



NSW Adult Literacy & Numeracy Council

Submission

Subject: *Draft Equity Blueprint: Creating Futures: Achieving Potential through VET*
Date: 7 September, 2010
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The NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council is the peak professional body representing teachers, workers and others interested in the field of adult literacy and numeracy in NSW. We are pleased to have the opportunity to provide comments on the Draft Equity Blueprint. Most of our members are working directly as teacher practitioners or indirectly as managers, teacher educators and researchers in areas of disadvantage in education, and are keen to see reform that can extend access, equitable participation and success in VET, particularly for learners who experience disadvantage.

The Council endorses the aims and areas needing reform, and strongly supports the idea of embedding equity 'in the DNA of VET'. We also fully support the need to improve workforce participation *and* social inclusion through these reforms. We would add that closer analysis through both quantitative and qualitative longitudinal research should be undertaken when the reforms are implemented to develop greater understanding of and confidence in the relationship between VET, workforce participation and social inclusion.

Reform area 1: Sustainable investment

We believe that disadvantage, particularly where this is systemic and multi-faceted cannot be redressed through a series of short-term initiatives. We welcome the identification of sustainable investment as an important core area of reform. We endorse the principles of a National Partnership Agreement for Equity in VET as a way of signalling that this is 'everyone's business'.

We have some concerns about the notion of 'reward payments linked to achievement of performance benchmarks, including performance incentives at training provider level for delivery of reforms'. While rewards will be welcomed by any recipient, it is more important that available funds are invested to enable providers to achieve equity outcomes, and to enable new initiatives that could widen participation to be developed and supported.

We strongly support the examination of the impact of contestable funding. There is arguably some contradiction between making a sustainable investment and a market-based approach to addressing disadvantage. Should VET programs continue to be based on contestable funding, then demonstrated evidence of capacity to support disadvantaged learners should be part of the criteria to be met in a tender. Capacity should be examined in terms of specialist teaching, counselling and support staff,

infrastructure, status within the local community, and links within and with external providers to offer pathways to and from the tendered programs.

We support the exploration of place-based and student-centre funding. A place-based funding model could more easily facilitate programs that integrate within existing community based programs and services, and the development of new programs that have the support and involvement on local industries. Student-centred funding on the other hand provides learners with the security of support if they move from one area to another.

We support learners' ongoing access to assistive technologies, and establishing a system that does not require the learners to renegotiate access each time they change course or enrol in a new program. A system of giving easy access to upgrades of these technologies as they become available would also be important.

Reform area 2: Measuring and reporting performance

We support the principle of public accountability and evaluation of programs. However, it is important that the aim of the reporting be, as its core, to better inform policy makers and funding bodies on what are effective strategies and what are barriers for provision that lead to success, especially among students who come with one or multiple forms of disadvantage. Measurement should not be undertaken in ways that impede or detract effort from good educational practice. As mentioned in the introduction, well designed qualitative and quantitative research could provide fruitful insights for policy evaluation and renewal.

As the draft Blueprint notes, collection of student data using a 'unique student identifier' can have both benefits as well as risks. We would not like to see students' educational experiences being recorded and accessible without informed consent by the learners. Learners have a right to protection of their privacy; it will be easy for learners in the target groups identified in the draft Blueprint to feel stigmatised if they have experienced repeated non-completions and or failures and they know that each time they make a decision to re-engage with study their past record is going to be examined. Like any database construction, careful and wide consultation about specific proposals of the design is needed, for example examining and evaluating hypothetical scenarios from multiple perspectives.

Reform area 3: Building the capability of the VET workforce

Workforce development in the VET sector is critical as the level of casualisation is unacceptably high, and many currently in the workforce will be retiring over the next 5 to 10 years. There is some significant impetus for change with the work currently underway, including the study by the Productivity Commission's study of the VET workforce, the study undertaken on the quality of VET teaching by the LH Martin Institute (funded by DEEWR, led by Dr. Leesa Wheelahan), and the NCVET study on the professional development in the VET workforce by Hugh Guthrie.

Setting the minimal qualification benchmark for the VET workforce at the Certificate IV in TAA helps to ensure that trainers and assessors in all Registered Training Organisations meet a minimal qualification level. However, many learners from the target groups identified in this draft Blueprint would need teachers who are able to constantly reflect on and renew their practice by drawing on a sound and wide range of pedagogical resources. The Certificate IV in TAA is unlikely to be sufficient as the only teaching qualification.

