

FOUNDATION SKILLS WORKING GROUP

NATIONAL FOUNDATION SKILLS STRATEGY FOR ADULTS

CONSULTATION PAPER: Submission date: 20th April 2011

Discussion questions

1. What are foundation skills?

a. Do you agree with the definition of foundation skills set out in this paper?

AMES agrees with the definition of foundation skills set out in this paper on the basis that the National Strategy clearly recognises that there is a continuum of foundation skills. Each different level of vocational training and each level of skill/knowledge expected in different jobs requires different levels of language, literacy, numeracy, ICT and employability skills.

Although Foundation Skills can be viewed as those that ‘underpin’ other vocational learning and skills, they cannot be interpreted as only low-level or single-level skills. In a summary of research on adult literacy and numeracy, NCVER [Foster, S. National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2005] stated: there is a growing recognition that the challenge is... not confined to those with poor basic skills, but extends to all people trying to understand new forms of communication and information as they take on different roles in life and work.

Roberts & Wignall (2010) Briefing on Foundation Skills for the National VET Equity Advisory Council

In a response to Skills Australia (November 2010) AMES supported Skills Australia’s position that:

Understanding and defining literacy is complex ... It is a moving target, often contingent on context or changing environments

This applies not only to literacy, but equally to all the skill areas defined as ‘foundation skills’. All the skills identified by the working group as ‘foundation skills’ are context or workplace bound and need to be understood as the underpinning skills (as distinct from content/knowledge) needed to engage in any given level of training or at any level of employment.

In *Foundation Skills in VET Products for the 21st Century*, the NQC, TVET Australia describes two types of foundation skills:

- ... Foundation Skills that are described in competency standards as being an integral part of work performance, e.g. the skills and knowledge to complete a particular type of report, to interact with customers, to calculate measurements required for production, etc.
- ... the underpinning Foundation Skills that are needed in order to build new vocational skills, e.g. the ability to communicate in English, the ability to write basic information, the ability to read texts required in learning and work environments.

AMES would argue that the first type of skills described above are not foundation skills, but rather competency standards which assume the learner has the underpinning foundation skills required to undertake the training.

To be able to successfully undertake these units of competence learners need the underpinning foundation skills in language, literacy, numeracy, ICT and employability skills adequate to the level of the training they are enrolled in. For example ‘to calculate measurements required for production’ the learner needs the

foundation skills in numeracy that equip them to calculate measurements in the context required by the Training Package.

It is the place of a National Foundation Skills Strategy to provide supports for VET learners who need to build the underpinning Foundation Skills that enable them to develop the specific skills described in the competency standards.

2. What should be the focus of the National Strategy?

a. Given the scale of the need for foundation skills, should the National Strategy focus on certain sections of the adult population to maximise benefits for individuals, families, employers, society and the Australian economy?

Foundation Skills to gain initial employment and to up-skill

People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds make up a significant percentage of the adult population in Australia. Many of these people are well settled in Australia and are fluent in spoken and, often to a lesser degree, written English. At the 2006 census just over 20% of the people counted did not speak English as their first language at home. For a number of the adults in this section of the population, low level foundation skills (especially English language and literacy) are a barrier to further training and education and/or to moving from low skilled to more highly skilled work.

Recently arrived refugees and migrants make up a relatively small sub-set of the adult CALD population and for many in this cohort low levels of English create a major barrier to accessing vocational training and/or obtaining employment.

To build the skills of the adult CALD population (including recently arrived refugees and migrants) the National Strategy should target both (i) people who are not in the labour force or who are unemployed and need assistance to get into work and (ii) existing workers who need up-skilling.

Other groups with barriers to accessing training should also be a focus; however, as detailed below, this should not be at the exclusion of the general population of ESB adult Australians with low language, literacy and numeracy skills.

b. Should the National Strategy be directed at adult Australians in general or focus specifically on groups of disadvantaged adult Australians?

A National Foundation Skills Strategy for all adult Australians

To create fair and equitable access for all Australians the National Foundation Skills Strategy should be directed at all adult Australians who need to develop foundation skills so as to access further training and/or higher level employment, while providing additional supports that 'level the field' for specific disadvantaged groups.

