



Feedback on the JSA Foundation Skills Study Discussion Paper

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute a response to the JSA Foundation Skills study discussion paper released in April 2023.

About ALA

ALA has been operating for more than 60 years and is the oldest and largest national peak body for adult community education in Australia.

ALA is a not-for-profit entity with organisational and individual members in all states and territories who reflect the diversity of adult learning and community education, including community learning centres, community colleges, neighbourhood houses, libraries, worker education associations, Aboriginal training and skills organisations, TAFEs and other adult education institutions. ALA exists to provide leadership and professional development for the sector and to advance quality services for all adult learners.

Our vision is for equitable access to learning for all Australians to support social cohesion and economic prosperity.

We believe in the power and potential of adult learning and community education to transform lives and to affect both social and economic change. ALA values and promotes the benefits of learning in all of its forms and is an active advocate in state, territory, national and international communities.

Our members offer a range of learning and education opportunities: from personal enrichment learning, and foundation skills to formal or accredited learning.

ALA attended the Jobs and Skills Summit in July 2022 and is a current member of the Australian Government's Foundation Skills Advisory Group and the VET Workforce Blueprint Steering Group.

Our organisation has a keen interest in ensuring that the adult learning and community education sector is recognised. ALA advocates for good quality programs and a strong network of providers. We are committed to local solutions to community learning

Introduction

PIAAC

ALA has been a strong advocate for the continuation of the OECD *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)* and called on the previous government to ensure funds were maintained in the then federal budget to undertake the task at a time when the funding was at risk. Over the years, ALA representatives have liaised with ABS staff pre COVID and during COVID to discuss the status of PIAAC and met with relevant commonwealth department representatives about the potential inclusion of remote communities.

ALA also liaised with several different state government representatives to encourage them to expand the PIAAC sample survey across their jurisdiction to reach vulnerable and disadvantaged population cohorts.

It is disappointing then that the Australian government has decided not to proceed with the PIAAC survey as planned, particularly when Australia had already participated in earlier negotiations to proceed.

Australia's temporary withdrawal from the [OECD PIAAC survey](#) 2022/23 means that we miss the opportunity for comparative like for like longitudinal data that allows us to analyse what has changed in Australia over the last 10 years (are things getting better or worse for various cohorts or in specific areas) and how we might compare with other western countries like Canada, NZ and UK.

ALA is interested in how the proposed JSA National Foundations Skills Study will replace PIAAC and provide the data continuity we need to build the picture of our population so that we understand what is needed in terms of services and programs and in what locations.

The proposed study must provide meaningful data to allow us to follow up on cohorts missed under the 2011/12 PIAAC, including those in rural and remote communities. This data is critical to ensure our models of service delivery are collaborative, relevant and appropriate, and that access is provided through equitable funding distribution, to provide Australians with the learning they need, in the way they need it.

Research indicates that a significant percentage of a working age adults' work life learning often arises outside of participation in programs covered by existing tertiary education provisions as defined under the 2011 Vocational Education and Training Regulation ACT or included in tertiary education programs.

It is the learning by Australian workers of all kinds and classifications as they participate in their work activities, including responding to new challenges such as those arising through the current recent pandemic, technological innovations, changes how work is undertaken and with whom those workers need to engage. For instance, the PIAAC data indicates that Australian workers are amongst the highest globally engaging in problem-solving in and through their work. It is these very qualities that will be important for Australia to become more self-reliant, self-sufficient and resilient in the face of emerging geopolitical challenges.

Decision-making, planning and policy development and best practice supporting work and life learning of adult Australians must be well informed by good research and data.

Peak organisations like ALA, along with governments at all levels, educators and researchers working in the field of adult learning and education, draw upon this data frequently and it is central to informing understandings about the kind of knowledge that adults need in Australia and pointing to how that knowledge can be developed.

Australia must be able to fully utilise the data and secure important social benefits from the investment in its enactment.