Workforce development and renewal must be considered as part of the sustainable investment that is needed in VET, in the same way that investments are made by both national and state governments in the development of school teachers. The challenges for VET teachers who work with learners who have experienced multiple disadvantages in their schooling, are arguably even greater than, and require at

least the same level of teaching skills and knowledge as the challenges faced by many school teachers. The sector needs practitioners who have the capacity to imagine and lead new approaches, based on research of their own practice as well as an openness and ability to respond critically to challenging ideas and research generated elsewhere. A serious approach to widening access, participation and success in VET requires serious investment in the teachers who work with the learners.

Given the amount of information and insights being captured and analysed by the above-mentioned studies on the VET workforce, we believe it is important that the NVEAC blueprint is developed in concert with the recommendations that emerges from these studies, and indeed, their recommendations need to be informed by NVEAC's data and analysis.

It should also be noted that casualisation can be seen as one of the consequences of contestable funding. Provider organisations are not unlikely to employ staff in more secure forms of employment so long as their funding source is insecure; nor are they likely to make significant investments in the development of their workforce.

Reform area 4: Embedding support for foundation skills development

The Council welcomes the attention being given to literacy and numeracy/ foundation skills by NVEAC, Skills Australia, DEEWR, the Australian Industry Group and the Innovations and Business Skills Australia (IBSA), and the commitment to the development of a new national strategy.

The Council recognises that there is both a capacity and capability crisis looming in the 'foundation skills' workforce, especially in the rural and remote areas where it has always been more difficult to attract teachers, and where access to teacher training and professional development has been limited. The scholarship scheme introduced by the Government is welcomed and may help to rebuild the workforce, although some fundamental questions about career prospects and industrial conditions of the literacy and numeracy workforce need to be addressed, as discussed later on in this submission..

The draft Blueprint and the supporting document by Anita Roberts and Louise Wignall refer to the work of IBSA in developing skill sets/ electives for the Training and Education training package, and new VET qualifications for adult language, literacy and numeracy teachers. These are important initiatives in widening access to initial training and professional development for practitioners. However, what has escaped mention in the draft Blueprint and the supporting document is the role that the university sector plays and can play in this area.

It is fair to say that the university sector, with a small exception, has failed in more recent years to sustain involvement in the provision of adult literacy and numeracy teacher qualification programs, advocacy for and critical analysis of policy, mentoring of practitioner researchers, and engagement in the kinds of research that are informed by and which inform practice in the field. Not only has this led to a paucity of teacher training courses for teachers, but to a lack of the kinds of leadership that the university sector ought to provide, particularly in regard to policy analysis and renewal, and strengthening the practice – theory nexus. This also means that there is not a sufficiently strong relationship between the university sector and the adult literacy and numeracy practitioners in the VET sector. As a result, the literacy and numeracy field is not benefiting as much as it can from the research being done in universities in related public policy areas such as health, workplace learning, and Indigenous education and social policy.

The university sector, like VET, is increasingly market-driven, and universities are unlikely to introduce and sustain teacher training programs if there are not viable student numbers. One of the obvious factors that influence potential trainees in deciding to undertake a course is the career prospects. The current level of casualisation in the VET sector generally and in the adult literacy and numeracy field in

particular, exacerbated by the contestable nature of the program funding, do not make the field attractive to as many people as the field can potentially attract. The career structure and the industrial conditions of teachers need careful attention in order to build capability and capacity in the field.

One of the specific and important consequences of the weakening relationships in the field between the VET sector and the universities and the limited amount of practitioner involvement in research is that new research and theoretical models for thinking about literacy and numeracy generally, and the 'embedding' of literacy and numeracy in vocational programs, are not being engaged with and debated in Australia, especially among practitioners. There is, in fact considerable research from the UK and elsewhere that ought to be informing the way we think about 'what embedding foundation skills' means.

We do not wish, in this submission to put forward what ought to be the 'right' approach to embedding, or indeed what embedding should mean. However, we do wish to point out that there are significant gaps and differences between:

- embedding literacy and numeracy in a training package;
- embedding literacy and numeracy support in VET policy either at a national, state or individual organisational level;
- embedding literacy and numeracy in the pedagogy of a vocational course; and
- embedding a literacy and numeracy teacher in a vocational classroom.

All of these aspects of 'embedding' need to be part of a coherent understanding of the role that literacy and numeracy (and other aspects of foundational skills) play in the *learning of* and the *practice in* the vocational area. Furthermore, it is necessary for the teachers and students alike to recognise that the literacy and numeracy for their 'academic' study may be different to the literacy and numeracy that they will use in their workplace practice. Ideally, the pedagogy in the college would assist the students to see the connections between these apparently different literacy and numeracy practices; however, this can only occur if the embedding is across the whole of the students' vocational learning experience.