'... Foundation Skills are not simply an equity issue. For many equity groups Foundation Skills can be a barrier to participation and achievement in training, but Foundation Skills also need to be developed by all learners concurrently with the development of new skills and knowledge. By specifically focussing on Foundation Skills only in the equity part of the quality assurance process the message is reinforced that they relate only to equity.'

Foundation Skills in VET Products for the 21st Century, National Quality Council, TVET Australia

AMES recommends that in the National Strategy, foundation skills are developed side-by-side with new vocational skills and knowledge for all learners. Equity groups will need specialised support/programs, in addition; however foundation skills are not the exclusive domain of these equity groups.

Specific support for recently arrived CALD adults

AMES supports the federal government policy of social inclusion through economic, educational and social participation and argues that within the CALD population in Australia, recently arrived refugees and migrants are one of the disadvantaged groups that need targeted assistance to be able to fully participate in Australian society.

Recently arrived CALD adults can face a number of barriers to accessing vocational training which leads to satisfying employment. These include limited understanding of systems and processes in the education and training sectors in Australia; low English language and literacy skills as well as, often, low numeracy; little experience of ICT and little or no experience of workplaces or of what constitutes 'employability' in Australia.

Many of these adult learners do not successfully complete vocational training where there is no foundation skills development concurrent with, and closely aligned to, the vocational skills being developed in a course.

Consultations with former AMES students who have moved onto mainstream TAFE courses confirm the significance of support with foundation skills development for CALD students undertaking vocational training.

The VET courses were too difficult because students did not have the required level of English ... and did not get the required support at TAFE even in Access programs which advertise ESL plus VET.

Consultation Noble Park 2011

AMES advocates strongly that the National Strategy includes specific training models, pathways and funding to support all groups of disadvantaged adult Australians, including recently arrived CALD learners.

3. How do we build the demand for foundation skills training?

b. Is there a stigma associated with low foundation skills? How can we overcome this?

CALD learners with low foundation skills

In AMES experience of delivering education and training services to recently arrived refugees and migrants and employment services to CALD clients generally, this cohort does not perceive a stigma associated with training and support to address low foundation skills.

On the contrary, many CALD clients explicitly ask for support with developing language, literacy and, when relevant, numeracy skills both as preparation for entering mainstream vocational training and as concurrent support during vocational training.

The cohort also explicitly requests any context-based training and workplace exposure (work experience, work placements) that will assist them develop employability skills for Australian workplaces – hence AMES focus on developing blended courses that integrate language skills development and vocational units.

ESB learners with low literacy skills

Principles for integrating foundation skills support in vocational training developed for the Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) (Bates and Wiltshire, 2000) have had considerable success. The two key principles of this methodology are *normalising* and *relevance*.

There are two central principles that underpin the concept and success of CAVSS. One is the normalising principle where the literacy support is an ordinary part of the vocational training and something that every student is engaged in. This moves away from an 'individual deficit' perspectives that underpin other remedial approaches. The second is the relevance principle that works to eliminate the possibility of 'extra' literacy tasks or added 'academic' literacy in which the literacy lecturer might introduce literacy tasks that do not relate to the course content or context.

Wendy Roberts & Kathleen Krsiich, NZ, 2004

By *normalising* Foundation Skills development as an integral part of any vocational training, the Strategy would not only ensure that all adult Australians (including CALD learners who do not require the targeted support describe above) are developing the *relevant* language, literacy, numeracy, ICT and employability skills for all levels of training and all workplaces, but would also remove potential stigma associated with being identified as having low foundation skills.

c. Are there any other barriers stopping people from participating in foundation skills training and how can they be overcome?

Barriers for people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Levels of English language and literacy

People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can face a number of barriers to participating in mainstream training, the most significant of these being low levels of English language and literacy.

The issue for many CALD learners is the gap between the exit point from ESL specific courses (eg the AMEP) and entry level expectations of mainstream VET courses – which generally do not have built in foundation skills support.

We need good reading and writing skills and [to] be good at speaking for oral presentations and group assessment tasks. VET courses use lots of slang for that industry or area of study. Teachers didn't explain words – my teacher told me "this is not an English class."

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Limited experience of formal education

Another barrier for a sub-set of the CALD cohort – many of the refugee and humanitarian entrants – is limited experience of formal education, especially for those who have spend lengthy periods in refugee camps. This can also be a barrier for early school leavers.

