Inquiry into Economic Equity for Victorian Women

Response to the Department of Treasury and Finance Victoria | August 2021

Introduction

AMES Australia (AMES) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry into *Economic Equity for Victorian Women.*

AMES is an autonomous adult education institute accountable to the Victorian Minister for Training and Skills. The organisation provides a comprehensive range of initial settlement support, English language and literacy tuition, vocational training and employment services to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Sydney.

AMES work, guided by our vision of 'full participation for all in a cohesive and diverse society', is focused on maximising the economic and social participation of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and the benefits of migration to Australia. Our experience therefore lies in working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) individuals, their families and their communities.

Many of the CALD women AMES supports experience disadvantages and challenges arising from their pre-migration experiences and settlement in a new country further compounded by intersectional disadvantage relating to disability, age, their status as single mothers, their residence in rural and regional areas and experiences of domestic violence.

AMES provides a range of settlement, employment, education, social and economic participation services and activities that directly or indirectly contribute to enhancing economic equity for Victorian Women. In the 2020-21 FY AMES provided services and support to over 22,000 CALD clients. Through this engagement, especially as we assisted our clients to navigate and overcome the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we identified digital access, affordability and literacy as key drivers of economic equity in a rapidly changing world.

In response to this growing and urgent need, AMES develops and delivers digital literacy and inclusion courses to meet our client requirements and to reduce their potential economic disadvantage. AMES has also applied this expertise to support CALD people across Australia through the development of a digital application to support people undertaking the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) at the request of the Department of Home Affairs. The Victorian Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions also commissioned AMES to develop digital content for people with low literacy whose employment was impacted by COVID-19 restrictions.

In this context, and for the purpose of this submission, AMES response will focus on digital literacy and its importance for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds living and working in Victorian communities. Specifically, it will provide comments on the impact that digital literacy skills have on labour market participation and access to employment and promotion opportunities.

Implications and opportunties for action

CALD women play a critical role in ensuring the economic stability and economic future of their whole families, and a particularly pivotal role in economic equity being reached by their children. Continuing disadvantage to CALD women leads to intergenerational disadvantage which undermines refugee and migrant women's economic and civic participation, both within communities and in the wider society. This ultimately compromises the strength of CALD communities and the broader social and economic benefits of migration for Australia.

COVID-19 has magnified the current disadvantages that refugee and migrant women, and therefore their children, face. Intervention is urgent. If intervention is not strong enough or fast enough the depths of disadvantage will deepen and reaching economic equity will become further away through the generations.

AMES Australia acknowledges and supports the progress the Victorian government has made to date and provides the following recommendations:

1. That lack of ability in digital literacy is recognised as a significant barrier to Victorian refugee and migrant women from CALD communities in achieving economic and workplace equality in Victoria.

2. That all policies and programs seeking to address economic inequity include specific directions and responses to address the particular needs of CALD women.

3. That a State Action Plan be developed to address this barrier through;

   - Extending digital literacy and inclusion courses specifically designed for and targeting refugee and migrant women; and

   - Developing industry specific courses for refugee and migrant women to create better access to employment, promotion opportunities and career-pathway counselling.

We welcome the opportunity to assist the Panel further in its Inquiry.

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Digital Literacy – why it is important for CALD women

What is digital literacy?

Considering the complexity of the digital world, pinning down an accurate definition of digital literacy is challenging, since what it means to be "digitally literate" is continuously evolving. However, the Australian Government's Digital Literacy Skills Framework captures a wide scope of factors that form digital literacy:

> "the ability to search and navigate, create, communicate and collaborate, think critically, analyse information, and address safety and wellbeing using a variety of digital technologies"[1]

Why is digital literacy important?

AMES knows that full social and economic participation for our culturally diverse communities is key to successful settlement; and digital literacy skills are essential to participate across different contexts of today's society, from engaging with the community and socialising to accessing education and employment opportunities.