A team based approach between vocational teachers and literacy and numeracy teachers is essential to a successful embedding. However, unless there is policy support at all levels, and an agreed position and pedagogical leadership capability from both the foundation skills and the vocational sections, any 'good practice' guidelines are unlikely to gain traction on the ground. Furthermore, while raising awareness about the language, literacy and numeracy needs of learners among the vocational teachers is an important starting point, it is not sufficient. Teachers in both the foundation skills and vocational areas need to have a strong pedagogical foundation themselves to have the language and resources to develop a way of working together as professionals. This relates to the issue of VET workforce development discussed in the earlier section.

Another aspect related to the career prospects and industrial conditions of the literacy and numeracy/foundation skills practitioners is the opportunity and support for continuing professional learning so that these teachers can work as true professionals who can confidently and legitimately exercise their own professional judgement, and exercise agency in shaping their practice in response to their learners' needs. The strengthening of professional networks and other avenues for supporting the professional learning of practitioners needs to be elements of the Blueprint.

Reform area 5: Pathways and partnerships to achieve positive learning, life and work outcomes for learners

We fully endorse the principles of taking a holistic approach to improving people's learning, life and work outcomes. We agree that effective cross-sectoral and intra-sectoral partnerships can play critical roles in

achieving positive outcomes for learners. Although partnerships have been a topical concept for some time now, there are still challenges to forming sustainable partnerships between educational providers and potential partners, especially in some key public policy areas such as health and housing. Furthermore, some of our members have emphasised the need for partnerships to be built, rather than imposed from above, in order that they have relevance and effectiveness in their local communities.

More research is needed to evaluate existing partnership programs in ways that express the outcomes in 'measures' that have traction in the respective sectors. Such research would provide strength to significant developments in cross-sectoral policies that are supportive of such partnerships. The possibility of research relates back to the issue of capacity and capability of the foundation skills workforce discussed earlier.

We are concerned that the COAG targets for increasing the qualification levels for the Australian workforce is having the effect of transferring resources and attention to the higher level certificate courses at the expense of the lower level courses. This will have a direct impact on the availability of pathways for students who have faced educational disadvantage. Specifically, some of our members have expressed concerns about the availability of courses at levels below Certificate 3 that are needed for many learners coming in through pathways and outreach programs to make a successful re-entry into study.

Reform area 6: Listening to the voice of the learner when designing the VET system

The role of the ACE sector varies from state to state. For many learners, community colleges appear more 'user-friendly' than large TAFE colleges. They can and do play an important role in re-engaging adult learners into study. In NSW where our Council is located, ACE colleges do not attract the same status as other public education providers such as TAFE colleges: their funding base is more precarious, they have little infrastructure themselves to offer diverse programs, and their teaching workforce is even more casualised and paid less than their colleagues in TAFE. It would be desirable if public providers such as TAFE and community colleges can work in a cooperative manner to create and enhance pathways for learners, rather than work in competition with each other. Creating conditions (employment conditions, infrastructure) that gives equal status for both sectors, but distinct and complementary roles in the project to improve learning, life and work outcomes for people from disadvantaged groups is needed. In order to achieve this, some of the factors contributing to the competition (eg contestable funding for programs intended to support these target groups) need to be critically reviewed.

We fully endorse the principle of including student voice in the development and evaluation of the new policy. We would also advocate for the voices of the teachers on the ground to be listened to, and responded to. Many teachers are feeling the lack of professional agency and voice in policy making, and empowering both students and their teachers in shaping their learning and teaching environment can lead to continual improvement and renewal of policies and approaches to creating a VET system that increases social inclusion and human capital.

In summary, the NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council welcomes and broadly embraces the principles outlined in the draft Blueprint. However, we believe that in order to achieve a system that can demonstrate sustained and effective efforts in increasing access, participation, equity and success by disadvantage learners groups, serious examination is needed in:

- capacity and capability building in the VET workforce generally, and in particular, the foundation skills workforce;
- rebuilding the research-practice nexus in VET and foundation skills through supporting

practitioner research and partnerships with higher education researchers;

- increasing the engagement of the higher education sector through partnerships in research and professional development;
- improving the career structure and industrial conditions of the VET workforce generally, and the foundation skills practitioners;
- examination of the impact of contestable funding on learners, providers, and the community;
- examination of the impact of the focus on increasing the qualification levels of workers on those in the early stages of their learning pathways;
- the development of cross-sectoral policies that facilitate partnerships across the education and other social services sectors.