

Research to identify and qualify  
professional practice in foundation skills

## Final Report

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## 1. Background

### The National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults

The National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults (the Strategy)<sup>1</sup> provides a blueprint for action to develop the foundation skills of the Australian adult population. The Strategy recognises that current and future economic, social and technical demands have heightened the need for solid foundation skills for adults within, and outside of, the labour market. However, survey data on the adult population indicates that a significant proportion of Australian adults do not have the literacy and numeracy skills required for effective participation in a modern economy.

The Strategy sets an aspirational target.

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*By 2022, at least two thirds of working age Australians will have the literacy and numeracy skills needed to take full advantage of opportunities afforded by the new economy.<sup>2</sup>*

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The challenge of this target is evidenced by data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) conducted in Australia in 2011. PIAAC results indicate that 56 per cent of the adult population currently have literacy skills at the level identified in the Strategy target, and only 45 per cent have numeracy skills at the target level.

To raise the foundation skills of the Australian adult population, the Strategy identifies four priority areas for action:

1. **Raising awareness and commitment to action** – building an understanding of foundation skills in the workplace and the community and removing the stigma associated with low adult foundation skills.
2. **Adult learners have high quality learning opportunities and outcomes** – providing a variety of foundation skills development opportunities that can be tailored to individual needs.
3. **Strengthening foundation skills in the workplace** – establishing strong and lasting partnerships between government, industry, employers and unions and providing foundation skills training that is responsive to employer and industry needs.
4. **Building the capacity of the education and training workforces to deliver foundation skills** – building the skills of specialist language, literacy and numeracy practitioners, developing the workforce to enable the effective teaching of employability skills and supporting vocational trainers to better integrate foundation skills with vocational training.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults, COAG Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTESE) Nov 2011

<sup>2</sup> At the release of the Strategy in 2012 this equated to literacy and numeracy skills at level 3 or above (on the five point scale from the OECD Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey).

<sup>3</sup> National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults, COAG Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTESE) Nov 2011 (p3)

The first three of these priority areas acknowledge the need, and raise demand, for services to address foundation skills within the adult population. The fourth priority area recognises that national foundation skills improvement will be dependent on the delivery capacity of the education and training workforce. The ultimate success of the Strategy will therefore hinge on the development and maintenance of practitioner skills across the ten year period.

## The National Foundation Skills Strategy Project

The National Foundation Skills Strategy (NFSS) Project 2014-15 is a joint initiative by Australian governments to support priority action areas from the Strategy. The project builds on the work of the 2013-14 Foundation Skills Workforce Development Project. In 2014-15 the NFSS Project comprises three main elements:

1. Research to identify and qualify professional practice in foundation skills
2. Foundation Skills Community of Practice
3. Foundation Skills Workplace Champions

The NFSS Project has also supported the development of a review framework for use by Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to review progress against the aims and priorities of the Strategy.

## Research to identify and qualify professional practice in foundation skills

This element within the NFSS Project addresses the fourth priority area from the Strategy, specifically relating to this agreed action:

*From 2012, Australian governments will work collaboratively to strengthen and diversify the identity of the foundation skills practitioner field, and support professional expertise in foundation skills delivery, including by exploring options for developing professional standards for practitioners.<sup>4</sup>*

This work in 2014-15 has built on scoping activities conducted for the Foundation Skills Workforce Development Project in 2013. The 'Scoping a Foundation Skills Professional Standards Framework' project found strong resistance to the notion of a 'foundation skills field' despite widespread recognition of foundation skills delivery programs that corresponded with the range of skills encompassed by the Strategy definition of foundation skills.

The 2013 scoping phase resulted in a call for further research to clarify the skills and expertise that practitioners who deliver foundation skills bring to their work in community, classroom and workplace settings. Further discussion about the best ways to support practitioners' professional development was also recommended, including consideration of the viability and shape of a professional standards framework.

The 2014-15 work consisted of:

- Desk-research on qualifications
- National NCVET survey
- Stories from the field narrative research

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<sup>4</sup> National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults, COAG Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTESE) Nov 2011, p24

- Focus groups

The aim of these four elements was to gather new data, and equally importantly, to encourage widespread engagement with the issue of practitioner pathways and professional development. Through information dissemination and the involvement of key professional associations, professional dialogue was initiated with training providers, community organisations and hundreds of individuals who self-identified as having a role in foundation skills provision across Australia.

In total more than 800 people participated in the research:

- 683 respondents participated in the NCVET survey
- 30 people provided 'stories from the field' in full, and a further 35 people provided snippets of their story
- 51 people attended the national focus groups
- 13 people used the online platform to share their views.

Independent evaluation by Phillips KPA reported that participants involved in the research and consultation activities felt that the work would contribute lasting benefit to the research base underpinning the foundation skills workforce. Evaluation respondents also acknowledged that 'this is a complex area' and that ongoing work will be needed to establish a framework that supports professional capacity building.

**Appendix A** contains an explanation of the methodology for each project activity.

## 2. The workforce delivering foundation skills

### Defining foundation skills – broadening responsibility

Within the Strategy foundation skills are defined as:

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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.

Foundation skills development includes both skills acquisition and the critical application of these skills in multiple environments for multiple purposes. Foundation skills are fundamental to participation in the workplace, the community and in adult education and training.<sup>5</sup>

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Definitions of language, literacy and numeracy skills are in constant flux, but since 2010 the term Foundation Skills has been used in Australian education and training policy documents to describe the generic skills, including language, literacy and numeracy and employability skills, that underpin the acquisition of more technical or vocational skills.

The inclusion of *skills acquisition* and the *critical application of skills* in the Strategy definition of foundation skills positions these skills on a continuum from quite basic to very highly developed. As a result, the definition expands responsibility for building and/or addressing foundation skills beyond a singular set of practitioners. When the need to both *acquire* and *critically apply* foundation skills is considered across the entire adult population it is clear that the responsibility will extend beyond traditional language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) practitioners to vocational trainers and other educators within adult education contexts, trainers and supervisors in the workplace and frontline workers in community service organisations who interact with adults outside formal learning environments.

The capacity and preparedness of this broad workforce for their role in addressing foundation skills is a critical issue. Questions around practitioner capability are frequently raised in education and training contexts. Adequate delivery time and resources, and opportunities for professional development, are needed to support the breadth of foundation skills provision envisaged by the Strategy.

