



Government of Western Australia
Department of Training
and Workforce Development

Foundation Skills Policy Review

August 2023



Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Training and Workforce Development acknowledges Aboriginal peoples as the first sovereign Nations of Western Australia. We acknowledge their ancestral ties to the land and spiritual connection to Country. We acknowledge Elders both past and present, and value the contribution of Aboriginal people within our organisation. We support the Uluru Statement from the Heart and embrace its invitation to walk alongside Aboriginal people, united in a movement for a better future for all Australians.

The term 'Aboriginal' is intended to include reference to Torres Strait Islander people.

© Department of Training and Workforce Development

Postal address:

Locked Bag 16, Osborne Park Delivery Centre Osborne Park, WA 6916

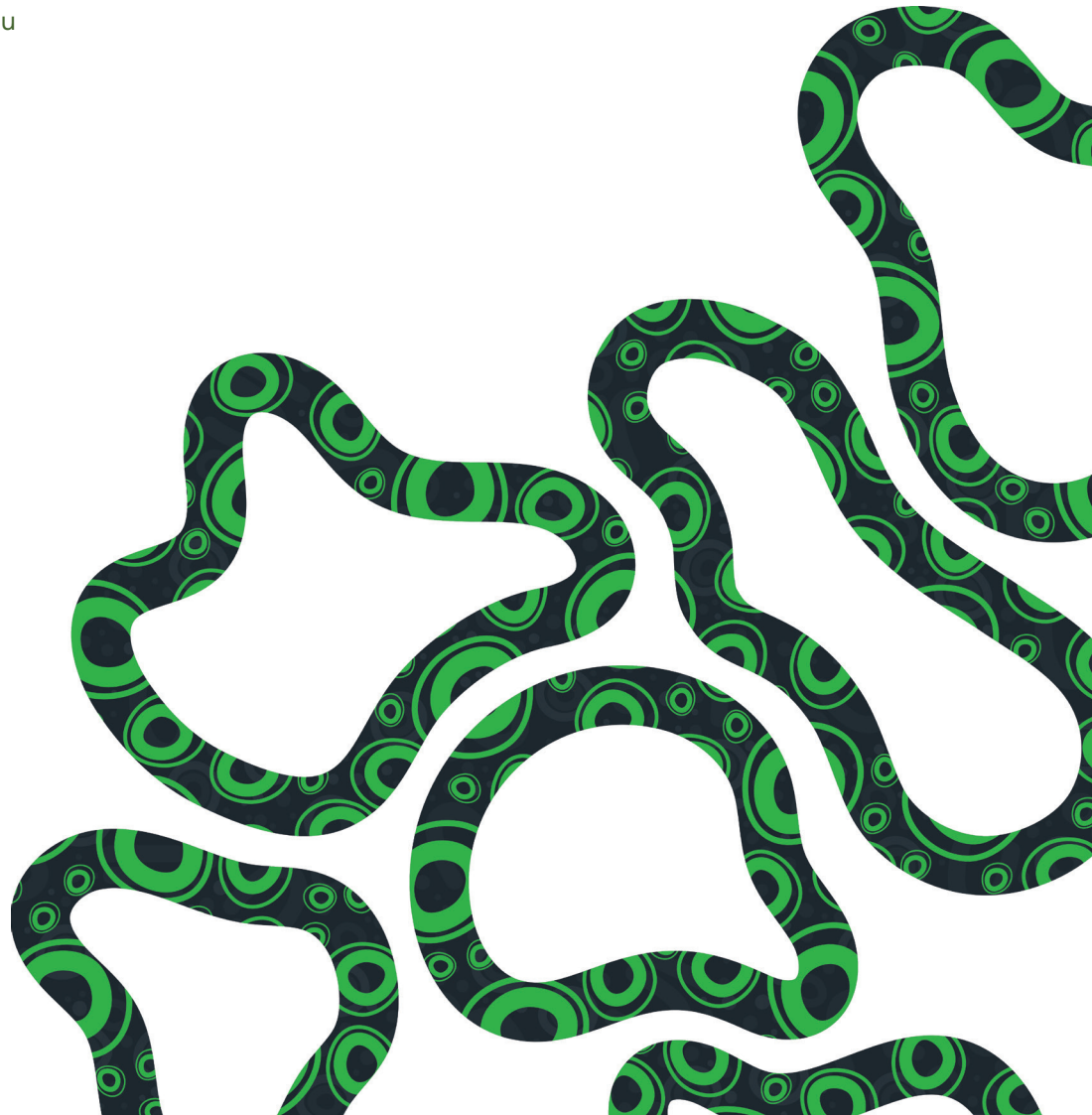
Street address:

Djookanup, 16 Parkland Road
Osborne Park, WA 6017

T: 08 6551 5000

E: VET.policy@dtwd.wa.gov.au

W: dtwd.wa.gov.au



Contents

4	Introduction
5	Foundation skills in the Western Australian skills sector
6	Data insights
8	Findings of the review
9	Foundation skills pathways
13	Assessment of competencies
17	In-class foundation skills support
25	Wraparound supports and services
27	Conclusion



Introduction

Foundation skills are core skills needed to thrive in work and life. These include English language, literacy, numeracy, digital skills, and skills required for the workplace such as teamwork, innovation, and problem solving. Foundation skills are typically developed in the early years and at school, and continue growing throughout life as personal and work circumstances change. New technologies, workplace design, social and economic change also require further development of people's foundation skills. Western Australians who experienced disrupted schooling are more likely to need focused support developing their foundation skills as adults.

