Ms Anita Mills
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Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
nfss@deewr.gov.au.

Dear Ms Mills,

National Foundation Skills Strategy Consultations

Please find attached a response to the Discussion Questions on the National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults Consultation Paper from the Western Australian Adult Literacy Council (WAALC). WAALC is an affiliate of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) and the members of its Executive Committee are drawn from the WA Department of Training and Workforce Development, the Department of Corrective Services, TAFE colleges, community-based Registered Training Organisations, and advocacy groups.

The organisation has a long and active history and continuing involvement in supporting professionals teaching adult literacy and numeracy in Western Australia. A number of individuals were involved in the development and implementation of the previous national strategy, the *National Collaborative Adult English Language and Literacy Strategy (NCAELLS).*

We are pleased to take this opportunity to contribute these ideas and comments to the thinking behind a new National Strategy for foundation skills. We see this as a national watershed opportunity with the potential to inject new energy and direction into the work we all, in our different ways, are undertaking. We are also mindful of the people who are served by the programs we help to deliver: we would like to see a better deal for these people.

We would like to express one concern about the outcomes of the face-to-face NFSS consultation conducted in Perth on 31 March. A number of different stakeholders were represented at that meeting and the consultation process invited comment (often in a highly summarised form) but did not really encourage informed discussion. In addition, there were many examples of naive comments from participants who were not well-informed about any aspect of the issues under discussion. We would like to be assured that there is a process in place that can distinguish between ideas that reflect an understanding of the complexity and difficulty of the issues and those that are derived from unquestioned assumptions about the nature of the problem.

We wish you well in your present efforts and would be very happy to discuss our submission further with you. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the consultation for this very important initiative.

Yours sincerely,

Stephanie Mitchell
Treasurer, WAALC

1 What are foundation skills?

The current definition includes, and differentiates between, *language* (speakers of other languages learning to speak, read and write the English language), *literacy* (improving competence in coding and decoding, understanding, using and critiquing written (English) language), and *numeracy (*improving competence in coding and decoding, understanding, using and critiquing numerical systems). Each of these three components have both discrete and exclusive characteristics, as well as overlapping and shared characteristics. All of them involve the simultaneous interaction of communication and cognitive functions; all of them entail use of semiotic systems, often in combination; all of them require acquisition and application of abstract knowledge; all of them require knowledge of social and cultural systems and practices. Unlike the acquisition of a first language, all of these competences are the product of explicit instruction: they are taught. Generally they are the product of schooling systems. The fact that almost half the adult population do not have the level of competence deemed essential for successful participation in all aspects of life and work suggests that all of these cognitive and communication skills are difficult to learn and difficult to teach. The Consultation Paper acknowledges that for individuals "improving foundation skills is a challenging, lengthy and involved task" (p5). Recognition of the complexity of the teaching and learning needed to improve *language, literacy* and *numeracy* competencies in individuals must be at the centre of the thinking that goes into devising a National Strategy. There can be no quick fix: at the heart of the problem is a complex pedagogical failure; this suggests that improved pedagogy is central to any solution. The foundation for a successful National Strategy is to build an understanding of the factors that contribute to pedagogical failure and begin to address them – this also present an opportunity for joint work with the schooling and higher education sectors.

Complexity and difficulty are also reflected in the need to differentiate between pedagogies for each of the three components - *language, literacy* and *numeracy* – as well as the societal factors associated with the individuals that may require additional teaching and learning in any or all of these fields. People requiring English language tuition may be literate in their first language, or may not. It is much more difficult to learn to read and write in a second language or dialect. People who are refugees may have experienced varying levels of social dislocation up to and including severe trauma. New migrants and refugees have competing priorities and demands on their time and often, especially for men, prioritise finding employment over learning. Learning a new language is estimated to take up to seven years.

