

Anita Roberts, Innovation & Business Skills Australia

ACAL – key note address

VET + LLN = Together Forever

Primarily I've been invited to talk to you about the development of the Foundation Skills Training Package – and I will... but I think that the Foundation Skills Training Package is just part of a much bigger story about the relationship between LLN and VET.

[SLIDE]

And so that's what I'm going to talk about. It's a story that can probably be told a lot of different ways. My version is really a love story...

[ROMANCE]

In the turbulent economic climate of the late 80s and early 90s LLN and VET first really noticed each other. This period marked the beginning of thinking, especially by policy makers but also by employers and educators, about LLN in relation to the skill needs of the workforce – linking LLN skills to workplace productivity and vocational competency.

There were policies and studies and reports... there was a lot of passion, but the obsessive element of the relationship was short-lived and the initial excitement died down as the economy picked up.

[COMMITMENT]

Nevertheless – the passion might have gone, but in the mid to late 90s LLN and VET developed greater clarity on what they each wanted and started to make formal declarations about the importance of the other. There seemed to be a willingness to be together for the long term.

Built in not bolted on was a mantra that seemed to imply long-term commitment and mutual respect between VET and LLN.

[NOT HAPPILY EVER AFTER]

Heading into the new century the cracks were starting to appear. Onlookers perceived that the VET/LLN relationship was a bit unequal. Maybe VET didn't always give LLN the respect it deserved, maybe LLN hadn't done enough to work cooperatively with VET. Maybe they are just from different ideological backgrounds and the divide was too great to overcome.

Contributing to their woes was a complete lack of policy response to the outcomes from the 1996 Survey of Aspects of Literacy... and the uncomfortable feeling that maybe other couples – across the ditch – were happier and had more to show for their relationship.

[COUNSELLING]

Perhaps prompted by results from the 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey, but more likely triggered by economic conditions again, the last few years have seen a lot of introspective self-reflection from VET and LLN – both individually and together. There have been various reviews and evaluations. Counselling has been offered by many interested parties with well-meaning experts providing advice and recommendations on what should be done to improve the relationship.

[GIVING IT A GO]

And this is the point that I hope we have reached now... taking on board some of the counselling and recommendations and trying to change things for the better. By aiming for a

closer and more equal relationship between VET and LLN there is the opportunity to learn more about, and from, each other; to document shared aims and collaborate to achieve them; to plan together using and valuing the specialist skills of each party.

So, given that we've reached the present, I'll just step outside the love story here to talk in a bit of detail about the Foundation Skills Training Package. IBSA has been developing the Training Package over the last 12 months – I think we were just starting consultations around the time of the ACAL conference last year. The aim is for the new package to be endorsed before the end of this year.

What my story has been trying to show is that the Foundation Skills Training Package hasn't come out of nowhere. For nearly 20 years there have been real efforts to ensure that the workforce is equipped with the language, literacy and numeracy skills that underpin vocational performance and vocational pathways. In that time we've come a long way in acknowledging the importance of these skills and in describing them in various frameworks and training products, but we still don't seem to be very good at ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to develop them.

LLN practitioners have done a lot of fabulous things within VET and in support of VET but they haven't yet carved out an established place in the system. Funding regimes in particular don't seem to support the regular involvement of LLN practitioners in VET and therefore don't cater for the LLN needs of VET learners.

The aim of the Foundation Skills Training Package is to make it easier for training providers to package VET programs that include the vocational and LLN skills development that learners need.

In developing the Foundation Skills Training Package IBSA has acknowledged that mechanisms do already exist to achieve these aims. Numerous accredited courses provide pathways into vocational training and a number of Training Package qualifications at lower levels include units that can be used to build learners' LLN skills. Some funding arrangements make use of the Certificate in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) or provide entitlements to Learner Support that allow additional opportunities for LLN support to be provided to vocational learners.

Despite all that, there is evidence to suggest that these solutions are not always available to the learners who would benefit from them, and that they are not understood by, or even on the radar, of all RTOs.

So, how will the Foundation Skills Training Package make support for foundation skills development within vocational training programs more widely available?

[SLIDE WITH DOT POINTS]

1. [CLICK] Awareness – A nationally endorsed Training Package is more visible to a wide range of RTOs than existing accredited courses. There is more likely to be some consideration given to how the Foundation Skills Training Package could be used in vocational programs.
2. [CLICK] Accessibility – As a nationally endorsed Training Package, the content of the Foundation Skills Training Package will be publicly available on training.gov.au. Potential users will be able to look at it and think about how they might use it. There will also be no licensing fees to use the Foundation Skills Training Package, only the costs associated with registration to have the Training Package on scope.

