



**NACCHO**

National Aboriginal Community  
Controlled Health Organisation  
*Aboriginal health in Aboriginal hands*

[www.naccho.org.au](http://www.naccho.org.au)

# Foundation Skills Study

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Submission to  
Jobs and Skills Australia

April 2023

## ABOUT NACCHO

NACCHO is the national peak body representing 145 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs). We also assist a number of other community-controlled organisations.

The first Aboriginal medical service was established at Redfern in 1971 as a response to the urgent need to provide decent, accessible health services for the largely medically uninsured Aboriginal population of Redfern. The mainstream was not working. So it was, that over fifty years ago, Aboriginal people took control and designed and delivered their own model of health care. Similar Aboriginal medical services quickly sprung up around the country. In 1974, a national representative body was formed to represent these Aboriginal medical services at the national level. This has grown into what NACCHO is today. All this predated Medibank in 1975.

NACCHO liaises with its membership, and the eight state/territory affiliates, governments, and other organisations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing policy and planning issues and advocacy relating to health service delivery, health information, research, public health, health financing and health programs.

ACCHOs range from large multi-functional services employing several medical practitioners and providing a wide range of services, to small services which rely on Aboriginal health practitioners and/or nurses to provide the bulk of primary health care services. Our 145 members provide services from about 550 clinics. Our sector provides over 3.1 million episodes of care per year for over 410,000 people across Australia, which includes about one million episodes of care in very remote regions.

ACCHOs contribute to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing through the provision of comprehensive primary health care, and by integrating and coordinating care and services. Many provide home and site visits; medical, public health and health promotion services; allied health; nursing services; assistance with making appointments and transport; help accessing childcare or dealing with the justice system; drug and alcohol services; and help with income support. Our services build ongoing relationships to give continuity of care so that chronic conditions are managed, and preventative health care is targeted. Through local engagement and a proven service delivery model, our clients 'stick'. Clearly, the cultural safety in which we provide our services is a key factor of our success.

ACCHOs are also closing the employment gap. Collectively, we employ about 7,000 staff – 54 per cent of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders – which makes us the third largest employer of Aboriginal or Torres Strait people in the country.

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## Recommendations

### **NACCHO recommends:**

1. the Foundation Skills Study explicitly align with the four Priority Reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
2. full implementation of Recommendations 2 and 3 of the *Don't take it as read* report as part of this initiative.
3. the feasibility study inform the design of the national survey, rather than the reverse.

## Introduction

NACCHO welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the JSA Foundation Skills Study.

NACCHO supports the submission to this consultation by the Literacy for Life Foundation.

## National Agreement on Closing the Gap

At the meeting of National Cabinet in early February 2023, First Ministers agreed to renew their commitment to Closing the Gap by re-signing the National Agreement, first signed in July 2020. The reforms and targets outlined in the National Agreement seek to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians.

This Government's first Closing the Gap Implementation Plan commits to achieving Closing the Gap targets *through implementation of the Priority Reforms*. This represents a shift away from focussing on the Targets, towards the structural changes that the Priority Reforms require, and which are more likely to achieve meaningful outcomes for our people in the long term:

### **Priority Reform Area 1 – Formal partnerships and shared decision-making**

This Priority Reform commits to building and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress against Closing the Gap.

### **Priority Reform Area 2 – Building the community-controlled sector**

This Priority Reform commits to building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors to deliver services to support Closing the Gap. In recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services are better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, achieve better results, employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are often preferred over mainstream services.

### **Priority Reform Area 3 – Transformation of mainstream institutions**

This Priority Reform commits to systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to improve to identify and eliminate racism, embed and practice cultural safety, deliver services in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, support truth telling about agencies' history with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and engage fully and transparently with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when programs are being changed.

### **Priority Reform 4 – Sharing data and information to support decision making**

This Priority Reform commits to shared access to location-specific data and information (data sovereignty) to inform local-decision making and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to support the achievement of the first three Priority Reforms.

**NACCHO strongly recommends** the Study explicitly align with the four Priority Reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/priority-reforms>

## Why foundation skills matter

Evidence suggests that levels of English literacy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are exceptionally low. Research from the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF) estimates that between 40 and 65 per cent of Aboriginal adults are functionally illiterate in English<sup>2</sup>.

Low levels of adult-literacy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are part of the legacy of colonisation. A legacy of exclusion from the education system and systemic racism within it. Mainstream education systems continue to exclude and are often culturally unsafe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. A 2018 report from The Conversation estimated that at a national level, Year 9 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are on average three years behind non-Indigenous students in numeracy, 3.4 years behind in reading, and 4.2 years behind in writing. For Year 9 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in very remote areas, the gap is even wider - they are five years behind in numeracy, six years behind in reading, and seven to eight years behind in writing, equivalent to the average Year 3 non-Indigenous city student.<sup>3</sup>

