



NACCHO

National Aboriginal Community
Controlled Health Organisation
Aboriginal health in Aboriginal hands

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Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance

**Submission to the
House of Representatives
Standing Committee
on Employment, Education
and Training**

May 2021

ABOUT NACCHO

NACCHO is the national peak body representing 143 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) Australia wide on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing issues. NACCHO's work is focused on liaising with governments, its membership, and other organisations on health and wellbeing policy and planning issues and advocacy relating to health service delivery, health information, research, public health, health financing and health programs. Our members provide about three million episodes of care per year for about 350,000 people across Australia, including about one million episodes of care in very remote regions.

Sector Support Organisations, also known as affiliates, are State based and represent ACCHOs offering a wide range of support services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs to their members including advocacy, governance and the delivery of state, territory and national primary health care policies.

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 Workers/Practitioners and/or nurses to provide the bulk of primary health care services, often with a preventive, health education focus. Our 143 ACCHOs operate approximately 700 facilities, including about 450 clinics. ACCHOs and their facilities and clinics contribute to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing through the provision of comprehensive holistic 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.

Collectively, we employ about 6,000 staff, 56 per cent of whom are Indigenous, making us the second largest employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the country.

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Recommendations

NACCHO recommends that the Australian Government:

1. Resource the Australian Bureau of Statistics to establish a data collection standard to determine adult literacy levels in both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the wider Australian community, which includes people living in remote and very remote areas.
2. Provide sustained funding for evidence-based, community-led adult literacy campaigns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as Literacy for Life Foundation's *Yes, I Can!* Program, which is grounded in community ownership and control.
3. Provide funding for language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) as pathway support for further study.
4. Implement Recommendation 11 of the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Report into Education in Remote and Complex Environments (November 2020) in particular, those elements relating to mass literacy campaigns and in-language learning at school level.

Introduction

NACCHO welcomes the inquiry into adult literacy and its importance and appreciates the opportunity to contribute a submission to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training.

In responding to the Terms of Reference for this inquiry, we focus on the following two main areas that require strengthening in order to improve adult literacy levels in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:

- community-led mass adult literacy campaigns; and
- bilingual or English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) schooling for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

As well as pointing out barriers and issues we identify solutions, which should consistently centre on strong partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, in alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Lack of data and use of proxy indicators

Establishing an accurate indication of the level of literacy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is difficult without reliable or consistent data sources. An earlier submission to this inquiry from the Literacy for Life Foundation details this lack of accurate or consistent data across the various surveys used to establish adult literacy levels in Australia. 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 Aboriginality¹.

Emerging evidence suggests that levels of literacy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults is low. Research from the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF) estimates that between 40 and 65 per cent of Aboriginal adults are functionally illiterate in English².

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'³.

NACCHO recommends the Australian Bureau of Statistics be resourced to establish an ongoing data collection standard to determine adult literacy levels in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the wider Australian community, which includes people living in remote and very remote areas. This should be developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and in keeping with the principles of Indigenous data sovereignty⁴.

¹ <https://www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/programme-international-assessment-adult-competencies-australia-methodology/2011-2012>

² <https://www.lflf.org.au/>

³ 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>

⁴ National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/priority-reforms>

Adult Literacy Programs

LFLF research shows that poor literacy and low education levels in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are linked with increased risk of alcohol and substance abuse, poor health and high mortality. A 2017 study by Charles Darwin University (CDU) found that low English literacy and numeracy could be implicated in many of the areas of relative disadvantage, including:

- understanding health information, prescriptions and engaging in confident conversations with doctors and hospital staff
- engaging in education and employment
- interactions with the justice system, and other government and community services
- understanding and managing finances and contracts such as rental agreements
- navigating and using online information⁵.

Improving literacy and numeracy skills has been shown to have a positive effect on employment outcomes. A 2014 Productivity Commission report states that an increase in literacy and numeracy by one skill level is associated with about a 10 per cent increase in wages for both men and women⁶.

VET Foundation Skills courses are often posited as the first step to improving adult literacy skills, yet to have the competency level needed to complete Certificate I and II courses, a moderate level of literacy is needed. Both LFLF and the CDU study found that most participants in their respective studies were below the level of English literacy required for Certificate I or II programs. The CDU report concluded that, more than 24,000 Aboriginal adults in the Northern Territory would not have the English LLN skills needed to successfully complete a VET Certificate I or II course⁷. Low literacy is a likely contributor to very low completion rates in VET for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - nationally, the completion rate for VET Certificate I courses is only 13%, and lower in rural and remote areas⁸.

Evidence from Literacy for Life suggests that community adult literacy programs can provide the confidence and skills needed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with low literacy to consider VET pathways, and for these to then be viable options.

Indeed, previous submissions from other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations⁹ 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

⁵ A statistical overview: Aboriginal adult LLN in the Northern Territory, Shalley F. and Stewart A., Whole of Community Engagement Initiative Office of the PVC of Indigenous Leadership, Charles Darwin University 2017. <https://www.cdu.edu.au/files/2019-09/WCE%20statistical%20report.pdf>

⁶ Literacy and Numeracy Skills and Labour Market Outcomes - Staff working paper – Productivity Commission 2014 <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/literacy-numeracy-skills>

⁷ A statistical overview: Aboriginal adult LLN in the Northern Territory, Shalley F. and Stewart A., Whole of Community Engagement Initiative Office of the PVC of Indigenous Leadership, Charles Darwin University 2017. <https://www.cdu.edu.au/files/2019-09/WCE%20statistical%20report.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/infographics/indigenous-vet-participation-completion-and-employment-outcomes-infographic>

⁹ Submission 49 Lowitja Institute; Submission 64 Central Australian Aboriginal Congress; Submission 84 Tharawal Aboriginal Corporation

effectively in community activities¹⁰

Boughton proposes that mass adult literacy campaigns are one of the most effective ways to improve health outcomes and foster health development in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities¹¹.

NACCHO recommends the provision of sustained funding for evidence-based, community-led adult literacy campaigns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as Literacy for Life Foundation's *Yes, I Can!* program, which is grounded in community ownership and control. Programs such as this use evidence-based implementation strategies and have well-documented outcomes for individuals and community, including a 64% completion rate. Funding should also be provided for language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) as pathway support for further study.

In-language school education

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.¹²

Low literacy starts in childhood, however research from LFLF has found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are less likely to do well at school if their parents have low literacy. This is a perpetuating cycle of poor childhood education outcomes which lead to poor adult literacy, which in turn contributes to poor outcomes for the next generation of children.

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 system¹³.

There is also increasing recognition that being strong in language and culture are protective factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's health and wellbeing, and can support mainstream educational attainment¹⁴.

Indeed, this Standing Committee's *Report into Education in Remote and Complex Environments* noted strong support for bilingual education programs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools. The submission from the Australian Education Union notes;

¹⁰ 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>

¹¹ Boughton, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, Volume 38, Issue 1, January 2009, pp. 103–109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1375/S132601110000648>

¹² <https://theconversation.com/closing-the-gap-in-indigenous-literacy-and-numeracy-not-remotely-or-in-cities-88704>

¹³ 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>

¹⁴ NACCHO submission, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Our land, our languages: language learning in Indigenous communities*, September 2012.

Learning an Indigenous language and becoming proficient in English are complementary rather than mutually exclusive; rather than acting as a barrier to the learning of English, bilingual programs actually strengthen it (provided they are adequately supported and resourced).¹⁵

Funding for and the implementation of bilingual education programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students would support English proficiency and align with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020 Target 16:

There is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken by 2031.

In November 2020, the Standing Committee recommended that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth:

- provide adult literacy campaigns in communities with low levels of adult English literacy
- ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can access English as an Additional Language or Dialect support and instruction at school
- ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can access bilingual education where Standard Australian English is not the first language spoken, or where school communities have expressed a desire for this to occur
- establish programs that support the development and professionalisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce, and
- establish trauma-informed, cultural induction and training programs for educators working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.¹⁶

NACCHO recommends the urgent implementation of Recommendation 11 of the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Report into Education in Remote and Complex Environments (November 2020) in particular, those elements relating to mass literacy campaigns and in-language learning at school level. We reiterate that such initiatives, including campaign and program design, development and implementation must be undertaken in partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Conclusion

Without learning in local language through all levels of schooling, which has been shown to complement and enhance a student's ability to become proficient in English, and simultaneous community-led interventions to improve adult literacy, the issue of low literacy in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will remain a pervasive problem and will continue to adversely impact health, education and life expectancy outcomes for our communities.

¹⁵ Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments, November 2020.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report

¹⁶ Recommendation 11, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments, November 2020.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report