### Shifting policy – raising awareness

Since the launch of the Strategy in 2012, a number of policy initiatives have been introduced that have raised accountability across the education and training sector for the delivery of foundation skills. Foundation skills have increasingly become part of mainstream discourse with the introduction

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<sup>5</sup> National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults, COAG Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTESE) Nov 2011 (p2)

of the Foundation Skills Training Package, the inclusion of a foundation skills section in the Standards for Training Packages and changes to the *Certificate IV in Training and Assessment* to address foundation skills.

*I think that anyone involved in the field of LLN needs to be aware of the Foundations Skills package and be able to situate their own practices and programs within it, or at least understand how it might connect or fit with what they are doing.*

Online response hub

With this increased profile comes the need for stakeholders to be able to differentiate between overarching terms and the products and policies that surround them. Practitioners, especially those new to foundation skills, need clear information about their responsibility and accountability in relation to foundation skills provision – including information that extends beyond a simplistic compliance-based model.

Project consultation indicates that there is a growing acceptance of the term ‘foundation skills’ by those operating within and outside of formal education and training environments.

*I spend quite a lot of time talking to people about the definition of foundation skills. I didn't like this definition to start with but I've come to like it more because it includes the term 'such as' (in the list of employability skills) that allows for room to move and flexibility to adjust it to fit.*

Melbourne focus group

Since the project's initial scoping phase, there has been a notable increase in practitioner understanding of how foundation skills apply within community and VET delivery contexts. There is also recognition of the way that the definition can be shaped to accommodate the needs of different learner groups.

*Social and emotional learning – looking at foundation skills development is a journey, sometimes people aren't ready to look at those other foundation skills until they have that self-confidence.*

WA focus group

For those delivering integrated foundation skills support within vocational delivery in the VET sector, the term ‘foundation skills’ was seen as an accepted common language to describe the way these skills are embedded within applied vocational learning across Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) qualifications.

*In addition to the LLN requirements I also focussed on the 'Employability Skills' needs of each qualification and where practicable developed a working relationship with industry so that my students could showcase their newly acquired competencies, throughout their course, in a fully operational commercial environment. This led to numerous employment opportunities for my students who are now working with these employers.*

Melbourne Story from the Field, vocational trainer with qualifications in English as an additional language/dialect

For those working in stand-alone language and literacy programs and community education contexts, addressing foundation skills includes exploring study interest areas and rounding out life skills including, but not confined to, accessing employment.

In general the practitioners who participated in project activities were far more confident in talking about the language and literacy aspects of foundation skills, than about employability skills. Practitioners acknowledged that knowledge and skill around numeracy and digital literacy, are a current 'weakness' within foundation skills provision that needs to be further developed. But many practitioners did not identify or articulate an awareness of how employability skills are addressed in foundation skills delivery practice.

*Foundation Skills is a broader term than what I am teaching now, but this term reminds me that I need to incorporate more critical thinking, problem solving and employability skills in my delivery. I think I can do more to broaden my delivery that is relevant for the students.*

Adelaide Story from the Field

Project discussions around the definition of foundation skills led many practitioners to the conclusion that no single individual can be an expert in all aspects of foundation skills provision. The range of provision – across learning contexts, learner groups, skill levels, acquisition and critical application, and skill areas including the breadth of language, literacy and numeracy and employability skills – provides multiple fields of expertise and many niche areas of specialisation.

The complexity and diversity of foundation skills provision makes it necessary for practitioners to reflect critically on their practice and continue to build their repertoire of skills and knowledge. In particular, the project identified scope for deepening knowledge and skills in the provision of digital literacy, numeracy and employability skills.

The Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) is widely accepted and understood within the LLN and broader VET fields as a mechanism for describing skill levels in reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy and learning. However, most practitioners do not have the same degree of confidence in articulating concepts around employability or work-readiness skills. As a relatively new development, the Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework has had little impact to date on practice around employability skills, but there is considerable potential for it to underpin the development of education and training products and practices that will strengthen foundation skills provision in future.

### Roles and responsibilities in foundation skills provision

An increasing focus on foundation skills in VET has led to a widely-held belief that 'responsibility for foundation skills belongs to everyone'. However, project research and consultation has shown that, in terms of professional identity, responsibility for foundation skills belongs more to some practitioners than others.

The convenience sampling methodology of the NCVET survey means that respondents self-identified as having a role in foundation skills provision. As a result, survey data may not provide an accurate representation of the practitioner population, however it does provide valuable information on who is currently delivering foundation skills.

The survey responses indicate a predominantly female workforce aged between 45 and 64 years of age. Two thirds of respondents came from the metropolitan area and more than half were engaged

full time. The table below shows the range of delivery environments in which survey respondents practice.<sup>6</sup>

Delivery environment	Per cent of respondents
TAFE	41.4
Private education/training organisation	17.5
Community-based education/training organisation	17.2
University	5.2
Community-based not-for-profit	13.9
Job services provider	2.8
Library	6.8
Enterprise training provider	1.8
Other (including corrections and schools)	5.5

The majority of respondents to the NCVER survey indicated that their current role included the direct delivery of foundation skills, in English language, literacy, numeracy and/or employability skills. Practitioners reported delivering combinations of these skills and that most practitioners have strengths in particular areas of delivery, e.g. lower level of language and literacy, or just numeracy, or vocationally specific areas of literacy or numeracy.

The ability to use knowledge and skills in assessment and delivery, and to be able to customise programs to meet specific learner needs, also emerged as a consistent theme through the narrative and focus group research.

*After a needs analysis of the client group, the practitioner would tailor a program to suit. In this area of delivery, it is important to be flexible and multi skilled.*

Online respondent

Combinations of skills and knowledge about adult learning principles and techniques, specific knowledge about effective assessment and learning strategies, the capacity to trial and evaluate new approaches and to reflect on the efficacy of one's own teaching practice were seen as critical to high-level practitioner capability.

The concept of specialisations and specialist skills and knowledge figured prominently in input from practitioners. Specialisations in aspects of foundation skills provision were often described as being built across time through experience with specific delivery contexts and learner groups. Specialisations were thus a combination of qualifications and experience, but practitioners were wary of letting their specialisations define them.

*Expertise (can be developed) with different groups EAL/D, youth, deaf, but it is not a specialist practitioner but a specialised one.*

Brisbane focus group

<sup>6</sup> For full details refer Attachment 2 - *Who is delivering foundation skills? A survey of the LLN and education and training workforces*, NCVER, 2015.