Low literacy starts in childhood, however research from LFLF has found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are even less likely to do well at school if their parents have low literacy. Low English literacy and numeracy are therefore intergenerational issues for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Foundation skills, and in particular literacy, are critical a person's ability to participate effectively in their community. Research shows that poor LLN and low education levels among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities are linked to increased risk of poor health, high mortality, and alcohol and substance abuse. Low English literacy is implicated in a wide range of areas of relative disadvantage, including:

- interactions with government and community services;
- interactions with the Australian justice system;
- understanding of health information, prescriptions and engaging in confident conversations with doctors and hospital staff;
- interactions with the private- and social-housing sectors and the understanding of contracts, such as rental agreements;
- understanding and managing personal finances; and
- navigating and using online information.<sup>4</sup>

Practically, that means low literacy makes it difficult for a person to find and access education, training and employment opportunities. It makes it harder to navigate the health system to understand what your medication is for or how much to take, to ask questions of your doctors, to provide informed consent if you need an operation. To access and navigate support services like Centrelink, NDIS or aged care. All of which has profound impacts on the mental health and the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Low English literacy entrenches cycles of poverty and disadvantage.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lflf.org.au/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://theconversation.com/closing-the-gap-in-indigenous-literacy-and-numeracy-not-remotely-or-in-cities-88704>

<sup>4</sup> Shalley F, Stewart A. Aboriginal adult English language literacy and numeracy in the Northern Territory. Darwin: Charles Darwin University; 2017.

<sup>5</sup> NACCHO Submission, Submission 130, Inquiry into the nature and extent of poverty in Australia.

<https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=9337d692-7989-41d1-bc68-69ca2088b75c&subId=735617>

Submissions to the Inquiry into Adult Literacy from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations<sup>6</sup> detailed the significant, sometimes profound impact that improved literacy had not only on the self-confidence of participants, but also on their ability to manage their finances, apply for work or participate more fully in community activities.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, evidence shows that improving adult literacy also improves child literacy as parents are better able to support their children's learning, and have increased confidence to interact with teachers and the school system<sup>8</sup>.

Improving LLN skills has been shown to have a positive effect on employment and health outcomes. A 2014 Productivity Commission report states that an increase in LLN by one skill level is associated with about a 10 per cent increase in wages for both men and women.<sup>9</sup>

Boughton proposes that improving literacy is one of the most effective ways to improve health outcomes and foster health development in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities<sup>10</sup>. Improving literacy and numeracy is therefore critical to arresting cycles of poverty and disadvantage and to improving health outcomes for our people. It is therefore vital that initiatives to improve adult-literacy data are developed in partnership and designed to be culturally safe, in line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

## Data

Establishing an accurate indication of the level of literacy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is difficult without reliable or consistent data sources. The discussion paper outlines the considerable gaps in the data landscape. The absence of this data is compounded for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, many of whom are specifically excluded from the limited and intermittent data collection that does take place.

## PIAAC

One of the primary data sources for Australian adult literacy, the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey, specifically excludes people living in very remote areas and discrete Indigenous communities, and does not differentiate data by Aboriginality<sup>11</sup>. This has echoes of the past - of a time when Aboriginal people weren't counted in the National Census. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people deserve better than being expressly excluded from collection of this critical information about our communities.

The omission of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities from this data collection must be rectified. If the Government is truly committed to Closing the Gap and improving health and life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, an accurate understanding of literacy levels

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<sup>6</sup> Submission 49 Lowitja Institute; Submission 64 Central Australian Aboriginal Congress; Submission 84 Tharawal Aboriginal Corporation

<sup>7</sup> Ratcliffe, R., & Boughton, B. (2019). The Relationship Between Low Adult Literacy Levels and Aboriginal Family and Community Engagement in Educational Decision Making. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 29(1), 1-16. Retrieved from <https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/180>

<sup>8</sup> Ratcliffe, R., & Boughton, B. (2019). The Relationship Between Low Adult Literacy Levels and Aboriginal Family and Community Engagement in Educational Decision Making. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 29(1), 1-16. Retrieved from <https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/180>

<sup>9</sup> Shomos A, Fobes M. Literacy and Numeracy Skills and Labour Market Outcomes in Australia. Canberra: Productivity Commission; 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Boughton, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, Volume 38, Issue 1, January 2009, pp. 103–109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1375/S1326011100000648>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/programme-international-assessment-adult-competencies-australia-methodology/2011-2012>

across our communities is critical. We must have robust data on adult literacy levels so we can understand the depth, the extent of the problem, and begin to address it. This is important work, and good data can help drive it.

#### *Proxy data*

NACCHO caution against the use of proxy data. LFLF research has found that in eight Aboriginal communities across New South Wales, 51 per cent of people who had completed Year 10 or higher had low or very low English literacy. The researchers note, '[t]his casts serious doubt on the value of school completion data which is used, for example, in Close the Gap reporting, as an accurate predictor of adult literacy rates'<sup>12</sup>.

#### *SEE Program*

The discussion paper identifies the SEE Program as a source of administrative data, however we suggest the presentation of this data is flawed.

