



Tasmanian
Small
Business
Council

'Uniting Small Business'

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Illiteracy

If compulsory education was a product offered in the commercial world, and the results were as they are presently reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics* (“of those aged 15 to 19 years, 52% attained skill scores lower than Level 3 on the prose scale”) the trade Practices Commission and Consumer Affairs bodies would declare the product as not being of merchantable standard and allow the goods to be returned and demand that a full refund be issued.

This is a matter that deserves urgent attention to address a presently unsatisfactory situation.

The Tasmanian Small Business Council has received many reports of the unsatisfactory standard of literacy among job seekers. Our members concerns have also been expressed by other employer representatives both in Tasmania and nationally.

While past comments have been anecdotally based, the concern has now been confirmed by recently released survey results prepared by the Australian Bureau of Statistics ref. 4228.0 “Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey”

While literacy levels are bad, worse still is the fact that of the same cohort some 57% are innumerate*

The data demonstrates that a significant proportion of Australians have literacy levels below that which is considered necessary to effectively manage their lives.

The burden of this deficiency will be felt not only by the individual, but also by their family, their community and eventually by the state.

Low levels of literacy mean that a person does not have the ability to gain adequate knowledge about **any** subject or matter and therefore they will always be deficient in performance in all aspects of their life.

Clearly this inhibits their ability to learn those skills necessary to complete trade or technical education.

By way of a relevant analogy; as the computer became popular and started to become a tool of education one often heard the comment “that unless a student became computer literate he/she would be denied access to the

knowledge of the world” To some extent this thought is repeated in the Australian Government’s commitment to ensure that all students do in fact have computers to assist them with their learning. But if the students do not have the skills to use the computer the knowledge of the world **is** denied to them.

It is doubtful if the total community cost of illiteracy has been calculated but clearly it would be many tens of millions each year in economic terms and equally costly in social terms.

While there will be many issues and opportunities around the subject of illiteracy there are two fundamental concerns:

- How to stem the tide i.e. ensuring that never again is any young person released from the compulsory education system while he or she is illiterate.
- Providing an opportunity for those who are presently illiterate to become literate.

With appropriate action it should be possible to arrive at the situation where never again will any young person be released from compulsory education while he or she remains illiterate.

It is interesting to note a relevant comment from Victorian educationalist Margaret Stewart in her presentation to the Tasmanian Southern Area Taskforce in January last year “extremely low levels of literacy made it impossible for some young people to cope with the VCE” Later in the same presentation Margaret used the example of an action by the *Ballarat Courier* who found that “some young people could not read the advertisements in the paper” and thus they created a special page for employment advertisements written for, and targeted to, these people. Is this not a good enough example to demonstrate the validity of the concern?

While there is much discussion about how to address the symptom of illiteracy it seems only logical that the major effort should be focused in the school system so as to address the cause.

The question that TSBC members ask is “How is it that a student can be allowed to progress to a higher grade without gaining the skills specified at the lower grade?”

In regard to apprenticeships and vocational trade training much of the burden of dealing with poorly prepared (illiterate and innumerate) students is left with the learning institutions.

The Tasmanian Small Business Council and the Council of Small Business of Australia (COSBOA) will be happy to support appropriate initiatives to assist

where ever possible. But it must be understood that the illiterate and innumerate job seeker presents a substantial risk to the prospective employer. Risks include OH&S issues and the potential to be a danger to themselves and their work mates. An employee who cannot read or comprehend a poison antidote warning on a container is an unacceptable risk in any workplace.

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Chairman
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*Reference: ABS Bulletin 4228.0 "Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey"