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THE PERCEPTIONS THAT
HOMELESS PEOPLE AND
THOSE AT RISK OF
HOMELESSNESS HAVE
OF LITERACY CLASSES

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## APPENDICES

# Executive Summary

This study draws on 23 in-depth interviews that were conducted in outer and inner Sydney in the period between January 2017 and April 2017.

The report is divided into four sections:

1. Literature Review: Housing and Literacy: What do we know so far?

2. Methodology

3. Findings: An exploration of the motivations participants have for undertaking the classes; when and where the classes should be held; and the expectations participants have of each class. We discuss, at the end of this section, some possible recruitment strategies for enhancing participation.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations: The report details in Section Four the main conclusions from this study, and recommendations for enhancing future uptake of classes.

The interviews suggested that for a literacy programme with this group to succeed, the following is required:

1. The classes should be held in locations that are both central and accessible to participants by public transport.

2. The participants emphasised the importance of feeling comfortable and safe both during the class *and* getting to the classes.

3. Classes need to take into account the differing skill levels of participants. Many were keen, but the classes need to respond to their existing skill levels.

4. Participants sought weekly classes that were held in the afternoon. They emphasised that the classes needed to fit within their existing schedules.

5. Outcomes from the classes were viewed as important: seeing progress, and links to future education and job prospects were seen as crucial.

6. Interviewees emphasised the importance of having a classroom where they felt totally safe and comfortable and a tutor who was able to relate to them.

# 1   Homelessness, Housing and Literacy: Background Literature

In both national and international adult education policy discourses, literacy is recognised as critical for social inclusion (SCOTESE, 2012; OECD 2013a). The literacy needs and practices of adults who have experienced various forms of disadvantage and social marginalisation have been the subject of much research (Barton et al, 2007; Duckworth, 2014; Marston & Johnson-Abdelmalik, 2015; Ollerhead, 2016). Recently, Grotluschen, et al. (2016) undertook a comprehensive analysis of the information from the first round of the OECD Survey of Adult Skills which assessed literacy and numeracy proficiencies of adults in 24 OECD countries including Australia. Their analysis focussed on the characteristics of those adults who were assessed as having low proficiencies in literacy and numeracy. The study suggested correlations between lower levels of literacy proficiency and poorer social outcomes. In the case of Australian, the OECD reported that "the link between higher literacy and social outcomes such as trust in others, participation in volunteer and associative activities, a belief that an individual can have an impact on the political process and better health, is stronger than in most other countries" (2013b, p. 10).

There is however, limited research specifically on the literacy needs and practices of people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness. Castleton (1998) examined the accounts of homeless people's needs to determine a role for language, literacy and numeracy training. Her research sought to understand the "apparent", "perceived" and "expressed" literacy needs of homeless people. The "apparent" needs were determined from quantitative data sources such as population statistics and large-scale surveys; the "perceived" needs from service delivery agents, researchers, community workers and other informed stakeholders and the "expressed" needs from homeless people themselves or people who worked directly with them. Further literacy training was established both as an "apparent" and "perceived" need in this study, however, the findings on the "expressed' need were more nuanced. Castleton found that homeless people, while acknowledging literacy as an important issue in the range of different factors impacting on their lives, felt it was not the most important issue, nor the issue to which they would attribute their homelessness. She found that the homeless people in the study negotiated literacy demands in their lives by tapping into various networks in which they belonged. Within these networks were people who assumed the role of "literacy broker" (p. 74) and whose skills and knowledge were called on to assist.

Although the established "apparent" and "perceived" needs for literacy training were linked to employment, Castleton found that many of the homeless people in her study were not jobseekers. Rather, many saw literacy "as a means of enabling them to achieve greater personal and collective responsibility over their lives" (p. 75). From this, she suggests that discourses about literacy for homeless people needed to shift from that related to employment to helping them build bridges so that "homeless people can access mainstream services and assume some measures of choice and control in their lives" (p. 75). This resonates with what Marston and Johnson-Abdelmalik (2015) concluded in their study of a literacy program for adults who were at risk of social exclusion. They found that participants were also seeking to develop literacy skills in order to gain independence and control over their lives, for example to gain access to independent housing.

Castleton further recommends that literacy be regarded as a communal resource that can be drawn upon by a number of people in the informal networks of homeless people. She also suggests that any literacy training for homeless people cannot be structured in the traditional style of structured classes. Rather, literacy training must be designed in collaboration with a range of service providers who interact with the homeless people.

The significance of the environment for literacy development is highlighted in the report of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (EU HLG) (2012), which discussed how adults' skills are shaped by and are their development respond to the demands and learning afforded by the environment.

> For adults, recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning are particularly important. The process enables adults to identify their skills and weaknesses, reflect on their learning since school and identify where they need to improve. The flexibility that non-formal and informal learning offers is particularly valuable for older groups of adults, who may not have had many opportunities for formal learning when they were younger, but have valuable skillsets that they developed through other types of learning. (EU HLG, 2012, p. 81)

The value of providing learning opportunities that offer flexibility both in where and how learning is facilitated, and what focus they take is supported by views that recognise the context specificity of literacy. Castleton's study, and many of the other adult literacy research cited earlier, views literacy as a social practice, that is as an activity embedded in social interactions and contingent on the historical, socio-cultural and economic contexts in which these activities occur (Papen, 2005).

