

# ▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

## Community adult language, literacy and numeracy provision in Australia: Diverse approaches and outcomes

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▶ THIS STUDY MAPPED the non-accredited community adult language, literacy and numeracy sub-sector in Australia. Its focus was on community provision of courses for which no accredited qualification is awarded. The study found there is a strong demand for such courses from adults who are not interested in or would struggle with accredited courses, and for whom the acquisition of self-confidence through participation is a major outcome.

### ▶ Methodology

The study drew on survey data from 125 eligible organisations in each state and territory, except the Northern Territory. In addition, seven case studies involving a variety of program coordinators, teachers, tutors and students were undertaken in urban and rural areas in three states.

### ▶ Findings

#### *Types of provision*

There are four major groupings of non-accredited adult language, literacy and numeracy providers:

- community
- accredited
- English as a second language
- disability service providers.

The majority of learners are in the 30 to 49 years age group and women predominate overall. It is suggested that this is because men generally find it harder to seek assistance and tend to sign up only when pressured by

workplace changes or unemployment, or if they are encouraged by a female partner to do so.

There is a great diversity of adult language, literacy and numeracy provision, a diversity necessary to meet the needs of the learners who seek assistance at this level. In the larger towns and cities, learners have a choice of providers and courses and they choose the one most suitable for them. In rural areas, the choice is not as large or is non-existent, but the need is still there.

Students and providers generally consider non-accredited courses to be less pressured and to be effective in developing self-confidence as well as skills. It is the combination of individual attention, the comfortable learning environment and, in some cases, a less formal approach to assessment, which makes these courses attractive.

#### *Assessment*

A quarter of the providers use formal assessment tools. Among the rest, a combination of small assessment tasks and teacher perceptions of progress based on observations and student feedback, often verbal, seems widespread. This informality means rigorous appraisal of student learning does not always occur. On the other hand, the range of motivations for learning suggests that formal assessment may not always be appropriate.

#### *Reporting*

Reporting non-accredited adult language, literacy and numeracy data is a contentious issue for providers, with exactly half believing reporting should be mandatory, almost 30 per cent being opposed, and the rest not responding. Organisations that support mandatory reporting feel it would mean either better recognition of the benefits and



extent of non-accredited courses, or the possibility of increased government funding, or both. Those opposed believe it might reduce their autonomy as community organisations and place undue demands on volunteers.

## *Professional development*

In larger organisations, professional development tends to be fairly well established, but in smaller ones, especially those using volunteers, the picture is patchy. Typically, professional development opportunities in rural areas are scarce, and often teachers and tutors have to travel considerable distances to access them. Almost 20 per cent of providers offer no professional development. A small number of organisations using volunteers do not require prerequisite qualifications or tutor training. In other instances providers have developed training manuals in response to staff needs.

## *Funding*

Lack of funding is a major concern for all providers. Most want to see funding cycles extended from one to three years. While revenue comes from a variety of sources, recurrent state government funding is the largest source for the sub-sector.

## *The need for non-accredited language, literacy and numeracy provision*

This study demonstrates that a significant number of adult literacy and numeracy students are not normally seeking qualifications. Indeed, many of them have had such bad school experiences and/or their current skills are so low, that they are not capable of beginning certificate-level training. Non-accredited courses provide an important alternative avenue for these people, as the presence of accredited training providers as a major grouping at this level of provision confirms.

Another important factor identified in the research is the pace of learning. At basic levels of language, literacy and numeracy, students need time to develop their understandings and skills as well as their self-confidence. Accredited courses typically follow a structured curriculum and have to operate within institutional constraints, conditions not generally appropriate for learners with very low levels of skills in this area. The study also shows that students enrolled in accredited

courses sometimes need individual external support in order to get through. In this way the accredited courses complement the non-accredited courses.

## ► Implications

There are three main areas where further support for community providers might be focused.

### ► Recognition

Providers believed that government recognition of the value of community non-accredited language, literacy and numeracy provision is critical. Developing language, literacy and numeracy skills in addition to adequate self-confidence provides the basis for individuals to interact with and make a positive contribution to the wider society. Financial support is one significant way in which such recognition can be expressed. This funding should take into account that learners at this level need time to develop their skills.

In response to this recognition, some providers believe they need to be able to demonstrate the quality of their programs, with the implementation of an appropriate national reporting mechanism being one means to facilitate this.

### ► Professional development

As the development of language, literacy and numeracy skills for these learners runs parallel to the growth of self-confidence, the teacher–student relationship is critical. If compassion, commitment and an interest in language (and sometimes numeracy) are complemented by initial training and ongoing professional development, then the teaching and learning should be more effective.

### ► Monitoring progress

A more sustained approach to monitoring progress of students' personal growth and skills development is warranted in some programs. Careful assessment is a way of demonstrating the efficacy of non-accredited language, literacy and numeracy provision to both learners and funding bodies.

***Community adult language, literacy and numeracy provision in Australia: Diverse approaches and outcomes by Darryl Dymock can be downloaded from the NCVER website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.***