



SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL FOUNDATION SKILLS STRATEGY
DISCUSSION PAPER
May 2011

Background to Community Colleges Australia

Community Colleges Australia (CCA) is a member-funded peak body. It was formed in late 2006, recognising a need for an industry association at a national level to represent not-for-profit (NFP) community owned providers of adult and youth education, training and learning in a local environment. It currently has 65 members whose businesses include independent schools and learning provision for re-engaging youth, non-accredited pathway learning including personal development courses and social inclusion activities, disability learning and caring, specific foundation skills programs such as LLNP and AMEP, VET courses up to Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeship training organisations and employment (job services) advice.

Membership comprises long established learning organisations located in metropolitan, regional and rural locations. The community colleges are strategically placed to provide a focus on student welfare with commitment to the employment outcomes for, and personal development of, the individual. CCA members have a history of delivery that is:

- Supportive and nurturing
- Customised to individual needs
- Strongly retentive
- Provided by fully qualified trained teachers
- Flexible in course scheduling
- Highly cost effective

Our vision is for Australia to achieve more dynamic and vibrant communities, informed and empowered through learning.

Introduction

CCA members have a collective annual turnover of \$250 million and deliver over 7 million accredited training hours annually. CCA members also undertake a high number of contact hours (some measurable, some not) in foundation skills learning. CCA therefore welcomes this opportunity to provide input into NFSS discussion paper and is willing to assist DEEWR further during its deliberations and preparation of its final report. We look forward to the opportunity to be present in a range of forums and for the Department to hear directly from CCA members to further elaborate the comments outlined in this submission.

CCA wishes to acknowledge the contribution from many of its members in the preparation of this submission and notes that in some instances it has directly input wording and statements from the individual colleges own submissions. This is intentional and aims to reinforce the message that the industry association wishes to portray; namely the consultation and delivery of messages from its members, who are adult education providers delivering a range of learning and training programmes, including working with individuals and groups who require foundation skills.



Executive Summary

CCA considers that if all Australians' foundation skills improve, the country will benefit from increased economic productivity, enhanced social inclusiveness, cohesive communities and a competitive edge on a global scale. Australia has world-leading organisations that create learning resources and deliver education and qualifications that are on a par with the rest of the world. The challenge is utilising the existing infrastructure to ensure all adults gain or improve their foundation skills to a level which allows them to participate fully in society. A national strategy will need to be sensitive of the long term, ten year approach and be bold enough to set out programs and initiatives that drives student engagement; builds employer involvement and, ultimately, delivers the desired outcomes for industry and society.

CCA believes that many of the learners the NFSS will be targeting are likely to be:

- requiring more than just literacy, numeracy and employment-ready training
- wary of formal educational institutions and easily put off by complex enrolment procedures
- anxious about their ability to engage in learning and assessment
- lacking in self-esteem and self-motivation and unable to concentrate for long periods
- de-motivated by formal assessment, not very self-directed or self-disciplined in learning
- in need of regular direction and guidance from their teacher

CCA's key findings identified throughout this submission include:

- The principle around foundation skills should be one of focus on the creation of economic and social value; that is a real return for individuals, employers and society. The skills people develop through foundation learning should be transferable (adaptable to 21st century work and life changes) and responsive (to Australia's workforce and community needs).
- Much of society's focus today is on social capital and the value of a literate person in building community and networks - which supports the economy and sustainable development.
- To reach the goals on foundation skills, streamlining current measurement practices with consistent assessment will be vital.
- In establishing a focus to the National Strategy, CCA contends that no disadvantaged individual or group should be overlooked. The benefits to maximising the strategy are the holistic improvements to Australia as a country and Australians as a whole.
- The strategy needs to be long term, recognising that sustainable solutions are not a "quick fix" but that investing now in improved foundation skills will reduce costs in other government policy areas in the future e.g. welfare payments, corrective services infrastructure, health budgets etc
- Alternatives to mainstream learning institutions could be vital in enhancing the capacity building of foundation skills across the spectrum of groups who require them.
- Restricting the Strategy's criteria to indicators of disadvantage such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, disability, low-socio economic status risks excluding people with legitimate needs who are outside of these groups.
- Promotion to raise awareness of the benefit foundation skills training will be most effective if it shows specific benefit to the individual and that benefits can occur relatively quickly, that is in the short term rather than over the longer term.
- An important area of learners needs from CCA's perspective is to create credible and connected learning pathways.
- Previous successful LLN initiatives have been those which are imbedded into learning programs rather than running separate or parallel to them. These are not necessarily vocational programs.
- Priorities should be strengthening the professionalism of the workforce that delivers foundation skills training; and increasing the responsiveness of foundation skills training to the needs of individuals, employers and industry.
- The strategy must have quantifiable achievements but also encourage qualitative contributions.

Foundation Skills - The Concept

Community Colleges Australia (CCA) supports the concept of a universal definition of foundation skills. CCA notes that the definition of foundation skills is challenging and looks forward to the work undertaken through this discussion paper and its conclusions, providing clear guidance in the future. At a minimum, the definition should encompass language, literacy, numeracy and generic employability skills as identified in the Consultation Paper.