*I have a specialty in certain ...areas, but I can also do a lot of things beyond the specialty area. Specialist is a value-laden term that is interpreted differently by different people.*

Adelaide focus group

NCVER respondents described subsets of non-delivery roles within their job and a significant number reported that their current role does not involve the direct delivery of foundation skills yet they consider that their role supports the development of these skills.

The identified support roles fall into four broad themes:

Support role	Example
Resource development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing training and assessment resources and tools</li> <li>• Gathering/collating appropriate resources for use by trainers</li> <li>• Looking at new methodologies with application or relevance to course design</li> </ul>
Pathways and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing information to trainers and/or students about educational pathways or appropriate learner support groups</li> <li>• Discussing study and work goals with learners</li> <li>• Supporting learners or library users in using computers</li> <li>• Supporting vocational trainers in the classroom through helping students with literacy or numeracy skill development needs</li> </ul>
Capacity building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training volunteers</li> <li>• Organising professional development for staff involved in the direct delivery of foundation skills to learners</li> <li>• Delivering LLN-related units or qualifications in the Training and Education Training Package</li> <li>• Mentoring trainers who deliver units in the Foundation Skills Training Package</li> <li>• Working with vocational trainers to incorporate LLN tasks into VET assessment tasks and learning activities</li> <li>• Linking vocational trainers and assessors to available and suitable foundation skills support tools and information</li> <li>• Working with teachers to develop activities appropriate for developing and using employability skills</li> </ul>
Administrative-related roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administering and coordinating courses including course and session planning, timetabling, pre-enrolment information, interviewing and LLN assessment of students</li> <li>• Compliance and audit management</li> <li>• Validation and moderation</li> <li>• Recruitment and ongoing coordination of trainers, librarians, teachers, volunteers</li> <li>• Marketing of program and sourcing funding</li> <li>• Problem solving information technology issues</li> <li>• Strategic planning</li> <li>• Advocacy work</li> </ul>

These descriptions from the direct delivery of foundation skills through to support roles, demonstrate the diversity and complexity of the foundation skills field and the range of skills required to ensure the effective foundation skills provision to meet the needs of a varied and multifaceted learner group.

## Qualifications of the existing field

The 2013 scoping research found that the skills required of a practitioner involved in the direct delivery of foundation skills are largely shaped three factors.

Factor	Example
Characteristics of the learner group	English as an additional language or dialect Native English speakers People with disabilities Indigenous Australians Youth Job seekers
Context of delivery	Informal community setting, libraries Stand-alone classroom-based Workplace Integrated vocational delivery Integrated community-based delivery
Requirements of the program	Adult Migrant Education Program Skills for Education and Employment Learner support models in VET Community-based programs

*...the context under which foundation skills are applied varies from client to client; class to class; and this is what is not always understood.*

Tas Community based provider

*There are a great number of players in the field, there is a great deal of variety depending on the setting in which programs are delivered. For example at the library, literacy and numeracy programs are delivered by volunteers who have done their basic Volunteer Tutor Training course at (Provider Y). These volunteers are supervised by literacy co-ordinators with various professional qualifications.*

Tasmanian Online respondent

In many instances, human resource statements, business rules or funding guidelines set key credentials and experience required of a practitioner. Although it was not possible within this project to analyse the NCVET survey data by jurisdiction, the qualitative data gathered indicates that there is considerable variation in practitioner requirements according to State and Territory policy and funding settings and the availability of practitioners in thin markets. Whilst some flexibility is required to allow for the wide variation in delivery contexts, the current lack of guidance around the capabilities required for some types of delivery, e.g. content from the Foundation Skills Training Package, has contributed to confusion among RTOs and questions about the quality of provision. Many practitioners are hopeful that a framework could provide greater clarity around the capabilities required to deliver foundation skills in different contexts.

In general, respondents to the NCVER survey were highly credentialed with many having more than one qualification at AQF 8 – 10 levels. The survey found that:

- Graduate Diploma qualifications were prolific, including the Vocational/Graduate Diploma in Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Practice/Leadership, and the Graduate Diploma/Certificate in TESOL.
- Graduate Diploma qualifications were also held in Adult Literacy Teaching, Literacy and Numeracy, Adult Education, Education, Reading and Language Education, Education (Secondary), Applied Linguistics, Social Science (Rehabilitation and Disability), Information and Communication Technology, Literacy Studies, Library & Information and Multi-cultural Studies.
- A number of Masters and Doctoral degrees were noted in areas such as special education, deaf education and applied linguistics.
- Bachelor degrees reported tended to be in education, including adult and vocational education, secondary education (English/mathematics), and TESOL.
- Other qualifications that respondents held included a wide range of vocational and higher educational qualifications, examples include:
  - Certificate in Traffic Safety Education
  - Trade Certificate in Mechanical Optics
  - Certificate III in Cleaning Operations; Certificate III in Transport and Logistics
  - Diploma of Salon Management; Diploma of Career Guidance
  - Bachelor of Science; Bachelor of Social Work; Bachelor of Commerce
  - Master of International Management.
- Most respondents indicated they also held a Certificate IV Training and Assessment with many indicating they also had completed additional LLN units at either AQF level 4 or 5.

Some survey respondents indicated that they had completed lower level courses and skill sets in foundation skills, including the Address Foundation Skills in Vocational Practice Skill Set, financial literacy education skill sets and courses relating to volunteering and tutoring. It was not possible within the scope of this research to determine whether respondents held these credentials in order to then deliver them, or if these were their primary credentials within the foundation skills field. Either way, the importance of lower-level foundation skills awareness and capability building credentials cannot be overlooked as part of a broader capacity-building matrix.

*Qualifications are so highly valued now, when I started you could volunteer to help teach/tutor literacy without any qualifications. You can't do that now.*

Adelaide focus group

A common theme in focus groups and the Stories from the Field narratives was the idiosyncratic combination of qualifications that individuals hold as influenced by their career pathway, job role and requirements of the market.

*It shouldn't be one level of qualification because the field is so diverse. But the notion of expertise kicks in at around AQF 7 or 8 where you have to pull together theoretical knowledge and make it practical. Concepts involved in specialisations take time to develop.*

WA focus group

However, it should be noted that many of the credentials listed by survey respondents are now discontinued, or are overseas credentials and do not have formal equivalence to credentials

available within Australian education and training institutes today. Specialised courses in adult numeracy are discontinued and many higher education qualifications are in jeopardy due to declining numbers of enrolments and increases in course fees.