The need for Western Australians to develop their foundation skills has grown in response to recent social and economic changes. The digital economy expanded rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic and many Western Australians now access services, connect with community and family, and do their shopping and entertainment online. Employers are increasingly seeking skilled workers and there are fewer entry level jobs available in the labour market. These changes mean many Western Australians need to further develop their foundation skills to remain connected with their community, improve their participation in the economy and support their personal wellbeing.

In recent years the foundation skills of Australian adults have become a national priority. The

Commonwealth Government released a report in 2022 that noted one in five Australian adults have literacy skills below the level required to operate effectively in the modern workplace.¹ This means three million Australians do not have sufficient literacy skills to function well in life and work. As a result, in 2023 the Commonwealth Government announced it would broaden access to foundation skills programs for Australians aged 15 years and over who are not enrolled at school, and provide place-based support for First Nations people to develop their foundation skills.

The Foundation Skills Policy Review (the Review) was initiated by the Department of Training and Workforce Development (the Department) in May 2022 to identify the foundation skills policy settings and supports required by Western Australians to achieve their training goals as the economy transitions.

The Review included 60 interviews and focus groups with 226 stakeholders in the skills sector including TAFE colleges, private registered training organisations (RTOs), students, the Training Accreditation Council (TAC) and representatives from Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments. A survey of 320 TAFE college students was undertaken throughout November and December 2022 and relevant program data and literature were analysed. The Review was completed in March 2023.

¹Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, *Don't Take it as Read: Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance*, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Commonwealth of Australia.

Foundation skills in the Western Australian skills sector

Many students need additional support to be equipped for the challenges of adult learning. For some students, enrolling in a foundation skills course is a valuable stepping stone to vocational training and qualifications. Entry level foundation skills courses provide learners with opportunities to build their confidence, study skills, literacy, numeracy and digital skills. The Department's *Participation Program* provides wraparound support for students at a disadvantage, including subsidised enrolment in entry level courses and assistance in transportation, childcare, and purchasing meals.

Some adults wish to develop their foundation skills outside of formal training environments within their local community. In Western Australia, access to pre-accredited foundation skills programs in the community is mainly provided through *Read Write Now* (RWN). RWN is a volunteer-based program developed in 1977, that has supported thousands of Western Australian adults to achieve their goals in literacy, numeracy and digital skills by providing access to trained volunteers who provide supportive, one-on-one tutoring in a community setting. The program supports around 500 adult learners per year with a network of hundreds of volunteers and is administered by North Metropolitan TAFE.

Many students enrolling in vocational training need assistance to meet the challenges of their coursework. Training packages and products can include a mix of basic and complex mathematical tasks, requirements to read complex text books

and industry standards, complete formal writing tasks and navigate digital learning environments. Students who have not been enrolled in education for some time, or who experienced disruption to their schooling, are more likely to need extra help to build their foundation skills and keep up with the demands of their vocational course.

The Western Australian Government has a history of innovation when developing foundation skills programs suited to vocational learners. It is well-recognised that foundation skills courses contextualised to reflect industry conditions are more suitable and successful for learners in vocational settings. For example, Western Australian students enrolled in nursing courses may be provided with an expert foundation skills lecturer who supports the successful application of mathematical formulae relevant to health and medicine.

The following Western Australian designed foundation skills programs are funded by the Department:

- *Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills* (CAVSS) was developed in 2000 and is an accredited course that provides 'team teaching' with a specialist foundation skills lecturer in class;
- *Course in Underpinning Skills for Industry Qualifications* (USIQ) was developed in 2008 and is an accredited course that gives students additional time to develop foundation skills; and
- RWN is a volunteer-based program provides one-on-one tuition for adults who wish to develop their literacy and numeracy skills.

Data insights

While standard foundation skills assessments are not currently mandated as part of the enrolment process, many private RTOs and TAFE colleges have introduced various assessments of competency. Program data considered by the Review was limited to records held by the Department, as well as a student survey. The results were also considered against qualitative data gathered from focus groups and other studies.



Strong growth in CAVSS and USIQ enrolments

Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) and Course in Underpinning Skills for Industry Qualifications (USIQ) enrolments grew strongly between 2013 and 2021 across a growing range of vocational courses statewide. There is particularly strong growth in enrolments in CAVSS and USIQ in Certificate IV and Diploma level qualifications. Key insights from the program data include:

- In 2021, 16 per cent of total publicly funded enrolments in WA were in CAVSS and USIQ (eight per cent each).
- CAVSS and USIQ enrolments have increased annually regardless of vocational training activity levels.
- In 2021, 26 per cent of vocational activity supported by a foundation skills course included enrolments in both CAVSS and USIQ.
- In 2021, 19 per cent of USIQ enrolments were for courses at Diploma level or above.
- A higher proportion of Aboriginal students and students with disability are enrolled in USIQ.





Female and younger students have lower confidence in their foundation skills

A survey sent to 320 Western Australian TAFE college students by email and text message in November and December 2022 asked students how confident they felt completing maths, writing, reading, and computer tasks before they started their course, compared to how they felt at the end of the year. The survey found that female students typically had lower confidence than male students, particularly in maths. Key insights include:

- All students were most likely to have low confidence in maths tasks compared to other tasks.
- More than one in four women (26 per cent) had low confidence in maths tasks prior to commencing their course, compared to just over one in 10 men (11.1 per cent).
- Younger people (aged 15–24) were more likely than mature students (aged 35 and above) to have low confidence in reading and writing before starting their course. They were also twice as likely to have low confidence in maths at the end of the year compared to older students.
- Many students' confidence in their writing skills saw substantial improvements by the end of the year, with 74 per cent of respondents expressing high confidence in writing tasks.



