



*Australian Council for Adult Literacy*

The Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) was established in 1977 to lead Australia in the development and promotion of adult literacy and numeracy policy and practice. ACAL's vision is that every Australian achieves the literacy and numeracy skills to lead an active, engaged and satisfying life.

## ACAL Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the progress and future directions of life-long learning

June 2004

The Australian Council for Adult Literacy welcomes the opportunity to comment and provide advice regarding the importance of adult literacy and numeracy in the effectiveness of any policies and strategies aimed at addressing the life-long learning needs of an ageing population. From ACAL's perspective, adult literacy and numeracy include computer and information literacies, which are increasingly referred to as the new basics. ACAL calls for a **National Summit** to develop and carry forward an informed, multi-faceted, coordinated whole of government strategy for adult literacy and numeracy.

Any effective strategy that aims to address the life-long learning needs of an ageing population must apply to the whole adult population. We are all ageing. Failure to recognise and act on literacy and numeracy needs of all Australians places not just Australia's literacy and numeracy levels at further risk, but will have dramatic detrimental effects on Australia's and Australian's economic, employment, social and health well-being and competitiveness.

A comprehensive approach to lifelong learning and adult literacy and numeracy requires:

- ❖ flexible options so that programs can support the different needs of different clients on different pathways
- ❖ coordinated policies and activities across all sectors to ensure there is a coherent national policy on literacy and learning from childhood to adulthood
- ❖ the commitment of key stakeholders related fields such as health, welfare, criminal justice and employment; and
- ❖ an evidence base informed by global trends in adult literacy and lifelong learning policy development
- ❖ a comprehensive whole-of-government national policy agenda to ensure a literate and numerate Australia with funding that aims to achieve sustainable progress

## Key Messages

- ❖ As with other industrialised nations, Australia will be experiencing a serious skills shortage. Poor literacy, numeracy and IT skills present a barrier to many Australians who may need to retrain in order to remain in the labour market;
- ❖ In line with changing individual, community and industry literacy and numeracy demands (ANTA 2003), broader notions of literacy and numeracy than 'the lingering basics' (Lankshear in Lonsdale and McCurry 2004) need to inform future planning and provision. New basic skills such as using technology, group problem solving and critical thinking are now determinants of success in the labour market (Murnane and Levy 2004);
- ❖ Poor literacy (including information literacy) and numeracy skills will hinder individuals' capacities to manage an increasingly 'patchwork' life-work trajectory created by rapidly changing patterns of employment (Speirings 2004);
- ❖ The 'new basics' were not part of the curriculum of large numbers of the workforce that will still be working in twenty years time (Adult Learning Australia 2004);
- ❖ Older Australians require appropriate learning opportunities available in flexible modes and relevant to their immediate needs. Older Australians do not need to do general education courses
- ❖ Literacy and numeracy skills can and need to be developed in many ways. Pathways start from unpredictable points. Literacy and numeracy improvement is a whole of community issue. Experience from overseas indicates that a wide range of service delivery organizations can play a part in improving society's basic skills capital stocks by developing their capabilities to enable learning in many life situations (Bateson 2003; Literacy and Social Inclusion 2004)
- ❖ People's lives pass through many transition points, not always linked to work and training. Often their literacy and numeracy needs are greatest at such times. Ensuring support is available at such times in one way of increasing the literacy and numeracy learning opportunities for Australian adults
- ❖ Thus there's a need to map the possibilities for greater organisational collaboration in a broad integrated national learning and literacy strategy across sectors – i.e. health, education, youth, ageing, housing, welfare, justice, crime prevention, community

development and so on. A systematic approach is required, driven by a clear strategic framework, preferably supported by legislation and/or endorsed by COAG (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, forthcoming)

- ✧ The training of all 'front-line' workers needs to contain practical strategies as to how they can help develop the adult literacy, learning and numeracy skills of their clients. The current commitment to a community capacity building approach provides the opportunity for this but Australia is at risk of missing the learning possibilities that could be built into strategies that relate to families, ageing, health, crime prevention, consumer affairs and so on
- ✧ Literacy and numeracy practitioners must acquire the skills to deliver the 'new basics' to enable the effective implementation of a broad-based adult literacy and numeracy strategy
- ✧ Greater parity in pay and conditions needs to occur for adult literacy and numeracy workers in different sectors to assure greater quality and consistency across the field.

### ACAL's position

ACAL supports a 'built-in not bolted-on' approach to adult literacy and numeracy practices and policies, which will deliver:

- ❖ more effective collaboration across sectors
- ❖ greater connectedness with communities
- ❖ greater responsiveness to needs of individuals
- ❖ greater self- and collective management
- ❖ more opportunities for learning engagement
- ❖ multi-disciplined approaches appropriate to meet the increasing complexity of everyday life and Australia's changing skills requirements.

