

## SOME SUGGESTIONS TOWARDS A NEW STRATEGY 2011



### Australian Council for Adult Literacy

Prepared on behalf of ACAL by Rosie Wickert

The Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) sought my assistance with providing suggestions for the scope and implementation of the proposed National Foundation Skills Strategy (NFSS). Specifically, I was charged with developing one or two concrete proposals that may assist ACAL in developing its response to the NFSS consultation process and that are in line with Black and Yasukawa (2010) *Time for national renewal: Australian adult literacy and numeracy as 'foundation skills.'*<sup>1</sup>

Black and Yasukawa propose four key areas for action in such a strategy: social capital, cross-sectoral partnerships, integration and professional renewal. I have suggestions relevant to three of these but before doing so it might be helpful to note, as a reminder, some of the many other calls, since the demise of the 1991 *Australian Language and Literacy Policy* (DEET 1991) in 1996, for a new national strategy in this domain. These include but are not limited to ACAL 2001, 2006, McKenna and Fitzpatrick 2004, Bardon 2006, Wickert 2006. More recently, the calls are coming from an ever broader range of sources. In 2010-11 alone, Skills Australia, the Productivity Commission, the COAG,

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'Achieving the [COAG] targets will involve bringing many currently marginalised groups into the workforce. This will require some highly personalised, innovative and intensive approaches to personal and skill development from the VET and community education sectors'

Robin Shreeve 2010



the Australian Industry Group and the Industry Councils have all called for action. The NCVET 2010 Search conference report and the NFSS Consultation paper provide clear evidence of the federal government's recognition for the need to act in this area<sup>1</sup>.

Australia's lack of a comprehensive and long-term strategy (and consequent 'policy and programme stagnation' NALA 2011) is noted in the recent publication from Ireland's National Adult Literacy Agency, *A Literature Review of International Adult Literacy Policies* (March 2011). This analysis of policies, undertaken by the Adult Literacy National Resource and Development Centre, University of London, across eight countries provides a useful

summary of key findings – see attached.

The findings resonate with a number of consistent themes ever more insistently rehearsed in reports in Australia such as those referred to above. In summary, these are calls for:

1. a coherent national strategy rather than short term piecemeal approaches
2. a better prepared and supported teaching workforce
3. a more effective approach to integrating LLN
4. stronger, effective cross sectoral partnerships.

It is encouraging that there is recognition of these themes evident in the Discussion Questions and Areas for Action identified in the National Foundation Skills Strategy Consultation Paper (March 2011). It was particularly pleasing, for me, to see reference to the 1993 *National Collaborative Adult English Language and Literacy Strategy* as this was so influential in building a coherent field before

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<sup>1</sup> It was encouraging to note K Shrugg's indications to the WELL Practitioners' Conference Nov 2010 that the NFSS would provide a coordinated framework, be cohesive and over-arching across sectors and jurisdictions.

subsequent policy settings in training and labour market programmes dismantled most of the gains made, not least in terms of state and territory collaborations and the professionalization of adult LLN.<sup>2</sup>

What is becoming clearer and clearer is the need for a new and substantial dedicated resource commitment to building Australian's foundation skills. As has been evident for some time, there is no simple add-on solution.

As requested, I offer one or two ideas relevant to three of Black and Yasukawa key areas for action: cross-sectoral partnerships, integration and professional renewal.

### 1. The Foundation Skills Learning Improvement and Support Network

The following proposal is partially informed by the growing number of concerns from a range of sources about the quality and effectiveness of ACE and VET provision in relation to foundation skills development. This is a situation that has largely been brought about as a result of opening up the

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Quality is the biggest  
immediate issue for VET  
(Shreeve 2010)

market of adult education and training to new providers and the subsequent casualization of adult education and training whilst not at the same time ensuring adequate setting and monitoring of standards.

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I propose the idea of a Foundation Skills Learning and Support Network (unashamedly borrowed from the UK Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS <http://www.lsis.org.uk/AboutLSIS/Pages/default.aspx> and see attached).

This would be a national entity funded jointly by the Federal and State and Territory Governments.

