In this paper the Australian Council for Adult Literacy shares the results of independent research commissioned to explore issues relating to literacy and current youth policy initiatives.
International Benchmarks and Australian Practice

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Review of the Transition From Initial Education to Working Life Report (1998) the characteristics of an effective school to work transition system within a healthy economy are:

- **Youth-friendly labour markets.** These are characterised by: (i) ample training places within enterprises; (ii) widespread opportunities for students to be employed part-time or during vacations; and (iii) limited barriers to new labour market entrants.

- **Well-organised pathways.** These connect initial education’s qualifications with jobs and further education so that young people’s skills are well understood and valued by potential employers and society.

- **Workplace experience combined with education.** This serves to establish good links between students and local employers and improves skill development by making learning more applied. Apprenticeship is the best known form of such a pathway. Others include school-organised workplace experience, as in co-operative education and the part-time jobs held by students.

- **Tightly-knit safety nets.** These pay attention to the needs of at-risk students, and quickly pick up and re-insert dropouts. They require education, employment and welfare policies to be co-ordinated in ways that increase incentives for active participation in education, training and employment. They require close individual follow-up and support through local delivery mechanisms to co-ordinate services across several policy domains and levels of government.

- **Good career information and guidance.** This aims to achieve universal access to high-quality information and guidance at an affordable cost.

- **Effective institutions and policy processes.** These involve key stakeholders in policy design and in on-going management of transition frameworks. Partnerships at national and local levels are important. Effective policy processes include pilot projects, learning from local initiatives and monitoring and evaluation as integral parts of policy implementation.
1. Introduction

This ACAL View is the result of independent research commissioned by the Australian Council for Adult Literacy in March, 2000. It explores issues relating literacy to current youth policy initiatives in Australia. The need for such work arose out of, and its agenda set, at the ACAL 1999 national conference held in Melbourne through a keynote address provided by Nicole Gilding (Gilding, 1999). In this address Gilding indicated that there is a crisis for young Australians in realising their education and employment aspirations within the current policy and institutional arrangements, and that this had implications for organisations like ACAL and the field in which we work.

Literacy for young people has not been a high priority in public policy in Australia over recent years other than in the early years of schooling. Australia has only ever had one all encompassing language and literacy policy in its political history, the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Australia, 1991). The policies it put in place generally lasted only three years; consequently adult literacy is currently operating in what is essentially a policy vacuum.

It was the intention of the researcher, Carolyn Ovens, to address this policy void by providing ACAL with an understanding of the historical and international contexts that inform current effective practice. In her view, all stakeholders must accept some responsibility as a way to reconcile the past with a future which is bound to international and global influences. Her report forms the basis of this ACAL View.

2. International benchmarks and Australian practice

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an effective school to work transition system in a healthy economy is marked by the following:

- Youth friendly labour markets
- Well organised pathways
- Workplace experience combined with education
- Tightly-knit safety nets
- Good career information and guidance
- Effective institutions and policy processes.

(OECD, 1998)

The characteristics of an effective transition system within a healthy economy are described in more detail on the opposite page.

2.1 The seriousness of the situation is heightened when we consider the predicament early school leavers in Australia may face in trying to join the youth labour market. Figures from the 1996 Australian Bureau of Statistics census (ABS, 1997), and supported by more recent research (Curtain, 1999) show a decline in job opportunities for young people.

2.2 A recent OECD (2000a) report characterises economies such as Australia’s as providing a marginalised youth labour market marked by low skills, low pay and poor job prospects. In conducting its review, the OECD identified a range of issues that are pertinent to the Australian context. The OECD research found that there is a general tendency across the countries...
reviewed for participation rates to fall in those pathways that do not lead to tertiary study (OECD, 1998:6). For many young Australians, the rhetoric around creating “pathways” for young people raises the question of “Pathways to where?”

2.3 Another related issue pertains to the relevance of young people’s education to the labour market. Australia is described as having an “open labour market” (OECD, 1998:7), in which the transition phase is characterised by an emphasis upon the development and provision of core skills or key competencies, and of unified qualification frameworks aimed at encouraging individuals to develop personal learning routes and skill profiles.

Furthermore, such countries are aiming to strengthen employer involvement in education and training through the development of school-enterprise partnerships and through industry bodies being responsible for defining changing skill requirements. A particular dilemma facing Australia in this regard, however, is the volatile nature of the state/federal relationship in the education and training sectors.

