



Australian Council for Adult Literacy

supporting literacy and numeracy education for adults

Senator the Hon Christopher Evans
Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research
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14 November, 2012

Dear Senator,

The Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) congratulates the Federal Government on the release of the National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults. ACAL is the peak professional body for adult literacy and numeracy practitioners, representing adult literacy and numeracy practitioners, managers, teacher educators, policy analysts and researchers nationally.

ACAL acknowledges the wide and lengthy consultation process that the Government initiated in the development of this Strategy. The Strategy reflects the interests of a wide range of stakeholders, most visibly the interests of industry and employers who had made strong calls for this Strategy. ACAL participated in a number of these processes, starting with the Search Conference held in Canberra in 2009. We made a formal written submission during the consultation process in 2010.

We acknowledge and welcome the collaborative approach between the Federal and the State and Territories jurisdictions that is suggested in the Strategy. A shared commitment from both levels of governments is essential to ensuring outcomes.

We endorse the four national priority areas identified by the Strategy:

1. Raising awareness and commitment to action
2. Adult learners have high quality learning opportunities and outcomes
3. Strengthening foundation skills in the workplace
4. Building the capacity of the education and training workforces to deliver foundation skills

We provide the following observations and seek clarifications with the expectation that our input can assist the Government in its implementation of this Strategy.

Authority and responsibility

We endorse a collaborative, intergovernmental approach and look forward to practitioners and providers on the ground being given clarification of the nature of the collaboration in more specific terms. It is important that stakeholders can have confidence that as the sponsor of this national Strategy, the Federal government will ensure that those on the ground are not caught in a funding vacuum because neither the Federal nor the State and Territories are taking funding

responsibilities for the various aspects of the action items. Practitioners and providers have been eagerly awaiting this Strategy, and need to access the resources to take their part in the implementation of the Strategy.

In addition to the Federal and

jurisdictional nexus, we also seek clarification of the extent to which this Strategy is being understood by both levels of Governments as a 'whole of Government' approach in a 'lateral' sense. That is, what support for this Strategy from other government departments such as health and housing can be assumed? Adult literacy and numeracy practitioners' experiences show that many socially and economically marginalized adults benefit from integrated approaches to adult literacy and numeracy learning that for some mean partnership delivery of literacy and numeracy programs with community services providers. To effectively establish these partnership arrangements and sustain these provisions in areas of need, explicit whole of government support is required. We seek information about the ways in which these other relevant government departments have been brought on board in the development of this Strategy, and what expectations we can have from them about support for partnership initiatives.

Improving Foundation Skills development in the workplace

ACAL acknowledges the Governments' close attention and response to the needs expressed strongly by industry and employers to improve Foundation Skills of the workforce. Many of ACAL's members have experience in working in workplace literacy and numeracy programs as trainers, assessors, and researchers. We offer the following observations that may advance the Government's agenda about foundation skills in the workplace.

Recent NCVET research by Ryan and Sinning¹ (2012:3) suggests that migrant workers in 'low-skilled' jobs do not require further literacy training in order to improve their job performance, although their relative lack of engagement in further training that may lead them to escape from their low-skilled jobs may be explained by some language and literacy barriers as well as other barriers. ACAL strongly supports measures that encourage and enable workplaces to address the literacy and numeracy needs of their workforce. However, we observe in many of the public discourses including in the Strategy, an assumption that literacy and numeracy improvements are correlated with productivity levels. For example, we note the claim made in the Strategy, based on a Skills Australia report that:

A one per cent increase in literacy can lead to a 2.5 per cent increase in labour productivity, and there is evidence that stronger LLN skills in the workplace can lead to reduced downtime and reduced maintenance costs.²

¹ *Training requirements of foreign-born workers in different countries*,
<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2520.html>

² National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults, p. 7

The meaning of such statements is not clear, for example what is an example of ‘a one percent increase in literacy’? These statements can add to the stigma that the Strategy is trying to remove.

We acknowledge and endorse the recognition that literacy and numeracy skills play important and varied roles in workplaces. However, as the NCVET research cited earlier suggests, many workers with ‘low-level’ English language and literacy are functioning productively in their workplaces; while they may need further training if they wish to move to different job roles it is also necessary to acknowledge that the jobs they are performing are – at this point in time at least – contributing to the Australian economy, and they are performing work that many more highly trained and educated workers are unlikely to do.

Just as Government has invested in re-developing the framework of ‘employability skills’³, we suggest that there is a need to support industry and employers to more actively embrace and work with cultural and linguistic diversity in the workplace, and to see diversity as an asset, rather than as the deficit which it is implicitly presented as in many of the policy documents. There are challenges not only to employees, but to employers as well, in responding to a more globalised market and movement of labour.

Building the Capacity of the Foundation Skills Workforce

ACAL welcomes the Government’s focus on workforce development of the Foundation Skills workforce. We have seen the positive impact of the LLN Practitioner Scholarships since they were introduced; however, we were surprised and disappointed to see that in the last week, the round that was expected to open was cancelled without notice. As the peak body that provides a major annual professional development conference to practitioners each year, ACAL requests further information about the rationale for this decision and what is anticipated for the future of this scheme.

The Strategy also mentions the establishment of ‘professional standards’. We would be interested in playing a major role in deliberations on this matter.

Finally, how is research being supported in this Strategy? While large scale surveys such as the ALLS and PIAAC provide statistical data about the ‘state’ of adult literacy and numeracy levels, ACAL believes that research of the actual experiences of learners, workers and practitioners on the ground is also needed to understand how the Strategy is working and impacting on the lives of people. The NCVET Search conference⁴ identified the need for such research.

³ Core Skills for Work Framework

<http://www.innovation.gov.au/Skills/ResourcesAndPublications/CoreSkillsForWorkFramework/Pages/default.aspx>

⁴ Building the foundations: outcomes from the adult language, literacy and numeracy search conference, <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2345.html>, p 45.

In conclusion, ACAL welcomes the publication of the Strategy and sees the potential for many worthwhile initiatives. However, there are some areas that ACAL believes clarity is needed. These are summarised below:

1. What funding is being injected for the implementation of this Strategy by the different jurisdictions, and in what timeframe?
2. What mechanism will the Commonwealth have to ensure that the Strategy is implemented at the state and territories level? What are the delegation of responsibilities and authority?
3. How is a whole of government approach to integrating foundation skills delivery with community services (e.g. health and housing programs) supported by this Strategy?
4. What is the process and timeline for deliberating on the establishment of 'professional standards' for the foundation skills workforce?
5. What support for scholarly research is available from this Strategy?

ACAL looks forward to your response to our questions, and to working with you in the successful implementation of the Strategy.

Yours sincerely,

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