

Associate Professor Leesa Wheelahan
LH Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Management
University of Melbourne
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Submission to Quality of Teaching in VET project

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Options paper for the Quality of Teaching in VET project . We are impressed with and feel optimistic by the amount of thought and analysis that has gone into the creation of the options outlined in the paper.

Your paper touches upon the area of what has come to be referred to as Foundation Skills, an area that has a significant overlap with our own area of work - adult literacy and numeracy. We believe that literacy and numeracy is a critical aspect of VET pedagogy, and should be part of any deliberation about improving the quality of teaching in VET.

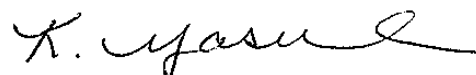
Discussions about a new national Foundation Skills strategy have commenced in a number of different quarters. As researchers in the area of adult literacy and numeracy, based at the University of Technology, Sydney we have developed a working paper on what we believe should be considered in developing the new national strategy in literacy and numeracy or 'foundation skills'. At this stage we are not aware of the timeline or process for the formal consultation over this new Strategy, but feel that the Foundation Skills Strategy and the VET workforce strategy need to be in concert in some way.

We hope our working paper might provide some useful information or insight for your study on the quality of teaching in VET, from the perspective of adult literacy and numeracy/ foundation skills. The views expressed in the document are our own; we do not claim they are the views of our Faculty, Centre or the University of Technology, Sydney. We contributed this same working paper to the National VET Equity Advisory Council

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Stephen Black
Senior Researcher
Centre for Research in Learning & Change
University of Technology, Sydney
PO Box 123, Broadway 2007, NSW
02 9514 4590
stephen.black@uts.edu.au



Dr. Keiko Yasukawa
Lecturer
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences
University of Technology, Sydney
PO Box 123, Broadway 2007, NSW
02 9514 3478
keiko.yasukawa@uts.edu.au

Time for national renewal: Australian adult literacy and numeracy as 'foundation skills'

Stephen Black and Keiko Yasukawa, University of Technology, Sydney

Introduction

Those working in the field of adult literacy and numeracy are currently anticipating changes in the near future as the federal government has flagged the development of a National Foundation Skills Strategy (Australian Government 2010). 'Foundation skills' is a term that has recently been suggested as a way of simplifying discussions about literacy and numeracy (Perkins 2009:8), and it has gained traction in various Australian national policy environments (e.g. Gillard 2009, COAG Reform Council 2009, Australian Government 2010). Foundation skills appears to encapsulate adult language, literacy and numeracy, and more broadly, it may also include so-called employability skills such as communication and teamwork (Roberts and Wignall 2010:1). In this paper, our main focus is on the adult literacy and numeracy dimensions of foundation skills.

While there are no specific details available at this stage, the general focus of a new National Foundation Skills Strategy seems clearly evident. A strong and influential call for a new national strategy came from *Skills Australia* (2010), an organization with a mandate to develop the nation's industry skills (see <http://www.skillsaustralia.gov.au/about-us.shtml>). Similar 'human capital' arguments supporting the development of adult literacy and numeracy skills have been presented recently by the Australian Industry Group (2010) and the COAG Reform Council (2009). Already, the federal government in its recent 2010 budget has allocated significantly increased funding for workplace and jobseeker literacy and numeracy programs which are designed primarily to contribute to economic skills development (Australian Government 2010). A publication designed to inform a future literacy and numeracy strategy also suggests that 'work-based and work-focused programs should feature strongly in future strategies' (Perkins 2009:31).

The purpose of this paper is not to undermine the primacy of the human capital underpinnings of a new National Foundation Skills Strategy. In the current highly competitive, globalised economy, it is to be expected that a new national strategy will build on the perceived productivity and international competitiveness advantages of skills development that were also promoted in the previous national policy some twenty years ago (the ALLP - *Australian Language and Literacy Policy*, see Department of Employment, Education and Training 1991).

Our purpose instead, is to draw attention to some other complementary dimensions of the adult literacy and numeracy field which we consider should be incorporated in a new strategy, and we will present these under the following headings: Integrating literacy and numeracy in the delivery of VET courses, social capital, cross-sectoral partnerships, and professional learning and partnerships with universities.