In order for adults to participate fully in life, including work and community involvement, they require a broad range of skills. Language, literacy, numeracy, employability and technology skills are essential, not only in the workplace, but also through a range of activities within society. The inability to function within these core areas impacts negatively on life in general - affecting the individual and their family members. The principle around foundation skills should be one of focus on the creation of economic and social value; that is a real return for individuals, employers and society. The skills people develop through foundation learning should be transferable (adaptable to 21st century work and life changes) and responsive (to Australia's workforce and community needs).

In our members businesses, foundation skills are a set of interdependent prerequisites essential to coping with work, life and community involvement; these include language, literacy, numeracy and employability skills. Employability is what businesses seek; employers may then be prepared to up-skill using training methods and facilities that suits their unique circumstances. However, given the work undertaken by and the range of clients community colleges work with, foundation skills should not be inherently linked with employability skills. Much of society's focus today is on social capital and the value of a literate person in building community and networks - which supports the economy and sustainable development.

Foundation Skills may be viewed as those that 'underpin' other vocational learning skills and should not be misinterpreted as just low-level or single-level skills. CCA would also broaden the definition to include the educational nurturing that will be necessary, incorporating the needs of not just the person requiring foundation skills but also their family or extended household. These extra skills include:

- 'mechanical and cognitive skills' - learners from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may need to develop these in preparation for reading and writing - e.g. holding a pen, processing the English alphabet and numbers system;
- 'social comprehension' - an ability to connect or reconnect with Australian society. For individuals/families/groups who have suffered trauma in their lives e.g. humanitarian refugees, members of a drug-dependent household, youth at risk, people with a disability including mental health illness, long-term unemployed etc. the re-engagement into participating actively in their community setting requires foundation training beginning often at a more basic level than merely building the ability to understand English and to be understood by others;
- 'resilience' - an important capability that is often under developed in the cohort likely to be in greatest need of foundation skills training; and
- 'e-literacy' or 'digital literacy' which goes beyond just basic technology skills. Contextual learning in an information technology-rich environment is an essential strategy for gaining and improving e-literacy/digital literacy skills.

All these foundation skills are essential in order for all adults to participate in work and their community. Without them, people who have never been in employment or actively participated in their community, have trouble adjusting to the demands of a workplace or the location where they reside. Issues particularly relevant to employment include punctuality, dressing appropriately, cultural tolerance of others and generally, learning to work alongside other people who may or may not be the same age/race/gender/religion as them. Employers' feedback to CCA members in the past has included that for their business some adults may not meet industry demands even if they have passed basic LLN requirements; that is they require more rounded foundation skills.

One goal for the Australian Government in creating a national definition for foundation skills should be the accompaniment of consistent assessment and measurement practices. One of the key aims therefore to achieve consistent assessment and measurement practices will be to ensure all State and National foundation

skills initiatives follow the same system. CCA notes that some inconsistencies currently exist. One example of this is the Consultation Paper's proposal to draw on the OECD Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) to assess and measure foundation skills levels while the Australian Government's Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program draws on the Core Skills Framework.

CCA also notes that quality assessment has become somewhat bureaucratic with measurements and audits undertaken by a diverse range of government agencies.

To reach the goals on foundation skills, streamlining current measurement practices with consistent assessment will be vital. CCA members would be willing to participate in performance-based funding with groups of adults to provide evidence of best practice in building the basis of and capacity in the country's foundation skills.

Focus for the National Strategy

In establishing a focus to the National Strategy, CCA contends that no disadvantaged individual or group should be overlooked. If Australia is to improve its economic production along with its social and community cohesiveness, there is a need to ensure that all persons holding inferior foundation skills are afforded assistance in their learning and training opportunities. CCA members have been highly successful over decades of education provision in supporting and succeeding with non-traditional learners. These learners are often from lower socio-economic status groups or communities. Such cohorts include:

- Youth at risk and those young people who have left school without completing Year 10
- People with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Persons with a disability, including temporary mental health issues
- Disadvantaged women
- Long-term and short-term unemployed
- Older isolated adults (particularly those living in public housing)
- Homeless persons
- Indigenous individuals or families
- People recovering from drug dependency or time in jail/corrective institutions

Acknowledging that there could be a significantly high scale in persons requiring foundation skills, then the response to this question is to identify the benefits and return from government investment, rather than merely identifying that there is a cost to a specific program. The emphasis for the National Strategy should be on sustainable investment, rather than funding (a short term cost item).

Noting Skills Australia recommendation for a 3% incremental increase in tertiary sector enrolments over the next 15 years aligned on COAG setting qualifications based on Australia requiring more people with significantly improved foundation and higher level skills (*Creating a Future Direction for Australian Vocational Education and Training, Skills Australia, October 2010, page 4*), it will be necessary to encourage adequate financial and resources investment; both per individual and per annum. The benefits to maximising the strategy are the holistic improvements to Australia as a country and Australians as a whole. And given the Bradley Review recommendation to increase the number of adults with a Bachelors Degree to 40% of 25-35 year-olds by 2020 (*Review of Australian Higher Education Report, Executive Summary, page vii*), there must an emphasis on investing in delivery of foundation skills otherwise a wide group of potential students will not have the wherewithal to participate in higher education.

