Productivity Commission Round Table meeting Friday 10 July 2020
Response to the agenda discussion paper

WHAT ARE FOUNDATION SKILLS?

1.   How should the scope of foundation skills be defined?

MCC can work with the definition provided in the discussion paper. The definition does not matter to the learners - but it is relevant to procurement, funding, contracting and outcomes measurement.

We strongly agree that foundation skills are skills for work and skills for life. A too narrow focus on employment pathways misses the point that some learners are on a very long pathway to work, if at all. Nevertheless for social inclusion and engagement in Australian society all Australian regardless of their place of birth need adequate foundations skills in English language (speaking and listening), literacy (reading and writing), digital literacy, numeracy and employability skills.

We believe that so called "employability skills" (planning and organising, teamwork, collaboration etc) are part of work and life.

We also know that the ability to learn and progress are accelerated when the learner also has the chance to build their self-esteem and self-belief – these are hugely importance to achievement, as is general "well-being".

2.   What courses should be included beyond those in the foundation skills training package?

There are many worthy qualifications and accredited courses. Like all responsible RTOs we manage our scope in order to ensure compliance and control costs.

We utilise:
- Foundation Skills package (FSK 10113, 10213, 20113) and have individual units of competency (UoCs) on scope.
  We are preparing to deliver the new package.

- Certificate 1 in Information, Digital Media and Technology. We also utilise UoC BSBITU111 and part or full quals from the BSB package for learners who are accelerating rapidly on their digital literacy learning pathway. The current accredited training packages do not adequately address digital connectedness – a greater focus on applications, software and practical tasks (e.g. enrolling in Centrelink, using myGov, banking) is offered in non-accredited training courses we use from sources or build.

To retain learners on a pathway we create "stepping- stones" between full qualifications using accredited and non-accredited units – for some learners the gap between the end of one Certificate level and the commencement of the next level requires a "bridge".

We have a track record of success in engaging and retaining mature aged NESB migrant learners along a full qualification pathway to a career (in aged care, disability and child care for example) - sometimes moving from pre Cert 1 English to completing Cert IV quals.

We also create short, contextualised courses with a combination of accredited and non-accredited units - English for Child Care is one example (which includes pronunciation and accent reduction) that is a stepping stone support for NESB students who intend to eventually complete a Certificate 3.

Accredited courses:
- Certificate in General Education for Adults (22471 Vic, 22472, 22473, 22476)

Our 18 years of AMEP experience with migrants learning English tells us that the **Certificate for Written and Spoken English** is the best possible course – and should be added to the "skills list" for funding as should some of the lower levels of qualifications. It requires highly qualified English teachers to deliver this well, and time.

3.   To what extent should employability skills be included?

Both native speakers and NESB migrant target groups with low foundation skills may have two common issues: not have much experience in an Australian workplace; and limited networks to access employment opportunities. Practical employability skills and tools can be relatively easily gained with quality employability skills training - resume writing, interview skills, interpersonal communication, workplace conventions. These are all essential for those on an employment pathways. Supported work experience is often the critical element of success that enhances these training approaches.

We work from a strengths basis but recognise that addressing foundation skills deficits for native speakers is usually very different to approaches for educated migrants from NESB. Starting points and aspirations, plus the intervention(s) required to progress learners to higher levels of core employment skills vary. Statistics and reports from PWC, PC, BCA, AIG[1] seem to indicate we have a growing problem and a persistent issue in workplaces. During these Covid-19 times of disruption to employment this could become an even bigger issue with a very long tail for jobseekers and those under-employed with low skills.

Native speaker foundation skills deficits are often, in our experience, accompanied by additional complex issues of disadvantage including undiagnosed or untreated learning disabilities, mental and physical health, indigeneity, poor school attendance, intergenerational unemployment etc. The excellent Scanlon Foundation report[2] points to increased numbers of migrants with low foundation skills in more recent years and barriers to participation in foundation skills training (e.g. increased humanitarian intake, trauma, un-skilled family reunion, older Chinese migrants with limited schooling). Overcoming these barriers take time, specialist skills and safe environments.

ASSESSING FOUNDATION SKILLS

We note that the agenda report for the 14 July roundtable on foundation skills only quotes the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIACC) the most recent survey being 2012.