JSA Foundation Skills study

The proposed foundational skills survey needs to go further than foundational skills associated with adult literacy and numeracy. It is important that this survey be cast more broadly in terms of adult capabilities and their development, which can include foundational

skills such as literacy and numeracy, but also include other and broader considerations such as:

- the kinds of knowledge that adults are required to use in and through their life and working activities and interactions;
- the kinds of problem-solving required of adults in life and through their work;
- there are accounts of the kinds of learning they engage with and sources of support for that learning; and
- the kinds and extent of discretion that Australian adults can enjoy in life and through their work. These data sets on their own are important, but when they are correlated and are analysed against sets of variables, such as gender, level of education, positioning on AQF and individual societal positioning (i.e., Australian born, indigenous Australian, migrant, migrant from English-speaking countries) which understandings can emerge – they can build upon existing items within the PIAAC survey.

Response to discussion paper questions

Definitions

1. Do you agree with the proposed definitions for literacy and numeracy?

These definitions can only constitute the broadest of guidelines - that need to be understood in the circumstances of family, community and workplace requirements and development premised upon understandings of individual readiness to learn and through activities aimed to promote these forms of competence.

This requires educators with the capacity to understand the particular literacy and numeracy requirements that their students will need to develop and then arrange educational experiences to achieve those outcomes.

Even so, we provide the following suggestions for the currently proposed definitions:

Literacy

That the definition be expanded to include the ability to write although UNESCO's most recent definition is much broader:

“Literacy is a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing and using numbers throughout life and is part of a larger set of skills, which include digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship as well as job-specific skills.”¹

Numeracy

That the numeracy definition be shortened, and the original last sentence combined into the final paragraph of the last paragraph into the following:

¹ 2 Feb 2023 <https://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/need-know>

“Numeracy is the ability to use, apply, interpret, and communicate mathematical information and ideas. It is an essential skill in an age when individuals encounter an increasing amount and wide range of quantitative and mathematical information in their daily lives.”

2. What definition would you propose for digital literacy?

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills are interdependent, and it is important to assess how these competencies interact since they are distributed differently across subgroups of the population. These skills exist along a continuum ranging from basic to advanced.

The requirements for digital literacy are likely to be not only situationally premised but highly dynamic. Finding ways for adults to engage in processes that utilise such technologies and gain competence in their use may well be a platform for reducing the perceived low levels of digital literacy within the adult education community.

The Digital Literacy Skills Framework (2021) defines digital literacy as, *‘covering the physical operations of digital devices and the software operations in those devices (UNESCO, 2018). It incorporates the ability to search and navigate, create, communicate and collaborate, think critically, analyse information, and address safety and wellbeing using a variety of digital technologies. These skills are essential for individuals to participate effectively in today’s society. Digital literacy skills exist on a continuum with varying degrees of competency required depending on the context (personal and community; workplace and employment; education and training) within which the skills are applied’.*

It further states that *‘as the digital world is rapidly changing, as physical devices and software are adapted to meet new possibilities and demands, individuals’ skills will change and adapt and as a consequence, what it means to be ‘digitally literate’ will also change over time’.*

It would be useful to consider the Australian Digital Inclusion Index in the proposed study which has been developed by the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance. It looks at the level of digital literacy needed in terms of skills or abilities, as well as access and affordability challenges, as the use of online technologies has grown. The Index measures these three dimensions because research shows they are the key requirements of digital inclusion.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index uses data from the Australian Internet Usage Survey to measure digital inclusion across three dimensions - Access, Affordability and Digital Ability. We explore how these dimensions vary across Australia and across different social groups².

Connected digital and communication technologies are rapidly changing the way we live, learn, and work.

It would be more logical to use the equivalent definition(s) already developed by the OECD for the upcoming PIAAC and apply it to the Australian adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy context to ensure a measure of consistency and comparability.

² <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/>

3. Do you currently use or are you aware of any digital literacy measures to inform policies and/or programs?

Apart from the suggestions mentioned in the response to the previous question above, the [ACSF Report 2022](#), pretraining assessments from [Foundation Skills for Your Future](#) program, and existing foundation skills data could provide information to inform policies and programs.

4. How do you currently use (or have previously used) data on foundation skills, including PIAAC data?

Although dated, the PIAAC data is still the most useful single source of data about adults' proficiency in key information processing skills like literacy, numeracy and problem solving in Australia. It provides data on how adults use their skills at home, at work and in the wider community.

