

Extract from NO MORE EXCUSES
AN INDUSTRY RESPONSE TO THE LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND NUMERACY CHALLENGE

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An industry response to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge

Setting learners up for success supporting training product users changing the mindset of employers and employees boosting VET system capacity investing wisely

Language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) are the essential underpinning skills that enable people to be productive in their work, to continue to learn and develop, and to participate fully in society.

This is an obvious statement, the truth of which has been recognised for decades. But it needs to be made, as progress to a satisfactory situation has been slow:

- Literally millions of Australians have insufficient LLN skills to benefit fully from training or to participate effectively at work
- The situation looks as if it could be getting worse, not better: the LLN performance of Australian students¹ has, over the past decade, worsened in comparison to other OECD countries
- Access to LLN expertise at the right time in the right way remains limited.

LLN issues and challenges manifest differently in different industries and workplaces, but some similar challenges are faced across all industries.

They include inadequately prepared workforce entrants, the challenges of an ageing workforce, increasing use of technology, increasing compliance requirements, and a demand for higher level skills. This represents a considerable list of potential barriers to learning and to an effective workforce.

The Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) believe that responsibility for building the LLN skills of Australians should be shared by industry and all education sectors. Nothing less than a co-ordinated response to the LLN challenge will succeed. To achieve this, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) should establish an overarching blueprint for action on LLN in Australia 2012-2022 to identify and address long-term goals that will profoundly shift the capacity of learners and the workforce and significantly impact our nation's future.

More immediately, within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system, ISCs propose:

- Better identification of the LLN skills of learners before training, and targeted funding to address identified LLN skill gaps
- The inclusion of clear advice on LLN skill requirements in Training Packages and/or their companion volumes
- The implementation of a strategy to develop greater national awareness of LLN issues, including the de-stigmatisation of LLN skill development
- An increased capacity in the VET system, and all practitioners, to support the LLN skill development needs of learners and workers
- Better-targeted solutions for building the LLN skills of workers/learners.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Recent results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey reveal that Australia has seen a decline in the reading and mathematics performance of 15 year olds between 2000 and 2009.

An industry response to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge THE CASE: ECHOES FROM THE PAST

Twenty years ago the first survey of adult literacy in Australia pointed out what many in industry already knew from their own experience: a significant proportion of Australian adults from both English-speaking and non-English speaking backgrounds could not read and write well enough to participate effectively in work or training.

Two further surveys of adult literacy, in 1996 and 2006, have since confirmed those initial findings. The enormity of these figures, representing approximately half of Australia's working age population, can have the effect of making the problem too overwhelming or difficult to comprehend. But when the complexity of literacy and numeracy demands in modern society is taken into account the figures are more easily understood.

More than 7 million Australian adults are likely to experience difficulty with reading skills

This does not mean that this number of adults cannot read at all. It means that the reading tasks required in work or personal environments are sometimes beyond the skill level of 46% of Australian adults. People experience difficulties, or make mistakes, reading and following instructions, communicating reliably via email or interpreting graphs and charts.

Nearly 8 million Australian adults are likely to experience difficulty with numeracy skills

Again this does not mean that people cannot use numeracy skills in their lives. It means that the numeracy tasks required in work or personal environments are sometimes beyond the skill level of 53% of Australian adults. People experience difficulties, or make mistakes, calculating correct change, recording accurate measurements, checking calculations against estimates.

Not all people assessed as having difficulty will find the same tasks challenging, and they may not make the same mistake every time, but they are likely to experience difficulty with some of the literacy and numeracy tasks they have to tackle.

It is important to remember that the language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) demands of work are not static so exactly what it means to read and write 'well enough' for the workplace is constantly shifting. The assessment of what this meant 20 years ago will be very different to what is required today. A move away from low-skilled work to greater knowledge-based work has increased the need for workers with good LLN skills. Rapid changes in technology have triggered the creation of new business models, systems and processes that require considerable, and ongoing, upskilling of the workforce. In addition,

the ageing of the Australian workforce has put pressure on employers to retain and re-skill older workers.