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[1] https://cdn.aigroup.com.au/Reports/2016/AIG9675_EMAIL.pdf
[2] Scanlon Foundation; Australia's English Problem

4.   Are there other data sources that could be used to assess progress against foundation skills gaps since 2012?

Yes – lots of long term Australian data sets exist already.

Migration data should include measured skills levels at least in Language and Literacy. Additionally decades of program acquittal data is available to the Commonwealth for the AMEP and SEE programs). The ACIL Allen reports[3] reviewing these programs in 2015 have excellent data sets.

The NCVER and each State Government training/funding unit would have decades of data on completion of UoC and qualifications, re-enrolments along a pathway, as well as more recent student outcomes surveys.

Job active and DES data categorising jobseekers and documenting barriers to employment from DSS and FACs programs that those on benefits access.

NATPLAN and school age stats and reports and those about NEETs and youth unemployment[4] are excellent sources of local relevant statistics on the impact of low literacy and school-leavers.

Our view is that the ACSF is the best assessment tool for pre and post-training progression measures in LLN – and we understand they are looking to include measures of digital literacy and other skills.

However our experience with the SEE program has taught us that to do an ASCF assessment properly requires time, access and professional expertise, and ongoing investment in professional development. It is an impost on both the learner (properly done this takes at least 90 minutes) and the organisations involved in the testing and needs to be costed accordingly. "ACSF-lite" introduced into the AMEP contract of 2017 has not apparently proven feasible nor commercially viable.

ALL RTOs use pre training LLN assessment tools. These could presumably be adapted to measure post-training capabilities. We (and all other VET providers) are required under the SRTOs to conduct thousands of pre-training LLNs each year. We have two purposes for this process – the majority being to assign our foundation skills students to levels and streams for English classes, and also to determine whether any VET students, (especially our mature aged NESB and jobActive/DES students) need additional assistance prior to, or during, their Certificate level studies.

Our proprietary LLN test developed over many years of experience has recently been audited by ASQA and seems to work well - with almost zero error rates (re appropriate pre-training screening and allocation to correct level of training). We have recently updated this (as we do annually) and will continue to improve this each year.

Access to a universal and standardised Pre and post-Training assessment tool for LLND would be useful - but that is not in our view necessarily going to be only an online offering given the practical issues around oracy testing, proof of identity and the pre-requisite of digital literacy for users.

The development of post-training measures beyond the training outputs tracked quarterly by AVETMISS data and re-enrolment, progression statistics etc would be VERY welcome. A research-based framework of outcomes measures and, more importantly, social impact measures is definitely

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[3] https://acilallen.com.au/projects/program-evaluation/amep-evaluation
[4] https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1269064/YA_unemployment_fnl_V6.1.pdf

possible. We would be very willing to contribute to this process, assuming there is sufficient funding to administer and conduct such post-training measurement.

5.   Given the scale of the issues, what is the role of VET in improving foundation skill levels?

This is a BIG question. Some practitioners would argue that English (for example) does not belong in VET, whereas digital literacy might. LLND is not necessarily best taught nor assessed with a competency-based, AQF full qualifications model. It is our view that great teachers and trainers working within and education/training framework will work out the best approaches. VET credentials and accredited training certainly play a key role - an apprentice plumber can best acquire vital numeracy skills whilst in training in the VET system – but is someone who is an expert in drainage going to be a great maths teacher? An aged care trainer delivering the first aid and medication units will realise rapidly when a student cannot understand the difference between 10cc and 100ml of drugs, or read the label on a bottle of medication. The ideal is team and co-teaching of LLND alongside vocational studies, where needed and specialist pre-vocational and vocational learning for literacy and language for post-school adults.

Having said the above we do believe that the VET system of Registered Training Organisations is the natural home of effective post-secondary teaching and training interventions to address the lack of foundations skills in adults. The provider network is large enough, well regulated and able to scale up to deliver more training when more funding or more demand exists. It is also part of the educational "ecosystem" that is the continuum from ECEC to senior secondary schooling as well as pathways to (and from) higher education.

Given our history we think the worker education and Evening Colleges movement was a forerunner of the "second chance" classroom learning environment for adults that did not or could not finish their schooling due to war, poverty, family circumstances. Community education providers and TAFE do this work well. Some (very few) for profit private providers also deliver solid programs and services.