If Australia is to move students through higher VET qualifications and/or on to Bachelor degree qualifications, then there must be better financed programs for foundation skills established; not just a continuation in

funding for other, higher levels of skilling, education and training. A National Strategy will require a simplified system that unites government departments (both at state and federal level) to support each other in achieving results. The strategy needs to be long term, recognising that sustainable solutions are not a “quick fix” but that investing now in improved foundation skills will reduce costs in other government policy areas in the future e.g. welfare payments, corrective services infrastructure, health budgets etc.

The National Strategy should identify that all the key elements of foundation skills (addressed at Question 1) require equal emphasis when considering government investment and that 21st century skills makeup cannot be shortcut by reducing funding of any of the key elements. If the real cost of service is not met by the National Strategy, services to disadvantaged and low socioeconomic status persons will be delivered at compromised levels and lead to lower success rates in foundation skills take-up. The delivery of foundation skills to these groups requires persistence and a long term commitment, not short-term funding. CCA members know that those who are disengaged from learning and who suffer from low foundation skills require innovative models for delivery of education. CCA would welcome the opportunity to trial pioneering training models, including the Lifeworks Program which has had significant success in other OECD countries.

A community development response for foundation skills could see an investment in organisational capabilities in order to offer potential students the best delivery opportunities. This approach would facilitate diverse, life long, life wide opportunities for all members of the community to engage with foundation skills formation. Alternatives to mainstream learning institutions could be vital in enhancing the capacity building of foundation skills across the spectrum of groups who require them.

Should the National Strategy focus on certain sections of the population to maximise benefits to the Australian economy?

In both examples provided in the Consultation Paper, CCA recommends the focus be a combination of both approaches.

- For those not in the labour force foundations skills will assist with preparing the individual for work, improve confidence to seek employment and assist in the job search process. In defining those ‘not in the labour force’ CCA members noted the cohort of people who are not “unemployed” by Government definition but who could require assistance with foundation skills despite them falling outside the specific target group. For example, targeting ‘people not in the workforce’ should include all people, not just those registered with Centrelink. This would ensure inclusion of key groups such as stay at home partners currently supported by their working partner and not eligible for Centrelink benefits, but seeking to enter the workforce. In addition there may be people involved in educating children and providing family focus caring who require foundation skills building. Those not in the labour force could also be extended to ‘youth at risk’, that is under 17 year olds who are still in school but not engaging well with the education system.
- For existing workers, it is generally acknowledged that there may be a significant component why have achieved employment without holding the necessary foundation skills to sustain or improve employment outcomes. This may lead to problems with people keeping their jobs, or an inability to progress within an organisation. In addition, those individuals attempting to study higher qualifications for work outcomes may be hampered by an inability to cope with the demands of educational programs without holding the necessary foundation skills.
- Support is required for those with very low or low foundation skills as it is very difficult for these Australians to enter the workforce or to participate fully in general life or their community.
- Assistance for those with existing adequate foundation skills will enable these Australians to improve and develop their quality of life and seek enhanced work opportunities, and in this sense, enable them to contribute more fully to the economy.

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

Assuming that there may be created a method of defining persons who require assistance with their foundation skills, CCA anticipates that most of the focus for the National Strategy should be based on disadvantaged adults and youth at risk. However, whilst we predict that people needing foundation skills training will generally fall into disadvantaged groups, restricting the Strategy's criteria to indicators of disadvantage such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, disability, low-socio economic status risks excluding people with legitimate needs who are outside of these groups.

With regard to disadvantaged Australians, the many additional barriers faced by these Australians may require specific additional support in order for them to be successful. Such barriers need to be recognised and addressed for these Australians. Attitudinal challenges include:

- people not seeing themselves as a learner or a simple lack of confidence
- difficulty in controlling a work/life balance including 'caring' demands
- lack of appropriate education opportunities

Material challenges for disadvantaged Australians include:

- financial constraints e.g. fees, transport, books, equipment, childcare
- time constraints
- lack of information as to the benefits of accessing foundation skills
- geographic isolation
- lack of basic skills

Finally in having a strong focus on disadvantaged adult Australians, the National Strategy needs to take account of structural challenges in formulating a delivery plan for foundation skills which may include:

- limitation of delivery options locally in regional areas and/or access issues
- lack of acceptance by individuals into improving their potential from improving their foundation skills
- balancing work & family commitments even where individuals desire extending their knowledge
- Loss of identity/ ostracism from their own communities

CCA members also recognise that some emphasis/evaluation should be undertaken on adult Australians who may not be considered 'disadvantaged'. There are many adult Australians who left school at an early age and are now in the workforce - who are required to use technology, analyse information, write reports, etc. Challenges to their levels of foundation skills arise where they have progressed to a supervisory level on the basis of time employed or technical knowledge. In these situations, people may go from technical positions into management positions requiring a much higher level of foundation skill capability and the lack of skill isn't always recognised in the workplace before they are promoted. These people don't always identify as being in a 'disadvantaged group' and therefore may not access support if they believe the National Strategy is only for those who are disadvantaged.