The adult literacy survey data also shows that:

About 2 million adult Australians are in the lowest literacy category

More than ever it is critical for Australia to not only raise the literacy and numeracy skills of those performing at the lowest levels but also raise the capacity of all Australians to fulfil their potential as learners, workers and citizens.

Many qualifications under the Enterprise Based Productivity Places Program are in competitive manufacturing. Business expectations around monitoring quality, reducing failures, dealing with variation and identifying process improvements are demanding LLN skills from workers who have not previously been expected to use these skills. Similar demands are being made of workers in Community Services and Health occupations where increasing compliance requirements are putting an emphasis on the quality of reporting.

Statistical analysis by Productivity Commission staff has estimated that an improvement in literacy and numeracy skills has a larger effect on workforce participation and productivity (as measured by hourly wage rates) than increasing educational attainment.

While some of the data is new, the overall message is not. Echoing through the last twenty years are recurring declarations of the importance of language, literacy and numeracy skills to the workforce and productivity.

There is undeniable evidence to demonstrate that poor communication skills adversely affect productivity in the workplace... productivity suffers as does our global competitiveness.

The levels and types of English language and literacy required in modern Australian society have increased dramatically. Economic restructuring has placed heavy demands on skills, and on education and training programs to develop those skills. English language and literacy is fundamental to the whole of the education and training effort.

We are living in a time of skill shortages arising from demographic and technological change and the proportion of jobs requiring vocational education and training qualifications is expected to significantly increase in the future, yet the capacity of many individuals to re-skill and up-skill is constrained by poor LLN.

Literacy and numeracy shortfalls have emerged as a major issue for employers as they evaluate their skills base against opportunities presented by the improving economy... more than 75% of employers responding to our survey reported that their businesses were affected by low levels of literacy and numeracy.

Language, literacy and numeracy skills are now recognised as fundamental to improved workforce participation, productivity and social inclusion.

The importance of foundation skills such as literacy, language and numeracy cannot be overstated. Poor foundation skills can be a major barrier for job seekers and for those wishing to up-skill. These core skills are crucial to higher educational outcomes — which in turn lead to higher workforce participation and higher productivity.

Links between Literacy and Numeracy Skills and Labour Market Outcomes: Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper

There has been no shortage of agreement about the significance of LLN skills to the Australian workforce, but astonishing little in the way of outcomes. Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) agree that now is the time for action. The current public and policy interest in foundation skills presents an opportunity for co-ordinated and strategic action to make real inroads into the national LLN challenge. There can be no more excuses: it's time to act.

What do we call them?

Over the last twenty years, language, literacy and numeracy skills have been frequently relabelled, often in an attempt to gain policy traction. Core skills, foundation skills, essential skills, key competencies, generic skills, basic skills, employability skills, enabling skills – a variety of terms has been used both officially and unofficially to encompass LLN, often in conjunction with other non-specific workplace skills like working in teams and self-management. Even when used independently, definitions of language, literacy and numeracy are slippery and can be the subject of fervent academic debate. Literacy has been defined in many different, sometimes contradictory, ways. Some definitions focus on the skills needed by individuals for work, education, social interaction and negotiation of everyday living. Others have a more social focus, and include the literacies for specific contexts and those which empower particular communities enabling them to challenge the status quo. How literacy is defined shapes the kinds of policies developed and the teaching/learning practices adopted.