Cost: course fees

The cost of course fees can be a barrier to training – particularly where people need to undertake additional training (ie 'front-end' foundation skills course in preparation for main stream VET) at an additional cost. Refugee and humanitarian entrants are likely to be on low incomes or Centrelink benefits.

Addressing the gap

The *Victorian Skills Reform* provides a model that can support systemic interventions and scaffolded approaches which bridge the "artificial separation" of language and literacy programs (e.g. AMEP, LLNP) and mainstream vocational education. AMES commends the following features of the Victorian model:

- a category of Foundation Skills courses (language, literacy and numeracy) which can be delivered concurrently with any other vocational training under the funding model
- low fees for Foundation Skills courses
- eligibility for government funded English language learning courses, regardless of what other qualifications are held

AMES recommends that in a National Strategy all 'front-end' Foundation Skills Courses be available at a publicly subsidised rate for equity groups – including CALD new arrivals with low levels of English language and literacy and/or limited formal education; Indigenous Australians; early school leavers (those with limited formal education); people with disabilities.

4. How do we improve foundation skills training so it meets demand and the needs of learners?

The artificial separation of Foundation Skills from mainstream VET has added to the marginalisation of people facing barriers to learning. Breaking down the 'silo' approaches of the past and giving greater attention to building and supporting Foundation Skills in all VET delivery will enable more equitable participation and significantly improve quality outcomes for all.

Roberts & Wignall (2010)

a. What types of foundation skill training work for learners? What foundation skills initiatives work? How can we build on this?

The non-completion rate for all learners in VET is very high. Many learners who have gained access to mainstream courses:

- (i) still need language, literacy and/or numeracy support to complete their training
- (ii) significantly improve their LLN skills when learning in a vocational context

This is true both for CALD learners and for the almost 50% of adult Australians who have poor literacy skills. (ABS (2007), Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey: User Guide 2006, p8)

Front-end Foundation Skills

Many recently arrived migrants and refugees initially access Foundation Skills (ESL) as 'front-end' courses. Most commonly this will be through Commonwealth funded Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) and Language Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP). Depending on an individual's prior educational background and level of English when they commence ESL tuition this may equip some for entry to further training or employment.

Those who start from a lower skills base will need additional English language and literacy skill development before they are able to undertake vocational training – or employment. English language and literacy tuition that builds language and content knowledge for specific occupations can be very successful in preparing learners for entry to (supported) mainstream study.

AMES recommends that any pre-vocational foundation skills (ESL) courses contain some units of vocational training – eg OH&S unit from the relevant Training Package. The courses should also include some industry specific vocabulary and communication skills to prepare learners for understanding the language of the vocational training and use materials and resources drawn from the industry.

On-going, concurrent Foundation Skills

Foundation Skills are not only a 'front-end' requirement for accessing and succeeding in vocational training. Once learners (CALD and ESB) gain entry to mainstream training many will continue to need language, literacy and/or numeracy support to complete their training.

Foundations Skills should not be viewed as merely a set of basic, low-level skills needed to access entry-level mainstream training. Demands on learners' LLN and generic learning skills are relative to the level, content and context of the training they are engaged in. Therefore these underpinning skills need to be built and updated in response to changing contexts, different courses and the increased levels of skills/knowledge required of higher level qualifications.

Although some demographic groups are more likely than others to experience low levels of literacy and numeracy, the problem is not confined to identifiable groups. The notion that only some equity groups need support in the development of Foundation Skills is out-dated.

Individuals continue to build Foundation Skills over a lifetime. Foundation Skills need to be continually built and updated in response to changing contexts – new workplaces, new technologies, and new responsibilities. For this reason, all education and training programs need to support the development of associated and underpinning Foundation Skills (which was the original intent of built in, not bolted on).

Roberts & Wignall (2010)

AMES experience strongly supports the value of providing LLN support during training and in the context of vocational skills acquisition and proposes two approaches to building foundation skills into vocational training.

1. One approach is to mandate that Communication Skills units are built into Training Packages as additional core units – not as electives.
2. Another approach is to build on the model provided by the *Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS)* - described below.

The Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) is one successful strategy for the delivery of Foundation Skills (in particular language, literacy and numeracy) embedded in mainstream vocational training.

