



1. What are foundation skills?

The NFSS Consultation Paper states that there is no generally accepted definition of foundation skills and that the FS Working Group has agreed to use the OECD definition ‘Language, literacy and numeracy’ in combination with ‘employability skills in the information age’ (page 4). This definition is a useful starting point for discussion about the education needs of different groups of adult Australians. It accords with the statement in the Industry Skills Council’s paper *No More Excuses* (April 2011) that language, literacy and numeracy are the essential underpinning skills for enabling people to participate in work, learning and society.

Language, literacy and numeracy skills have been variously described in policy and programs for adults. However, so-called **language** skills are generally poorly understood in policy papers and policy development. Earlier policy documents (e.g., *National Policy on Languages*, Lo Bianco, 1987, and *Australia’s Language*, DEET, 1991) have made the distinction between **language** and **literacy**. The Consultation Paper states that ‘language’ is ‘the ability to understand and speak the English language’ and that ‘literacy’ is the ‘ability to read and write’.

However, this definition focuses on the “end points” (or outcomes) for learning. It contains the danger of assuming that learners of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) will have the same *learning needs* as English ‘native speakers’ who are developing basic literacy skills. Learning needs derive from learners’ *starting points* and the pathways they traverse *towards* desired end points. Learners’ starting points vary enormously and hence also their learning pathways. Assuming that learning needs are uniform will produce ‘one-size-fits-all’ programs and approaches that fail to target learners’ starting points for learning or build on what they know. A national strategy directed to improving the foundation skills of working-age Australians must address learning needs, and should not make the simplistic assumption that pathways towards desired outcomes are uniform.

A truly national strategy for developing Foundation Skills must start with a conceptual framework that is inclusive of adult learners’ diverse starting points and pathways. It needs to provide a basis and justification for different programs and approaches that can address learner needs, while also allowing for the flexibility to combine programs and approaches where needs overlap and come together.

2. What should be the focus of the national strategy?

The focus of the national strategy must be provision for the diverse **starting points** from which adult learners can develop foundation skills, and building **appropriate and coherent pathways** towards acquiring these skills.

The Consultation Paper homogenises and over-simplifies both English language learning needs and literacy learning needs. If policy definitions fail to acknowledge these starting points and pathways, the programs that follow are liable to miss their mark.

The national strategy must accommodate the basic distinction between adult learners **who speak English as their only language and mother tongue and who lack literacy skills**, and those for whom other languages are their primary or dominant means of communication and **who are learning English as a second/additional language or dialect**.

Those who have grown up speaking English (the first group) have been socialised and had their education (however much or little) in English. The need for assistance in acquiring basic literacy will relate to many factors but their starting points and pathways into literacy will have in common **a foundation in spoken English** (for example, an ability to distinguish sounds in English, a command of English words and sentence patterns, etc.) and **an understanding of local cultural meanings and the Australian context**. Literacy programs must build from this starting point and use it to underpin teaching.

Beginning English language learners (the second group) who are adult migrants need to learn to distinguish English sounds, develop an English vocabulary and a command of English sentence patterns, and learn about Australia. Some may have advanced literacy skills in their other language(s), while others may have had little/no previous formal schooling. Some of these learners may be highly skilled in acquiring knowledge in an orally-based culture. Learning literacy in English may require programs that build on a good education and a full understanding of literacy in other languages but that cannot assume any competence in spoken English or knowledge of the local Australian context. Quite differently, other learners will require programs that also must build a foundation in spoken English but at the same time provide very basic real world and school knowledge.

Indigenous speakers of English as an additional language, including those who speak Aboriginal creoles, may be similar to this group in significant ways but differ in others. **Speakers of Aboriginal Englishes** will be similar in some ways but quite different in others, as will also some adults from the Pacific Islands.

A national strategy should promote programs that build on diverse skills and levels of skill, whether for existing workers moving to higher positions, unemployed workers requiring training prior to participation in the workforce, or parents/guardians supporting their children in school education. It should take into account that learning needs will vary, and may include a combination of many skills or a focus on one or two skills. For example, as just indicated, some recently arrived adult migrants or refugees may need to focus on spoken English and local knowledge in order to access occupations for which they are already

qualified or in which they have considerable experience, but may already have advanced literacy skills (even in English), while others will need a long-term and comprehensive approach to both English and basic education.

The Industry Skills Councils paper *No More Excuses* correctly states that English language and literacy skills are an ongoing and integral part of workforce development. They should not be targeted simply at lower skill levels. Development of high-level spoken English and English literacy skills are also important, for example, for skilled and well qualified migrant workers.

At the same time as recognising and providing for different starting points for learning, a crucial aspect of a national Foundation Skills strategy must be to overcome existing blockages in learning pathways and to develop substantive linkages that allow learners to move between programs along a coherent track towards mainstream vocational training or higher education. For adult migrants and refugees, a major problem is the lack of such pathways between, for example, on-arrival (AMEP), WELL, LLNP, VET and community ESL programs.

3. How do we build the demand for foundation skills training?

Building a demand for skills training should not be based on the assumption that individuals lack motivation to develop foundation skills. Rather, demand is crucially dependent on overcoming individual and systemic barriers. Most adult migrants and refugees arrive in Australia with high ambitions. These may be thwarted by training that does not address their needs (see above regarding the assumption that learning English and learning literacy are the same thing; also Miralles, J. 2004. *A fair go: Factors impacting on vocational education and training participation and completion in selected ethnic communities*, NCVER). A significant barrier would appear to be the inflexibility of current VET funding mechanisms (See Industry Skills Councils 2011: 13 for discussion of this issue and recommendations in *Foundation Skills in VET Products for the 21st Century*).