The Australian federal government, following the lead of other countries, has invested in a “carrot and stick” approach. They have directed this to both the compulsory schooling and the post-compulsory and training/employment sectors. Government policy has particularly targeted disadvantaged youths, tying funding to systems on outcomes-based performance, and applying sanctions to individuals through the withdrawal of unemployment benefits if they do not cooperate, which entails offering education, training and work opportunities to people at the same time as requiring them to actively search for work (Freeland, 1999).

2.4 The requirement for tightly-knit safety nets raises further concerns in the Australian context, created, in part at least, by traditional federal/state bureaucratic divides and traditions, with each State and the Commonwealth department approaching policy development in different ways. According to the OECD description, attention to the needs of ‘at risk’ youth requires coordination across several policy domains and levels of government.

A further aspect of this concern is the general lack of acknowledgement of young people’s lives. This is emphasised in a range of literature around topics such as youth health issues (Beresford, 1993; Hazard & Lee, 1999); neighbourhood youth programs (Jensen & Seltzer, 2000) and youth literacy programs (Castleton et al, 1999; Coare & Jones, 1996; Hamilton & Davies, 1996) where programs continue to ignore informal networks that young people belong to and use on a daily basis and this ignorance on the part of providers and policy makers leads to poor and inappropriate programs.

2.5 Good career information and guidance and effective institutions and policy processes also require good understandings of the issues for young people approaching the service. Taking up Raffo and Reeves’ (2000) contention that young people have varying access to material and symbolic resources reinforces the importance of ensuring information and guidance is readily and equally accessible to all young people. They have demonstrated, through their study of ‘disaffected’ youth in Manchester in the UK, that the young people often only have access to material and symbolic resources that are limited and culturally inappropriate, thereby denying them opportunities afforded to their more fortunate contemporaries.
3 In(ex)clusion in and from effective transition

The issue of social exclusion is beginning to emerge in research, particularly as it relates to education and training, and to growing interests in life-long learning (Brynner, 1998; Cohen & Ainley, 2000; Preece, 2000; Raffo & Reeves, 2000; Schuller & Bamford, 2000). According to Brynner (1998:2), the responsibility for disadvantaged circumstances should shift from a position of exclusively impeding individual development and restricting life chances in adulthood, to one that recognises society as erecting barriers in the way of progress of particular individuals and groups, and even to citizenship itself.

With regard to the role of education in social in(ex)clusion, Preece (2000:1) notes that while the new discourse of education recognises the problem of exclusion, it ‘makes some of the issues which constitute the problem invisible - for example the issue of structural unemployment, the issue of age, the fact that some people only indirectly contribute to the labour market as well as the nature of social values, institutional provision and what counts as worthwhile learning’.

Youth exclusion has become the subject of OECD efforts, and the focus of two recent OECD Ministers’ Conferences on youth issues (Washington, 1999; London, 2000), where policy coherence for the social inclusion of youths was discussed including a package of measures that needed to include education, employment, social, family and tax policies and acknowledge the added risk for those young people who suffer from multiple disadvantages.

The OECD Ministers’ Conferences on youth issues discussed particular kinds of interventions across broad policy areas and that these interventions must be achieved through policy coherence. They acknowledged many gaps in coherence currently and recommended input from families, communities, teachers, social and youth workers. Furthermore, they suggested their involvement at all stages, from policy conceptualisation and design to the monitoring of the implementation of programs. They insisted on the efficacy of integrated and individualised local delivery mechanisms in reaching disadvantaged young people, many of whom fall outside existing systems of social protection and may have little association with or connection to formal institutions. (OECD, 2000b)

4. Examples of what is happening on the ground

Examples of good practice in youth programs do not record any supporting literacy programs (Phillips, 1999; Madaly, 1999; Mapstone, 1999). However, Madaly also suggests that models where youth services focus on and link school to a range of issues impacting on young people are not documented and little is known of their efficacy. While these examples are from the coalface so to speak, they beg the question as to what constitutes “good practice”, a further reminder of the difficulties and limitations of this approach, as identified by Oman (1999) who would look for ‘effective’ practice which could be taken up more broadly. It must be accepted, however, that in Australia, there is wide variation depending on regional resources.