Desk research<sup>7</sup> into the current availability of higher education and VET credentials reveals a variety of courses from Certificate III through to Graduate Diploma.

Despite the array of qualifications held by survey respondents, practitioners consulted through the project were unanimous in the view that expertise was built through ongoing engagement with professional learning and practice. Survey respondents were asked to think about their skills and knowledge gained through credentials, professional development and work experience, and to indicate the relative importance of each in fulfilling their current role. For the majority of respondents experience was considered most important.

*There shouldn't be one qualification that says you are qualified to teach all of these things – it might be L, L or N, not necessarily all of them. There is a set of skills that people need to learn so that they can move forward (e.g. teaching of numeracy) and so I won't just let anyone who says they can do it teach numeracy. I have a lot of primary teachers and the ones who have a leaning toward numeracy are very good numeracy teachers, probably better than the maths teachers. So the credential doesn't necessarily cover the skills that are being looked for.*

Melbourne focus group

### Continuous professional development

In recognition that qualifications are only a part of practitioner identity and that skill development occurs over time, the project invited practitioners to reflect on how they renewed their ideas and practices and the value of professional development in building their own capability. Focus group sessions focused on the potential value of a professional standards mechanism that could be used to identify and map professional development needs and gain. There was, in general, support for a systematic means of mapping the outcomes of professional development to required skills or experience to provide tangible recognition of industry currency.

Practitioners expressed a strong interest in access to ongoing professional development, with an emphasis on the value of discipline specific skills rather than system-compliance issues.

Highly valued PD topics	Examples
Provision of adult education to specific learner groups	Learners with learning difficulties, mental health issues and/or behavioural problems Disengaged youth Specific cultural groups Learners with very limited English language skills Mixed level groups
Digital literacy skills	Incorporating contemporary digital tools (such as iPads and mobile phones) in the teaching process Best practice in online delivery including converting materials for engaging online delivery Online software and developing online learning tools

<sup>7</sup> See Attachment 1 for full details of available courses.

Somewhat surprising was the lack of awareness or engagement around topics such as 'employability' or 'work-readiness' or interest in improving personal numeracy skills. This indicates that considerable effort may be required to engage existing practitioners in increasing and diversifying their skills. New workforce entrants may need to be engaged and developed to fill these gaps.

Attendees within focus groups raised the issue of the need for the 'self-reflective practitioner' and 'the adaptive teacher' and discussed mechanisms for self-assessment of skills and knowledge and experience. For this to be possible however, the practitioner has to have learning self-awareness and the capacity to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses and skill gaps.

*It only happens if people are interested and curious, you can't assume that meaningful PD is happening just because you have practitioners in a room, they need to have the right attitude to ongoing development.*

*Often frameworks like this start out with little questionnaires that lead practitioners to reflect on their own skills and professional development needs and how they fit into the workforce. They put the question back onto the practitioner themselves.*

Melbourne focus group

Focus group discussions explored the potential for using a framework to link professional development with credentials. While there was widespread support for the idea of more formally recognising professional development undertaken, concerns were expressed about the potential for adding unnecessary layers of bureaucracy to an already compliance-heavy environment.

*Maybe that everyone in the field needs to demonstrate a common understanding of Foundation Skills Frameworks and ACSF assessment, so that even though there is diversity we are aiming for a common language.*

TAS online hub response

*Use existing associations to ensure PD is beyond attendance. That it has to be about doing something. Mapped back to ASQA Standards, TAE quals or Grad Dip quals or other underpinning knowledge to allow for portfolio approach to evidence gathering.*

Brisbane focus group

*Sometimes a requirement of CPD might step up the professionalism of the field – it has to be recognized at a national level rather than a state level. There has to be some form of outcome (what did you take away from it?) maybe there should be some requirement at the end to state what you got out of the session. It's not just turning up, you have to get something demonstrable out of it.*

Adelaide focus group

Those consulted in focus groups expressed a view that access to a wide range of professional development to suit the needs of diverse practitioners is more important than a rigid professional standards framework. Given the focus in the Strategy on the importance of both strengthening and diversifying the foundation skills field, professional development opportunities need to serve a mix

of practitioners – from those with emerging awareness of their needs, through to those adapting their practice to meet specific needs of learners or those involved in program design and leadership.

*I particularly appreciate PD that I can go away and with a bit of tweaking be road testing in my classroom straight away. There is no one-way to improve Foundation Skills and trying as many and varied methods of delivery to keep my students motivated intrigues me.*

Story from the Field, Adelaide

## Maintaining a valuable resource

*In general, Australians are living longer and healthier lives than in years past, and are more active in their older years. Over the next 40 years Australia will need to embrace the potential of this talented older population group, particularly by valuing their increased and ongoing engagement in the workplace and community.<sup>8</sup>*

Practitioners working to deliver foundation skills include, but are not be confined to, those who deliver language, literacy and numeracy skills in stand- alone Commonwealth funded programs (such as the Adult Migrant Education Programme or Skills for Education and Employment) and those who identify as teachers of Adult and Basic Education (ABE).

Although many current practitioners may have begun careers in stand-alone delivery contexts and have spent many years in these roles, the changing nature of foundation skills provision indicates that there is a need for flexibility and the capacity to shift jobs in response to policy and funding changes.

Over a third of respondents to the NCVET survey indicated that they have been involved in one or more of the foundation skills fields for more than 15 years and yet 35% of respondents were relatively new to their current role having been in their job for two years or less. These figures suggest significant movement within the foundation skills job market, even when there is also notable stability.

Most respondents indicated they are staying in the field, at least in the short-term: around 50 - 60% of respondents indicated it is 'extremely likely' they will remain in the foundation skills fields over the next five years.

The composition of the field suggests that there is currently a window of opportunity to benefit from the knowledge and experience of established practitioners by engaging them in guiding and supporting new entrants. Unless dedicated efforts are made to capture and share their knowledge, through mentoring and professional development initiatives, considerable expertise could be lost from the field – especially given the limited availability of higher level teaching qualifications that formerly prepared workforce entrants.

The expertise of existing practitioners can be used to upskill the education and training workforce through:

- the delivery of units and skillsets to the broader VET and community services community that raise trainer and frontline worker capacity to recognise and address foundation skills within their practice

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<sup>8</sup> Australian Government, The Treasury, 2015 Intergenerational Report, p 96

- the delivery of higher level qualifications specifically designed to credential specialised practitioners
- mentoring and supervising new entrants in practicum and peer-review processes.