10 Although the terms language, literacy and numeracy may be only narrowly understood by many Australians, they do at least have meaning. In contrast, terms such as employability skills and foundation skills always need to be accompanied by an explanation of the types of skills that are intended. ISCs understand LLN as enabling, context-sensitive skills that can be demonstrated over a continuum from basic to advanced practices. However they also recognise that agreed definitions will not provide solutions. Addressing the workforce LLN skill challenge will require action, not words. While individual industries, sectors and enterprises face specific LLN issues (as outlined in section 2), Industry Skills Councils believe that a number of broad challenges apply across the Australian workforce. Despite the efforts of many within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, at a system level LLN skill development has not been accorded the value, funding or attention that it deserves as an integral part of workforce development. Employers are increasingly reporting that they have LLN problems in their existing workforce and that the LLN skills of new recruits are inadequate. Research within Australia and from around the world confirms what Australian employers have been reporting. From the research and from on the ground experience, ISCs understand that the LLN challenge is complex and has many contributing factors. These factors include workforce and VET system realities as well as commonly held attitudes to LLN. By exploring some of the prevailing views about LLN it is possible to gain an insight into the complexity of the challenge and into possibilities for solutions.

“BLAME THE SCHOOLS”

Some employers feel let down by the school system:

This is system failure on a grand scale – industry should push back and say that they want students to come out of the education system with a certain level of LLN.¹¹

A recent project¹² looking at the maths skills of commencing bricklaying apprentices within a regional TAFE showed that:

- 75% could not do basic arithmetic such as adding numbers with decimals or subtraction requiring 'borrowings'
- 80% could not calculate the area of a rectangle, or the pay owed for working 4½ hours
- 20% could not interpret millimetre measurements from a centimetre/imperial calibrated tape measure.

While this is a strongly held view, the problem is of course far more complicated. Firstly, one-sixth of the Australian workforce was actually educated overseas.

But more importantly, there is a difference between school literacy and numeracy and the skills required in the workplace. Employers of apprentices frequently complain that:

Apprentices get high scores on the numeracy test, but they can't do the maths in the workplace – can't transfer to a new context.

In addition, the majority of employees left the school system 10, 20, 30 or even 40 years ago, and what was learnt at school is sometimes not sufficient to meet to workplace LLN requirements.

Employer representative at IBSA 2011 Environment Scan consultation, Brisbane, August 2010

Most recent data available: ABS (2007) Migrants, Education and Training Experience, Australia 2005

Employer at Ai Group National Workforce Literacy Project round table, Wollongong, August 2009

An industry response to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge Length can be measured in three common units – millimetres, centimetres and metres. Most trades use millimetres, but domestic tape measures use centimetres. Several different systems are used to mark millimetres and centimetres on standard measuring tapes.

Even when students have learned the units of measure in a maths classroom they can have trouble making the appropriate conversions in real work contexts

Length can be measured in three common units – millimetres, centimetres and metres. Most trades use millimetres, but domestic tape measures use centimetres. Several different systems are used to mark millimetres and centimetres on standard measuring tapes. Even when students have learned the units of measure in a maths classroom they can have trouble making the appropriate conversions in real work contexts.

A supplier of timber roof trusses and frames to the building industry in South East Queensland has partnered with local secondary schools to present practical maths classes that help students take the step from school into employment. Classes are conducted on the worksite using the timber and trusses to talk about trig, volume and length. Students discover the importance of maths knowledge in the real world and the enterprise gets a real buzz from seeing these non-maths theorists enjoying the concepts in a practical sense.

Recent results from the international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey¹⁵ suggest that schools are not succeeding in giving students the LLN skills they need for learning, work and life: they reveal that Australia has seen a decline in the reading and mathematics performance of 15 year olds between 2000 and 2009. In particular the survey shows that fewer Australian students are now performing at the highest levels. Australia is also unique among all participating countries in that students with an immigrant background in Australia now outperform students without an immigrant background.

ISCs believe that the declining results are consistent with concerns expressed by employers about the skills of workforce entrants.

Although Australia's overall results remain above the OECD average, there is an urgent need to arrest any further decline and to ensure that Australian students are developing the LLN skills that will equip them for an internationally competitive labour market. Schools need to ensure that students have the LLN skills that they will need for the future.

Responsibility for the development of adequate LLN skills for work or further study needs to be shared by all stakeholders – schools, employers and the tertiary sector. Effective collaborative approaches are essential at the local level but they also need to be supported by collaboration and shared goals at the system level. Nothing less than a co-ordinated response to the LLN challenge will succeed.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, PISA 2009 Results: What Students Know and Can Do – Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science, 2010

“JUST FIX IT”

In ISCs' experience, many employers take a pragmatic approach to workforce development issues. If there is a problem in my workforce that is impacting my business productivity then I need to do something about it.