3. [CLICK] Connection – Because it’s a Training Package, the Foundation Skills Training Package will be better understood by Industry Skills Councils than accredited courses. Units from the Foundation Skills Training Package are more likely to be referenced or drawn on in the development of future industry qualifications or implementation advice to RTOs – increasing the likelihood that foundation skills content is packaged into vocational programs.
4. [CLICK] Relevance – The Foundation Skills Training Package is designed specifically to support the achievement of vocational outcomes. All of the Training Package content, including the companion volumes and support materials, is written with the aim of explaining to RTOs how the package can be used to support learners in achieving vocational competency.
5. [CLICK] Usability – Widespread consultation with potential users across the VET system has informed the development of the Foundation Skills Training Package. Potential barriers to implementation have been identified and will be monitored during the first 12 months of the implementation process to inform an early review of the package. The review will commence in 2014.

The Foundation Skills Training Package includes three qualifications and nearly 100 units of competency.

[SLIDE - QUALIFICATIONS]

The qualifications are designed to provide vocational preparation and pathways into vocational training. They will most likely be accessed by learners who are outside the workforce. Each of the qualifications includes core and elective units. The core units in each qualification are aligned to the Australian Core Skills Framework: the first certificate I has core units aligned to ACSF level 1, the second certificate I has core units aligned to ACSF level 2 and the certificate II qualification has core units aligned to ACSF level 3.

Each of the qualifications complies with the flexibility rules so electives can be imported from other Training Packages, from accredited courses or from within the Foundation Skills Training Package. Elective choice is important for tailoring the qualifications to the specific needs of learners. Electives can be used to contextualise the qualification for particular vocational areas, they can also be used to build core skills at ACSF levels above or below the core units.

[SLIDE – UNITS]

The primary purpose of the Foundation Skills Training Package is to make foundation skills units available for use in a wide range of contexts within the training system. The units describe foundation skills – including learning, reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy, digital technology, problem solving and planning and organising – across a range of levels. The units are not aligned to an Australian Qualifications Framework level because they are designed to be packaged into vocational qualifications at a variety of levels depending on the foundation skills development needs of the learner and the demands of the vocational program.

The units are designed to be contextualised to match the underpinning skill requirements of specific vocational areas. While they have been aligned to the Australian Core Skills Framework, they don’t cover the whole of the ACSF. The Training Package is not intended as an ACSF assessment tool because its focus is purely on supporting foundation skill development for vocational outcomes. The units are therefore narrower than the whole of an ACSF level in any given core skill.

[SLIDE – IMPLEMENTATION]

Expertise required for delivery must include vocational and foundation skills. If foundation skills are going to support vocational pathways, there must be involvement by practitioners with vocational expertise – and, of course, practitioners with expertise in developing foundation skills will be necessary. There is not an easily identifiable qualification or experience that defines this required expertise – it will vary depending on what foundation skills content is being used (high level numeracy, digital technology, oral communication, learning skills, etc). It will also vary depending on the needs of the learner.

Through the consultation process, many people pointed out that learners who need to develop foundation skills have complex support needs. This is true, but not in every instance. Some learners who need to develop their foundation skills – particularly at the higher levels – have reasonable learning skills and self-confidence... they simply need more time or specific instruction or practice opportunities to build their skills to the level required for vocational competency. The Foundation Skills Training Package is supposed to give learners the chance to do that. The expertise of LLN practitioners won't always be needed at every point of the implementation process – instead there will need to be a collaboration throughout the planning, design, implementation and evaluation stages with the LLN and vocational practitioner playing different roles depending on the nature of the program.

Vocational practitioners understand vocational competence. They often know when foundation skills are preventing learners from achieving vocational competency. Sometimes they know things that would help to address the problem, but time and resources often prevent those things from being put in place. This package is designed to help that situation.

But we will need even more vocational practitioners who know when foundation skills are preventing successful outcomes and so capacity building will be crucial.

IBSA is developing an online resource to support the implementation of the Foundation Skills Training Package. Much of the content is aimed at vocational practitioners to raise their awareness of foundation skills and their relevance to vocational training. The resources give vocational practitioners advice on the types of adjustments they can make to their own practice and advice on how to work collaboratively with foundation skills specialists.

[VIDEO]

Of course, capacity building will also be needed for the new roles that foundation skills specialists will take on. The skills to:

- understand vocational programs
- support vocational practitioners
- collaborate with VET practitioners to design integrated training and assessment programs.

The final version of the Foundation Skills Training Package will be available on the IBSA website early in October. The online resource and advice publications will be finalised over the next few months so that they are ready when the package is endorsed in December.

[INTO THE SUNSET]

And if we try to look into the future, I hope we will see steady, close companions with a shared history and a shared outlook – maybe there'll be a danger of growing too much alike, or taking one another for granted... but with little chance of abandoning one another because VET and LLN will have grown too inseparable.