



Don't take it as read

VCOSS Submission to the inquiry into Adult literacy and its importance

March 2021

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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A fully accessible version is available online at vcoss.org.au/policy/



VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays respect to past, present and emerging Elders.

This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.



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Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Commonwealth House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's inquiry into Adult literacy and its importance.

VCOSS is the peak body for social and community services in Victoria. VCOSS supports the community services industry, represents the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage and vulnerability in policy debates, and advocates to develop a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

Education is **the foundation** for social and economic inclusion. Literacy, numeracy, problem solving, **and** digital literacy skills enable Australians to get a job, look after their health, and thrive in the community. For people who've not had the chance to master these skills through childhood and adolescence, adult community education "changes people's lives... [and] breaks cycles of disadvantage".¹

The reasons that people enter adulthood with low literacy, numeracy, problem solving and digital literacy skills are many and complex. They include (but are not limited to):

- Experiences of discrimination that have impacted attendance, participation and attainment in education – from early childhood through to schooling.
- Failure by early childhood providers and/or schools to provide learning support (for students with disabilities, this may also include a failure to provide reasonable adjustments such as adapting the teaching style or modifying the curriculum and assessments).
- Experiences of family violence, homelessness, mental or physical ill-health, or other circumstances that disrupt learning and are exacerbated when there is a failure by the education system (or other intersecting systems) to identify the need for, or provide, timely wellbeing supports or engagement/re-engagement programs.
- Impacts of poverty, with compounding effects for those who have grown up in families or communities that have experienced intergenerational poverty.

¹ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *The Future of Adult Community Education in Victoria 2020-25: Ministerial Statement*, 2019, p.1.

State, Territory and Commonwealth governments all play a part in supporting adult literacy.

This inquiry provides an opportunity to consider and share examples of best-practice from around the nation, as well as profile concerns, challenges and gaps, and identify solutions.

We call on the Commonwealth Government to:

- Invest in prevention and early intervention measures, such as those recommended in this VCROSS submission, so that fewer Australians enter adulthood requiring adult literacy support.
- Use evidence from this inquiry to work with States and Territories to improve access to high-quality adult literacy programs, for Australians who need this support now and into the future.

For example, Victoria has a vibrant adult community education sector comprised of more than 270 adult community education providers. These providers are embedded in local communities and provide rich examples of the value that is created, and the impact that is generated, when governments invest in community-led, place-based responses to improving adult literacy. The Commonwealth can draw examples from how Victoria's Learn Local sector supports adults with low literacy into work through increased skills, **and** fosters social connection, builds trust and creates a sense of belonging (contributing to policy goals such as improved mental health and active citizenship).

Recommendations

VCOSS recommends that the Commonwealth Government:

- Commit to long-term funding under the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education and expand this to include the provision of three-year-old kindergarten.
- Boost Commonwealth funding to government schools.
- Permanently increase the rate of JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment and related income support to a level that ensures everyone has enough to afford the basics. The rate of Jobseeker should be **at least** \$65 a day.
- Ensure activity requirements linked to income support payments have sufficient flexibility to support engagement in full time or part time training, even when training is not directly or immediately linked to employment outcomes.
- Foster collaboration and partnerships - including sharing, adaptation and scaling of best practice approaches - between State, Territory and Commonwealth adult literacy programs.
- Support transitions into adult education by funding community hub models and supporting other types of community-led responses.
- Improve the accessibility of government forms for adults with low literacy (and reduce the administrative and cost burden on community service organisations that support them), by initiating a codesign process to identify and implement solutions.
- Replace attendance-based funding in the Adult Migrant Literacy Program with enrolment-based funding.
- Take a national leadership role to improve digital inclusion, including funding community service organisations who deliver adult literacy programs to provide devices and internet access to adult learners.

The importance of adult literacy

Literacy, numeracy, problem solving and digital literacy skills give adults the tools they need to thrive in their communities. Having these foundational skills leads to greater self-esteem, confidence to build social connections and improved mental and physical health outcomes, improved job prospects, and greater personal and financial independence.

When members of the community aren't supported to improve literacy and related skills, they are locked out of myriad opportunities. For example, VCROSS members report young adults with low literacy have difficulties securing apprenticeships because they lack the foundational skills required to support practical skill development.

While VCROSS recognises the central role of meaningful employment in supporting social and economic inclusion, we are pleased that the Committee is not limiting the scope of its inquiry to labour market outcomes. We welcome the Committee's interest in examining the intersection of adult literacy with broader wellbeing outcomes.