This attitude is laudable and has allowed Australian businesses to flourish by taking proactive steps to overcome workforce skill gaps. Perversely, though, this self-reliant approach to addressing workforce LLN needs has the effect of hiding examples of effective solutions. Many of the businesses that just get on with fixing the issue don't realise that they have done anything special or difficult – it's all part of running a business.

While conducting Certificate IV level supervisor training, a Melbourne-based warehousing operation realised that LLN issues were preventing people from completing the training. Conscious of the need for effective outcomes from their investment in upskilling, the company immediately took a proactive approach to fix the problem. The manager spoke with employees individually to work out what the underlying issues were and find workable solutions.

One-on-one support was provided to help learners cope with the LLN requirements of the training, as well as extra study time and resources. Although it took an extra eight months for some people to get through, everyone completed the certificate and significantly increased their capacity to contribute to the workplace.

Sharing and showcasing examples of effective, individual business solutions for LLN issues are important for raising awareness and driving change for other enterprises and training providers.

“IT'S LOW LEVEL BEGINNER STUFF”

Skills can be acquired, developed, maintained and lost over the lifespan, making the relationship between skills and age complex.

LLN skills are developed over time and demonstrated on a continuum from basic to advanced skill levels, but this reality is not well understood outside the LLN field. ISCs are mindful of the difficulties presented by reskilling and upskilling, especially given the ageing of the Australian workforce.

Underpinning LLN skills are not only built prior to entry into the workforce but need to be continually built and updated over a lifetime and are an issue at every level of qualification.

ISCs have particularly noted the way that LLN skills can act as a barrier to progression into supervisor roles. The demand for new and higher LLN skills at supervisory level is common across all industries and poses a problem for workers who do not have access to appropriate preparation and support to build the newly required skills. Alternatively, LLN issues can arise after workers have been in job roles requiring low levels of LLN for many years, and like other skills, their LLN skills have deteriorated without use.

An assessor working in the forestry industry in Tasmania had aspirations of becoming a qualified trainer but was limited by his own LLN skills. Coming from a third generation logging family, the assessor had extensive industry knowledge and experience but without better reading and writing skills he could not complete the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment or work effectively as a trainer.

Determination to achieve his goal provided the incentive for the assessor to practice and develop his LLN skills until they were good enough to successfully undertake the Certificate IV qualification. The effort and reward of developing his own LLN skills also gives the newly qualified trainer direct insight into the way in which LLN issues impact on skill development.

All employers, employees, vocational trainers and others responsible for workforce development need to understand that LLN skills are an ongoing and integral part of workforce development. Currently this understanding is not aided by VET system funding mechanisms which focus almost exclusively on LLN skills at lower levels and ignore the development of high level LLN skills.

Employer at Ai Group National Workforce Literacy Project round table, Brisbane, August 2009

Willms, J. and Murray, T. (2007) Gaining and Losing Literacy Skills Over the Lifecourse, International Adult Literacy Survey, Statistics Canada

“NOT MY BUSINESS”

Experienced managers and trainers often do not see the literacy demands of roles because they are so embedded in the work.

Many employers do not see a direct connection between LLN issues and their own business.

Employers, of course, are not homogenous and they have widely varying views on LLN and training issues. However, there are some commonly held views that prevent a focus on LLN skill development.

These include:

- LLN skills are required for workforce entry and should already have been addressed elsewhere
- Low-skilled work roles do not require LLN skills
- Highly qualified workers do not require LLN skill development
- LLN deficits are individual failings that are private and potentially embarrassing for employees, the organisation should not draw attention to them
- It is not viable to ‘stop the workflow’ for LLN training.

