



Adult literacy a decade after the White Paper

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2001 marks the 10th anniversary of the release of Australia's Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) by the Labor government in 1991. This was a landmark document for a number of reasons, but significantly for adult literacy, it placed adult English language and literacy concerns on the national education agenda while linking the language and literacy competence of adult Australians to national economic imperatives shaped by technological advances and globalisation. It is an appropriate time to take stock, asking questions such as 'what has been achieved?' and 'what remains to be done?'

Undoubtedly, there have been significant achievements over the last ten years, but there is still much to be done. At the time of the ALLP's release Australia was thought to be at the vanguard of adult literacy policy and provision internationally. Now, ten years down the track, we are falling behind efforts in other countries. Some even say that adult literacy in Australia is as badly served as it was before ALLP, with a dying commitment from federal and state governments resulting in poorly coordinated action, fragmented, under-resourced provision and lack of appropriate accountability measures.

We have two federally funded and managed programs: the Workplace English Language and Literacy Program (WELL) and the Literacy and Numeracy Training (LANT) Program, part of the government's mutual obligation arrangements. States receive annual funding through their training plans. We know little about the relationship between these programs and what happens within the states where money is allocated to public providers through recurrent funding agreements, or through direct grants and competitive tendering arrangements. We know that good provision is happening across a variety of sites for many client groups through appropriately resourced programs, but we also know that good provision is happening in some settings not because of funding and systemic support, but rather in its notable absence.

Among the many unknowns is any global sense of what is and isn't working, and for whom. We lack publicly available

information on the success or otherwise of programs, funding and accountability mechanisms already in place. There has been little public debate over what might constitute 'success' in adult literacy programs, beyond a simplistic, narrow focus on employment-related outcomes. Related to this, there has not been enough critical debate around the relationship between pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. There is still limited recognition in current education and social policies of the relationship between literacy and health, social welfare, justice and labour market participation. There has been no significant consideration of the consequences of the 'digital divide' and the push for online delivery for adults with literacy needs nor has it been made clear where adult literacy learners' needs are accommodated within official discourses of lifelong learning.

OECD (2000) findings indicate that member countries have somewhere between one-quarter to one-half of their adult populations failing to reach the threshold level of literacy competence considered as minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life. These issues become too critical to ignore, particularly by countries that profess, or aspire, to be a 'knowledge' nation or society.

So what should be done at this particular point in time?

Federal and state governments must recommit to addressing the human rights of adults with limited literacy skills and to providing education that meets their needs. In the first instance this requires a mapping and rigorous evaluation of existing provision. Where and how is appropriate provision taking place? More importantly, what significant gaps in provision exist within the community? On the basis of this evaluation and following wide consultation, the federal government needs to develop a comprehensive, suitably resourced strategy that takes a whole-of-government approach to addressing social exclusion more broadly, through recognising the interrelatedness of literacy to individual and group social and economic well-being. Included in this strategy must be transparent evaluation and accountability mechanisms for all stakeholders to ensure that progress towards achieving goals can be monitored and reviewed.