Reading Writing Hotline
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Engaging Adult Literacy Learners: A Literature Review

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Executive Summary

The aim of this review is to explore good practice in engaging adults in literacy education. Across Australia there are adults currently experiencing literacy challenges who may wish to engage in literacy education but face multiple systemic barriers that prevent access. The conclusion that emerges from the literature is that literacy outreach programs can overcome multiple barriers and successfully link potential learners to appropriate education services.

The literature reveals adults are attracted to literacy education that is based on adult learning principles, is learner-centred, meets immediate needs, is welcoming, and is conducted in safe spaces. Safe spaces are underpinned by the emotional and social environments, which rely on both suitable staff and responsive, flexible governance models. The governance models need to respond to the long-term contexts of literacy learning through sustained funding and be adaptable to provide services tailored to individual's needs and circumstances.

Successful programs often involve activities that respond to real life needs in an engaging way to initially interest people in learning (i.e. programs that use a 'hook' to attract participants). The physicality of the learning space also matters. Place-based and familiar learning spaces are preferred and should include wrap-around services to address logistical issues. These are best served through partnerships between education services and other organisations that meet the broader needs of the learners.

Education providers, literacy advocates and policy makers can apply the insights provided by this review, which is based on a wide range of Australian and international literature, to inform their practices. The review provides information about who potential learners could be, why they are not currently participating in education, what means of informing potential learners about literacy education are effective, and how to engage new learners to inform future programming.

Purpose and methodology

Through a review of current Australian and international literature the Hotline seeks to understand good practice in outreach engagement that links adults experiencing unmet literacy needs to appropriate educational services. The focus of the review is on adults with basic literacy needs, positioned by formal testing regimes, such as the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), as experiencing challenges with day-to-day functional literacy. Across Australia there are adults currently experiencing literacy challenges who may wish to engage in literacy education but face multiple systemic barriers that hinder access. Annual calls to the Reading Writing Hotline (the Hotline) suggest these adults may number in their thousands. National data from the 2012 PIAAC, currently used across Australia to report adult literacy issues, supports this supposition.

The literature has been reviewed for information on the cohorts and individual characteristics of potential learners and the barriers to participation they may experience (in Part 1). This is followed by a review of the literature on ways in which educators have successfully reached potential learners (in Part 2).

The need for information about previous, existing, and potential outreach models has been realised through a series of Australian research articles commissioned by the Reading Writing Hotline (the Hotline). These have consistently reported that across Australia those working at grassroots levels are aware of significant unmet need (Social Equity works 2020; 2022; 2023).

The literature review is drawn from academic journals, VOCEDplus, NCVER and internet searches. Literature types included are academic journal articles, reports for and by governments, Australian Government media releases, organisational reports, conference papers, thesis papers, frameworks, case study reports, and academic books. Where possible a currency range of 10 years is applied. In some instances, older research is used where it has been consulted as a primary source.

The literature review forms the first part of a project to understand the features of outreach literacy models that can raise awareness and engage potential literacy learners in education in Australia. The literature review will be followed by a research project to investigate successful models currently running in Australia. The research will be informed by lessons from the field and the views of both students and practitioners.

Part 1: Reaching new learners

What do we know about potential literacy learners?

Learning to be literate is not a process that is finalised. Ongoing changes in Australian society, such as those noted by 26TEN (2024) in technology, workplace safety, education and in health, create changing literacies. Consequently, adults can require new skills and knowledge for literacy engagements. New vocabulary, new modes of text, new contexts for critical thinking, and new ways of generating texts can require continuous re-engagement with literacy learning. Lifelong literacy involves 'the development, updating or maintenance of one's literacy competencies as a continuous learning process, which occurs before, during and after school education, in and out of school, and through formal, non-formal and informal learning' (Haneman & Robinson, 2022, p. 238). While acknowledging adults may need to develop their literacy skills at any age, stage or level of literacy, this review focuses on adults who may benefit from strengthening their basic literacy skills. For some Australians, this need may be served by organised learning opportunities such as tutoring and classes which strengthen literacy skills.

> ***Literacy empowers and liberates people. Beyond its importance as part of the right to education, literacy improves lives by expanding capabilities which in turn reduces poverty, increases participation in the labour market and has positive effects on health and sustainable development.***
>
> UNESCO (2025)

Existing data is drawn upon to define the extent of adults who may benefit from basic literacy development in Australia today. At the time of writing (October 2025), the Australian Government has commissioned a national foundation skills study. This work includes a survey of adult literacy and numeracy skills, a feasibility study into how best to understand the foundation skill levels of First Nations peoples, and analysis of Commonwealth administrative and other data to gain insights into the skill levels for priority groups (Job Skills Australia, 2025). However, the last PIAAC study Australia took part in was reported in 2013, and in 2025 that data is still heavily relied on to describe levels of literacy: 43.7% of the adult population can find everyday reading and writing challenging and 53% of the adult population can find everyday numeracy challenging (ABS, 2013). In some communities the percentages seem to be higher. For example, a 2017 report found 85% of Aboriginal adults surveyed in the Northern Territory have unmet literacy needs (Shalley & Stewart, 2017).

Appleby (2010) points out that being identified by others as having unmet literacy needs does not necessarily mean self-identification as needing literacy assistance, nor does it imply a desire to engage in literacy education. In recent Australian research this disparity between the motivations of those who seek to reach potential learners and those who fall into the data-set definitions of low literacy has been revealed through the context of literacy mediator research (Blake 2023; Thompson 2024). This research shows that aspiring to join a class is not inherently a motivation for all adults with literacy skill levels that are identified in the data as lower than needed for everyday literacy engagements. Instead, for some people, informal, unplanned, ad hoc, on-demand, in situ support of everyday literacy tasks is provided by empathetic literate people in the community described as literacy mediators (Blake, 2023; Papen & Thériault, 2016; Thompson, 2024). Papen (2012) reports that people draw on literacy mediators when their literacy needs change because they encounter new literacies and/or new contexts that require unfamiliar literacy engagements.

Other adults who fall into the category of low literacy, as determined by formal measures, may already be using successful strategies to navigate their current literacy engagements. For example, NALA (2017) found that some people working in jobs where the literacy demands were low drew on successful strategies and did not therefore feel

the need to currently access formal learning. Becker Patterson & Song found most adults they interviewed valued education but pointed out 'even where deterrents have viable solutions, not all solutions will meet the needs of all adults, and some adults will continue to live productive and happy lives without further education' (2018, p. 14).

This research suggests then that the definition of functional literacy – determined by 'others' as necessary for everyday engagements – does not resonate with the lived experience of all adults who might 'test' at these levels. However, the literature also demonstrates that when presented with opportunities, a significant number of people are keen to be engaged (*for example see* Boughton & Williamson, 2019; Smith, 2023).

Calls to the Hotline over three decades indicate when people have a known and trusted source of help, and the timing is right, they are more likely to actively seek literacy assistance. Since its establishment in 1994, the Hotline has had approximately 185,000 calls from Australian adults who wanted help with reading, writing and numeracy as well as from advocates such as family members, community agencies, or employers calling on their behalf. The Hotline continues to receive up to 4000 such calls annually providing a 'no wrong door' approach to many potential learners.

The Hotline is staffed by qualified adult literacy teachers who undertake in-depth conversations to understand the needs of callers. Their experiences in speaking to advocates who call on behalf of a client, friend or family member show many adults do not know where to reach out for assistance or are not confident to initiate contact themselves and these represent a further cohort of potential learners yet to be engaged. This is supported by the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Importance of Adult Literacy that found there is a need to raise awareness of where people can access support to strengthen their literacy skills (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). There are also some callers to the Hotline who cannot be matched to suitable provision. For example, in the reporting period 4 January 2021 - 30 June 2023 the Hotline received 9532 incoming calls/emails. Of these, 1335 people seeking a local class could not be linked to a suitable source of assistance. These adults represent a cohort of potential learners who, though actively seeking assistance, are unable to access appropriate literacy education.