If we consider older Australians, for example, we note that:

- Older Australians have disproportionately higher rates of low literacy compared to the general population, including those in retirement age.²
- Low literacy can be a key factor in social isolation or loneliness. For example, VCROSS members report older people can feel reluctant to join a social group or engage in new activities due to low confidence and shame associated with low literacy.
- Social isolation or loneliness can contribute to poorer health outcomes, lower quality of life, and increase reliance on government services.³

Recognise digital literacy

The terms of reference do not explicitly recognise the importance of digital literacy but this should be taken into consideration in light of government's intentional shift to move to online

² Australia Bureau of Statistics, *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011-2012*, Cat No 4228.0, 2013.

³ Deloitte Access Economics, *The economic benefits of improving social inclusions*, a report commissioned by SBS, August 2019; D Perry, *Social isolation and loneliness – a neighbourhood house perspective*, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, 2020.

service delivery⁴ and the experience of COVID-19 highlighting the importance of digital inclusion in enabling social and economic participation.⁵ Digital literacy is an essential competency and should be treated similarly to literacy and numeracy.⁶ For adults with low literacy, low digital literacy can compound exclusion across all facets of society. The effects are even more pronounced for people who experience intersectional barriers such as English not being their first language (including Auslan speakers).

Parent engagement

Parents' engagement in children's education helps to set children up for success. It promotes the value of education and supports children's learning. Academic literature consistently shows that when parents engage, there is a positive impact on children's attendance, behaviour, school retention, academic achievement and wellbeing.⁷

This presents challenges where parents have had poor education experiences and/or have low levels of literacy. In these circumstances, parents may not see a role for themselves in supporting their children's schooling, or they may want to support their child but are constrained because their own literacy needs have not been addressed. Either way, this can impact parents' capacity to fulfil the role of their child's 'first teacher' and model important behaviours such as reading to children from infancy. In circumstances where parents have not had an opportunity to develop an understanding of the value of education, our members spoke about this as a strong predictor of children developing poor literacy, numeracy, and problem solving skills.

VCOSS members noted children of parents with low literacy often become carers and/or translators for their parents, or present to the same services their parents access as a result of low literacy.

⁴ Digital Transformation Agency, *Vision 2025. We will deliver world-leading digital services for the benefit of all Australians*, Australian Government, 2018.

⁵ J Thomas et al., *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*, RMIT and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, October 2020.

⁶ P Shergold et al., *Looking to the future: Report of the Review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training*, Education Council, July 2020.

⁷ M Castro et al., 'Parental involvement on student academic achievement: A meta-analysis', *Education Research Review*, v.14, February 2015, pp.33-46; R Chazan-Cohen et al., 'Low-income children's school readiness: Parent contributions over the first five years', *Early Education and Development*, v.20, issue 6, December 2009, pp. 958-977; R B McNeal, 'Differential effects of parental involvement on cognitive and behavioural outcomes by socioeconomic status', *Journal of Socio-Economics*, v.20, issue 2, 2001, pp.171-179.

Prevention is the best form of investment

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Commit to long-term funding under the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education and expand this to include the provision of three-year-old kindergarten.
- Boost Commonwealth funding to government schools.
- Permanently increase the rate of JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment and related income support to a level that ensure everyone has enough to afford the basics. The rate of Jobseeker should be **at least** \$65 a day.
- Ensure activity requirements linked to income support payments have sufficient flexibility to support engagement in full time or part time training, even when training is not directly or immediately linked to employment outcomes.

Provide universal access to early childhood education

Research demonstrates that access to two years of high-quality early learning in the years before school supports children's cognitive, social and emotional development. This decreases the likelihood of entering school behind and sets children up for success. Children experiencing disadvantage, including those who may not have rich learning environments at home, benefit the most from two years of early learning.⁸

Starting school without the skills to excel can have life-long impacts and contribute to higher risk of disengagement from school, long-term unemployment and poor mental health outcomes.⁹ When children start school behind they are less likely to catch-up to their peers¹⁰

⁸ S Fox, M Geddes, *Preschool – Two years are Better Than One: Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year olds – evidence, policy and implementation*, Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 03/2016, Mitchell Institute, October 2016.

⁹ S Lamb, J Jackson, A Walstab & S Huo, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, for the Mitchell Institute.

¹⁰ S Lamb, J Jackson, A Walstab & S Huo, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, for the Mitchell Institute.

and the gap widens as children progress through their schooling.¹¹ For children who are not proficient in English, they are more than 90 per cent likely to be start school behind.¹²

State governments like Victoria are leading the way through significant investment in universal access to three-year-old and four-year-old kinder, and capacity building programs like School Readiness Funding to improve outcomes for children in the years before school.

