
WHO BEST TO APPROACH: TAKING PARTNERSHIPS FORWARD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Australian Medical Association (02 6270 5400) and Doctors Reform Society (02 9264 9084). These could perhaps be worked on at state level ▪ health clients who may be organised enough and interested enough in their own literacy are the plethora of self-help groups (especially those concerned with chronic or lifelong health issues) and health consumer associations. A starting point could be the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing (www.health.gov.au) to see if there are leads for identifying these or peak bodies. 	
READINESS	<p>The logic is unassailable: the health sector should generate real opportunities for resonance with literacy (as the Canadian and US reports indicate). However, the public health sector here seems to be satisfied with its strategy of social marketing as 'getting around' literacy problems. It might be more useful to try to get to the practitioners and others who directly have to deal with the effects of poor literacy on health and they have strong national peak bodies.</p>	
LINK WITH NATIONAL VET STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN	<p><i>Strategy Objective 3</i>: Communities and regions will be strengthened economically and socially through learning and employment <i>Action Plan Priority 5</i>: Conduct targeted research to complement and strengthen regional and community development initiatives across Australia</p> <p><i>Strategy Objective 4</i>: Indigenous Australians will have skills for viable jobs and their learning culture will be shared <i>Action Plan Priority 6</i>: Increase training opportunities leading to sustainable employment for Indigenous Australians.</p>	

FINANCE AND SMALL BUSINESS SECTOR

<p>WHAT WAS DISCUSSED – WHAT LITERACY MEANS TO THEM</p>	<p>The finance sector</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ is exceedingly conscious of the need for informed decision-making by people in the community (from investment decisions to use of credit cards and not being tempted by scams, etc). They call informed decision-making 'financial literacy': understanding and managing money. ▪ the advice sent out by financial institutions can only be general and non-directive (i.e., they cannot say "do this" or "do not do that") because it is illegal for anyone other than a licensed financial adviser to be prescriptive in that way. So they need their 'audiences' to be literate and numerate: able and willing to pay attention to reasonably complex information. ▪ this is, as several pointed out, "an excellent time" to link literacy with the finance sector. The Consumer and Financial Literacy Taskforce submitted its final recommendations to the government at the end of August 2005. Its prime recommendation was that a national Coordinating Body be set up because there are some 700 organisations in Australia involved in financial literacy activities one way or another. Having a national coordinating and advocacy body for financial literacy would suit ACAL well. <p>The small business sector [this is the area that employer-sponsored workplace training has missed]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the agencies dealing with small business development – including the national chain of Business Enterprise Centres (BEC) – are interacting with people who might well profit from improved literacy and numeracy. This is a sector which would like to do more thinking about the literacy and numeracy of the small business people they help. However, it doesn't take much to show that there are grounds for thinking about integrating lit/num in their other skill development activities. 	
<p>APPROPRIATE MESSAGES: HOW TO APPROACH THE SECTOR</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ people I spoke to (both involved in the Consumer and Financial Literacy Taskforce and not) were very interested in advancing literacy as an integral part of advancing financial literacy. As one indication, they kept giving me the names of more and more people to talk to. ▪ they will want to know what kinds of materials could be jointly devised and how they would work. My suspicion is that they tended to imagine schools and haven't quite got their heads around how this would work with adults. On the other hand, they <i>are</i> trying to reach adults in the community. As the following quote from one consultation demonstrates <p><i>Using financial literacy messages within the context of general literacy and numeracy work is one way that we could further all our literacy education goals. Your [ACAL's] various members no doubt have a range of different ways in which they have the opportunity to influence education programs, be it in the workplace, community or schools and continuing to plug financial literacy themes as part of their broader agenda is one of the most useful things the Australian Council for Adult Literacy can do. ASIC would be happy to work with you to develop content.</i></p>	