Your report shows that adults clearly learn a lot of directly relevant skills in the workplace than in the VET system . Whilst this is true it does not capture those who are not in the workforce (never employed or temporarily unemployed) and those who are not performing to their potential (e.g. the skilled migrant engineer working as a cab driver) nor those who learn important skills through other processes, learning styles and physical activities that address and grow employability skills, communication, risk assessment, well being (eg outward bound, partners in recovery)

To state the obvious, English teaching at any level from pre-beginners to advanced English is a very different process to teaching basic numeracy (although often expected to be done by the same people!), just as employability skills training and digital literacy training differ from each other.

Developing foundation skills like literacy in an illiterate native speaker or a migrant from an oracy culture takes skilled teaching and lots of time (more than 500 hours!).

Unless an employer resources both the programs and worker time we would argue that is unlikely much progress at all will be made in literacy or numeracy through only workplace learning, some can be made in language, more in employability skills and rapid progress can be made in digital literacy.

Community based volunteer driven programs definitely have an important role to play but unless attached to more sophisticated program structures would in our view be difficult to regulate and harder to hold accountable for funding.

Another essential role the VET sector needs to play, in conjunction with the university sector is filling the large skills gaps of trained educators that can teach and train and assess progress. There is a large and growing skills shortage in TAE LLN qualified individuals, and we believe there are insufficient numbers of adequately skilled university qualified literacy and language teachers, including those with masters level qualifications.

6.   Which groups should be targeted?

We believe there is a case to make that there is a return on investment from enabling ALL individuals that lack foundation skills to improve and learn. Like vaccinations – we are all better off if the population as a whole takes the opportunity and makes it their own responsibility. Whether or not all individuals are fully subsidised is a different question. Not all eligible individuals will take up an offer to improve their skills. Those that do will create a return on investment in economic return from those who improve their economic and social functioning (tax payments, earned income, multiplier effect, improved productivity) and saved negative social impact costs (welfare, housing, health etc)

In a nation of migrants such as ours there are huge benefits to the nation as a whole in terms of both employment economics and social cohesion. We applaud the long-standing commitment of Governments to assist NESB migrants in their settlement period, including the acquisition of vital English language and literacy progression and relevant, contextualised employability skills. This has been proven for decades with the AMEP program. The Joyce and other reports show that eligibility and access initiatives must go beyond the first five years of arrival, and the aspirational aim for individuals should be well above levels of "functional English". Programs where possible should have additional, holistic support measures for vulnerable groups (e.g. refugees, those that have experienced trauma) and migrants with significant barriers to participation (primary carers, older migrants).

Although we work from a strengths base, our experience is that addressing foundation skills deficits for native speakers will generally be a longer and more complex issue, because target cohorts may have more complex issues and need specialist additional assistance. Although MCC does very little with indigenous groups we recognise the vital work done by others and stress the importance and achievement of targeted and culturally appropriate programs to 'close the gap'. Similarly, there is a return on investment when we assist moving people from welfare to work for those who have lost formerly secure employment and have become long term unemployed and are struggling to re-train or re-gain access to the jobs market. Even if they do not return to the workforce there is a benefit in ensuring they do not become socially isolated and financially disadvantaged and develop other more complex problems including homelessness and health issues.

The astonishing depth of the digital divide is definitely being highlighted by these Covid times – those who lack any or much digital literacy are being left further behind, especially those that do not have affordable or individual access to networks and equipment, older people and those with accessibility limitations due to disability are just some of the groups needing intensive and creative approaches to support them. Our belief is that anyone that has a phone can probably manage to gain enough digital literacy to get started, and that progress is relatively rapid for some more than

others. Engagement with employers about specific needs for specific work is essential in increasing digital literacy for work – this can be from a base line of improving onsite communication, WHS and gaining "tickets" to increasing productivity per worker using tailored digital devices and specialist software programs/apps.

THE EFEEFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

The COAG National Foundation Sills Strategy for Adults (agreed in 2012) was intended to be a central element of Australia's policy response to addressing foundation skills gaps with a goal for 2/3 of Australians to have reached a level 3 for literacy and numeracy by 2022 – (without any large amounts of specific additional funding).

We note that If 44% of Australians 16-65 were below **level 3** in literacy (OECD average is 50%) and 54% are below level 3 in numeracy (OECD average is 49%) there seems to be a mismatch in the aspirational goal of placing them into Certificate 3and above qualifications given the SRTOs.