Building the demand for foundation skills training

CCA believes that it will be vital to build demand for training amongst the wide range of potential learners requiring foundation skills. A range of different entities should assist in this endeavour. Whilst it would be recommended that Governments take the lead, employer groups, industry skills councils, peak industry bodies and charities could all assist in raising awareness. Raising awareness that foundation skills are essential for employability and community engagement should be a common goal for all Australians and a defined national strategy will be an encouraging principle. As highlighted in the previous question, resourcing will be vital to the success of not just building demand but also achieving outcomes. If the core focus is on lower socio-economic status individuals and disadvantaged groups, then Governments must be prepared to invest in a range of programs to ensure quality outcomes. Demand could be driven in a socially engineered format that allows some groups to participate in learning that assists their foundation skills without necessarily providing an emphasis that this is what is occurring e.g. through joining a personal development course. Self-esteem considerations will be vital in any foundation skills marketing.

If it could be assumed that the development of foundation skills marketing may have two primary audiences then raising demand will differ between the two:

- (i) groups who have been continuously disadvantaged and who will require guided and personal one-on-one tuition to make any real substantive gains could require significant persuasion / alternative programs to build demand / take-up foundation skills opportunities; and
- (ii) those individuals or groups who have an aspirational desire to improve their life outcomes and obtain/improve work opportunities and/or gain better social acceptance may be more easily marketed to using traditional formats.

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

It is CCA members' experience that people are often unaware of their own foundation skill limitations. Two key reasons are:

- (i) low skill and education attainment amongst their peers leading individuals to believe their skills are comparable and adequate; and
- (ii) a lack of suitable role models motivating them to aspire to more.

Without understanding the problem, people may also lack knowledge of the benefits foundation training can bring. These benefits must be promoted to them. In addition to lack of awareness, people may not see a demand because:

- Potential learners will not necessarily identify that they need foundation skills training as learners are often fearful of telling people they need assistance. This can be for many reasons, including the stigma attached to not being able to function in society as they believe they should be able to, fear of losing their job if their employer was to be made aware of the problem etc.
- Employers need to be educated to give their employees the opportunity to take up these skills.
- Learners aren't always able to assess their own skill levels. While they may be able to do this where levels are very low, the capacity of some individuals to recognise shortcomings at the moderate levels is not always present. Learners may not understand what foundation skills are all about; or how to assess themselves effectively. With the help of someone who has this knowledge they can then begin to understand and identify where the gaps are and how best to address these gaps.

Learners don't always understand the benefits of improving their skill levels and this is particularly evident at lower levels of skill development, where learners have not had the opportunity to engage in successful education or work programs. For example, those who come from a background of intergenerational and long term unemployment have not had the opportunity to understand the broader benefits of active engagement in

the workforce, and therefore may have a lesser understanding of the need for foundation skill development and its potential outcomes.

b) Is there a stigma associated with low foundation skills? How can we overcome it?

A stigma associated with low foundation skills most definitely does exist. CCA members who all operate long-standing RTOs and some of whom are also employment services providers, are aware of the hesitancy most people have around disclosing foundation skills issues or accepting additional assistance when offered, following assessment. Promotion to raise awareness of the benefit foundation skills training will be most effective however if it shows specific benefit to the individual and that benefits can occur relatively quickly, that is in the short term rather than over the longer term. Promotion must also overcome previous negative experiences and demonstrate that foundation skills training will be positive and different from prior learning environments or experiences such as school or institution based learning.

There have long been associations made (often incorrectly) between the ability, for example, to read and write, with a person's intelligence levels. People who can't read and write, are often embarrassed and many have lower self esteem levels. When forced to undertake study people can suffer both personally and at work. Individuals often don't want others to know they have an issue with foundation skills so may try and hide it for fear of ridicule by workmates or others in their local community.

Strategies to assist might include:

- Education programs for the general public about the affect of low foundation skills on the capacity of potentially their friends/relatives to function fully in life/work/community
- Educating employers to support their employees in developing additional skills
- Using examples of people who have overcome low foundation skills levels and gone on to lead productive and successful lives
- Using case studies that include positive role modelling

c) Are there specific barriers stopping people from participating in foundation skills training and how can they be overcome?

CCA is aware that current learning practices allow for rejections by some adults in funded places because of e.g. a reported mental health issue 10 years prior. It will be vital to offer foundation skills to all who wish/should participate and ensure that previous impediments are not considered permanent restrictions to learning. Similarly, where someone has completed one low-level qualification e.g. Certificate I they should not necessarily be stopped from receiving government funding for undertaking another low level qualification because it may be that they need to undertake education and training in a range of different foundation skills before having the confidence to join the workforce or participate in their community.