Additionally, the Literacy for Life Foundation found large numbers of adults in remote Aboriginal communities would engage in literacy learning if presented with appropriate opportunities (Boughton & Williamson, 2019). Both sources provide evidence that there are many adults across Australia who have a desire to increase their literacy skills but are not yet engaged in literacy education either because there is not the appropriate help available or there is appropriate help available, but they are not aware of those opportunities.

Together the data and literacy mediation research suggest there are individuals and/or cohorts of adults, who are either not currently known or not linked to educational services, who might benefit from literacy education. They are referred to in a number of ways in the literature, including hard to reach, vulnerable, second chance learners, at risk, disadvantaged, non-traditional and non-participating (in education) and are generally presumed to be under-represented in other educational spaces.

The barriers adults face, which include a range of systemic issues (discussed in detail later in this review) demonstrate many factors may contribute to a status of not being currently engaged in education and these factors are largely beyond the control of the individual. Terms such as those listed above may position adults as personally responsible for overcoming the barriers they face. Instead, in this discussion the term 'potential learner' is used, which situates these adults as potential future learners. This puts the focus on policy interventions to address systemic issues and remove barriers, rather than situating overcoming barriers as an individual responsibility.

Little of the literature speculates about potential learners who are not yet known to educators. Instead, potential learners are described by drawing upon the types of adults who have historically, and who currently, engage in basic literacy tuition. These descriptors are broad and generalised. They are included here tentatively, with the acknowledgement that each adult is an individual, has their own history, needs, barriers and motivations.

Based on current cohorts being reached by literacy education courses, the literature indicates potential learners may include any combination of:

- early school leavers

- youth not engaged in education or employment
- mature age workers
- later life learners or older people (who may be post-work)
- First Nations people, particularly in remote areas
- people impacted by the justice system
- those returning to learning after a long period of absence from study and or work
- asylum seekers
- carers
- those who have been carers and now have reduced loads
- people returning to study because they do not feel their school education was complete
- workers seeking different roles
- workers who are re-skilling
- unemployed persons
- under-employed people
- people experiencing homelessness
- adults experiencing social and economic disadvantage
- people experiencing drug and alcohol problems
- people experiencing mental health problems
- individuals of working age who are neither working nor studying
- those identified in basic skills surveys (such as PIAAC) who are not engaged in education.

The cohorts above are drawn from the following sources: Becker Patterson (2018), Boughton & Williamson (2019), Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (2025), Foley & Ollis (2024), Goodacre & Sumner (2020), Harrison et al. (2020), O'Dwyer and Mihelic (2021), NALA (2017), and Savelsberg et al. (2017).

The very term 'potential learners' indicates all cohorts and individuals are not yet known, so this list may not be exhaustive.

What is an outreach approach to adult literacy?

Forms of outreach have historically occurred in literacy education spaces in Australia. For example, Bee (2014) describes outreach in vocational education and training (VET) as a general education service that started in 1974 in TAFE NSW. It included seeking potential learners who faced barriers to accessing vocational education and training, understanding their educational needs, teaching in place-based settings, and being part of local community development. Outreach, in this TAFE NSW context, was designed to 'reach out into the local community... It would go out and be visible and proactive in researching the needs and wishes of individuals and groups ...enabling individuals from all walks of life and from all areas of the state to acquire and improve vocational competency, develop talents and pursue interests' (Bee, 2014, p. 71).

In 2008, Volkoff et al. reported around 31% of Australian TAFEs were actively seeking to reach disadvantaged learners. This was labelled a 'community obligation approach' and was based on forming partnerships with community agencies to identify 'groups not yet accessing TAFE training' (p.18). More recently, Lamb et al. (2018) described outreach being used by VET RTOs as a series of actions rather than as a role. These actions include local and targeted advertising, collaboration with other local educational services, holding classes in community or informal settings, flexible learning schedules, flexible courses and programs to adapt to local needs, and local partnerships with community organisations (p. 31).

Outreach occurs in community education spaces. In Victoria, Learn Locals have used outreach to attract potential learners described as very disengaged or disadvantaged (ACFE, 2013a; 2013b). Current Victorian programs, such as *Reconnect* (Victorian State Government, 2025) require providers to 'locate, engage and attract eligible individuals back into a learning environment using a variety of methods such as outreach, leveraging existing networks, and referral pathways' (para. 3). These outreach and engagement activities involve locating, engaging and attracting potential learners.

In Tasmania, the 26TEN program engages in outreach through state-wide community information programs about adult literacy issues. The model uses community-tailored

approaches to engage local people in literacy education. A community coordinator is place-based (situated in the community). Their role is to develop an understanding of the characteristics of the local community, including literacy services and supports, and foster links and engagement with the services (26TEN, 2024). This outreach model addresses the unique needs of each community and its members.

In a Tasmanian prison, where low literacy rates are assumed to be up to approximately 80%, Johnson (2021) describes the library service as an outreach program that aims 'to reach the prison cohort who are not participating in reading or education because of low literacy and confidence' (p. 7). Prisoners are initially engaged by low-risk activities such as informal learning in groups, one to one tutoring and support to read and record books for their children. These non-threatening activities can lead to involvement in more formal and sustained learning.

The Literacy for Life Foundation engages Aboriginal communities through an adult literacy campaign model based on community involvement known as Yes, I Can! (or 'Yo Si Puedo'). Involvement is generated in a process of first actively engaging with the community to create interest and a sense of ownership (Boughton et al., 2022). The premise is that the program allows the community 'to themselves take on responsibility for addressing the issue of low literacy in their adult populations' (Boughton & Williamson, 2019, p. 296). An understanding of the context of each community is essential for this phase, called *Socialisation and Mobilisation,* which involves extensive consultation in the community, including visits to every house to discuss literacy. The subsequent high uptake of the program is attributed to the household survey/visit and word of mouth. Significantly, the initial interest and uptake results in high retention and this is also attributed to the community-based nature of the model and the response to local and individual needs (Boughton & Williamson, 2019).

Beyond the field of adult education, outreach models in Australia exist in social service areas. For example, Social Equity Works (2020) describes community service organisations with form-filling services established to help clients complete forms and register for online government sites while Dandolo partners and The Paul Ramsay Foundation (2022) refer to 'linkers'. Linkers 'sit outside the system and are focused on participant aspirations and priorities. Relationship-building, client-led goal setting and

service system navigation is the explicit purpose and focus of their role' (p. 4). An important role of linkers is that they address barriers to accessing relevant services through 'individualised, relationship-based practices' (p. 3).

In other contexts, outreach serves to link specific services or organisations to new clients. For example, The State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network (2016) describe outreach workers as moving within the community and going out to people in socially isolated groups to encourage engagement with library services (p. 29).

What barriers does outreach address?

Both international and Australian literature is drawn upon to understand issues that may act as barriers to participation in adult literacy education. However, much of the research discusses barriers to adult education generally rather than specifically adult literacy education. Some sources draw on institutional, situational or dispositional categories (*for example*, Becker Patterson, 2018; Becker Patterson & Song, 2018; MacKeracher et al., 2006; Sualehi, 2023). Institutional barriers are created by operational processes, systems and policy requirements. Situational barriers are created by circumstances such as work and carer roles. Dispositional barriers relate to self-perception and self- efficacy or the 'ability to envision themselves as successful' (Sualehi, 2023, p. 69).

These resonate with the literature that looks more closely at adult literacy education, although for potential literacy learners there is added emphasis on multiple systemic barriers. In Australia, Social Equity Works (2022) reports 'a better understanding of these barriers can help in the design of better programs, courses and learner support resources and assist with the re-design of systemic barriers such as enrolment processes' (p. 22).

Themes relating to barriers to participation in adult literacy education noted in the literature include:

- Multiple systemic barriers
- Community perceptions and understandings of adult literacy
- Logistical issues in accessing literacy education

- The two digital divides (access issues and skills issues).