Assistance from lecturers helps students with their foundation skills

Students were asked about the types of assistance that help them with their foundation skills. 39.4 per cent reported that assistance from their lecturers was most effective. 25.0 per cent found support from other students the most effective, and 20.9 per cent found support from friends or family most effective.

76 students provided additional written comments to explain their response. The most common themes from students' comments included:

- praise for the quality of their lecturers (45 per cent)
- experiences of insufficient support and/or resourcing (17 per cent)
- praise for a positive learning experience (12 per cent)
- recognition of the importance of student support services in their learning (8 per cent).

Findings of the review

1 Foundation skills pathways

There are limited pathways in WA for adult learners whose foundation skills need further development to enter the VET sector or employment.

In many states and territories, a formally recognised Adult Community Education (ACE) sector offers foundation skills courses for adult learners in neighbourhood centres, libraries or other community-based locations. Students typically enrol in courses that help them re-engage in learning, connect with their community and gain some new skills. The ACE sector can also be a stepping stone for students to build confidence and study skills before moving on to vocational training or employment.

ACE supports learners to participate in their community and get involved in lifelong learning.² Many adults enrol in ACE courses to:

- gain a qualification and/or fulfil work criteria;
- gain or improve their employment prospects;
- progress their education goals, including helping their children with homework;
- achieve personal goals and self-confidence; and
- gain independence, success, health and wellbeing, parenting goals and/or social participation.³

A key feature of the ACE sector is a supportive environment to gain skills for life which can be particularly well suited to the learning needs of:

- youth at risk;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- culturally and linguistically diverse people;
- students with disability; and
- people who have been disengaged from formal education for an extended period of time.⁴

Commonwealth Government programs

The Commonwealth Government funds foundation skills courses delivered in the WA community and some TAFE colleges. These include the Adult Migrant English Program, which supports new migrants to develop English language skills, the

Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) and Foundation Skills for your Future (FSFYF) programs for adults. SEE and FSFYF programs have typically focused on supporting job seekers. This leaves a gap in training opportunities for adults born and/or schooled in Western Australia who need to develop foundation skills to meet personal needs and build confidence before moving on to vocational training and employment.

In May 2023, the Commonwealth Government announced it will remodel the SEE and FSFYF programs from July 2023 to enable Australians aged 15 years and over who are not enrolled in school to enrol in community-based and pre-accredited courses. The effects of this decision remain to be seen but this considerable expansion in eligibility to enrol in community-based foundation skills programs is likely to provide more opportunities for Australian adults to pursue their learning goals.

Read Write Now

Read Write Now (RWN) tuition supports Western Australian adults to achieve their foundation skills goals in an informal community setting. Common goals for participants in the program are learning to read to their children, write a Curriculum Vitae for a new job, or receive assistance with their vocational training coursework. RWN coordinators are based at offices throughout the Perth metropolitan area in Albany, Bunbury, Collie, Esperance, and Katanning. Volunteers and students are often based in smaller towns and locations outside these centres and are limited to online delivery.

Previous reviews and consultation with stakeholders found the following positive outcomes of RWN:

- Its person-centred approach focuses on individual goals with ongoing support from volunteers.

- Achievement of personal aims through goal setting.
- Increased confidence.
- Relationship development between students and tutors.
- Progression to further education and training as a result of participation.

Students and volunteers come to RWN with different foundation skills gaps so matching volunteers with students is crucial to success. There can be challenges with finding appropriately skilled volunteers who are able to meet the needs of the diversity of participants. As one program stakeholder described:



“A volunteer is not always confident or comfortable enough dealing with someone with a learning disability or learning difficulty, so they don’t want to. They want to volunteer and they want to help but they only have a specific skill set they feel they can contribute to the program.”

RWN is also more accessible in the Perth metropolitan area and southern regions of Western Australia. There are varied levels of digital literacy among both volunteers and students. Some stakeholders advised that RWN could be more inclusive and benefit more communities if it was supported by:

- providing more culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal participants;
- offering greater coverage statewide (as the program is focused on southern regions);
- including digital resources and more online delivery; and
- promoting the program more effectively within the community.

The role of TAFE

Many learners in Western Australia are referred to TAFE or private RTOs to develop their foundation skills and build their readiness for vocational training. The Review found that despite the growing need for community members to build their foundation skills and participate

in the modern economy, enrolments in foundation skills courses have declined between 2019 and 2021. Enrolments in foundation skills courses such as Wider Opportunities for Work and New Opportunities for Women saw declines over this period. However, there were sustained enrolments in the Course in General Education for Adults, which is commonly used to support young people at risk of disengaging from education and employment to enter training and build their confidence and foundation skills.

Learners who have not attained a Certificate III qualification are faced with greater challenges finding employment in the modern economy where skilled workers are in demand. In 2021, the unemployment rate for Western Australian adults whose highest level of education is Certificate I or II remained high at 19.5 per cent and the participation rate for this cohort was 51.4 per cent. For Western Australians with a Certificate III or IV qualification, the participation rate was 77.2 per cent and unemployment was low at 4.2 per cent. Foundation skills help people upskill, participate fully in life and work, and ensure they are not left behind.