*Right now I'm teaching TAELLN401 and TAELLN501. Although core skills are relevant the particular focus is on Core Skills for Work. Teaching high-function rapport building and leadership are workplace communication skills that VET trainers desperately need. I specialise in teaching the TAELLN411 unit - this brings the foundation skills into stark relief.*  
Story from the Field, Melbourne

*The mentoring stuff is so important and we need to set it up wherever we can because it can be very lonely.*

Melbourne focus group

### Encouraging new entrants

*I'm looking to increase my experience in LLN and Foundation Skills teaching and I'm wondering if anyone knows of organisations I could approach? I'm an experienced VET Teacher at the tail end of a Grad Dip in LLN but I need to meet the practicum requirements and my current work in CGEA doesn't have a qualified supervisor. Does anyone know of any organisations that accommodate internships or voluntary teaching (under supervision)?*

Online professional network enquiry

Whilst the NCVET research consolidated knowledge about the existing field, we know less about how to attract new people. Stories from the Field and focus group sessions identified new entrants who were able to identify 'blockers' such as difficulties accessing practicum and mentors. Desk research into qualifications found that the availability of targeted courses at higher AQF levels was severely limited.

The capacity to work collaboratively with, and pass information onto others was discussed as a high order skill that was critical to maintaining the quality of new entrants and those building their skills in a particular delivery context. However it appears there are few formal mechanisms available that assist a new entrant in identifying support opportunities and a lack of incentive and structures to encourage more experienced practitioners to engage in mentoring or peer review activity.

*I have been mentoring someone new into the field from a vocational area to help them adopt the vocabulary of the LLN/FS field. People in the field have a shared language – we value diversity but we want everyone to be able to speak the same language. It can lead to feeling excluded from the main group, we need to be better at accepting that people talk about these things in different ways.*

Adelaide focus group

Professional associations, such as the Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL), Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) and Australian Workplace Practitioners Network (AWPN), were identified in project consultations as a possible resource for supporting new entrants. A number of respondents suggested that these associations may be well-placed to take a more formal role in developing and monitoring professional development for foundation skills provision, as well as leading future research, policy formation and product development.

*We need to provide guidance to professional associations about the ways to 'grow new practitioners'.*

Brisbane focus group

*A person not yet credentialed is a really important level because that's where the coaching and mentoring comes in and where you are going to get new people entering the field.*

Queensland focus group

One such model showcased by ACAL in 2015, used the *Address Foundation Skills in Vocational Training Skill Set* with new entrants to incrementally build skills whilst under the direct supervision of a more highly experienced practitioner. A participant's Story from the Field illustrates the value of this approach in building the new entrant's awareness of their developing skills.

*I started off by volunteering in the X Learning Centre in (remote community), assisting local people with their foundation skills. Before that I have been a concreter, landscaper and a musician. My current job satisfaction comes from helping someone improve their reading and writing skills. The way that they interact with the world gets easier for them as their skills develop. I've developed my skills and knowledge by having support from my LLN mentor and doing some LLN units at AQF IV. It was necessary for me to have a mentor to get help with strategies to meet some of the LLN challenges of my learners. Also it helped to push me along.*

NT, Story from the Field

### Approaches to team capability building

*The 'specialists' are almost doing a disservice for themselves by saying that we have these magic little rooms where people come in to be fixed. Instead we should be inviting people in to see what we do. We need to shift from gate-keeping, to demystifying it so that others can start to understand what we do and how they can be involved with it.*

Melbourne focus group

There was agreement in focus groups that a single practitioner could only lay claim to being able to deliver only some aspects of foundation skills and that collaboration between practitioners with differing specialisations is often required to meet learner' needs. Valuable discussion took place in focus groups regarding the nature of this collaboration between vocational and foundation skills practitioners and the mutual understanding that evolves where,

*the partners view their partnership/relationship as working with 'the more knowledgeable other'.*

Adelaide focus group

It was reported that when both sets of practitioners recognise the value of each other's contribution the models work well, whereas those that reinforce notions of one practitioner 'with superior knowledge helping another out' were fraught with tensions and ultimately less successful.

*Mentoring is a two way process, as is working with vocational practitioners in a professional partnership. They can be set up to serve the interests of both parties. I think that learning from each other needs to be respected because it is not always respected.*

Melbourne focus group

In the case of foundation skills support within vocational delivery, a number of approaches to building team capability were identified through the project. The Applied Learning Model at TAFESA, the Collaborative Foundation Skills Support model used by the Canberra Institute of Technology and the Western Australian Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) are three such models that involve systemic support and co-ordination. These models use the strengths of both foundation skills and vocational practitioners to meet learner cohort needs and to enhance the professional skill sets of both groups of practitioners.

*Every day I go into the VET classroom as the foundation skills practitioner working collaboratively with the vocational specialist and I see immense value in it for the students.*

Perth focus group

Whilst there were concerns raised about contestable funding arrangements working against models of collaboration, both within and across organisations, there were also examples where mutually agreeable arrangements had been made for delivery partnerships. In this instance the partnership is as a result of one provider recognising the importance of course completions and the need for innovative business models to provide the solution.

*We are providing support for learners to access a vocational program through a collaborative model with another RTO. Our main communication is with the other RTO's marketing person who works out the type of learners to target and the type of support they will need to get through.*