Its purpose would be to improve the quality and outcomes of Foundation Skills learning by providing high quality support and advice available to all providers in receipt of public funding. It would complement and supplement the work of the professional associations, industry skill council brokers and the WELL network. Each of these should contribute to the determination of the goals and objectives of the proposed new network.

In part what I have in mind is how the schools sector has approached professional development in the past. Demonstration schools were nominated; leading teachers were taken off line and modelled good practice in visits to schools, at workshops and so on. Encouraging innovation would be another aspect of the work. The logic is that excellent practitioners, currently in the field, have much to offer and that revitalisation of this important and complex work needs to happen to encourage new entrants.

There are a number of structures that could be adopted, ranging from a university/college Centre of Excellence approach to something much more fluid, flexible and connected with the field. The latter is my preference, so long as there is strong leadership and a clear nationally agreed direction.

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<sup>2</sup> In passing, I note that the Consultation Paper referred to the activity surrounding the 1993 Australian National Collaborative Adult English Language and Literacy Strategy leading to 'important improvements in foundation skills training, including the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program and the Reading Writing Hotline, as well as considerable effort in states and territories in literacy training'. My memory is that both WELL and the Hotline preceded the Strategy.

A small team of full-time staff (2-3) would need to operate such a 'centre' or 'project'. Location would be a challenge as it would be desirable for more than one state to contribute to the personnel. Another option might be for each state and territory to contribute a 'node' to the national network but it would be important that they each work to an agreed set of objectives.<sup>3</sup> Models from other sectors may be available.

There would need to be a national overseeing body to ensure that the concept remains relevant and focussed on the task rather than its own long term survival or becoming enmeshed in a particular state or territory's priorities. Reference to the governance of the 1990s National Adult Literacy and Numeracy Staff Development Strategy might be helpful here.

One task would be to try to achieve some national consistency regarding minimum standards of competence for foundation skills teachers and trainers. This may be in the form of establishing agreement on minimum levels and currency of qualifications. Monitoring of available teacher education courses could also be in the brief of this project along with providing support and advice to RTOs and other organisations delivering training for foundation skills and VET professionals.

Compliance and moderation will no doubt be monitored by the emerging VET regulatory bodies. However there is a specialist support role for Foundation Skills programs that are not so much about compliance but about developing and supporting good practice under challenging funding regimes.

The central network coordinators could bring together teams with expertise in different aspects of foundation skills work. Such 'teams' would not need to be physically co-located but could provide virtual support and modelling for much of the time.

Differing focus areas would include:

- Integrating or embedding foundation skills in VET training
- Embedding LLN skills development in the workplace
- Using new technologies (very limited at present)
- Numeracy, literacy and ESL pedagogies
- Designing relevant learning experiences for different ability and cultural groups
- Partnering with health and other relevant community sectors
- Bilingual/bidialectal/bicultural approaches, especially for Indigenous learners.

Caution would need to be exercised to ensure the relevance, mobility and accessibility of such teams of experts. For example, rather than getting caught up in developing a library and a physical presence, the team could identify and promote virtual possibilities, resources already held elsewhere and so on.

Too many resources have been wasted in the past on duplicating existing 'materials' and delivering poorly designed short workshops rather than customised training. In relation to resources, it may be worth, for example, revisiting the many PD resources that were developed in the 1990s and updating and technology enabling them rather than inventing new ones.

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<sup>3</sup> This is beginning to sound like the ALRN without intending it to. Lessons can certainly be learnt from that exercise about the challenges of operating a national network in Australia. I would be cautious about locating the proposed new network in a university.

If appropriate, units in accredited courses could be offered, enabling practitioners to gain credit as they build expertise. Also, differing levels of support could be available so that, for example, a summer school could be offered to those who want to deepen their knowledge and expertise through more scholarly activity, including action research, that could give them credit into a university course,

The concept or project would need to have a life of at least 5 and preferably 10 years for it to have a sustaining impact on the field. This should ensure that the jobs of running it are attractive enough to interest the kind of Foundation Skills 'brokers' needed to expertly cross the disciplinary and sectoral boundaries that would be required. Out of this might also come a new mindset for those educators who choose to work in what should increasingly become a broad canvas for foundation skills development – a new kind of adult education professional.

### Resourcing

This is a complex project. Costing it would depend on which elements were enacted.

