

Language Literacy and Numeracy Program Services Discussion Paper for Consultation

VALBEC Response July 2008

The Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) is a leader in the area of adult literacy, numeracy and basic education, supporting those working in adult literacy education and promoting the importance of literacy and numeracy skills for all Australians. In 2005, VALBEC contributed to the consultations regarding the LLNP tender process for 2006- 2009 and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the current consultations and discussion paper on behalf of our members and adult learners.

We are heartened by the Rudd government's priorities in relation to social inclusion and regard the development of language, literacy and numeracy as fundamental to improving individual lives and strengthening communities.

Julia Gillard says in her speech at the launch of the Australian Social Innovation Exchange (28/02/08) '[w]hat many people actually wanted to talk about was social inclusion. They saw it as a moral imperative – part of ensuring that Australia is a decent society – but also a highly pragmatic need. They recognise, as we do, that Australia cannot afford the marginalisation of large numbers of Australians on the fringes of community life.'

We agree with this and believe that government has a responsibility to develop and support LLN programs that respond to individual's learning needs with flexibility and consideration of health and social factors that impact on lives while also providing a vocational focus. We concur with Balatti, Black and Falk (2007) who argue that social capital outcomes need to be recognised and accounted for, along with human capital outcomes, in a reframing of the reporting of adult literacy and numeracy courses and indeed in a reframing of adult literacy and numeracy policy and practice generally.

We question the equation implicit in this discussion paper of a causal link between a gain in LLN skills and gaining sustainable employment and that the provision of 160 hour blocks of training will result in the prescribed incremental shift in skill levels when so many other factors and variables impact on progress, factors acknowledged in the government's social inclusion work. We are concerned that under the current LLNP system in any given period of education and training at the foundational levels and where socio-economic disadvantage factors impact on learning there appears to be a 'draconian' attitude to monitoring and policing clients.

A conceptualisation of literacy as a de-contextualised set of skills that can be merely topped up is at odds with reality of the complex demands of 21st century society. In an age when we have seen an unprecedented change in workplace practices as a result of technological advancement and globalisation, literacy has come to be seen as multiple, as contextualised and fluid (see, for example, Lonsdale and Mc Curry, 2004). This understanding of literacy has very real implications for the delivery of literacy and the diverse ways in which this delivery needs to take place.

We question expected outcomes of students being 'work ready' when jobs are not necessarily available nor the support of networks or agencies to assist clients in finding appropriate work. What does 'work readiness' mean, ready for what work? where? In relation to jobseeker literacy programs, Falk (2001) argues that in order to achieve employment outcomes students need to acquire not only improved literacy skills but also social capital, including social networks involving bridging ties. Thus

getting a job can be as much about who people know and what networks they can tap into as the work-related skills they may possess. The government is only too aware of the complex relationship among things such as poverty, mental illness, limited schooling. Julia Gillard (28/02/08) points to the work done by Tony Vinson which shows 'how just 1.7 per cent of Australia's postcodes currently experience up to 7 times more of their fair share of intergenerational poverty, including low income, limited computer and internet access, early school leaving, physical and mental disabilities, long-term unemployment, prison admissions and substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect.'

This more nuanced understanding of the interrelationship of impacts on lives and education provides a challenge in terms of the conceptualisation of programs that are flexible and focus on community engagement while valuing social and cultural activities as part of a broader learning that is not tightly regulated in language, literacy and numeracy outcome measures. Julia Gillard speaks highly of the men's sheds movement. The Australian Council of Literacy (ACAL) has identified men's sheds as a potential site for programs that include literacy in real contextualised settings that many choose to come to voluntarily.

Suggestion: This model for learning communities could be developed and applied to a range of environments and client groups.

It is widely agreed that the outcomes of training do not always reflect the learning pathway suitable for the development of the whole person, additionally, incremental measures in a linear progression will not necessarily portray the complete picture of a learner's progress. In a commodity-based environment the vocational orientation on measurable outcomes undervalues the personal transformations, social and community connections that are far less easy to quantify. Matched with this is the concern of many practitioners that the most marginalised and disadvantaged learners are not being catered for in current modes of delivery. The mechanisms of accountability and bureaucratic monitoring are designed to maximise output but often to the detriment of developing quality programs and meeting the individual's learning and social needs.