Integrating literacy and numeracy in the delivery of VET courses

In addition to literacy and numeracy programs conducted in workplaces (i.e. WELL – Workplace English Language and Literacy) and those that target the unemployed (i.e. the LLNP – Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program), a further program area in need of federal government funding is one which involves the integration of literacy and numeracy in the delivery of the full range of VET courses. These programs have been a traditional focus of adult literacy and numeracy provision in public VET systems (e.g. Johnston 2002:25, Wickert et al 2007:251), often referred to as ‘support’ programs (as in *Tutorial Support* and *Learner Support*), and they have been funded primarily from state/territory budgets.

This type of program is based on the theoretical concept of the ‘integration’ of literacy and numeracy with vocational education and training, which involves concurrently developing literacy and numeracy and vocational skills and competences ‘... as interrelated elements of the one process’ (Courtenay and Mawer 1995: 2). In other words, literacy and numeracy are not taught as separate or discrete skills, but are contextualised or ‘situated’ within the process of learning vocational skills. In its practical application in VET, it often involves team teaching between literacy and numeracy teachers and vocational teachers, which has long been promoted as good practice in TAFE NSW (e.g. Glossop 1990, Randazzo 1989), and is obligatory in the Certificate in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) developed in Western Australia (Bates 2008). In most states and territories there is a mixture of team teaching and withdrawing individuals or small groups of students in order to provide the additional literacy and numeracy support for them to complete their vocational studies.

Integrating literacy and numeracy in the delivery of VET courses has for many years worked effectively to improve workplace skills in the federal government’s WELL program (e.g. Woods et al 2006). Drawing mainly on interview data from a current research project (Yasukawa and Black forthcoming), it would seem that in many college-based VET programs the primary focus of these integrated programs has been to provide support to enable students to complete what is often called the ‘theory’ component of their vocational studies. This form of provision would appear to be basic to improving course completion rates and assisting the progress of students

in VET, but nationally the extent of this provision is ad hoc, with funding levels and delivery methods varying considerably across the different states and territories. Apart from acknowledgement that this literacy and numeracy support is needed and ought to be provided, there is little agreed or indeed, debates about, the theoretical underpinnings of the pedagogies that are used. Further, with the exception of Western Australia, there is no designated funding for these programs, and therefore they have to compete with many other priorities in declining (in real terms) state VET budgets. Interestingly, the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC 2010:13) has recently suggested in its blueprint for the future in VET that funding options should take account of 'foundation skills being embedded into VET delivery at all levels of the Australian Qualifications Framework'. Integrated literacy and numeracy delivery has been recognised overseas as an essential aspect of VET provision (e.g. Casey et al 2006, Hegerty and Feeley 2009) and is worthy of a national approach and funding. In fact, the case for such provision is stronger than ever given the recommendations arising from the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (2008) along with the COAG targets (COAG 2009) to increase the proportion of the Australian workforce holding university qualifications. Foundation skills underpin courses that extend from VET to higher education level and the world of work beyond.

There are however, some cautionary issues to contend with if integrated literacy and numeracy delivery is to join the workplace and jobseeker program initiatives currently funded by the federal government. Firstly, effective programs involving partnerships between adult literacy and numeracy teachers and those from vocational areas require additional investment costs in order to account for the shared planning, delivery and evaluation for continuous improvement (Casey et al 2006: 9, NVEAC 2010:20). These extra program costs are unlikely to be compatible with the contestable funding model used by the federal government for many of its programs and thus the sustainability of the programs may be threatened. The National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC 2010:13) has recently drawn attention to the negative impact in VET of the contestable funding model.

A second cautionary issue involves the casualisation of teachers. The investment in time and resources to make partnerships work between literacy and numeracy teachers and vocational teachers may be problematic when one or both categories of teachers are paid on a sessional/hourly basis. Necessarily, many part time/sessional teachers, by the very nature of their contract work, will have neither the time nor the inclination to invest their (often unpaid) time and energies into a partnership program where they can have their work terminated at very short notice (see Perkins 2009:34). The National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC

2010:17) reports the high level of casualisation in VET is viewed as a critical issue for the VET workforce, and employment status would appear to have an influence on the effectiveness of programs involving integrated delivery.