In a study of Dignity Village, "an experiment in democratic self-governance and independent living for homeless people" in the Pacific northwest of USA (Finley, 2003), the author describes the adult learning initiatives in the Village that were established in partnership with a local state university. The partnership entailed making certain University resources available, – for example, technical supports, skills in grant writing and procurement, so that the Villagers could strengthen their self-sufficiency, for example by starting a micro-business or a cottage industry. Technological literacy programs were also set up so that individuals could develop the knowledge and skills necessary to apply for jobs, housing or use the internet for other purposes. The teaching was conducted in some instances by Villagers who had the relevant skills and knowledge and in other instances by pre-service teachers from the University. The key point emphasised in this study is methods of self-governance and independence, rather than charity, that underpin all of their educational initiatives.

The transformative potential of literacy learning is the subject of a study by Juchniewicz (2012). This close study of five homeless adults in the US found that although the status of homelessness could lead to disengagement from literacy among many people, for those who found personal value in literacy there were some profound benefits. Literacy was a lifeline for 'rewriting' their lives, giving them time and space to think, and ways of valuing their personal stories.

Literacy provision for homeless adults or those in vulnerable housing situations is discussed in the study by Marston and Johnson-Abdelmalik (2015) where literacy learning was made available in a small community-based setting in Brisbane by a social welfare agency. Another study from the USA (Terrile, 2009) discusses the benefits of literacy programs and services provided by public libraries. Both implicitly support Castleton's (1998) conclusion that traditional structured classes would not be the appropriate option for many homeless people seeking to improve their literacy. Small community-based classes where learners' individual circumstances are respected and accommodated, and which are responsive to the learners' own goals for engaging in learning are identified as critical for sustained participation and success.

The limited literature available on the literacy needs of adults experiencing homelessness suggests that despite the policy discourses that identify literacy as a critical resource for social inclusion, homeless people will not necessarily prioritise literacy development as a way to negotiate hardships in their life circumstances. Engagement in different kinds of literacy learning may occur if opportunities are afforded to help them gain greater control over other issues that

they have identified as priorities because usually literacy is needed to negotiate these goals. Homeless people may also belong to informal networks from which they access 'literacy brokers', and these 'literacy brokers' may also 'broker' further learning opportunities for homeless people whose needs cannot be fully met through their informal networks.

# 2 Aims and methodology

## 2.1 Aims

The aims of the study were to examine the following:

    i) The level of interest of this group in literacy classes.

    ii) The perceived gains from attending a literacy class.

    iii) Perceptions of what would encourage / discourage regular attendance.

    iv) Views on how the classes should be structured and run.

    v) Optimal recruitment strategies.

## 2.2 Research method

The study is based on 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews. In five of the interviews, there were two interviewees, thus a total of 23 homeless or people at risk of homelessness were interviewed; 11 were female and 12 were male. All of the interviewees had English as their first language (see Appendix A for an overview of the profile of the interviewees).

The main themes focused on in the interviews were how the participants perceived literacy programs and what they thought would encourage or discourage people in their situation from attending; their interest in attending; expectations about the structure, frequency and venue of the classes, recruitment strategies and what they expected to gain from the classes (See Appendix B for the interview guide).

The interviewees were given information about the project in the form of a project information sheet (See Appendix C) and verbal confirmation was sought to confirm that they understood the project, and their participation in the project.[1] They also signed a consent form (See Appendix D) to indicate they were happy to participate in the project, and understood that the data that was collected would remain confidential. The interviews lasted on average 20 – 40mins, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews took place at the University of Technology, as well as at food services offered near Wynyard station in Sydney city, Ashfield (8 kilometres from the CBD) and Parramatta (24 kilometres from the CBD). Five interviews were conducted at a residential facility for homeless women.

The participants were recruited in two ways: Firstly, through a flyer handout, which requested participants call the university to arrange an interview; Secondly, the researchers attended food services and community centre spaces where potential interviewees gathered. The endeavour to recruit interviewees using flyers was unsuccessful. Only two of the interviewees responded to a flyer. The face-to-face recruitment method was effective and 21 of the 23 interviewees were recruited through personal contact. Interviewees were given a $20 shopping voucher for their time. The interview transcripts were transcribed and organised using NVivo software.

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[1] Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Technology Sydney research office.

# 3   Findings

This section first reviews the literacy profile of the interviewees. It then examines the level of interest of interviewees in attending a literacy class. This is followed by a discussion of strategies that would encourage attendance. The next section investigates how interviewees felt the classes should be structured and the expectations of the content of classes. The final section outlines what interviewees viewed as the most sensible recruitment strategies.

## 3.1   The literacy profile of interviewees

The interviewees had varying levels of literacy. We identified three main groups. Those who said they could not read, those who said they had basic literacy skills but struggled with complex words and texts and those who said they had adequate literacy skills to meet their own needs.