7.   What have been the outcomes from the 2012 agreement?

Based on the 2012 data, the various reports published in the past 10 or more years, and our own unending stream of demand, by all accounts we have not made much or any progress at all, and may have slipped backwards in achieving a goal that aspired to closing a 10 percentage point gap between 56% and 66% on literacy and a 20 percentage point gap from 46% to 66% on numeracy. We can do better than that. We must do better than that.

8.   What factors affected it effectiveness?

The recent Scanlon foundation report on Australia's "broken" English programs[5] is very clear about a number of drivers behind the falling participation numbers and quality of the once gold-standard AMEP program, notably the misalignment of the settlement versus employment goals of the AMEP program and the growing numbers of individuals arriving with low skills. With one of the largest migration and formal refugee programs in the OECD, strategic and long term commitment to addressing the foundation skills of migrants from NESB is an important issue to solve.

NATPLAN and PISA results, plus the tremendous amount of work done on the Gonski funding models to address the growing inequality of outcomes for students in "poor" (mostly public) schools all speak volumes about systemic issues in literacy and numeracy outcomes and teaching- from ECEC to senior school.[6]

State based funding for providers of foundation skills (e.g. under NSW Smart and Skilled FSK caps) is tied to completion of full qualifications and individuals acquiring credentials that rarely appear on a resume or the mantelpiece, and few employers seem to understand or look for.

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[5] https://scanloninstitute.org.au/publication/australias-english-problem-how-renew-our-once-celebrated-adult-migrant-english-program
[6] Standards in Literacy and Numeracy: Contributing Factors, Australian Journal of Teacher Education vol 39 issue 7

MCC boasts astonishing FSK full qualification completion rates (67% - 70% against a national average more like 30-40%). It has however taken years to find a teaching team and a methodology that moves our students so successfully along a full qualification FSK pathway. We genuinely believe that finishing qualifications has inherent achievement value for those that have never succeeded in "schooling" - even to the most reluctant of learners. We acknowledge that our success in this area be underpinned by the existential necessity as a medium sized not-for-profit working with disadvantaged clients of adapting our offering to our funding than catering fully to the needs of individuals. Qualification completion is an objective measure of attainment, but it is not necessarily the answer for the learners and employers. Skills improvement and regular, systematic application and practice of the newly acquired skills in a workplace is the ultimate quest.

One complication that gets in the way of measuring the effectiveness of government program funding is that delivery modes and approaches will be driven by, or disturbed by, the procurement model of the LLND programs themselves and other programs that "compete" for the time and attention of the individual enrolled. For example, employment programs. JobActive mutual obligations for newly arrived migrants may ironically serve to pull students out of class. Contrarily this can be counteracted by the opportunity for a jobActive to "park" long term unemployed people into a Cert 3 level qualification - arguably a program well above the level they can genuinely achieve. Mutual trust and putting the clients goals and needs is key.

We are not entirely convinced that FREE programs always carry sufficient "buy-in" from participants. Even a very modest co-payment (as little as $10!) can help build commitment to attendance and completion of hours or assessment within courses. However unless all courses have a cost then "arbitrage" will happen as students shop around for free programs. Perhaps some programs could have a modest co-payment so that they are seen to be valued and important, but providers could be given the discretion to waive co-payment fees for those facing genuine hardship.

There are possibly also broad sociological issues that may be impacting the growing numbers and the effectiveness of LLND program success in modern Australia. National economic and technological progress and support systems - all great things in a modern civil society. Technology, tools and multiculturalism mean that many or most of us do not have to have even basic skills to get by - no young person gets daily practice in numeracy when you have a calculator, a GPS, and don't use cash. A migrant can shop, socialise and participate almost everywhere at all times in their native language. Even in a low socio-economic class or neighbourhood we can live reasonably compared to other countries. Compared to prior generations is it possible that we no longer feel an urgency around survival - nor see education as a pathway out of poverty? There is also apparently very little buy-in from employers to take any responsibility in educating their workers – it is an expectation that prospective workers will pay for and invest in their own qualifications and credentials before applying, and potentially pay for all of their own work related training too. Our plummeting apprenticeship numbers are perhaps one sign of that lack of employer buy in - when those who personally benefitted from being apprentices themselves are apparently not willing to make an effort to take on and mentor others.