State-led work can be better supported by the Commonwealth through a strengthened, long-term commitment to the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education. This agreement should be expanded to provide universal access to three-year-old kindergarten to support the best outcomes for children.

Boost funding for students in government schools

Schools provide protective factors for children and young people and are the most important place to build proficiency in foundational skills before young people transition into adulthood.

VCOSS members highlighted the impacts of COVID-19 in 2020, noting Victoria had prolonged periods of remote and flexible learning to limit the community transmission of COVID-19. They noted:

- Increased household stress as a result of pressure to support children with home-based schooling – this stress was particularly pronounced for parents with disability, single parents, and parents who have low English proficiency (including those whose first language is Auslan).
- The impact of digital exclusion, including inability to afford sufficient data, access devices for everyone in the household who needed one, and difficulties navigating digital technology, including keeping children safe online.
- Children and young people feeling isolated as a result of the digital divide, learning being inaccessible (including for students with disability), or having a home environment that was not conducive to learning.

These issues were heightened for parents with low literacy.

¹¹ P Goss & J Sonnemann, *Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress*, Grattan Institute, March 2016.

¹² Australian Early Development Census, *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2018*, Australian Government, 2019.

Members raised concerns that many students fell behind or regressed in their schooling throughout 2020. The Victorian Government has invested in several programs to provide additional support to students during 2021 including funding for a tutoring program,¹³ increased mental health and wellbeing supports, and additional resources for programs that support students who have disengaged from learning.¹⁴

While these programs are welcomed, the Commonwealth has a key role to play in boosting the funding it contributes to government schools, not only to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 but as a key strategy to promote wellbeing and prevent disadvantage.

Over recent years, the concentration of disadvantaged students in public school systems has increased¹⁵ while the wealth gap between non-government and government schools is also increasing.¹⁶ Commonwealth funding for non-government schools continues to grow faster than funding for government schools.¹⁷

VCOSS is aware that the Commonwealth signed new funding agreements with the states and territories in 2018-2019.¹⁸ Notwithstanding that, the Commonwealth should increase its funding commitment to public schools to reflect higher levels of disadvantage in public schools and the long-term economic benefit to the nation by boosting investment in education.

The Commonwealth Government can also lift its game for students with disability, starting with the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*. The Standards set out the rights of students with disability, the obligations of education providers, and provide guidance for the application of inclusive practices. Their effectiveness is limited by a lack of funding and resources to implement reasonable adjustments. Other issues include inconsistent application.¹⁹ While the Government's 2020 review of the Standards outlined a number of recommendations for change, including awareness of the Standards and capacity building, this is not supported by funding.²⁰ The Commonwealth should fund the implementation of the recommendations.

¹³ Premier of Victoria, 'Thousands Of Tutors To Bring Students Up To Speed', Media release, 13 October 2020.

¹⁴ Premier of Victoria, 'Supporting Students Through The Pandemic', Media release, 7 August 2020.

¹⁵ T Greenwell, 'Everyone loses when schools are segregated – but some more than others', *Canberra Times*, 14 December 2019.

¹⁶ I Ting, A Palmer, N Scott, 'Rich school, poor school: Australia's great education divide', *ABC news*, 13 August 2019.

¹⁷ P Karp, 'Australian government funding for private schools still growing faster than for public', *The Guardian*, 2 February 2021.

¹⁸ Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Quality Schools Package. The National School Reform Agreements, <<https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/national-school-reform-agreement>>, accessed 24 March 2021.

¹⁹ Victorian Council of Social Service, *The right standards for change*, VCOSS submission to the 2020 Review of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, September 2020.

²⁰ Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *Final Report of the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005*, 16 February 2021.

Lift Australians above the poverty line

Current social security payments don't cover the costs of meeting the basics, forcing many Australians to live below the poverty line. This can have long-term impacts on people's health, wellbeing, employment prospects, and can contribute to intergenerational inequality.

Children who experience socio-economic disadvantage are more likely to start school behind their peers,²¹ and socio-economic disadvantage is one of the greatest indicators of reduced educational opportunity.²² This means children living in poverty are more likely to be at risk of disengagement and experience poor literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills as a result.

The inadequate rate of income support makes it harder to engage in employment or training. It leaves people without enough money to pay for transport costs or childcare, to afford digital devices and data to look for work or support training, and creates difficulties in looking after your health. For adults with low literacy, these challenges are exacerbated by difficulties accessing and navigating services, such as enrolling children in childcare.

The Commonwealth Government must lift the rate of income support payments in order to lift Australians out of poverty. As a starting point, the rate of the Jobseeker payment should be raised to at least \$65 a day.

