'LLN' is dead. Long live 'foundation skills'. Maybe.

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2012 was a decisive year for adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) education in Australia. Following the results of the 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and subsequent calls from industry groups such as Skills Australia and the Australian Industry Group to improve literacy and numeracy skills of the Australian workforce, the federal government released the *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*, an agreement by all Australian states and territories through the Council of Australian Governments to be the national policy document in Australia for foundation skills (Newton, 2016). Whilst the 'Strategy' incorporates four key priority areas that all deserve in-depth exploration, the focus here is on the term 'foundation skills' itself, notably its use, absence of use and mixed use in both the Strategy and subsequent government documents that potentially create uncertainty for foundation skills support services. Specifically, this paper presents the inconsistency of terminology in government documents, highlights potential uncertainties for foundation skills support services in Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) as a result of these inconsistencies and presents a call for action to provide clarity for all involved.

Inconsistencies

In her report *Adult literacy and numeracy: Research and future strategy*, one strategy Perkins (2009) suggested that may raise awareness and help "ensure literacy and numeracy is seen as a mainstream concern" was "a move from talking about literacy and numeracy to a discussion of core skills or foundation skills" (p.37). This report, other contemporary usage within government environments and industry influence (Black and Yasukawa, 2010; Wignall, 2015) paved the way for 'foundation skills' to be the term the Australian federal government would use in its new adult literacy and numeracy strategy. Here, in

the Strategy (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment [SCOTESE], 2012), literacy and numeracy were replaced within a broader set of 'foundation skills' that "underpin workforce participation, productivity and social inclusion" (p.2), defined as the combination of:

- English language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) – listening, speaking, reading, writing, digital literacy and use of mathematical ideas; and
- employability skills, such as collaboration, problem solving, self-management, learning and information and communication technology (ICT) skills required for participation in modern workplaces and contemporary life.

Here, 'foundation skills' has two components: one, an LLN component that applies to multiple contexts, and two, an employment component for workplace contexts. This definition alone is not challenging to understand, but it is the uses of the terms 'LLN', 'digital literacy' and 'employability skills', along with references in the Strategy to the *Australian Core Skills Framework* and the *Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework* that create inconsistencies, each of which are presented below.

Whilst page 2 of the Strategy states the definition provided above, subsequent pages (p.12, p.15, p.17, p.19 and p.23) relate foundations skills to the five core skills of the *Australian Core Skills Framework* (ACSF): learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy. According to the project team that developed the framework (also released in 2012), the ACSF "facilitates a consistent national approach to the identification and development of the core skills in diverse personal, community, work and education and training contexts" (McLean, P., Perkins, K., Tout, D., Brewer, K., & Wyse, L., 2012, p.1). With a definition of 'foundation skills' already provided that includes 'LLN' and 'employability skills', the inclusion of the ACSF in the Strategy presents an important question to ask: *What is the purpose of the ACSF in the context of the Strategy*? One answer to this is presented on page 15 as "Australian governments agree that the ACSF will be used as the standard framework for measuring foundation skills". Here, then, all

of the six 'LLN' skills listed in the definition (which includes 'digital literacy') and all the employability skills (five of which are provided as examples) are to be measured by the one framework that itself only consists of the five core skills of learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy. Of course, a number of follow-up questions arise, such as:

1. *How can 'digital literacy' be measured by the ACSF?*
2. *How can 'employability skills' be measured by the ACSF?*
3. *Since LLN does not specifically include the 'learning' skill of the ACSF but 'learning' is provided as an example of an 'employability skill', is 'learning' to be identified, developed and measured only in the context of employment?*

An alternative answer to the main question asked above is presented on page 21 as "Australian governments agree that the ACSF will be used as the standard framework for measuring LLN". Here, the single difference with the quote from page 15 is simply that the term 'foundation skills' has now been replaced with 'LLN'. This in itself presents further questions, such as:

4. *Why now limit 'foundation skills' to being only 'LLN'?*
5. *Was the use of 'LLN' here a mistake, and 'foundation skills' should have been written instead?*
6. *Does the ACSF relate only to LLN or LLN only in the context of workplaces?*

Unfortunately, the Strategy does not answer any of the above questions, resulting in inconsistency, and it is this ongoing mixed use of the terms 'foundation skills', 'LLN' and 'core skills' (along with others) that continue in later government documents.

