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Jobs and Skills Australia
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
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By email: foundationskillssurveyteam@jobsandskills.gov.au

Dear Foundation Skills team,

Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) Foundation Skills Study Discussion Paper to determine the intent and desired outputs of the foundation skills study, including scope, coverage, use of the results, and the most appropriate options for achieving this within the timeframe and resources available.

UA is the peak body representing Australia's 39 comprehensive universities. Universities provide education opportunities to a range of students at different life stages and backgrounds. However, universities are not specific foundation skills providers and, therefore, we have focused our response on the questions pertinent to our sector.

Universities, as tertiary education institutions, play a critical role in educating the nation's future, and provide a range of programs and projects that build off and, in some cases, facilitate foundational skills development for adults. For example, universities provide pathways programs, outreach programs and other projects to engage students and potential students from a diverse range of backgrounds. Whilst universities are not specifically set-up to provide foundation skills development for literacy, numeracy and digital skills in formative years, they do provide opportunities for foundation skills development leading up to university and during university.

While the paper proposes aligned definitions with the OECD for literacy, numeracy and digital skills, we believe they could be better aligned to Australia's context while reflecting other definitions currently in use within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Australian curriculum. In particular, we would like to highlight the need to include an oral communication component within the definition of literacy. While the current definition limits literacy to a purely written component of communication, an oral component better captures the importance of effective communication and reflects diversity in different populations, particularly Australia's Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Furthermore, JSA could consider a broader cultural and linguistic definition of literacy and numeracy that accounts for Australia's cultural and linguistic diversity. While for the purposes of international comparisons, English language definitions will remain important, for domestic purposes a broader approach could be considered to realise the diversity of Australia's cultural foundation skills more fully.

It is important to recognise the unique histories of Australia's Indigenous peoples and Australia's multicultural populations, whose cultures and histories emphasise oral history and oral communication as a

core aspect of identity. Additionally, an oral component has already been implemented in the Australian curriculum, which reflects Australia's learning environment and would provide a more holistic view of literacy for JSA to consider.

We support the proposed definition of numeracy, which is derived from a combination of the one provided by JSA, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. To measure digital literacy, JSA could use the measures outlined in the UNESCO 'Recommendations on Assessment Tools for Monitoring Digital Literacy within UNESCO DLGF' (2018). The UNESCO Institute for Statistics also offers measures that build on this document, noting the importance of a measurement set that uses a combination of self-assessment, knowledge-based assessment, and performance assessment.

An example definition could be: 'Digital literacy is the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately digital technologies — both hardware and software — while also using digital information to solve problems and handle security and safety challenges created by technology'.

Aligned with recommendations made by the UNESCO 'Recommendations on Assessment Tools for Monitoring Digital Literacy within UNESCO's Digital Literacy Global Framework (2019) we recommend that JSA measure digital literacy based on self-reporting, similar to the Danish Digital Competence Wheel and Dutch MDS, responses on a 3-5 point scale - none, basic, advanced. The test duration should not exceed 15-20 minutes, and automatic assessment should be provided for all items. The test should be piloted with a range of states and territories and include a reasonable number of participants to validate the outcomes through a dedicated steering group. In responding to Australia's context, an oral examination could be considered as a mechanism to accommodate a diverse range of peoples and backgrounds.

A knowledge-based test (similar to France's Pix test that combines multiple choice and interactive elements) for items ranked higher by respondents in the self-reporting stage could be included. This knowledge-based test should align with an evidence-centred assessment design approach. JSA could adopt a software architecture (or a similar direct data transference model) for evaluating digital literacy similar to France's PIX platform, which provides direct data to a database. This software should allow users to take the test on a diverse range of devices as well as the opportunity for users to generate their own portfolio of learning. This could help develop a user's sense of development over time while providing a platform for the 'badging' or microcredentialing of skill sets over time.

Data to support these tests must be reflective of the Australian context and take into account a range of factors including:

- Educational attainment to help identify the relationship between formal education and foundation skills.
- Demographics such as age, gender, cultural and linguistic diversity, and socioeconomic status to provide important socio-cultural and equity-based information.
- Employment and income to help identify the relationship between foundation skills and economic outcomes.
- Workforce data to inform the development of tailored foundation skills programs, including the recognition of a shared approach to developing Australia's future through co-investment programs with workforce stakeholders.
- Program outcomes of Australia's current foundation skills programs to inform future programs.
- Impact analysis to provide cost and benefit information for program development and delivery, and the expected return on ensuring all Australians have at least the minimum foundation skills competencies necessary to have equal opportunity in Australia.

We recommend that the creation of a specific platform should be considered alongside the longevity of the program and the return to the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) test (when possible). While universities do not specifically use PIAAC data to measure adult literacy, they use a range of admissions practices to help universities address socio-cultural inequalities that may be inhibiting people from accessing university. Information on adult literacy can be used to reinforce pathways programs into university for certain groups of people or to generate outreach programs to support school students prior to leaving school.

Additionally, many universities offer a range of foundation skills programs, short courses, microcredentials, and pathways programs to support the development and communication of foundation skills. These programs are often used as credit towards another program or can be used as a guarantee to another program. Furthermore, these skills are developed during the course of a student's university life and reflect the critical skills necessary for employment. These are reflected in the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), whose data points could also be useful in surveying people's literacy, numeracy and digital skills competencies.

Given the information provided, it is clear that there are various options for determining the intent and desired outputs of the foundation skills study. The scope of the study should take into account the unique histories and cultures of Australia's Indigenous and multicultural populations. The coverage should include self-reporting and knowledge-based assessment, as well as performance assessment, and should be piloted with a range of states and territories to validate the outcomes. Validation, prior to large-scale implementation, is necessary to ensuring the considered impact of the survey and the policy, program, pedagogical and workforce implications the survey could have down the line.

Universities, through their normal admissions practices for pathways programs, also provide a unique data point for evaluating foundation skills and experiences according to an admissions standard – the Higher Education Thresholds Standard (2021), which sets out certain requirements for entry into university, among other things.

To support the collection and analysis of this data, and to ensure programs are collaboratively developed with relevant stakeholders, we recommend that JSA work closely with foundation skills and tertiary education providers to gain a greater pipeline understanding of how foundation skills are managed, assessed and built upon at different life stages and for different purposes.

Determining the intent and desired outputs of the foundation skills study is a complex task that requires careful consideration of various factors. However, with the right strategies and approaches, it is possible to measure and improve foundation skills in Australia, and to ensure that all individuals have the skills they need to fully participate in society and reach their full potential. Thank you for considering these ideas, and I look forward to hearing your thoughts and feedback.

Regards,



Catriona Jackson
Chief Executive