Multiple systemic barriers

For adults with unmet literacy needs there can be multiple systemic barriers to accessing assistance. These can be caused by fragmented services and reactive, rather than pro-active, programs (Dandolopartners and the Paul Ramsay Foundation, 2022). Fragmented services are also problematic for digital access, where multiple services and siloed approaches pose 'significant risks, including inefficiencies, duplication, gaps in service delivery, and lost potential' (ADIA, 2025). Dandolopartners and the Paul Ramsay Foundation (2022) explain 'experience of the 'sharp edges' of the service system often leads people to carry trauma or distress, discouraging further interaction' (p.3). These systemic barriers can be exacerbated for adults with low literacy: Grummel found the impact of previous negative educational experiences and the resulting self-doubt is often 'intertwined with structural and cultural inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity and disability that intersect across people's lives' (Lynch, 2021 cited in Grummel, 2023, p.152; *see also* DEWR, 2024, p. 13; *and,* Social Equity Works, 2022).

> ***Limitations of the current service system mean the people who benefit most from support are most likely to miss out.***
>
> Dandolopartners and the Paul Ramsay Foundation (2022, p.3).

Another systemic barrier is caused by ineffective dissemination of information about education services. Not knowing what opportunities are available is a recognised barrier in Australia, where adult education entry information is fragmented and difficult to navigate (Commonwealth of Australia Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019; *see also* 2019; O'Dwyer and Mihelic, 2021; Social Equity Works, 2022; The Smith Family, 2024). Information that is difficult to access, read, and understand forms a cluster of barriers, particularly when the information is needed for finding programs, navigating enrolment processes, and coping with study finances (*see* Becker Patterson,

2018; Condon et al., 2025; NALA, 2017; Social Equity Works, 2022; Volkoff et al., 2008; Windisch, 2016).

> ***Some adults simply did not know adult education existed within reach.***
>
> Becker Patterson & Song (2018, p. 4)

In the United States, Condon et al. (2025) surveyed potential adult learners and identified misunderstanding about the costs associated with literacy learning and lack of knowledge about service availability as major barriers: 80% of respondents were unfamiliar with adult learning programs. Notably, a high number (84%) expressed strong or moderate interest in enrolling when information was provided. Similarly, The Literacy for Life Foundation in Australia found that of over 400 adults given information about literacy classes in a three-year period, 55% expressed interest. Of those, 62.5% started classes when they became available (Boughton & Williamson, 2019).

The intersection of multiple barriers can place those with low literacy in a situation of precarity. Precarity, as described by Barber (2002 cited in Papen & Thériault, 2016, p. 186), can include issues arising from financial instability, uncertain housing, family and social issues, mental and physical health, education and substance abuse. Health issues are often conflated with other barriers. Examples from the literature include medical issues, mental health issues, and disability. Becker Patterson (2018) found that 18% of non-participants studied wanted to engage in education but could not because of health barriers.

For some vulnerable adults, barriers imposed by their social contexts can limit access to education. Where family or peer support is not provided, adults can be prevented from engaging in both direct and indirect ways. Appleby (2008) describes the relationship between violence, learning and literacy as pervasive and often invisible. Examples include people in abusive or coercive relationships (Appleby, 2008; Voth Schrag and Edmond, 2017). In such cases there is a lack of individual agency. Voth Schrag and Edmond (2017) discuss 'school sabotage' which has a negative impact on women attending community colleges in the United States. Some school sabotage is

direct and purposeful, such as harassment within the educational precincts and physical intervention preventing attendance. Indirect barriers include lack of assistance with time-management or with sharing of carer responsibilities, no safe conducive space or time in which to do homework, and absence of emotional support (Appleby, 2008; Broek et al., 2025; Voth Schrag and Edmond, 2017).

Community perceptions and understandings of adult literacy

On a societal level in Australia there is little conversation that explains and normalises changing adult literacy demands across the lifespan, particularly in the context of multiliteracies. In this review only the Reading Writing Hotline was found to provide Australia-wide information about adult literacy aimed at the general community. Lack of information about the value of adult literacy education can impact potential learners' perceptions of their own needs and their beliefs about their ability to succeed in education and the worth of undertaking literacy learning as an adult. Attitudes towards adult literacy at a local community or peer/family level can also act as a barrier to participation, particularly where potential learners are not encouraged or supported.

Perceptions about adult literacy can prevent others from offering assistance. For example, Easton et al. (2013) found healthcare workers assumed adults with low literacy presented as not capable of functioning and were thus easily recognised. The research indicated many adults with literacy gaps did not self-identify and were not identifiable by others. Similarly, in the Tasmanian agriculture sector, it was found people often assume low literacy is the result of low intelligence (26TEN, 2020). Such perceptions present two issues. Firstly, there is likely to be no assistance for those who may not be fully or accurately engaging in written communication and secondly, it becomes less likely that adults will ask for assistance when they risk being perceived as less intelligent.

International literature explores the impact of self-perception on accessing education. Windisch (2016) suggests some adults may not recognise they have difficulties and that this is particularly the case when numeracy skills are low (*see also* MacKeracher et al., 2006; Melrose, 2014). This is compounded when family and friends also have low

literacy or numeracy. Drawing on Finnie and Meng (2005), Windisch explains 'individuals often assess their literacy and numeracy skills relative to a local norm (e.g. friends or colleagues), which can make them unaware of basic skills problems shared by their social network' (2016, p. 286). This aligns with the findings of Appleby (2010) who pointed out adults who fall into the societal category defined as low literacy do not necessarily define themselves this way. For example, for some employed adults, it is suggested improving basic literacy and numeracy is not considered to be a priority because either it is not a demand of their current job, or they are already engaging in successful coping strategies (NALA, 2017).

> ***Adults come with so much shame to learning: We are much more risk averse than children having had years of (often unprocessed) shame experiences. Adult learners, especially nontraditional students or those in adult basic education, are often in educational shaming recovery.***
>
> Walker (2017 p. 368)

The Australian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Importance of Adult Literacy reported that on a societal level there is an issue with the discourse that surrounds adult literacy. It was suggested that to address shame and stigma there is a need to normalise speaking respectfully about literacy gaps (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, 3.143).

For those adults who do perceive their own literacy levels as not currently sufficient for their needs, socio-emotional impacts, underpinned by societal perceptions of adult literacy, can create barriers to engagement with literacy education. Adults challenged by everyday literacy demands are often impacted by shame and embarrassment and are therefore reluctant to come forward to seek support (26TEN, 2020; Alkema, 2020; Becker Patterson, 2018; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2022; Pierre et al., 2022; Social Equity Works, 2022; Windisch, 2016).

Grummel (2023) describes 'heavy burdens of oppression from negative schooling experiences and subsequent socio-economic, cultural and political misrecognition' (p.152) that impact the self-belief of many adults with low literacy. These experiences make adults reluctant to engage due to feelings of self-doubt. Fear of failure, lack of confidence and uncertainty around their own capacity to learn are common barriers to seeking formal learning opportunities (*see* 26TEN, 2020; Aker et al., 2023; Alkema, 2020; Becker Patterson, 2018; Condon et al., 2025; Harrison et al., 2020; NALA, 2017).

Conversely, Black (2023) argues few adults are impacted by shame and embarrassment: 'There were some…who did appear to experience low literacy as a personal failing and who internalized shame, but others did not and were relatively untroubled in their everyday lives, often because they had social networks of support… there were few comments that indicated a disposition of shame' (pp. 178-180). However, Black goes on to explain, 'a contributing factor to this lack of expressed shame and stigma was that many of the students I interviewed were born overseas where English was not their main language (i.e. ESL/EAL). While they may have lacked English language and literacy proficiency, they were often multilingual and proficient in many other written scripts' (pp.178-180). Holden (2022), in describing the current challenges of reaching potential learners for a rural volunteer tutor literacy program explains 'There is no shame in learning a second language, but lots for adults in learning to read and write their first language. Despite every service proclaiming the great need in the area for speakers of English as their first language to access this kind of help we are only seeing a few come through the doors' (p. 4).