Along with the introduction of the ACSF, another change occurring at the time was the notion of what constituted skills for employment. In the Strategy, two variations exist. Firstly, the definition in the Strategy uses the term 'employability skills' and lists examples taken from the 2002 research project *Employability Skills for the Future* by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia (for the Department of Education, Science and Training). The Strategy, however, also mentions the development and use of the three clustered skill areas (ten skill areas in total) of the *Core Skills*

for Work Developmental Framework (CSfW). Like the ACSF, the CSfW is a detailed, modern framework and its purpose is to assist "with the identification, description and measurement of employability skills" (SCOTESE, 2012, p.17). Specifically, the CSfW details the three clustered skill areas of 'navigate the world of work', 'interact with others' and 'get the work done' and describes "a set of non-technical skills, knowledge and understandings that underpin successful participation in work" (Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education and Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013, p.1). To be fair, the Strategy mentions, "the use of the Framework will be included in the National Strategy at the first review" (p.17), and since the framework wasn't released until 2013, it is understandable that the Strategy should mention both the former 'employability skills' and the new 'Core Skills for Work', yet the inclusion of two variations in the one policy document creates a certain amount of inconsistency that persists in later documents.

When considering the changes in the field at and around the time of the release of the Strategy, slight variations in meanings can be overlooked, especially when taking the words of Wignall (2017) into account, who stated the definitions of what constitutes foundation skills are "in constant flux" (p.3) and "a flexible approach to defining and redefining foundation skills is needed to accommodate the broad and shifting range of individuals' skill development needs" (p.4). In the competency-based training world of Vocation Education and Training (VET), however, there is more user-friendly terminology embedded within the units of competency of training packages. The Strategy states that Industry Skills Councils "are revising Training Packages to more clearly identify the opportunities to develop underpinning foundation skills as part of vocational training" (SCOTESE, 2012, p.12) and a fact sheet from the federal government's Department of Education and Training informs us that "a key outcome arising from the National Strategy has been the explicit inclusion of foundation skills into units of competency. It is now a mandatory requirement that units of competency describe the language, literacy, numeracy and employment skills that are essential to performance in the unit" (Department of Education and

Training, n.d.)*. As a result, with the contemporary release of the *Standards for Training Packages*, units of competency are now made up of technical (or discipline specific) skills as well as foundation skills. Certainly, mixed terminology is apparent in these Standards (and the fact sheet) by using 'language', 'literacy' and 'numeracy' when it describes 'foundation skills' as being the "language, literacy, numeracy and employment skills that are essential to performance" (p.4), however, recent units of competency now include a list of the five core skills of the ACSF and the three clustered skill areas of the CSfW that are embedded and explicitly stated in each unit. Here, then, as shown below, is a specific, consistent list of skills for VET teachers to teach and assess, which includes a specific, consistent list of foundation skills that foundation skills support services can support VET learners with.

Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF)

- Learning
- Reading
- Writing
- Oral Communication
- Numeracy

Cor*e Skills for Work Framework (CSfW)*

- Navigate the world of work
  - Manage career and work life
  - Work with roles, rights and protocols
- Interact with others
  - Communicate for work
  - Connect and work with others
  - Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives
- Get the work done
  - Plan and organize
  - Make decisions
  - Identify and solve problems
  - Create and innovate
  - Work in a digital world