Three interviewees had very weak reading and writing skills and struggled with basic text. Gregory commented, "*I can't even read the newspaper.  I pretend to people…I can read…but I just look at the pictures".*

The next group (9 interviewees) had very basic literacy and struggled with composite words and grammar. A number of interviewees in this group had struggled with early homelessness and or housing instability which impacted on their schooling. When asked if she would be interested in attending a literacy program Holly responded,

> *I dropped out of school in Year 7 so I haven't had much schooling and things like that and then going to being on the streets and going from house to house you don't learn very much, just what sort of you learn from other people*

They also spoke about learning dis/abilities such as dyslexia, as well as institutional impediments to learning, such as racism, which impacted on their ability to acquire literacy. Rick, an older Indigenous man, experienced intense institutional racism:

> *I didn't have much schooling because of discrimination back in the 60s, 70s and that and didn't get much to school and that.*

In contrast to this group, eight interviewees indicated that they could read and write but they wanted to improve their literacy skills for their own personal enrichment and to enhance their study and job prospects. Leanne's comment captures this desire:

> *Well I mean it has been a long time since I've been out of school so I really need to update and I wasn't very good at school I left halfway through Year 10.  I didn't even finish my Year 10 exams.  I did the half yearly but didn't complete my certificate so I found it really hard to get into work…I'm looking to get work and to do literacy and numeracy like skills…[it] would be really good to get my background up-to-date.*

These interviewees were able to read newspapers and could read basic books. Some felt their current skill levels were adequate for their needs and they were not interested in attending a literacy class. When asked if he would attend a class, Andrew responded,

> *Not really. My literacy standards are reasonably high.  I wouldn't say good, great but they're good.  I can read and write fairly well…Unless I changed what type of work I was going to look for…no cos the type of work, I'm going to be getting back into it's adequate for what I do -  warehousing or driving trucks. Stuff like that.*

Three interviewees considered their writing skills to be quite strong, and felt that they did not need to partake in a literacy program. However, they were keen to participate in the program to assist others and take on the role of an assistant, co-facilitator and/or a teaching aide:

*I probably would like [to attend the class] but I've done TAFE courses so I don't need like help with vocabulary … but I'd be happy to help or assist … but I just don't need [literacy classes] yeah. (Drew)*

Chloe had experienced being homeless and had great empathy for people who were sleeping rough. She thought literacy classes were an excellent idea and was keen to be involved:

*C: Well for myself I've just finished TAFE and I'm actually finishing off university as well …*
*I: So you don't really need literacy classes?*
*C: No but I'd like to be able to help others to be able to build on their skills.*

All of the interviewees saw the potential for a literacy program for homeless people and/or for people at risk of homelessness, and considered literacy crucial for improving the quality of their lives.

## 3.2  Motivations for Attending

There was an awareness that acquiring literacy could potentially change their lives and a number of possible gains were mentioned:

*I've heard of adult literacy courses before and I actually lived with a guy that did one …He was completely illiterate and after doing it for I think a couple of months and he read a book to me and it was only a simple book…but the smile on his face was, you know what I mean, it was unbelievable cos he'd gone from nothing to being able to at least read a book at a five or six year-old level in the space of two or three months so that was massive. Like I could just see how good he felt. (Sam)*

The more specific perceived gains from attending a literacy class were assistance in undertaking everyday activities and for furthering their education and employment prospects. These are discussed in turn.

### 3.2.1  Help in undertaking Everyday Activities

For 8 of the interviewees attending a literacy class was perceived as crucial for completing everyday activities and tasks. Key activities such as filling in forms, shopping, reading and sending emails and text messages, writing letters, as well as being able to read the newspaper were mentioned. When asked why he would be interested in attending a class, Luke outlined some of the difficulties he faced engaging in everyday activities because of limited literacy:

L: *To help with reading newspapers stuff like that … Filling out forms would probably come in handy cos I always have trouble with forms.*

I: *Any particular forms?*

L: *You name it.  Everything you've got to do nowadays is filling out forms.*

Jane also expressed her frustration at not being able to complete the documents required to request the services she needed:

*I can read, but I don't know how to fill forms out, I don't know how to put the words you know what I mean. Like I can read, but some words I don't know what they mean.*

Aaron spoke about the difficulties of sending a text message:

*I've got pretty basic literacy. Like since you left school, you forget a lot of words which you don't use most of them.  And then you get on the phone and you're trying to send a*

> *message and …write something to someone and you go, "How do you spell that bloody word?" … You can't put the… letters to the word.* (Aaron)

A similar challenge was expressed by Holly:

> *[I can read] small words and that but … I don't understand the big words. Obviously going (only as far as) … Year 7 you don't learn very much. The bigger words until older in life so just knowing little words and every day words that you need to know but a lot of spelling mistakes and things that friends help you with, with a dictionary. (Holly)*

These interviewees wanted help building on their limited literacy. Jim spoke about how he needs help forming sentences and using grammar correctly. He wanted to know, *"Where to put the commas so I can actually read the letter without it actually just being one big sentence …"* and how he "G*et[s] mixed up on where to put full stops and…apostrophe[s] and I want to sort of learn what's that for".*