These are likely to be achieved though:

- ❖ expanding and reworking the notion of what counts as successful adult literacy and numeracy provision
- ❖ broadening understandings of literacy beyond elementary notions of reading and writing to literacy as a community resource that works with others in many and varied ways
- ❖ broadening the opportunities for literacy and numeracy learning to occur
- ❖ a broader funding commitment enabling sustained skills development

The possibilities for a more life-wide and life-long approach to adult literacy and numeracy development are being constrained by a number of factors. These include:

- ❖ poor understandings of the issue outside education and training sectors
- ❖ poor understandings of possibilities for learning in other contexts within the education and training sector
- ❖ short term funding for relevant initiatives allied with a competitive funding culture and a plethora of unconnected initiatives in adult education and training; i.e., wasted fragmented effort
- ❖ no overarching strategy or framework and thus no leadership for a collaborative national implementation effort (what Scotland calls its 'national development engine')
- ❖ a poor information base which inhibits the potential for reducing duplication of effort and learning from 'what works'
- ❖ departmental silo responses to social problems and issues

### Literacy and numeracy

Literacy and numeracy contribute to all forms of capital - human, economic and social. Literacy and numeracy capabilities are an essential resource for active citizenship, individual employment and economic sufficiency and community development and cohesion.

The final report on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society* (OECD, 2001, <http://www.oecd.org>) tells us that literacy means more than knowing how to read, write or calculate. It requires the ability to understand and use various forms of print and digital text in day-to-day activities at home, at work and in the community. Adult literacy and numeracy abilities include computer and information literacies, which are increasingly referred to as the new basics.

Advances in information technologies and other effects of cultural and economic globalisation are bringing about remarkable changes in how people go about their daily working and personal lives and all of these changes have implications, at times not recognized, for adult literacy and numeracy policy and provision.

Using automatic teller machines, the internet, e-mail, filling in taxation forms or understanding supermarket checkout procedures are just some of the day-to-day tasks that require people to apply their literacy and numeracy skills in diverse ways. Increasingly people will be turning to the internet to learn new skills and gain new knowledge. Using these forms of literacies and numeracies are the new basic skills of the 21st century.

Furthermore, research indicates that literacy and numeracy demands are increasing in workplaces (Belfiore et al 2004, ALNARC 2002). Apart from the additional demands of increasingly technologised workplaces, changing patterns of work organization and accountability requirements increasingly depend on effective literacy skills (Kilpatrick and Miller 2004).

Workers are required to be flexible about when, for whom, and how they work. They are increasingly being expected to present to employers with a portfolio of skills while often having limited access to education on the job.

This need for a range of competencies, simply to take part in a changing society, has serious implications for government policy, particularly with an ageing population.

*Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society* (OECD, 2000) also suggests that a broad range of policy areas such as those related to youth, seniors, employment, human resource development, health, social welfare and crime prevention need to be involved when considering how to address adult literacy needs.

## The Current Situation in Australia

*Literacy in the Information Age* (OECD, 2000; <http://www.oecd.org>) reveals that more than forty per cent of Australians do not have the necessary literacy skills to effectively participate in daily life. These findings emerge from Australia's participation in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). Australia has a particular challenge with almost twenty per cent of the adult population performing at the lowest level across types of literacy and numeracy (quantitative).

The results of the Australian survey (ABS 1997) indicate that those more likely to have literacy and numeracy difficulties are older, have left school early, are not in the labour force, and have a first language other than English and live outside capital cities (Kilpatrick and Millar 2004). Adult literacy is viewed as a major factor in the participation of Indigenous people in community development and capacity building processes (Kral and Schwab 2003).

Even a relatively small increase in national productivity through improved literacy can have a significant impact on public revenues. According to *Literacy Skills for a Knowledge Society* (OECD, 2000), a 2 percent increase in wages and earnings from improvements in national literacy could provide approximately 1.8 percent increase in revenue. This clearly demonstrates the need for adult literacy and numeracy to be given great emphasis at all political, policy and economic levels and throughout life.

## Australia's Adult Literacy Policy Environment

There has been no new comprehensive national policy framework for adult literacy since the 1991 Australian Language and Literacy Policy, when Australian national policies and

strategies were the envy of the Western world. Through the 'literacy decade' of 1987-96 (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, forthcoming), funding was provided to extend adult literacy programs, undertake research, curriculum development, professional development and innovative projects that together formed an important plank in the strategy of the National Training Reform Agenda.

