

The House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training
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Dear Committee members

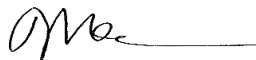
Re: The Lowitja Institute's submission to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training inquiry into adult literacy and its importance.

The Lowitja Institute is Australia's national institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, named in honour of our Patron, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG.

We welcome this opportunity to highlight the importance of your committee's work for improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Please find our submission attached. We would appreciate the opportunity to present to your Committee, should the opportunity arise.

Warm Regards



Dr Janine Mohamed
CEO, Lowitja Institute

Enc: Submission

The Lowitja Institute's submission to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training inquiry into adult literacy and its importance

1. Introduction

The Lowitja Institute is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation working for the health and wellbeing of Australia's First Peoples through high impact quality research, knowledge translation, and by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers.

Established in January 2010, we operate on key principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, a broader understanding of health that incorporates wellbeing, and the need for the work to have a clear and positive impact. We have 12 [member organisations](#).

The Lowitja Institute has a longstanding commitment to improving literacy. Our Chairperson, Ms Pat Anderson AO, is a Director of the national Aboriginal organisation, [Literacy for Life Foundation](#), an Aboriginal-led initiative that has achieved significant success in boosting adult literacy in Indigenous communities. The Lowitja Institute is a founding partner of the Foundation.

We are a member of the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, which in July 2020 signed [a National Agreement on Closing the Gap with all Australian Governments](#) (the National Agreement).

We note that the four priority reform areas of this agreement are:

Priority Reform One – Formal partnerships and shared decision-making

“The Parties commit 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 One seeks to apply the principles in the historic and unprecedented Partnership Agreement to more partnership arrangements between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments at all levels.”

Priority Reform Two – Building the community-controlled sector

“The Parties commit to building formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors to deliver services to support Closing the Gap. The Parties acknowledge 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 Three – Transformation of mainstream institutions

“The Parties commit to systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to improve accountability and respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

Priority Reform Four – Sharing data and information to support decision making

“Shared access to location specific data and information will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to support the achievement of the first three Priority Reforms.”

We encourage members of the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training to read the National Agreement, as it is critical that your inquiry and recommendations align with these agreed priority reform areas.

2. General preamble

Before addressing the inquiry's specific terms of reference, we encourage Committee members to consider the long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and our sophisticated and diverse cultures and knowledge systems. Over millennia we have cared for Country and for our communities in this place now called Australia. Despite the traumatic and ongoing consequences of colonisation, we continue to maintain and develop our cultures and knowledge systems, including our diverse languages. As the preamble to the National Agreement notes:

“The Parties also acknowledge the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in sustaining the world's oldest living culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures have prevailed and endured despite too many experiencing entrenched disadvantage, political exclusion, intergenerational trauma and ongoing institutional racism.”

At the Lowitja Institute International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conference 2019, several hundred national and international conference delegates made [a conference statement](#) that included the following points relevant to your inquiry:

“First Nations knowledges and languages are our assets. We must protect, repatriate and rejuvenate cultural practices relating to health and wellbeing — including medicinal; therapeutic; and nutritional and healing-related knowledges and practices. Data is part of our narrative. First Nations must be empowered with the knowledge and infrastructure to collect, monitor and interpret our own health and wellbeing data. First Nations and dominant languages and literacy are fundamental rights and a foundation of empowerment. Lifting levels of literacy in our first and dominant languages is key to our self-determination and the development of our children.”

3. Specific terms of reference

Below we address some of your specific terms of reference (as underlined below).

The relationship between adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills and socio-demographic characteristics, particularly migrant status, First Nations status and individuals living in households that have experienced intergenerational unemployment

An estimated 40 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults have minimal English literacy, a figure that rises to as high as 70 per cent in many remote areas, according to the Literacy for Life Foundation. However, when considering these issues, it is important to recognise that mainstream education systems have often excluded and been culturally unsafe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Lower levels of adult literacy and numeracy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are a symptom of the legacy of colonisation, exclusion and systemic racism. It is therefore vital that recommendations and initiatives to improve adult literacy and numeracy among our people are designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, in line with the National Agreement.