People requiring *literacy* and *numeracy* tuition, having often attended school and finding themselves failed by the services offered, may have a legacy of self-doubt when it comes to formal learning. Poor educational outcomes are associated with low socio-economic status, higher levels of unemployment, poorer health, more reliance on social services, and higher levels of interaction with the justice system. These factors can, singly or in combination, create barriers to engagement in sustained and formal learning. Moreover, there is a clear correlation between poor educational outcomes and social status: linguistic research has produced evidence that differences in *language practice (dialects)* may account for this correlation. The part that social class plays on language development and practice, and the impact of these dialectal differences on school performance and the development of cognitive behaviours and structures should be examined in the effort to develop a new and more effective pedagogy for adults who have only partially learnt the literacy and numeracy skills required to function in a complex, post-industrial society with sophisticated technological information and communication systems.

Employability skills as listed describe the application of a range and combination of communication and cognitive skills to achieve different outcomes in real life situations. The situations in which these skills and abilities might be applied extend far beyond the workplace, so in some ways, it is a misnomer to call these abilities 'employability' skills. These human

attributes and behaviours are equally useful to individuals in many contexts of their lives: for most people, employment is just one context among many.

There are two challenges in adopting the proposed definition of *foundation* skills bringing together the diverse fields of *language, literacy* and *numeracy* together with the expectation that people will learn how to behave in ways that indicate that they:

- have insight into their own and others' intellectual processes and motives,

- possess emotional sensitivity and the capacity to communicate with empathy,

- are able to develop new concepts

- understand risk-taking behaviours and what constitutes reasonable risk

- are able to think analytically and laterally to produce new ideas

- develop the skill and the confidence to take initiatives.

The first challenge is to avoid defining *language, literacy* and *numeracy* solely in terms of skills for employment; all of these capacities, attributes and behaviours are important for many aspects of a person's life and the acquisition and application of them is likely to bring many benefits to individuals, families and communities as well as to employers and the economy.

The second challenge is to strive to produce the capacities, attributes and behaviours listed as employability skills as outcomes from language, literacy and numeracy teaching; the employability skills describe the behavioural outcomes adults might value in learning new cognitive and communication skills - they provide an authentic context and purpose for learning as long as they are not exclusively associated with employment.

2   What should be the focus of the National Strategy?

The National Strategy should be devised as an adult education strategy directed at adult Australians in general.   The *principles* underpinning the strategy can place the development of foundation skills in a continuum of life-long learning and participation in formal learning environments in different sectors. The *principles* can be drawn from goals relating to equity, social cohesion, social inclusion, increasing the nation's health, maximising life chances, creating social capital and contributing to innovation. Such *principles* could form the basis of the key messages for a national campaign aimed at generating interest in the issue in a variety of sectors, groups and individuals. Any campaign that focuses specifically on groups of disadvantaged adult Australians could contribute to the maintenance of the stigma associated with poor educational achievement (and other forms of disadvantage). When people feel stigmatised, it is the behaviour of others that creates the situation.

The practical *initiatives* of the strategy could focus on funding, programs and national projects that might more successfully meet the needs of those individuals and groups who have not been well served in previous educational sectors and who aspire to extend their learning. This includes the 45% of the adult population that are estimated to have poor skills, and could struggle to achieve a vocational entry-level qualification (certificate III). However, the National Strategy also needs to align with other COAG targets such as increasing the proportion of the population that holds a qualification at certificate IV or above. Developing the nations' communication and cognitive skills is best conceptualised as happening on a continuum. There is an imperative to develop intellectual capital to keep pace with both the demands of the modern workplace and the demands of modern living. Intellectual capital does not have a natural 'cut-off' point.

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

This question needs to be turned on its head:
- what is it about the way educational services are constructed and delivered that fails to attract adult learners who may have much to benefit from our teaching?

- how might adult education providers find out more about what their potential clients may want to learn?

- what outcomes would potential learners want for themselves and how would this impact on the program design, program content and program indicators of success?

- how can restrictions and impositions associated with funding formulas and protocols and accountability processes be reconciled with creating flexibly structured programs that are designed to address the different needs and aspirations of different people?

- what do teachers need to know about how to teach technical language, literacy and numeracy skills in application to the reasons adults have for learning them and to develop the cognitive and communication behaviours currently described as employability skills?