Adelaide focus group

## 3. A professional standards structure

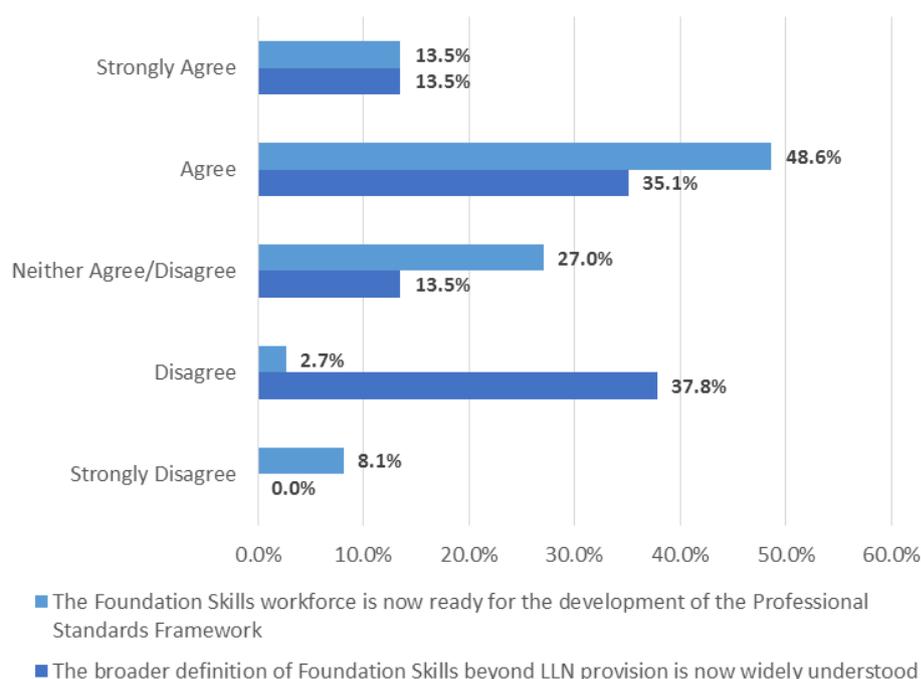
### The need for a common language

Over the last two years the project has witnessed increased practitioner understanding and acceptance of foundation skills as ‘a complex field of practice’ that includes a diversity of practitioners delivering a wide variety of skills across a range of contexts. There is widespread recognition that a range of practitioner capabilities are required and that there is no single definition of a foundation skills practitioner.

One of the goals of this project was to explore options for developing professional standards for practitioners who are delivering foundation skills with a view that any resultant standards would seek to strengthen and diversify the identity of the foundation skills practitioner field and support professional expertise in foundation skills delivery. Formal professional standards in many other industries include a number of structures, procedures or systems, such as: qualification frameworks, codes of ethics, membership arrangements, continuing professional development requirements, registration conditions and quality assurance processes that sit across the top of a set of descriptors of associate and professional roles within a particular industry.

The outcomes of this research indicate that whilst there are mechanisms that could be developed that would support practitioners working in foundation skills delivery and design, the introduction of a separate system for regulation and compliance requiring high-level infrastructure and management is not supported, or necessary. There is, however, an opportunity to develop a standards framework that would provide a consistent, shared language for talking about the range of roles and responsibilities in the foundation skills field, and document the types of capabilities demonstrated by those working within the field.

Focus group views on the research into professional practice



Evaluation feedback from focus group participants was analysed by Phillips KPA and indicates that more than 60 per cent of participants felt that 'the foundation skills workforce is now ready for the development of a Professional Standards Framework'. However, participant feedback also indicates that only 49 per cent felt that 'the broader definition of Foundation Skills beyond LLN provision is now widely understood'.

In focus groups, support for a framework was entirely predicated on its purpose and potential use – with a call for a clear rationale for the framework's use.

*Overarching the framework should be a very clear idea of what the purpose of the framework is. What are we doing it for? Is it for a pathway? Is it to assist employers to employ people? Where is it going? The focus should be on pathways and inclusivity, not something that locks people in or out.*

WA focus group

*So if the framework is built on a really clear understanding of the skills and knowledge of the field and the range of places where it is delivered/used and allows people to identify where they fit and where the pathways are then it's an empowering model too (a pathway model, bringing new people into the field in thin markets).*

Melbourne focus group

There was a feeling that national literacy programs within the education sector (especially schools) are more broadly understood than a broader notion of foundation skills among the Australian population but that foundation skills had the potential to be more widely known if promoted.

*It's the single hook we can hang our work on but people need to know about it.*

Sydney focus group member

### From awareness to accountability – a framework for everyone

Consultations for the project have highlighted a tension between the need to establish professional benchmarks that will preserve a highly qualified practitioner field and the need to expand and diversify the field enabling foundation skills provision to occur in a wider range of contexts. A framework of capabilities for foundation skills provision would seek to describe the skills and knowledge required for all of the diverse roles performed in the multi-faceted foundation skills field.

A multidimensional framework that allows practitioners to plot capabilities gained through a combination of credentials, professional development and work experience could be used to:

- describe what foundation skills practitioners need to know, understand and be able to do
- provide direction and professional development structure to support the induction and development of the foundation skills workforce
- sustain and stimulate foundation skills practitioners in professional practice
- provide a common language that can be used to communicate about the foundation skills workforce and advance the status and standing of the profession.

Such a framework has the potential to consistently describe professional capability in a way that makes it possible to position individual capability, job requirements and qualification outcomes within a developmental pathway.

The framework will need to capture the variation in responsibility for foundation skills provision, from awareness at one end of the continuum to primary accountability and specialised knowledge and skill at the other.

<b>Aware</b> – captures ‘associate’ level capabilities where foundation skills are not the main focus of the job role	<b>Developing</b> – represents the capabilities of an ‘apprentice’ or practitioner-in-training	<b>Practitioner</b> – describes capabilities for a competent foundation skills practitioner	<b>Specialised</b> – encompasses expert knowledge that may be used to mentor or guide others
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This continuum of capability needs to be represented across personal and community contexts, informal and formal education and training contexts and employment and workplace contexts if it is to capture the full range of practitioners and associated workers who identify as having some role in foundation skills capacity building.



Capabilities included in the framework will need to capture knowledge and skill required for the range of job roles in the foundation skills field, including those that do not involve direct delivery. Not all capabilities are relevant to all practitioners, and not all capabilities are developed to the same extent. Thus practitioners are likely to have a ‘spiky profile’ across the framework with specialised capabilities in some areas and developing capability or awareness in others.

Information gathered from practitioners through the project has been used to identify the range of capabilities that should be described in the framework. They can be divided into four areas of capability.

- Knowledge of foundation skills
- Capacity to provide adult education
- Experience in foundation skills teaching practice
- Skills in professional capacity building

Project research indicates that the framework will need to identify specialisations in English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D), literacy, numeracy, digital literacy and work readiness. Specialisations may also need to be identified for specific delivery contexts or for delivery to specific learner cohorts.

**Appendix B** contains a draft framework structure. This has been based on data gathered through the project and reflects the roles, capabilities and professional development needs of those who have taken part in research activities. However, the capabilities included within it serve only to illustrate an initial concept and are proposed as a starting point for discussion only.

## 4. Recommendations

A single project cannot seek to identify and provide solutions for a raft of systemic issues related to foundation skills delivery across the country. Both phases of the project have been overshadowed by significant national and State and Territory government changes that have resulted in rolling shifts across the country in foundation skills policy settings, funding models and provision.

The project provided multiple opportunities for practitioner engagement and provided a rare opportunity for grassroots feedback on issues that were impacting on the professional lives and practices of practitioners at various points in time.