Finally one other factor is the now poor market position of VET as a whole - it is in a weakened and vulnerable state compared to every other sector on education – decreased proportions of funding over time, the prestige of university degrees, the decimation of TAFEs, the marketisation of private provision and the long tail and tarnished reputation of the VET FEE Help scandal.

The LEVEL of effort by governments has been steady

9.   How effective are current programs in improving the overall level of foundation skills in the community?

From a provider perspective:

The AMEP - (1998 – 2017 for MCC). The AMEP has demonstrated decades of excellence, but in the view of many it is currently diminished by the latest procurement model and changes to the program model. Some great smaller, nimble and experienced providers (eg AMES and community colleges) have very little chance of competing against national and state-wide organisations to secure contracts. If we could get back into the AMEP we would do it well.

SEE program – (2013-2017 for MCC) this program had excellent goals and frameworks - but serious underfunding makes it virtually impossible to run well and/or viably for NESB or native speakers. A trainer needs to be a magician to be able to work with small classes made up of individuals with disparate skills (spiky profiles). They also have to manage around complex issues that are both cause and effect of long-term unemployment while trying to assist them to achieve their individual training and employment plan goals- all within 800 hours. If the program were properly funded and we were able to secure a large enough contract to have streams and levels we would jump at the chance to participate again.

Skillmax and **English for Employment** – formerly accessible via the NSW AMES. Terrific targeted programs that were a pleasure to run, with great outcomes for participants and providers. If this funding stream were available we would definitely reengage with it.

NSW Govt **ACE funded program** (formerly known as **CSO**) - (1988? to present) This program is excellent due to its flexibility (accredited part quals plus some non-accredited and able to be targeted to specific community needs. One drawback is that many clients that could benefit from it are not eligible due to the disadvantage test, biased towards individuals on benefits. Lack of LLN skills is in our view its own disadvantage, whether or not you are on benefits or financially disadvantaged. We currently use our ACE funding to target the lowest level learners with the most disadvantage. If we had the opportunity to access more funding we would use it well.

NSW Foundation Skills cap. (2015-present) This is now (after 5 years of trying) a very good option for our NESB students, and viable for us as a provider - but not necessarily a forward facing strategy unless volume growth is possible.

Our FSK cap full qualification programs have developed over time to be a viable option for us - but we have spent 5 years persevering from a very low base in 2015 to significant program breadth and depth. Without Covid-19 impacting enrolments we could easily have used much more funding and served more communities this year. Our journey has been an investment in finding a way to make it work with low margins, pushing students and teachers to achieve full qualification completions, advocating with market operations for eligibility and pricing changes. We have now unfortunately apparently hit a growth wall with no cap increases likely. A purely commercial decision for us would be to focus on delivery of the higher levels FSK 2 for reasonably capable NESB and digital literacy programs, and leave the "harder" clients and programs to others to deliver. This commercial realism is not however consistent with our purpose and values

Smart and Skilled TNIs (2016?-present) funding on application targeting identified priority training needs for part qualifications including targeting LLND. The TNI process is unpredictable and uneconomic as a funding source for us as a provider to depend on, the application processes are onerous and almost always lead to frustrated employer clients. So far our view is that applying for one-off TNIs with allow chance of success is NOT an answer for large scale approaches to addressing foundation skills.

NSW ACE programs - Tech Savvy Business and **Tech Savvy seniors** accredited and non-accredited training to support digital literacy and skills. Funding levels are too low to be meaningful but programs and program materials are great and demand is ever present. The Good Things Foundation **Be Connected** program has also been a great program to be involved in for over 50s digital literacy. With more funding we would scale up our delivery to reach more people, particularly financially and socially disadvantaged people who are not seniors.

The **WELL** program was well regarded for employers and providers.

We have applied to be on the panel for **Foundation Skills for Your Future**, but remain uncertain about whether or not it will eventually lead to financially viable programs.

We note that there is a relatively large gap for individuals who are working at a level or in a career area that is below their potential – for example mature aged males who are breadwinners (eg The Iranian pharmacist working in a warehouse; The skilled but injured tradie that needs to re-train with higher levels of LLND for an office-base role but finds it hard to admit they have limited literacy or digital skills). The pressure on them to retain work, any work, competes for their time and eligibility issues may exclude them from accessing available programs if they are not (yet) on welfare. For mature aged males if this becomes a long term pattern this can also limit or extinguish their aspirations to create a better future and lead to serious health and mental health issues.