- how can adult education providers communicate with their communities to build relationships of trust that contribute to service uptake?

Patterns of demand
There are very different patterns of demand for tuition from different groups. In Western Australia, there is unmet demand for *language (ESL)* tuition with neither the infrastructure nor the funding to cater for the demand. This may be an indication that funding arrangements for the Settlement Program should be reconsidered. People with low *literacy* and *numeracy* skills do not clamour in the same way for access to tuition. There are complex reasons for this associated with the way educational service has been experienced in childhood, the likelihood of past failure, the seeming lack of relevance in the lives of people who do not share the values of the 'educated' class, and the degree of effort that might be needed to acquire cognitive and communication skills (the difficulty of the learning). To translate a societal need into a personal demand, the motivations that are intrinsic to an individual person need to be understood and mobilised. This will not happen if the focus of the thinking about the problem cannot move beyond the language, concepts and paradigms of economic management and development. What is most important is that people begin to want to learn new things, see it as important that they do so, appreciate that there is the potential for personal gain, believe in themselves as learners and commit the time and sustained effort needed to make substantial gains in learning. One stakeholder in Western Australia has labelled this as the 'intrinsic motivation' factor, differentiating it from the external motivation factors such as finding a job, or the carrots and sticks associated with being a recipient of Government income support.

Barriers
Some barriers associated with different demographic groups have already been identified in answer to Question 1. Generally speaking, all adults must juggle competing demands on their time and their energy if they elect to engage in formal learning. For the most disadvantaged people – those who are poor, suffer from ill-health, are recipients of social services, are injured or disabled – these competing demands on their time and energy magnify. It is to be expected that the education journey may take longer and may need to be undertaken in segments for people who experience multiple disadvantage. Poor literacy and numeracy skills are strongly associated with multiple disadvantage.

For those living in regional and remote areas, access to suitable face to face programs and skilled teachers may be limited. The delivery of quality teaching and learning programs using interactive technology for the language, literacy and numeracy fields is in its infancy. The reach and capacity of this technology is limited not only by availability of specialist staff able to make effective use of interactive technology, but also by the lack of infrastructure and services (particularly bandwidth) in regional and remote areas.

Successful communication strategies

The *Reading Writing Hotline* and its associated advertising on commercial television channels proved to be a very successful methodology for advertising services, generating calls from people who had never before sought help, and making referrals and connections between potential clients and service providers. While the *Hotline* service still exists in name, its effectiveness has been severely reduced in recent years because of insecure and reduced funding, deskilling of staff, lack of paid television advertising, and reduced maintenance of the provider database leading to loss of currency. The service that the *Hotline* effectively provided was a counselling service for often insecure and hesitant callers; because the staff who responded to calls were experienced LLN professionals they were able to empathise appropriately and offer informed advice to callers to encourage them to take the next step. This component of the service has been lost. If there is to be a national campaign encouraging engagement with learning, this must be associated with a call to action if value for money is to be achieved. The one-stop-shop provided by the *Hotline* is an effective way to capitalise on motivation inspired by an advert. *Hotline* data collected between 1994 and 2008 indicated clearly that advertising on commercial television is the most effective way to reach the target audience.

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

Teacher quality

The first imperative is to focus on the different pedagogical demands of the three fields of teaching: *language, literacy* and *numeracy.* There is a danger in rolling all three fields, as well as employability skills, into a single term. Clear differentiation is needed to ensure that the most effective pedagogies for different fields are utilised and that there is recognition that different people will need different programs taught by staff with particular skills and knowledge. The need for suitably qualified and skilled staff for each area of specialisation is paramount. These staff will need to be given access to relevant and high quality professional development opportunities – indeed there should be a requirement for staff to participate in relevant professional development regularly. For this to happen, there needs to be a strong research culture that influences teaching methodologies.

It would be helpful to establish national standards for adult *literacy* or *numeracy* teachers similar to the national standards for teachers of *language (English as a Second Language)*. The specialised skills and knowledge needed to undertake teaching roles in these fields must be recognised and processes put in place for the recruitment and training of these specialist teachers. This is one important link with the tertiary sector.