Whilst these immediate needs are often the first to be discussed in interviews, interviewees also discussed the importance of being able to read books. The ability to improve their literacy specifically for reading books came up in seven of the interviews. In reflecting on the interest for engaging with books, Chloe reflects on how individuals engage with the books that The Footpath Library make available:

> *Some of them actually get the books even though they can't read. They love just being able to say I've been to The Footpath Library and then they bring the book back the next week and get another one. At the moment the gentleman [in Martin Place has] … got a big crate of books from Sarah last week and they have it there and some of them you'll see flicking through cos they might recognise one or two words so they're trying themselves but they just love the feeling of having a book.*

In discussing their preference for reading, these participants wanted to read books for pleasure, and part of their everyday activities. However, some, like Gregory, need assistance with reading because he will pick up a book and "… *pretend to read it, I don't even know what it says".* Some interviewees said they needed assistance with comprehension and also some direction in choosing the right book for their needs: "*I'd expect a tutor to say pick up a book, I've got one here that I suggest if you're struggling".* The ability to have help to not only improve their reading ability, but also choose the right books was important and perceived to assist with their everyday wellbeing, as Sandra noted "*Books have helped me through my mental health issues*" and "*books are very useful in times of need*".

### 3.2.2 Help with achieving education and employment goals

There is also an indication from the interviewees that literacy classes could benefit their long-term goals. For 9 interviewees this meant contributing to work-related goals. For these interviewees, such as Leanne, this meant increasing their employment outcomes, and using the literacy class to "*get back into the working field*". She saw value in having some formalised recognition, in the form of a certificate:

> *I mean if it puts me back into the workforce that'd be great even if it was just like…a certificate of attainment or whatever that'd be even better. It…would be something.*

For these interviewees they saw benefits if the classes could contribute to their overall skillset, and be used to enhance their employability, and be something they could include on their resume. To this extent they felt the classes were a good idea if they would, as Drew suggested "*better my job prospects".*

Three of the interviewees mentioned how a literacy class could assist them with writing projects that they would like to pursue. Lyle commented, *"I want to write a book on human behaviour so I*

*thought it would help me".* These classes could provide important skills, and motivation to assist with such projects.

Some interviewees saw the literacy classes as a stepping stone to (re)engage with educational institutions. When Holly was asked how a literacy program would fit into her future, she indicated that it would assist her by helping her do "*Year 10 and my HSC no matter how much it takes".*

## 3.3 What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

Interviewees mentioned several aspects that they felt would encourage regular attendance and increase the chances of the program being successful. They discussed the preferred times of the day for classes, as well as the preferred group size. Clear indications of progress, certificates, were viewed as important. Some interviewees saw the benefit of providing materials that would assist with learning, including the provision of reading glasses. There was also broad agreement that the provision of food would encourage class engagement.

### 3.3.1 Preferred frequency and times

We asked interviewees how often they could see themselves attending a class and what time would suit them. They all felt that a weekly face-to-face class was optimal. When the discussion turned to what was the best time it was evident that running the classes in the afternoon rather than the morning was a better option. Mornings were difficult because people were often engaged in routines around showering, getting to breakfast services, and accessing healthcare services. Evenings were difficult for interviewees with children. Holly observed,

> *During a week day of course, probably afternoon because a lot of people probably don't get up early in the morning or you know have things to do in the morning, so afternoon is probably best or evening time…Yeah really if you've got children, different story.  During the afternoon would probably be best.*

Anna commented that for her to attend, the classes would have to fit within the scheduled set of programmes of the hostel where she resides:

> *It would have to work around the structure here because we've got pretty much a week planner and it would just have to fit into that which is probably doable.*

Two of the interviewees were working or had caring commitments and had very little time to spare. Lisa felt she had too many other ongoing commitments to attend a literacy class, even though she was keen: "*I would go [to a literacy class], but just [don't have] enough time cos my days are full*".  Lisa was unusual.

### 3.3.2 Class Size and length of lesson

Only two of the 23 respondents indicated that they would prefer a one-on-one situation rather than a group. Interviewees believed that group classes would enhance their learning outcomes. Anna commented, "*if you're all there for the same reason it wouldn't be a bad thing as a group…all learning together*".

Lisa had an interesting analysis of the potential problems that could emerge with one-on-one tuition:

> *One-on-one feels like a counselling session about your own life.  Just some people don't like that confrontation about things. They … are not open to that much … They wouldn't want a one-on-one. They'd feel more comfortable to do it in a group. I would, yeah.*

Holly felt that a group situation would motivate her and her fellow learners:

*It's more motivation. Like a lot of people are there and they're understanding and saying things that you need to understand. It's a lot easier to understand without having to interact on your own. Like having support there and knowing that they're there for the same reasons.*

Holly and Lisa's comments capture how groups can be supportive and allow people to come together over shared difficulties with reading/writing, and address problems from different perspectives.

The interviewees felt the classes would be a good opportunity to get together with others in similar circumstances and as a way to foster and extend their social networks. Interviewees were keen to know that they had friends in the class. Drew indicated it would be good to sit in a class where "*our mates sit next to us*". Chloe commented it would be good if classes could be with "*friends that they've already made on the streets"*. They saw the groups as inclusive of their existing contacts as well as an opportunity to meet similar others who they might not know. Lyle referred to this engagement as generating opportunities for "more social interacting".