Since 1996, there have been significant changes in the resourcing of adult literacy, generally driven by policy measures designed to meet other social policy objectives. Existing labour market programs, for example were replaced by the Literacy and Numeracy Training (LANT) Program (now Language Literacy and Numeracy Program), part of the government's mutual obligation policy for unemployed people. An evaluation study (Rahmani and Crosier 2002) indicates that the potential of this program to achieve real learning gains are affected by:

- ❖ few pathways to secure employment or further training and education
- ❖ part-time, short-term programs, often not easily accessed because of assessment and referral problems
- ❖ inadequate funding of case managers in the Jobs Network private and community-based agencies
- ❖ ineffective processes for encouraging participation in literacy programs; and

In addition, practitioners report that the sometimes heavy-handed approach to meeting mutual obligation requirements can inhibit choice and incentive.

The ANTA strategies for Vocational Education and Training currently provide a useful policy framework for adult literacy and numeracy, but the approaches to implementation of this strategy are a state and territory matter, which reduces the potential for an effective coordinated national approach.

Nonetheless, the strong efforts to achieve an approach to VET that integrates literacy and numeracy have been widely regarded as successful (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, forthcoming) and provide a sound base on which to extend an integrated and life-long approach to basic skills development to other portfolios and to people whose literacy and numeracy needs are not met through the VET system.

Here follows examples of two such groups whose literacy needs are not picked up in a traditional education and training environment. There are of course many other groups, such as rural youth.

### Addressing the needs of Older Learners and marginalised groups

The majority of adult education and training programs in Australia are either workplace oriented or focus foremost on specific/specialised skill development. These often are not relevant for older learners. If we are to engage people in learning 'post-employment' then we need to design and implement new learning opportunities that make use of the wealth of skills and knowledge that older community members have via relevant, authentic, learner-centred projects that are driven by community interests and needs.

For older learners there is often little relevance in a 10 week skills based course. After successful working lives, general education/literacy courses hold little appeal (despite 'new literacy' requirements); and 'hobby' courses often fail to engage individuals in meaningful discourses that will have impact. We need to adopt an approach that focuses on 'designing for learning' rather than the 'planning for teaching' typical in VET today.

If we consider 'literacy' an ever developing process, closely linked to changing social and cultural practices, it is vital that our adult education programs are structured to support older learners to make full use of new and emerging literacies such as those associated with Information Communication and Technology (ICT).

An additional consideration regarding the ageing population is the need to increase access to the internet in view of the growing number of people living alone. This could be achieved by an increase in funding to public libraries, community houses and schools for the targeted provision of access to the internet.

Furthermore, funding is required to train volunteers and paid workers to facilitate delivery of training to target groups. A Government subsidy on computers and internet access for the target groups is also required.

We know skills can fade with age. The impact of this and life circumstances on particular marginalised groups, for example the homeless, who often have other health issues that impact on skills as they age is amplified. The Government needs to investigate how health issues such as Acquired Brain Injury (which so often accompanies drug and alcohol abuse) plays out for people when they have limited access to lifelong learning opportunities.

Opportunities need to be affordable and diverse. The settings for programs need to be varied and approaches innovative to engage these citizens.

Literacy and numeracy support can work very well in integrated settings with other services, supporting the need for a whole-of-government approach to this group.

## Change, the Information Age and a Whole-of-Government Approach

'Information literacy is usually described as the ability to locate, manage and use information effectively for a range of purposes. As such it is an important 'generic skill which allows people to engage in effective decision-making, problem solving and research. It also enable them to take responsibility for their own continued learning in areas of personal or professional interest' (Bruce 1997).

Australians are becoming familiar with a 'digital divide' and the potential for division based on access to, and skills in, the use of, technology. This situation is exacerbated by geographic and social isolation and can lead to the creation of further poverty. Evidence from overseas indicates that those who leave school now without these skills are more at risk of long-term unemployment and social disadvantage than their equivalent twenty years ago (Bynner 2004, Murnane and Levy 2004).

It follows that people with limited literacy skills could be potentially locked out of the future economy without adult education programs that include literacy and numeracy targeted at their requirements. A large proportion of the Australian population is at risk of being permanently in this state. Those at risk include Indigenous Australians; people from non-English speaking backgrounds as well as native speakers; people living in rural and remote areas of the country; people with physical and intellectual disabilities; some aged Australians and many young people.

Literacy, as we have argued earlier, is not just an individual issue. Literacy and numeracy capability help build the social capital that in turn contributes to the cohesion and ongoing development of social communities. Adult literacy is a social issue.

Encouraging results are beginning to emerge from some OECD countries of whole of government approaches to these issues, although their policies and programs may well still need closer investigation to see whether they are offering much to low income people with limited literacy skills. Countries that have taken this path have begun to incorporate adult literacy and numeracy as core components of a system of lifelong learning as well as recognise that these skills will need to be upgraded and renewed/sustained continually rather than be taught as short-term programs. The Learning City (Core Skills) approach in Birmingham UK (Bateson 2003), the UK national Literacy and Social Inclusion project (Bird 2004) and some health literacy initiatives in Canada and the US, referred to in McKenna and Fitzpatrick (forthcoming), are worth exploring further.