When it comes to accredited courses, however, terminology again becomes unclear. The *Standards for VET Accredited Courses 2012* do not mention 'foundation skills' at all, and in only one place is 'LLN' mentioned; as being 'helpful' to include as recommended entry requirements. VAC 7.4 in these Standards does, however, include 'employability skills', requiring VET accredited courses to identify employability skills relevant to the course outcomes. Being initially released in 2011, one year before the *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*, the omission of 'foundation skills' is understandable, yet an amendment to the Standards one year later in 2012, when 'foundation skills' were explicitly included both in the Strategy and the *Standards for Training Packages*, still did not include 'foundation skills'. It would seem an opportunity for more clarity was provided in 2019 with the release of the *Users' guide to the Standards for VET Accredited Courses* where there are a number of references to 'foundation skills', including a definition and a list. Unfortunately, however, inconsistency exists. The user's guide defines foundation skills as "the five core skills of the Australian Core Skills framework (ACSF) plus employability skills or the Core Skills for Work Framework" (p.7). This seemingly presents 'employability skills' as interchangeable with the 'CSfW', however, they are two very different portrayals of skills for employment. Furthermore, in the list of skills presented on pages 19, 25 and 26, six of the eight original 2002 'employability skills' are included, which contrasts directly with the inclusion of CSfW skill areas in units of competency directed by the *Standards for Training Packages*.

This mixed messaging of what constitutes foundation skills is mirrored in the *Foundation Skills Training Package* (FSK), first released in 2013. One of the roles for Industry Skills Councils coming out of *The National Foundation Skills Strategy* was to develop the *Foundation Skills Training Package* (SCOTESE, 2012), which was designed to provide "an opportunity for RTOs to select and deliver foundation skills units and qualifications that will enable learners to build the specific foundation skills required to achieve vocational competency" (Innovation and Business Skills Australia [IBSA], 2013, p.4). Here, the accompanying *Implementation Guide* defines 'foundation skills' as encompassing

"the core skills … described by the ACSF and the Employability Skills / Core Skills for Work" (IBSA, p.9). Herein lies two aspects to mention; one is the incorporation of 'digital technology', and two, again the dual use of skills for employment. Page 14 states that the units of competency within the package "have been organised into six skill groups: learning, reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy and digital technology". The first five of these skills groups can be directly attributed to the ACSF, however, the origin of the sixth, 'digital technology', is more obscure. This is not an explicit skill or stream of the ACSF and its inclusion may relate to the original definition of 'foundation skills' in the Strategy, which includes 'digital literacy' as one part of LLN as well as 'technology' in 'employability skills' and 'work in a digital world' in the CSfW. It seems that the skill group 'digital technology' is a fusion of all of these digital-related terms and skills. Secondly, as with the *Standards for Accredited Courses*, 'employability skills' and the 'Core Skills for Work' are included simultaneously, as if they were interchangeable. The guide states, "While these [skill] groups primarily reflect the core skills described by the ACSF, they also encompass Employability Skills of: communication, planning and organising, problem solving, learning, team work and technology and have been informed by the Core Skills for Work" (p.14). It is unclear how the CSfW 'inform' the 'employability skills', since they are very different, and the question of why 'employability skills' are mentioned at all must be asked, since the CSfW is a recent framework designed for more modern workplaces. Even with time and the opportunity to clarify, the 2019 release of an updated version of the *Implementation Guide* repeats the above (PwC, 2019, p.31).

Released three years after the Strategy, The *Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015* are key requirements that specify the operations of Australian RTOs, and its formulation presented an opportunity for the federal government to clarify terminology. With three years to digest the changes of 2012, it is perhaps more than surprising that nowhere in these requirements is the term 'foundation skills' mentioned. A major policy strategy for adult education and full embedding of foundation skills within the units of competency of training packages occur, yet not once is the term used in the essential

requirements that follow. Instead, the term 'language, literacy and numeracy' is included in two locations: one as an example of a program where RTOs can provide 'education and support services' and another as a specific unit of competency for VET trainers to complete to become qualified to teach in the VET sector (that is, the unit 'Address adult language, literacy and numeracy skills'). Furthermore, even the *Users' guide to the Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015* released in 2019 only mentions 'foundation skills' once, advising RTOs to "check that assessment criteria in assessment tools address" them (p.58). The absence of the term 'foundation skills' in these Standards (and an accompanying definition or list) has potentially profound implications on foundation skills support services in VET and leaves a vacuum of guidance on the depth and breadth these services must provide (discussed in detail in later paragraphs).

