



NSW Adult Literacy & Numeracy Council

Submission

Subject: National Foundation Skills Strategy consultation paper
Date: 20 April, 2011
From: NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council

The NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council is the peak professional body representing practitioners, researchers, managers, volunteers and trainee teachers in the TAFE, adult community education, private VET provider, corrective services, NGOs and university sectors.

We welcome the opportunity to provide a response and comments on the National Foundation Skills for Adults Consultation paper. We have a strong interest in the development of a substantial new Strategy that will serve to shift widespread societal perception of 'low levels of LLN' as individual deficits or problems, and firmly place LLN as a fundamental human right for all Australians and consequently see the embedding of the development of LLN in all levels and aspects of learning – both formal and informal, as everyone's business.

In the attached document we have provided responses to each of the questions outlined in the Consultation paper. In summary, fully endorse the notion that LLN are foundational resources for all forms and levels of learning. We make some specific recommendations including:

- The value of reflecting the complexity of language, literacy and numeracy in their definitions so to avoid simplistic approaches and simplistic measures to be implemented to address a complex issue.
- The need to address some of the barriers experienced by practitioners that are limiting their capacity to work effectively – eg lack of a career structure and job security; difficulty of working in partnerships with other stakeholders, conflicting policy messages;
- The value of some longitudinal and in-depth research on learner experiences in some of the major LLN programs;

We look forward to seeing the new Strategy. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the points made in our Submission. I can be contacted on (02) 9514 3478 or keiko.yasukawa@uts.edu.au

Yours sincerely,

Keiko Yasukawa
President, NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council

1. What are foundation skills?

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

The Council believes that the definition of Foundation Skills as 'language, literacy, numeracy and employability skills in the information age', based on the definitions of language, literacy, numeracy, and employability skills listed on p 4 of the Consultation Paper does not capture all of what needs to be captured.

The Consultation Paper states that

The purpose of the National Strategy is to provide an approach to improving the skills that are essential for meeting the demands of everyday life, work and participation in the community. The definition that will ultimately be used by the National Strategy will clearly show which skills are needed to meet the demands of everyday life, which groups in society the National Strategy will focus on assisting, and how the success of the National Strategy will be measured over the next decade by showing what will be measured. (p 4)

The definitions that are presented do not capture the dynamic nature of the uses or practices of language, literacy and numeracy by individuals and communities, nor the ways in which these practices are contingent on a number of cultural, historical and other contextual factors. Thus, the first point the Council makes is that:

- **language, literacy and numeracy are more than skills, and they cannot be clearly and simply identified once and for all for any groups in society.**

While appreciating that rejecting a simple definition complicates the endeavour to improve how people can improve their language, literacy and numeracy, measuring success against a definition that does not capture what needs to be captured would not serve anyone well.

We also do not believe that the definition of language as 'the ability to understand and speak the English language' to be very helpful. If the intention is to have a term that distinguishes the use of the spoken language from the written language, perhaps the word needed is oracy or spoken language.

The Council is aware of other definitions that could usefully inform the definition(s) that might be suitable for the purposes of the new Strategy:

OECD definition of literacy for the Programme of International Assessment of Adult Competencies:

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society

http://www.oecd.org/document/2/0,3343,en_2649_39263294_2670850_1_1_1_1,00.html

OECD definitions of literacy and mathematical literacy for the Programme of International Student Assessment:

Reading literacy is defined in PISA as the ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society.

<http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=5420>

Mathematical literacy is defined in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as the capacity to identify, understand and engage in mathematics, and to make well-founded judgements about the role that mathematics plays in an individual's current and future private life, occupational life, social life with peers and relatives, and life as a constructive, concerned and reflective citizen.

