

## Foundation Skills Resolutions

### Community Colleges Australia National ACE Summit

29 June 2021

#### Resolutions

The Summit supports access to and provision of foundational skills for all Australians regardless of age, work status or background, and requests the widespread integration and promotion of the new *National Framework for Foundation Skills* as a matter of national priority. The Summit notes the anticipated Framework priority to ensure, “A productive and inclusive Australia in which adults develop and renew the foundation skills they need to participate confidently in the community and meet the complex demands of modern life.”

The Summit highlights the importance of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) as well as digital literacy (DL) provision and the fundamentals of employability skills (or LLNDE) delivered in a community context by not-for-profit adult and community education (ACE) providers.

The Summit supports all national, state and territory efforts that will enable and support an expanded workforce of appropriately qualified practitioners who can deliver quality foundational skills training.

The Summit also supports all regional, state and national efforts that expand digital inclusion of Australians, many of whom – especially low-income; regional, rural and remote; younger; people with disabilities; and older – do not have adequate skills, and may not have access to devices, a safe learning environment, technical support or suitable access to high-quality Internet services at a reasonable cost.

#### Recommendations

It is recommended that Commonwealth and state/territory policy-makers recognise the role of adult and community education (ACE) providers in supporting adults with low levels of language, literacy and numeracy and other foundational skills by:

- renewing the national Ministerial Declaration on ACE; and
- supporting and working with the ACE sector to develop robust and holistic outcomes measures.

It is also recommended that the Commonwealth Government improves and supports the development of foundation skills for all Australians, regardless of their employment status, through consultation with specialist LLN practitioners and ACE stakeholders in order to provide:

- appropriate guidance to JobActives and Disability Employment Service providers in identifying and linking job seekers with poor Language Literacy Numeracy (LLN) and Digital literacy (DL) with appropriate training/support;
- meaningful language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy client outcome measures into JobActive contracts;

- incentive payments to job service providers that value and encourage foundational stepping stones;
- plain English information to jobseekers that explain what they can access and why it might be useful;
- broadening the approach to funded curricula for Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy programs;
- funding model consideration, including broadening AMEP style mode of support, such as childcare and volunteer tutoring to be available for literacy learners; and
- consideration of a community and workplace mentor services models – a formal funded mechanism for people to access basic LLNDE services.

The ACE sector actively engages in informing the national and local discourse around foundational skills. Summit participants request engagement by government and industry to talk in open public forums about why and how LLNDE matters and how to access relevant services.

It is recommended additional Commonwealth, state and territory government action on:

- supported university places for graduate and post-graduate Language, Literacy and Numeracy specialists;
- a framework that acknowledges and inserts appropriately skilled people into the training system;
- funding and rollout of a professional development program for foundation skills trainers, incorporating a digital skills stream, to upskill and support trainer assessor skills<sup>1</sup>; and
- assistance for trainers and assessors to undertake professional development, to ensure knowledge of adult language literacy and numeracy (in addition to the current minimum requirements) and ensure currency and appropriate knowledge with Foundation Skills Training Package (FSK)/LLN& DL.

## **The Role of the ACE Sector**

Australia's not for profit ACE sector is one of the major providers of foundational skills training, along with TAFE. ACE providers deliver a great deal of the informal, non-accredited and pre-accredited foundation skills training and have a particular role in the eastern states delivering accredited foundation skills units in specific programs assisting disadvantaged learners. They do this through learner-centric local service delivery, frequently in partnership with local community organisations.

Key points:

- “The characteristics of community education providers, such as their relatively small scale and flexibility in teaching strategies, make them particularly suitable for providing [foundation skills] training.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Victorian ACE VIC and Adult Learning Australia LLN professional development pilot for Learn Local trainers may be an excellent model.

<sup>2</sup> NCVER, 2020; see <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/provision-of-foundation-skills-training-by-community-education-providers-in-regional-australia>.