The social security system also needs to have sufficient flexibility to enable adults to engage in full or part-time training to boost their skills, *without* restrictive requirements linking these opportunities to direct or immediate employment outcomes. This is particularly important for Australians with low literacy. We have outlined the important benefits of improving literacy and numeracy beyond employment outcomes earlier in this submission, and these should be explicitly recognised in Australia's social security system through greater flexibility in activity requirements.

²¹ S Fox, M Geddes, *Preschool – Two years are Better Than One: Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year olds – evidence, policy and implementation*, Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 03/2016, Mitchell Institute, October 2016.

²² S Lamb, J Jackson, A Walstab & S Huo, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, for the Mitchell Institute.

Support access to adult education

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Foster collaboration and partnerships – including sharing, adaptation and scaling of best practice approaches – between State, Territory and Commonwealth adult literacy programs.
- Support transitions into adult education by funding community hub models and supporting other types of community-led responses.
- Improve the accessibility of government forms for adults with low literacy (and reduce the administrative and cost burden on community service organisations that support them), by initiating a codesign process to identify and implement solutions.
- Replace attendance-based funding in the Adult Migrant Literacy Program with enrolment-based funding.
- The Commonwealth should take a national leadership role to improve digital inclusion, including funding community service organisations who deliver adult literacy programs to provide devices and internet access to adult learners.

Champion flexibility and place-based programs

The adult community and further education sector in Victoria has a long and rich history and is primarily delivered through Learn Local providers.²³ Learn Locals are not-for-profit community organisations that provide welcoming, safe spaces for adults to learn and build foundational skills.²⁴

Learn Local providers are embedded in local communities and offer place-based and, at times, cohort-specific programs that meet the unique needs of their communities. Learn Locals often support learners with high-needs, which takes additional time and resources. Some organisations employ additional staff – for example, a community worker – to assist

²³ Adult Learning Australia, *Adult Community Education. Australian Environmental Scan 2020, 2021.*

²⁴ Learn Local, About Learn Local, <<https://learnlocal.org.au/about/>>, accessed 24 March 2021.

learners who present with the most complex barriers. Even though these types of extra supports are integral to boosting learning retention, they are not usually built into adult literacy funding models.

The Commonwealth Government can help to support state and territory adult education programs such as the Learn Local sector in Victoria. This could include examining additional funding streams that recognise the costs of supporting high-needs learners, including for providers who deliver state-based Foundation Skills and federal programs such as the Adult Migration English Program (AMEP) or the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) Program. The Commonwealth could consider expanding the remit of their programs or provide additional resources to state-based programs that support adult literacy without direct links to job outcomes.²⁵

Support transitions into adult education

Not all adults with low literacy know how or where to access training programs to boost their skills and confidence. Similarly, community sector organisations who can provide soft entry points into training opportunities may not have the knowledge or resources to support adults to transition into the right programs.

Transition pathways need to be strengthened, particularly for members of the community who experience the highest barriers to participation. This includes people with mental ill health, people with disability who have experienced marginalisation in education, and people who are physically isolated in rural or remote areas.

Support community-led responses

Community hubs are one of the platforms that can be leveraged to improve outcomes for whole families and communities – in the context of this inquiry, VCROSS believes they can be utilised to support transitions. Community hubs take a number of different forms. They can be physical spaces that co-locate services, such as the Our Place model²⁶ or they can take the form of physically dispersed networks and open doors. Importantly, community hubs create trust and can be soft entry points into a range of services, including early learning for children, and adult education classes for parents or carers. For example, Doveton College provides a wide range of wrap around education and allied-health supports from maternal

²⁵ For example, eligibility for the SEE program is made through referral from an employment services provider which excludes adults who would benefit but who may not be able to engage in the labour market in the short, medium or long-term. See: <https://www.dese.gov.au/skills-education-and-employment/job-seekers>

²⁶ Our Place, <<https://ourplace.org.au/>>, accessed 24 March 2021.

and child health services to playgroups, to careers advice and adult English classes.²⁷ Government can capitalise on the trust community service organisations hold within their communities by resourcing them to build connections or to create hub models.

The inability to read or complete forms is one of the key barriers for adults with low literacy identified by VCOSS members. Adults with limited family and social support networks, including through faith communities, rely heavily on community service organisations to support access to government services. However, many community service organisations face significant funding constraints and are not funded to support people to fill in complex government forms.

Insufficient funding to support access to services means community organisations don't have the resources to build the capacity of adults with low literacy, leaving them with few levers to intervene in the cycle of low literacy. When community service organisations are unable to support adults to fill in forms, people go without access to health and income support.