Are there specific barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

A number of CCA members deliver a range of Indigenous specific employment and training programs. Their experiences are that Indigenous Australians face a range of barriers to participation in employment, education and training programs, foundation skills or otherwise. These include specifically for this group:

- a lack of appropriate role models to motivate them and encourage goal setting;
- Attendance issues arising from family and community commitments;
- Cultural awareness amongst staff of the organisation;

- Past negative experiences with education leading to issues of disengagement;
- Low expectations of Indigenous students from staff;
- peer pressure and shame for trying to improve their skills or employment; and
- a need for culturally sensitive training and support services.

A range of barriers also exists for the broader population including:

- lack of availability of suitable training due to thin markets (limited or no training places), particularly in regional areas;
- stigma from peers/colleagues/friends/family;
- entrenched disadvantage, for example long term unemployed;
- Cost of participating in programs (fees, transport, child care, resources, work experience components);
- Lack of awareness within the local community of available services;
- Lack of flexibility of delivery;
- Effects of poor rapport with staff;
- Lack of available transport to attend learning institutions; and
- Low levels of support available from family or friends.

Are there specific barriers for people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?

- Language barriers for new arrivals (speaking, writing);
- Complexity of language for differing industries (often very different from conversational English – most industries use some form of jargon which adds another layer to the language);
- Many culturally and linguistically diverse clients are also socially and economically disadvantaged by their position, so cost is an issue;
- For those culturally and linguistically diverse clients who work fulltime in lower level positions, access to education can be a major issue; and
- Lack of understanding of cultural issues

Do barriers differ depending on people's:

- ***Labour force status***
 - Barriers differ between existing workers and unemployed. Cost of programs, transport, childcare etc may be a barrier for unemployed. Existing workers may struggle with coping with extra study on top of a full-time workload, time pressures of study, family commitments, employer attitude to participation in learning programs etc
- ***Gender***
 - Barriers for women include child care issues, access to educational programs close to home or within school hours, pressure to return to work for those in low socio-economic circumstances, family

- attitudes, time management for existing workers where the female is often required to juggle full-time work, care of children and housework
- Barriers for men include stigma associated with low foundation skills levels, work pressures, family responsibilities
- **Age Group**
 - Older people tend to require more support when learning than younger people
 - Fear of technology can be a factor for older learners
- **Place of residence**
 - Those who live in remote areas may experience barriers relating to location and accessibility of services, access to technology, cost, time.

From this synopsis the National Strategy will require trainers who are sensitive to the many and varied barriers that learners may face. Cultural sensitivity will also need to be carefully considered, together with a trainer's capacity to manage a variety of individuals with significant learning and education barriers.

Improving foundation skills training for the demands and needs of learners

CCA is confident that the success of the National Strategy will be achieved through policies and programs that have sufficient investment for both the providers and learners of skills over the long-term and that funding will be specifically applied for the targeted outcome of improved foundation skills. This is not to say that foundation skills should only be taught in isolation, indeed members report strong success where some students can concentrate equally on a VET qualification as well as English language development. We also note that using a 'big picture' approach linking the significance of foundation skills to the student undertaking the learning to other training pathways assists the learner in better understanding the benefits of foundation skills. However, these and other examples must not lessen ensuring that foundation skills investment does not get absorbed or dissipated or reduced in favour of other learning outcomes or higher qualification training demands.

It is CCA's belief that the results achieved using an approach which offers programs with significant and on-going investment will ensure learners gain the self esteem and confidence to contribute to wider society, be it through further education, acquiring (or improving) a job or through being a better citizen. The key point is to ensure momentum and continuing encouragement to allow whatever it takes for a learner, especially from disadvantaged groups, to acquire greater foundation skills. One program will not suit all learners of foundation skills and there should be built-in flexibility to incentivise the learners' needs and to ensure that they can all be accommodated. Innovative learning solutions should be invested in and the focus on goals including a more inclusive society, greater GDP per capita and highly productive businesses should be biased towards the end of the ten year strategy timetable, i.e. long-term improvements.

Another important area of learners needs from CCA's perspective is to create credible and connected learning pathways. CCA members have identified through many years of learning delivery that persevering with learners on personal development or non accredited training courses, yields outcomes through students acknowledging they have the ability to undertake further education or join the workforce. This can especially apply to lower socio-economic status individuals who often need to develop self-esteem and confidence before applying themselves to formalised and structured learning. Identifying flexible learning options will be vital; to overcome the barriers to learning identified in question 2. For example, potential clients may be busy working and find it challenging to set aside time and money to improve their foundation skills even when they are fully aware that they are missing opportunities at their workplace or not able to participate fully in their local community.

a) What types of foundation skills training work for learners? What skills initiatives work? How can we build on these?