With consistency proving elusive in federal government Standards, even in the recent user's guides to Standards and in the *Implementation Guide* of the FSK, it is warranted to examine a document focused on a broad examination of VET. *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System* (also known as 'The Joyce Review') was published in 2019 and set out to "conduct a health check of the Australian VET sector to determine how ready it is to step up to the challenge of training more Australians, now and in the future" (Joyce, 2019, p.1). In this review, 'foundation skills' is defined as "Foundation language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills" (p.2) or "LLND" (p.109). Here, now, the focus seems to return to the definition of the 2012 *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*, with its use of 'LLN' and inclusion of 'digital literacy'. Without explanation, however, The Joyce Review omits employment skills entirely, along with any reference, direct or indirect, to the core skills of the ACSF. With eight years of referring to both of these aspects of 'foundation skills' in government documents, albeit in sporadic and inconsistent ways, The Joyce Review seems to abandon them and instead uses the term 'LLND' without providing explanation of where that term originates from.

In the 2019-20 budget, the federal government announced the four-year

allocation of funds for the *Foundation Skills for Your Future Program*, developed to "support eligible Australians with a means to develop their Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy (LLND) skills to help them up-skill or re-skill for new roles, to obtain and retain secure employment and to undertake further education and training" (Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, 2019). Whilst not providing a specific definition of 'foundation skills', this program seems to have been influenced by The Joyce Review, published just months earlier, or even established as a result of the review, in that it also restricts the term 'foundation skills' to "Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy (LLND) skills' (p.4). Like The Joyce Review, it does not mention 'employability skills' or the CSFW, however, considering the purpose of the program is to improve the skills for employment, it must be assumed that LLND development is to be focused on workplace contexts. The guidelines of this program, however, do include the ACSF, along with a newly-created (2020) framework for digital skills, the *Digital Literacy Skills Framework (DLSF)*, stating, "Service Providers delivering RTO Personalised Training projects and/or Employer Workplace Training projects, are required to assess each Participant's:

- Language, Literacy and Numeracy Skills, through the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF); and
- Digital Literacy Skills, through the department's Digital Literacy Skills Framework (DLSF)" (p.5).

Here, then, is a direct link between 'LLN' and the five core skills of the ACSF, along with the formal elevation of 'digital literacy skills' to be seemingly equal in standing to each of the five core skills. In fact, the DLSF attributes the elevation of 'digital literacy skills' to The Joyce Review itself, stating that Joyce "acknowledges the importance of digital literacy skills [by] renaming the core foundation skills as Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy (LLND) skills. The inclusion of digital skills alongside the foundation skills of language, literacy and numeracy recognises that digital literacy has become increasingly critical for individuals' participation in the workforce" (McLean, Oldfield & Stephens, 2020, p.4).

Thus far, a variety of definitions and terms from a number of federal government documents have been presented. Some refer to 'LLN', whereas others refer to the

five core skills of the ACSF, while others refer to both. Some documents use the term 'employability skills' and some of its examples from 2002, whereas others use skills from the CSFW, while others refer to both. What is clear, however, especially when viewing the table below of a collation of the documents and terms, is that very few of the documents are consistent with each other.