	<p><i>By way of example, and in terms of your built-in not bolted on approach in workplaces, financial literacy/consumer education messages around the theme of superannuation choice would be timely and wonderful in the lead up to the introduction of super choice from 1 July 2005. We would be happy to develop materials on this theme with you.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consultations indicated that there is a real need for evaluation of financial literacy programs and materials in terms of consumer understanding from a literacy point of view. This needs to be deeper than a Plain Language industry approach ▪ the small business development sector will need to realise that literacy and numeracy is relevant to them. That's not hard once you start talking to them. What they really need is to understand <i>exactly</i> how this might be done. They have no idea of how they can help – indeed, why should they? 	
WHO BEST TO APPROACH: TAKING PARTNERSHIPS FORWARD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to stay in touch with the progress of the Consumer and Financial Literacy Taskforce: ▪ ASIC expressed a genuine interest in working with ACAL ▪ Financial Organisation Finance Literacy Projects ▪ within the ambit of welfare organisations, there is a lot of financial counselling ▪ while the BECs are nation-wide, they are state-based without a single umbrella organisation for them. Would be useful to explore state-territory based BECs. ▪ social entrepreneurship may bring together people whose interest in building social enterprises might be a vehicle for extending their literacy and numeracy skill. It might also identify people who become involved in the enterprises the 'entrepreneurs' create whose skills could be advanced through the enterprise. 	
READINESS	<p>finance sector:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the sector's interest in (and commitment to) financial literacy has made it very receptive to overtures about literacy – they do see that literacy and numeracy is a key ingredient in developing financial literacy. ▪ the people interviewed were keen to follow through with ACAL ▪ if a national Coordinating Body is set up, that gives ACAL a single solid partner to work with small business sector ▪ would be able to identify local individuals/groups who might profit from stretched literacy/numeracy skill but no single national contact point ▪ social entrepreneurship is, in my view, worth a watching brief 	
LINK WITH NATIONAL VET STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN	<p><i>Strategy Objective 1: Industry will have a highly skilled workforce to support strong performance in the global economy</i> <i>Action Plan Priority 1: Generate strategies to enable VET to respond to emerging skills needs for the future world of work.</i></p> <p><i>Strategy Objective 2: Employers and individuals will be at the centre of VET</i></p>	

	Action Plan Priority 4: Develop and implement a strategic plan to respond to emerging skill needs of the mature age workforce and our ageing population	
--	---	--

WELFARE SECTOR

Separating the ‘welfare’ sector from the ‘community building’ one is not entirely satisfactory because these days so much of the emphasis in this sector is on strengthening community services and their linkages. For example, The Smith Family is in the process of turning their overall strategy to a “community-centric” model; the various state Councils of Social Services have seen supporting community organisations as one of their roles for many years. In the end I have kept them separate because these large organisations have a well established advocacy role and a recognised voice through the media and in some political circles.

WHAT WAS DISCUSSED – WHAT LITERACY MEANS TO THEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the alignment between poor literacy and poverty is absolutely clear to this sector. ▪ this is the one sector where most of the people I talked to had quite a sophisticated view of literacy as empowerment rather than simply decoding a given text ▪ the welfare organisations, according to most of my informants, feel themselves stretched almost to the breaking point and operating on the proverbial smell of an oily rag. Therefore, they are loathe to divert any of their attention from the main roles of (i) advocacy for broad economic and social policies that will counter disadvantage and (ii) supporting associated service providers. ▪ some described a problem that might be called one of ‘critical mass’. Large national or umbrella organisations see themselves, in part, as a voice for reporting up from community organisations’ experience. The ‘critical mass’ problem is that these small non-government community organisations, which are now providing many government services, might only see 2 or 3 people with significant literacy problems. The devolution of government services – “<i>breaking it up into 300 little pieces</i>” – may be masking the literacy problem, at least as it is noticed and ‘reported up’ from small providers. ▪ where welfare organisations supply ‘learning’ to community organisations – for example, training in governance – they say (reminiscent of health) “we dumb it down to a 10-year-old’s level”. Ourcommunity.com said a similar thing about the hundreds (literally) of ‘help sheets’ they produce. Citizens’ Advice Bureaus see people with literacy/numeracy problems but ‘fill in the forms’ and do the information gathering for these people. 	
APPROPRIATE MESSAGES: HOW TO APPROACH THE SECTOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the sector is exceedingly aware of, and in many ways a leader in, the need for holistic approaches to reversing disadvantage. They do not need to be convinced of the value of addressing the literacy needs of their clients (both ‘lingering basics’ and spiky profiles) ▪ on the other hand, time and resources are tightly stretched meeting immediate obligations and they tended, consequently, to feel that ‘someone else’ needs to concentrate on literacy and numeracy. My impression was that the sector would welcome ACAL so long as ACAL (or associates) could continue to shoulder the literacy/numeracy aspect – i.e., not hand lit/num over to the welfare organisations 	
WHO BEST TO APPROACH: TAKING PARTNERSHIPS FORWARD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Smith Family is the one organisation in the sector I spoke to which appeared expansive and receptive to acquiring new directions. The Smith Family has unambiguously focused on learning and 	