Mindset status also presents a barrier to engagement when beliefs, influenced by societal (mis)perceptions of adult literacy, impact motivation. For example, thinking it is too late to learn in adulthood, or fixed learning beliefs such as an idea that some people are not good at maths and never will be (Melrose, 2014; NALA, 2017; Pierre et al., 2022). Becker Patterson (2018) adds that maths anxiety can be a further barrier, as can general anxiety and fear (Becker Patterson & Song, 2018). As an example, Goodacre & Sumner (2020) discuss self-perception in the context of dyslexia and the need to address stigma and misinformation. They note that when diagnosed with dyslexia some people perceive this as an additional barrier to learning, taking 'a "deficit" perspective and

report[ing] embarrassment about being identified' as dyslexic. Conversely, when the diagnosis was accompanied by a positive explanation, the adults 'appeared more positive and self-assured about their dyslexia' (p. 91). Where adults have not been encouraged to embrace a growth mindset they may be inclined to believe education as an adult is not worthwhile.

Following from perceptions of self-belief are uncertainties regarding the usefulness of literacy development and literacy classes (Aker et al., 2023). NALA (2017) refers to 'self-serving cognitive biases' (p. 42) relating to stereotypical assumptions around the value of education. For example, that people who have higher qualifications can still be unemployed or underemployed, or that getting a job is about personal connections rather than education. In Australia, in remote Aboriginal communities it was found that lack of employment and further education options contributed to doubt around the worth of literacy education for adults (DEWR, 2024).

In some instances, simply not having a support system is a barrier to engagement (Becker Patterson & Song, 2018). However, in other cases the support system can have a direct impact by situating educational achievement as undesirable. This is an impact of social/peer and inter-generational literacy issues and expectations where education is not valued or is undervalued (Becker Patterson, 2018; NALA, 2017, Savelsberg et al., 2017). For example, Becker Patterson (2018) found many younger adults in the US who were not participating in adult education lacked parental role models or were not encouraged by parents to participate. Similarly, an Irish study concluded for those whose social contacts are both unemployed and not engaged with education there is little motivation (NALA, 2017).

In South Australia, Savelsberg et al. (2017) found 'many participants reported lacking social supports within their existing networks that are necessary to engage educational and employment pathways' (p. 52). In a more direct example, Becker Patterson and Song (2018, pp. 5-6) heard from an adult who perceived strong anti-education pressures from social networks. He explained that in his community it is the norm to reject education, and the impacts of trying to engage in education as an adult had social ramifications, including loss of trust by peers and loss of social inclusion. Without role

models, adults may not know how to engage and may not be aware of the potential benefits of adult education.

Logistical issues in accessing literacy education

Logistical issues have been identified as barriers to accessing literacy education both in Australia and internationally. Logistical barriers are often noted to be conflated with economic and social barriers. These include geographical remoteness, transport, access to childcare, cost of attending, timing of educational services, lack of internet access, and balancing personal and work pressures (*see* 26TEN, 2020; Jones, 2014 in Aker at al., 2023; Becker Patterson, 2018; Becker Patterson & Song, 2018; Condon et al., 2025; DEWR, 2024; O'Dwyer and Mihelic, 2021; Social Equity Works, 2022; The Smith Family, 2024; Wibrow et al., 2025). Social Equity Works (2022) found lack of transport, no childcare, costs associated with study, and times of classes were consistently identified as reducing opportunities to participate, and for people in Australian regional and remote areas, transport is particularly problematic (*see also* O'Dwyer and Mihelic, 2021).

The two digital divides

Digital literacy is a barrier to engagement with education. Digital literacy barriers are created by both access issues and skills issues. Sualehi (2023) describes this as two digital divides. The first digital divide is access to the tools, and the second is the ability to use the tools. For adults who also face reading and writing challenges, the second divide is exacerbated.

In the US, Becker Patterson & Song found adults who are potential literacy learners are often already highly engaged with technology and suggest this 'is positive news for adult education outreach and instruction and could be a support' (2018, p. 14). However, in Australia, lack of connectivity, access to a device or ability to pay for an online presence can exclude many adults from locating information about services. In regional Australian areas this is a more common barrier to participation (O'Dwyer and Mihelic, 2021; Social Equity Works, 2022). According to ADIA (2015) 'almost 24% of Australians remain either 'excluded' or 'highly excluded', with divides between capital cities and regions, a pronounced gap between First Nations and non-First Nations people, and

lower levels of digital inclusion for a range of other disadvantaged cohorts' (p. 5). Additionally, ADIA (2025) raises the barrier of 'connectivity literacy' which is about understanding, selecting, and optimising connections to the internet. An Australian survey of literacy teachers found the greatest barrier to engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns was equally the lack of, or limited, access to the internet software and lack of access to computer hardware (ACAL, 2020; *see also* Social Equity Works, 2022). These barriers impact the ability to locate services and to participate in online learning opportunities.

Having issues with reading and writing when using devices compounds barriers to finding out what options are available. The Covid-19 pandemic illustrated the impact of the digital divide on those for whom (one or both of) the digital divides create a barrier. There were reports of exclusion from accessing essentials such as healthcare, financial assistance, shopping and social connections (Aguilera & Salas-Isnardi, 2024; Social Equity Works, 2022). Literacy teachers in Australia reported that for learners with high literacy needs it was often not possible to assist them in the digital environment (ACAL, 2020).

Part 2: How are potential literacy learners engaged?

Broek et al. (2024) point out that systemically adult education systems are structured to work for those individuals who can take self-responsibility for engagement.

A goal of *no wrong door* to adult literacy education thus needs to embed systems for helping potential learners find an appropriate entry point: literacy outreach seeks to locate and engage adults who, for whatever reason, are unlikely to initiate and follow through a connection to literacy education services on their own. To do this, multiple systemic barriers need to be addressed.

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government deliver: in consultation with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment, peak bodies and key stakeholders, a national campaign to destigmatise and raise awareness in the community about the challenges people with low language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (LLND) skills experience, the benefits of improving LLND skills, where people can receive support and the education options available to them.

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia (2022, 3.219).

Understanding why adults engage in literacy learning

Research has found common reasons for voluntary engagement by adults in cohorts who are impacted by multiple barriers. These may provide insight into how to reach other potential learners. They include:

- seeking to meet specific goals
- seeking to meet personal affective goals, including self-confidence
- encouragement from social connections (such as friends and family)
- seeking social connections and activity
- referrals (for example, by health professionals or employment agencies).

Research into Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria found people were motivated by opportunities to establish, or re-establish, social relationships. Harrison et al. (2020) reported people came to the centre at 'a time in their lives when they were experiencing change and disruption to social connections and networks as the result of moving to a new town, redundancy or unemployment, isolation, or due to complex life and family issues' (p. 478). In an Irish study, almost 50% of those included 'were motivated to seek further learning for personal self-confidence reasons; half that number (25%) cited career reasons as their primary motivation. The majority were seeking courses on reading and writing' (NALA, 2017, p. 17).

NALA (2017) surmised the opportunity to attend education decreases with age yet conversely the motivation for learning increases, largely because of career needs, carer needs and the desire for personal fulfilment. They thus concluded that younger adults need more motivation to engage while older adults need more opportunity.

One study from the US considered supports used by those not participating in education. They were listed as 'liking to learn new things, use of computers, and getting information from television and trusted people in their lives' (Becker Patterson, 2018, p. 57). Although this type of information is rarely discussed across other sources, it is included here for an example of an area that might be better explored to determine if such supports could be leveraged to attract potential learners.

Overcoming barriers to engagement

Themes in the literature indicate seven approaches that work in reaching and engaging potential learners in literacy education. These could inform potential adult literacy outreach services and are discussed in detail in the following sections.

- Ongoing information campaigns
- Using a 'hook'
- Place-based services
- Partnerships between education services and organisations
- Stable funding, long-term program continuity and flexible monitoring and reporting requirements
- Supported outreach staff
- Links to programs that are perceived as worthwhile, characterised by:
    - Education that meets real needs
    - Culturally safe spaces
    - Inclusion of wrap-around services

Broek et al. (2024) reminds us that these measures seek to engage potentially vulnerable and disadvantaged people and 'activating individuals in a holistic manner

requires approaching potential learners as persons who may face a number of challenges needing to be solved before they can engage in learning' (p. 218).