The effect that literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual's labour force participation and wages; Links between literacy and social outcomes such as health, poverty, ability to care for other family members and participation in civic life

Literacy and the related concept of health literacy are important social determinants of health. They directly influence health, including through individuals' capacity to access and understand health-related information, and also through their interconnections with other determinants of health. Low literacy levels influence determinants of health such as education, employment, and participation in society. Lifting literacy therefore has wide-ranging benefits for health, and the wider determinants of health, including self-determination, employment and community safety. Policy measures to address the issue of adult English language literacy are fundamental to the success of policies in health, in law and justice, in education, and in community and economic development. There is now a substantial body of evidence, in Australia and internationally, to show that low levels of adult literacy limit the capacity of individuals and families:

- to make effective use of primary health care services and take greater control of their health;
- to succeed in further education and training; to gain employment;
- to reduce negative interactions with the justice system; and
- to play an active role in their children's schooling.

Adults with low English language literacy struggle to comprehend and critically respond to government initiatives and are also severely disadvantaged in many aspects of community organisation governance, where these skills are involved.

Two recent studies¹ in the Northern Territory have shown the importance of Aboriginal community control in designing and implementing health literacy initiatives, and these findings may also be relevant to wider literacy initiatives.

Whether changes to schooling in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 will have a disproportionate impact on the skill development of those children of parents with lower literacy and numeracy levels, and, if yes, consideration of appropriate remediation programs which might address this

Concerns have [arisen globally](#) that the pandemic is exacerbating existing inequities in education. Addressing these inequities requires far more than remediation programs. It requires systematic efforts to overcome entrenched inequities across primary, secondary and tertiary education systems, with a particular focus on addressing inequities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities. This means enacting the commitments that Governments have made under the National Agreement to implement these measures within government mainstream institutions and agencies:

- identify and eliminate racism
- embed and practise meaningful cultural safety
- deliver services in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, communities and people
- develop genuine relationships between government organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and/or businesses to enhance the quality and cultural safety of mainstream service delivery
- increase accountability through transparent funding allocations
- support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures
- improve engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

¹ Lowell A, Maypilama EL, Gundjarranbuy R. 'Finding a pathway and making it strong: Learning from Yolŋu about meaningful health education in a remote Indigenous Australian context'. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*. 2020; 32 (S1): 166-178.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/hpja.405>

Ireland S, Maypilama EL. "'We are sacred": An intercultural and multilingual approach to understanding reproductive health literacy for Yolŋu girls and women in remote Northern Australia'. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*. 2020; 32 (S1): 192-202
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/hpja.439>

The availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy educational programs in Australia and internationally;

As previously indicated, the Lowitja Institute supports the Literacy for Life Foundation, which uses an innovative, evidence-based, campaign approach that has been implemented in 30 countries around the world and is now delivering results in Australia. The Lowitja Institute provided [initial funding for a pilot](#) of the Foundation approach, building on the well documented links between literacy and improved health outcomes. The Lowitja Institute extended further support following the promising results achieved during pilot phase. The graduation rate of Literacy for Life Foundation students was five times higher than existing programs and the campaigns created a range of benefits across the community. Building on this evidence base, the Lowitja Institute helped Literacy for Life Foundation design and carry out a longitudinal study of individual and community impacts, with a focus on measuring improvements in areas such as health, education and community safety.

The Foundation is going from strength to strength, working with and for communities across the country. Its campaign approach relies on community ownership and control. The Lowitja Institute believes this community owned and controlled model could be implemented far more widely across Australia. Many communities have shown considerable interest in implementing its campaigns. For more information about the Foundation, see: <https://www.lflf.org.au/>

4. In conclusion

It is vital that Aboriginal community-controlled organisations lead the design and implementation of initiatives to promote literacy and numeracy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. We do **not** support the use of mainstream models, such as outreach by TAFE or VET.

Nor are Indigenous-owned registered training organisations (RTOs) the best solution, for these four reasons:

First, there are few such providers at present, and the process of establishing them and getting registered under the national system is long and arduous, something many Indigenous communities do not have the resources to undertake.

Second, even if and when sufficient numbers of such RTOs could be established, they will still have to fit within the national and state-based compliance and accountability regimes for the VET system as a whole to maintain their registrations and gain approval to run their courses. The process of doing this again requires skilled VET professional staff, whom many communities will find it hard to attract.

Third, these accountability requirements not only consume a great deal of resources but also quickly lead to a loss of flexibility in the way the provider deals with students, staff and the community, especially contextualising their offerings and their whole approach to local circumstances, and sustaining the level of community engagement and support that is required for success on any scale.

Fourth, Indigenous-owned-and-led is not the same as 'community-owned-and-led'. Without community ownership and control, such RTOs are less likely to understand and be able to meet the specific needs of diverse communities.

Finally, to reiterate our points made in the introduction, we urge Committee members to ensure your recommendations align with the principles of the National Agreement, which was signed by the Coalition of Peaks, representing more than **50 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak and member organisations across Australia, and by all Australian Governments.**