It is not surprising in a high participation and low unemployment labour market context that more students would seek to enrol in vocational qualifications. Students who experience barriers to successfully participating in vocational courses are at greater risk of being left behind. The world of work also presents new literacy challenges, including using digital technologies. Staff at all RTOs consulted during the Review advised these barriers are best addressed in a supportive, adult-learning environment to avoid ‘setting students up to fail’ in vocational courses that exceed their capability. The following comment from a foundation skills lecturer at a metropolitan TAFE college summarises the issue.



“There are gaps that need to be filled in the community. There could be a successful workforce out there that can’t be released due to lack of foundation skills training, and because of lack of programs.”

There are examples of good practices across the skills sector where foundation skills programs are delivered in places community members feel safe and supported. One example of a successful outreach program is delivered by North Metropolitan TAFE at the Swan City Youth Service. Young people at risk of disengagement from learning and employment can enrol in a certificate of general education for adults that is customised to their needs and delivered on location. Learners also have access to recreational supports, mental health and social supports, and a low-stakes, confidence-building environment. Statewide, stakeholders confirmed the important role that foundation skills courses delivered in the community can play in building participants' confidence and capability to progress to vocational training and employment.



“There are opportunities in taking education to places like women’s refuges and delivering it in a recovery centre... it fits really quite well to take education services to these community services spaces.”

Foundation skills lecturer at a metropolitan TAFE college

²Ferguson, C and Merga, M 2021, ‘How can an adult literacy tutoring program help participants build confidence and meet their goals?’, *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, vol. 44, no. 1

³Windisch, H.C, 2015, *Adults with low literacy and numeracy skills: A literature review on policy intervention*, OECD Education Working Papers No. 123, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jrxnjdd3r5k-en>

⁴Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2022 *Don’t Take it as Read: Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance*, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Commonwealth of Australia

⁵Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census 2021.

⁶Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census 2021.

⁷Community Colleges Australia, National ACE Summit 5 April 2022, Foundation Skills Panel Discussion, Community Colleges Australia National ACE Summit 5 April 2022 foundation skills panel discussion - YouTube





Findings

1.1 In Western Australia, TAFE colleges are the main entry point for students whose foundation skills require development prior to engaging in further education and training, however enrolments in entry level courses are declining.

1.2 The Adult Community Education (ACE) sector is at various stages of maturity nationally, and Western Australia lags jurisdictions such as Victoria, South Australia, and New South Wales, which have embedded sustainable pathways that link pre-accredited training in ACE to employment and vocational training.

1.3 *Read Write Now* plays an important role providing community-based foundation skills supports for Western Australian adults, however there are gaps in its capacity to attain statewide coverage, attract and retain volunteers, raise awareness, and meet the needs of diverse cohorts including Aboriginal people and people with disability.

1.4 Commonwealth Government funded foundation skills programs (currently under review) play a role for eligible cohorts, however do not fill the gaps for adult learners to develop foundation skills in a low-stakes, student-centred community setting that builds confidence.



Recommendations

1 The Department to develop a foundation skills policy framework that defines the intent, scope and approach to supporting foundation skills development within the skills sector in Western Australia.

2 The Department to work with RTOs to strengthen the promotion and sharing of good practices that situate foundation skills training within community services e.g. women's refuges and youth centres.

2 Assessment of competencies

Assessment of foundation skills competency as part of enrolment can effectively identify support needs and goal-setting.

Assessing the foundation skills proficiency of students is a common feature of the enrolment process at many RTOs in Western Australia and nationally. The purpose of the assessment is usually to identify whether a particular course is appropriate for an individual, and/or to identify the range of foundation skills and other supports a student needs to successfully participate in their chosen vocational course.

Formal and informal methods such as using endorsed foundation skills assessment tools LLN Robot, the Basic Key Skills Builder, conducting interviews, setting short assessment tasks, and observation are used across the VET sector in Western Australia. Private RTOs are more likely than TAFE colleges to routinely assess the foundation skills competencies of students during the enrolment process.



“Generally with the pre-apps we find that in a class of fourteen, probably four have low numeracy.”

CAVSS/USIQ lecturer at a metropolitan TAFE college

There is a broadly held view across the sector in Western Australia that there is a growing gap between students entering VET with sufficient confidence and foundational skills versus those who are likely to struggle. As data on foundation skills competencies of students is not collected in Western Australia, it is not possible to ascertain the specific gaps and strengths of students over time. However, the student survey completed during the Review found that 20 per cent of young people aged 15–24, and 20 per cent of mature aged people 35 years and above, had low confidence in numeracy prior to commencing their

vocational course. Young students are almost twice as likely as mature students to have low confidence in their ability to complete maths tasks at the end of the study period. Female students are up to twice as likely to experience low confidence compared to males.

Nationally, there is a trend toward upfront assessment of foundation skills competencies as part of the enrolment process, to enhance allocation of supports and develop a learning plan that reflects the capability and goals of the student. A requirement for RTOs to review foundation skills as part of enrolment is included in new, draft *Standards for Registered Training Organisations* (RTO Standards) anticipated to be in place by 2025.⁸ South Australia and Queensland mandate assessment for access to subsidised training, and have developed examples of best practice, that include a flexible, student-centred approach.⁹

The Review found that in Western Australia there is a patchwork of approaches to assessment, including examples of best practice and some areas where there is no assessment of foundation skills competencies as part of the enrolment process. Staff at three TAFE colleges and five private RTOs described assessment processes that are in place and can include:

- identifying foundation skill needs of students;
- identifying the diverse learning, personal and health needs of students;
- increasing students’ awareness of their foundation skills levels;
- creating individualised learning plans;
- helping to allocate foundation skills supports, particularly CAVSS/USIQ; and
- referring students to student services or foundation skills programs as required.