<http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=5388>

UNESCO definition of adult literacy in the Belem Framework for Action (2009)¹:

Literacy is an indispensable foundation that enables young people and adults to engage in learning opportunities at all stages of the learning continuum. The right to literacy is an inherent part of the right to education. It is a prerequisite for the development of personal, social, economic and political empowerment. Literacy is an essential means of building people's capabilities to cope with the evolving challenges and complexities of life, culture, economy and society. (p 2)

The Scottish Government's *Literacy Action Plan 1* has established Scotland's overarching vision for all learners – **to raise standards of literacy for all from the early years through to adulthood**. Specifically for adults, the Scottish Government's vision is:

By 2020 Scotland's society and economy will be stronger because more of its adults are able to read, write and use numbers effectively in order to handle information, communicate with others, express ideas and opinions, make decisions and solve problems, as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners.

A definition of literacy as social practices (that can be extended to language and numeracy) from the New Literacy Studies:

Literacy practices refer to:

- the social activities as part of which we read and write;
- the social and institutional contexts within which reading and writing takes place;
- the cultural conventions and the social rules that govern our behavior in a literacy event;
- the people who read and write, and the meanings and intentions they bring to this event².

Ultimately, the definition that is chosen should reflect the broader social, cultural and economic objectives for developing and implementing a new Strategy. The Council does not in any way reject the connection between language, literacy and numeracy and the economy – eg workplace participation, productivity, reskilling. However, we believe that this connection is not a linear, causal relationship. Furthermore, we believe that there are, to use the Government's own terms, social inclusion objectives that must also be served by this new Strategy. We do not believe that these are separate to the economic objectives, and to separate them would be detrimental to one or both of these sets of objectives.

We argue that progress towards greater workplace productivity and social inclusion does not rest solely on *individuals* building skills in Foundation Skills *in isolation of* improved broader understanding of and commitments in adult language, literacy and numeracy. These broader understanding and commitments should recognise:

- that language, literacy and numeracy learning are fundamental human rights for all people living in Australia (and elsewhere);
- that while English is the official language of Australia, knowledge of, respect for and continuing use and development of other languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and migrant populations that make up the population of Australia are important for advancing social inclusion as well as developing pedagogies for English literacy, English language, and numeracy learning;
- that a societal response is needed to address the fact that adults' motivations and

¹ UNESCO, (2009), *Harnessing the power and potential of adult learning and education for a viable future: Belem Framework for Action*, CONFINTEA IV, 1-4 December, Belem, Brazil.

² Papen, U (2005) *Adult Literacy as Social Practice: more than skills*, Routledge, London & New York, p 31.

capacity to participate in learning can be hindered and/ or interrupted by a number of factors including poverty, poor health, societal prejudices, perceptions (and or reality) of limited prospects of gainful employment, family responsibilities, and/ or alienation or marginalization in the workplace or community.

We would therefore like to see definitions of language, literacy and numeracy or foundation skills that place improvements in these areas as the collective responsibility of society as a whole in terms of educating *all* Australians to take a role in enabling those who are facing barriers or stigmatisation in improving their language, literacy and numeracy. We would like to see measures that evaluate the wider society's commitment to these improvements; not just statistics on how individuals' levels of LLN have gone up or down.

We also note that we did not understand the intent of the following claims in the Consultation paper, and found it perplexing:

For many individuals with lower foundation skills, improving foundation skills is a challenging, lengthy and involved task, as it requires the use and development of more fundamental 'cognitive skills', such as comprehension, attention, memory and symbolic thinking. Although the development of such skills is an important factor in improving foundation skills, the National Strategy will not address these directly. (p 5)

We do not see how cognitive skills cannot be addressed in the Strategy – how is it possible to develop LLN without developing comprehension and symbolic thinking? Furthermore, we would like to see critical thinking skills added explicitly as an important cognitive skill underpinning LLN as well as employability skills.

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?**

We believe that language, literacy and numeracy is a fundamental human right, and would want the Strategy to endorse this view. Focussing on particular sections of the population would only increase the stigma on the people in those sections of the population, and would further perpetuate the view that language, literacy and numeracy is the responsibility of individuals, not the whole society.

