

Literacy goals fail ESL students

The Federal government's national literacy goals need to be revamped to prevent ESL students from failing, a Queensland academic has warned. The warning comes from Queensland University of Technology education lecturer Penny McKay, who is president of the Australian Council of TESOL Associations that specialise in students for whom English is a second language.

Dr McKay said the national literacy goals were too broad and did not cater for students with English as a second language, who had different literacy needs and needed specialist support and educational plans.

"Under the literacy plan, ESL students are to be assessed against the Literacy benchmarks which are maps of expected learning for English-speaking background students. Students who have spoken English at home and at school all their lives have different teaching and assessment needs from ESL learners."

Under the literacy plan, money is no longer tagged for many ESL programs and has instead been subsumed into the general literacy funding pool, said Dr McKay.

"Australia has (always) been a world leader in researching and teaching ESL in recent years, mainly because the commonwealth has allocated special funding for these students," said Dr McKay, who coordinates QUT's Masters in TESOL for ESL teachers.

"Without specific ESL goals and without funding separately tagged for ESL students, these students will lag behind and become invisible to policy makers. Fifteen percent of all students come from a non-English speaking background, (twenty percent in Victoria, and almost twenty-five percent in the Northern Territory and New south Wales) therefore it's vital that our literacy goals address ESL."

Dr McKay warned that in some schools, specialist ESL teachers, with masters degrees and years of experience, were being moved to jobs as general literacy teachers.

An ESL taskforce of State and Territory Education Department CEOs has prepared a national policy framework for the Ministerial Council of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, said Dr McKay.

She called on State and Federal Governments to release the policy framework to the education groups and the public, and then to amend the national literacy goals to include separate ESL goals and strategies.

Under the commonwealth's literacy plan, children identified with low literacy levels are to receive extra assistance. But Dr McKay said ESL students needed specialist teaching from ESL teachers who could cater to the needs of migrant children, children from non-English speaking backgrounds, refugees and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. With this specialist teaching, we have an opportunity to achieve our goal, which is high standards for all our students.

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