CCA members provide a range of learning initiatives that from their knowledge as RTO deliverers and adult education providers, they are confident could be effective for foundation skills learning. In our members'

experience, many successful strategies have been those which are imbedded into learning programs rather than running separate or parallel to them. These are not necessarily vocational programs. Foundation skills training could be greatly enhanced by involving the following key elements:

- customised learning environments that meet the needs of the learners and optimise learning by overcoming previous negative experiences. For example, classroom based learning can remind learners of school and therefore be a barrier to participation. Alternate environments such as community centres, PCYCs and Aboriginal Lands Councils can offer familiar and more relaxed surrounds that break down the barriers for learners;
- contextualised and practice based learning so students learn by doing. Employability skills such as team building and problem solving should be embedded into activities so they are developed through active learning. Work experience type activities are also valuable in providing practical learning;
- passionate and experienced trainers who inspire and engage learners. Trainers must contextualise training to make it relevant to the learners, and modify it to meet individual learning styles wherever possible;
- fostering a workforce of foundation skills specialist trainers rather than relying on generalist trainers to deliver foundation skills training as an addition to their role. Foundation skills should be acknowledged as a discrete discipline in its own right;
- a whole of person approach – the full range of needs must be addressed for people to benefit from foundation skills training. For example, in one program with inmates at a local Juvenile Justice centre, literacy skill development is built into arts and crafts programs. Inmates create greeting cards for family members' special occasions, such as Mother's Day. The craft teacher includes poetry and verse writing as part of the activity – enhancing skills in these areas without seeming to be 'literacy' courses;
- DEEWR's recent Foundation Skills Taster Program enabled programs to be offered for mothers of young children, aimed at enhancing the mothers' literacy levels by engaging them in activities with their children;
- Men's sheds may offer opportunities for foundation skills development for young men, as part of the mentoring process that already takes place within these environments;
- existing specialist government programs such as LLNP should be extended to learners with this specific need, not only to recent arrivals to the country or the unemployed. Social inclusion programs should be open to all programs and not just specific groups. There may exist a perception that foundation skills are "not for me" because a learner does not fit within groups defined by existing government programs; and
- Foundation skills may need to be embedded more specifically into training package qualifications or skill sets.

b) What can we improve upon?

Adequate resourcing is vital and critical to the success of 'second chance' learners. The resource needs cover a variety of requirements; for example delivery providers need first class facilities. These will include appropriate venues for a range of learners, technology for learning appropriate to workplace requirements (tablet computers etc) and community expectations (social media), and qualified trainers. CCA members advise that there are currently not enough foundation skills trainers, particularly in regional areas. The limited number of trainers available must be shared between training providers. There is a tangible shortage in foundation skill trainers and a lack of resources to address this issue.

Whilst our members advocate for specialist trainers, we also know the importance of generalist trainers having a sound understanding of foundation skills to provide base level support to learners as well as the ability to recognise and refer learners needing more intensive assistance. Currently, there is limited professional development available in foundation skills. It is imperative that all trainers have access to professional development to debrief and share experiences, exchange ideas, keep their skills and knowledge current and develop their problem solving abilities. Formalised, structured and regular professional development and networking opportunities are critical to achieving this.

Without consistency of programs for foundation skills learners within the National Strategy there may be an inability to offer sufficient teaching work within industry areas to engage trainers fully and this could lead to trainers seeking work elsewhere. And if trainers cannot be convinced of longevity to foundation skills programs they may be reluctant to acquire new foundation skills techniques and integrate them into accredited training units or qualifications.

Do VET practitioners need more support to address the foundation skills needs of their learners?

CCA notes that professional development support as identified above will be vital to offer quality foundation skills learning. Additionally, current provision of education and training for adult learners is delivered in a variety of contexts including classroom based, employment based, online and via correspondence. Existing trainers are not necessarily equipped to identify foundation skills needs in these varying contexts. And once identified, specific expertise may be required for trainers to support learners in each context for the provision of foundation skills.

Some foundation skills need very specific strategies (literacy and language for example). Many trainers do not have these skills and building those skills into other (including VET) teaching qualifications may preclude many from gaining those qualifications if the time and cost involved increases markedly. Many trainers don't teach full-time, and may be less willing to expend additional money to gain further qualifications.

Are there any other factors that impact on the quality of foundation skills training delivered by LLN specialist practitioners, ACE sector trainers and volunteers etc:

The transitory nature of many existing government funded learning programs e.g. LLN, equity/social inclusion programs means that it is not possible for CCA members to outlay resources to support the engagement of permanent professional staff. CCA and its members would need to be able to identify that programs offered for delivery under the NFSS were sufficiently long term to enable them to commit to permanent employment for their trainers. In addition, our members are in a unique position of providing VET, accredited programs and non-accredited but life-long self-development learning courses which provides colleges with a diverse and wide range of training expertise. However, the challenges for recruiting staff is that there is inconsistency between existing government programs and rates paid e.g. for AMEP, LLN, ESL etc and so there would be a nervousness within colleges that adding NFSS programs could further complicate trainer rates. As employers however, CCA members have already identified that it is often inappropriate (and almost impossible logistically) to pay a different rate to the same teaching practitioner for teaching students enrolled in different foundation and educational and training courses.

CCA notes that the growth in compliance requirements continues to create limitations on growth and innovation, including in sourcing the supply of the 'right' type of workforce for members businesses. For the NFP sector of foundation skills education providers, what will form a potential workforce supply is impacted by:

- Opportunities for volunteers decreasing due to legislative requirements and budget constraints, including trainer support (historically very helpful in regard to foundation skills provision);
- Skills of employees needing to include an understanding of the variety of learning groups the college may work with and their specific learning needs, and the local community aspirations;
- Workers who understand the need to facilitate learning through empathetic and flexible delivery methods;

- Pay scales which may not be the same as that available in the private sector; and
- Persons who are committed to helping all students to develop their full learning potential.