Whatever may be decided, aside from the salaries, set up and ongoing running costs, consideration should be given to setting up a fund open to submissions from providers for PD activities or action research or similar.

Some services would be free to providers; others would have to be bought. Proposals for making use of this service should be included in tender guidelines for RTOs.

The management and oversight of such a project should not be put to tender. It needs to be owned by and accountable to state and territory governments.

## **2. A National Think-tank preceding the establishment of a Foundation Skills Advisory Council**

Australia achieved its most significant impact on improving basic literacy and numeracy infrastructure capacity during the 1990s. Six years of a relatively small budget allocation delivered the National Reporting System, a curriculum framework that delivered some impetus and consistency across states and territories, national collaboration regarding priorities, great TV series, public awareness campaigns and above all, a sense of direction. Perhaps most significantly, it achieved agreement among industry bodies to incorporate LLN into industry standards. Leadership was provided through the Australian Language and Literacy Council, a committee of the National Board of Education, Employment and Training (NBEET) – an influential advisory body to the various Ministers of Education and Training in the Hawke-Keating governments.

The ALLC's influence was in part achieved because it included representation from industry (employer bodies and union), welfare, Indigenous and multicultural Australians alongside the schools and adult education and training sectors. This partnership enabled significant learning on all sides from which essential leadership across the sectors was delivered regarding what needs to be in place to deliver improvements in foundation skills, or what was then called basic skills or language, literacy and numeracy (LLN).

Fifteen years after the demise of the ALLC, the need for partnership and collaboration to achieve a coordinated national strategy is pressing. As noted above, more and more reports are arguing for the need for a comprehensive national strategy, a whole of government response that can capture

and exploit as many opportunities as possible for the development of foundation skills. For example, in relation to the long-term unemployed, just last week Julian Disney and David Thompson argued emphatically that training alone is not enough to break the cycle of dependency and furthermore that it has to be quality training. Sectors have to work together to provide the kind of 'individualised, sustained advice necessary' (ABC/RN 15.4.11).

Too often potential or actual gains are lost because of a lack of high level interest and system level commitment. Short term project funds with little or no guidance or post-evaluation exacerbate this. High level sponsorship and high levels of accountability are needed to effect the transformative changes that are now needed.

Thus I propose that a high level national advisory body be established to oversee and further develop the National Foundation Skills Strategy. This body should be independent of governments and thus not be part of the Ministerial Councils structure. Possibly it could be a body appended to Skills Australia. It should comprise high level representatives of the health, welfare, finance, youth, schools, VET, ACE and industry sectors, Indigenous peoples and those for whom English is not their first language. Public and private provision would need to be represented. Its Terms of Reference should be determined by the goals of the National Foundation Skills Strategy and it should be charged with providing advice on the more challenging aspects of the implementation of this strategy.

Prior to the determination of the Strategy and thus the establishment of such a Council, that a high level working conference or think-tank/lock-up should be held to assist the Minister and his Department to finalise the elements of the National Foundation Skills Strategy. This would not be another consultation round. The outcome of this 2.5-3 day event would be a final draft incorporating the Strategy's purpose, goals/objectives, key strategies, resourcing, structural and advisory arrangements. Invitees would be required to make a serious commitment to this exercise (all or nothing). They should be high level thinkers in each of the areas identified above but also have enough knowledge of the issues involved to contribute meaningful and realistic advice.<sup>4</sup>

### **3. Incentives to achieve funding to support effective integration of foundation skills with VET**

Australia has long had a reputation for being the world leader in the notion of integrating LLN development with vocational training, workplace training etc. It is increasingly difficult to defend this reputation as a growing number of studies fail to find more than a sprinkling of evidence that this is being done effectively (eg. McKenna and Fitzpatrick 2005, Wickert and McGuirk 2005, Black and Yasukawa forthcoming). On the other hand, studies from England and New Zealand, which took and developed what was Australia's lead in this area, are providing evidence that a systematic implementation of this strategy does deliver results (Casey et al 2006).