Suggestion: LLNP works for students who are ready to be fast tracked, they may be able to achieve an outcome of advancing a level in two macro skills against the NRS, but this stringent rule for students who are below level one could be relaxed.

As others have indicated (Castleton, Sanguinetti & Falk, 2001) what is needed is to view these programs from a 'triple bottom line' perspective which would acknowledge involving economic, social capital and community development gains and outcomes. Social capital outcomes from adult literacy and numeracy courses cannot be ignored nor that they are at least as important as human capital outcomes. They must be seen as complementary to human capital outcomes and should be evident in adult literacy and numeracy policy and practice. This would mean a reframing of what is meant by literacy and numeracy, what and how we teach in adult literacy and numeracy courses, and how we measure and value such course outcomes.

Suggestion: Cross sectoral partnerships with other agencies and industries to find creative and dynamic models for learning could be explored further.

VALBEC acknowledges the broad goals of the LLNP program to provide language, literacy and numeracy training for eligible clients and to seek to improve clients' language, literacy and/or numeracy with the expectation that such improvements will enable students to participate more effectively in training or in the labour force and

lead to greater gains for society in the longer term. Nevertheless VALBEC believes this program currently struggles to achieve broad outcomes for students.

The Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey highlighted the following

- In 2006, between 46% and 70% of adults in Australia had poor or very poor skills across one or more of the five skill domains of prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and health literacy. This means they did not attain skill level 3, the level regarded by most experts as a suitable minimum for coping with the increasing and complex demands of modern life and work.
- There has been some upward movement in performance from the lowest skill levels since 1996. In regard to prose literacy, there has been a significant 1-2% percentage point decrease in the proportion of adults with a skill level of 1 and a corresponding 2 to 3% increase in the proportion of adults with skill levels 2 and 3. In regard to document literacy, there has also been a significant decrease in the proportion of adults with a skill level of 1.
- Higher literacy levels are associated with higher levels of employment and personal income

(ABS, 2008, cat no 4228)

We need to work together to address the needs of these adults.. VALBEC recognises the role and responsibility of government to respond to these challenges but also the pressures exerted by other areas of government in demanding measurable outcomes and value for money. VALBEC is very happy to work with the government to look at creative ways in which the gaps in foundational skills levels can be reduced and how a holistic and inclusive model could be developed.

Suggestion: Tools to capture the social and personal gains of the individual must be developed to take the place of the current excessively regulatory and inflexible system.

The original intention of the Language and Numeracy Training (LANT) program was to cater for Centrelink clients who would benefit from assistance with their literacy and numeracy skills, in other words the focus was on the traditional Adult Literacy and Basic Education (ALBE) student. When LANT and the Advanced English for Migrants (AEMP) were conflated into LLNP we believe in some areas ESL has taken over the bulk of the LLNP client profile. This requires higher levels of support with their language needs, in particular as we have an increasing number of new migrants who have limited literacy skills in their first language. It also disadvantages the ALBE client who no longer seems to be as well represented in this program, it seems there are 'slip through the cracks' categories of learners who are looking for second chance learning opportunities that are not punitive in structure like LLNP.

*Suggestion: The capped number of hours for AEMP should be increased so that these students are not forced into the LLNP program.
Review the profile of clients who are catered for by the program*

The way in which the program is currently structured puts a heavy burden on providers, providers who have already had to tender low to get a contract and are under strain. This is exacerbated by assessment being so rigorously calibrated with payments reliant on successful outcomes for them to receive the last 40% of their payment on this narrowly defined successful outcome. There is enormous pressure on the provider to get outcomes in the first 160 hours – this is simply not realistic for

students who are coming from non literate cultures. Teachers believe it is not time enough to achieve genuine competence, this amount of time for provision is very intense and students may well achieve an outcome in this manner but it is questionable whether they can retain this gain when they are in different contexts, like for example a workplace. Students who have an adequate time to build on their skills and test these skills in a range of contexts are better prepared for the rigors of the workplace.

Funding payments are currently unrealistic in a system that puts undue pressure on completions to achieve funding targets, it is unrealistic for all students to have to reach two indicators or provider loses 40% of their funding. There is an increased administrative burden on teachers, when the number of hours students were allotted was 800, there were two reports for teachers to write. With the change to 160 hours there is potential for teachers to write up to five reports for each client. This is an enormous administrative increase. The Internet System II has not delivered on promises to make record keeping easier with providers experiencing many technical problems and it is regarded as badly designed.