Among RTOs delivering foundation skills assessments, the benefits described by stakeholders included the ability to discuss students' aims and goals, as well as their readiness for their chosen course and refer them to appropriate supports. It was also a valuable opportunity to identify the need for extra supports in class, such as CAVSS or USIQ.

Assessment tools were generally seen as a first point of contact rather than a full diagnostic assessment. A foundation skills lecturer at a regional TAFE college explained,



"No matter which Language Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) test you give, it's only a snapshot and it doesn't give a full picture of the students' abilities."

From this point of contact, students could identify whether they would seek assistance at a homework group, find a tutor, or attend extra tutorials if they were available. Foundation skills practitioners

delivering CAVSS or USIQ also used the information to design learning experiences for students that suited their needs.

Overall, statewide the enrolment experience ranges from a high-touch orientation process focused on identifying foundation skills strengths, challenges and support needs, through to completing a form where students can declare their foundation skills needs. The introduction of new RTO Standards that require foundation skills proficiency reviews is likely to provide greater consistency. However, the Review also found the importance of ensuring that any assessment is culturally safe and does not become a barrier to enrolment in suitable training.

Private RTOs commonly described focused assessment processes during orientation, comprising a formal and/or informal assessment and interview to confirm students' selected course was well suited to their aptitudes and goals, and to establish support requirements and referrals. The following example of effective practice included development of an individualised study plan.

Example of effective practice

Private RTO: Developing a holistic study plan based on student goals



"Before they go into the classroom we take them through an orientation induction session where we either do that over the phone, or I like to do it face to face with the student [...] It is saying to them, you know that the course is this long, that it has this [Nursing] registration requirement against it if you want to work at the end, so we let them know every detail that they need to know before even going into or tackling the course. [...]"

We get all the information extracted so that we can actually build a picture for that student to say 'you're going to have financial challenges [...] who's going to take your kids to school.' It's quite in detail and in-depth with the discussions that we have with the students. To do that we build a study plan, and that study plan follows them throughout the course. Now they're in control of that study plan, they're in control every step of the way. So we do referrals, we have a lot of access to external agencies, that's really important for us, we can't do all this on our own."

⁸Draft changes to the *Standards for Registered Training Organisations (2015)* would require RTOs to review the foundation skills of learners as part of enrolment and provide information about the appropriateness of training products to suit their needs. The changes are currently under consideration following public comment.

⁹For more information about the South Australia Upfront Assessment of Need (UAN) see the Department of Innovation and Skills, 2019, *Upfront assessment of need guidelines version 1.0 – 23 May 2019*, Government of South Australia, and for Queensland assessment process see the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, *Skills Assure Supplier Policy 2021-23 for Queensland VET Investment Programs*, Queensland Government.



Findings

2.1 Other jurisdictions require foundation skills competencies of students enrolling in accredited courses to be formally assessed.

2.2 The assessment of foundation skills competencies as part of enrolment is a feature of effective practice to identify support needs of students.



Recommendations

3. The Department to work with RTOs to promote and share examples of effective practices in the assessment of foundation skills competencies and development of individualised learning plans.

3 In-class foundation skills supports

In-class supports using CAVSS and USIQ are the main mechanism for supporting foundation skills for vocational course delivery with varying levels of quality and coverage statewide.

In Western Australia, students who are likely to need help with their foundation skills as part of their vocational training are most likely to receive this support in class as part of their vocational coursework. Up to 100 hours of CAVSS support per six months can be embedded in the course with a specialist foundation skills teacher who ‘team-teaches’ with the vocational lecturer. USIQ is a non-assessable course delivered as additional tutorials, extra time, or preparation for a vocational course. It is typically delivered by a vocational or CAVSS lecturer, with 250 hours permitted per six months to a total of 500 hours over a vocational course.

CAVSS and USIQ

TAFE colleges are the main providers of CAVSS and USIQ. From 2017 until 2021, CAVSS was delivered at only three private RTOs, and USIQ at one private RTO. Students are enrolled in CAVSS and USIQ based on an assessment that previous students have struggled with the subject matter, as well as by identifying individual students in need of support. Despite large increases in enrolments in CAVSS and USIQ at TAFE colleges, access to CAVSS lecturers differs by location.

There is a strong perception across stakeholders at the TAFE colleges that CAVSS and USIQ play a substantial role in improving students’ capability to progress through their vocational training and complete a qualification. As a result, one regional TAFE college embedded both CAVSS and USIQ in all vocational training. However, across the sector there are examples where CAVSS or USIQ are embedded in vocational courses and there is strong cooperation and collaboration with vocational lecturers, as well as pockets where there is little awareness about CAVSS or USIQ and their benefits. In regional areas, there is limited availability of trained CAVSS lecturers. As a

result, USIQ is often delivered by vocational lecturers as extra course time or additional tutorials. While this was generally described as useful and students value extra time with their vocational lecturer, it was also noted that many vocational lecturers do not have expertise in identifying foundation skills needs and addressing them.



“What I can tell you from witnessing it myself and talking to my lecturers, is that some of these students would not get through the course without [CAVSS] support. They just won’t complete it as they don’t have the knowledge in relation to LLN.

What we need to understand is TAFE, especially the trades, don’t just have students coming out of school. We have teenagers all the way through to adults who have been out of school for a long time.

Especially now with the skill shortage [...] there are people coming through as mature age learners who have been out of school for a long time, and now they’re put into a training environment which is totally new for them.”