In general, there is limited understanding, and limited real data, on the return-on-investment relationship between LLN and business outcomes. This is especially the case in industries with a highly educated workforce where problems with ‘low level’ skills are uncommon. An understanding of LLN as only low level skills, or very narrowly defined skills of reading and writing, can blind people to the real embodiment of LLN in the workplace.

A Melbourne-based chemical manufacturer identified the need to improve the LLN skills of key workers to address problems with communication breakdowns and productivity. Participants in the LLN skill building program included two production workers, a supervisor and an industrial chemist. The specific training objectives for each participant were based directly on the requirements of their job.

Through the program one production worker developed the numeracy skills to calculate amounts, volumes and yields, another production worker improved their clarity in spoken English. The supervisor improved reading speed and the ability to write toolbox reports, while the industrial chemist honed his ability to write and present unambiguous data reports for internal company use. Through the program the company’s management also developed a deeper understanding of the way in which LLN skills underpin work at all levels of the organisation.

Industries with safety and compliance requirements have more readily seen a connection between LLN and business goals. The avoidance of workplace accidents might be the most compelling reason for attending to LLN issues, but many others are also triggering greater attention. Organisations wanting to introduce change in the workplace – new business objectives, restructuring, new technologies, systems or processes – often find that workforce LLN skills are an impediment.

ISCs are conscious of the significant awareness raising that is needed to ensure that LLN issues are recognised in the workplace and addressed during all forms of training and skill development.

“LLN ARE OUT-DATED SKILLS”

Increasing requirements of regulation, accountability and proficiency in IT are putting more pressure on individuals in the workplace to develop their literacy skills. Those with low level skills are using a variety of strategies to cope including: avoiding work requiring LLN skills, relying on memory, increasing their use of technology to disguise skills deficiencies, and using colleagues and wider social networks to assist them.

There is a belief held by some VET stakeholders that the traditional paper-based LLN demands of the workplace are decreasing as a result of new technologies – GPS navigators, barcode scanners, speech recognition software, visual computer operating systems and video based communications. Employers are now focussed on the digital skills required by employees but few recognise that this is also a form of literacy.

Workplaces have two broad options for addressing LLN issues: build or bypass. The build solution involves building employees' LLN skills to meet the workplace LLN demands. The bypass solution involves modifying workplace processes to reduce the LLN demands. Often the most effective approach involves a combination of the two.

At a food processing plant in Queensland while conducting a training program to build supervisor and line manager LLN skills, a workplace-based LLN trainer noticed that important workplace documents needed simplifying for line workers to read them.

Workshops were held for a number of senior managers to emphasise the principles of writing documents in plain English so all staff could engage with the material. As the company's risk manager observes:

Sometimes the problem can be perceived as the reader's issue, but if you think about it – it is a two way thing. The writer has to think about the needs and skills of the audience.

A Sydney-based aged care provider with a high proportion of employees from non-English speaking backgrounds found that staff LLN skills were a barrier to meeting regulatory reporting requirements. While the organisation's long-term staff were highly valued for their experience and their ability to communicate with residents in their first language, many of these employees did not have recognised qualifications or the LLN skills to participate in vocational training.

Over a two year period, LLN support and skill development were provided to staff working across the organisation, in direct care, recreation, catering and administration.

With attention paid to their underpinning LLN skill development most staff were able to achieve relevant Certificate III and IV qualifications. The program resulted in a significant improvement in documentation and a tremendous boost to staff confidence and self-esteem.

The 'bypass' approach is also used in many industries during training and assessment, where assessment practices are adjusted to minimise LLN demands. In some cases this is done to accommodate learners with LLN difficulties, in others it is to replicate the LLN realities of the workplace. ISCs have noted that innovative approaches to reducing the LLN demands of assessment can sometimes raise problems during Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) audit processes. They may also fail to prepare workers for changing workplace requirements or for further training or career progression. It is likely that a combination of building and bypassing is also most effective in training and assessment practice.

“MY SKILLS ARE FINE”

The self-assessment approach to measuring literacy is usually regarded as unreliable.

