

## VSA skills plan questions

Context for the Foundation skills webinar 'Give learners a stronger foundation of knowledge and skills'

The pathway to greater economic equality and good career opportunities for individuals begins with a strong foundation of knowledge and skills. Foundation skills such as literacy, numeracy and digital skills are important cognitive skills that people need to participate in life, their community, and the workforce. The Victorian VET system plays a key role in delivering foundational knowledge and skills to learners.

The aim of the webinar was to discuss ways to deliver foundation knowledge and skills training to more Victorians through VET, to help people secure employment and succeed in the workplace.

### 1. Do VET qualifications provide learners with a strong enough base of foundation skills to succeed in the labour market?

*As discussed at the above-mentioned live webinar, VET qualifications are vocationally focused to build skills and knowledge in specific industry areas such as for example Early Childhood Education and care not to specifically improve the learners general foundational LLNED skills and knowledge.*

*VET qualifications focus on **industry specific language, literacy and numeracy** which is vital for the learner to be prepared for industry job readiness and this is generally done well within VET qualifications. While VET qualifications do not focus on improving the learners foundational knowledge and skills there would be limited LLNED gain through exposure to course materials.*

*If specific units were developed to increase the foundation skills of students for use within the VET qualification system it would be difficult to see what content would be developed- general LLNED skills or vocationally specific?*

*It could be anticipated that if developed these units would be classified as elective units rather than core units and potentially have the possibility of never being selected as part of the delivery package by providers.*

#### Other foundational knowledge and skills

*Contracted Community RTOs and TAFE institutes provide opportunities for learners to access foundation knowledge and skill building programs such as the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) that is a free service to help eligible migrants and humanitarian entrants improve their English language skills and settle into Australia. The Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) Program, is open to the general population aged over 15 years of age and who have left school, this program aims to improve foundational skills in literacy, numeracy and digital skills. These programs are also usually completed well in advance to VET qualification enrolments.*

*We would advocate for a system that fosters comprehensive human development and equips individuals to critically engage with and transform their social and economic conditions. This can be done through supporting an **integrated** system – supporting lifelong learning not just knowledge and skills.*

*As sourced from NCVER DataBuilder, students surveyed indicated that where they were enrolled and attended a Community Education Providers for VET qualification enrolment that 72.06% had improved writing skills on completion of their qualification. In contrast student enrolled at TAFE indicated that only 51.8% had improved writing skills on completion of their qualification.*

*(Source: NCVER 2023, Government-funded student outcomes 2019-2023: DataBuilder, Outcome by Year, Provider type)*

Community RTOs are well and best placed to provide the foundational knowledge and skills building prior to and alongside VET qualification delivery through the delivery of pre-accredited programs building LLNED as reflected by the above statistics. This is a unique facility supporting the learners foundation skills currently bespoke to Community RTOs (Learn Local) and is recognised as achieving outstanding learner LLNED outcomes that are not reflected elsewhere in the Victorian skills landscape.

The ACE Board 'Skills for Work and Study' programs are centrally developed, quality assured vocationally based curricula specifically design to support learners seeking work but who do not have the required levels of LLNED to succeed in achieving the necessary qualification, thus relegating them to unskilled and menial work. There is increasing evidence that these programs support learners with improved English language skills, digital, numeracy and literacy skills that directly relate to improved quality of community participation but also to success in the workplace. This is achieved by scaffolding accredited training with the SFW&S (pre-accredited) thus ensuring the learner journey is completed. Only Learn Local organisations can apply this model, either in partnership with TAFE (which can be problematic) or in the context of a learner focussed, supported learner environment such as that provided by Community RTOs/Learn Locals.

## **2. Where are the biggest foundational gaps and what impacts do these gaps have in the workplace? Can you give us some examples?**

The biggest foundational gaps are literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. These gaps have profound impacts in the workplace, affecting productivity, efficiency, and overall performance as well as the self-confidence of workers.

Inadequate literacy skills can lead to miscommunication, errors in documentation, and difficulty in understanding complex instructions. This can result in increased operational costs and reduced quality of work.

Numeracy gaps hinder the ability to perform basic calculations, analyse data, and make informed decisions. This can impact financial management, project planning, and problem-solving abilities, leading to potential financial losses and missed opportunities.

Lack of digital skills affects the ability to use modern technology and software, which are essential in today's digitally driven workplaces. This can slow down processes, reduce competitiveness, and limit innovation. Addressing these foundational gaps through targeted training and education can significantly enhance workplace performance, employee confidence, and overall organisational success.