Quality programs

The second imperative is to focus on the individual to ensure that whichever kind of tuition is delivered meets their particular needs, is designed to respond to their individual aspirations, and recognises and builds on their existing strengths. In this respect, *language, literacy* and *numeracy* programs have a different starting point from industry qualifications. Industry qualifications are built on the standards required by workplaces to undertake particular job

roles; *language, literacy* and *numeracy* programs must first look at the individual person who wants to learn and then engage with the 'intrinsic motivation' that the person brings, rather than consulting an external standard. Language practice is endlessly variable and, while there are conventions of both speaking and writing to master – pronunciation, word, choice, social protocols and spelling, punctuation, paragraph structure – there are innumerable contexts demanding that conventions are used selectively and with adaptation.

There are many research products (NCVER, NRDC) suggesting what makes for successful programs for different cohorts of students. In Western Australia in 2003, an evaluation of the performance of the *Certificates of General Education for Adults* was published.[1] This publication provides advice on principles for program management and advice for improvements in teaching approaches.

Many training providers are now looking beyond the dedicated full time or part time adult education courses offering a full AQF qualification to meet the demand from potential learners who want shorter, more flexible workshop style programs. Other training providers have identified the need for more 'outreach' programs that are project based, delivered in the community and develop *language, literacy* and *numeracy* skills as integral components of practical or project-based activities determined by community members. One example of an 'outreach' program is the Foyer Oxford Project to build accommodation for young homeless people connecting a requirement for training with the clients' participation in the project. The need for new purpose built curriculum to serve the clients in this project has been identified.

Embedding LLN with vocational training

Western Australia has also introduced mechanisms to provide additional specialist tuition *embedded* with vocational courses. Two accredited courses, operating differently from all other qualifications or training products, serve as *dual enrolment* courses available for any student enrolled in a vocational qualification. The *Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS)* serves students who need additional *literacy* and *numeracy* tuition; the *Course in Underpinning Skills for Industry Qualifications (USIQ)* serves students who need substantial time to develop their cultural, linguistic, social or cognitive resources to succeed in their industry training. After 10 years' experience delivering CAVSS, both statistical and qualitative evidence suggests that embedding *literacy* and *numeracy* tuition with vocational training makes it accessible, acceptable and useful to students where there would be reluctance to attend stand alone courses. [2]

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

5 How can the National Strategy complement initiatives in other sectors?

The VET sector provides second chance education opportunities through both its vocational and its adult education courses. [3] In recent decades, the adult education component of VET has been conceptualised, defined and regulated as a *component* of vocational training rather than

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[1] https://vetinfonet-staging.det.wa.edu.au/adultliteracy/docs/CGEAEffectReport.pdf
[2] http://www.nveac.tvetaustralia.com.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/54355/WA_CAVSS.pdf
[3] Karmel, T & Woods, D (2008) *Second-chance vocational education and training,* NCVER,

as a separate field making a distinct contribution to both human and social capital. The conflation of the two fields (vocational training and adult education) has produced distortions in the provision of adult education services. This distortion is well- illustrated in the proposal to create an 'industry' Training Package for Foundation Skills. The assumptions underlying this proposal include:

- foundation skills are exclusively skills for employment;
- the definition of competence related to job roles can be used to describe the complex cognitive and communication skills comprising *language, literacy* and *numeracy;*
- AQF levels can be applied unproblematically to complex cognitive and communication skills (for example, learning a new language, or learning the alphabet)
- *language, literacy* and *numeracy* can be conflated in a single framework of competence;
- and that Units of Competence can be constructed that will meet the diverse needs of all learners in each of three different fields.

None of these assumptions is supportable and it is highly unlikely that such a training product will be able to contribute to the complex pedagogical and other issues that have been identified in this paper. It is clear that the project to integrate *language, literacy* and *numeracy* with vocational training endorsed by Ministers in 1993 has largely failed.[4] This failure can be attributed to the products, processes and regulatory frameworks that guided reforms in the VET sector and their inappropriate application to curriculum, teaching, and assessment in the *language, literacy* and *numeracy* fields.