It helps to identify gaps and needs and provides evidence for accepted benchmarks/indicators. PIAAC data has been useful in supporting bids for funding and resources. In Tasmania, for example, it helped inform policy and additional services for the 26Ten program.

The data helps inform the content of ALA's annual professional development program which aims to build the skills of adult educators working with adult learners to improve literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Data sets are also referenced to raise awareness about literacy gaps in communities and in social forums to engage and inform the media and other groups. The data also helps identify priorities for action including further research and funding.

The use of this data permits extrapolations from small qualitative studies across a broader population, and the items themselves when used in surveys or response sheets provide very helpful insights into adult requirements for work, their working and learning.

5. What data do you need to inform questions related to foundation skills policy and program development?

The data needed is about the current requirements of Australian adults and their needs to perform their family, community and workplace roles (what is), and also some consideration of how those requirements are likely to change in the near future (what should be), how they are currently being developed (what is) and how they might best be developed now and in the future (what should be).

The PIAAC data gathered in 2011, provides much of this information and it would have been helpful to have an update in 2023. A survey of the scale of PIAAC, with a sample size of over 4000 allows considerations of these requirements across several variables – educational levels – occupational classifications – ages of Australians – locations of those Australians. All of these can be triangulated to provide the very kinds of information that the JSA claims it wants to inform policy.

If we understand what where and how things have changed over time since the previous PIAAC, we can build our knowledge base and collect information about what's the story behind the data. Comparisons to previous PIAAC 2012 and changes over time provide the essential context that can make the data meaningful. It could be overlaid with ABS

community profiles. Insights could be communicated via tables, charts, maps and textual analysis and guidance.

Questions should still be posed along PIAAC lines, but additional questions could inform the following:

What stops people from engaging? Understanding the barriers can assist ALA in terms of advocacy and service provision.

Does the learner need support for learning? This can help inform providers to better develop relevant programs. ALA can then target our professional development to adult educators to suit and match skills practitioners with what they need to know.

Is there an emerging cohort or intergenerational evidence that needs to be addressed?

Is there a formal diagnosis i.e., dyslexia or a recognised Specific Learning Disability? This can inform specialist support teaching/PD about extra learning needs.

6. What data sources and data assets do you hold/create/use in relation to foundation skills that have not been covered above?

Reports and information we are aware of include:

- The [Australian component of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies](#) (PIAAC) 2011-2012
- The OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) [additional results.](#)
- The existing 2017 report about Australia from the OECD based on the PIAAC data:
OECD. (2017). Building skills for all in Australia: Policy insights from the survey of adult skills. OECD skills studies. Paris: OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264281110-en>
- The [2021 Parliamentary Inquiry into Adult LLND](#), titled, *Don't Take it as Read?*
- A repository of over 30 years of data on working age Australians' requirements for work and how they learnt as funded through projects from the NCVET, ARC and other funding agencies, including those overseas.
- The Adult Learning Australia [ACE scan 2022](#)
- National data on ASCF, SEE, AMEP, Basic Key Skills Builder, LLN Robot, [TAFE AVETMISS](#). For example – employers like the AFL use ASCF
- Other potential information could be gained from ABS Household survey data and the ABS Census, ASQA and regulatory bodies
- States and Territories hold their own data. For example, in Victoria [ACFE](#) on [Learn Local](#)

In 2021 the then DESE established the Foundations Framework Advisory Body of which ALA was a member. Deloitte was commissioned to undertake a Foundations Framework Scoping Study and produced a report with significant information, but it was never released by the Department. It would be worth reviewing this document

7. What gap/s or challenges have you encountered with what is currently available?

The JSA Foundation Skills Study Discussion Paper indicates that there is a risk that such data gathering will largely occur in metropolitan centres, and that regional, rural and remote communities will miss out. First Nations, remote and rural communities are often excluded due to cost and location, but these are the very communities that need outreach.

A very important quality of the PIAAC data is that it was gathered one-on-one: a researcher speaking directly to the interviewee. If whatever JSA organise is nothing other than an online survey, the outcomes will be less than sufficient, because it will be relying upon the interpretation of the reader, and this limits the efficacy of the data gathering, who would respond, how they would respond, and the quality of the data gathered.