- “Proportionally more regional community education providers deliver foundational skills training than other regional training providers, although regional ACE enrolments have declined, because of difficulty in securing sufficient funding and appropriately qualified staff.”<sup>3</sup>
- The National Foundation Skills Strategy (latest version in 2012, in process of being updated) states that “Providers of adult education in community settings are critical to providing diverse foundation skills programs for adults, including through pre-vocational and bridging programs. The adult and community education (ACE) sector provides flexible pathways to help learners build their skills and confidence and progress to further learning or employment.”<sup>4</sup>
- A strength of the Australian ACE sector is the flexibility to contextualise to learner cohort, adaptability and accessibility for those unused to formal institutions.
- “Informal learning as a stepping stone: For many individuals who are not engaged in formal learning, non-accredited education and training can build self-esteem and confidence and can provide a viable pathway into pre-vocational training, education or employment. Adult and community education (ACE) currently provides a diverse array of vocational and learner interest focused education and training that fosters the development of skills required for individuals to participate fully in their communities and the economy. Australian governments will continue to support purpose-built community-based approaches to delivery through the ACE sector.”<sup>5</sup>
- Foundation skills students with ACE providers are generally more disadvantaged than students with other providers. Consequently, community education providers are more challenged in their reach, teaching and delivery strategies. “For example, the lower socioeconomic status of their students acts as a barrier to securing transport to attend training, using the internet, and accessing childcare.” Despite their more disadvantaged profile, a higher proportion of foundation skills subjects in regional areas were completed by students with community education providers than with other training providers.”<sup>6</sup>

## Background

There are still stubbornly low levels of language, literacy & numeracy (LLN) and digital skills nationwide. Around three million – one fifth – of working-age Australians have low literacy (43%), numeracy (54%) and digital skills.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/provision-of-foundation-skills-training-by-community-education-providers-in-regional-australia>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.dese.gov.au/skills-information-training-providers/resources/national-foundation-skills-strategy-adults>, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.dese.gov.au/skills-information-training-providers/resources/national-foundation-skills-strategy-adults>, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/provision-of-foundation-skills-training-by-community-education-providers-in-regional-australia>, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> OECD (2017) *Building Skills for all Australians*, <https://www.oecd.org/australia/building-skills-for-all-in-australia-9789264281110-en.htm>.

Training providers, including community education providers, have a role to play in helping adults develop their foundation skills.

- “The need for individuals to build and develop their foundation skills is becoming even more important with the growth in the use of technology in the workplace causing a shift away from low-skill work.”
- “Almost half of Australia’s adult population at that time had literacy and numeracy skills at a level considered to adversely impact on their ability to participate and function in a technologically-advanced economy.”
- “Online learning may be a cost-effective delivery mode for education and training ... but is generally not suited to foundation skills training, especially in LLN, because it requires a prerequisite level of literacy and digital literacy. Further, internet access is often poor in regional areas. Traditional class-based, face-to-face teaching was the typical mode of delivery for foundation skills training among survey respondents and interviewees.”<sup>8</sup>

The Commonwealth Government is targeting an unemployment rate of 4.5%, and while sectors of the economy are robust, gross unemployment figures hide an underlying crisis for people who do not have the skills to enter or re-enter the workforce, including young people and many disadvantaged groups.

Despite record investment and reform of school funding, this issue has shown little sign of improvement, particularly among the cohorts of people who need it most. There is a clear role for adult and community education to provide a safety net for people who have not attained sufficient skills from their school education. Only a concerted effort to address foundational skills will see Australia achieve its desired employment and societal engagement level.

## Discussion

Foundation skills play in Australia’s democracy and its economic and societal health. A person without basic literacy lacks real opportunities to engage effectively with democratic institutions, make choices, exercise her/his citizenship rights and act for a perceived common good. Australia’s active and vital ACE providers have maintained and sustained a collective infrastructure and developed a resilient capacity to adapt to change and to support the communities in which they operate. ACE providers are able to engage, contextualise and provide access and flexibility to learners close to where they live.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the provision of decades of data by providers to funding authorities and the NCVER, data is limited on how and where foundation skills training takes place, how much is needed and for whom. These circumstances make it challenging to provide an evidence base for this need. Data collected from the Reading Writing Hotline across jurisdictions does show that LLN provision is now extremely volatile and ephemeral; there is little consistency of offerings compared to previous decades, and the visibility of LLN provision for consumers/students is

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/provision-of-foundation-skills-training-by-community-education-providers-in-regional-australia>, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Role-of-adult-and-community-education-in-sustaining-Australian-democracy-and-supporting-civil-society-Jan2020.pdf>, pp. 10-11.

poor. “It comes and goes from colleges and buildings, and from suburbs and towns. It’s hidden behind weird names, complex websites, gatekeepers in government offices.”<sup>10</sup>

Support for adults needing assistance in developing their foundational skills is fragmented and often focussed on LLN learner support for existing VET classes rather than stand-alone literacy and numeracy classes for those not yet ready for formal VET study.