In interviewing adults who were not engaged in adult education, but were potential students, Becker Patterson & Song (2018) reported 'interviewees offered numerous recommendations for adult education to recruit them. One interviewee suggested, "Go everywhere." Another added, "In any setting we [potential learners] are going to be in" (p. 13).

Ongoing information campaigns

For many adults, deciding to access education is a process that occurs over time. Smith (2023) found 'almost all participants agreed that they had seeds planted in their minds prior to actually signing up… Almost all participants indicated that they had been thinking about going back to school for a while. That said, there was consensus that a well-placed ad, sign, or other promotion can help trigger action' (Smith, 2023, p. 3). Similarly, Wilson (2023) reports 'adult learners said they needed to 'build up courage' to make contact, and that process could take a long time… This courageous action sometimes came after months or years of them thinking about taking that first step' (p. 32). Thus, long-term information campaigns are essential.

Reaching potential learners can be dependent on ongoing exposures and raised awareness so, when the time is right for the individual, they have the personal resources to access services. Long-term mass communication campaigns can be successful in reaching potential learners both directly and indirectly (through family, friends and services). In addition to facilitating direct engagement with learning opportunities, ongoing mass information campaigns can address reluctance to engage caused by shame and embarrassment, assure potential participants that learning as an adult is possible, and build awareness of the benefits of strengthening basic skills (26TEN, 2024; NALA, 2017; Windisch, 2016). 26TEN also posits that widespread information to create acceptance of adult literacy variations and to increase community understanding about reasons for literacy gaps in adulthood can 'reduce the stigma that stops people from seeking help, and the embarrassment that may prevent others from

offering it' (2024, p. 3). 26TEN point out that awareness raising has long-term benefits but also requires long-term commitment and ongoing communication because removing barriers to seeking assistance for unmet literacy needs involves significant cultural change (2020, p.14).

In Australia, the Hotline and 26TEN use successful long-term mass communication campaigns. The Hotline has provided a national information campaign since 1994. Perlgut (2024) reports the Hotline actively invests and engages in continued awareness raising and people are most effectively reached through television, radio, the website, word of mouth, brochures, posters and social media. These channels are also suggested by ACAL (2022) and NALA (2017). The Hotline campaign encourages potential learners to 'have a go'. Similarly, Irish research found advertising campaigns that centred on 'not regretting starting a course' resonated with potential learners, as do real people telling real stories (NALA, 2017).

Significant awareness raising occurs in Tasmania through the 26TEN long-term information campaign, with points of emphasis throughout each year such as literacy awareness workshops and the annual 26TEN Week. This includes action in workplaces, educational services, community spaces, government channels, and other organisations (26TEN, 2024). One tranche of both the 26TEN and the Hotline campaigns that is not widely reflected in other literature is a focus on providing education about plain English and its impact. Another aspect of the 26TEN campaign is promotion of a resource to create individual conversations about literacy via a step-by-step guide to start conversations that encourage those with low literacy to seek help. Similar approaches are used in Germany and Turkey (Windisch, 2016).

Ongoing communication and facilitating conversations about adult literacy are important because research suggests educational information is often relayed by word of mouth, and particularly by relatives and friends (Barton et al., 2006; Boughton & Williamson, 2019; Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, 2025; DEWR, 2024; Melrose, 2014; O'Dwyer and Mihelic, 2021; Smith, 2023; State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2016; The Smith Family, 2024; Wibrow et al., 2025; Windisch, 2016). Word of mouth is particularly noted as an effective way to attract new

learners in regional and remote areas of Australia (O'Dwyer and Mihelic, 2021; Wibrow et al., 2025).

Becker Patterson (2018) further suggests word of mouth is important because adults may not be engaged in local activities and additionally may have a lack of 'social trust' (p. 59): 'they tend to place faith in family, friends, and trusted coworkers to gain information. To the extent that … if educators can ally themselves with community and family members who live near or work closely with non-participants, the chances of successful recruitment would rise' (pp. 59-60).

In addition to wide-scale information campaigns, such as those provided by the Hotline and 26TEN, local campaigns consist of activities to raise awareness in communities. These are informed by local events such as fetes and festivals. They can also include visits to schools (to reach parents), visits to community groups, displays in shopping centres, local markets, talking at local events, handing out flyers, and talking to individuals and households (Boughton et al. 2022; O'Dwyer & Mihelic, 2021; State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2016). Localised advertising can draw on personal connections in a direct way: NALA suggests campaigns could encourage people to draw on peer support and encourage them to bring a friend, which can increase participation (2017, p. 14). Smith (2023) further suggests engaging existing students in developing marketing plans to draw on their lived experience.

Consideration of lifespan factors that increase literacy demands can inform targeted localised awareness campaigns. For example, new technology demands, returning to work, work displacement, or other 'trigger points at which people might start thinking about improving their literacy – for example, when a child starts asking, 'Dad, will you read to me?' (State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2016). These trigger points can provide the opportunity to use a 'hook' as an interest point to draw people in.

Using a 'hook'

Much of the literature suggests educational outreach services should seek to attract adults though methods that appeal to their interests. For example, Grummel (2023)

describes a ‘wide range of multi-modal and creative pedagogies’ (p. 158) including arts, music, games, cooking, photographs, digital and historical research. Other examples centre on access to new technologies and opportunities to use tools and devices that are unlikely to be otherwise accessed (Barton et al., 2006; NALA, 2017, p. 38). The hook is designed to ‘pique learners’ interests’ (State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2016, p. 69).

> ***To raise interest in a program you need to be able to sell its relevance to people’s lives and help them to see the benefits it can provide.***
>
> State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network (2016, p. 23)

Some hooks are tangible. For example, Aker et al. (2010) reports on an overseas study that indicates the use of desirable technology (in this case mobile phones) could attract participants and Windisch (2016) says e-learning can attract new cohorts. Further, Bauer (2017) points out that using technology can present a low-risk entry into literacy learning, noting writing online can ‘enable the learner to experiment with ideas, drafting, spelling and self-correction (all good writing strategies) which encourages the risk in writing without the threat of failure or impact on confidence’ (p. 16).

Food and social activities are useful for attracting people (O’Dwyer & Mihelic, 2021; State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2016; Wibrow et al., 2025). For example, ACFE (2013b) describes a program where participants are offered morning tea and the chance to get help with completing forms.

Other hooks make use of known people to draw learners in ‘through someone who is from their own community or culture and who has a practical and authentic understanding of the everyday challenges they face’ (State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2016, p. 23). These may also be high profile people who act as ambassadors (26TEN, 2020; Becker Patterson & Song, 2018; Broek et al., 2024; Windisch, 2016) or former students (Melrose, 2014; O’Dwyer & Mihelic, 2021).

Providing a hook requires knowledge of the community and individuals, including barriers they need to overcome to engage in education. There are numerous examples

of programs where the hook involves being able to help one's children. Often in these programs adults engage either in lessons to learn to read to children or they learn with their children as they read together. In these inter-generational literacy programs adults and children concurrently develop their literacy (Haneman & Robinson, 2022).

A program in Scotland used a hook to attract new learners and engage them in reading and writing skills. The program drew on 'learners' detailed knowledge of the 'beautiful game', football' (Player, 2010). The participants' shared passion (football) was used as 'a potential carrot' and then as a framework for learning reading, writing and numeracy. Significantly, the authenticity of the program was informed through partnerships between several adult learning services, the local council, and the local football club. Being place-based and operating from desirable locations (the football club) was an integral part of establishing trust and attracting learners.

Place-based services

Adults with unmet literacy needs can be reluctant to enter formal education buildings (26TEN, 2024; O'Connor, 2024). Harrison et al. (2020) describe this as feeling alienated from mainstream educational systems. Engagement is more likely to occur when services are placed in locations where potential learners already are: 'it has been found that the more formal approaches of inviting people into 'your space' are less likely to work than approaches that meet people 'on their own turf' in a non-threatening environment (State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2016, p. 23; *see also* Broek et al, 2024).