A recent research paper conducted by Max Solutions indicated that the digital divide is one of the largest foundational gaps developing in the Australian landscape at this time.

Stating that;

- "33% of people looking for work aren't confident in applying for jobs due to their digital skills
- 42% of all middle to mature-age respondents (46 – 65) didn't believe they had the ability to keep up to date with the digital skills required to maintain employment.
- Half of 36 to 45-year-old DES customers were worried about their digital skills. 62% feared they did not have the ability to keep up to date either.
- 90% of our customers surveyed believed that there was not enough human interaction involved in the recruitment process.

- 1 in 5 customers surveyed do not have access to reliable internet and close to half do not own or have easy access to a digital device such as a PC.”

<https://www.maxsolutions.com.au/about-max/news/max-report-finds-digital-divide-denies-1-in-3-job-seekers-employ>

“Australian workplaces have also seen a 12% increase in demand for digital skills since 2016 and by the year 2026 could be facing a shortfall of over 300,000 workers with the appropriate digital skills.”  
(The Digital Divide, The impact of digital skills and resources on finding work 2024.)

This paper and report highlight the digital divide has also been impacted due to the current cost of living crisis.

These foundational gaps do not only impact the workplace. Research from ACER Discover highlight that continued low LLND impact a person's whole life experience and expectation.

“Australia's PIAAC results demonstrate that a significant number of people aged from 15 to 74 years old do not have access to sufficient foundation skills in reading and numeracy to be able to cope equitably with life and work in the 21st century.

Around 44 per cent (7.3 million) of Australians achieved in the lowest two bands for literacy, while about 55 per cent (8.9 million) achieved in the lowest two bands for numeracy.”

PIAAC also included an assessment of adults' problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments (PSTRE). 44 per cent (7.5 million) of Australians were classified as low skilled in PSTRE with a further 25 per cent (4.2 million) not being able to be classified because they either opted out of the computer-based test, failed a basic ICT test or had no computer experience.

“Results from PIAAC confirm that literacy and numeracy skills are strongly linked to socioeconomic background. Longitudinal studies have also identified intergenerational patterns of low achievement, where adults who have poor literacy skills are more likely to have children who also struggle with these skills.” (ACER Discover-The importance of measuring adult literacy and numeracy June 2021-  
<https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/the-importance-of-measuring-adult-literacy-and-numeracy>)

Victoria is currently facing significant skills shortages in the community services industries, particularly aged care and early childhood. It would seem obvious that the skills shortages cannot be met by drawing on the current cohort of learners in the Victorian system. In order to meet the needs of industry, we need to attract new cohorts of learners who can successfully engage in a way that enables them to enter these workplaces as qualified workers. Community based RTOs/Learn Locals are ideally placed to engage and support cohorts of learners that are currently not engaged as qualified workers.

These groups could include CALD women over 45 for example, who may not have ever considered engaging in learning but are ideally placed to work in their own communities as qualified workers in early childhood, aged care and disability. Community RTOs/Learn Local have not only the necessary tools and resources to create learning opportunities that support accredited pathways for these learners, (eg. ACFE Board centrally developed resources such as SW&S) but more importantly they have the community connections and networks to create these partnerships and the teaching and learning context of supported and bespoke learning methodologies.

### **3. What can the VET system do differently to provide learners with stronger foundation skills across all domains (literacy, numeracy, digital, etc)?**

*To provide learners with stronger foundational skills across all domains (LLNED) the VET system should adopt a lifelong learning approach and align more closely with Learn Local programs.*

*Victorian learners benefit from quality Learn Local programs that focus on enhancing Language, Literacy, Numeracy, Employability, and Digital (LLNED) skills.*

*Currently 900 courses in Language, Literacy and Numeracy, 1017 in employability and 856 in digital literacy statewide courses available. (Learn Local website July 2024)*

*The Learn Local sector has the unique position to be able to offer bespoke LLNED programs locally to fill the gaps where accredited training programs are not able to focus on improving general foundation skills for learners.*

*To support learners enrolled and/or about to commence in VET qualifications to improve their foundation and job readiness employability skills VET providers (TAFE and private providers) need to invest in partnerships with Learn Locals with the expertise to deliver quality foundational skills courses. This would ideally be prior to VET enrolment and also delivered alongside VET delivery.*