Given Australia's Federal system the whole-of-government approach must be incorporated across all levels of government. This will require a demonstrable commitment from the Commonwealth, states, territory and local governments, and again should build on existing initiatives to bring governments and local communities closer together.

## Approaches to Outcomes and Reporting

As we have argued, the achievement of a learning culture and the improvement of adult literacy and numeracy, IT and information literacy skills requires a multi-faceted, inclusive approach. A national framework that recognises this and that enables an appropriate, yet systematic, approach to reporting will be necessary. Broader understandings of adult literacy and numeracy and the new basics mean that evidence of skills gains do not reside in simplistic assessment regimes and approaches based on linear assumptions about skills acquisition. Increased basic skills levels contribute to broader social outcomes as well as individual gains. Australia needs a reporting framework that reports on progress against a number of relevant social and personal indicators. Albert Tuijnman's 2001 report *Benchmarking Adult Literacy in North America: An International Comparative Study* offers one possible approach. Another is the standards framework developed for the Core Skills Development Partnership in Birmingham, UK (Core Skills Development Partnership 2003).

## References

- Adult Learning Australia (ALA) (2004) *The Case for Life-wide Learning: ALA's submission to the DEST consultation paper, 'you can too'*, <[www.ala.edu.au](http://www.ala.edu.au)>.
- ANTA (2003) *Shaping Our Future: National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training, 2004-2010*, <http://www.anta.gov.au>
- Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC) (2002) *Learning for Life: The role of adult literacy and numeracy in lifelong learning and socio-economic well-being, executive summary, National Research Program 2001-2002*, <<http://staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc>>.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997) *Aspects of Literacy: Assessed skill levels*, ABS, Canberra.
- Bateson, Geoffrey (2003) *Moving the Mountain: Halfway there?: A whole city approach to basic skills developments*, accessed May 2004 <[www.coreskills.co.uk/download/index.html](http://www.coreskills.co.uk/download/index.html)>.
- Belfiore, M.E, Defoe, T, Folinsbee, S, Hunter J and N. Jackson (2004) *Reading Work, Literacies in the New Workplace*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah NJ.
- Bird, Viv (2004) *Literacy and Social Inclusion: The policy challenge. A discussion paper*. Accessed May 2004 via the National Literacy Trust, [www.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk).
- Bruce, Christine (1997) *Seven faces of information literacy in Higher Education*, accessed 10 June 2004 at <http://sky.fit.qut.edu.au/bruce/inflit/faces/faces1/htm>.
- Bynner, J (2004) Literacy, numeracy and employability: evidence from the British cohort studies, in *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 13.1.
- Core Skills Development Partnership (2003) *Working towards a standards for Birmingham: the Learning City*, version 1/10/03 <[www.coreskills.co.uk/download/index.html](http://www.coreskills.co.uk/download/index.html)>.
- Kilpatrick, S and Millar, P (2004) People with poor language, literacy and numeracy skills, in Bowman, K (ed) *Equity in VET: Research readings*, <[www.ncver.edu.au/publications](http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications)>.
- Kral, I and Schwab, R G *The Realities of Indigenous Adult Literacy Acquisition and Practice: Implication for capacity development in remote communities*, Canberra, ACT: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Discussion Paper np.257, <http://online.anu.edu.au/caepr/discussion.php>.
- McKenna, R and Fitzpatrick, L (forthcoming) *Building Sustainable Adult Literacy Provision: A review of international trends in adult literacy policy and programs*, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Murnane, R and Levy F (2004) *The New Division of Labour: How computers are creating the next job market*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ.
- Lonsdale, M and McCurry, D (2004) *Literacy in the New Millennium*, Adelaide, NCVER, <[www.ncver.edu.au/research](http://www.ncver.edu.au/research)>.
- OECD and Statistics Canada (2000) *Literacy in the Information Age: A final report for the International Adult Literacy Survey*, <<http://www.oecd.org>>.
- OECD (2001) *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society*, <<http://www.oecd.org>>.
- Speirings, J (2004) Make your own way there: An agenda for young people in the modern labour market, *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 13,1, pp. 85-91.
- Rahmani, Z and Crosier, T (2002) *Evaluating the impact of the literacy and numeracy training program for jobseekers*, DETYA, Canberra.
- Tuijnman, A (2001) *Benchmarking Adult Literacy in North America: An international comparative study*, Statistics Canada, Ottawa.