ALA has encountered gaps with what is currently available including the cost of accessing the data, getting access to longitudinal – comparative – sample sizes that are meaningful, and access to adult and community education (ACE) data in some states and territories. ALA's ACE Scan requires resources to update the information, particularly since the pandemic as there have been many changes in the sector. Adequate funding will be necessary to collect relevant data and facilitate consultation.

National Survey

8. Is there an alternative approach/option that you think would be suitable for the study?

Assessment must include multiple access points for the community such as by telephone, hard copy forms, online, and registered community access points like libraries or community hubs so that people can get support to respond to the survey and use what works best for them.

Organising the data gathering based on different kinds of communities – metropolitan, regional, rural and remote, and identifying the needs of families, communities and workplaces in those regions to develop a more nuanced set of literacy, numeracy and digital skill requirements across those communities rather than a general set of competencies. That is, having sets of conditional factors that give substance to and articulate different kinds of literacy, numeracy and digital skill requirements. There is no possibility of being comprehensive but moving away from the kind of abstract definitions and performance measures mentioned above necessarily requires understanding of what constitutes literacy, numeracy individual skills within the circumstances of their requirements.

Re-joining OECD's PIAAC 2023/24 with the JSA study supplementing the data with more specific questions and cohorts.

9. Are there online tools for measuring LLND that you think would be suitable to be adapted for the needs of the survey?

No. Online tools might seem attractive, cost-effective and easy to administer, but they will likely fail to provide the kinds of data sets that are required and, in the ways set out that is sensitive to capture the needs of adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills across different kinds of communities, and understand the kinds and levels of readiness of those adults who

are supposed to be the subject of educational interventions to improve their so-called foundational skills.

10. What frameworks do you use in describing foundation skills (such as the Australian

The ACSF however the language literacy, numeracy and digital skills should include E for employability.

11. What outputs would be most useful for you (such as reports, analytical articles, CURFs³, other microdata)?

What would be useful is the kind of data that provides detail of those broadly defined concepts of literacy and numeracy and digital skills in the particular circumstances that all kinds of Australian adults use in their domestic, community and work situations. Added to this would be data about how these capacities can be best learnt, based upon grounded accounts of their current learning (i.e., strengths and limitations) and suggestions for how they might be improved.

Data could also be applied across a social atlas framework (based on census data) with thematic maps that highlight the need for services and identifies hidden demographic groups and target populations.

12. The proposed age range is persons aged 16-65 years. Does the proposed age range align with your needs?

No. The age range is too restrictive to provide the snapshot required. Apprentices start at the age of 14 years so 15 years must be the minimum year and older people are returning to the workforce and needing digital skills to access work. Our recommendation takes a lifelong learning approach 15 – 80 years or it could have no particular endpoint.

13. What level of statistical geographical ⁴output do you need? Why?

Geographical areas of need and emerging cohorts in specific locations must be identified to enable the matching of relevant service provision and facilities.

As stated above, samples of the requirements for literacy, numeracy and digital skills needed for family, community and activities from individuals living in metropolitan cities, regional centres, and rural and remote communities are required. This is not just about the evenness of data gathering, there are distinct needs across these different kinds of communities and understanding how best the development of these capacities can occur across such diverse communities is essential if the goals of developing further foundational skills is to be successful.

14. Which groups would you like to see more extensive research into and why? For example, First Nations, recent migrants, mature age workers, Australians in rural or remote locations?

³ CURF is a Confidentialised Unit Record File

⁴ [Australian Statistical Geography Standard \(ASGS\) Edition 3, July 2021 - June 2026 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#)

All of the above, including apprentices, refugees, adults with disabilities, incarcerated adults, young adults and older Australians.

The scope could be further broadened to include adults engaged in pre-accredited training and informal learning which aims to build their capacity and confidence to pursue improving their LLND skills. In particular, focusing on adults whose initial education was inadequate or who left school early which put them at risk of being ill-prepared for effective participation in family, community and work life because of a deficit in literacy, numeracy and digital skills, and individuals whose needs and readiness to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills requirements are captured by a number of these measures.