*The Learn Local and Community RTO sector supports their students in a holistic wrap around, Learner focused model.*

*An integrated system must include a distinct and more clearly defined role in properly assessing and preparing people for success in accredited VET education. This function exists in both the successful Finnish and German systems:*

*'In addition to vocational qualifications, students can complete training preparing them for VET. This preparatory education and training provide students with capabilities for applying to VET leading to qualifications and fosters their preconditions for completing qualifications.' (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019)*

*Learn Locals and Community RTOs are ideally suited to, and in part are already, fulfilling this function which the evidence above shows should not only improve completions and minimise the current practice which can effectively set some learners up for failure, but attract and engage new cohorts of learners vital for addressing critical skills shortage areas. However, this work is undervalued and the potential unrecognised, currently delivered through a mix of pre-accredited and foundation skills training that varies across Learn Local providers and including some TAFE delivery, particularly successful when delivered in partnership.*

*We urge the VSA to seriously consider these models and that they become installed and resourced as a distinct function within the VET learning architecture. These models are particularly successful in engaging and retaining learners who have been disengaged from the VET system due to the current intransigence of the compliance regime that by its very nature is daunting and confronting for many disengaged learners. Locally delivered, learner focussed and flexible, bespoke programs that engage, retain and build vital employability and vocational skills are already operating in the Victorian skills system, but they do not receive the acknowledgement or resources they deserve.*

*Through its network of around 230 Learn Locals in 2023, Victoria's Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) sector is helping people acquire and develop these skills.*

*An NCVER report Provider type by state or territory of delivery location, 2015 to 2022 report indicated a decline of Community RTO's 131 to 78 providers a 60% decline in community RTO providers these numbers are unfortunately declining due to the difficulties of resourcing these successful models of delivery for this unique element of the Victorian Skills system*



#### 4. How can existing VET qualifications be re-designed to provide learners with a strong base of knowledge and skills that can be applied across multiple industries and occupations?

*Do VET qualifications need to be re-designed to provide a strong base of knowledge and skills that can be applied across multiple industries and occupations?*

*To provide learners with a strong base of knowledge and skills that can be applied across multiple industries and occupations, existing VET qualifications do not necessarily need to be redesigned but should be enhanced through a broader and more integrated lifelong and lifewide learning approach.*

*While the current Australian training package system focuses on vocational-specific industry knowledge and skills, these are generally not transferable across multiple industries and occupations. Instead of redesigning the VET system, value can be added through the introduction of funded micro-credentials and skill sets. This approach offers flexibility and quality assurance, enabling skills development that meets specific needs as workers transition across industries.*

*Micro credentials and skill sets can be successfully incorporated to facilitate supplementary knowledge and skills required as workers move within and across industries/occupations. These are currently being used to great effect in regenerative agriculture training including digital upskilling for First Nations farmers using the pre-accredited quality framework. This model provides the flexibility for skills development that is quality assured, and that reflects the specific needs of the learners that is also based on extensive consultation with Community members and most importantly the farmers themselves.*

*"The Micro-credentialing Program provides an opportunity to support changing workplaces by enabling the provision of focused training for new or transitioning employees in specific skills. This will support businesses and industries to adopt innovations and improve productivity." (Queensland Government, Department of Employment, Small Business and Training)*

*Micro credentials creation and delivery is well suited to the pre-accredited sector. With investment and resources from Government, stakeholders, industry, TAFE and the ACE sector in continued **building of the reputation** of pre-accredited training, showcasing flexibility of pre-accredited courses and the Learn Local sector to have the ability to move quickly to design with industry flexible curriculum to fill gaps in industry knowledge and skills, to develop and create micro credentials that create pathways across industry and occupations, delivered via quality training across the state. This would work best in partnership between Industries, Learn Locals and the TAFE sectors. Learn Local partnerships with TAFE to be able to deliver industry training utilising pre-accredited courses is a real option. Although as previously mentioned partnerships with TAFE can prove problematic. Taking a holistic approach to education and training and aligning VET qualifications with lifelong learning principles, ensuring that learners are not only prepared for immediate job roles but also equipped with the skills and knowledge to adapt and grow in their careers.*

*There is no need to re-design VET qualifications themselves to include either explicit foundation knowledge and skills building nor knowledge and skills that can be transferrable to multiple industries and occupations. The ACE Learn Local sector is well placed to work in partnership with industry and TAFE to ensure these gaps are covered to strengthen the Victorian post-secondary education sector.*

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