10.   What is the role of the fee-for service sector in the provision of foundation skills courses?

Fee for service programs are usually not viable whenever they compete with free courses. We have limited demand for paid enrolments in foundation skills courses.

It is very hard to get individuals to pay for LLND training at the best of times, even when there are demonstrable benefits to the individual in terms of employment, career progression, higher levels of well-being.

Elicos is one sector of Fee For Service LLND provision that is different.

Digital skills training for employees, including the self-employed, that is tailored to specific workforces and workplaces is one area that is probably more easily addressed by FFS programs, and/or in-house training.

Given the vulnerability and disadvantage of most clients with low LLND and, sadly, based on the reality of what enough for-profit providers did when they could get away with it in the VFH period, plus the extreme levels of "marketising" training engaging for-profit providers in most states, we believe that government should only consider contracting private providers in this areas with extreme caution. Our view is that there is NOT a market for training in foundation skills and that

small, local trusted providers are essential parts of the provision landscape, alongside TAFEs. The domination of TAFE or the largest for-profit providers in the more profitable areas of provision will make it very hard for smaller providers to provide any sustainable levels of service at all.

ARE CURRENT PROGRAMS WELL TARGETED?

11.   How might programs be better targeted?

Existing programs (AMEP, SEE, NSW ACE, NSW Smart and skilled) are reasonably well targeted but clearly the uptake is not as strong as it could be even when access to funded programs is very open or uncapped.

This may be a marketing and supply problem rather than a program design problem.
- Not all adults with low LLND are willing to admit they need help – it is embarrassing to most and can be well hidden.
- Not all that acknowledge they need help know that they can get help, or where to get it
- Not all that would benefit can prioritise foundation skills development above all other pressing priorities such as earning an income.
- Agencies that support disadvantaged (potential) learners may not see foundation skills training as a potential option or know where to refer them to.
- Employers may not have the werewithal or will to support employees in the time consuming and skilled process of improving low foundation skills
- There are providers that run out of funding and/or lose money delivering services, particularly to those that are starting from a very low base and have complex interacting factors that present barriers to participation.

    In the perfect world program providers would have :
- Participant volumes that allow streaming of participants on the basis of starting point skills levels (per-beginners, beginners, intermediate, advanced)
- Specialisation streams for native speakers and NESB where applicable
- Differentiation of issues – language teaching for migrants is very different to literacy teaching of native speakers, numeracy does not usually "fit" with L and L, and digital literacy can be a whole other pathway
- Eligibility that is needs-driven not time-limited nor based on a welfare to work model
- Delivery to motivated participants that want to learn, and once they do achieve something they intend to keep going
- Trusted relationships with highly qualified and motivated teachers in a safe environment where achievement no matter how small no-one feels dis-respected or hopeless

12.   What additional supports need to be provided for particular groups to ensure the investment is successful?

A shared national vision for how education and training will contribute to creating a "better Australia" from ECEC through school and tertiary to life-long learning is lacking.

Vulnerable individuals with complex issues need more than training – they need community services, access/referrals to agencies that can help them and student support to address barriers to

participation and progression. "Culturally" appropriate approaches need to be put in place by providers that understand the nuances of their target cohorts.

Recognition and respect for their achievements. Appreciation and encouragement from the "haves" that they as "have nots" are trying desperately to secure a better future through skills and education.

Appropriate levels of governance and accountability, contract monitoring for providers.

Development of communities of practice and peer learning.

Properly framed program logics and funded longitudinal studies of outcomes and impact not just satisfaction levels and outputs.
Targeted, well designed programs with clear goals and long-term funding certainty.

Procurement models that are not aimed at having very few, very large providers

Properly remunerated, appropriately qualified, committed and compassionate, inclusive teachers - with time to work on program design, delivery, individualised student attention and professional development.

Experienced professionals engaged in program management and administration.

Safe and modern learning spaces.

13.   What does best practice look like in this area?

Tailored, relevant and "Culturally appropriate" approaches are necessary to engender trust and credibility and foster a sense of achievement that means something to the participants – whether that be interculturally sensitive approaches for specific NESB migrant and refugee cohorts, targeted and inclusive programs delivered by indigenous organisations for indigenous participants, modified programs tailored for people with learning, intellectual or physical disabilities, or cohort groups based on to gender or age.