Portfolio Manager at a metropolitan TAFE college

Delivery mode

+ More effective models

- Planned, contextualised support that assists the vocational lecturer to 'break down' concepts, identifying student needs and responding in-class, and modelling positive learning behaviours.
- 'Tag' teaching, where the vocational lecturer is absent from the class while the CAVSS/USIQ lecturer assists the class with foundation skills needs.

- Less effective models

- 'Hovering' by moving around the class to identify students who are struggling, and sitting down to work with them.
- Sitting next to an individual in class who has been identified as in need of support, and providing intensive support to them during class.
- Adopting a largely observational role and providing availability for students who seek out their assistance.

Team teaching is the preferred model for teaching foundation skills in the WA skills sector. The model is widely recognised as highly suited to adult learning in vocational settings. It does not require extra hours, which helps apprentices and their employers who must release them to attend TAFE. When delivered effectively, students are not 'singled out' by the foundation skills lecturer, but rather the whole class is assisted with the foundational skills required to be competent in their industry area.

The quality of team-teaching was described as largely dependent on the quality of relationships between CAVSS, USIQ and vocational lecturers. Having sufficient time to plan course delivery together was

also seen as a factor. Another element of quality delivery is the extent to which the foundation skills lecturer contextualises learning content to the vocational area.

Role of the lecturer

Vocational lecturers are widely recognised as a valuable support for students. Portfolio managers at all TAFE colleges, and training managers at private RTOs, noted that many lecturers provide significant additional support to students during lunch breaks, before and after class. This support was often provided regardless of whether the students were formally enrolled in a foundation skills course.

This was reinforced by the results of the student survey which found 39.4 per cent of students saw the assistance they received from their lecturer as the most effective form of support for their foundation skills. Recognition of the role played by lecturers was also the most common topic of additional commentary. Some students went on to explain the most valuable things that lecturers did to support them, such as:

- *"The lecturer going the extra mile after classes to assist in helping me wrap my head around the course".*
- *"I've received all the support throughout my studies if needed. If I didn't understand something each lecturer would offer assistance to help me understand what is misunderstood".*
- *"The support I received from my lecturers was amazing, they supported me in the classroom, prac rooms, and went above and beyond while [I] was on my clinical placement".*

Student survey data found that of the 151 respondents who were concurrently enrolled in CAVSS and/or USIQ, 25.2 per cent identified having an additional lecturer in class as the most effective form of support received. For this group:

- **76.3 per cent** are enrolled at a regional TAFE College;
- **23.7 per cent** identify as Aboriginal;
- **10.5 per cent** mainly speak a language other than English at home;
- **5.3 per cent** identify as having a disability or condition that affects their learning¹⁰.



Consultations with students who identify as Aboriginal ascertained that team teaching, is generally seen as an effective method of providing a culturally safe environment that supports the participation and engagement of Aboriginal students.

Workforce

The RTO Standards require VET lecturers to have a minimum Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.¹¹ To deliver CAVSS, lecturers must also have at least five years' experience teaching literacy and/or numeracy to students, including adults, along with a qualification in:

- adult literacy/numeracy teaching;
- primary school teaching;
- secondary school teaching (English, maths, science or special education); or
- Graduate Diploma of Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Practice.¹²

Professional development is also required to deliver CAVSS and RTOs are required to provide the CAVSS lecturer with:

- a mentor who is an experienced CAVSS lecturer;
- a copy of the *CAVSS Teacher Handbook*;
- a copy of the *Essential information about the CAVSS Business Rules*; and
- professional development designed to ensure the key delivery (including the CAVSS team teaching model) and reporting requirements are understood.¹³

The foundation skills workforce is concentrated in TAFE colleges in the Perth metropolitan area. Consultations with regional TAFE college staff identified a shortage of qualified CAVSS lecturers as a key driver for increased enrolments in USIQ. While shortages were described in metropolitan and regional locations, these issues were more acute in regional areas.

Digital literacy and access

CAVSS and USIQ do not have a strong, contemporary focus on digital literacy. Many lecturers reported that this is a gap that needs to be addressed. The Review found that both younger and mature age students often require substantial support with digital literacy to successfully navigate TAFE college systems, complete their studies, and prepare for the workplace. Two key themes emerged during consultations regarding the competency of students and staff to participate in digital environments:

- The myth that younger people or 'digital natives' have high levels of digital literacy versus the reality that poor literacy and numeracy, and barriers to accessing computers and broadband constrain digital literacy skills.
- While face to face learning remains important, there is an appetite for digital resources, innovation and upskilling that would enable trainers to provide authentic, contemporary learning experiences and build the skills of staff and students that are required for the digital economy.

The stereotype that younger 'digital natives' have superior digital literacy was not borne out by the Review. Rather, students with barriers to accessing digital technologies such as computers often had difficulties operating office software, email and file management. This was described as a common feature of students who may have been highly proficient navigating smartphone and other portable devices and applications.

Digital literacy and capability was frequently described as a learning need for staff as well as students. There is also a strong appetite in the sector for lecturers to upskill and provide improved digital literacy supports in vocational training through a focus on digital literacy. This would include enhanced capability to design learning experiences in digital environments that support readiness for participating in online services, the changing workplace, and the digital economy more broadly.



“We had [...] cohorts of students face to face and then we pushed over to an online platform. Some students made that transition, and some said, ‘I’ll come back next year’”.

