

# **Foundation Skills Training Package (FSTP) Development Project**

## **Response from the Western Australian Adult Literacy Council (WAALC) to the Consultation Paper**

### *Introductory remarks*

In the Background section of the Consultation Paper the stated purpose in developing the FSTP is to provide a ‘national systemic approach to developing foundation skills units of competency, qualifications and skills sets’ which suggests that what will be created is to be used as national curriculum. Further along in the same paragraph, the stated purpose for the qualifications that are to be developed is that they are to be ‘integrated with existing vocationally oriented units to provide training relevant to each industry.’

The two parts of this definition are somewhat contradictory. Is the FSTP to be designed as a national, stand alone qualification – a national curriculum? Or is it for the sole purpose of ensuring that when other Training Package qualifications are delivered, systematic and appropriate attention is paid to developing the foundation skills that underpin both the qualifications and the standards of communication and cognitive performance that are expected in the workplace?

Of these two options, only the second is justifiable. Training Package qualifications, particularly at Certificate I and II levels do not currently address the development of either Core Skills or employability skills with any degree of effectiveness. In part, this problem derives from the construction of a Training Package around job-role competences. At lower level AQF levels, the job-role entails little autonomy and few opportunities to define the kinds of quite sophisticated communication and cognitive skills that are expected of all employees, including those who are at entry level in the workforce.

The limitations of the job-role impose a structural limitation on describing, and therefore teaching and assessing, a range of underpinning skills. For example, because an entry-level employee is not expected to operate autonomously it is difficult to identify the problem-solving skills they are expected to have or to develop. Such problem-solving skills will entail a combination of accurate observations, careful analysis, an understanding of power relations, an ability to ‘read’ the organisational environment, skilful communication competence (including the ability to negotiate in a situation where the individual is likely to hold little personal or institutional power), awareness of timing, and a capacity to accurately evaluate their own individual competence. These are skills that are far more complex than other attributes of job-roles at AQF level 1.

Foundation skills of this kind are not being systematically taught in vocational Certificates I and II. In fact, because of the constraints of developing curriculum through the medium of job-role description, no vocational qualifications teach the underpinning skills for the next level up. This is a systemic weakness. If the FSTP is conceptualised as a mechanism to address this systemic weakness, then it may be able

to make a contribution to improving outcomes from the vocational training system and at the same time help to achieve COAG targets for higher level qualifications.

On the other hand, if the FSTP attempts to replace all existing language, literacy and numeracy courses and qualifications with a single, one-size-fits-all qualification at Certificate I and II, then not only will this be deleterious to the quality of language, literacy and numeracy provision nationally, it will also prove to be the most enormous waste of public money.

It is very difficult to see how a set of specifications can be written that can address simultaneously the needs of all the learners identified as the target of the FSTP (page 3). Each of these groups of learners are characterised by having different language profiles and in respect of Core Skills these differentiations are of fundamental importance. In order to write effective language, literacy and numeracy curriculum for different groups or individuals who have different linguistic, educational, cognitive and social profiles, it is important to reflect these differences in the construction of the curriculum. Existing courses and qualifications reflect this diversity: the same qualifications are not used to teach speakers of other languages as are used to teach literacy and numeracy to people from an English speaking background who were unable to optimal advantage from the service they received at school. The most successful curriculum for Aboriginal people are those that are designed with the specifics of Aboriginal history, identity, locality, language and culture in the forefront.

We would advise that you conceptualise your project as one which can address the identified, systemic weaknesses of national vocational training products and the concomitant weaknesses in the national system for quality assuring outcomes from training and in the jurisdictional regimes for purchasing training.

As you point out in your Consultation Paper (page 6) the written specifications in any Training Package, including this new one, do not have the capacity to address implementation issues. Moreover, without significantly undermining the existing rules for Training Package development, it will not be possible to address a number of the issues you have identified.

*1 Are there other learner groups or other reasons for learners to use the Foundation Skills Training Package?*

The learner for whom this Training Package should be designed is a person who is already enrolled in a vocational (Training Package) qualification at Certificate I or II level. As outlined above, it is vainglorious to attempt to write a single language, literacy and numeracy curriculum that can be all things to all people. However, if the new FSTP qualifications are designed to be always delivered with a vocational qualification and in close alliance with vocational training then this environment would provide a legitimate means of contextualising course delivery.

- 2 *Is the proposed content appropriate for learner needs? Should there be more emphasis on employability skills, or vocational preparation component of foundations skills?*

It is difficult to see what purpose the two qualifications will serve unless it is to insist that every graduate of a vocational Certificate I or II qualification will also be a graduate of the FSTP Certificate I or II. If this were to become a requirement, it would ensure that foundation skills are systematically taught in entry-level qualifications. There are far-reaching implications for such a requirement. Nominal hours for Training Package delivery would need to be reconsidered and considerable human and financial resources be made available for increased delivery.