By distinguishing the characteristics and goals of a national strategy for adult education, the links between adult education and VET can be specified as between different sectors. Adult education programs, embedded within vocational training courses are meeting with success in this country and in the UK[5]. Building foundation skills requires a sectoral approach that recognises the differences between adult education and vocational training and establishes new partnerships with new sectors - housing, health, justice, social service - and with communities.

6 What are the national priorities?

Each of the priorities suggested in the paper could make a contribution to the goal of increasing and improving the formal learning opportunities adult Australians can access to develop their store of intellectual capital. What is missing is any consideration of the funding needed to expand formal learning opportunities. In addition to including a focus on funding, there could also be a focus on what initiatives could be taken at a national level to achieve economies of scale and a coordinated approach. Some options are discussed below.

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[4] Industry Skills Councils (2011) *No More Excuses: an industry response to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge*
[5] Casey, H., O. Cara, et al. (2006) *"You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering…." Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes-the impact on learning and achievement.* London: NRDC.

<u>Funding</u>
There are three aspects to funding that must be considered:

• growth in the overall amount of funding available nationally to provide adult education services

• improved synergies and efficiencies where program funding from state and Commonwealth governments overlaps so that providers servicing the same clients are essentially in competition with each other

• limiting costs for the individual since the people with the greatest need are likely to be the poorest segment of the population and experience multiple disadvantages.

The state training agency currently expends around 11% of the state training profile in the delivery of courses defined as 'enabling' . These are accredited, non-vocational courses and qualifications structured in various ways to meet demands from the community for life skills tuition, *language (ESL)* tuition or general education *(literacy* and *numeracy)* tuition. The *language, literacy* and *numeracy* component of this effort comprises around 5% of the state training profile. It is likely that other states and territories have similar levels of expenditure and effort. The Commonwealth Government funds discrete programs (AMEP, LLNP and WELLP) for targeted client groups. In the case of the LLNP the same ESL or general education qualifications are delivered as those in the state training profile. Other Commonwealth funding can be directed at *language, literacy* or *numeracy* training through contracted employment services.

The current level of funding provides formal learning opportunities for around 4% of the adult population per annum. If more people are to access formal learning opportunities, then more funding is needed and more capacity in the training infrastructure and beyond needs to be developed. In the first instance, the National Strategy could make recommendations for additional funding in the context of negotiating new agreements for Skills and Workforce Development.

In the longer term, consideration may be given to establishing a new sector – adult education - which is subject to a new funding agreement, different regulation, and curriculum products that are differentiated from those for training and which are tailored to meet the needs of other sectors, agencies and organisations dealing with people with low skills: health, justice and social services.

There are opportunities to review the interaction between different Commonwealth funded programs (eg employment services contracts and the LLNP) and programs funded by the Commonwealth that overlap with those funded by the state (Settlement Program, LLNP and state-funded general access programs).

<u>National Projects</u>
In recent years there has been a loss of funding for targeted adult literacy national projects. This has impacted on:

• targeted adult literacy and numeracy research;

• curriculum development and innovation;

• the Reading Writing Hotline service; and

• national professional development and information provided by the Australian Council for Adult Literacy.

It is suggested that a second national priority is to provide secure and adequate funding to provide two national services:

•   a national referral and counselling service such as the Reading Writing Hotline once provided - a one stop shop for people seeking help and information about language, literacy and numeracy services; and

•   a national research and professional development consortium of universities able to coordinate specialised research into pedagogical practice and disseminate the outcomes of research to the three fields of practice.

National Standards for Literacy and Numeracy Specialist Teachers.

A third national priority is to develop professional standards for literacy and numeracy specialist teachers (and others who may undertake para-professional roles in the vocational training sector or the community services sector).

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

In many respects the most important stakeholders are the individual people comprising the 45% of the adult population whose skills are deemed to be too low to enable their successful participation in life and work in a modern, post-industrial society. Unless these individuals are motivated to engage in learning the Strategy will fail. The interests and preoccupations of other groups (governments, industries, employers) must stand second in line to the perspectives of the major stakeholders. A Strategy that is built around the perspectives needs, aspirations and reservations of these primary stakeholders must be the first objective.