A final cautionary issue involves the assessment of VET learners. Many vocational students, especially apprentices, are young, having left school fairly recently. They need literacy and numeracy support, but they may well resist being identified as lacking or deficient in skills through the processes of receiving literacy and numeracy support. In the Western Australian CAVSS, the guidelines make clear that no students are assessed for their literacy and numeracy skills because the course is aimed at assisting the whole class (Bates 2008). In many NSW TAFE 'learner support' programs, minimal 'screening' is undertaken to identify students who may encounter literacy and numeracy problems in their course, and often students are unaware this screening has any implications for their learning. The lesson to be learnt from these state programs is that if vocational students are to be assessed for their literacy and numeracy needs, then it needs to be undertaken in a minimal and largely informal way.

Social capital

A decade ago on the 10th anniversary of the ALLP, a group of researchers made the case for a new national policy on adult literacy and numeracy, arguing that it should be based on 'a triple bottom line taking account of economics, social capital and community development' (Castleton, Sanguinetti and Falk 2001:4). 'Economics' can account for current workplace and jobseeker programs, and to a large degree the integrated literacy and numeracy support outlined above. It is now time to focus on the second bottom line, social capital.

Twenty years ago social capital did not feature in government thinking in relation to adult literacy and numeracy policy, but much has happened in the intervening years to change this. Adopting the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004) definition for social capital to mean 'networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or amongst groups', the concept is now seen to have considerable value in adult education and adult literacy and numeracy in particular. Social capital can be seen as a resource, along with other forms of capital, including human capital, that contributes to the socio-economic wellbeing of individuals and communities (e.g. Putnam 2000). Further, there is recognition at national and international levels that social capital, often in conjunction with human capital, can have an important part to play in the prosperity and well-being of nations (e.g. Productivity Commission 2003, OECD 2001).

To date, studies relating adult literacy and numeracy with social capital have been relatively limited, but nevertheless significant in their implications. Falk (2001) was instrumental in demonstrating that social capital was implicated with adult literacy and numeracy provision. He argued, for example, that in jobseeker literacy programs the focus on developing employment skills may be insufficient to result in employment outcomes unless participants have the requisite social capital, including access to the right networks. Research by Balatti, Black and Falk (2006) demonstrated that there are significant social capital outcomes from accredited adult literacy and numeracy courses, and further, that the development of social capital, often in combination with human capital, has an impact on the socio-economic well being of individuals in areas such as health, education and learning, employment, and their social environment. Balatti, Black and Falk (2009) in a later study provided guidelines for a social capital approach to pedagogy that was likely to enhance the production of social capital outcomes. Such an approach included viewing students as members of networks and developing bonding, bridging and linking ties through drawing on existing networks and building new networks for participants.

Most of this research focuses on the role of social capital at an individual level, but there is evidence in the broader adult learning research to demonstrate the positive role of social capital in the well-being of communities (e.g. Falk, Golding and Balatti 2000, Falk and Kilpatrick 2000, Kilpatrick, Field and Falk 2003).

We consider that the role of social capital in adult literacy and numeracy learning is sufficiently significant and established to warrant its recognition alongside human capital as a rationale for adult literacy and numeracy provision. Adult literacy and numeracy programs are not just about developing the technical skills of reading and writing. These skills in themselves count for little unless they can be put to good use (for example, in employment), and it requires social processes (i.e. social capital) to enable this to happen. Elements of social capital such as how people identify themselves in relation to others, their levels of trust with others, how they work with others in various networks, and the number and type of networks people can live and work within, are significant and should be explicitly acknowledged and written into a new strategy. The literature sometimes presents human and social capital as a dichotomy, involving a choice to be made between one or the other, a form of vocational/social divide (see Perkins 2009:31). We maintain, however, the two forms of capital are interrelated and that socio-economic well-being requires both forms of capital (see Balatti, Black and Falk 2006).