The NFSS and complementary initiatives

CCA maintains that there is a difference between delivering foundation skills and pure LLN skills to students, both of which require attention if we are to achieve the COAG goal of halving the number of those without a Certificate III by 2020. We also consider the inclusion of funding of “skill sets” rather than just full qualifications needs to be developed as our members often receive feedback from employers and students that they require “just in time” customised training to meet their industry or entity needs. There will be a need to recognise that the “one size fits all approach to education and certificates” is not effective given the increasing numbers of ‘special needs’ students and the increasing level of bespoke training skills requested from employers.

CCA notes our members feedback regarding their frustration of funding in many past or current initiatives being capped and short term; our colleges advise that the delivery of foundation skills to equity students requires persistence, and a long term commitment, not short term funding. Any future ‘penalising’ of lower level training through removing or restricting government programs will not assist increasing the number of people entering the workforce. In that regard, CCA members are committed to implementation of the Ministerial Declaration on ACE Goal 1 and the accompanying strategies have a strong focus on this initiative. It includes:

- “ promote the significant role played by the ACE sector in developing pathways to further training”
- “ facilitate auspicing and partnership arrangements which increase access by individuals to vocationally focussed training”

Having stated the need to enhance and build on current funding offered for foundation skills, CCA members believe the National Strategy should work closely with employment service initiatives such as those currently offered by Jobs Services Australia, Disability Employment Services and the Indigenous Employment Program.

The National Strategy also holds great potential to act as a bridge between initiatives in other sectors. The interplay between schools and VET and also VET and the higher education sector should be capitalised on. Students assessed as ‘at risk’ due to foundation skills deficiencies should be picked up as they exit the schooling system and transitioned into the VET sector to build on their foundation skills and gain workplace and/or social competencies. Similarly, the VET sector should support the higher education sector through ensuring students embarking on advanced diplomas/degrees already have well developed foundation skills. Foundation skills which are integrated into learning from early childhood development through to higher education means learners will be employable and leave studying with competencies ready for the workforce requirements. This should lead to increased productivity in the Australian workforce and more cohesive communities.

CCA also notes that the Industry Skills Councils have recently published a report “*No More Excuses*” in which they outline responses in their training packages and support resources to the problems with low LLN skills in their own respective industries. CCA concurs with the report’s statement that “*....the size and complexity of the LLN challenge means that there is no single answer. The challengemust be addressed across all aspects of education and workforce development*” (page 16). Continuing to develop their training packages by acknowledging foundation skills requirements will ensure that the ISCs complement new initiatives introduced as part of the NFSS.

National Priorities

Foundation skills in such a linguistically and culturally diverse country as Australia should be the aspiration of anyone at any age and where assistance is required training should be available to all Australians notwithstanding their background or employment status. Adults are socially, vocationally and educationally

disadvantaged when their foundation skills do not provide them with an acceptable level to integrate and engage in work and community situations.

All of the priorities identified in Section 5 of the Consultation Paper are important and CCA members consider that all need to be included within projects of the NFSS. In terms of the national priorities, critical initiatives are identified as:

- (i) projects and programs that are applied consistently and with the same requirements and measurable outcomes across all the states and territories;
- (ii) strengthening the professionalism of the workforce that delivers foundation skills training; and
- (iii) increasing the responsiveness of foundation skills training to the needs of individuals, employers and industry.

CCA cannot stress enough the need for a steadfast and long-term commitment to adequately resource the National Strategy. Australia cannot hope to achieve its Commonwealth and State and Territories Governments objectives for workforce participation or build its social capital through better and fully cohesive communities without lifting the high percentage of current residents who suffer from inadequate foundation skills. This strategy provides the opportunity for all stakeholders (governments, industry, education providers, social enterprise) to be proactive and responsive in developing programs that will make the difference to all the Australians who need (even if unrecognised) improvement in their foundation skills.

In identifying a crucial need for professional development for foundation skills teaching we would caution against an expectation of a full user pays system, but would encourage teachers to be skills tested regularly.

In developing projects that will underpin the strategy CCA members would caution against creating a prescriptive program approach with measurement success only by tightly defined completion results. Foundation skills projects need the flexibility to alter specific programs where individuals or employers identify revised competency requirements. Performance indicators such as learner and employer satisfaction, and improvement in skills through competency measures and progression along pathways would be one recommendation. Outcomes which measure increases in social participation such as more parents being more able to be actively involved and assisting with the family's school homework may be another.

One current example in the vocational training and employment services industry highlights levels of compliance burden. In the Access pre-apprenticeships training program, 90% of key indicators are administrative; only three indicators relate to performance outcomes. In our colleges' experiences, compliance complexity can adversely affect a program's capacity to be flexible and responsive to the individual needs of employers and learners. If the nation is to continue to engage with people requiring foundation skills improvements, training (and the outcomes measured) must be capable of rapid amendment.