According to O'Dwyer and Mihelic (2021), in regional Australia the example of friends and family can influence the attendance of new learners. This suggests place-based provision can provide opportunities for word-of-mouth referrals related to the ability to create a localised welcoming space to address reluctance and provide opportunities for what 26TEN (2014) refer to as 'warm referrals': 'the person seeking support is personally introduced to someone who can help them. This helps put them at ease and also reduces the chances of them getting lost in the system' (p. 17). In a remote First Nations community, word of mouth was one of the main ways information about foundation

skills courses was shared, and this was possible because the program coordinators lived in the community (Wibrow et al., 2025).

Community-based and local approaches have been found to be effective in reaching vulnerable adults and those often considered hard to reach because they offer familiarity and convenience (26TEN, 2015; 26TEN, 2024; Barton et al., 2006; Broek et al., 2024; Melrose, 2014; Player, 2010; Social Equity Works, 2022). In NSW, LCSA (2024) describes a range of services that run out of neighbourhood and community centres, including literacy and numeracy projects. Being place-based they: 'act as a gateway and are often the first place of contact by the community for services, information, advice and referrals. They operate on a 'no wrong door and person-centred' approach, where all individuals who come to the centre are helped to navigate to an appropriate response' (p. 9).

Few sources suggest workplaces are a potential source of outreach. However, some report that being busy at work is a barrier to engagement so offering work-based learning could be the best way to reach these adults (Becker Patterson, 2018; Becker Patterson & Song, 2018; NALA, 2017). Similarly, 26TEN involves businesses, workplaces and industry and promotes the value of upskilling the literacy of employees as part of their on-going information campaign (26TEN, 2024).

> ***We know a longer-term, place-based approach will provide the opportunity to build trusting relationships in local communities… This is where adult literacy and numeracy learners can learn best.***
>
> 26TEN (2020)

Taking education to where potential learners are can overcome barriers related to logistical issues (such as transport and associated costs) and hesitancy to engage. For example, Laptops on Legs is a program that goes to organisations who are already working with vulnerable adults (ACFE 2013b). Similarly, Warren et al. (2019) report delivery of financial literacy learning to women in a refuge that was able to take local needs into account because it was place-based. They considered the mobility of refuge

users, and particularly the First Nations women involved, and thus determined the duration and frequency of sessions on a site-by-site basis. They also opened the program to women outside the refuge so those who left the refuge were able to continue through accessing the safe and familiar space. Place-based services such as these have strong opportunities to identify organisations to partner with.

Partnerships between education services and organisations that are already engaged with the potential learners

Partnerships are considered essential for adult literacy services to reach potential learners.

> ***Community partnerships are the cornerstone of outreach. With some creativity, clear communication, and assertiveness, you can work with those around you to deliver the outreach your community needs.***
>
> Smallwood (2009, p. 228)

The following general information on potential partners, benefits of partnerships, and features of successful partnerships is drawn from 26TEN (2024); ACFE (2013a); Aguilera, & Salas-Isnardi (2024); Alamprese & Cheng (2020); Becker Patterson (2018); Broek et al. (2024); Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (2025); Haneman & Robinson (2022); Lamb et al. (2018); Melrose (2014); O'Dwyer, & Mihelic (2021); Rosen (2024); Smallwood (2009); and, State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network (2016).

Across the literature suggestions of potential partners include:

- senior/aged care services
- recreational services
- digital inclusion services
- health and medical services
- affordable housing providers
- women's refuge services
- First Nations community groups
- public libraries
- childcare providers
- youth centres

- job or disability agencies
- government departments such as Departments of Justice
- community support organisations such as parent support programs
- high schools
- disability service providers
- Centrelink
- The Reading Writing Hotline
- vocational rehabilitation services
- employers

Benefits of partnerships: Partnerships serve important purposes in a literacy outreach model. The literature repeatedly points to overall benefits that include:

- contact with potential learners who are accessing the partner service (often suggested also as sources of referrals)
- access to wraparound services to overcome multiple systemic barriers that may prevent engagement
- increased opportunities for staff engagement and shared knowledge and thus potential new projects
- increased opportunities for learners
- building literacy awareness in the partner organisations
- Insight into community needs, particularly where consultation occurs with other organisations who are already working with adults experiencing unmet literacy needs.

Features of successful partnerships: The literature suggests in learner-facing aspects successful partnership models need to:

- go to where the learners are
- be learner-centric to meet individual needs, reasons for learning, and goals
- use customised curriculum and teaching and learning methodologies
- use broad information dissemination strategies by providing information to potential learners in their local community spaces
- include individual planning meetings with potential learners that follow the broad information dissemination strategies
- provide stronger and/or increased opportunities for learners

- avoid duplicating services.

In organisational aspects the partnerships should:

- attract stable funding
- involve adequate planning, especially between partner organisations
- include time for regular and effective communication
- have a process for both maintenance and continuous improvement
- have well defined roles for each partner
- share an agreed governance model for partnership action
- have benefits for all partner organisations
- have benefits for staff including new opportunities to both share and develop their skills and knowledge
- increase the literacy awareness of the partner organisations and understandings of good practice.

In Australian contexts, successful literacy programs in remote Aboriginal communities involve partnerships with both local organisations and individuals. Programs are most successful in attracting participants when they are well-integrated with other community organisations, have community buy-in, involve local people, and continue to foster these community relationships throughout the duration of the program. Community partner organisations often include local Aboriginal corporations, other service providers who give external wrap-around support, organisations offering learner pathways, local employers, local educational services, and government services.

Community buy-in is seen as an essential aspect of success in attracting participants (DEWR, 2024; Guenther et al., 2017). Furthermore, engaging potential learners is increased when local community members are involved. This involvement includes endorsement by Elders, direct and active engagement by community leaders in the program, community advisory groups, past participants taking a mentor role, and staff drawn from the local community. DEWR (2024) found that when programs 'continued to cultivate buy-in and active involvement from community members' they were more successful (p.12).

In another example of a successful partnership, Warren et al. (2019) describe a Western Australian financial literacy program aimed at women who had experienced abuse and noted that the partnership with refuge and shelter staff was important because 'it meant the knowledge remained within the centre and could be further developed in the future… using a train-the-trainer model to embed knowledge about economic abuse into local women's refuges' (p. 503).

One paper suggested social prescribing approaches. Melrose (2014) reported on pilot programs in the UK where those working with disadvantaged cohorts prescribed learning as part of the support package used by partners such as doctors and social workers. The partnership included information by the educational organisation to increase understanding of those already in contact with potential learners, and included a 'clear, simple document about the courses that the partners could then give their clients when referring or 'prescribing' them to provision' (p. 42).

In a US paper, Rosenberg (2017) explored the difficulties associated with creating three outreach partnerships. The relationships were described as 'often challenging', 'difficult work', and requiring 'complex' navigation (p. 66). However, this was clarified as presenting opportunities for significant learning, where negotiation can be used to create better engaged relationships. Importantly, the author noted 'none of these relationships could have succeeded within a single model of a community partner relationship… experiences suggest that we need a more fluid model for how to interact in outreach projects' (p. 71). This research suggests that due to the localised nature of suitable partnerships, outreach models are stronger when they have flexible governance models. Stable funding and long-term continuity are also important.

Stable funding, long-term program continuity, and flexible monitoring and reporting requirements

A repeated theme through the literature is the importance of stable and flexible funding that takes extended timeframes into consideration when dealing with vulnerable cohorts (26TEN, 2020; Grummel, 2013; Melrose, 2014; Savelsberg et al., 2017; State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2016). For example, Grummel

(2013) explains 'the imposition of set timeframes and predefined boundaries of outputs on learning … is a major restriction on learning imposed by systems requirements rather than learners' needs' (p. 156). In explaining that 'improving adult literacy is a long game…results are not guaranteed, and they are hard won', the State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, (2016, p. 58) point to the need for stable funding that is specific to outreach services.