Cross-sectoral partnerships

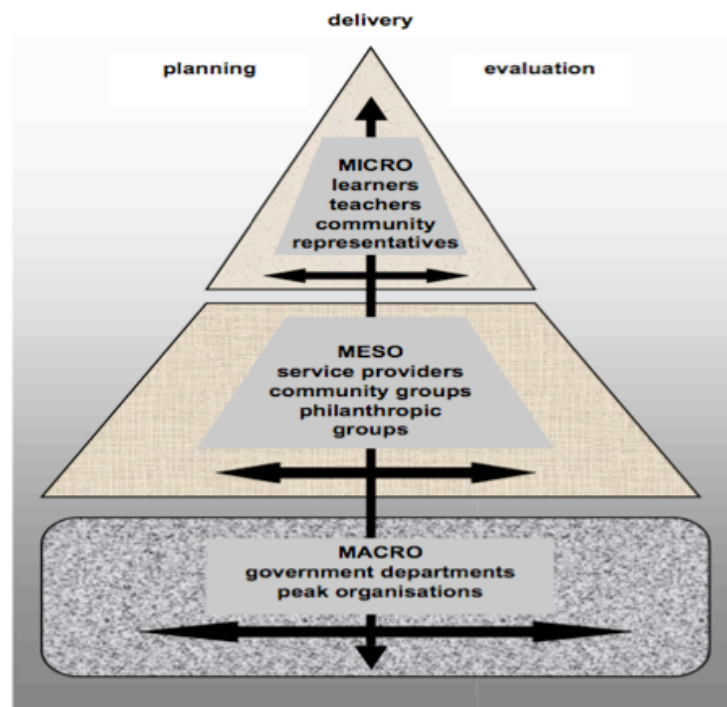
Drawing on both the concept of social capital and also integrated or embedded literacy and numeracy, Wickert and McGuirk (2005) argue the need for the field of adult literacy and numeracy to extend beyond formal learning sites to become engaged as partners with a whole range of social policy areas. In broad terms, this constitutes the third bottom line for a national policy, community development (Castleton, Sanguinetti and Falk 2001:4). Literacy and numeracy learning have a significant role to play in areas such as health, youth work, welfare, and crime prevention. To date, integrated literacy and numeracy has featured primarily in workplace and VET support programs, and has been slow to feature in these other social policy areas. There have been a number of local cross-sectoral initiatives reported in the areas of health (e.g. Black, Innes and Chopra 2008), family literacy (e.g. Leske, Harris and Francis 2005), youth studies (e.g. Widin, Yasukawa and Chodkiewicz 2008) and aspects of community development (e.g. Black, Lucchinelli and Flynn 2006, Shore 2009), but these initiatives have been undertaken primarily with short term federal government innovative funding. These local partnerships are often difficult to sustain due to the absence of underpinning partnerships at the broader policy and funding levels.

Balatti, Black and Falk (2009:33) provide a visual representation (Figure 1) of vertical and horizontal partnerships at the macro, meso and micro organisational levels. Importantly, we argue that what is needed are partnerships at the macro, foundation level involving, for example, government departments and peak professional organisations, to provide the policy and funding framework to support and sustain the community level partnerships (meso level) and the micro level of interaction where the learning happens. Without these macro partnerships, the other partnership levels tend to be short term only.

To a large degree it is the absence of government support and funding that currently restricts the potential for productive partnerships in a number of key social policy sectors. In the area of health, for example, overseas in countries such as the United States (e.g. Anderson and Rudd 2006, California Health Literacy Initiative 2008, Hohn 2002) and Canada (e.g. Rootman and Gordon-El-Bihbety 2008) there are considerable 'health literacy' programs involving active partnerships between adult literacy and numeracy and health professionals. In Australia it is difficult to identify any significant health literacy partnerships involving health and adult literacy and numeracy professionals, and the concept of health literacy is almost exclusively the domain of health professionals. Take the case of 'mental health literacy', where there is macro organisational level support (Council of Australian Governments 2006), which in turn has resulted in extensive mental health literacy programs (presented as 'Mental Health First Aid')

being conducted in local communities throughout Australia, but exclusively by a health organisation.