- 3 *Should the Foundation Skills Training package include 'high level' skill sets that provide pathways for career development, further training and/or higher education?*

There is a clear need to create course options to teach higher level maths for a range of qualifications including engineering, nursing, science and accounting. The same is true for communication and cognitive skills for management, dealing with a cultural diverse workforce, decision-making and complex problem-solving.

- 4 *Should more, or less vocational content be required? Should the qualifications allow for electives to be imported for accredited courses?*

No vocational content is necessary because the Certificates I and II should be designed for students who are enrolled in vocational qualifications. The challenge is to ensure that delivery systems and environments establish and support the kinds of collaborative partnerships between different curriculum specialists that will ensure relevance of FS teaching to the vocational qualification.

The FSTP qualifications should NOT be conceptualised as stand-alone preparation courses replicating or replacing the range of existing language, literacy and numeracy qualifications that are offered from Certificate I – IV. The jurisdictions and major providers have made significant investments in implementing these programs and there is no identifiable advantage in undermining this investment.

- 5 *Are the titles of these qualifications appropriate? Should an attempt be made to differentiate between foundation skills qualifications (through the use of bracketed titles) according to which elective groups are selected?*

The title is adequate. When the qualification is issued, it should always be issued with a vocational qualification.

- 6 *Are the proposed ACSF levels for the core units appropriate for the potential users of these qualifications?*

If these qualifications are to be used to ensure that all students enrolled in vocational qualifications, particularly in lower level certificates, then the proposed ACSF levels proposed for the core units are appropriate.

7 *What type of advice, guidance or supporting resources would be helpful to users of the Foundation Skills Training Package?*

The written specification must clearly show that the new qualifications are to be embedded in other Training Packages and are not to be used as a substitute for any other stand-alone language literacy or numeracy course.

Clear advice on the content-specific staff skills at post-graduate level must be given.

Advice on how specialist teachers of different kinds can most effectively work together to provide their students with effective teaching and improved outcomes will be useful. A recent report offering advice on this matter is attached.

8 *What are the barriers to importing foundations skills units into vocational programs? Are there mechanisms for delivering foundation skills units alongside vocational programs? What impact would the proposed packaging rule have on funding and delivery approaches?*

To ensure that all graduates from all vocational qualifications at Certificate I and II levels have had an opportunity to develop, and receive recognition for, appropriate foundation skills learning, the FSTP qualifications it must be made mandatory within all other Training Package qualifications.

9 *If foundation skills units and qualifications are to be contextualised for vocational requirements, who should deliver them? What approaches to integrated delivery, or collaboration between vocational and foundation skills practitioners would support the implementation of the Foundations Skills Training Package?*

Since foundation skills are largely language, literacy and numeracy skills (employability skills are not yet clearly enough defined) then the staff skills requirements must be consistent with requirements in other sectors: schools and TESOL. Appropriate, tertiary, content-specific post-graduate teaching qualifications must be required if value for public expenditure is to be assured and equitable outcomes achieved. Teacher quality has been identified in a number of key reports as the most significant factor in student achievement. Clearly language, literacy and numeracy skills are difficult to teach and difficult to learn: if they were easy to teach and learn, education systems would have more success in teaching them to a larger proportion of the population.

In Western Australia, where language, literacy and numeracy support has been systematically offered to students enrolled in vocational courses for more than a decade, a requirement is made for a team-teaching to be put in place. The requirement is a condition of funding and written within the course specifications. By conceptualising the FSTP as a dual enrolment for all other vocational qualifications—defining a single purpose—it would be possible to write into the specifications a requirement for the way it is delivered.

*10 How can learners' foundation skills needs be identified prior to the commencement of training? Are there systems that can be put in place to ensure that learners in vocational programs have access to foundation skills support if required?*

Is there really any need to ask this question? If the end users of the FSTP are students who are enrolled in Certificate I and II vocational qualifications, they are, almost by definition, unlikely to hold the educational qualifications that suggest that their foundation skills learning is 'complete'. Added to this, in asking this question the learner is framed as deficient and in need of being singled out from their more competent peers. This approach is unlikely to meet with any success in encouraging learners to undertake what they will understand to be remedial training. In adopting a deficiency approach in defining the problem, in effect the individual learner is being blamed for what is actually a systemic failure. The systemic failure of firstly schooling systems and secondly entry-level training products must be the focus of the problem solving. The individual who has been ineffectively taught (for any one or combination of a number of complex reasons) is not the site of the problem.

If this Training Package is to contribute to solving the problem of ineffective teaching, then it must be positioned as a change agent, not for individual behaviour, but for the way systems currently operate.