In terms of the size of the group only two interviewees said that would like more than 10 people in a class. As Luke indicated

*5 – 10 people that's still [a] small enough group that you know to be able to do stuff without getting bogged down and that if you have it too big a class that could bog things down a little bit.*

When asked about the length of the classes the majority of the interviewees said 1.5 to 2 hours. They envisaged that this length would give everybody time to speak and have a break midway. On this latter point, each class should *"…allow for the smokers so they can go out and have a quick puff"* (Chloe).

### 3.3.3 Provision of Resources

It was assumed by the interviewees that they would be provided with writing materials. Interestingly, 8 interviewees also indicated that reading glasses would be useful in the literacy classes. Those who had engaged with *The Footpath Library* indicated that the glasses that the coordinators made available at their mobile service were extremely useful and that they should be available at every literacy class:

*They [the coordinators] also provide …glasses. They have like a box. They're only the ones like you go to a chemist or whatever and try on and see what fits, but some of them [homeless people] …don't know how to read and write because of issues with being able to see. So maybe just even that continuing…on and at the venue having the box of glasses there and saying, "If you have difficulty there's a box here" …*(Chloe).

There was an acknowledgment that many people have visual problems that impact on their ability to read. Also losing reading glasses is a common phenomenon. A couple of interviewees suggested that learners could be linked to optometrists if people wanted further assistance.

There was also consensus that providing light refreshments would encourage attendance. This could include "*tea and coffee…you know water that sort of thing. Sort of refreshments"* (Jim). As Drew indicated "… *sort of stuff like that, coffee and biscuits. Don't have to put on a full spread*". Full meals were suggested as an incentive, but there was some concern that this might encourage people to *"…just com[e] along for a free meal and disrupt the class. It wouldn't be helpful*" (Connor)

### 3.3.4   Preferred venue for classes: Creating the right atmosphere

The venue for the classes, and its accessibility were viewed as critical in determining whether interviewees would attend a literacy class. The preferred location (urban/suburban) was usually dependent on where interviewees spent most of their time.

> *City is always good cos I [am] …around here and around Kings Cross …[where] there tends to be a higher concentration of people living on the streets …  struggling with the day-to-day sort of thing…Yeah and Woolloomooloo [too]* (Jim)

> *You gotta keep [it here] if that's where your target is. I know there's a fair few homeless people in Parramatta. You're going to have to keep it fairly local if that was the case. You're going to have to probably bring your teacher to a place like this [lunch service venue] or use one of the local universities or something like that.* (Andrew)

In the above quote/s the interviewees emphasise the importance of the service being available in a geographically accessible and central space.

There was a strong sentiment that to minimise drop-out, learners had to feel totally relaxed in the class. In discussing one of the venues near Wynyard Station Sam noted its appeal:

> *Well, for example, this place is a church and not all people are religious or go to church at all but yeah, it's quite comfortable here and it is relaxed… It's not overwhelming or anything like that. So probably [if] …  this place is set up where you've got someone to normally greet you at the door and just say, "Hi" and then wander in yourself and then kind of find your own place and sit with people you may or may not know but you got that option there… so it's comfortable enough. Yeah, it doesn't feel like you're forced to do anything so somewhere like here actually is quite good… Cos the way it's set up here is great.*

Sam mentioned the importance of comforting aspects of a service, including knowing that someone will greet "you at the door", and the possibility of being able to "wander in yourself and then…find your own place". Sam also observed that the church was appealing because it conjured up a feeling of being "relaxed".  Anna made a similar point about the importance of feeling relaxed, arguing that a literacy class would be best placed at

> *a community centre or like a town hall something like that.  Something relaxing … cos you don't want people coming in and just being you know (in) unknown territory.*

The importance of known 'territory', or familiarity was viewed as important. Andrew made this point as well: "*See if you get a hall like here … [that] people are familiar with, it's got a different atmosphere".*

Interviewees were asked about literacy classes being run within educational institutions, such as at a TAFE or a University and whether this would be acceptable. Reactions were mixed. While acceptable for some, some interviewees commented that these spaces could be quite intimidating:

> *Say someone who hasn't done, or hasn't got a very high level of education so they've only gone to Year 8 or 9 or something and they haven't been anywhere near a school or training institution in say 15 or 20 years. I'm sure it'd be a bit daunting.  Even myself, cos I never went to university, walking through the university campus would sort of be you know what I mean like a bit daunting cos you got all these academics there.* (Sam)

Andrew had a similar view:

> *People would probably be more comfortable coming to a place like this [a community centre] as opposed to a university cos you've got some pretty funky young people nowadays.*

Easy access to the classroom was viewed as vital: When asked if the university would be a good place to hold classes, Connor responded,

> Yes but no because you've got all the students and you don't know how the students are going to react to homeless coming through you know there's always going to be a bit of tension there…I think you might find that a few people might be too intimidated to walk into a university.