Figure 1



There is considerable scope for health literacy partnerships involving both health and adult literacy and numeracy professionals. Low levels of health literacy are generally a strong indication of lower levels of health (Hartley and Horne 2006:7). As the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) 'health literacy' survey indicates, those with the lowest health literacy levels are often older, poorer, with lower formal education levels, with their first language not being English, and unemployed. These demographic characteristics fit the profile of many students in

adult literacy and numeracy courses and thus their needs are well understood and addressed by literacy and numeracy teachers. The indications are that health and adult literacy and numeracy professional work well together in partnership, especially in providing education for the prevention of chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes (Black, Innes and Chopra 2008). Interestingly, health promotion professionals and adult literacy and numeracy teachers share common discourses of individual and community 'empowerment' (see for example, Lavarack 2007 and the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* [World Health Organisation 1986] and a recent UNESCO (2007) report *Literacy Initiative for Empowerment LIFE*).

Another area of potential partnerships are those involving employers, unions and literacy and numeracy providers. Some of these partnerships have been covered in WELL projects in terms of improved work skills, but not in terms of engaging workers in broader learning projects. In the UK for example, there are successful union learning representatives programs involving partnerships (see Clough 2010, Alexandrou et al 2005) which are underpinned by literacy and numeracy support. These programs are funded largely through the UK government's Union Learning Fund, an example of the macro policy and funding foundation which is required for the sustainability of partnerships. New Zealand (Holland 2007) and other countries (e.g. Ireland, Denmark, Finland) have adopted union learning programs along similar lines.

At the national policy informing level there are strong calls by the National VET Equity Advisory Council for cross government, community and employer partnerships (NVEAC 2010:20) and for sustainable investments (p.11) in light especially of stakeholder frustrations about short term and inconsistent funding. Australian adult literacy and numeracy researchers have strongly promoted the idea of partnerships in a number of sectors (e.g. Figgis 2004, Hartley and Horne 2006, Perkins 2009:33, Wickert and McGuirk 2005) and cross sector representative likewise have welcomed these partnerships (e.g. Keleher and Hagger 2007 in relation to health). But without federal government policy and sustainable funding partnerships will remain short term and ad hoc.

Professional learning and partnerships with universities

This final section considers the professional learning of adult literacy and numeracy teachers. It is a dimension of the adult literacy and numeracy field that has reached a parlous state and is badly in need of national renewal. This has been picked up in recent key publications (Skills Australia 2010, Roberts and Wignall 2010), and is beginning to be addressed through federal government initiatives including a scholarship scheme to encourage and support initial teacher trainees in adult literacy and numeracy (Australian Government 2010). Alongside these

initiatives are various projects examining aspects of workforce development, quality and qualification standards for the VET workforce more generally (Productivity Commission 2010, Wheelahan 2010, NVEAC 2010). Our main concern in this paper is the continuing professional learning of current adult literacy and numeracy teachers.

For the past decade or more the mechanisms that have supported the professional learning of adult literacy and numeracy teachers in Australia have been crumbling. In the post-ALLP era (especially 1994-6) there were many national professional development opportunities supported by the federal government via the National Staff Development Committee for Vocational Education and Training, but from this time onwards, at both federal and state levels, professional learning mechanisms have declined. Practitioner-based journals such as *Good Practice in Adult Literacy and Basic Education* and *Literacy Now* have come and gone. Organisations which provided resources and professional development, such as the Adult Literacy Information Office (ALIO) in Sydney (see Johnston, Kelly and Johnston 2001), and the Adult Education Resource Information Service (ARIS) in Melbourne (see Hazell 2002), ceased operating and were not replaced. Through their regular publications (*Broadsheet* and *ARIS Bulletin*) both these organisations provided important national networks for professional learning. Other important information links through organisations such as *Language Australia* and the *National Centre for Language Teaching Research* (NCELTR) have also now ceased. The peak professional organisation for the field, the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL), contributes to professional learning with its annual conference, but the Council's journal, the only national journal of adult literacy and numeracy with a practitioner focus, *Literacy Link*, has now ceased publication through lack of funds (one key journal remains – *Fine Print*, published by the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council [VALBEC] based in Melbourne).