Year	Document	Terms Used
2002	*Employability Skills for the Future*	Employability skills = Communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning and technology
2012	*National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*	Foundation skills = LLN plus employability skills, but includes ACSF and CSfW
2012	*Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF)*	ACSF = Learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy
2012	*Standards for Training Packages*	Foundation skills = ACSF core skills plus CSfW skills
2012	*Standards for VET Accredited Courses*	LLN
2013	*Foundation Skills Training Package*	ACSF core skills plus digital technology
2013	*Core Skills for Work Development Framework (CSfW)*	CSfW = Three clustered skills of navigate the world of work, interact with others and get the work done
2015	*Standards for Registered Training Organisations 2015*	LLN
2019	*Users' guide to the Standards for Registered Training Organisation 2015*	Foundation skills – no definition or examples
2019	*Users' guide to the Standards for VET Accredited Courses*	Foundation skills = ACSF core skills plus employability skills *or* CSfW
2019	*Foundation Skills Training Package: Implementation Guide*	Foundation Skills = ACSF core skills plus employability skills / CSfW
2019	*Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*	Foundation skills = LLND
2019	*Foundation Skills for Your Future: Program Guidelines*	Foundation skills = LLND

It is obvious to see that the federal government has been unable to provide a clear and consistent use of the term 'foundation skills'. What started out in 2012

as a purposeful push for a broader set of skills to define, identify, develop and measure skills that "underpin workforce participation, productivity and social inclusion" (SCOTESE, 2012, p.2), and including them in policy and Standards, has resulted in an assortment of variations over time, leading to a new redefining in 2019/20 as simply 'LLND', despite the continual use of the original term 'foundation skills'.

The state of Victoria, on the other hand, may be an ideal place to look for consistency since its VET system is the most de-centralised in Australia and has a diverse TAFE system, meaning it may require a greater need for consistent terminology to help manage the diversity of stakeholders. Below, a number of documents are examined and listed in chronological order of their release, providing an insight into the Victorian state government's view.

2018: *Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: Pathways to participation and jobs – Discussion paper*
Produced by the Victorian Department of Education, this discussion paper "considers whether the adult community education [ACE] sector is equipped with the system-level supports and capabilities it needs to support at-risk Victorians into social and economic participation" (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p.7). Certainly, the Victorian government's endeavour to support 'at-risk' Victorians must be recognised, along with numerous references to 'foundation skills'. In this document, however, no definition of 'foundation skills' is provided, with pages 4, 7, 8, 14 and 36 all referring to "literacy, numeracy and foundation skills" in an innovative twist, seemingly as if literacy and numeracy were separate to and distinct from foundation skills.

2019: *The Future of Adult Community Education in Victoria 2020-25: Ministerial Statement*
Outlining the Victorian Adult and Community Education reform agenda for 2020-25, this document also provides no definition, but 'foundation skills' is highly prominent in the reforms, stating the three core roles of

ACE are 1) to engage and support adult learners who need to develop their core foundation skills for work, further study, and to participate in society as valued citizens, 2) to play a lead role in adult literacy, numeracy, employability and digital skills education and training for Victorians and 3) to support workers who may be vulnerable to becoming unemployed to develop the skills necessary to remain and thrive in employment as work changes" (Department of Education and Training, 2019, p.6). Whilst the significant development of 'foundation skills' becoming at the heart of ACE reforms must be recognised, the term 'core foundation skills' in the first 'core role', seems to be a variation of 'foundation skills' itself. Nowhere in the document is an explanation of this term provided, and, to speculate, it may refer to the core skills of the ACSF or perhaps 'LLN', or it may even be the core skills of the ACSF plus the skills areas of the CSfW.

2019: *2018-19 Standard VET Funding Contract (extended to 31 December 2020)*
Section 5 of this contract relates to the planning of training and assessment, specifically the Pre-Training Review. In line with the federal government's *Standards Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015*, section 5.1 of the Victorian VET funding contract states, "For each Eligible Individual, the Training Provider must conduct a Pre-Training Review, as part of enrolment, or prior to the commencement of training, to ascertain a suitable, and the most suitable (as defined in the Quality Charter), course for that student to enrol in" (The State of Victoria, 2019, p.9). In relation to 'foundation skills', section 5.1 states the Pre-Training Review must (amongst other points not included here):

- consider the individual's existing educational attainment and capabilities;
- include consideration of literacy and numeracy skills;
- where the proposed learning includes portions delivered online, identify the individual learner's digital capability, including access to necessary technology, and where necessary identify steps to overcome any barriers in this regard (p.9).