It is also important not to put so much emphasis on current employees at the expense of potential learners who may not be employed. In some areas, there are potential learners who are second, third or fourth generation unemployed who may benefit from a range of different kinds of LLN programmes, some directed at employment outcomes but others with broader community outcomes.

Furthermore, we believe that everyone is constantly developing their LLN because LLN practices are constantly changing for everyone due to broader technological, workplace and cultural changes, as well as changes in the individual's life circumstances and choices. In other words, LLN are foundational resources that need to be embedded in all forms and levels of the lifelong and lifewide learning spectrum.

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

As stated above, we believe that no groups should be singled out. This does not mean, however, that approaches to engaging people in language, literacy and numeracy can be the same for everyone. Any approach would need to build on the existing strengths and resources of the individual and their community, and take careful account of their needs, aspirations and the opportunities that are available to them.

We would support extra support being directed to disadvantaged groups, and we would also recommend that the disadvantage experienced by the groups are addressed through a whole of government approach so that the structural barriers to education, employment and community participation are examined. It is important that groups are not identified and prioritised in ways that excludes individuals who do not fit neatly into the pre-identified groups. Just like simplistic definitions of LLN do not serve us well, simplistic definitions of disadvantage would also not serve us well.

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

a. Do we need to build demand for training amongst potential learners?

For example, can learners adequately assess their skill level? Do learners know how to access foundation skills training? Do learners know they could benefit from such training?

Assessment of learners must be undertaken in view of what they want or need to be able to do (for work, community or personal needs) that they cannot currently do. Many individuals are unlikely to be able to self-assess their foundation skills against anything as complicated as the Australian Core Skills Framework; however, many would be able to negotiate what they might learn through genuine consultation with a language, literacy and numeracy specialist. The latter should be the basis of programme planning.

Efforts at providing genuine incentive for learners to participate in foundation skills development is needed. For example, more workers would participate if they could see the kinds of work that they could do as a result of further training that they currently do not have the skills to perform; if the learning could be done in their work time as part of their development, rather than as a remedy for what they are perceived to be in deficit of. Greater consultation with groups of workers to discuss how they might benefit as a group from learning new skills and knowledge, rather than assuming that these are known could lead to much needed insights into how to engage more workers in further education and training.

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

There is a stigma associated with 'low' foundation skills. The current 'crisis' discourse that attributes low productivity levels and social problems to low foundation skills would not help to remove this stigma. Unless 'low' foundation skills levels are understood as a collective responsibility, individuals will continue to feel the stigma.

A national media campaign, presenting a range of contexts involving foundation skills development would be useful. However, such a campaign must be supported by sufficient resources to meet increased demand for provision.

The nation needs a promotion campaign that debunks current myths and perceptions about literacy and promotes literacy skills as important relevant achievable and not a person's 'problem or fault'. Continuous learning through life should be promoted as a right and satisfying experience

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

- Are there specific barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
- Yes, lack of enough language, literacy and numeracy specialists who have the cultural and language sensitivities and knowledge to work with people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in their communities. There is insufficient acknowledgement

of the value of a two-way approach to teaching and learning language, literacy and numeracy with Indigenous Australian peoples³.

- Are there specific barriers for people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?
- Yes, like with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a lack of 'two-way' and bilingual approaches that see the learners' first language as an important resource rather than as a deficit. More effort is needed to help people recognise multilingualism as an asset rather than a threat in workplaces and communities where English is the official language.
- Do barriers differ depending on people's:
 - o labour force status (ie. not in the labour force, unemployed, employed but could benefit from upskilling)
 - o gender
 - o age group, eg. 25-34, 35- 44, 45 and over
 - o place of residence (ie. remote, regional town, city)?
- Yes, all these are barriers that complicate the ways in which individuals experience barriers to participating in learning.