Broad issues relating to the VET system such as the new arrangements for Training Package development and the role of regulators, whilst not directly related to foundation skills, were causes of concern among research participants. Additional issues that were raised by participants as impacting on their professional practice included:

- the pending status of the Certificate IV within the TAE Training Package
- obtaining scope to deliver the Foundation Skills Training Package
- the purpose of the Foundation Skills section of a unit of competency
- curiosity about the Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework
- the potential impact of the Foundation Skills Assessment Tool.

There is no doubt that there is a need for consistent and sustained information channels about the range of systems and field based issues at play and the need for overarching commitment to provide practitioners with clear, dependable information and solutions if possible.

Unless there is commitment (both nationally and within jurisdictions) for funding models to ensure delivery of foundation skills across personal and community, education and training and workplace and employment contexts then foundation skills activity risks remaining disparate and will not realise the impact that is required if the Strategy's aspirational targets are to be met.

If there is commitment federally for the Strategy, its targets and the effort that is required to implement its four priority actions, then the further development of the draft framework developed as a result of this project would seem warranted and could be a useful tool for policy makers, registered training organisations and practitioners. However, if further development of the framework is to go ahead then a number of key activities are required.

### Further development of framework content

The list of capabilities currently included in the draft framework has been drawn only from input gathered through the project to date. Further consideration is required to ensure that the framework will provide complete coverage of capabilities required for foundation skills provision. Additional work is required to ensure that all relevant areas of specialisation are captured.

### Validation with key stakeholders and professional associations

Ongoing engagement with key professional groups and stakeholders will be critical to validate the framework content to ensure that it uses appropriate language to accurately describe the range of skills required 'across the field'.

## Mapping of qualifications, skill sets and PD to framework

Once the common language of the framework is established, exemplars can be developed to illustrate how the framework could be used to map skill and knowledge expectations for:

- units and qualifications at a range of AQF levels
- professional development offerings
- job descriptions
- individual self-assessment.

Exemplars should make clear that 'spiky profiles' of capability are expected. The provision of foundation skills covers a broad range of contexts, learners and skill areas; no single practitioner, job role or qualification will have a uniform level of expertise in all areas of capability.

Mechanisms for describing the outcomes of professional development will need to be explored to maximise the ease of mapping continuous professional development to the framework. Existing mechanisms such as the Credley Badge system could be explored with a view to assigning a badge to professional development offerings that link directly to the framework.

A simple self-assessment tool that individuals can use to plot current capabilities and identify developmental goals could be developed as a support tool for building practitioner awareness and responsibility for tracking the progress of their professional learning.

## Information dissemination strategy

A consistent set of clear messages about the Framework's purpose and uses and stage of development will be critical to broad stakeholder engagement and support. A central information portal that has core information about the Framework, draft tools and exemplars will be required. The portal could also link to authoritative sources of information on related Foundation Skills policy, resources and communities of practice and act as a cohesive link between what is at present a disparate set of information sources.

Any ongoing development of the Framework will require continued engagement with the stakeholders who have been involved to date. Efforts will also need to be made to identify and engage with an even broader range of interested parties.

## Appendix A: Project methodology

### 1. Qualifications desk research

#### Rationale

A 2006 NCVET report<sup>9</sup> found that opportunities for formal professional development for credentialed and non-credentialed practitioners were rare, and that the Adult Literacy Teaching and Adult Numeracy Teaching courses that were developed by the National Staff Development Committee in 1995 had not been replaced.

The scoping research in 2013 highlighted the fact that there is no single accepted qualification to credential practitioners delivering foundation skills and that quite distinct differences exist between the qualifications required for specialisation in different parts of the field, e.g. TESOL/EAL/D vs literacy or numeracy specialists.

Higher education options have been decreasing over recent years with some existing courses suspended or being phased out in coming years. The qualification stocktake sought to identify exactly which credentials are currently available for the workforce delivering foundation skills.

#### Project activity

Through this project information was sourced from VET and Higher Education sectors on the range of current available qualifications that might credential a graduate as:

- an adult LLN practitioner (language, literacy and numeracy as major subjects)
- a VET practitioner with specialisation in language, literacy and numeracy
- a community educator with specialisation in language, literacy and numeracy.

There are no generic courses in delivering employability skills.

Liaison with Deans of Education (through Universities Australia) was identified as the best way to identify current higher education credentials in adult LLN.

- A template was developed to gather information on course content and availability.
- Email distributed on behalf of project by Erica Smith, Convener, Australian Council of Deans of Education Vocational Education Group (ACDEVEG) to identify courses available in 2015. Deadline for course information was Friday 21st November 2014.

**Attachment 1** contains a table of information received on current, available higher education qualifications.

To identify available VET qualifications, a search of all content in the national database for accredited VET content – training.gov.au. The search examined all VET qualifications, accredited courses, units and skill sets for the terms language, literacy, numeracy and foundation. Details on the structure and module content of accredited courses is not included in training.gov.au. To gather information on the content of identified accredited courses, an email was sent to the relevant accredited course owners in November 2014 requesting further details.

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<sup>9</sup> Current and future professional development needs of the language, literacy and numeracy workforce, Mackay et al.

**Attachment 1** contains the information gathered on VET qualifications, skill sets, units and accredited courses.

## 2. NCVER survey of practitioners

### Rationale

Desk research<sup>10</sup> examined recent reports and project findings to identify current and future challenges for workforce development of LLN practitioners and the education and training workforce involved in the delivery of foundation skills. Although a number of NCVER research studies had examined the professional development needs of the LLN field, they concentrated on stand-alone LLN course provision and were from 2006-7<sup>11</sup>. More recent research on collaborative models of provision<sup>12</sup> concentrates on only one vocational area. During the initial phase of the project, a literature review identified a Canadian survey<sup>13</sup> as the most contemporary international study of similar skills.

New research was required to gather broader viewpoints than were possible to gather in the scoping phase and to capture the fast changing nature of foundation skills provision that sees it positioned both within stand-alone or Commonwealth funded programs, part of integrated VET delivery and within community and social services activity.