USIQ lecturer at a regional TAFE college

Digital literacy is dependent upon access and exposure to digital environments, as well as explicit training in digital skills and various technologies. Currently, publicly funded courses that address basic digital literacy available in Western Australia include:

- USIQ module stream Using Digital Interfaces which covers a range of digital literacy skills that can be applied at various course levels, with some gaps such as emerging technologies, cyber security, social media, and artificial intelligence (AI);
- two fee-free digital literacy skill sets;
 - *Introductory digital literacy skill set* delivered at Central Regional TAFE; and
 - *Digital literacy skillset* delivered at Central Regional TAFE, South Metropolitan TAFE, and South Regional TAFE; and
- a fee-free *Introduction to cyber security skill set* delivered at Central Regional TAFE, North Metropolitan TAFE, and South Metropolitan TAFE focused on the IT industry in particular rather than broader foundation skills.

The digital literacy skill sets are entry level and focus on confidence-building, orientation to digital devices and completion of simple tasks such as creating documents and sending emails, operating office suite applications and safely searching on the internet.

Foundation skills courses are typically taught face to face, however in response to remote working practices and growth of the digital economy, it is unlikely to be feasible to limit training to this method.

Key themes from consultations with lecturers regarding the suitability of existing programs for developing digital literacy skills found that:

- digital literacy skills are under-serviced in current foundation skills courses;
 - USIQ digital literacy modules are often required to assist students at all levels, from those with severe digital literacy and access gaps to navigate TAFE college systems, as well as the capability to use a range of technologies; and
 - CAVSS modules do not sufficiently address the digital literacy skills relevant to the modern digital economy.
- many vocational and foundation skills lecturers believe their digital literacy skills and familiarity with digital technologies and capability to develop and deliver learning experiences in digital environments are not sufficient; and
- there is an appetite for online resource hubs that:
 - provide students with resources, learning modules, and assistance with their foundation skills; and
 - provide staff with a resource and collaboration hub that would enable them to upskill, share resources and teaching methods.

Teaching methods for face to face learning cannot simply be transposed to a virtual classroom. Successful online learning experiences often require full redesign of courses, and that trainers have access to skills and resources for quality outcomes in online learning.¹⁴

Nationally, innovative digital learning experiences through blended, online and/or virtual or augmented reality and simulated learning and workplace environments are growing in line with the pace of technological change. These experiences go beyond basic digital literacy instruction to include the foundational skills required for the workforce to develop broader, more sophisticated digital competencies that support the digital economy.

The Western Australian Government established the *Digital and Technology Skills* program to assist

Western Australians under-represented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics to develop technology and digital skills. Other jurisdictions have leveraged the VET sector more broadly to create digital innovation. For example:

- TAFE NSW Digital Learning Lab uses emerging technologies to develop ‘next generation immersive learning content and strategy’;¹⁵
- Digital Innovation Futures Victoria curates and showcases the State’s ‘technology culture’ by curating events, resources, collaboration opportunities and partnerships;¹⁶
- Victorian Government’s *Skills Plan 2022-23* includes a digital innovation action plan delivered in partnership with TAFE to identify new skills and models for delivery;¹⁷
- Queensland Government’s *Digital Professional Workforce Action Plan* includes subsidised training, micro-credentials and analysis of VET sector offerings;¹⁸ and
- Tasmanian Government’s \$114 million investment in a dedicated *TasTAFE Virtual Campus* to expand access to training, alongside a 10-year innovation strategy.¹⁹

Consultations with lecturers throughout TAFE colleges frequently referred to a need for more professional development opportunities to bolster the capability of the workforce. A comment typical

of lecturers’ concerns about their capability with online pedagogy came from a vocational lecturer at a regional TAFE college:



“I would need a lot more training in [online delivery] to make that more beneficial to our [students]. I don’t know that I do it as well as I do classroom delivery.”

Foundation Skills Training Package

The nationally recognised Foundation Skills Training Package (FSK) is delivered in the skills sector nationally, and is the main accredited foundation skills course used to support vocational course delivery. The course aligns with the Australian Core Skills Framework and is typically delivered as specific units of competency suited to the needs of students enrolled in a vocational course. FSK can be delivered by specialist foundation skills practitioners, and by vocational lecturers who have completed a relevant accredited skill set.

FSK has not been publicly funded for the skills sector in WA given the successful embedding of CAVSS and USIQ in vocational programs since their inception in 2000 and 2008 respectively.

¹⁰ The figures provided do not add up to 100 per cent as some students fit multiple categories and are therefore counted more than once.

¹¹ Under Clause 1.13 to 1.16, all VET trainers require a TAE40116 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment or its successor or TAE40110 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment plus the following units: TAELLN411 (or its successor) or TAELLN401A, and TAEASS502 (or its successor) or TAEASS502A or TAEASS502B or a diploma or higher level qualification in adult education. See Chapter 4 – Training and assessment, ‘Users’ guide to Standards for RTOs 2015’ Chapter 4—Training and assessment | Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), Australian Skills Quality Authority.

¹² Department of Training and Workforce Development 2021, Business Rules for 52823WA Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills effective October 2021, Government of Western Australia, CAVSS business rules 2021 (dtwd.wa.gov.au)

¹³ Department of Training and Workforce Development 2021, Business Rules for 52823WA Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills effective October 2021, Government of Western Australia, CAVSS business rules 2021 (dtwd.wa.gov.au)

¹⁴ Commonwealth Government, (2023), Strategic review of online learning: Final report, Australian Skills and Quality Authority, p. 27. Available from: Strategic review of online learning (asqa.gov.au).

¹⁵ Available from: TAFE Digital Lab | TAFE Enterprise - TAFE NSW.

