



▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Building sustainable adult literacy policy and provision in Australia: A review of international policy and programs

Rosa McKenna and Lynne Fitzpatrick

▶ **THIS REPORT COMPARES** six English speaking Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) participants in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The comparison countries are Canada, New Zealand, the United States, Ireland, the United Kingdom and Australia. Significant proportions (45%–55%) of their adult populations fall into the lowest two of the five International Adult Literacy Survey levels.

Information was sought on each country's economic situation; adult literacy regulation, funding and quality assurance; conceptualisations of adult literacy; and the preparation for literacy teachers.

Canada, an English and French speaking nation with a diverse ethnic population of 33 million, lacks a coherent national adult literacy policy or system. Largely as a result of the survey, a 2003 parliamentary report recommended a federal literacy policy and doubling the funding (currently C\$23 million) for Canada's National Literacy Secretariat. The Secretariat, which is augmented by seven key English or French literacy institutions, provides national leadership and funding in partnership with provincial governments and local providers.

Canada also supports a National Adult Literacy Database and has established the Essential Skills Framework which describes the skills adults need that are linked to occupations. Some innovative literacy provision is undertaken through community-based approaches. There is no national framework for literacy teacher training.

New Zealand (Aotearoa) has a population of four million with 20% of the population either Maori or Pasifika people. Following major reviews, a Tertiary Education Commission

was established in 2002, with NZ\$12 million allocated annually for implementing expanded strategies for adult literacy and English for speakers of other languages.

New Zealand adult literacy provision assists about 20 000 students and occurs mainly through Literacy Aotearoa's community-based providers, the New Zealand Centre for Workforce Literacy Development, and the Kiwi Ora program for all new immigrants. Certification of literacy teachers is being linked to the New Zealand Qualifications Framework.

The United States has an extremely diverse population of 290 million. A 1992 International Adult Literacy Survey trial found that 90 million Americans were only functioning at the first two levels of literacy.

Recent United States policy includes the 'no child left behind' education reform and the 2003 *Literacy Act*, which re-authorises the National Institute for Literacy as the national coordinating body. The tri-agency National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) coordinates national policy while the Office of Vocational and Adult Education distributes national literacy funding. Total federal literacy funding, nearly US\$1.2 billion for about 2.9 million enrolments, is augmented by contributions from the states and from business. The United States National Reporting System is mandated for this funding. Most paid literacy instructors are part-time employees.

Unlike other study countries, the United States is turning away from frameworks which describe the skills needed by adults, such as its own 'Equipped for the Future', and aligning literacy more with traditional (school) basic skills outcomes.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Ireland with a population of nearly four million demonstrated extremely poor 1995 International Adult Literacy Survey results, prompting a policy review and the subsequent 2000 National Adult Literacy Plan. Previously minimal, literacy funding now exceeds 70 million Irish pounds in the development plan for 2000–2006.

Ireland's National Adult Literacy Agency coordinates research and service delivery. Over 100 vocational education committee adult literacy schemes offer tuition for 23 000 learners, up 400% from 1997.

With an ethnically and culturally diverse population of 60 million, the United Kingdom has the most comprehensive system and learning infrastructure for adult literacy of any of the countries reviewed.

The Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit coordinates policy. The Learning and Skills Development Agency is the strategic agency for post-16 education and training, while the quasi-government Basic Skills Agency pursues literacy development, and the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy comprise of university members.

Survey results from 1997 influenced the Department of Education and Employment policy, *Skills for life*, which sets national curriculum and quality standards, and targets the neediest adults requiring literacy and numeracy or English language support. Over 2001–2004, the United Kingdom plans to increase adult literacy expenditure by 55% and participation from 400 000 to 750 000.

The National Learning and Skills Council plans and funds literacy and English for speakers of other languages programs, usually at further education colleges. Jobseekers and other benefit recipients may receive support and there are literacy initiatives for early school leavers.

Australia has a population over 19 million with about 12% of the adult population engaged in vocational education and training (VET).

After the 1987–1996 'literacy decade', Australia wound back national literacy policy and funding. Currently, adult literacy is taught informally, through accredited courses, and by embedding literacy instruction in training packages and VET qualifications. A National Reporting System for language and literacy outcomes was developed after 1996.

National literacy programs, costing about AUD\$160 million and serving over 70 000 students in 2001, are the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program; the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme for jobseekers; and Adult Migrant Education Programme (AMEP).

Messages for policy and practice

A significant proportion of adults in the study countries are at low International Adult Literacy Survey levels and may have difficulty with everyday literacy tasks. Many of these will remain in the labour market for a number of years, so that interventions to improve their literacy should target the post-compulsory education system. Literacy requirements will continue to expand to include more information and more communications technology.

In all countries studied, adult literacy tends to be marginalised, and often adults most in need do not actually receive literacy education. All countries have developed or are in the process of developing national policies and strategies. The United Kingdom has developed the most comprehensive policy and provision while federations like Australia, Canada and the United States need to engage the cooperation of the states, territories and provinces as well as key stakeholders to successfully implement strategies.

This study suggests national adult literacy policy should include a national leadership structure, national research and referral programs, flexible funding arrangements and diverse delivery models, consistent reporting and quality assurance, and reliable supply and maintenance of teachers.

Australia's post-compulsory education system has some of these features in place for a national literacy policy, but literacy goals and targets need to be established. The new national VET strategy is an opportunity to develop a literacy action plan.

The United Kingdom, Ireland, and New Zealand have identified levels of their qualifications frameworks in which basic or foundation skills are developed. Australia should do similar, so that adult literacy needs can be identified and tracked.

Lack of capacity or skill in the teaching workforce is a barrier to effective adult literacy provision. The United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand and Australia have policies which embed literacy teaching qualifications in national frameworks and upgrade professional development.

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