### Project activity

In August 2014, NCVER was contracted to undertake an online survey and research based on the Canadian study. The activity involved:

- NCVER developed questionnaire in August and piloted with members of the NFSS Project Community of Practice in early September.
- Liaison with Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) to ensure compatibility of survey content with planned ACAL survey (ACAL endorsed NCVER to carry out a single survey).
- Feedback from the pilot helped refine the final questionnaire *Who is delivering Foundation Skills?*
- The online survey was launched on 1 October and concluded on 19 December 2014.
- An extensive communication strategy was used to widely promote the survey including through NCVER's Insight e-newsletter and portal, Twitter feeds, LinkedIn groups, promotion on the NFSS Project web page, professional association e-newsletters, as well as targeted emails.
- 679 useable responses were received with the following percentage distributions across the country: Vic- 28.1%, NSW- 22.4%, QLD – 16.1%, SA – 12.3%, WA – 9.2%, TAS 5.2%, NT 4.4%, ACT – 2.2%
- The draft Data Analysis report was made available to Steering Group members for feedback before preparation of a final report.
- Final report received from NCVER May 2015.
- Findings from the NCVER survey and Stories from the Field activity presented at Australian Workplace Practitioners Network conference (March 2015), the Western Australia Adult Literacy Council conference (April 2015) and ACER's National Adult language, Literacy and Numeracy

<sup>10</sup> Material considered included Australian Workforce Productivity Agency reports, Australian Industry Group, Innovation and Business Skill Council project findings and OECD Adult Life Skills Survey data

<sup>11</sup> Berghella, Molenaar and Wyse 2006; Mackay, Burgoyne, Warwick and Cippolone 2006; Dymock 2007

<sup>12</sup> Leske, 2010

<sup>13</sup> Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (CLLN 2013)

Assessment conference (May 2015). Two additional conference presentations have been planned – NCVER No Frills in July and the ACAL conference in Adelaide in September.

The timeframe and resources available within the project have shaped the extent of analysis that was possible with the gathered data. The large dataset has significant potential for further analysis and the analysis to date should be seen as introductory only.

**Attachment 2** contains the NCVER report: *Who is delivering foundation skills? A survey of the LLN and education and training workforces.*

### 3. Stories from the Field

#### Rationale

Stories from the Field emerged from scoping study feedback that called for ethnographic research that represented practitioners' voices. The activity was conceived as a professional development exercise that allowed foundation skills practitioners to talk with one another about their career trajectory, their current practices, how they refresh their practice and their future plans. The secondary purpose of the activity was to generate narrative content that could be used to illustrate or expand upon the quantitative data generated through the NCVER survey.

Practitioners taking part were invited to submit their stories to the project via email. This was voluntary and the purpose was not to amass stories, but to collect a small number of examples.

#### Project activity

Thirty stories were submitted via email from practitioners. The process did not require practitioners to indicate their job role or location, but analysis of stories indicates a mix of urban and rural, classroom-based and workplace-based practice and a mix of highly experienced and some novice practitioners.

- A flyer was designed as a professional development activity for practitioners to share their professional journey, credential, experience and professional development approaches that contribute to the professional identity of practitioners in the foundation skills field.
- The activity was piloted at the South Australian Council of Adult Literacy (SACAL) Conference in August 2014.
- The flyer was released and activity promoted through the NFSS Project e-newsletter in August 2014.
- Promotional materials for Stories from the Field were developed and placed on the NFSS website.
- Liaison with Australian Council of Adult Literacy (ACAL), Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) and Adult Learning Australia (ALA) to secure organisational commitment to promote research activities to their members.
- Promotion of research activities to more than 70 additional stakeholder groups in ACE and VET via email, e.g. VISTA, VET Development Centre
- Participation in ACAL conference presentation on NFSS activity and lunchtime session on Stories from the Field.
- Highlights of the stories from practitioners at ACAL Conference featured in Sept/Oct 2014 NFSS Project e-Newsletter.
- FinePrint (the VALBEC Journal) article published November 2014.
- VELG online e-zine article published February 15.

- Dinner activity at AWPN conference March 15 generated 35 snippet stories based on a limited number of questions.
- Four stories were collected at the Western Australian Adult Literacy Conference in April 15.
- Excerpts from the stories have been used in presentations to illustrate some of the trends appearing in NCVER data (AWPN, WAALC, ACER and NCVER No Frills conferences).

**Attachment 3** contains Stories from the Field promotional flyers (including PD process and trigger questions) and 30 full stories.

## 4. Focus groups and online response hub

### Rationale

The NCVER survey carried out in Phase 2 of the project provided a wealth of information about individual practitioners working to deliver foundation skills within community, VET and workplace contexts. The survey confirmed that the foundation skills field is not homogeneous although there are some key patterns emerging about practitioner's qualifications, perceptions of key skills and knowledge and identification of topics for continued professional development.

The project's aims to identify the viability of a Foundation Skills Professional Standards Framework required focussed discussion around the degree of acceptance by practitioners for such a concept and the broad parameters of such a framework.

### Project activity

A series of targeted focus groups titled Making Connections – Working Together was planned for March/April 2015 to test initial findings from the project research and with a view to identifying elements that may form part of a schema for a Professional Standards Framework.

- NCVER identified more than 250 respondents who volunteered to be contacted to take part in targeted focus group discussion.
- Five focus groups (in NSW, QLD, SA, VIC and WA) of mixed delivery context respondents were held in March/April 2015 – 50 practitioners attended these face-to-face sessions.
- Invitees were sent a focus group paper and invited to attend the sessions with a view to discussing the questions posed.
- An online response hub (including paper and response fields) was set up in Survey Monkey and respondents who could not attend focus groups and all respondents from NT, TAS and ACT were invited to lodge written responses to the focus group paper.
- Thirteen responses were received from the hub however not all questions were answered by all respondents. The NT was under-represented in online hub responses.
- An evaluation form was designed in conjunction with Phillips KPA for the focus group sessions.

**Attachment 4** contains the focus group paper, summary of responses and results of Phillips KPA evaluation.

## Appendix B: Draft professional standards framework schema

### Introduction

The purpose of the Foundation Skills Professional Standards Framework is to provide a consistent, shared language for talking about roles and responsibilities in the foundation skills field, and to document the range of capabilities demonstrated by those working within the field.

The framework can be used in a variety of way, such as:

- as a self-assessment tool for practitioners to identify and describe their current capability
- to identify existing skill gaps and focus areas for professional development
- to consistently describe expected practitioner capabilities for job descriptions or program requirements
- as a mechanism for mapping outcomes from current and historic qualifications for the purposes of comparison with individual or employer requirements
- as the basis for describing and organising professional development options.

A draft professional standards framework schema has been developed. It will be published when information is available about the next phase of the National Foundation Skills Strategy Project.