

Reading Writing Hotline

Submission to NIAA

Sept 2021

ISEP - Indigenous Skills, Engagement and Employment Program

Background on the Hotline

- National referral service for adults seeking help with literacy/numeracy.
- More than 4000 calls annually from individuals, employers, Indigenous communities, government departments, industry groups, community organisations
- Statistics and case studies providing a rich source of information from the “front line” of adult literacy program delivery
- Unique overview of actual availability of and demand for adult literacy services. Maintains database of all adult literacy/numeracy providers around the country
- Funded by the Commonwealth for 25 years.

Key points

- **Adult literacy, language, numeracy and digital (LLND) skills are key** to Closing the Gap and employment targets. ISEP must address quality adult language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) skills support for First Nations people.
- Adult LLND **empowers community self-determination** and self-management. It supports adults to achieve their employment aspirations, and gain confidence and skills to participate in governance, social, economic and community life, and in their children’s education.
- Programs **developed and controlled by communities** are the only programs likely to be effective. A **variety** of models are needed to address unique contexts and priorities.
- There is a need for **standalone, non-accredited classes for ‘everyday’ literacy**, where beginners can gain confidence. These can build a pathway to more formal vocational literacy programs and improve completion rates. Only face to face learning is effective at this level.
- **Workplace LLND programs** are needed to keep Indigenous people in jobs. Employers tell us they will employ more Indigenous people if there is access to suitable English LLND provision. Indigenous workers tell us they can stay in jobs if they are supported by suitable English LLND programs.
- Many **jobs in remote communities** can be filled by community members if LLND is addressed, instead of bringing in outsiders. Spending on LLND and vocational training to build capacity will have long term benefits. Wrap around support relevant to community needs will encourage LLND participation in communities.

- Low literacy limits the ability to **recruit for local Indigenous jobs**. This is evidenced by the chronic workforce shortage of workers in health sector, disability, and aged care as well as mining.
- There are many problems with the current **major LLND programs, both national and state**. They do not meet the needs of Indigenous learners, especially speakers of First Nations languages.
- The role of **CDP programs and employment services** providers in Indigenous LLND provision needs urgent review.

Comments on discussion questions

1 Specific cohorts, regions, industries, barriers

Over 30% of Indigenous callers to the Hotline are currently employed and seeking help to improve their literacy in order to stay employed. Close to 50% are 25-44 years old and so at working age. A further 30% of Indigenous callers are seeking employment and want to improve their English literacy to assist them. Only 43% of Indigenous callers can be referred into classes due to a lack of suitable provision. Over 65% of Hotline's Indigenous callers left school before Year 10.

- **Barrier: Lack of literacy programs** -The Hotline is regularly unable to find any LLND provision for Indigenous callers in regional areas. This is particularly true in NT, QLD and all remote communities where callers have extremely limited access to suitable adult literacy classes. Adult learning centres and qualified adult literacy teachers were located in some NT communities in the past. This is no longer the case.

Case Study - Community

Dean, an Aboriginal corporation staff member, works with speakers of 8 different First Nations' languages in a community of 800 people. Approximately 200 community members want to learn to read and write in English. There is no-one to help them and they have no access to phones or the internet.

- **Barrier: Lack of educational pathways** - Vocational courses at Certificate 3 require high level literacy and study skills. Pathways via non-accredited 'everyday' literacy and Certificate 1 courses are needed to enable people to get to vocational training. Without these pathways learners will lack underpinning LLND skills and confidence; course completion will be low; employment retention at risk. Indigenous Ranger groups are an example: the Hotline regularly receives calls about LLND issues in training in Conservation and Land Management.

Case study – employees

Land Council staff discussing ranger employee retention stated, 'I have a suspicion that the reason we lose rangers at the two year mark is because they don't have the LLND to continue in the VET courses - they don't want to do the Certificate 3 course because they can't. Most of the rangers have low numeracy and also literacy.

- **Cohort: Disengaged Indigenous young people** - Learners tell us they will be more inclined to improve their literacy and job prospects if classes are tailored to their needs.
- **Cohort: Individual workers** –Indigenous adults already in employment may need to access suitable LLND classes to improve their skills, gain promotion, cope with workplace change, or handle compulsory training. Current workplace literacy programs do not meet the needs of individuals.

Case Study - Employee

Josie, an Aboriginal woman working in aged care is worried about losing her job. She needs to do training at work but can't do the reading and writing. Josie wants to keep job but doesn't want to tell her boss about her low literacy. "She thinks I am telling lies. We get on and joke around – she wouldn't believe how I can't read and write".