Research in adult literacy and numeracy, which helps to inform the practitioner field, developed strongly for a short while with federal government support in the early 2000s with the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC). With the demise of ALNARC, continuing federal government research support was provided for a number of years via the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), but this designated adult literacy research stream ceased from around 2007. Annual federal government Innovative Adult Literacy funds also ceased at about the same time. Beyond the federal government's WELL and LLNP initiatives, there are now no funding sources for research specifically in adult literacy and numeracy.

Many adult literacy and numeracy teachers have every reason to claim they are isolated, with few professional learning opportunities, and an almost complete absence of information about

recent developments in the field (though we acknowledge the NCVET has made attempts to convey research findings to practitioners through their Adult Literacy Resource website, see <http://www.adultliteracyresource.edu.au/>). The National VET Equity Advisory Council notes stakeholder concerns generally about access to professional development in VET (NVEAC 2010:17). In public VET Institutes, much of the current professional development initiatives seem to be focused not on pedagogy, but on compliance with accredited standards (see Black, this volume, and Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2009 for a discussions relating to teachers in other sectors). It should be no surprise in the current climate to hear the following comment from an experienced adult literacy and numeracy teacher in a focus group:

We don't speak about pedagogy much, but I don't think anybody does either. I haven't seen new ideas around at all, reading theory, writing theory, what's new? Maybe it's there, but we're not seeing it. No professional development, no one speaks about pedagogy anymore (Black this volume).

And yet, while practitioners such as this teacher are asking 'what's new?', researchers are making claims about new 'paradigms' for adult literacy and numeracy studies (Balatti, Black and Falk 2009, Ivanic 2009:103). Research-practice links thus appear to be absent. What is needed is a re-focus on pedagogy and professional learning that goes beyond compliance with accredited standards. Adult literacy and numeracy teachers need a focal point, a national 'centre' where they can engage with ideas and theories, draw on recent developments in the field, and make a contribution themselves. A practitioner journal (which could be electronic) and a specific website should be available to all practitioners. The National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) for adult literacy in the UK with its consortium of partners, provides a working model for such recommendations, though necessarily in Australia we are talking of more modest proportions. Another area of need is practitioner research in adult literacy and numeracy, almost completely undeveloped in Australia, unlike in the UK (see Barton et al 2006, Davies, Hamilton and James 2007, Hamilton and Appleton 2009). This form of research would contribute not only to professional learning but to developing the capacity of the research community. The field of adult literacy and numeracy pedagogy appears to have lost much of its vibrancy and enthusiasm. It needs re-energising.

The call for re-energising however, begs the question of who will lead and sustain it. The number of universities that focus on adult literacy and numeracy teacher development and research has never been large in Australia, but in recent years, the number has diminished further. While courses in TESOL feature in many universities, courses focused specifically on adult literacy and numeracy teaching are now almost invisible. The decline in these teaching

programs has also meant a lack of renewal in the academic workforce who specialise in adult literacy and numeracy. Concomitant to developing practitioner research capacity should be a program of academic renewal in adult literacy and numeracy so that the field has research partners in universities who can mentor practitioner researchers. Working together they can synthesise the research in the field and inject new theoretical constructs that can foster innovation and reflection. To facilitate this, teaching qualifications obtained in the university sector in adult literacy and numeracy that provide a pathway to a research degree program must be recognised as legitimate qualifications alongside VET qualifications in the field.

Conclusions

The field of adult literacy and numeracy in Australia stands at the cross roads. A new National Foundation Skills Strategy is an opportunity for renewal at a time of apparent decline. There are opportunities to develop further the important human capital rationale for adult literacy and numeracy provision, but also, as we have indicated, a social capital rationale which in turn complements skills development and enhances the socio-economic well-being of individuals and communities. There are considerable opportunities for extending the influence and value of adult literacy and numeracy skills into other sectors with partnerships, but without national policy and subsequent sustainable funding, they will remain largely unfulfilled opportunities. And finally, those who work in the adult literacy and numeracy field, and for those who are new entrants, new opportunities and support mechanisms are urgently required for their professional learning.

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