Without providing a definition or a list of 'foundation skills', this document includes 'literacy', 'numeracy', 'digital capability' and any other existing 'capabilities', which may or may not be related to 'foundation skills'.

2020: *Skills First Literacy and Numeracy Support Implementation Guide*

In Victoria, RTOs can receive *Skills First* funding to enrol eligible learners into units "specifically designed for learners requiring literacy and numeracy skills to support the achievement of vocational competence" (Department of Education and Training, 2020, p.1). Whilst 'literacy' and 'numeracy' are the two terms used in the title and throughout the document, the approved units are "grouped into Reading, Writing, Numeracy, Oral Communication, Learning and Digital Technology to align with the FSK Foundation Skills Training Package" (p.6). No explanation is provided as to why 'literacy' and 'numeracy' are used in the title of the document and throughout, but it can only be assumed that the five core skills of the ACSF together with 'digital technology' are what constitute 'literacy' and 'numeracy' here.

2020: *Victoria's Growing Economy: Issue Paper*

Outlining critical issues for students, governments, industry and providers, it is the one Victorian document that provides a glossary of terms and includes a definition for 'foundation skills', which states it is "a combination of language, literacy and numeracy skills (e.g. listening, reading, speaking, writing, digital literacy, mathematics) and employability skills (e.g. collaboration, problem solving, self-management, learning, information and communication technology) that are included in VET courses and units of competency" (p.59). Here, the term 'foundation skills' matches virtually word-for-word the definition in the 2012 *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*, without any recognition of the core skills of the ACSF or the skill areas of the CSfW, even though units of competency explicitly list these ACSF and CSfW skills.

It seems then, Victoria, like the federal government, does not have clear and

consistent usage and definitions of terminology, but instead, a number of ways to state and use the variety of skills that make up 'foundation skills'. Unfortunately, this inconsistency in both federal and state government documents potentially creates a number of uncertainties for VET foundation skills support services, services that are responsible for supporting VET learners in their 'foundation skills' development as they progress through their programs, into their careers and into the next stages of their lives.

Uncertainties

After examining the documents above, four main themes emerge: 1) the interchangeability of 'LLN' with the core skills of the ACSF, 2) the defining of 'digital literacy skills', 3) the interchangeability of the 2002 employability skills with the skills areas of the CSfW and 4) the variations in Standards. The following paragraphs discuss each of these themes separately.

Eight years after the introduction of the ACSF, the term 'LLN' still endures, now extended to 'LLND'. For foundation skills support services within VET, however, the term 'LLN'/'LLND' alone does not fully encompass the skills or issues involved in this particular field. Certainly, there is a great deal of overlap, with 'LLN' being represented in the reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy skills of the ACSF, but the 'learning' skill cannot be ignored. Within the ACSF, the two performance indicators of 'learning' are 1) Awareness of self as a learner, planning and management of learning and 2) The acquisition and application of practical strategies that facilitate learning. It is precisely these aspects of learning that many VET learners need support with, and by only referring to 'LLN', even if 'learning' is implied, the importance of directly identifying and addressing the ability for many adults to learn is diminished. Hence, a number of questions that may arise for support services are:

- *Does the 'learning' ability of a prospective learner need to be identified at the pre-training review stage?*
  - *If so, how can it be identified?*

- *Aside from enrolling learners into specific 'learning' units of the FSK, how can 'learning' be taught and what strategies can be provided to assist learners?*
- *Do the identification, delivery and outcomes of support for 'learning' need to be recorded and reported?*

2019 saw the term 'LLND' used in The Joyce Review, with 'LLND' now being the subject of the *Foundation Skills for Your Future Program* and 'digital literacy skills' now having its own framework, *The Digital Literacy Skills Framework (DLSF).* This is an important development for support services, marking a point in time when 'digital literacy skills' become formalised with its own framework to articulate and measure stages of development. The questions raised above for 'learning' are, however, also relevant for 'digital literacy skills', along with the important question of:

- *Do all trainers possess the necessary 'digital literacy skills' themselves?*

As with 'LLN' and the core skills of the ACSF, there is overlap between the 2002 term 'employability' and skill areas of the CSfW. Yet, they are very different, and by referring to both of them simultaneously, there is less common language, resulting in dislocation and uncertainty. Also, the CSfW provides a more recent framework that enables foundation skills service providers to identify and address learner needs for a more modern environment, so repeated references to a previous list, rather than a specifically designed framework, can result in a reduced ability to support learners for their modern careers. Furthermore, the omission of all specific references to employment skills in recent documents introduces doubt into the scope of what support services should and must provide support with. Here, a number of questions can be raised, such as:

- *Like 'learning' and 'digital literacy skills', do employment skills need to be identified at the pre-training review, then taught/supported and then reported?*
- *Do the core skills of the ACSF (or 'LLND') only need to be taught and supported, but within the context of employment?*
- *Have specific skills for employment been abandoned completely?*

The greatest cause of uncertainty, however, results when overlaying the *Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015* (where 'foundation skills' are not referred to at all) with the *Standards for Training Packages* (which not only requires units of competency to specifically identify, embed and communicate the five core skills of the ACSF and the three clustered skill areas of the CSfW, but also for VET trainers to teach and assess them). The *Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015* require RTOs to undertake an initial assessment of learner skills and knowledge, identify individual learners requiring support, provide education and support services and maximise the chance for learners to complete their courses. The application of the two Standards, therefore, generates numerous questions for RTOs in their planning, providing, recording and reporting of support, many of which have been presented in detail below. One major consideration is related to whether or not RTOs are required to 1) document the full range of ACSF and CSfW skills (and their levels) in training and assessment strategy documents and 2) identify the capabilities of each prospective learner for each of those same skills and their levels, since the full range of ACSF and CSfW skills are now embedded within units of competency. The answer (or answers) to this aspect of VET alone can have dramatic effects on staffing, staff training, funding, services, reporting and communications. Without clear guidance, the breadth and depth of foundation skills support services and their contribution to learner outcomes is difficult to determine.

Before introducing possible questions, however, the following list (adapted from the *Users' guide to the Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015,* 2019) provides an inferred summary of RTO registration obligations that relate to foundation skills. Note: This list does not include matters relating to communications with, costs or limitations for students, for example, the need to inform students when changes occur.

Identifying support
- Develop a training and assessment strategy for each training product

registered to deliver, identifying particular requirements a learner would need to meet to enter and complete their course

- Determine the support needs of individual learners prior to their enrolment or commencement (whichever is earliest):
    - through a pre-enrolment or pre-training check, for example, by requiring students to complete an Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) test or a self-assessment as part of the enrolment process
    - by aligning them with the requirements of training and assessment strategies
- Develop and implement strategies to make support available to learners where gaps are identified as they learn and progress

Providing support

- Provide access to the educational and support services necessary for learners to meet the requirements of training products, maximising the chance for learners to successfully complete their training
- Provide access to the required support throughout their training
- Provide equitable access to all required educational and support services so that no learner is disadvantaged regardless of their mode of study or location

Teaching elements

- Demonstrate through training and assessment practices that learners gain all the knowledge and skills relevant to their qualification
- When developing assessment materials, use the information from the unit or module elements, performance criteria and assessment requirements to determine what competence looks like
- Employ skilled trainers and assessors:
    - to ensure students gain all relevant skills and knowledge
    - whose qualifications include an LLN component

Whilst it is impractical and possibly counter-productive to impose a single set of definitive foundation skills obligations on all RTOs across Australia, considering the variety of sizes, regions and cohorts, the overlaying of the *Standards for*

Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015 with the *Standards for Training Packages* leaves the reasonable extent of application of the Standards open for debate and, ultimately, up to the interpretation of individual auditors. It is not the intention here to state the exact roles support services must engage in in order to reasonably fulfill their registration requirements, so, in an attempt to provoke thought and discussion and to help stakeholders find clarity, the following questions are asked; with 'foundation skills' here being defined as the five core skills of the ACSF plus the three clustered skills of the CSfW (as documented in units of competency directed by the *Standards for Training Packages*).