If Australia is to meet the COAG targets, then increasingly young people will be need to be taking accredited VET units or courses as part of their studies in school and beyond. This is a good move,

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<sup>4</sup> *Examples of the kinds of people I have in mind include Julian Disney, Marie Persson, Robin Shreeve, Patrick McClure, David Thompson, Heather Ridout, Jon Speirings, Ursula Stephens, Kaye Schofield with written (limited and very focussed) and verbal input from experts and engagement by relevant Department heads.*

including for unemployed people doing the LLNP, many of whom would probably benefit more from an approach such as this rather than studying units in standalone general education or language and literacy courses.

Integration can be interpreted in differing ways. The *Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills* (CAVSS) model instigated in Western Australia is one model that seems to be delivering results. This is an accredited course that serves as a dual enrolment course available for any student enrolled in a vocational qualification who needs additional literacy and numeracy tuition. It is based on two underpinning principles: the 'normalising principle' in which L&N support is viewed as an 'ordinary part of the VET training, and something that every student is engaged in as a matter of course', and the 'relevance principle', which ensures L&N practices relate primarily to the vocational learning (Bates 2004:4).

Apart from Western Australian TAFE Institutes, the CAVSS course is now delivered in other states, including Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, and in a number of private Registered Training Organisations. After 10 years' experience delivering CAVSS, both statistical and qualitative evidence suggests that embedding literacy and numeracy tuition with vocational training makes it accessible, acceptable and useful to students where there would be reluctance to attend stand-alone courses.<sup>5</sup>

As Black and Yasukawa (2011) argue, by 'situating' L&N practices fully in the context of vocational learning, including in the practical workshops where much occupational identity work occurs, it is likely students will more readily accommodate these practices because they see the relevance of them. As the ... CAVSS teacher notes in relation to building trades students, '... they will start seeing why they need to be able to do quotes ... so it is success breeding success'.

The elements of the CAVSS model could be used to build other embedded programs in contexts other than vocational training. Connecting literacy and numeracy tuition to a pre-existing motivation for learning is a successful means to reach people. The model demands a partnership between teachers with different specialisations and the collaborative model it presents to students appears to engender collaborative learning patterns: team work, communication skills, problem solving and initiative are all evident in groups where students have the benefit of team-teaching.

CAVSS provides a way forward as long as conditions for its effective delivery are in place. It addresses some of the barriers to an effective integration of foundations skills with vocational education and training. These barriers include:

1. Limited expertise or understanding of how to achieve results on the part of both VET trainers and the LLN experts
2. Shortage of best practice models to inform practitioners and trainers and to generate change
3. Unwillingness to change from old ways of delivery
4. Lack of confidence about how best to make embedded LLN explicit
5. Funding models that generate disincentives to team teaching approaches
6. No clear national strategy to guide funding and generate incentives.

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<sup>5</sup> Data drawn from the AVETMISS collection in Western Australia (2008) indicates a growing trend in take up of CAVSS and the course is associated with a 3% improvement in module completion in the industry qualifications with which it is delivered as well as a reduction in withdrawal from 12.8 to 8.4%.

The discussion above concerns the education and training sector. Serious attention also needs to be paid to the potential of other opportunities where foundation skills capacity building can be integrated with activities such as in relation to health, welfare, families and entertainment. (See Wickert and McGuirk 2005 for example for an exploration of such possibilities.)

#### **4. Research questions**

I was asked by ACAL to assist with some suggestions towards a research agenda. This proved difficult partly because the findings of much of the research that already exists has had little impact. A useful exercise might be to trawl through this output and update those studies that can address ongoing concerns. One example would be various studies aiming to identify barriers to participation for different demographic groups.

It may not be worth revisiting some topics even though the questions remain. Here I am thinking of the never ending quest for a reliable database of existing provision. It might be more useful to design a sustainable data management system than undertake yet another audit.

Still needed are more: a) longitudinal tracking studies that really pin down what works in differing situations, b) serious evaluations of differing approaches and programs, c) detailed case studies of new initiatives and efforts with particular groups, d) what kinds of technology enabled learning have the most impact and e) evaluations of new approaches to teacher education.