NFSS Stakeholders

Whilst individual stakeholders may have a specific (sometimes unique) role the groups identified below need to work synergistically and collectively to build the foundation skills of Australians. From CCA's perspective, we see the critical stakeholders and their roles in building the foundation skills of adult stakeholders as:

- **Governments** - more funding to support foundation skills development, together with practitioner development. Monitor requirements for reporting and data collection to ensure that initiatives do not unnecessarily overburden providers
- **Peak industry bodies** - enhanced education for members; offering a supporting role for providers and gaining valuable feedback on the performance and success (or otherwise) of specific strategy initiatives
- **Industry Skills Council** - better consultation and communication processes in relation to embedding new strategies into Training Packages and working with providers and deliverers of foundation skills to identify future needs of the industry

- **Employers** - educated to identify workers with potential foundation skills needs and actively participating in early intervention strategies to build skills thereby increasing economic productivity. By showing them the benefits, employers should support their employees to undertake these studies
- **RTO's** providers of competency based training for a range of industries with learning including/requiring level of foundation skills ability
- **Adult & Community Education Sector** - specialists in foundation skills training and with an ability to build pathways of learning that help employers and the wider community understand the benefits. May work in partnership with other community based organisations to deliver foundation skills training embedded into community activities and non-vocational learning.
- **Community organisations** - provision of specialist support services to address personal barriers to foundation learning
- **Employment service providers** - help identify gaps in foundation skills and spend funding to help learners gain the required skills'. They may also act as referral agencies to education providers.

The stakeholders identified above will work better together through improved communication and consultation processes. CCA trust that through a foundation skills national strategy, the initiatives will encourage and support a partnership approach to achieving outcomes, with fair and equitable access to the necessary resources.

Measuring NFSS Success

CCA acknowledges that the strategy must have quantifiable achievements; one suggested outcome or KPI could be a significant percentage reduction in the number of working age Australians with insufficient literacy or numeracy to effectively fulfil their job role. Another suggested outcome would be measuring the increase in the number of Australians moving through from lower level education qualifications to higher. Specific competencies that may be measured/achieved include:

- Communication
- Teamwork
- Problem solving
- Initiative and enterprise
- Planning and organising
- Self-management
- Learning
- Technology

However, we would also encourage qualitative achievements of the strategy which may include (indirect contributions to) a reduction in the number of Australians on welfare benefits, less community crime, fewer young persons entering corrective services institutes and a smaller percentage of people with preventable health issues. Improving the foundation skills of all Australians of all backgrounds and ages in order to improve the country's general well-being and local community cohesiveness as well as its economic competitiveness should be specific targets.

In undertaking measurements of success for the National Strategy, CCA recommends:

- Avoiding focusing exclusively on course completions as the main measure of success;
- Including competency as a measure of success; and
- Not underestimating the value of progression and achievement of pathway milestones

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

CCA recognises that effective measurement of outcomes for the national strategy should rely on targets and performance indicators, to ensure effective and efficient use of foundation skills resources. Targets could be identified with COAG's existing agendas to improve the skills base of Australian workers, improve work productivity and meeting the tertiary education numbers (at both VET and higher education levels).

It has already been identified (No More Excuses, Industry Skills Councils Report, 2011) that for training packages, foundation skills could be built into an overall program. This would allow for competences to be assessed as part of the VET delivery. Very importantly for many foundation skills learners, there should be identifiable achievements and recognition provided to the learner when they attain them.

CCA would caution however on the automatic implementation of Training Packages with embedded foundation skills as they have not always produced the intended outcomes. This is possibly due to the method of learning where foundation skills components of vocational units are delivered by the vocational specialists for the specific certificate and not literacy teachers. To overcome this CCA recommends:

- Advice from LLN specialists/teams for the vocational specialist during planning and preparation;
- Team-teaching approaches for all or part of the course;
- Separate, additional skill-building sessions for some learners; and
- Customised resources.

These recommendations could be some of the identifiable requirements for professional development for teachers.

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?

Community colleges do not currently collect specific data on foundation skills for individual learners. And as identified earlier in this submission, attempting to quantify the actual and latent demand for foundation skills training could be challenging –either because an individual does not wish to admit to their lack of skills or because they are unaware that they require foundation skills improvement.

Notwithstanding this, CCA members fully identify with the need for a defined national strategy as they are confronted every day with individuals who require better skills to function fully in life, work and community. Community colleges already spend significant time with learners, often at the college's own expense, to assist and improve learners' competencies. The rewards and outcomes become measurable only when a person may complete a competency or undertake another course, gain a job or participate more fully in their family or community life; but identifying the demand for those competencies at 'point of entry' to the college will require careful and empathetic analysis, in order to avoid the individual removing themselves completely from a training and education opportunity.

National testing programs for individual learners could provide the information, as could measuring the progress of learners along the learning continuum. However, CCA would advise that adding a further burden to the already existing plethora of reporting sets and audit requirements should only be undertaken if the reporting is national, consistent, a requirement for all providers, adequately funded, and with the potential to streamline existing data collection.