Chloe echoed these sentiments:

> *A venue that would be central but also not so public as well [so] that they could easily get to [it] and not feel judged when they're walking through to get to it as well.*

Interviewees had ideas as to what could be done to make unfamiliar locations feel safe(r) and more comfortable. For example, if it was a university setting, classes could be held after hours, or, as Chloe suggested,

> *If there was say a hall or a conference room at the back or a bit more accessible out of the public way on the grounds here [University of Technology] I'm sure they would come because it is still central to Central Station and they all use buses and trains.*

### 3.3.5 Expectations of the tutor

When asked about what the participants expected from a teacher, the overwhelming response was that they wanted someone who could understand their needs.

> *Just to be really open and understanding … Obviously not judgemental or that sort of stuff. I guess just to maybe try and understand that people are at different levels as well and people want different things out of the course.* (Andrea)

The importance of being non-judgemental and respectful was also highlighted by Leanne. When asked what a tutor would need to be able to do she responded,

> *Just be really genuine. I suppose in the way that they sort of approach you and like keep it confidential so that you know that you're coming to a place where you are struggling and you do need help that you can come to someone and ask for that help and get the help that you need so people that don't judge you for what you're going through or what you've been through.*

The importance of being treated respectfully and confidentially and understanding the needs and experiences of homeless people, or those at-risk of homelessness was also highlighted by Lisa:

> *I'd expect them to think that they're not better than us and to relate to where we come from and what we've done in our life to get…to where we are. Just to be pretty much on the same level as the people and don't be like too teachery [sic].*

When asked what she meant by 'teachery'. She responded,

> *Teachery is like smarter than … Some people get a bit offended by that and intimidated by that. You know I do. Makes you feel dumb you know.*

She felt that the tutor should be 'street-wise':

> *Living out there and being in the other person's shoes and I think people will stick more to the group if they find a person like that that they can relate to.*

Lisa's observations suggest that it is worth considering the role that those with more advanced literacy skills could potentially play as co-facilitators or teaching aides. They could support

teaching staff and contribute to making the space feel relaxed and comfortable. Interviewees also discussed the importance of classes having a clear direction, and a tutor who could keep the class on track. They noted that the tutor needs to be inclusive, but also needs to be able to deal with people who disrupt the class. As Leanne suggests:

*Yeah, obviously if they're being rude and disrespectful yeah, they'd have to ask them to leave cos it just disrupts the whole class and we're trying to make it a more positive class cos people actually want to be here.*

Interviewees were worried about the possibility of difficult students in the class and expected a tutor to be able to deal with disruptions, and be able to provide an atmosphere of learning and support.

A few interviewees were concerned about being embarrassed in the class.

*Some people do want to go back to work, but you're going to have to [learn to read/write, but] nobody wants to be learning how to spell again cos that's for kids. That's how people think.* (Andrew)

*Yeah and then there's the embarrassment thing as well you know. Do you want to own up to being that stupid or do you want to own [up] to… not able to read a full sentence and stuff? And so people aren't going to be as open…cos you've got to remember you see these people every day you know and the last thing you want is for them to know your weaknesses. Cos you do end up arguing with people and your weaknesses will come out in the argument or they'll use it against you in that and that's why [it] may deter people from coming to the program.* (Conor)

Recognising the potential for embarrassment will require a good deal of sensitivity from the tutor.

There was agreement that if a tutor was able to clearly indicate progress, this would encourage ongoing participation:

*If people feel like they're achieving, they're going to continue doing it and continue to come back…So [if] you've got some sort of indicator of where you're at …  you've got the incentive to keep coming back.* (Sam)

Some interviewees mentioned the possibilities of gaining a "*certificate of attainment*" or "*some sort of official accreditation*" which would act as a further incentive to keep progressing, and encourage their ongoing participation in a literacy class.

### 3.3.6  Gender Considerations

When asked about gender, most participants were open to the idea of mixed classes. Some interviewees felt that students needed to be given the option of attending female-only, male-only or mixed classes. Chloe argued that some women, because of a previous history of domestic violence, would find it hard to participate in a mixed class and that transgender people may have to have a separate class:

*Gender I think would be a problem yeah…There's definitely some (women) … that would not want to be in the same room as males or vice versa …  There's also a few transgender as well, so that would have to be taken into consideration as well.*

She felt that there had to be choice:

*You could offer a mixed group, males only, females only and allow people to choose which one they want to come to. If you've got those three options, I think you would have a good success rate instead of just saying, "Right, the groups are going to be mixed and that's it". I think if those three options are there, it would be a lot better.*

Drew suggested that there was a danger that men may feel sheepish in a mixed group:

> *Some blokes would feel a bit reticent … They'd feel more comfortable in a group of their mates …*

However, when asked for more detail he emphasised that it would depend on the particular group, and also the facilitators skills to ensure everyone is heard. Generally interviewees saw value in having classes that had a gender balance.