- **Cohort: Speakers of Indigenous languages** in remote locations who need English literacy are especially disadvantaged. Many speak English as a second or third language, but are not eligible for AMEP. AMEP focuses on migrants and settlement and is culturally unsuitable. Jobseeker literacy programs such as the SEE program do not typically address the linguistic needs of speakers of Aboriginal English.
- **Cohort: Incarcerated Indigenous adults.** There are around 12,000 Indigenous people in prisons across Australia. Employment has been identified in WA as the single most important factor involved with reducing reoffending. Access to literacy education could develop skills for quality and long-lasting employment upon release, but in most states literacy education in prison is inadequate and rarely provided by qualified adult LLN teachers, and non-existent in remand centres.

2 Flexibility and partnerships

- **Employment services providers and CDP programs** lack skills and workforce to assess and support literacy needs. Providers appear unwilling or unable to establish support for adult LLN programs. The Hotline assists CDP providers and Job Actives with advice and contact details of qualified adult LLN professionals who are experienced in co-designing and delivering LLN education programs in First Nations communities. Follow up calls indicate that communities are at times left without access to LLN education and in many cases, meaningful training.

Case Study - CDP project

Provider has a case load of 500 First Nations unemployed people. 90% of them need English as an Additional Language (EALD) classes but there are no available places. "I can't get people into the classrooms –they need community-based training. They are not doing any literacy and there is no available work in the area. Can you please let me know if there are resources available?"

3 Monitoring and evaluation

- **A long-term approach** is needed. Research shows that outcomes from participation in adult literacy classes are often not evident until years later, or in the next generation.
- **A range of measures are needed.** Course completion is not a strong indicator of literacy outcomes. Adults with life responsibilities may be unable to complete a course but will still incorporate new literacy skills into work and personal life. Assessment of LLND only through narrow frameworks such as the ACSF may be culturally inappropriate.

4 Shared decision-making

- **Programs developed and controlled by the community** are the only employment and LLND programs likely to be effective. A variety of models must be supported, to address unique contexts and priorities. Gender, age, stigma, health status, family and cultural obligations must be considered. Flexibility is needed with referral processes to avoid anxiety, shame and punitive consequences around progress and levels.

5 Employers

- **Large employers** regularly contact the Hotline about LLND support for their Indigenous employment programs. They are keen to employ more Indigenous people but need support for pre-employment and on-the-job LLND training. There is a critical shortage of qualified workplace literacy teachers, especially in remote locations such as mines.

Case Study - Large employer

Queensland mining company with 40 Indigenous trainees rang to enquire about options. "What funding can we access to support trainees and apprentices?" Five currently need help with English literacy before they can get an apprenticeship. "We want to be able to support them."

- **People seeking work in their own homelands and communities** call the Hotline regularly. But work in many communities is carried out by workers coming from elsewhere, due to lack of literacy and access to training.

Case Study - remote NT

"We've got people outside, coming in doing jobs that our people can do. We need literacy so our people can be aged care workers and run the facilities, and council workers, including secretaries. We could be the welders, mechanics and hospitality workers. We could do the house repairs and run the shop. We want literacy for governance so we can be councillors and board members and read government documents."

6 Local focus

- **More community based LLND teachers and programs** are needed to support local employment opportunities. Local capacity needs to be built through scholarships, mentoring, incentives, and other supports.

Case Study – local need

Mandy is establishing a training program for disadvantaged young people in Conservation and Land Management and Business at Certificate 1 level, through *Skilling Queenslanders for Work*. Approximately one third of the trainees will be Indigenous. Mandy needs to demonstrate that she has contacts in the community who can assist trainees who need support with reading and writing.

There are SEE classes available in the day but no adult LLN teachers available to either conduct pre-training assessments or provide literacy support in the course.

The participants cannot enrol in the SEE classes because they cannot meet mandatory attendance requirements while participating in the Skilling Queenslanders for Work program.

Recommendations

- **Ensure local stand-alone LLND education options are available for beginners**
There is a critical need for appropriate beginner adult literacy courses accessible to Indigenous people across Australia, and particularly in First Nations communities. These are the first step towards vocational literacy and employment. ITAS tutoring and learner support should not be used in place of stand-alone LLND courses.
- **Ensure a range of local LLND education options to pathway to and support vocational training**
Flexible ongoing literacy/numeracy support underpins completion of qualifications and employee retention.
- **Streamline Job Agency referrals**
First Nations people should be supported to access to fully funded LLN education without being required to first seek a Centrelink or Job Agency referral.
- **Build local adult LLN teaching capacity**
There is a critical need for local qualified Indigenous LLN teachers. Capacity building will have long term benefits to individuals and communities.
- **Expand Workplace Literacy Provision**
The *Foundation Skills for Your Future* scheme has some benefits for Indigenous adults and employers, and covers both accredited and non-accredited training. It is unavailable to single or small numbers of employees.