¹⁶ Available from: Digital Innovation Futures Victoria (dif.vic.gov.au)

¹⁷ Available from: Action 7: Create innovative solutions to support future skills development | Victorian Government (www.vic.gov.au)

¹⁸ Available from: Priority 1: Developing Queensland’s digital workforce | Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy (chde.qld.gov.au)

¹⁹ Available from: The future of TasTAFE | TasTAFE.





Findings

- 3.1** Since 2013, enrolments in CAVSS and USIQ have increased in Western Australia, with dual enrolments in both CAVSS and USIQ representing 26 per cent of this activity in 2021.
- 3.2** The uptake of CAVSS and USIQ is uneven across the sector and concentrated within TAFE colleges. The courses are fully embedded in some courses such as the Diploma of Nursing, yet there are sections within TAFE colleges with little awareness or uptake of CAVSS and/or USIQ.
- 3.3** The effectiveness of CAVSS and USIQ team teaching is associated with learning that is contextualised to the industry area and embedded in the vocational program.
- 3.4** Digital literacy gaps are common across cohorts enrolled in vocational training and impacted by access to digital technologies.
- 3.5** There is a perceived need for the Western Australian VET workforce to upskill to meet the increasing demand and complexity of digital environments.
- 3.6** Jurisdictions such as Victoria and New South Wales have established initiatives to optimise digital learning delivery and support the readiness of students to contribute within the digital economy.
- 3.7** Among Western Australian VET sector stakeholders consulted, there is limited awareness of the Foundation Skills Training Package.



Recommendations

- 4** The Department to work with sector representatives to identify foundation skills program options, including future options to reaccredit CAVSS and/or USIQ, to ensure students enrolled in vocational courses have access to contemporary, evidence-based supports delivered by staff with expertise and experience in embedded, contextualised foundation skills programs.
- 5** The Department to collaborate with relevant agencies and sector representatives to identify options for enhancing digital course delivery, access, and resources to assist with the development of digital literacy and capability of students and staff to better reflect the digital economy, workplace expectations, and future jobs.

4 Wraparound supports and services

Students seeking support services on campus often present with foundation skills and other personal needs.

RTOs provide support services to assist students to achieve their training goals. In Western Australia, TAFE colleges receive funding to provide additional support for students with disability and Aboriginal students, with allocations based on their respective shares of enrolments for those student cohorts. Supports often include drop-in services, mentoring, library services, and pastoral care. In regional areas and smaller RTOs, these services are often provided by staff with additional job roles.



“We sit down [...] and help them with whatever they need, study skills, foundation skills, their assignments. It’s not basic LLN, it’s help with assessments, and procrastination, students getting overwhelmed. So in the first instance I’ll say bring what you’ve got, let’s lay it out on the table and see where everything is due, and [we’ll do] organisational planning. That’s where I find students get overwhelmed, and then we back it up with a tutor.”

Student services staff member at a regional TAFE college

Across the sector, a broad range of TAFE college students commonly present to student support services seeking assistance that includes foundation skills supports. Student support services often provide study skills programs within orientation, and referrals to services such as Jobs and Skills Centres. There are case examples of effective practice across the sector, where students can access culturally safe, inclusive, informal services that address pastoral care and support needs, enabling students to focus on their training goals.

Statewide, student support services staff members described increases in students presenting with diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health conditions. The issue was described as particularly common among young students, which aligns with findings that 39.6 per cent of youth aged 16–24 reported a 12-month mental health disorder between 2020 and 2021.²⁰ Across cohorts, addressing these issues was seen as key to students’ capacity to learn. An effective strategy used by regional RTOs was to partner with local community service providers to provide referrals to services, dependent upon service availability.



“We’ve got homework clubs, industry specific homework clubs, mentors, culturally specific mentors, we’ve got CAVSS and USIQ we embed into classes. I feel as an organisation we are offering so much, but maybe we’re terming it wrong - the uptake of it in certain areas is poor and then it is seen in some of their results.”

Vocational lecturer at a regional TAFE college

Barriers to accessing student support services include, eligibility constraints, distances to travel in regional and remote areas, a lack of online resources, work and family obligations, and for younger people, a stigma associated with seeking help. Student support services staff, including in regional locations, noted a need for provision of online supports and resources to support students.

²⁰Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2022), *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2020-21*. Available from: *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2020-21* | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au).



Findings

- 4.1 RTOs are required to provide student support services to respond to the needs of learners, with a primary focus on access and equity.
- 4.2 The range of student support services provided differs across the sector with fewer services available at smaller TAFE campuses and providers.
- 4.3 Student support services in other jurisdictions include expertise in foundation skills diagnostic assessments and support for vocational lecturers to respond to foundation skills needs.
- 4.4 RTOs reported an increase in demand for student mental health supports.



Recommendations

- 6 The Department to work with RTOs to identify delivery models that effectively and efficiently enhance access to foundation skills supports and expertise for students and staff.

Conclusion

The Review found that the need for foundation skills supports in the West Australian skills sector and broader community is substantial and likely to continue growing. There is a significant opportunity to revitalise and strengthen the focus on foundation skills in Western Australia.

The recommendations of the Review address the following drivers of change:

Drivers of change

Declining foundation skills competencies among people entering the VET sector

Prioritisation of foundation skills nationally in response to economic change and the importance that no one is left behind

Shortages in the foundation skills workforce in WA, particularly in regional areas

The need for foundation skills support in community settings

Changing economic needs including fewer entry level jobs, transition from legacy industries such as coal and forestry, growth in the digital economy, automation and mechanisation.