> *Probably half and half just depending whoever wants, whoever is interested in it. (Luke)*

> *No, I don't mind it being mixed it doesn't worry me.* (Leanne)

### 3.3.7 Packaging the literacy classes with other areas of learning and services

Several interviewees suggested that class attendance would be enhanced by extending the services offered. Incorporating computer technology and computer literacy learning into the classroom was one idea:

> *If you link the literacy part up with a computer program, computer course in some way you're probably going to get more bites (interest) because a lot of guys would be able to put that on a resume…* (Andrew)

> *A lot of people use keyboards and stuff, technology sort of thing if that's available…you know not pencil and paper sort of stuff although that's good for you know just…a lot of stuff it's to do with computers.* (Luke)

Another recommendation was to incorporate information about nutrition into the classroom material.

> *Actually, nutrition would be great especially on the streets cos there's a lot of you know what foods to eat and what foods not to eat … It would be good to have nutrition [information] to help them … Some of them don't even know what's even good for you and what's not* (Mary)

Liam proposed that "*a cooking class would be quite useful when they get their place, learn a bit of cooking skills*".  Andrew suggested "*an arts and crafts or a music type*" event.

### 3.3.8 Recruitment/Advertising

Interviewees were asked about the best way to promote the program and recruit learners. Various methods were suggested:

- Through **key networked individuals.** Several mentioned "Lance" at Martin Place, as a key source of information, and as a way to disseminate information about the project

- **Services**. They all mentioned how they access a variety of services, including services at *The Wayside Chapel*, various food services as well as accessing information through hostels and at Centrelink. Libraries were also mentioned. Interviewees recommended putting information on bulletin boards and notice boards in these spaces.

- **Distribution of Flyers**. They indicated that flyers and posters could be effective.

- **Technology.** A few participants mentioned using technology to access information about services. They discussed regularly accessing Facebook and recommended promoting the service and classes on Facebook, and having a Facebook page.

- **Opportunities to try it out:** Interviewees suggested that it might be worthwhile providing opportunities for people to come along and see whether they liked the class and would to continue participating. As Chloe suggests "*maybe just having one or two days where they come along and register and show their interest something like that*"

# 4   Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The study shows that similar to the wider population, there is a range of literacy levels among the homeless people interviewed in this study. The perceptions about literacy classes of those interviewed are similar to what earlier research (Castleton, 1998; Marston and Johnson-Abdelmalik, 2015; Terrile, 2009) has found about the perceptions of homeless people or people in vulnerable housing situations: what is perceived as structured classes in institutions such as TAFE would not be suitable. Associated with this perception is the awareness of social stigma attached to poor literacy, their ambivalence to be in large institutional settings, and the need to feel they are studying with people who can identify with and respect them.

Interviewees' yearning to improve their literacy skills was premised on the perception that it would improve their employment and further education prospects. However, it was also driven by the sheer desire to have a book in hand and to be able to read. The mental health benefits of reading were also identified by one of the interviewees. These indicate the wider benefits of literacy that homeless people who have not developed their literacy are not afforded.

Some of the interviewees commented on the literacy needs for filling out forms, because there "*Everything you've got to do nowadays is filling out forms.*" It would be useful to consider this area of need together with the possibility of computer classes, given the increasing use of online forms and modes of communication used by government organisations and other services.

The main aim of this report was to examine how people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness perceive participating in a literacy program and what would encourage or inhibit them from attending. The interviewees were clearly supportive of literacy classes but provided important indications of what would be required to optimise enrolment and continued participation.

The interviewees were firm that the classes had to take place in venues where learners would feel safe and comfortable and that the program should address their individual material and other needs and take cognisance of different skill levels. Common sentiments were that classes be held weekly, preferably in the afternoon, be a maximum of two hours with a break, that food/refreshments are provided and that classes be conducted in groups not larger than ten.

It is important to note that the participants in this study had varying skill levels educational experiences that have shaped their perceptions about literacy learning. The literacy levels and goals and the personal circumstances and histories of the participants must be considered in adapting services to meet the needs of homeless people, with clear indications of the benefits they might receive from participating.

The prospect of participating in literacy classes appealed to almost all of the interviewees. They saw much value in classes that:

- Are located in an accessible and safe place.

- Have a tutor who can make participants feel comfortable, and supported in class settings.

- Respond to the diverse needs of learners and tailor classes to provide supportive spaces for different levels of reading and writing skills.

- Recognise in the promotion, recruitment and content, the potential for feelings of stigma and shame associated with not having particular levels of literacy.

- Clearly indicate how learners are progressing and enhancing their capabilities through participation in the program. Some form of certificate or statement of attainment for attending, and/or progressing successfully through the class could be considered.

There are clearly opportunities to think through how literacy programs might be linked to broader goals the participants have, particularly around job seeking, and further education. Also, it would be advisable to consider how content discussed in the classrooms intersects with other content that interests the participants.

There is also a possibility of packaging the service with other educational as well as broader service/s. This might include computer literacy and health literacy programs that are often integrated into community adult literacy programs and other services such as eye checks. This could enhance the potential participation of literacy class participants and augment their overall capabilities.

In considering the advertising and promotion for the classes, attention must be paid to presenting advertising that does not make people feel stigmatised but clearly indicates how it will enhance their literacy capabilities and benefit their lives. Using their existing networks and communication systems would be crucial to reaching potential participants.