> ***Inconsistent does not necessarily mean non-persistent.***
>
> Carpentieri (2007, p. 20, cited in Grummel, 2023, p. 156).

In addition to extended timeframes, systemic flexibility is required to allow for changes in attendance patterns where funding is not adversely impacted. Due to the precarity experienced by many participants in adult literacy programs, attendance is often not regular and therefore programs move slowly and may not show consistent numbers and outcomes. Attendance in literacy classes can be sporadic (DEWR, 2024). Carpentieri points out 'learners may be 'dipping out' [of learning] for a while, generally because of other responsibilities' (2007, p. 20, cited in Grummel, 2023, p. 156). Although this pertains to literacy provision rather than outreach to attract new learners, the stability of appropriate programs for new learners impacts outreach activity because the programs targeted by outreach need to be available and accessible when people take a step toward engagement: 'program outcomes need to take a long-term approach, scaffolding personal development with incremental learning in order to deliver sustainable engagement and training/educational pathways' (Savelsberg et al., 2017, p. 55). It also suggests outreach might be used to re-engage participants who have previously attended.

Long-term funding is further essential to sustain trust in, and credibility of, local endeavours and subsequently in adult education generally. 26TEN (2020) call for extended time and investment to build place-based 'trusting relationships in local communities' and to achieve sustainable change. In one Tasmanian community the end of funding after two years was reported as significantly impacting learners: 'It is very hard to gain the trust of highly vulnerable people …clients feel abandoned. Green

shoots wither and die' (26TEN, 2020, p. 28). Boughton & Williamson (2019) share the insights of a local community Aboriginal trainer who illustrates the point that consistency and trust underpin participation in adult literacy education: 'If you don't keep going back and showing your support and you're there for them, they'll just back off and won't come' (p. 300).

Flexibility in funding reponsive enrolment and reporting options is needed to enable suitable outreach services and education opportunities for vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts. For example, O'Dwyer and Mihelic (2021) suggest rolling enrolments is important, especially for First Nations students. This is supported by recent research by Wibrow et al. (2025), who found First Nations learners sometimes came across training and joined on the day. Flexibility can also present opportunities to offer individual solutions such as inviting potential learners to come along prior to enrolment to try the class and check if it is suitable, or offering 'taster' courses to allow students to try shorter programs as pathways into other programs (ACFE, 2013b; O'Dwyer & Mihelic, 2021; NALA, 2017).

Another system issue relating to funding is monitoring, which should be supportive rather than punitive. Monitoring and reporting, often linked to funding, are mentioned by several sources as an underpinning enabler (or imposition where not suited to the cohort needs) (*see* Broek et al., 2024; Grummel, 2023; Melrose, 2014). Flexible funding and monitoring systems can provide opportunities to test models and incentivise good implementation practices. For example, in literacy programs in remote Aboriginal communities, 'providers worked with the Department to adjust resourcing allocations in response to implementation opportunities and challenges' (DEWR, 2024, p. 14).

Working in flexible responsive contexts and with people who face complex challenges can cause staff fatigue. It is therefore essential that outreach workers are well supported.

Supported outreach staff

Outreach staff in literacy programs are not a new concept. For example, Osmond (2021) discusses the role of Adult Literacy Officers introduced into TAFE NSW in the late 1970s

and 1980s who set up and supported volunteer tutor literacy programs (*see also* Bee, 2014).

> ***...the adult educators, guidance professionals, administrative staff, managers need a level of professionalism that allows them to build partnerships, engage with different groups of learners, make linkages between policy areas (think outside the box) and be a problem solver.***
>
> Broek et al. (2024 p. 218)

The characteristics of successful outreach workers are informed by ACFE (2013b), Broek et al. (2024), DEWR (2024) and Gelade et al. (2006):

- personal characteristics such as commitment and sensitivity
- a level of professionalism that allows them to build partnerships
- an understanding of the local community or the ability and willingness to develop an understanding.

Informed and supportive staff can address barriers caused by self-perception and previous educational experiences. For example, Goodacre and Sumner (2020) found that teachers who understood the situation of the learners and had training in understanding literacy difficulties were able to counteract the impact of previous negative educational experiences.

Staff retention and continuity tend to underpin successful outreach programs because the potential learners they seek to reach are more likely to engage when they form a relationship of trust with the organisation's representative. The literature suggests outreach workers, as the face of an organisation, represent stability and safety. Programs can therefore be negatively impacted by outreach staff changes. Supporting outreach workers (to retain them) is therefore an important component of building trust in local community contexts (State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2016).

The needs of outreach workers are informed by Broek et al. (2024), Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (2025), DEWR (2024), Goodacre and Sumner (2020), Smallwood (2009), State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network (2016), and Wibrow et al. (2025).

Outreach workers need:

- specific training in understanding adult literacy issues, including potential barriers to engagement and the role shame and embarrassment plays in being engaged
- time and money for:
    - their own professional development, including informal and formal options. For example, involvement in a community of practice and qualification upgrades if desired/needed and community-specific cultural training
    - opportunities to share knowledge and good practice
- structures that maximise the expertise and interests of staff members
- to be matched appropriately to roles and responsibility levels, according to their skills, experience and qualifications
- structures that support the well-being of staff.

Links to programs that are perceived as worthwhile

Literacy outreach seeks to firstly locate adults who may be interested in literacy education, and secondly to support and promote their (voluntary) engagement with appropriate educational services. It follows therefore that outreach activity should be informed by considerations of what potential learners want and need from educational experiences. Reaching out to potential learners to provide information about services needs to be paired with the availability and provision of relevant education ready for when they approach. There are three themes repeated across the literature when considering what type of literacy education is perceived as worthwhile and likely to engage new learners. These centre on education that meets real needs, culturally safe spaces, and the inclusion of wrap-around services.

Providing links to education that meets real needs

For those learners who are impacted by multiple systemic barriers, a learner-centred model is required. This is universally agreed across the literature. An adult literacy learner-centred model recognises learners 'as equal and knowledgeable partners in a learning process where they had the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how they wished to learn' (Ward & Ayton, 2019, p. 3). To achieve this, programs are based on agreed goals but are then flexible enough to evolve to meet changing needs and circumstances, content is authentic and relevant to the learners' lives, and activities are based on adult learning principles and theories (*see* ACFE, 2013a; Aker et al., 2023; Barton et al., 2006; DEWR, 2024; Foley & Ollis, 2024; Grotlüschen et al., 2025; Savelsberg et al., 2017; The State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2016; Warren et al., 2019). This is underpinned by a holistic approach that both acknowledges and responds to individual circumstances, barriers, strengths and needs.

For example, in reporting on successful literacy pilots in remote First Nations communities in Australia, DEWR (2024) found engagement was more likely where the learning space was both welcoming and culturally safe, and the teaching approaches supported individual needs. Importantly, learning achievements were celebrated 'no matter how small' (p. 9).

Culturally safe spaces

Culturally safe spaces are discussed in the literature in two ways. Firstly, in relation to acknowledgement of and respect for cultural background and secondly, in relation to the atmosphere of the learning program.

Culturally responsive teaching and learning relates to both the content covered and the responsiveness of the program to the cultural needs of learners (DEWR, 2024; Guenther et al., 2017; ICAE, 2020; Pierre et al., 2022; Warren et al., 2019). This can include attendance flexibility for cultural obligations, incorporating local culture, and cultural considerations that may impact processes. For example, DEWR (2024) provide examples relevant to Aboriginal learners such as time for Sorry Business, learning on Country, learning in Language, gendered classes, and acknowledging there may be shame associated with attending. Wibrow et al. (2025) found First Nations learners

ideally needed ‘a community support person, First Nations translator and/or First Nations trainer in the classroom’ (p. 16).

The social atmosphere and emotional safety of the educational space is discussed as important for creating trust and enjoyment of learning. The use of local mentors from within the local community is effective in creating safe learning spaces (Boughton et al., 2022; Boughton & Williamson, 2019; ICEA, 2020). Socially inclusive and emotionally safe learning spaces provide welcoming, non-judgemental and accessible opportunities to engage and this is facilitated largely by the attitude of teachers and attention to trauma-informed approaches but is also underpinned by systemic processes such as monitoring requirements (*see* Barton et al., 2006; DEWR, 2024; Foley & Ollis, 2024; Goodacre & Sumner, 2020; Pierre et al. 2022).