Prior to 2020, digital technologies were required for online activities such as banking or entertainment. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the ways in which we work, learn and socialise, adding a whole new range of activities for which we require digital literacy skills. **The pandemic has consequently exposed the digital literacy gaps of a wide cross-section of our community – but particularly in multicultural and refugee communities.**

Several countries, including Australia, have developed digital literacy frameworks to identify, assess and improve their citizens' digital literacy skills. In Australia, digital literacy has been included as the sixth core skill of the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) along with learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy.[2] The Digital Literacy Skills Framework has been designed to evaluate and develop these skills across multiple training, education, work and community contexts. The inclusion of digital literacy as one of the core skills demonstrates the critical need to acquire these skills in order to achieve educational goals, access the workforce and be able to effectively participate in society and employment. Within this context a lack of basic digital skills poses a significant barrier to a growing number of employment opportunities. According to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia digital skills are "a new basic skillset in the way reading and writing are today" and should "be a core component of ongoing workplace skills development".[3]

It is important to consider issues of access to digital technologies and their affordability. Since 2016, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) has been gathering data to measure the extent to which different groups of Australians are able to access internet and digital devices (Access), whether they able to pay for it (Affordability), and their skills and attitudes to use these technologies (Digital Ability). These three variables are used to determine the level of digital inclusion experienced by diverse groups of Australians, described by the ADII as "whether a person can Access, Afford, and have the Digital Ability to connect and use online technologies effectively".[4] The objective of gathering and analysing this data is to identify actions that need to be taken to bridge the digital divide across regions and sociodemographic groups.

Case studies demonstrating the impact and opportunity of limited access to digital technology and digital skills in CALD communities

According to the 2020 ADII report, CALD migrants (defined in this report as migrants born in non-English speaking countries and who speak a language other than English at home) have a relatively

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[1] Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). (2020). *Foundation skills for your future program: Digital literacy skills framework*, April 2020
[2] DESE. (2020)
[3] Committee for Economic Development of Australia. (2015). *Australia's Future Workforce?*
[4] Australian Digital Inclusion Index. (2020). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020*

high level of digital inclusion (65.1), a few points above the national average (63.0). However, considering the diverse nature of CALD communities, this data obscures some of the challenges faced by members of this cohort in accessing and using digital technologies. A case study conducted with recently arrived migrants in Shepparton for the 2019 ADII report identifies that this particular group of CALD migrants' level of digital inclusion is lower than both the national average and the general CALD population. **The particular barriers faced by recently arrived migrants in accessing digital technologies is the compounding issues of low levels of English and first language literacy, as well as affordability**. In other words, not being able to pay for internet access or technologies (phones, computers) and not having the necessary language literacy skills to engage with these technologies are the main barriers faced by recently arrived migrants in Shepparton. Despite this, recently arrived migrants are highly aware of the importance of digital technologies play in their everyday lives and are willing to learn more about them and gain digital literacy skills:

> "The maintenance of high levels of connectivity may also be a consequence of the very positive attitude recently-arrived CALD migrants in Shepparton have towards the role that digital technologies play in enhancing their day-to-day life. Around nine in ten respondents (87%) feel that computers and technology gave them more control over their lives and a similar proportion (86%) are committed to learning about new technologies. The comparable national averages for these indicators is 48% and 35% respectively".[5]

Another study conducted in regional Queensland supports these findings and highlights the link between digital and social inclusion. The refugee participants in this study regarded digital technologies as crucial to access learning and employment opportunities, integrating in the community, and staying in touch with friends and family. Again, this study identified **a digital divide between refugee communities and the general population, with refugees facing barriers in accessing and being able to afford and use these technologies**.[6]