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

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

This cannot be answered simply. What works for learners are programmes that take account of the complex mix of needs, aspirations and opportunities as well as the existing strengths of the learners. A key component of what works is good pedagogy; that is, one that negotiates the particularities, practicalities and the possibilities of the learners and their learning contexts⁴.

b. What can we improve upon?

- Funding by DEEWR to Job Service Providers influences what clients are referred to. Clients involved with Certificate III and above level courses outcomes attract increased income for the JSP - what incentive is this for the services to promote Cert I and II courses? We would like to see research on the extent to which LLN pathways are understood and created for clients of JSPs.
- Centrelink is also a key provider of 'encouragement' to people who may want to continue learning; however employees have very scant knowledge about literacy issues or how to identify a person's literacy skill - some centres have been advised to allocate 3 minutes per client!
 - Are there issues relating to the workforce that delivers foundation skills training (including LLN specialist practitioners, VET practitioners, ACE sector trainers and volunteers)?
 - One issue is the repeated reference to the work of LLN specialists as 'training'. Many LLN specialists see the work they do as education – addressing learning and change of individuals and society more broadly than training people in particular skills. Skills are important, and specialist training is an important role. However, not all LLN specialists see themselves as trainers, nor do they all see themselves as educators in the broader sense. It is important that the specialists working in the field have a say in the way their work is described and named.

³ See for example various resources from WA on two-way approaches, eg Malcolm, I et al (1999) *Two-way English: Towards more user-friendly education for speakers of Aboriginal English*, Education Department of WA, Perth, WA.

⁴ See for example, Kumaravadivelu, B (2003) *Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for Language Teaching*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Ct.

- Are there enough trainers?
- The availability of highly qualified and experienced LLN specialist educators and trainers is uneven. There is a greater need in the regional, rural and remote areas.
- The lack of career security and structure presents a significant barrier for many people who would otherwise enter this field.
- Are they sufficiently well trained to deliver foundation skills training (including VET practitioners)?
- Educators and trainers, like most workers, grow and develop continually if they are working in workplaces that provide an expansive learning environment. The increased casualisation of the LLN workforce presents challenges in terms of enabling continuing learning in the workplace. The promotion of increased competition between providers through the competitive tendering processes has further introduced career insecurity.
- A large number of the highly qualified LLN professionals in NSW will be retiring in the next 5 to 10 years. It is important that they are replaced, and with LLN specialists who have educational experience and qualifications that provide them with the skills and knowledge to imagine alternative pedagogies and policy futures – ie to provide policy and pedagogic leadership in the field.
- Do VET practitioners need more support to address the foundation skills needs of their learners?
- VET practitioners, especially those with only a Certificate IV level qualification in training and assessment need more support in effective and inclusive pedagogy; this includes LLN and foundation skills, but is a broader issue that we hope is being addressed through the other policy efforts in relation to the VET workforce⁵.
- Are there any other factors that impact upon the quality of foundation skills training delivered by LLN specialist practitioners, VET practitioners, ACE sector trainers and volunteers, etc?
- There are systems barriers that are felt by LLN specialists who work or wish to work with VET teachers in their programmes. LLN specialists are at best seen in ‘support roles’ (LLN support, tutorial support) in VET courses, and are, in many cases, prevented from playing an equal role in the VET classroom to contribute to the VET students’ learning. The way in which LLN is embedded in the students’ learning is for the most part dependent on what is allowed by the VET practitioner, who may or may not have a sound understanding of how LLN is integral to learning.
- On the other hand, VET teachers are decrying the overloading of content in the industry training packages while the pressure to cover more (content) for less (cost and time) increases.
- There are also concerns about the mismatch between what is identified as the LLN competencies in a training package and the actual LLN skills, knowledge and practices needed on the job.
- The casualisation of employment of both VET and LLN teachers mean that the opportunity of the VET teacher and the LLN teacher to meet and plan their teaching together is limited, if not non-existent.
- Finally, the LLN contribution to VET delivery is not earmarked, making it vulnerable when pressures for resources are acute.
- Are there inconsistencies or overlaps in foundation skills initiatives between the Commonwealth and states and territories and between the VET, schools and community sectors?