The AMEP is a great model – services wrap around an individual with specific needs at a time when they most need it (on arrival and for their first 5 years) rather than an individual needs to find a service themselves.

Individuals are attached to a community services/settlement support agency to work with them on all of their other needs (housing, health) so referrals and trusting relationships between like-minded organisations are built and strengthened.

Language acquisition and literacy in English is addressed in keeping with an individualised learning plan by expert tuition by a registered RTO which provides highly qualified teachers using excellent courses, holistic independent "counselling" support is accessible outside the classroom but within the program to those that need it, and brokerage dollars are available to remove other key barriers around transport and childcare is provided for parents during course attendance. Additionally extensions into work-placements are supported.

Face to face small groups enable personal relationships and friendships and circles of unofficial advice are formed in the classroom - across cultural, religious, age, gender and social divides (better social cohesion, multiculturalism, appreciation of diversity).

Reporting and acquittals are taken very seriously and properly resourced. Progress along a skills acquisition pathway is measured. Attendance and completion of hours is considered important, as is practice in the home environment (supported by a home tutor).

The investment into the participants by the Australian government is deeply appreciated and respected, especially by those who missed out on education in their country of origin and/or have a mistrust of government and politics.

An individualised training plan with realistic goals is also a great ingredient – importantly it should not be a duplicate or contradict up to 5 other individual plans they have with their jobActive or other service providers.

Are skills gaps best addressed in the VET system?

Foundation skills gaps develop over time if not addressed early and often in the continuum of early and school learning. The best place to start is to ensure that ECEC and school teachers can be equipped to identify and address LLN skills or learning issues in childhood and adolescence. Special Assistance and "alternative" high schools run by some of the not for profit community colleges in NSW are doing excellent work in supporting those that disengage from mainstream schooling.

For adults the VET provider system, working in conjunction with employers and community services is the logical "second chance" place to address deficits and build on pre-existing strengths. Accredited and non-accredited curricula can be used well by quality VET institutions to address and measure progress from low levels of foundation skills – whether or not a qualification or credential is issued at the end of the process.

14.   What other mechanisms might be used to address gaps in foundation skills?
15.   How much of these gaps should be filled by additional activity in the VET system compared to other alternatives? (examples include funding non vet, direct incentives to individuals, support for enterprises, more investment in schools)

Self-driven learning can be an alternative for some. There are many, many avenues an individual can pursue to gain skills – watching tv, listening to music, you tube, apps, games, books, libraries

Co-learning foundation skills while acquiring other skills and knowledge – leaning English while also qualifying in VET or Higher ed

Learning on the job

Informal, volunteer supported learning – churches, community centres, seniors groups, clubs, mentoring.

Learning by doing and participation in physical activities.

Tutoring and coaching outside the formal education system.

16.   What output and outcome indicator could be used to measure success? How much of this data is currently available?

Specific program outcomes data will probably exist for many programs – for example in programs targeted to specific cohorts (indigenous, elderly, migrants) but not necessarily using common metrics and probably not for programs such as church-based volunteer-run english conversation classes.

 Programs funded by foundations and other not-for-profits seeking donations would have outputs and probably outcomes data.

FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

17.   What are the funding trends for foundation skills?

At present we usually run out of our NSW ACE and Smart and Skilled funding and are generally unsuccessful when applying for foundation skills TNIs. In 2019 we delivered approximately $2m of NSW state funded foundation skills programs. We serve a large slice of metropolitan Sydney's north and west and "compete" with TAFE and other community colleges in delivering FSK and CSO.

TAFE NSW is the AMEP provider for north and western Sydney but we do get quite a lot of enquiries from AMEP eligible clients that are seeking more flexible, more local options – or us at MCC specifically. SEE providers are also competing for clients in this space.

18.   How much training is undertaken in foundation skills without government funding?[7]

We are aware of many church and community organisation based English language classes for migrants in our communities. Not many deal with literacy or numeracy.

We are not aware of many unfunded programs targeting native speakers with low literacy or numeracy except perhaps in specialist services (eg wayside chapel) or in particular low SES suburbs (eg mount druitt)

Libraries and computer clubs, church and community groups deliver some digital literacy training that may or may not be funded. Local councils and other government agency programs (eg communities and justice, health also run programs that include participants with low foundation skills, including employability skills.