Table 1: Non students aged 15-19 years unemployed / not in labour force as a proportion of total population aged 15 to 19 years, in rank order, in specified OECD countries, 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Rank order</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>12</td>
</tr>
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<td>Spain</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Education at a glance: OECD Indicators 1998, Table D1.1
Illustrating this, Dusseldorp Skills Forum has produced “Australia’s Youth: Reality and Risks” in 1998 and the following year “Australia’s young adults: The deepening divide” (Spiering, 1999) commissioning research from leading agencies and community organisations. Comparative studies reveal that other countries are doing better in levels of post-school qualifications (Curtain, 1999, Lamb et al, 1999).

Discussions around early school leaving for young people necessarily involve adult literacy. A received wisdom suggests that limited literacy is part of a cluster of deficits that typically describe early school leavers who are “at risk”. This is a theme taken up by Australian research (King, 1998; Sweet, 1998; McClelland et al, 1998; Kellock, 2000; Kelly, 2000) identifying that the record here of young people without apparent means of support is alarming and intransigent when compared with other OECD countries. There is a suggestion that the research base is inadequate for policy to impact (Ball 1999; Pocock, 1999; Sweet, 1996). Competitive environments appear to exacerbate social exclusion failing to reach young people early enough and in neighbourhoods in most need (Kellock, 2000).

The Jobs Pathways Program (JPP) has recently been evaluated through a project of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (August, 2000) which concluded that there is much potential to bring neighbourhood participants together if they are not impeded by bureaucratic barriers and are given the skills and resources to collaborate (Nicholson, 2000). Others across business, industry and educational research (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 1999) suggest that involvement of stakeholders has to date been minimal and inadequately focussed; while Sweet (1996), accuses federalism, over-bureaucratisation and employers having had little say as compromising the recommendations and outcomes of the reports into vocational training of the 80s and 90s.

5 A future role for ACAL

ACAL intends to better position itself to have a capacity to meet the challenge of youth literacy.

Opportunities for collaboration with other independent organisations working across discrete policy areas relating to young people will form part of ACAL’s strategic planning for the future.

ACAL will continue to seek out strategic alliances with those organisations that are well placed to promote the role of literacy practitioners as a fundamental plank in any framework that seeks to provide networks of safety for young people at the community level. At present these organisations include the Employment, Career and Education Foundation (ECEF) and the Australian Council of Social Security (ACOSS).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vic</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qld</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>16.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Good Practice

ACAL will work through its state affiliates to make links with, and document the work of those organisations that operate at the local level. The purpose of this strategy is to identify what is working for young people and enhance ACAL’s advocacy role in achieving cohesive policy. ACAL could, for example, urge that for young people at risk, funds be diversified from school based delivery to settings which afford better outcomes for young people already distrustful of institutions.

ACAL needs to be informed of the current work in the youth sector and to identify and recommend ways that an Adult Language and Literacy Strategy might be implemented which builds on current effective practice.

The professional development of youth workers and literacy practitioners must form an element of the Strategy.

7. Involvement

ACAL will seek to engage with players identified by the OECD - public authorities, employers, trade unions, as well as local communities. It needs to assist those stakeholders to acknowledge and act on the importance of each assuming responsibility for education within their own organisations and particularly taking on the low levels of literacy across their workforce and their systems which impact on their effectiveness.

Relational predispositions and barriers to participation existing across juvenile justice, housing and health could be tackled through the alliances ACAL can make with the systems themselves. ACAL will consider further research to document the most effective ways of working with youth workers and the young people themselves at the local and policy levels.

ACAL will work to develop new strategies to disseminate information regarding the close relationship between low levels of literacy and social exclusion and act to alleviate the levels of poverty of young people in Australia. In particular, ACAL will consider how best to draw attention to the specific needs of young people from non-English speaking and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, through urging educational and related policy which provides continuous access to another chance at basic education for young people who have a record of poor attendance and mistrust of institutions. Young people themselves and their families will need to be part of the campaign advising on its direction and operation.

The lessons learned from some of the big policy programs aimed at young people at risk such as the Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy provide much that could be adopted by ACAL in working to effect a program of information which is nationally coordinated and locally implemented.

ACAL wishes to acknowledge the efforts of researcher, Carolyn Ovens and also the advice and guidance of the youth project steering committee of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy.

...the OECD suggests the bottom line is a ‘network of safety’, that is, policy cohesion for each young person until aged twenty years at least. Australia has a long way to go to meet that vision.
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