

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Reading Writing Hotline

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Submission to the Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

About the Reading Writing Hotline

The Reading Writing Hotline is a national phone referral and advisory service for adults seeking help with literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. It has been funded by the Commonwealth for over 30 years, and is managed by TAFE NSW. It receives more than 4000 calls annually.

The Hotline maintains a database of all adult literacy/numeracy providers in NSW and has a unique overview of needs, issues and demand for adult literacy services including digital literacy. Our statistics and case studies provide rich information from the “front line” of adult literacy delivery.

Caller data, Hotline commissioned research findings and partner/stakeholder information provide the basis for this submission.

Contact details

This submission is authored and approved by Vanessa Iles, Manager Reading Writing Hotline.

The importance of volunteers in adult literacy and numeracy

The Reading Writing Hotline welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. Our submission focuses on the role of **volunteer adult literacy tutors**, and on the following terms of reference:

1.The current state of volunteering in Queensland and the value it contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities and the State;

Volunteer adult literacy tutors based in public libraries and community centres have historically played an important part in addressing adult literacy needs in Queensland. Recently many tutoring schemes have closed, resulting in unmet needs in communities and for individuals.

3.The current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and their recommendations for addressing challenges and improving the volunteering experience

Volunteer adult literacy tutoring is rewarding for community members who want to make a difference. It provides a comfortable starting point for adults who are not yet confident to attend a formal class. But literacy tutors need quality training and ongoing support to be successful and remain engaged.

5.The extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector in Queensland and sustainable opportunities for improvement;

Local government can support the growth of volunteer literacy tutoring schemes by minimising barriers for public libraries related to insurance and compliance, and allocating targeted funding to adult literacy volunteer schemes.

7.Opportunities for the Queensland Government to leverage all portfolios to support growth in volunteering across Queensland

State government can support tutoring by increasing the supply of trained specialist adult literacy teachers in TAFEs and RTOs who can train and support volunteers.

8.First Nations peoples volunteering, including in remote and discrete communities, and the role of First Nations volunteering in Closing the Gap;

Trained adult literacy volunteer tutors from within existing First Nations organisations and communities can be a trusted first step to build pathways to training for community members.

1. The current state of volunteering in Queensland and the value it contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities and the State;

The need for one on one adult literacy tutoring by volunteers

In the past five years the Hotline has received over 3,500 calls from Queensland adults seeking assistance with their literacy, so it is clear that literacy needs in our communities are not being adequately addressed. 44% of adult Australians have a literacy level insufficient to meet the demands of everyday life and work in the knowledge-based economy¹. In Queensland this equates to around 1.5 million adults with literacy gaps.

Volunteer tutor programs can play an important role in addressing these needs. Many adults with literacy gaps enrol in a formal course, but for many, this is not possible. There are many communities in Queensland where there are no appropriate courses for adults who wish to improve their literacy skills.

For some, the idea of going to a formal class at a college is a barrier. Adults who had negative experiences at school may not have the confidence for a formal learning program. Embarrassment and shame can further reduce their confidence to be in a group. Starting with a volunteer tutor is often a good first step. Many are then happy to go on to a formal class and begin the pathway back to education.

Examples of calls to the Hotline include:

- Young mum, wants to read to her child and help with their homework but doesn't know where to start. Too anxious to join a class and really wants to work with someone 1:1 to get started.
- Woman doing a Cert III in Business but having trouble writing assessments. Previously went to a library for help but the tutors are no longer available as the library is no longer running the program.
- Community legal centre looking for volunteer tutors to assist with form filling.
- Mother needing help to fill out affidavits for domestic violence support.
- Truck driver struggling to complete vehicle log books. Has been fined for filling them incorrectly, and worried his boss won't keep him on. Working all week so can't attend TAFE classes, and only available on weekends.

¹ [Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011 - 2012 | Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

The value of volunteer adult literacy tutoring programs in Queensland

The Hotline database lists a handful of volunteer adult literacy tutor programs operating from Queensland libraries, and one from a community organisation. There is great potential to capture and expand a valuable community resource by supporting the development of volunteer literacy tutor programs. Community organisations tell us that tutors have enriched their own lives while providing the keys to more satisfying and fulfilling lives for their learners. Libraries have assisted people to:

- gain their Driver's Licence
- gain employment or start their own small business
- write a resume
- improving their grammar, spelling, reading and writing
- read to their children and grandchildren
- write their autobiography or a cookbook of favourite recipes.

2. The current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and their recommendations for addressing challenges and improving the volunteering experience

Volunteer literacy tutoring programs in libraries and community organisations are a key part of improving adult literacy and numeracy levels in Queensland. However, there are significant challenges to starting and maintaining a program. COVID had a major impact with a number of volunteer adult literacy tutoring programs in libraries closing down during this period and not resuming post the epidemic.

Successful adult literacy volunteer programs in libraries need to include:

- A designated program coordinator role
- Expert adult literacy input- from local TAFE or RTO
- Ongoing training for volunteer tutors
- Adult literacy learning resources
- On-going supervision and support for tutors.

5.The extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector in Queensland and sustainable opportunities for improvement;

Resourcing is a key challenge and dedicated funding is required. Libraries have limited staffing budgets and do not necessarily have the expertise in-house to train and support volunteers. Growing the volunteer adult literacy sector in libraries and community organisations requires dedicated funding to assist libraries to fund coordinators, specialist training, and ongoing support and supervision. Some libraries have obtained funding under

Building Better Regions grants, but consistent and sustainable funding is required for a tutor scheme to be viable in a community. The Reading Writing Hotline has developed a structured training course for volunteer adult literacy tutors, available free to libraries and community groups.

The Hotline frequently receives enquiries from people wanting to volunteer as tutors, but very often there is no tutor scheme in their area that we can refer them to. This is a disappointment to the caller, and a loss to learners and the general community.

Local governments also need to address barriers such as insurance, public liability, compliance and privacy concerns through greater flexibility, to enable libraries and community groups to provide the service required without undue extra cost or effort.

7.Opportunities for the Queensland Government to leverage all portfolios to support growth in volunteering across Queensland

As noted above, successful volunteer tutor schemes need to be able to access expert educational input for tutor training. This is generally arranged via local TAFE colleges, but there is an acute shortage of adult literacy specialist teachers.

The Queensland government can support volunteer schemes by increasing the supply of trained specialist adult literacy teachers who can train and support volunteers and librarians. Currently there are no university courses offered in Queensland in adult literacy teaching. Tertiary programs need to be re-established, and new teachers supported through incentives like scholarships and employment guarantees.

There may be opportunity under the National Skills Agreement to use Adult & Community education Foundation Skills funding to support Regional Literacy Coordinator positions to train and coordinate volunteer tutors.

8.First Nations peoples volunteering, including in remote and discrete communities, and the role of First Nations volunteering in Closing the Gap;

Staffing is a perennial challenge in remote communities, and trained adult literacy volunteer tutors from within existing First Nations organisations and communities are a vital first step to building capability. Volunteers can build trust and confidence to support pathways to training for community members. As with libraries, volunteer tutors need to be given quality initial training, and supported by coordinators and expert advice when required.