Australia has imperfect measures to measure the extent and impact of low LLN and digital literacy. Policy in Language, Literacy and Numeracy has been primarily driven by international surveys, such as the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Programme, which measures proficiency.<sup>11</sup>

The AIGroup has communicated a strong view that mastery of workplace literacy and numeracy is increasingly essential to meet the challenges of the evolving economy. In 2018, they reported that 99% of the businesses they surveyed were adversely impacted by low levels of foundation skills in their workforce.<sup>12</sup> Higher levels skills needed for advanced manufacturing, systems, and analysis work (Industry4) has only exacerbated this trend, revealing higher level literacy gaps.

Australian employers want an estimated three million more workers with digital skills than are available.<sup>13</sup> Language, literacy, and numeracy skills were identified as the fifth most important category of generic skill need across industries by industry reference committees in 2019.<sup>14</sup>

The Productivity Commission (2021) found that the current range of language, literacy numeracy and digital literacy (LLN DL) programs are barely keeping pace with the flow of school leavers and new migrants who lack adequate LLN DL skills. The Commission recommended that a national LLN LD skills strategy to bring together measures to improve school education, second-chance learning in the VET sector and the other adult education services delivered by public and private providers.<sup>15</sup> This was also a major recommendation arising from the Joyce VET Review, delivered to the Prime Minister and published in March 2019.<sup>16</sup>

## Job Seekers

Reflecting the Productivity Commission’s concern is the lack of holistic and targeted support for job-seekers to address their LLN&DL literacy needs. Job intermediaries often require training that is beyond a learner’s current capability, mandatory for continued Jobseeker or allowance payments, for example, Certificate III programs that require a relatively high level of LLN capability and confidence.<sup>17</sup> The ACE sector can and does provide foundation skills pathways for jobseekers that enable them to advance to a Certificate III level.

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<sup>10</sup> Jill Finch, literacy practitioner, Reading Writing Hotline, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/>.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.aigroup.com.au/policy-and-research/mediacentre/releases/Skilling-WFD-Survey-12Sept/>.

<sup>13</sup> Deloitte Access Economics (2019) *Building the Lucky Country*, see <https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/building-lucky-country/topics/building-lucky-country.html>.

<sup>14</sup> See <https://nationalindustryinsights.aisc.net.au/national/foundation-skills>.

<sup>15</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Skills and Workforce Development Agreement Study Report*, January 2021, <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/skills-workforce-agreement/report>.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://pmc.gov.au/domestic-policy/vet-review>.

<sup>17</sup> CCA understands there are changes underway for future JobActive contracts that may assist the achievement of these aims.

Research demonstrates that individuals with low LLN levels have often had negative or disruptive school experiences, are reluctant to disclose this experience and the gaps in their skill levels.<sup>18</sup> These learners require specific support to gain fundamental foundational skills and the confidence to engage with accredited training.

When forced into a program, these individuals often become disillusioned and disengage. Re-engagement with training is very difficult. Additionally, eligibility does not guarantee to access to programs. These factors have ramifications for their ability to engage; in meaningful, productive work, with their communities and with Australia's democracy.

### **Available Foundation Skills Services Have Declined**

The diversity of foundation skills provision has narrowed. Eligibility is only relevant if individuals desiring assistance can access services. This has been recognised in the current Commonwealth project developing a new National Foundation Skills Framework. The redress of some of this shortfall includes:

- Removing caps on the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP)
- Devising a new Foundations Skills for Your Future program
- Expanding the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program
- Bolstering the role and capacity of the Reading Writing Hotline with additional funds for outreach
- Intention to invest in foundation skills needs research

These initiatives are welcome. However, it remains to be seen if the investment will result in greater levels of access to relevant services for the broad diversity of Australian learners.

State governments also have a number of programs. However, many of these programs are characterised by limited times, locations, levels, promotion, repeat enrolments, and curricula often not 'fitting' learner needs. Eligibility and access remain problematic. Nationally the system is fragmented, and there is still insufficient support for literacy and numeracy.

### **The Foundation Skills Workforce**

There is an insufficient current supply and pipeline of suitably qualified LLN specialists to deliver foundational skills training, due to factors such as:

- low relative levels of remuneration
- the casualisation of positions
- the ephemeral nature and insecure funding of LLN programs
- the unwillingness/lack of capacity to pay for skilled practitioners
- the Foundation Skills (FSK) training package delivery skill requirements
- the cost of acquiring specialist qualifications
- a lack of clear career pathways, and the absence of quality professional development which inhibits career progression

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<sup>18</sup> See *No More Excuses: An industry response to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge*, <https://readingwritinghotline.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/No-More-Excuses-ISC-response-to-LLN-challenge-LR.pdf>.

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