During 2020 AMES facilitated peer support groups for people from CALD backgrounds living with a disability, and their carers – the majority of them women. The two peer support groups established with the Afghan and South Sudanese communities were facilitated by trained community 'disability champions' and conducted in first language. Due to COVID-19 the peer support sessions were moved online. Pivoting to online settings was found to be challenging as most of the South Sudanese participants were unfamiliar with the Zoom platform. The solution to address this challenge was to train the group facilitator via Whatsapp (the only platform she was familiar with) on how to use Zoom so she could then train the other participants. Over the course of the lockdowns in Victoria, the group ran over 30 sessions online with guest speakers invited. As participants were no longer required to travel to the sessions AMES found that there was more consistent attendance. The online sessions also allowed for sharing of important COVID-19 resources. As the participants are now upskilled in how to use platforms such as Zoom, they have continued to connect with other groups and stay connected with their community online throughout COVID-19. The Afghan peer support group however, was unable to pivot to online mode due to technology accessibility and low levels of digital literacy. Most of these women did not have access to smartphones or any other devices and were unable to avail themselves of the potential benefits.

These case studies offer important insights into how service providers and government services may address these client cohorts' needs to enhance their digital literacy skills in order to provide support and services.

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[5] Australian Digital Inclusion Index. (2019). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*, p.21.
[6] Alam, K. & Imran, S. (2015). The digital divide and social inclusion among refugee migrants: A case in regional Australia, *Information Technology & People*, 28(2), 344-365. DOI 10.1108/ITP-04-2014-0083

Digital literacy, employment and promotion opportunities for CALD women

Digital literacy as a barrier to enter the labour force

As an education, settlement and employment services provider, AMES recognises that digital literacy skills are essential not only for learning and upskilling, but also simply to search and apply for jobs. AMES has observed that many CALD women lack confidence in using digital technologies and therefore need to rely on someone else to help them with their job searching (for example, their employment consultant, teacher or children).

Increasingly, employers now require online written applications and registrations as well as a range of psychometric and assessment tests. **Female job applicants from migrant and refugee backgrounds and with low language and digital skills, are often unable to complete these applications and tests to the standard required by employers**. The outcome is that they are screened out before they get to the interview stage. To address this situation, they need to acquire basic literacy skills in order to create their resume, search for jobs, apply for jobs, send and receive emails, attend interviews, and access myGov services. SCoA (the Settlement Council of Australia) notes that "increasingly, even low-skilled jobs require online applications. Moreover, 90% of the Australian workforce is set to require digital skills within just 3 years".[7] Ensuring that CALD women possess at least these basic digital skills will help them gain confidence and therefore increase their chances of entering the workforce and having more equitable access to opportunities.

Cultural and gender barriers

However, it must be acknowledged that digital literacy is not a 'silver bullet' in itself. For those where English is not their first language, online government, community and commercial systems and websites may be difficult to navigate. Translating online text will most likely not be adequate as many migrant and refugee women generally have lower levels of literacy. This is often influenced by the experience of pre-arrival conflict or refugee experiences which diminished opportunities for education, gender inequality in pre-arrival countries which reduced women's access to education, particularly higher education, sensitive cultural factors such as female child marriages, and use of girls as household labour from an early age. The nature of some women's experiences and the impact on their levels of competency in literacy and numeracy skills provides an additional layer of cultural and gender complexity that must be addressed in policy and program design.

Digital literacy as a barrier to promotion opportunities

Many migrants and refugees arrive with skills and career aspirations but often start their employment journey in Australia in a job that does not match their skills. This cohort plays a vital role in filling vacancies and into sectors that are less attractive to other Australians, most notably in regional areas and unskilled positions.[8] This rings true to many of AMES female jobseekers as a high proportion of CALD women secure employment in accommodation and food services, health care, social support work and manufacturing – industries that tend to be highly casualised, low paid and insecure. While these job opportunities provide valuable work experience they are not always accompanied by opportunities for career progression, an essential aspect of achieving economic equity. Digital literacy - combined with language, literacy and numeracy skills – can facilitate this as it allows individuals to undertake a range of activities needed to progress in the work place and in their careers.