CAVSS is designed to be used in conjunction with any accredited VET course or Training Package qualification at any AQF level to provide LLN support. Up to 100 hours of LLN support is provided to the entire learner group, not individuals, using a team teaching approach with a LLN specialist working with the vocational practitioner in a face-to-face classroom environment.

The CAVSS model has been designed specifically to:

- avoid assessing individual's LLN skills levels and identifying individual learners for support, acknowledging that many learners need LLN support, but may resent being singled out for assistance
- provide LLN support across all AQF levels in recognition of the need to continually update and build Foundation Skills for new contexts
- enable a literacy/numeracy specialist to deliver training in partnership with a vocational specialist

Capacity to fund the delivery of CAVSS varies in the different jurisdictions across the nation. Western Australia, where the course was developed, has state funding arrangements to cover delivery and the Victorian Skills Reform provides a funding framework that supports concurrent delivery of Foundation Skills and vocational training.

Government in all jurisdictions has a responsibility to develop workable funding models that enable training providers to build Foundation Skills in tandem with vocational delivery. The development of a National Foundation Skills Strategy provides the opportunity to build on state initiatives such as the CAVSS model describe above and develop an Australia-wide strategy that will:

- have significant impact on the levels of skill in language, literacy and numeracy in the adult Australian population in the VET system
- impact positively on training completion rates
- increase the uptake of training by adult Australians who might otherwise not see VET as an option

b. What can we improve upon?

Professional Development (LLN, ESL) for VET practitioners

... the capability of vocational practitioners is critical for the effective delivery of training that integrates Foundation Skills. If Foundation Skills are to become a regular component of all training and skill development, more people need to understand how to develop Foundation Skills.

More specialist LLN practitioners will be needed who are able to work in a range of environments and in partnership with other training providers. Vocational training providers will need greater awareness of Foundation Skills and an increased ability to support the development of Foundation Skills. VET managers and policy makers will need a greater understanding of the centrality of Foundation Skills to all skill development and effective approaches for integrated delivery.

Roberts & Wignall (2010)

Under Training Package development policy all units of competency and qualifications must include LLN skills and Employability Skills relevant to workplace performance. This concept of 'built in, not bolted on' originally assumed that literacy/numeracy experts would deliver parts of the vocational program in partnership with vocational practitioners.

However, most vocational programs are not delivered by teams of LLN experts and vocational content specialists and the majority of VET trainers are not LLN specialists. This has led some critics to claim that "LLN is 'not built in or bolted on, but buried'". (Roberts & Wignall, 2010)

VET courses use lots of slang for that industry or area of study. Teachers didn't explain words – my teacher told me "this is not an English class."

Consultation Noble Park 2011

If, as is argued in this response, on-going and concurrent Foundation Skills development is an essential component of vocational training and skill development, more vocational practitioners need to be skilled in methodologies that assist learners to develop Foundation Skills. It is not feasible that all Foundation Skills training and support will be delivered by specialist ESL/LLN teachers. Therefore the capability of vocational practitioners to deliver training that integrates Foundation Skills is critical.

NCVER research (McKenna, R & Fitzpatrick, L, 2004) has found that with appropriate training, enhanced by professional development opportunities, a vocational teacher could integrate language, literacy and numeracy skills within Training Package units and assessment.

AMES recommends that, as a means to this, the minimum requirements for VET practice, the new Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, should include the development of expertise in LLN delivery as a core, not an elective, component.

c. Are there any gaps, why do they exist, how can they be best addressed, and who is best placed to address them?

Systemic responses

Workforce development

AMES recommends the core skills of the VET training workforce include the capacity to develop learners' foundation skills (especially LLN) as part of vocational training and that this up-skilling be achieved through including expertise in LLN delivery as a core, not an elective, component of the new Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (as described above).

High quality foundation skills training embedded in Training Packages

1. Foundation Skills (LLN) support in mainstream VET programs (CAVSS model)

AMES recommends that the CAVSS model of language, literacy and numeracy development be used to support all pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship training and that up to 50 hours of LLN support is funded per semester per course.