ISCs know that getting participation in LLN up-skilling programs can be difficult. For many people in the workplace LLN difficulties have a stigma attached, making them something that must be disguised or

hidden. Workers are often unwilling to participate in LLN programs – although this is not always the case for people for whom English is a second language, for them there is less of a stigma because they have obvious and understandable reasons for not communicating well in English.

People can also be remarkably unaware of their own skill gaps. Many studies²¹ have shown that people are not good at judging their own LLN ability or skill needs. People develop, often unconsciously, personal strategies for overcoming their individual LLN barriers. In the workplace these coping strategies can mask LLN problems and work effectively until a change in workplace requirements or job role makes the strategies ineffectual.

Limited LLN skills can prevent people from taking up workplace training or development opportunities and from seeking promotion. The resistance or avoidance strategies used by people in these situations to avoid potentially embarrassing identification of LLN skill gaps, can sometimes be interpreted by employers as laziness or lack of commitment, which are then inappropriately dealt with as workplace discipline issues, creating even greater problems.

Given many employers' limited understanding of LLN, they are often incapable of explaining the benefits of LLN skill development to employees. Frequently there is an assumption on the part of employers and trainers that people understand the importance of improving LLN skills, but that is not necessarily the case. Employees have many demands on their time and they will place other priorities above LLN skill development unless the case for development is made clear to them and the skilling objectives are seen to be valued by the employer.

A large printing business in Queensland realised that improving teamwork and communication was vital for the introduction of the company's manufacturing excellence plan. Taking on the extra responsibility for meeting key performance indicators and achieving production targets would be difficult for some of the site's valued workers, many of whom had been with the business since completing their printing apprenticeships 20 years earlier.

The company adopted a gradual approach to the introduction of LLN training that was sensitive to workers' self-esteem and attitudes. The LLN trainer was on-site regularly to raise awareness and increase worker receptiveness to skill development. Inclusive approaches were used so that individuals were not singled out for remedial training and opportunities were maximised for one-on-one coaching. According to the company's HR manager:

"Analysing the characteristics of your workforce is important for creating a skill development program that delivers the desired result."

An underground coal mine in NSW embarked on a workplace-based LLN program with a view to improving communication, safety and productivity. The single greatest challenge for the employer was ensuring that workers on all shifts could access the training, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The solution was two-fold: management gave a clear message of support for the program by paying workers overtime to access the training either before or after their scheduled shifts; and the enterprise-based trainer offered a range of delivery modes to maximise access including one-on-one, small group, computer-based and self-paced approaches.

A local government in southern NSW instigated a long-term workforce development program to increase the number of staff with formal qualifications.

The organisation recognised that some of the outdoor staff targeted for participation in the Certificate III in Local Government (Operational Works) would need convincing to undertake a traineeship due to LLN difficulties and lack of self-confidence.

A twelve month workplace LLN program was used to prepare outdoor staff for the commencement of the traineeship. The LLN program helped staff get involved in learning by making it directly relevant to the workplace using toolbox meetings and onsite trainer visits. As a result the LLN program got trainees

off to a good start in the Certificate III by building their communication skills and breaking down their resistance to training at the same time.

ISCs understand that targeting people for LLN skill development is difficult and requires great sensitivity. Employers and trainers need to work together to develop inclusive, nonthreatening solutions, but even more importantly all stakeholders need to work to change the stigmatised view of LLN training. These skills need to be portrayed in a new light as complex, dynamic, universal and in need of continual updating to adapt to new technologies and everyday work and life requirements.

“DON’T CREATE BARRIERS TO ADVANCEMENT”

People with higher literacy and numeracy skills are more likely to participate in the workforce, be employed in more highly skilled jobs and earn more, compared with people who have lower skills. The competency based training approach used within the Australian VET system focuses on the achievement of workplace standards as an outcome from training. In the development of Australia’s national training framework there was a conscious effort to ensure that VET qualifications did not create barriers to advancement in the workplace or barriers to uptake for adult learners.

