NCVER

Whose responsibility? Employers' views on developing their workers' literacy, numeracy and employability skills

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Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Whose responsibility? Employers' views on developing their workers' literacy, numeracy and employability skills—Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1989.html>.

To find other material of interest, search VOCED (the UNESCO/NCVER international database <http://www.voced.edu.au>) using the following keywords: employer, employability, literacy, numeracy, staff development, workplace learning.

About the research

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Whose responsibility? Employers' views on developing their workers' literacy, numeracy and employability skills by Ray Townsend and Peter Waterhouse

In any discussion of labour supply and labour productivity, the importance of literacy, numeracy and employability skills (such as communication and problem-solving) should not be overlooked. Very few jobs can be performed properly without these skills.

Whose responsibility? Employers' views on developing their workers' literacy, numeracy and employability skills by Ray Townsend and Peter Waterhouse explores the views of those employers already engaged in the provision of literacy, numeracy and employability skills and their continuing development in the workplace. The research focused on the question of who should be responsible for providing employees with the requisite skills. As discussed in the report, Townsend and Waterhouse argue that the solution to this issue relies on a collaborative effort: education and training providers and employers working together for the benefit of individuals and their organisations.

Key messages

- It is not realistic to expect the education and training system to provide employers with job-ready applicants, complete with all of the literacy, numeracy and employability skills required by employers.

- The employers surveyed all recognise the need to develop and continue to enhance the literacy, numeracy and employability skills in their employees.

- Many individuals with relatively high qualifications, even professionals, need to develop or build on their literacy, numeracy and employability skills. What they need to learn will depend on the evolving nature of their jobs.

- Training providers need to be able to equip employers with the skills for identifying literacy and numeracy gaps and to provide education 'infrastructure' services, such as contextualised educational design. This will encourage the continuation of literacy and numeracy learning in the workplace.

Readers interested in the provision and development of literacy, numeracy and employability skills in the workplace should also see *Thinking beyond numbers: Learning numeracy for the future workplace* by B Marr and J Hagston (NCVER 2007). This research reinforces the message that employees respond well to learning within their work context and to the opportunity to apply their learning at work.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

Informing policy and practice in Australia's training system …

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Executive summary

Debates about literacy, numeracy and employability skills and attributes are a recurring feature of the national discourse on effective education provision. This qualitative study investigates how industry perceives, identifies and addresses issues relating to literacy, numeracy and employability skills, and explores the implications for policy and practice in workplaces and in adult and vocational education.

This project was prompted by our awareness of recurring concerns and criticisms expressed by employers and employer groups about their apparent inability to recruit employees with what they perceived to be adequate skills for employment. The requisite skills claimed to be missing or inadequate included literacy and numeracy skills and teamwork, problem-solving and communication skills. These had variously been identified as 'key competencies' (Mayer 1992) and 'generic skills' (Kearns 2001) and bundled with certain personal attributes were known as 'employability skills' (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002).

Defining the clusters of skills and attributes that were the focus of this study is not as easy as might be assumed. The various definitions attached to adult literacy and numeracy skills, as well as employability skills, are complex and contested. Literacy, for example, is more than a basic ability to read and write.

The issues of definition are discussed in the introduction and in an accompanying support document. Suffice it to say here that our interest was in how employers anticipated these skills would be used in their particular workplaces. We were interested in actual practice and in their experiences 'at the coalface'.

Framing the problem

This project was initially framed in terms of the provision *or* development of these skills. By *provision* we were referring to all education and training programs which prepare individuals for work in schools, universities, and the vocational and adult education and training sectors. By *development* we meant those policies, procedures and systems that employers put in place to improve or enhance the skill levels of their employees.

Put simply, we wondered whether it was realistic to expect that the education and training system should provide employers with job-ready applicants, complete with all of the literacy, numeracy and employability skills that employers might want. We wondered whether the perceived problem could ever be solved entirely on the 'provision' side of the equation and whether the continuing *development* of these skills by employers might not also be an issue. Our approach was also informed by two interrelated bodies of knowledge.