⁵ eg the Quality of Teaching in VET project undertaken by the Australian College of Educators; research into the VET workforce undertaken by the Productivity Commission; the Creating a Future Direction of Australian VET undertaken by Skills Australia.

- There have been increasing suggestions of removing the delivery of Certificates I and II courses from the scope of TAFE and having that absorbed by the ACE sector. However, our ACE constituents in NSW are experiencing the difficulties resulting from conflicting direction from Government at the state level and receiving funding for Levels I and II courses that are crucial for building pathways to Level 3 courses. They are being encouraged to focus on Level 3 courses and to incorporate VET units into all English classes; this presents difficulties in the very low level classes.
- There are also gaps in consistency and outcomes between LLN providers now that the market has become deregulated and organisations not previously involved with LLN delivery are attracted to government funding. It is important to maintain a professional status for LLN educators, and expect of them a high level of educational qualifications that will enable them to work creatively, ethically and effectively with learners and community and industry stakeholders.

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

There are gaps in the ways the field of LLN or Foundation Skills is conceived and defined, the productivity objectives and social inclusion objectives of the Government. A whole of Government approach is needed to see LLN/ Foundation Skills being incorporated into education and training, labour market, health, housing, and Indigenous Affairs strategies.

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?

See 4c above

6. What are the national priorities?

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

For example, do you agree with the national priority areas set out under Section 5 of this paper?

Are there any areas that should be removed from that list?

Are there any other areas which should be included in the list?

The Consultation paper has suggested that the priorities could include:

- o Raising community awareness that foundation skills are a pathway to opportunity
- o Strengthening the workforce that delivers foundation skills training, including language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) specialist practitioners, vocational education and training (VET) practitioners and Adult and Community Education (ACE) workers and volunteers.
- o Increasing the responsiveness of foundation skills training to the needs of individuals, employers and industry
- o Making it easier for learners to participate in foundation skills training
- o Creating pathways and better linkages between foundation skills providers/trainers
- o Greater accountability of foundation skills providers so they deliver quality outcomes for learners
- o Increasing research into foundation skills training (eg. pedagogy, best practice, engaging specific learner cohorts, etc). (p 8)

We endorse all of these priorities with the following proviso:

- 'Foundation skills training' be replaced by foundation skills education;
- that the criteria for 'quality outcomes' referred to in the sixth dot point be connected to wholistic outcomes rather than simply based on meeting budget and targets and moving upwards on the ACSF scales – that is, the quality should be examined in terms of the

contributions that the provider is making to the community as well as individuals (eg provision of vocational pathways, counselling and employment support, access to library and other resources, community outreach and development).

We also believe that attention to improving the attractiveness of the LLN profession is a priority. Some areas for improvement are:

- teachers' career structures and job security
- a sector wide pay structure that gives recognition to levels of qualifications (making it attractive for individuals to invest in self-education) and which does not leave teachers' income as the bargaining chip for achieving the lowest bid in competitive tendering
- a national clearinghouse of resources and dissemination of reports of good practice
- avenues for continuing professional development, particularly in pedagogical areas
- support for improvement in practitioners' practice-based research capabilities

7. How can stakeholders be engaged in building the foundation skills of adult Australians?

a. How can each stakeholder group support the National Strategy?

In particular:

- Governments
- Peak industry groups
- Industry Skills Councils
- Employers
- Registered training organisations
- Adult & Community Education Sector
- Community organisations
- Employment service providers
- Interested individuals

We would like to see a whole of Government approach (at both the Commonwealth and state levels) for LLN so that the multiple benefits and influencing factors on LLN/ foundation skills development can be addressed more easily at the provider and practitioner levels. For example, despite the study by Wickert and McGuirk in 2005 on integrating LLN provision in community settings⁶, there are no systematic avenues for providers to initiate LLN programmes as part of health education programmes, environmental awareness programmes or housing and financial literacy programmes sponsored by different arms of governments. These are lost opportunities, and expensive ones if the learning and messages received in these programmes are limited due to the LLN needs of the participants not being addressed.