Awareness-raising may be an appropriate component of a national strategy for foundation skills. However, any 'marketing/advertising' campaign should mainly target industry, community, and government departments rather than individuals (*Building the foundations: outcomes from the adult language, literacy and numeracy search conference*. NCVER 2011: 44). Such campaigns should seek to promote awareness of the diversity of learners and assist in identifying the needs of specific groups, including – and in particular – approaches that are appropriate for adults from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The Industry Skills Councils paper *No More Excuses* makes the important statement that the responsibility for developing English language and literacy skills for work or further study needs to be shared by all stakeholders, and that collaborative approaches should be supported at the system level.

Workforce development in VET will be a vital component of any coordinated strategy to improve English language and English literacy skills. Key components of this workforce development would include:

- capacity building in English language and literacy provision across VET education, government services and industry, and other stakeholders
- support for specialist qualifications and training in English language and literacy teaching (qualifications requirements, professional development, curriculum and materials development)
- involving community organisations.

4. How do we improve foundation skills training so it meets demand and the needs of learners?

A coordinated approach to building English language and literacy skills of adult Australians, one which is shared by industry, community and education sectors, is urgently needed. Effective foundation skills training will require flexibility, responsiveness to diverse needs, and contextualised understandings.

Flexibility

The Industry Skills Councils paper *No More Excuses* (2011: 13) highlights ‘barriers created by VET funding mechanisms’. It points out that these barriers must be addressed if learners are to be supported in vocational contexts and along coherent learning pathways. The 2010 Report *Foundation Skills in VET Products for the 21st Century* recommends ways of developing integrated approaches English language and literacy skills in VET, in particular support for nationally consistent Foundation Skills units, qualifications, recognised pathways and building VET system awareness about Foundation Skills.

Establishing linkages, transition points and coherent pathways between various Commonwealth and State English language and literacy programs is urgently needed.

Responsiveness to learner needs

Responsiveness to learner needs requires:

- a qualified, skilled and specialised English language and literacy teaching force with teachers capable of working in specialised ESL and adult literacy programs, and in industry, workplace and VET settings, and who can conduct effective initial assessments of learners and can place them in appropriate programs
- programs that recognise learner diversity within and between groups, including specific language, literacy and cultural considerations, and that respond to learners’ existing skills and that open doors to further training and vocational pathways
- flexible and targeted training in a variety of contexts, settings and arrangements (for example, ranging from traditional classrooms, to one to one support and mentoring in the workplace, to bilingual support for small groups in community setting)
- teaching resources appropriate to diverse learner needs.

Contextualised Understandings

A national strategy must look to developing and building on a real knowledge base in English language and literacy teaching for adult learners. It requires:

- practically-oriented research into the demands of specific workplaces, occupations, further education and community settings, so that English language and literacy education can be linked to real world contexts
- research into effective educational practices and current best practice in contextualised English language and literacy teaching (see, for example, the excellent research conducted by the NRDC in the UK)
- encouraging flexible and contextualised use of existing training resources including English language and literacy units
- longitudinal studies that document long-term learner trajectories
- research into better ways of articulating learners between programs and providers
- examining the current array of English language and literacy curricula to promote greater coherence and better articulation between and from programs
- reducing the crippling multiple reporting, quality assurance and compliance requirements in English language and literacy programs
- examining the Australian Core Skills Framework, how it is used with different cohorts of learners, and how it is understood within the VET sector, among employers and in the community
- supporting the development of a qualified, specialist English language and literacy teaching force and the broader vocational education teaching force

The appointment of a lead agency, council or other body to coordinate the strategy and programs would enable a better national approach. This should include representatives from key stakeholders, notably English language and literacy professional associations, AIG, Industry Skills Councils, Adult and Community Education, Trade Unions, TAFE, and community organisations such as Ethnic Communities Councils.

5. How can the national strategy complement initiatives in other sectors?

The suggested areas outlined in the Consultation Paper are worthwhile. The NFSS should complement the Australian Curriculum. Both the EAL/D support document and Literacy Continuum currently being developed by ACARA will provide useful guidance for planning and implementation of the NFSS.

6. What are the national priorities?

The proposed priorities outlined in the Consultation Paper are essential.

7. How can stakeholders be engaged in building the foundation skills of adult Australians?

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) would be pleased to offer advice and support in the development and implementation of the NFSS, and would welcome the opportunity to participate in future consultations over the proposed national strategy.

ACTA is the national coordinating council of State and Territory professional associations for the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Our objectives and those of our affiliates are to:

1. ensure *access to English language instruction* for speakers of other languages (Indigenous, refugee and migrant background, and international students)
2. encourage implementation and delivery of *quality professional programs* at all levels, and
3. promote *study, research and development of TESOL* at state, national and international levels.

Our membership comes from all educational sectors: pre-schools; schools; adult, community, TAFE and other VET settings; consultancy services in State/Territory Education Departments and the Independent and Catholic sectors; and university teacher education departments. It includes educators and researchers working in Indigenous education at all levels.

8. How do we measure the success of the National Strategy?

9. Is there anything else you would like to add about adult foundation skills?