First, recent research has highlighted the extent to which literacy in particular, but also numeracy and employability skills, are highly value-laden and defined by their context. Contemporary theory has shifted from an understanding of literacy as a single dimension and fixed, to an awareness of multi-literacies (New London Group 1996; Lonsdale & McCurry 2004). The plurality of literacies (and numeracies and employability skills) raises questions about the particularity of these skills in any given context, such as a workplace. It further raises questions about how feasible it is to

develop such skills outside the environment in which they are to be utilised. This understanding of multi-literacies is further discussed in the report and in the support document.

Secondly, as practitioner–researchers with substantial experience in workplace settings, we were aware of how these skills may be contingent or latent. They may be present in the workplace but not demonstrated and, consequently, not developed. There may be a complex web of historical, political, industrial, cultural, and managerial reasons why skills available in the workplace are not utilised. Virgona et al. (2003, p.53) note that these skills do not flourish if the environment is not conducive: 'The nature of these skills is that even when "present" they may be invisible, innate or inactive, like desert seeds waiting for the right conditions to sprout'.

This understanding gave us further reason to explore employers' perceptions. Perhaps conditions for demonstration and development *within the workplace* were as relevant as concerns about the outputs from the education and training system. While we recognised that the provision *or* development dichotomy was false, it served to highlight questions of interest.

Contributors to the study

Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 27 employer representatives from the community services and health, local government and manufacturing sectors, and group training companies. The participating organisations were taking an active interest in addressing these issues within their workplaces. The findings of the study are undoubtedly influenced by the purposive sample of interested employers contributing to the study.

Findings: The need for provision *and* development

The contributing employers did express concerns about the education and training system's *provision* of literacy, numeracy and employability skills. However, these employers also recognised the idiosyncrasies of their own businesses and that the training and education systems have difficulty providing 'ready made' workers on demand. As a consequence, they accept responsibility for the continuing development of the literacy, numeracy and employability skills of their own workforces. For them, it becomes a case of *provision and development* being equally important.

The employers were committed to building learning organisations. They worked to implement workplace systems that demonstrated values of inclusiveness, employee support and lifelong learning. In other words, people were not excluded (on the basis of language, literacy, ethnicity or gender, for instance), but rather they were included as much as possible and encouraged to extend their learning and development. Not only did these principles work at the policy level, but employers incorporated these values into daily work practices so that they became the norm.

The employers recognised that creating an environment of trust and confidence for the learner was crucial for successful demonstration and continuing development of these skills. They identified formal and informal mentoring and support systems as important. In these respects this study confirms the findings of earlier research (Figgis et al. 2001; Dawe 2002, 2004).

These employers recognised that the rapidly changing nature of work provides ongoing challenges for individuals and enterprises: skills need to be constantly updated and new sets created. The workplace change themes we discussed included technological innovations, pressures of globalisation, new work practices, auditing and compliance expectations, pressures for continuous improvement and 'lean' work processes. Most employers interviewed were proactive in the face of these challenges. Importantly, they also reported that active efforts to build workplace systems and cultures to promote the continuing development and demonstration of essential skills *improved organisational performance and enhanced their bottom line*.

The lack of essential skills, such as literacy skills, was sometimes identified amongst professional and higher-level employees. There were university graduates who were perceived to be 'unable to write' (what was required) and qualified engineers who were perceived to be lacking essential employability skills and attributes. Such findings are, however, consistent with the concept of multi-literacies and the idea that skills must be 'fit for purpose' within the particular workplace culture and context. It's more about 'fit' than 'level'.

The study also found that, where candidates demonstrate a positive attitude, enthusiasm, a strong 'work ethic' and a genuine interest in the work, employers may forego literacy and numeracy employment criteria during recruitment, particularly if they face labour shortages.

Implications

The continuing and rapid changes in the economy pose challenges for employers and for education and training systems alike. While most of the employers in this study took full advantage of what the education and training system was able to offer, including Australian Government funding for Workplace English and Literacy (WELL) programs, they are still looking for support.

The developmental issues to be addressed pose challenges for teaching and learning. It is not simply a matter of providing more literacy, or numeracy, or employability skills per se. The challenge is in identifying and designing appropriate cost-effective and innovative ways for the necessary skill development to continue within the 'fit' of the workplace.