15. Do you have any examples of existing data collection activities with First Nations people that may be applicable to assessing foundation skills in a culturally safe manner?⁵

In September 2017 the Aboriginal Adult English Language Literacy and Numeracy in the Northern Territory A Statistical Overview was released.

The four remote community pilots funded by the Australian government should provide data from their reviews.

Data collection in the health sector may provide a framework guide for numerous options in terms of cultural safety and appropriateness in data collection activities.

16. How would you recommend JSA engage with First Nations Australians for the feasibility study?

It is important to build confidence in ATSI communities, engaging not just with those speaking on behalf of ATSI adults, but those adults living in communities.

ALA members from our ATSI communities recommend the involvement of Aboriginal community controlled registered training organisations (ACCRT) in all stages of the feasibility study, including planning and implementation. These organisations not only have strong connections with community as Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCO), but also possess expertise and experience in foundation skills within the context of adult education.

To ensure the feasibility study is conducted in a culturally safe, sensitive and respectful manner, it is important to engage the Aboriginal community from the outset. This involves careful consultation with the community to address their needs and concerns and to ensure community benefit. Essential elements for the feasibility study include understanding and respecting Aboriginal cultural protocols and practices, building trust and relationships with the community, being transparent about the study process, and demonstrating a genuine commitment to listening to the community.

The involvement of ACCRT and ACCO in evaluating the feasibility study is crucial for successful planning and design for the full implementation of the study.

As noted in the discussion paper, strong foundation skills are integral to economic and social life activities. Neither foundation skills for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults nor

⁵ Responses to questions 15 – 17 were informed by ALA ATSI members

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult education are recognised and included in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CTG). ATSI adult education providers like Tauondi Aboriginal College and others have been advocating the importance of recognising and including a set target for Aboriginal adult foundation skills. The Foundation Skills Survey has potential to contribute to set a CTG target.

Due to ongoing resource constraints, adequate funding will be necessary to facilitate local consultation and to deliver the feasibility study for ACCRT and ACCO.

17. What are the key research questions you have for this part of the study?

The survey data would be valuable in highlighting the challenges related to foundation skills among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults and identifying the gaps in existing policies and programs.

- What constitutes literacy, numeracy and digital skills required for family, and/or, community and all work by ATSI people by the time they are 30?
- What are some of the differences in literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs across ATSI communities and adults?
- In what ways are the further development of these literacy, numeracy and digital skills likely to be developed in those communities and by adult ATSI?
- What are the most effective ways to improve foundation skills among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults?
- What are the barriers to improving foundation skills among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults?
- How can technology be used to improve foundation skills among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults?
- What are the cultural considerations that need to be taken into account when developing programs to improve foundation skills among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults?
- What are the gaps in current systems to improve foundation skills among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults?
- What are the long-term outcomes of improving foundation skills among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults?

Further investment is necessary for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults to improve their language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. It is hoped that the JSA Foundation Skills team will work genuinely and collaboratively with Aboriginal communities and people.

Conclusion

First, ALA believes that PIAAC is the best option. PIAAC has established benchmarks in Australia, so we can compare the latest PIAAC data with historical data to identify trends and benchmarks. It is a high quality survey which enables us to also measure against other

comparative countries. PIAAC Cycle 2 survey has recently been conducted in about 30 countries.

Second, the JSA study should supplement PIAAC with funds to include First Nations people and special needs cohorts as these are often the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. This would be in line with the recommendations from the Don't Take it as Read Parliamentary Inquiry into Adult LLND 2021 which recommended the broadening of the data collection.

Third, the timeframes identified for data collection by JSA are impossible for developing a new, quality, survey. Such surveys and instruments take multiple years to first develop, then implement and analyse. Surveys such as PIAAC and its predecessors have provided the sort of empirical evidence and research that has led to our knowledge and understanding on LLND issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond. ALA looks forward to the results of the feedback.

Contact:

Adult Learning Australia
45 Moreland Road Footscray Vic 3011
ceo@ala.asn.au
03 96898623
0488030073

8 May 2023