VALBEC believes the framework of curriculum should be at the centre of teaching and learning rather than the recording and verification of assessment as the crucial focus and the ultimate factor that determines funding. Teachers believe currently the NRS is becoming the de-facto curriculum, as it is the NRS level that determines payment.

Continuity is an ongoing issue, the nature of the tender process means that consortiums that have built up capacity and expertise are not necessarily successful in subsequent bids and therefore continuity and expertise are lost. The lack of security of funding impacts on such things as teacher employment conditions, infrastructure, accommodation.

Suggestion: There needs to be a suite of programs to address needs of a range of learners

Teachers are the most valuable resource we have but we do not believe LNNP teachers are supported by adequate professional development, it is currently the responsibility of providers under pressure. They are unable to provide professional development, just as they are unable to provide welfare and counselling services for students when they have to tender at a level that is hardly viable in order to retain their business. There is a mistaken view that verifiers are offering professional development to teachers, this is not the case their focus is on compliance. It is very problematic when professional development and compliance are seen to be synonymous.

Networking possibilities for teachers are undermined by competitive tendering, collegiality is inevitably undermined in this competitive atmosphere. The nature of competitive tendering means there is no ongoing secure work for teachers. It is all contract work, or staff are employed sessionally, this exacerbates the difficulty in obtaining well qualified, experienced staff. Teacher attrition rates are high, there is difficulty attracting and retaining staff. Not only are well qualified and experienced staff hard to get and retain but remuneration is poor. There is no incentive in this environment for young teachers to see this work as a viable career path and we are faced with an aging workforce.

Teachers find it difficult working with students at very low level, particularly under the pressure of unrealistic outcomes. Teacher stress is further exacerbated by the way new students are constantly added to or leaving classes after a set number of hours,

this can make the class a challenge to manage. This seems to be done to suit external targets to get Centrelink clients into some form of participation at the expense of educational principles.

Suggestion: Improve employment conditions for teachers and security of tenure. Provide quality professional development and collegiate support for teachers.

In conclusion, VALBEC acknowledges there are positive aspects to the program, for example teachers report that Centrelink is a useful source of referral for people who may not self refer as they do not know about the program. They say that many students who are nervous about starting a class, or reluctant to start, have been able to make progress. For some students this is their first opportunity outside their own community.

Suggestion: The ACE Provider Model of adding to existing programs so that students experience broad and sustainable connections is a good model.

We are also cognisant of the difficulties in building appropriate and diverse programs. However VALBEC believes the current LLNP program is flawed in its reliance on competitive tendering that undermines both quality and collegiality. There is a tension here between trusting teachers' knowledge and professionalism and requiring accountability and verification standards, it is a tension that has led to many experienced teachers walking away from LLNP.

Clients who come to LLNP classes usually have few choices to fulfil their 'mutual obligation' to the government, they are also often confused about these choices, we believe this is not a fruitful starting place for engaging in second chance education, especially for students who carry with them scars from their original educational experiences. In relation to teachers, there needs to be less surveillance in the form of verification and more professional development for teachers. Current professional development across the sector is constrained by the casualisation of the workforce, distance and lack of time.

Suggestion: A large investment in targeted and effective PD will improve outcomes.

The emphasis on performance measures in LLNP is at odds with broad-based notions of success and achievement. The rhetoric of the government in the first part of this paper, and elsewhere, does not match this punitive approach to provision. This sort of provision, with its focus on limited choice for students, narrow outcomes and short term competitive tendering is not a firm basis for an educational revolution. This paper merely suggests tinkering around the edges of the Coalition's punitive policy. It does not offer a comprehensive approach for social inclusion and building a highly skilled workforce. With the exception of two other very specific programs, the AMEP program for recent adult migrants and the WELL program for people in the workplace, the LLNP is the only Commonwealth program with a focus on language, literacy and numeracy. If this is to continue to be the case then the LLNP services needs to be overhauled so that it can truly be a program that promotes both social inclusion and an increasingly skilled workforce, a program that offers adult students both the time and the opportunity to learn in a way that will enrich lives as well as open up possibilities for sustainable futures. We look forward to working with you to achieve this.

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On behalf of VALBEC