A survey conducted with employers by the Australian Industry Group stated that the most significant effect of low language and literacy skills on employers was poor completion of workplace documents and reports followed by teamwork and communication problems[9] - issues likely to be taken into consideration when employers consider promotion opportunities. It should be noted that while many employers identified the need for Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) skills development in their

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[7] The Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA). (2020). *Supporting the digital inclusion of new migrants and refugees*
[8] SCoA (2020)
[9] Australian Industry Group (2018). *Survey Report Workforce Development Needs - Skilling: A National Imperative*

workforce, evidence of employer demand for and willingness to invest employee time and/or other resources in this training is not clear, even when the cost of actual training is funded by government.[10]

Current research undertaken by AMES as part of a project with a disability services provider (with a large proportion of staff being female and from migrant/refugee backgrounds) supports the Australian Industry Group's argument as it indicates that language barriers are one of the biggest challenges for their multicultural workforce. Team leaders stated that **many of their multicultural staff were performing above and beyond in their roles and could have been offered more senior roles with better salaries and benefits, were it not for their insufficient English language skills that impacted their report writing and digital capabilities**. This has become increasingly important as the caring industry continues to evolve and requires daily detailed, meaningful and accurate documentation of each customer's health issues to provide appropriate care and to meet compliance requirements.

A potential solution is to offer free English improvement classes in the workplace. This proposition is backed up by the fact that governments used to fund programs such as the longstanding Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program which helped businesses to train employees needing language and literacy support. Before this program was abolished in 2014, AMES worked with employers in a range of industry areas, including car manufacturing, footwear and textiles and meat processing, to develop LLN training for their largely migrant and refugee workforces. The WELL program was highly effective in helping employers maintain a viable workforce and employees keep their jobs.

> "Evidence also suggests that the most effective way to build foundational skills in adults is in the workplace, where people can readily see how the skills improve their work performance. This mode of delivery reduces the stigma adults may perceive to be associated with low literacy skills and does not create additional demands on people's time outside of work".[11]

As language is dynamic and evolving, continuous learning, upskilling and ongoing development of the workforce's digital literacy needs to be supported, particularly for newly arrived and CALD women entering industries such as the disability and aged care sectors. This would recognise that the digital space is constantly in flux and that skills required in the work place demand a commitment to life-long learning.

Supporting women learning online

Women who usually attended English as Additional Language (EAL) courses in face-to-face settings at AMES sites are now required to attend these courses online due to COVID-19 restrictions. Not having the basic digital literacy skills necessary to, for instance, download and use Zoom, communicate with teachers via email, or engage with learning modes such as Moodle (Learning Management System) platforms, puts women at a disadvantage at gaining new skills for employment (including English and other foundational skills).

AMES has addressed this issue by providing foundational digital literacy training that supports students' ability to progress in their EAL courses, including industry-specific pathway courses such as English for Childcare. The courses are adapted to the clients' level of English literacy by providing simple and well-sequenced instructions, materials and activities.

Furthermore, AMES launched a Digital Literacy and Inclusion online course in March 2021, directly addressing AMES clients' digital needs, such as computer basics (learning about different devices), using gmail (from creating an account to learning how to send emails), accessing services online, job seeking online, an introduction to social media, internet safety, and online banking and shopping. The language level is adjusted to the learners, facilitating the acquisition of digital literacy skills alongside the English skills necessary to access and use digital technologies. As at the end of July 128 clients commenced the course, many supported to enrol by their employment consultants at AMES. The client testimonial below from a CALD jobseeker struggling with her job search suggests

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Joyce, S. (2019). *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*

the positive impact a digital literacy course can have. Rima now feels more confident and is able to conduct job searches online herself.

> *"The digital literacy and inclusion topics course was helpful for me because I didn't have any experience about technology or how to do a job search, email, computer skills etc. This course helped a lot and make life easier and [I] have a confidence to use the technology. I recommend this course to people like me who need to learn about technology."*

A second phase may include adapting the course to reach a wider audience by, for example, adjusting language, adding new content or creating drop-in centres. For example, the course could target women from a specific ethnic group and deliver contextualised industry-specific content. Such an approach would guide women to employment opportunities in high growth sectors such as aged care benefiting the individual women as well as the broader community and economy.