



Australian Council for Adult Literacy

supporting literacy and numeracy education for adults

Minister for Education and Training
Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham
minister@education.gov.au

Re: Workplace adult literacy and numeracy

Dear Senator

The Australian Council for Adult Literacy is the peak professional body representing practitioners and researchers in the area of adult literacy and numeracy, including vocational and workplace education and training. We write in relation to the issue of literacy and numeracy training in the workplace and in particular note the current absence of a government policy addressing this aspect of lifelong learning.

The closure of the *Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL)* programme was announced as part of the 2014 Federal Budget and there has since been no announcement of a program to replace it. WELL had assisted businesses to address the English language, literacy and numeracy skills of their employees, helping them to meet their current and future employment and training needs. The program was consistently evaluated very positively and represented a vital aspect of workplace training in this challenging economic climate.

The Australian workplace has experienced continual processes of re-organisation since the advent of the national training reform agenda in the late 1980s. The globalisation of markets and technological advances in production and marketing have required industry to be flexible and innovative in order to remain competitive in an increasingly difficult market. The literacy and numeracy practices of workplaces are thus in continual flux.

This new work order puts huge stress on the need for lifelong learning and the need continually to adapt, change, and learn new skills, very often *on site* while carrying out the job. Many workers find it difficult to adapt their skills to the increasingly sophisticated language and literacy practices of the modern workplace, even though their skills allow them to engage in the literacy and numeracy practices of their everyday lives. In addition, there are numbers of Australian workers with minimal literacy skills, including those who are from a non-English speaking background, and those in regional areas affected by inter-generational disadvantage as suggested by the adult skills assessment *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)*ⁱ.

The loss of WELL has been particularly acutely felt in remote areas. Previous WELL funding allowed language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) training and support to Indigenous people in

remote communities, thus improving work satisfaction and performance and alleviating the LLN barriers resulting from limited access to post school education.

In addition, by building the capacity of the local labour force it meant that Indigenous people who filled positions in communities could continue to develop LLN skills over time in subsequent WELL rounds, with a chance to enter the Cert III and above qualifications which facilitate career progression, rather than non-Indigenous people having to be brought in to undertake the work.

The current view of language and literacy is that it can only be understood through a socio-cultural perspectiveⁱⁱ. That is, language and literacy do not occur in a vacuum but by being placed within and acquired within a social context. This places high priority on workplace literacy / numeracy programs: programs that had been stimulated and supported by the *Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL)* program.

ACAL supports the comments of Innes Willox, Chief Executive of the Australian Industry Group (AIG), that 'Promoting foundation skills to employers has been made difficult by the cessation of the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program'ⁱⁱⁱ. The WELL program supported some hundreds of workplaces to address their language and literacy needs. In the process, workplace literacy practitioners developed a body of expertise and resources for this specialist field, expertise which has since dispersed and become lost to the field. It is clear that government policy and funding are required to stimulate language and literacy workplace provision.

ACAL thus echoes the recommendation of AIG that 'A new national workplace LLN program needs to be developed to improve upon the WELL program'. Representatives of ACAL would be pleased to meet with you or officers of your department to discuss this or related issues.

Yours sincerely



Daniella Mayer

Vice-President ACAL

ⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2013, *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011–12*: Latest issue 9/10/2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs%40.nsf/Lookup/4228.0Main%20Features202011-12>

ⁱⁱ Gee, J., Hull, G. & Lankshear, C. 1996, *The New Work Order: Behind the language of the new capitalism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Australian Industry Group 2016, *Tackling Foundation Skills in the Workforce*. Retrieved from: http://cdn.aigroup.com.au/Reports/2016/AIG9675_EMAIL.pdf