- *Do all foundation skills of a particular program (listed in all its units of competency) need to be documented in the program's training and assessment strategy?*
  - *If not, which and how many of them need to be documented?*
- *How can entry and completion levels of each of these skills be ascertained?*
- *Do the capabilities of prospective learners need to be identified in all foundation skills listed in the relevant training and assessment strategy before they enrol and/or commence?*
  - *If not, which and how many skills need to be assessed?*
- *When, where and how should this identification take place?*
- *How reliable are the results of identification?*
- *Once identified, are RTOs obligated to simply inform learners of the services available or develop and implement learning plans for each individual learner identified?*
- *Once commenced, how can learners not identified pre-training later be identified?*
- *Are there a reasonable minimum and/or maximum number of hours a learner can/should/must receive support?*
  - *If so, what are they?*
- *Is providing one-on-one support for each identified learner a requirement or can a foundation skills trainer teaching to a class be the sole form of support?*

- *If identified learners from a variety of courses are enrolled together in a specific unit of foundation skills study, is that training required to be contextualised to the course of each learner?*
- *Can a specific unit of foundation skills study (with identified learners enrolled in it) be embedded within one of their course's units and taught concurrently?*
  - *If so, how does the RTO manage appropriate hours, training and assessment for both the course and the study unit?*
- *Is an LLN unit within trainer qualifications adequate for all trainers to identify learner foundation skills needs and teach/assess all the specific foundation skills aspects in units of competency?*
  - *If not, what funding and staffing provisions do RTOs need to provide in order for learners to gain all the knowledge and skills relevant to their qualification?*

There are, of course, many more questions that can be asked in relation to foundation skills support services in VET, but the list above is more than enough to demonstrate the uncertainty in not, firstly, defining with consistency what foundation skills are and, secondly, not providing guidance on the extent of requirements. This creates a significant number of grey areas that 1) create confusion and divergence within services and across providers, 2) leave interpretation of the adequacy of support services and the application of Standards in the hands of individual auditors and 3) jeopardise the foundation skills development, careers and lives of adult Australians.

Call for action

To assist foundation skills support services in VET fully understand their scope and obligations and remove inconsistencies and uncertainties, the questions raised above (and others) need to be answered. The following is a call for action that, once completed, can instil certainty, clarity and consistency in VET support services.

1. *A national discussion (involving federal and state/territory governments and industry professionals) on:*
   a. *whether or not the term 'foundation skills' should continue to be used in the future*
      i. *If so, for the discussion to update the definition of 'foundation skills' and provide a set list of skills*
      ii. *If not, for the discussion to provide an alternative term and list of skills*
   b. *the scope and purpose of VET foundation skills support services*
   c. *the application of Standards for VET foundation skills support services*
2. *The federal government and state/territory governments to formalise the agreed upon term, skills, scope, purpose and application of Standards in documented announcements*
3. *All previous and relevant federal and state/territory government documents, such as Standards and guides, to be updated and amended to include the agreed upon term and skills.*
4. *A future date proposed to review the agreed upon results of 1a-c, knowing that terminology and relative importance of skills change over time as society changes.*

As presented, there have been numerous government documents alongside and since the release of the *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults* in 2012, yet there have also been numerous ways to refer to 'foundation skills'. This lack of common language can create confusion and uncertainty for VET providers and distortions in services. Whilst acknowledging that terminology and meanings change over time, noting once more Wignall's expression "in constant flux" (Wignall, 2017, p.3), one single, common definition and usage of 'foundation skills' to be reviewed and adjusted periodically, and its application for VET support services, would alleviate much of this uncertainty and variance. The benefits for these support services are, however, secondary, with the benefits to learners in the studies, their careers and their lives being most important.

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