Although funded, there is an important co-existence and inter-dependency between RTOs that specialise in foundation skills and the entire job-active and DES network, plus most other schemes designed to address employment will have some element of addressing low foundation skills as a cause and effect of unemployment.

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[7] https://www.ala.asn.au/public/docs/alaconf/2007/A_frame_Full_Version.pdf

19. How important is unaccredited training in foundation skills?[8]

Non-accredited curriculum units and courses are a very important part of delivery by accredited and contracted providers in the VET system – whether that be to build tailor-made programs or to provide "stepping stones" or "bridges" to pathways between, before or alongside formal qualifications or to simplify build confidence at a starting point for learners taking a first brave step to re-engagement with formal learning.

Non-accredited delivery by non-regulated entities (churches, community groups etc) does play an important role in the social fabric and the informal learning ecosystem, especially for building safe, local social connections and a place to practice skills without fear.

Unless these services are using exceptional teachers or have rigorous program models we think it is unlikely that significant structured progress will be made by individuals participating in them. They are however a well-trusted source of referral to their patrons who might not know where or how to access more formal education and training pathways.

20. How is funding divided between TAFE, community and private providers?

Good question and an important one.

In NSW the ACE (CSO) part quals program targeting disadvantaged and barriers to participation is worth approx. $24 million and shared across the state's ACE college RTOs.

TAFE NSW has its own "CSO" funding – unknown amount and not clear what the funds must be spent on.

The FSK caps under Smart and Skilled are available only to TAFE and community based RTOs that have Smart and Skilled contracts. It is not clear how much in total is spent under the FSK caps. We do believe we may be the single largest community-based RTO delivering full qualification training under NSW Smart and Skilled FSK caps.

TAFE NSW also has access to AMEP and other funding/programs to deliver foundation skills training, and also direct contracts with employers and in projects such as the Barangaroo skills exchange.

Private for profit RTO providers include Navitas, Max employment and some others that have AMEP, SEE or contracts with other agencies (eg communities and justice work with TAFE and organisations like SIRCO work with prison inmates) migrant service organisations (eg SSI and others receive various program funds that include non RTO delivery of courses that include foundation skills.

Large charities and NGOs (eg Uniting, Wesley, Mission) also deliver foundation skills training through RTO and community service arms to some extent, presumably funded.

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[8] https://www.ala.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/research/ALA_Report_Dymock_FINAL_18_June.pdf

INTERGOVERNMENTAL ARRANGEMENTS

We note that the Joyce review recommend govts commit to supporting fee-free foundation-level education for all Australians who need training to bring their LLND skills up to Level 2 in the ACSF and that there should be a new agreement to achieve this outcome.

21.   Is a new agreement necessary or the best way to deal with foundation skills gaps?

In the absence of an alternative we think that forging a new national partnership, with committed funding, is a good idea.

This is a national level and increasingly urgent, growing problem and the State owned TAFEs and State funded community provider networks currently play a huge and important role.

A shift to Gonski-style entitlement, voucher funding for life-long learning to improve foundation skills is a good idea **but** if this is a three part completion based funding program (similar to smart and skilled) and there is NO base funding paid to organisations to pay for the necessary infrastructure, employment and overheads this can/will lead to even more disintegration of an already crumbling, weakening TAFE and not-for-profit provider network. Unless the program margins genuinely cover the actual costs of delivery there is not a sustainable future for community based provision of training, certainly not as sub-contractors to large for profits that may be great at winning tenders but perhaps not so great at working with vulnerable people.

22.   What are the relative merits of an online assessment tool?

We favour some form of universal, rigorous and easy to use assessment tool (pre and post training) and would use it wherever practicable. We think the ACSF is great but to use it well takes time and money, and in-person attendance is a superior way to implement it.

Given that states and territories rarely agree on education principles it could be that a state specific one could be developed and "owned" by each state education/training department at no cost to TAFE and community providers.

We are concerned that Government will invest in an interesting but possibly incomplete tool that may have accessibility issues for those that lack foundation skills.

A mixed-mode option that can be used on-line for some individuals or for some skills (eg reading but not speaking) could be a good alternative

Theresa Collignon
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