	<p>communities as the levers for removing disadvantage – both of which invite a strong literacy component into the equation. It also appears to have created strong two-way links between its general advocacy and active programs with clients.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the other large welfare organisations (the Brotherhood, Salvation Army, Mission, ACOSS, etc) should also be consulted: they may prove to be good advocates for literacy being 'built-in not bolted-on' ▪ one positive suggestion for a role where ACAL could partner with ACOSS was in drafting a joint submission to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in relation to the adult literacy survey planned for 2006 about what is measured and how so it will be of maximum use. 	
READINESS	<p>Because of the apparent diversity of resources and optimism in the sector, it may be more appropriate for ACAL to think of working with individual organisations than to identify the sector as a whole as a strategic partner – at least in current circumstances.</p>	
LINK WITH NATIONAL VET STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN	<p><i>Strategy Objective 3</i>: Communities and regions will be strengthened economically and socially through learning and employment <i>Action Plan Priority 5</i>: Conduct targeted research to complement and strengthen regional and community development initiatives across Australia</p> <p><i>Strategy Objective 4</i>: Indigenous Australians will have skills for viable jobs and their learning culture will be shared <i>Action Plan Priority 6</i>: Increase training opportunities leading to sustainable employment for Indigenous Australians.</p>	

APPENDIX: talk to ACAL Think Tank, Sydney 5 August 2004 as published in Literacy Link, August 2004 (*Taking Literacy to Fresh Fields*)

The 'built-in not bolted-on' model of literacy learning has been an effective strategy for improving the basic skills of people at work. Extending the model to other situations in the community – beyond workplaces - seemed a logical avenue for ACAL to investigate as part of its forward planning.

The first step was to identify the 'fresh fields' where improving the literacy and numeracy of customers and clients might deliver benefits both to the individuals concerned and the field itself. It was essentially a scouting mission: to find potential partners and then discuss with them ways improved literacy and numeracy might advance their agendas and ambitions. This task was given to Jane Figgis, an education consultant and former broadcaster.

The list of potential fields where literacy and numeracy might play a significant role was easy to devise. Health was an early entry where it seems obvious that being able to critique the flood of messages about dieting, for example, or simply to read accurately the directions on a prescription is critical. There are also the agendas of welfare organisations, community development agencies, banks and other financial institutions, housing commissions, the electoral commission, justice departments – all areas where the literacy and numeracy of clients, if limited in some manner, could decrease the effectiveness of the agency or organisation working with them.

Even though these fields are very different, I discovered fairly quickly that they share two common characteristics – characteristics which will determine the potential for ACAL (and for all people involved in providing literacy and numeracy programs) to build partnerships with them. They are:

1. literacy and numeracy is not a topic people 'out there' think about;
2. literacy and numeracy is not a topic people 'out there' know much about.

These factors are real hurdles to extending the built-in not bolted-on model. This article describes each in a little more detail in the hope that by understanding them, it will be easier to overcome them.

Literacy and numeracy not seen as problematic by potential partners

One person I spoke to who is highly regarded in the field of community capacity building said my approaching him made him realise that he simply took literacy for granted. Or, more accurately, he doesn't think about it because he doesn't have poor literacy or numeracy.

The point is an important one. He may well be in contact with people with weak or even very weak skills but the problem is often masked. People with low levels of literacy can be extremely articulate and good communicators. And people compensate – they use the literacy/numeracy resources of other people.

The statistics say that 20 per cent of Australian adults perform at the very lowest literacy and numeracy levels and that a further 20 percent do not have the necessary literacy skills “to effectively participate in daily life” making up 40 percent of the adult population. Frankly, that doesn’t correspond to most people’s experience of the world.

It may be the case that there is a greater problem than is readily observed – that 40 percent of the adult population of Australia is struggling to participate in daily life – but, with the exception of migrants who do not speak English, it just doesn’t sound right. People ‘out there’ will need to be convinced of the deficits. Many of the people I interviewed said that one of the first things they would ask ACAL (or other literacy specialists) to do would be to show them that there are real weaknesses in the literacy and numeracy skills of their clientele or in their particular community.