We provide an example of the ways in which a fragmented approach to addressing LLN needs in the community can lead to misunderstanding and unproductive working relationships in the cross-sector environments in which LLN professionals are increasingly working:

Feedback was provided to the CSHI in their consultations with LLN practitioners on the new units in the LLN skills set. Some of the terminology was discussed and suggestions given, i.e. CHCLLN401A – Element 1, 1.1, ...*identify learner's language and literacy level...* the term *practices* was considered more appropriate but this was not adopted. The range statement suggests using the ACSF framework and the ISLPR to determine a client's level, and that the candidate must have the required skills and knowledge to implement these tools. These are tools that are used by practitioners in a highly specialised environment, not resources that would normally be the domain of a community service worker. Information at the consultation confirmed there wasn't any agenda for CS industry workers to be involved in

⁶ Wickert, R and McGuirk (2005), *Integrating literacies: Using partnerships to build literacy capabilities in communities*, NCVET, Adelaide, SA.

training or delivery of LLN, yet this unit includes *planning and delivery* of language and literacy. It specifies that this should be done in consultation with a *supervisor*, the capabilities of whom was not determined in the draft, but is included in the final versions as “experienced tutor...or mentor”. These descriptions are vague and are not indicative of the skills and current adult LLN theories that underpins the LLN profession; and further “waters down” the discipline and delivery of quality teaching.

We also provide some increasing concerns about partnerships with industry. Some providers have experienced a concerning shift in the way WELL is managed and approved over the last 6 months and there is a fear if the current trend continues some quality and experienced providers will be marginalised from participation in these programmes and the spirit and success of WELL will disappear eg they no longer approve computer literacy, they no longer approve plain English programmes, and there is increased rigidity on how WELL is to be delivered that is counterproductive to programme effectiveness. All of this runs contrary to best practice WELL.

We recommend that DEEWR funded programmes such as WELL, IEP need to reflect best practice of Foundation Skills Programmes and embrace recommendations from No more Excuses regarding the need for flexibility and a broad understanding of the concept of Foundation Skills.

Finally we would like to see a greater role for LLN specialists and their learners in the monitoring and evaluation and continual improvement of what the new Strategy delivers: they are major stakeholders.

b. How can stakeholders better work together?

A strong, consistent, and long term (eg 10 years) whole of government policy to LLN/ Foundation skills at both Commonwealth and state levels that guide specific strategies would allow stakeholders to see their role better in a national effort to improve LLN. A Strategy without a strong Policy behind it is vulnerable to political manipulation and leaves the Government unaccountable.

8. How do we measure the success of the National Strategy?

a. Should targets and performance indicators be set? If so, what should they be?

- Poverty reduction
- Reduced gaps in health outcomes, particularly between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the rest of Australia
- Reduced instances of racially and ethnically based discriminations, vilifications and conflicts
- Increased participation in learning the languages and about the cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by a greater number and wider groups of people
- Reduction in the number of unemployed and underemployed individuals
- Greater worker involvement in planning and designing workplace training Programmes
- Expansion of the adult language, literacy and numeracy workforce in numbers and reach
- Expansion in range and diversity of LLN programmes that reflect the diversity of learner groups and their needs and aspirations

b. Are there existing data gaps in what is known about foundation skills delivery and the demand for foundation skills? If so, how can these gaps be addressed?

There are research gaps in the longer term benefits to individuals, the employers and the communities of existing Government programmes such as the LLNP and WELL. Although there are some statistics, there seems to be a lack of any in-depth studies of how these programmes have affected the learners in the long terms, most importantly, but also other stakeholders. This is a serious gap, given that these (or similar) programmes have been in operation for some fifteen years and yet we are talking about an apparent 'crisis' in literacy.