As a result, Training Packages and the qualifications they contain specify skill outcomes from training but they do not generally specify minimum LLN skill entry levels.

ISCs suspect that ongoing LLN skill development has been an inadvertent casualty of this approach. The built in not bolted on policy emphasised the importance of identifying and embedding the underpinning LLN skills into Training Packages. This policy makes sense when units of competency are interpreted as outcomes statements. However, when units of competency are used to guide skill development programs the open-ended approach to entry level skills means that building the skills required for competency may require an enormously wide range of time depending on the skills of the learner on entry. Even this in itself should not be a problem. Competency-based training is specifically designed to accommodate variations in learner background and preparation, however funding approaches based on a nominal duration of training did not change with the introduction of Training Packages.

The irony of this situation is that rather than being inclusive and supportive of learners from a variety of backgrounds, the system’s funding models have in fact set many learners up to fail.

An industry response to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge ISCs know that LLN skills are contextual. Often they are inseparable from vocational skills – such as in the development of communication skills for customer service – and their development at the same time as vocational skills is essential for meaningful learning. However, there is a need to differentiate between the application of LLN skills to new vocational purposes or settings and the development of the underpinning LLN skills themselves. ISCs are aware that the line between these concepts is fuzzy. The extent to which learners can develop underpinning LLN skills within a vocational training program will depend on the time and resources available and the VET practitioner’s skills.

More clearly highlighting the underpinning LLN skills required, as well as the way in which they must be applied in a workplace context, could assist the development of appropriate training solutions for individual learners and learner cohorts. This would need to be supported by a less rigid and more sophisticated funding model.

South Australia’s electricity distributor has been proactive in ensuring that power line workers have the LLN skills they need to stay safe. To combat skill shortages in the industry the organisation has recruited significant numbers of overseas workers. The organisation’s training services co-ordinator

found that while the vocational skills and professionalism of these recruits was exemplary, communicating effectively in English was an obstacle to their integration into the Australian workforce.

Trial Program

The Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) response was to implement a workplace language course designed to introduce new recruits to the Australian colloquialisms and language they would encounter in the workplace, helping them to overcome the language and cultural barriers of a foreign environment and develop the communication skills needed on the job.

A family-run retail group in South Australia recognised the need to bring staff up to speed with changing workplace demands such as WHS legislation and compliance. The employer also wanted to provide career pathways for casual employees to encourage them to stay with the business, but for many their limited education or non-English speaking backgrounds were a barrier to further training. Staff from non-English speaking backgrounds were enrolled in the course which has been a success and has helped casual staff transition into more permanent roles within the business, including as store manager.

“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. Evidence suggests that embedded LLN promotes learners’ progress and achievements on vocational programmes. Embedding LLN learning in a vocational context is particularly important for learners who do not immediately recognise their own need to develop LLN. ISCs believe that the LLN content of Training Packages has not been consistently well delivered through the VET system. Many vocational training providers lack staff with the LLN awareness or expertise to identify the LLN requirements embedded in training products, or to reliably pinpoint the LLN skill development needs of learners. Compounding this problem, access to practitioners with LLN expertise to assist VET delivery is limited for a number of reasons including:

- lack of LLN awareness among vocational training providers can mean that they do not always recognise a need to seek LLN advice or expertise – ISCs have also found that the issue of practitioner capability can often be more about insufficient pedagogical expertise to address the individual needs of learners, rather than a specific lack of LLN expertise
- there is a limited number of expert LLN practitioners, and an even more limited number willing and able to work in vocational areas –
- this is especially pronounced in regional and remote locations
- institutional structures and departmental budgets can limit the extent of cooperation and support provided across different business units in large RTOs
- many smaller RTOs cannot afford or access qualified LLN practitioners and do not include LLN competencies or courses on their scope of registration
- separate funding programs and mechanisms for LLN skill development and vocational skill development can make it difficult to integrate training using expert practitioners from both fields – this has been ISCs’ experience in relation to the Productivity Places Program and the Workplace English Language and Literacy program