In domains like health where there *is* a concern about clients’ literacy, the public health professionals’ solution has been to simplify the message and to market that message. Instead of improving the skill of people with limited literacy, these officers get around the difficulty basically by sloganeering. I’m sure we all applaud the efforts to encourage people to exercise more, stop smoking, use condoms, etc. However, turning health messages into (maximum) two-syllable word slogans does not lead to fruitful partnerships around developing literacy.

There is – this will come as no surprise – confusion about what the word ‘literacy’ connotes. Well, perhaps confusion is the wrong word. There is great consistency and little doubt for most people ‘out there’: literacy is being able to read – to decode text. Primary school type stuff. More than once in my conversations, the interviewee would be describing quite nicely the literacy demands on his or her clients – in one case, their having to write letters and how confusing some of the letters they produce actually are. But then, quite suddenly, they’d turn round and ask: but *is this communication or is it literacy?*

One of the informants, a person very knowledgeable about literacy who happens to do a lot of work in communities put the problem in stark (and startling) terms:

The term literacy is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Literacy has too much baggage and illiteracy too much stigma to be useful in conversation outside the profession.

It is interesting that although the word ‘literacy’ with respect to reading and writing is interpreted in the broad community in a rather pejorative way – to mean ‘basic literacy’ or, actually, illiteracy, deficits in decoding – the word itself is used positively and frequently in other fields. People talk happily, not disparagingly, about computer literacy, information literacy, health literacy, and financial literacy. Some of the community development people I interviewed talked about ‘institution’ literacy as knowing how to set up and run local organisations. It is not clear to me whether this appropriation of the word literacy by these other fields – to mean a basic understanding – is doing the adult literacy field a service or a disservice. It gives prominence to the word, but it’s not the literacy field’s take on the word which is being promoted.

Building partnerships is ‘pavement pounding’ work

Literacy and numeracy educators may not always recognise just how special their knowledge and expertise is. It will require patient and detailed effort on the part of the profession before people in the ‘fresh fields’ clearly understand the roles they might play in improving the literacy and numeracy of their clients and customers.

The vast majority of my interviews ended with the person saying they would be really interested in having a conversation with someone associated with ACAL or other literacy or numeracy specialist. One person put it particularly clearly, but the sentiment was voiced by many:

It is intriguing to think that we could actually to improve our clients’ literacy. I like that idea!

Those discussions are going to be time-consuming. Coming to an understanding of the ways literacy and numeracy are conceptualised and required in these arenas – including the language and meta-language used by these ‘outsiders’ – is not a task that can be short-circuited. Remember, these other agencies and organisations have accommodated to (or believe they have accommodated to) the current level of their clients’ literacy and numeracy skills. It will be a search for effective “hooks”, as someone put it, with that quite accurate image of pulling two sides closer together.

These discussions will need to proceed at two levels. One is on-the-ground with the agencies and organisations who deal directly with the clients whose literacy and numeracy are of interest. The other is at the policy level where advocacy for literacy and numeracy needs to be built in to on-going thinking and planning.

In health, for example, the two levels are the practitioners and the decision-makers. Both need to understand the value of people being able to critically analyse all the information they are subject to. In finance both local bank officers and peak body associations need to see the opportunities that are opened to them if client literacy and numeracy is improved. Similarly in the welfare sector: politicians concerned about poverty need to be engaged and so do social workers (and volunteers) helping disadvantaged families. The potential for knitting other people’s agendas to literacy’s is significant but it has to operate at many levels.

Once an agreed understanding of the potential is in place, sector by sector, then detailed program development work is called for. How is this extended literacy and numeracy learning to be built in? where? who exactly is going to do the learning? who is going to do the teaching? who’s going to pay for it? what exactly is involved?

In sum, moving forward together requires extended conversations. In the first instance, because the concerns of the adult literacy profession about continuing poor literacy levels are neither widely shared nor understood. Then conversations held to develop detailed programs and practical action plans that bring about mutual goals for improvements in literacy and numeracy. Literacy and numeracy will never be the core business of these potential partners but there is an opportunity to make many of them sincere and supportive allies.