#### **5. Finally – a campaign for what?**

There is no question that there will need to be a campaign to mobilise the interest and support of all the stakeholders that would need to be engaged to make a real difference to foundation skills capacity building in Australia. However, very careful consideration needs to be given to the intended target groups. It would be irresponsible to run a campaign for potential 'clients' at this stage as the necessary range of learning opportunities are yet to be put in place. There needs to be a cascading campaign targeted to different groups at different times and linked to those elements of the Strategy that are being implemented at that time. For example, it may be industry and welfare leaders initially, then perhaps employers etc etc. Demand will follow effective supply. In other words, there is 'no quick fix' and a coordinated, adequately funded strategy needs to be in place to encourage the necessary broad participation and avoid us finding ourselves in this same situation ten years hence.

And let's not forget the impact of the various television series that have been made in the past.

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## APPENDED

1. Extract from National Adult Literacy Agency, Ireland (2011) *A Literature Review of International Adult Literacy Policies*, NALA. Dublin

### Key themes and messages

1. Countries which have not actively strived to maintain momentum in the development of adult literacy policy have experienced policy and programme stagnation. Australia, for example, was viewed in the 1990s as a world leader in the development of adult literacy policy and provision, but since has suffered from a lack of coherent, long-term policy vision and strategy. In Canada, an impressive attention to producing adult literacy research has not been matched by policy efforts to produce sustainable, high-quality adult literacy programmes. Canada is therefore characterised by isolated, often short-term initiatives, leading to inefficiency, waste, and a lack of progress in tackling poor adult literacy.

2. In contrast, Sweden and other Nordic countries have been successful at creating a culture of adult learning which encourages high levels of participation by removing barriers to learning.

3. Cross-country evidence suggests that while short workplace literacy courses, like short courses provided in other settings, do lead to improved self-confidence and social engagement for learners, such courses do not tend to be long enough to yield quantifiable literacy gains for most participants. Research in the US suggests that the most successful courses in terms of producing such gains are those which involve more than 100 hours of coursework.

4. There is limited evidence either for or against the capacity of adult literacy initiatives to produce meaningful short-term employment or earnings gains for learners – more long-term research is required. However, there is clear evidence that such initiatives do lead to improved employability skills, improved health, increased social capital and greater civic engagement.

5. Some nations have primarily emphasised the potential for adult literacy provision to improve human capital, with particular emphasis on the potential economic gains associated with skills improvements. In contrast, other countries have placed equal emphasis on the social, health and citizenship benefits associated with provision.

6. In England, researchers have found striking evidence for the value of embedding adult literacy provision within Vocational Education and Training.

7. In the US, the state of Massachusetts has been particularly successful at improving adult literacy provision. Researchers have argued that five primary lessons can be learned from Massachusetts' success:

- a. Reform requires long-term leadership and advocacy
- b. Policymakers must focus on programme quality before quantity
- c. Programme improvement depends on staff development
- d. An expanded range of education providers should be utilised, as long as they are all working to a common set of standards

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e. Change takes time. Policies and programmes need time to have an impact, and to refine and improve themselves through internal and external evaluation.

8. Research has found that good family literacy programmes improve parents' ability to support their children's cognitive and non-cognitive development, leading to long-term educational benefits. Such initiatives support the development of the human, social and cultural capital parents need to better support their children, while also providing parents with motivation to engage in learning.

## 2. Extract from LSIS (Learning and Skills Improvement Service) Board meeting papers Dec 9 2010

### The LSIS Portfolio

2. The range of activities offered by LSIS has expanded over the past year to provide a comprehensive service to the sector. The main opportunities now provided are • creating a forum for the discussion of important strategic issues;

- leading on a range of quality improvement initiatives;
- producing regular policy analyses and brief guides;
- undertaking and supporting research;
- developing resources through the Excellence Gateway;
- providing up-to-date programmes and services for the sector;
- delivering regional and national conferences and seminars in key areas
- delivering coaching, mentoring and consultancy

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### LSIS's key priorities remain

- supporting providers performing below standards;
- building providers' capacity to (self) improve;
- providing sector-led and delivered solutions and strategies;
- developing new thinking and innovation in the sector
- recognising and celebrating greatness; and
- sharing effective practice

<http://www.lsis.org.uk/AboutLSIS/BoardAndCouncil/LSISBoardPapers/Board%20Papers/BP0449-091210.pdf>