Inclusion of wrap-around services

There is widespread agreement that adults who have not previously or recently engaged in literacy learning are likely to require wraparound services if outreach is to effectively link them to learning.

Examples of the types of support required are discussed by ACFE (2013a), Aguilera & Salas-Isnardi (2024), Aker et al. (2023), Becker Patterson & Song (2018), Broek et al. (2024), Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (2025), DEWR (2024), Harrison et al. (2020), ICAE (2020), O’Dwyer & Mihelic (2021), Pierre et al. (2022), Savelsberg et al. (2017), Social Equity Works (2022), State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network (2016), Wibrow et al. (2025), and Windisch (2016).

Useful wraparound services include:

- transport
- childcare
- food and/or kitchen facilities
- links to other services (e.g. healthcare, work experience programs, and volunteering programs)
- formal pathway connections (e.g. with partner organisations for employment or study pathways)
- informal pathway connections (e.g. links to ongoing support after the program)

- mentoring throughout learning and, ideally, that extends post-program
- access to counselling or other mental health and well-being services.

Wraparound services were considered more successful when delivered by the most appropriate service provider. This often requires partnerships with other organisations rather than an in-house approach.

In Australia, Wibrow et al. (2025) found wrap-around services associated with logistical issues for First Nations learners were highly valued. In another example, in a pre-accredited Victorian course described by ACFE (2013b), emotional and motivational wraparound support was provided. It was based on the knowledge that 'ensuring participants take the first step is the biggest challenge' (p. 14). Staff involved in a café skills program called participants on the day prior to the program to say "We're looking forward to seeing you tomorrow." Further support was provided for learners who were absent: phone calls were made to reassure them they were welcome to return whenever they could.

In the US, Becker Patterson & Song (2018) interviewed adults who were not participating in adult education and heard that access to services such as 'support groups, therapy, and classes in grief support or anger management – could assist adults in dealing with feelings of "no hope" or negativity as they considered and started adult education. Adults craved persistence, finding strength, and pushing forward past a "feeling of failure" that kept them from starting education they couldn't finish. Accessing these resources, adults could strengthen self-encouragement and cope with daily survival, community pressures, and family situations' (p.2).

> ***… effective outreach concerns tailored and clear messages for the targeted adults, forging links with the adult communities and lowering specific situational barriers.***
>
> Broek et al. (2024, p. 213)

Conclusion

What we know about potential learners

The literature illustrates there is likely an unmet adult literacy education need in Australia, the extent of which is unknown. This is suggested through both callers to the Hotline who cannot be matched to services, and research showing there is engagement in opportunities when they are made available. While unable to pinpoint exactly who and where potential learners might be, the literature review draws on 21 cohort descriptors that are based on information about past and current attendees. The review concludes the very term 'potential learners' indicates all cohorts and individuals are not yet known, so this list may not be exhaustive.

Further research needs:

- Deeper understanding of who potential learners are in current Australian contexts
- Prediction of future potential learner cohorts in Australian contexts

Clearer understanding of community needs and who and where potential learners are could allow services to use literacy outreach to connect with people in their local communities.

What we know about literacy outreach

The process of reaching and engaging potential learners can be performed through purposeful actions to raise awareness and encourage participation. This is referred to as literacy outreach activity. Effective literacy outreach raises awareness and engages new learners through information campaigns about adult literacy, its value, the availability of programs, and how to access them. Beyond information dissemination, literacy outreach actively helps adults to access and engage with services. This is often achieved through going out into the community and seeking partnerships with other organisations who can assist with both reaching and supporting potential learners.

Outreach has been undertaken in Australia for many decades, although few examples are publicly documented. Currently, outreach services take many forms although, in the case of VET RTOs, tend to be more akin to general business development actions. Beyond the VET system, documented examples of educational outreach that focus on place-based and personalised approaches are currently run by community education providers, community coordinators under the 26TEN model, in prisons, and in First Nations communities. There are further documented examples of outreach in social service areas and libraries.

Literacy outreach can address barriers that may hinder engagement with adult literacy services. These include multiple systemic barriers, community perceptions and understandings of adult literacy, logistical issues in accessing literacy education, and the two digital divides (access issues and skills issues). These require long-term approaches that account for the time needed to identify potential learners, to determine the barriers they face, and to address those barriers. Importantly, time is also needed to build trust. Outreach is therefore effective when it is underpinned by literacy provision that has flexible governance models and funding that allows for these long-term engagements.

The review finds literacy outreach programs are supported when delivered in conjunction with ongoing information campaigns that both raise awareness of the services and also create positive discources about adult literacy. Programs work when they use a 'hook' to appeal to potential learners, and when they are place-based. Partnerships with organisations who already work with potential learners are beneficial. Stable funding, long-term program continuity, flexible monitoring and reporting requirements, and supported outreach staff underpin success. Finally, outreach activity should link to programs that are perceived as worthwhile. That is, education that meets real needs delivered in culturally safe spaces with the inclusion of wrap-around services.

Further research needs: Areas identified in the literature as insufficiently covered in current Australian contexts:

- Documented current models of successful literacy outreach

- Learner voices explaining how they heard about services and why they engaged
- Potential learner voices discussing how they might be encouraged and/or assisted to engage
- How to establish and maintain effective partnerships
- Profiles of outreach staff.

Insights into the processes and roles involved in effective Australian literacy outreach could inform the establishment of localised outreach models to promote services and engage potential learners.

Next steps

The literature review is the first part of a research project undertaken in Australia by the Reading Writing Hotline. The second part of the research project will:

- Conduct, record and analyse a focus group and individual interviews with education providers, and representatives from community groups on their insights into what works for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy engagement.
- Conduct, record and analyse face to face focus groups or individual interviews with diverse learner cohorts on their insights into what works for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy engagement.

The research will seek to identify key principles in engaging potential learners. It will also investigate design and delivery strategies that engage new learners and which are transportable across a range of literacy program delivery contexts.

Appendix: Definitions

Literacy: Adult literacy, understood here as multiliteracies, includes reading, writing, numeracy (the use of maths in everyday life) and digital literacy. These forms of literacy are increasingly digital and include engagements with literacies used in all aspects of adult life, including personal, family, social, community, study, online and work contexts. Thus, in this review, the term literacy implicitly includes both numeracy and digital literacy.

No wrong door: The body of literature consulted suggests there are many barriers to becoming a literacy learner as an adult and effective outreach models could therefore locate potential learners, raise their awareness of educational options, and assist them to overcome barriers if they would like to engage. The premise of the literacy outreach model is to provide the opportunity to be guided toward and assisted to access the most appropriate door to adult literacy learning (with reference to the government's 'no wrong door' approach).

The 'no wrong door' approach, embedded in the Australian 2024 National Skills Agreement, asserts 'if someone needs help and seeks help, governments and those offering foundation skills education will assist people to find the right option for them' (O'Connor, 2024). While it is important to acknowledge that not all adults with low literacy experience disadvantage or multiple barriers, and additionally not all Australian adults with low literacy want or need to access educational services (Thompson, 2024), literacy outreach may serve to raise awareness of educational services for future need: when access to literacy mediators is lost or individuals decide they are able or want to engage with formal education services. The current Commonwealth Government's approach of 'no wrong door' for literacy learners (O'Connor, 2023) could be supported by a literacy outreach model so appropriate services can be found when they are needed.

Outreach: In an education context, reaching and engaging new learners is often referred to as an outreach process. In literacy outreach there is purposeful activity to

disseminate information, reach out into communities through active participation in community development and events, and engage potential learners.

Potential learners: This review uses the term *potential learners*. The aim is to use terminology that is respectful and emphasises the systemic responsibility around engagement. It is guided by a sense of terminology that would be appropriate if talking directly to the potential learners themselves.

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