It will take a long time to change societal attitudes and beliefs about poor educational achievement. There is a strong culture of blaming the victim (people who fail at school are lazy, stupid or have the wrong parents.) There is a general failure to appreciate the complexity of the issue and its contributing factors giving rise to expressions offering simplistic solutions (assess everyone, make them realise that it is they who are at fault, fix up their skills before they are allowed to enrol in a vocational qualification/leave school). Many people believe that it is someone else's job to fix the problem – usually the 'government' or schools. These attitudes will be very slow to change and may only do so if more people become more closely involved in helping to solve the problem and therefore understanding it. The way to achieve this could be to identify individuals (from all sectors/agencies) with an interest in forging partnerships with *language, literacy* and *numeracy* specialists to run projects. When these projects prove to be successful, they are used as models to generate spin-off activities. This could be run as a National Project, supported as a grass-roots activity with conscious activity at system management levels to embed successful practice as part of infrastructure.

Unions and health professional could be two groups of stakeholders that may be open to engaging with *language, literacy* and *numeracy* professionals on joint projects that serve their members/clients' interests.

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

OECD surveys
Targets and performance indicators have already been set by COAG. Australian Governments have already committed to conduct a national survey of adult skills - the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) – in 2011 and again in 2021. Data from these surveys will be comparable and will provide one measure for the success of new

initiatives to create more, better quality opportunities for formal learning. The Productivity Commission has advised that data of this kind (data about individual skills) is a reliable proxy measure that correlates with other proxy measures of economic performance. These surveys demand significant investment and, arguably, money spent on detailed measurement of outcome is money denied to teaching programs and other services that can help improve the situation.

<u>National collections of VET data</u>
The national AVETMISS collection provides another source of important data which is currently under-utilised. With adjustments to the coding system identifying those courses and qualifications that contribute to building *language, literacy* and *numeracy,* the AVETMISS collection can provide data relating to student enrolment, module completion and course completion. Similar data is also available from the state and territory collections contributing to the AVETMISS collection. In addition data collection at this level can provide information about withdrawals and be used an indicator of student satisfaction and provider performance. The Student Satisfaction Survey could also be adapted to create information about the efficacy of *language, literacy* and *numeracy* courses. This data already exists at state level. What is required to access this data as discrete elements of vocational training statistics is to ensure that courses are appropriately coded and then to require analysis of the data from the NCVER.

The AVETMISS collection could be used in other ways to measure the performance of the National Strategy:
- create benchmark data from the 2010 collection relating identification with socio economic group (perhaps through the postcode in the Client Field) and enrolment in level of qualification to be compared with improvement in 2015 and 2021

- collect completion data from vocational qualifications delivered with *language, literacy* and *numeracy* support

<u>Social capital outcomes</u>

There are other means of measuring outcomes from *language, literacy* and *numeracy* tuition written about at length in research identifying social capital outcomes. There are two existing measures that can be used to measure outcomes at the program level or at the Strategy level:

- ABS indicators of social capital

- OECD indicators of social well-being

These measures could be adapted for use with existing program evaluation tools.

<u>National advertising campaign</u>

If the *Reading, Writing Hotline* is once more established as the one-stop-shop for potential clients to access information, receive advice, identify the next step and feel encouraged to take it, then annual reporting on activity levels can identify:
- number of calls

- demographic profile of callers

- referral resulting in enrolment

- calls from employers and other agencies requesting information.

This information can be used to create progress measures for the information and referral service and for the efficacy of a national advertising campaign.

<u>Staff skills audit</u>
Over the 10 years of the National Strategy, information about the qualifications of teachers employed to teach *language, literacy* and *numeracy* education courses could be collected. Proxy measures to identify currency of skills and knowledge could include participation in relevant professional development. In 10 years' time the field could be re-professionalised to bring them in line with the schools sector. Service providers delivering *language, literacy* and *numeracy* education may be able to show that staff quality can be linked to improved outcomes from courses.