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# Appendix A.   Interviewees

| | Interviewee[2] | Gender | Location of Interview |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Chloe | F | University of Technology Sydney |
| 2 | Aaron | M | University of Technology Sydney |
| 3 | Andrew | M | Hope Hostel (Parramatta) |
| 4 | Drew | M | Hope Hostel (Parramatta) |
| 5 | Rick | M | Hope Hostel (Parramatta) |
| 6 | Jane | F | Hope Hostel (Parramatta) |
| 7 | Jim | M | Hope Hostel (Parramatta) |
| 8 | Christine | F | Hope Hostel (Parramatta) |
| 9 | Rachel | F | Hope Hostel (Parramatta) |
| 10 | Andrea | F | Guthrie House (Enmore) |
| 11 | Holly | F | Guthrie House (Enmore) |
| 12 | Lisa | F | Guthrie House (Enmore) |
| 13 | Anna | F | Guthrie House (Enmore) |
| 14 | Sandra | F | Guthrie House (Enmore) |
| 15 | Sam | M | Earlybird Cafe (Wynyard) |
| 16 | Luke | M | Earlybird Cafe (Wynyard) |
| 17 | Connor | M | Earlybird Cafe (Wynyard) |
| 18 | Daniel | M | Earlybird Cafe (Wynyard) |
| 19 | Mary | F | UTS |
| 20 | Liam | M | UTS |
| 21 | Gregory | M | Ashfield |
| 22 | Lyle | M | Ashfield |
| 23 | Leanne | F | Ashfield |

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[2] In the reporting of the research the interviewees have been de-identified and pseudonyms have been used.

# Appendix B.  Semi-Structured Interview Guide

**Topic 1: Interest**

Would you be interested in attending a literacy class?

If not, why not?

Is there anything that will persuade you to change your mind?

**Topic 2: Attendance**

If you are interested, would there be any problems attending classes?

What would be a good frequency – once a week, once a fortnight?

When would you want the classes to be held?

Where would you want the classes to be held?

**Topic 3: Structure / conduct of the classes**

Would you prefer one on one tuition or a group?

If a group what would be a good size?

Any expectations as regards the tutor? / what would make you feel comfortable in the class?

**Topic 4: Information gathering / advertising**

Where would people in your situation look for information on the classes? What is the best way of advertising the classes?

**Topic 5: Expectations. what's to gain**

What would you want to gain from a literacy program?

**Topic 6: Generating general interest**

Do you think there would be much interest amongst people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness?

If not, what are the reasons?

How can the Footpath library generate interest? What strategies should they adopt?

# Appendix C.    Participant Information Sheet

**INFORMATION SHEET**

An examination of how people who have experienced or are at risk of homelessness perceive participating in literacy classes **(approval number** ETH16-1061)

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?
My name is Alan Morris / Benjamin Hanckel and I am an academic at UTS.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?
This research is to find out how  people who have experienced or are at risk of homelessness feel about participating in literacy classes  and what they think needs to be done to encourage people who have experienced or are at risk of homelessness to participate in literacy classes.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?
If you say yes to participating in the research I will ask you to participate in an in-depth interview. This should not take longer than 40 minutes to complete and with your consent will be audio-recorded. When the research is written up you will not be identified.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?
There are very few if any risks because the research has been carefully designed.  However, it is possible that you could find a couple of the questions uncomfortable and/ or embarrassing.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?
You are able to give me the information I need to find out about because you have experienced homelessness or are at risk of homelessness.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES? WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?
You don't have to say yes to participating and if you say no there are no consequences and you will not be contacted again about this research.

IF I SAY YES, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?
You can change your mind at any time and you don't have to say why.  I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?
If you have concerns about the research that you think I can help you with, please feel free to contact me on 9514 4880.

WILL I BE PAID FOR MY PARTICIPATION?
You will receive a $20 shopping voucher as a thank you for your participation.

If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772, and quote this number ETH16-1061.

# Appendix D.  Participant Consent Form

### *CONSENT FORM*

I _____ agree to participate in the research project 'Homeless persons perceptions of participation in literacy services' (approval number ETH16-1061) being conducted by Alan Morris and Benjamin Hanckel, Institute for Public Policy and Governance, 9514 4880.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to explore how people who have experienced or are at risk of homelessness perceive literacy services.

I understand that I have been asked to participate in this research because I have experienced or am at risk of homelessness. Participation in this research will involve a face-to-face interview that will last for approximately 20 to 40 minutes. There is a very small possibility that I could find a question unsettling. If the interview evokes any distress it will be terminated. The interview with my consent will be audio-recorded. I will be given a $20 shopping voucher for my time.

I am aware that I can contact Alan Morris if I have any concerns about the research. I also understand that I am free to withdraw my participation from this research project at any time I wish, without consequences, and without giving a reason.

I agree that Alan Morris and/or Benjamin Hanckel have answered all my questions fully and clearly.

I agree that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that does not identify me in any way.


_____          ____/____/____
Signature (participant)


_____          ____/____/____
Signature (researcher or delegate)


**NOTE:**
This study has been approved by the University of Technology, Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee If you have any complaints or reservations about any aspect of your participation in this research which you cannot resolve with the researcher, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officer (ph: +61 2 9514 9772 Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au), and quote the UTS HREC reference number Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

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