One VCOSS member, a disability advocacy organisation working in rural and remote Victoria spoke about the number of referrals they receive to support clients to fill in complex forms for Centrelink or the National Disability Insurance Scheme. As an organisation operating in a part of Victoria with limited service provision, options to refer clients to gain this support are severely restricted or non-existent. Organisations in this position are often required to divert limited resources to fill in forms to access vital government services rather than providing tailored, specialised support.

Government can engage people with lived experience and the organisations who support them to codesign a solution that addresses their access needs **and** reduces the administrative and cost burden on front line organisations.

A range of other community-led programs that build trust and engagement should be considered as part of the diverse responses needed to improve adult literacy.

For example, the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) focuses on the importance of parents and carer as first teachers and provides opportunities for

²⁷ Doveton College, Our Family and Community Programs, <<http://www.dovetoncollege.vic.edu.au/family-community/about-family-community/>>, accessed 24 March 2021.

parents to receive training and employment.²⁸ HIPPY could be expanded as part of a programmatic response to boosting literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Communities who have experienced systemic marginalisation need to be engaged about ways to improve adult literacy for their community. For example, many people in the Deaf community reportedly have limited trust in mainstream education institutions because they have not had access to highly-skilled Auslan speakers in the classroom to support their learning, or because they have experienced a culture of low expectations. This can impact the ability of deaf or hard of hearing people to improve their literacy skills in their first language which makes it harder to gain proficiency in English. The Deaf and hard of hearing community is one example of a community that wants and needs to lead adult literacy, numeracy, problem solving and digital literacy programs to build trust and ensure programs meet community needs.

Strengthen the Adult Migrant English Program

Recent changes to the Commonwealth-funded program AMEP remove the limit of 510 hours of free English tuition, extend eligibility from functional English to vocational English²⁹ and remove time limits to access the program.³⁰ These changes are welcome and should be sustained. VCROSS members spoke highly of the AMEP model, including key components such as zero cost to the participant and access and support to find free child care.

However there are further opportunities to improve outcomes for learners, maintain provider viability and retain the highly skilled workforce.

These opportunities include:

- Changes to the funding model – Payment for AMEP is made on attendance and doesn't take into account the ongoing fixed costs of running the program or factor in that students will at times be unwell, be unable to attend due to caring responsibilities, or have religious or cultural events that can make attendance difficult, such as Ramadan. Community sector organisations who sub-contract AMEP

²⁸ Hippy Australia, Training and Employment, Brotherhood of St Laurence, <<https://hippyaustralia.bsl.org.au/benefits/training-and-employment/>>, accessed 24 March 2021; J Connolly & R Chaitowitz, *Transforming employment aspirations: results of the HIPPY Tutors Study*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2020.

²⁹ English skill levels recognised by the Department of Home Affairs are, from lowest to highest level of skill: Functional English, Vocational English, Competent English, Proficient English, Superior English. See <https://www.australianskilledmigration.com.au/english-requirements/>

³⁰ Department of Home Affairs, Adult Migrant English Program (AMPE). About the program, <<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/amep/about-the-program/background>>, accessed 24 March 2021.

spoke about the challenges this funding model presents, including undermining viability and contributing to a casualised and insecure workforce.

- Extending free child care – Adult learners would benefit from an extension of free child care beyond the current cap. This would enable adult learners, predominantly women, to engage in other opportunities to improve their English, build social connections and feel empowered in their new environment.

Digital inclusion

The first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 shone a light on a number of pre-existing challenges, including digital inclusion/exclusion. While state governments such as Victoria provided school students with devices and data to facilitate engagement in online learning, adult learners missed out.

Digital inclusion has three key components: ensuring people have **access** to devices and digital infrastructure; people can **afford** to access devices and enough data to meet their needs; and people have **digital literacy**.

Teaching digital literacy to adult learners with low literacy and whose first language is not English takes significant time. Recent changes to the hour limit of the AMEP will support teachers to build digital literacy skills alongside English literacy skills, however, access to devices and the internet remains a challenge.

The Commonwealth should take on a leadership role to address digital inclusion. This could include providing additional resources to organisations who deliver adult literacy programs to provide adult learners with individual devices and access to the internet to support learning. This would support digital inclusion and may also increase participation for learners when they are unable to attend face to face due to health concerns or other responsibilities.

Other issues

VCOSS members raised a number of other issues the Committee should investigate, including:

- The need for workforce issues to be addressed. This should include the relationship between funding models for foundation skills and the highly insecure nature of the workforce.
- The role of JobActive, local councils and employers in supporting the literacy needs of adults.
- Considering low English literacy as an eligibility criterion in accessing a range of government programs.