Capacity to fund the delivery of CAVSS currently varies in the different jurisdictions across the nation. However, ensuring the Australian population is proficient in the basic (foundation) skills of language, literacy and numeracy, and is employable, is an issue that needs to be addressed at the national level. A National Strategy should provide a workable funding model that enables training providers to build Foundation Skills in tandem with vocational delivery.

2. Foundation Skills support at every qualification level

AMES supports Skills Australia's position that "*Understanding and defining literacy is complex ... It is a moving target, often contingent on context or changing environments*" and recommends that funded Foundation Skills development is built into all Training Packages, at all levels of the AQTF through the inclusion of Communications Skills units as core, not elective.

Program level responses

'Front-end' Foundation Skills support

Australian Government programs such as the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) provides 'front-end' ESL support for recently arrived migrants and refugees with low levels of English and the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) is designed to meet the need of a specified number of CALD and ESB job seekers.

1. ESL preparation of vocational training

Some CALD learners will require explicit ESL programs to develop their language skills and equip them to undertake vocational units of study. This 'front-end' ESL skills development should be delivered in a vocational context where possible – ie should contain some 'hands-on' practical learning that starts to develop vocational skills while the learners are improving their English language skills.

2. ESL and Vocational Units integrated

A National Strategy needs to ensure that providers – ACE, TAFE, and any other large state training providers - provide integrated Foundation Skills (ESL) and Vocational Skills bridging courses where there is demand for mainstream vocational training from the migrant and refugee cohort. (eg AMES is piloting models of delivering foundation skills combined with units from Certificate II in Bricklaying with two groups of CALD learners).

Refugee and migrant students enrolled in the AMEP with AMES suggested the following as a means of bridging into mainstream vocational study or work:

... specific VET courses, like TAFE, after level 3 [Certificate in Spoken and Written English], with English built in. "Give students courses with many subjects, not just English - general education, maths, science, computer, study skills, interview skills, language about my area of study."

Youth Consultation Noble Park 2011

5. How can the National Strategy complement initiatives in other sectors?

a. How can the National Strategy best complement reforms in early childhood development, the schools sector, in VET and in higher education?

Multi-sector delivery (bridging programs)

Training that relies on specialist facilities/trade skills cannot be delivered by all providers. It is necessary to develop models that provide both sequential and concurrent pathways across sectors. Establishing and building on existing models that facilitate TAFE, ACE and schools working together in the interests of learner pathways will make the best use of the government's investment.

To deliver courses that integrate Foundations Skills (ESL and LLN) and Vocational Skills, most RTOs in the ACE sector, and many schools, need access to TAFE workshops and trade training expertise. Where funding supports (and encourages) providers to work in partnership and allows learners to enrol in modules of courses at multiple providers concurrently, each party can bring their strengths and specialist resources to a program.

AMES works in partnership to deliver VCAL courses for young recently arrived migrants and refugees. These VCAL programs provide a model for how providers across three sectors can work together in the interests of the learners.

Full time VCAL Foundation - Curriculum: CSWE 2, ESL Frameworks

AMES delivers the literacy component from the CSWE, Work Related Skills from the CGEA, Personal Development Skills from the Cert II in ESL Access, provides bilingual support in classes and specialist teaching and learning materials.

Debney Park Secondary College delivers customised modules from the VCAL Foundation Program - Numeracy Skills, Personal Development and Work Related Skills Units and arranges work placements for the students.

Kangan Batman TAFE delivers the Industry Specific Skills Strand as part of the Options for Work and Education (OWE) Program.

A National Strategy needs to provide funding models that support partnerships across sectors by facilitating concurrent enrolment in modules at multiple providers.

Funding needs to include incentives for providers to share specialist resources and skills.

6. What are the national priorities?

a. Given the issues you have identified in relation to the above questions, what are the highest priorities?

The priority for a National Foundation Skills Strategy must be to have effective Foundation Skills programs and initiatives built into vocational training nationally.

AMES strongly recommends that the National Strategy give priority to:

1. Integration of Foundation Skills development in vocational training – at all levels of the ATQ – through core Communication Skills units in all Training Packages.
2. Foundation Skills support (50 hours per course per semester) for pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship training
3. 'Front-end' (pre-vocational training) Foundation Skills programs designed for specific equity groups (including bridging courses)
4. Workforce development in supporting language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) development in vocational courses for vocational education and training (VET) practitioners