NACCHO understand that 2021-2022 data shows that around 36,000 people were *referred* to the SEE Program as having low LLN. Of these, just 1300 received assistance through the program. Of those participants, only 27 students completed the Program. Of the 1300 participants around 55% completed less than 50 hours, and 346 (26.6%) completed less than 100 hours. The use of administrative data should be used with caution.

Provision of LLN support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needs to be treated as a broad, community-wide *educational* project that interconnects with social determinants of health outcomes, rather than one narrowly aimed at improving individuals' skills for securing employment opportunities. Attempting to address low adult-literacy levels primarily through programs designed to enhance employment opportunities, limits the capacity of those programs to achieve improved outcomes. The SEE Program data above amply demonstrates this. The Program is failing jobseekers with low literacy and requires fundamental restructuring to align with Priority Reform 2 of the National Agreement and to enable the community controlled sector to lead programs.

#### National survey

The discussion paper notes the recommendations of the *Don't take it as read* report which highlight priorities to strengthen and broaden the evidence base on adult literacy. We draw your attention specifically to Recommendations 2 and 3 (*our emphasis*).

#### **Recommendation 2**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government immediately fund the broadening of data collection by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the 2022 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey and ensure all subsequent PIAAC surveys are appropriately funded, to include:

§ *oversampling of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, including those living in very remote areas, and the immigrant populations*

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<sup>12</sup> Lin, S., Williamson, F., Beeton, J. et al. Quantifying low English literacy in Australian Aboriginal communities: a correlational study. *Aust. Educ. Res.* 48, 267–280 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00388-7>  
<https://rdcu.be/b3dM2>

§ samples in sufficient numbers to provide statistically reliable results not only for Australia as a whole, but also for each state and territory

§ samples in sufficient numbers to provide statistically reliable results for all age groups, including extending collection to a younger cohort (15 years) and an older cohort (66-74 years).

2.155 *The Coalition of Peaks and the National Indigenous Australians Agency must be consulted in considering how to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations in the PIAAC surveys.*

2.156 *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community workers must, where possible, be trained and resourced to conduct PIAAC interviews in their communities.*

### **Recommendation 3**

2.160 The Committee recommends that the Australian Government provide ongoing funding for a new Australian Adult Competencies Survey to be conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics at the mid-point of each Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) cycle, with consultation on development to begin by March 2023 and the first survey to be conducted in 2026.

2.161 The new Australian Adult Competencies Survey must be:

§ comparable with the Committee's expectations for future PIAAC surveys and provide *statistically reliable data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including those living in very remote areas*, for the immigrant populations, by state and territory and for all age groups

§ *developed in consultation with the Coalition of Peaks, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, other peak bodies including the Australian Council for Adult Literacy and Adult Learning Australia, and the states and territories.*

In the context of data collection, **NACCHO recommends** full implementation of Recommendations 2 and 3 of the *Don't take it as read* report as part of this initiative.

Further, any survey developed must align with the *four* Priority Reforms of the National Agreement, not only with Priority Reform 4.

NACCHO note the intent to deliver the national survey in partnership with a research organisation or university. Any organisation delivering the survey must demonstrate alignment with the four Priority Reforms of the National Agreement. In order to align with the four Priority Reforms, the survey must be co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and communities. The national survey working group must also be representative of the Australian population. The discussion paper contains no indication that these factors have been considered.

The utilisation of existing materials is sensible, but JSA must take care that this does not simply lead to a continuation of the status quo in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities are excluded from data collection, or are not properly consulted or involved in its collection. Again, the discussion paper contains no indication that this has been considered in the context of the national survey.

We also note the reference to cost and time factors, and reiterate that it is no longer acceptable to exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities from data collection in order to cut costs. Government must be prepared to invest in the collection of *statistically reliable data for*



*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including those living in very remote areas as recommended above.*

Any survey option must align with ACSF and should allow for multiple modes of completion. Overreliance on online completion (which acknowledging the need to assess digital skills) will hinder participation by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in more remote areas.

Consideration of the way in which people use LLN skills must include the health implications of low English literacy.

### Feasibility study

NACCHO notes the suggestion that the national survey design will inform the feasibility study. If this is the case, in order to ensure the feasibility study is undertaken in a culturally safe way the national survey must:

1. align with the four Priority Reforms of the National Agreement
2. be designed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
3. the working group must be representative of the Australian population

As stated above, the discussion paper contains no suggestion that this will be the case. It demonstrates an entirely mainstream approach to the design and delivery of the national survey. This is an approach that continues to fail Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We welcome the commitment to consultation with the sector, however it appears such consultation is only intended to inform the feasibility study and not the national survey. This does not align with the Government's commitment to the four Priority Reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, nor with the obligations of JSA to implement that commitment through its work.

**NACCHO recommend** the feasibility study inform the design of the national survey to ensure it is designed in partnership with community, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are adequately represented, that there is alignment with the Priority Reforms and in order for JSA to demonstrate its commitment to Priority Reform 3 – changing the way government does business with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

NACCHO is ready to work constructively with Government and in genuine partnership to co-design initiatives to improve English literacy levels for our people. NACCHO would be pleased to participate in the working groups.