For employers, the challenges lie in building effective learning organisations that actively promote and enable the necessary skills, including learning-to-learn skills. This involves developing enabling and facilitation skills amongst managers, supervisors and team leaders, as well as enhanced learning capability amongst shop floor employees. Workplace culture and relationships, as well as work systems, resources, and the working environment, also play a vital role.

For education and training providers, there are challenges in continuing, expanding and improving provision to meet these skills needs as far as possible *before* learners become workers. Yet, however well this is done, it is unlikely to be sufficient. There are further challenges in how educational services and the theories related to teaching and learning can be integrated into workplaces. This involves new skills for many educators in interpreting the requirements of work, workers, and workplaces; contextualised educational design; consulting and advisory services; and in understanding the place of literacy, numeracy and employability skills, both within the fabric of working life and beyond it. There are considerable professional development implications in these challenges.

For governments, policy-makers and policy managers, the challenges lie in finding and funding ways to support the necessary diversity of approaches to the provision of these skills, *as well as* their continuing development in workplaces. At least some employers are indicating that they recognise and accept their responsibilities for the continuing development of these skills. The leadership of these employers needs to be appreciated, and they need support. However, while employer requirements are important, it is naïve to assume that these will always correspond to the needs of their employees. Ideally, policy should reflect the understanding that these skills are necessary for work *and life*. Adult and vocational education providers need support to continue diverse forms of provision and to develop, market and deliver new products and professional services to facilitate the continuing development of essential skills in the workplace.

Introduction

Provision or development?

This study set out to explore how employers perceive, identify and address the literacy, numeracy and employability skills issues within their workplaces. We were interested in these issues, in employers' understandings of them, and in the implications of their understandings for policy and practice in workplaces and in adult and vocational education.

This project was initially framed in terms of provision *or* development. By *provision* we were referring to all education and training programs which prepare individuals for work and which take place in schools, universities and the vocational and adult education and training sectors. By *development* we meant those policies, procedures and systems that employers put in place themselves to improve or enhance the skill levels of employees.

Passionate debate on these issues of education and employment has waxed and waned over the years (Edwards 1990; Brown 2004). The popular press regularly headlines the 'literacy crisis' (for example, Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2005; Pearson 2006), while politicians reiterate concerns about falling standards in schools (Nelson 2004).

Bessant (1988, 1990) has shown how such popular and mass media expressions of concern over the perceived 'literacy crisis' are closely aligned with significant shifts in social, political and economic circumstances rather than with shifts or declines in educational standards per se. We were mindful of recurring criticism of the educational system for its apparent failure to provide graduates with skills to match employers' expectations. However, we also appreciated the complicated nature of the issues and recent research, some of which is discussed below, suggesting fresh understandings of these skills.

In the following section we discuss contemporary research-based understandings of literacy, numeracy and employability skills. Given these recent understandings, we wondered whether it is still reasonable to expect the education system to provide all of the necessary skills.

Traditionally we have thought of the need for a foundation of 'basic skills'. The education system has been perceived as the provider to deliver this simple solid foundation. The unquestioned metaphors of 'foundation', 'provision' and 'delivery' have underpinned our education and training system. However, we began to wonder whether these systemic metaphors and the assumptions they carry might need to be reconsidered. If so, what are the implications for policy and practice in workplaces and in adult and vocational education?

We were also mindful that the skills which are the focus of this study may be present in a workplace but, for a range of reasons, may be neither demonstrated nor developed. These latent skills may represent substantial potential. However, if they remain undemonstrated, undeveloped and underutilised, they are hardly likely to be making a very substantial contribution to the workplace.

Hence we had a particular interest in whether and how employers were acting to release latent skills. Is the workplace an effective place for the development and demonstration of literacy, numeracy and employability skills?

In order to explore this question we argued that it was essential to better understand employers' expectations and their understandings of the issues and challenges. There was a need to get to the 'nitty gritty' of employer expectations, to the grounded, practical level, where employers, adult worker–learners and some adult and vocational educators have their concerns.

Investigation of employers' perceptions of vocational education and training (VET) and qualifications had revealed that employers do not necessarily share the perceptions of vocational educators or place the same value upon training and qualifications (Waterhouse et al. 2005; Ridoutt et al. 2002). Similar dynamics, we thought, may be at work in relation to literacy, numeracy and employability skills.

The proposal provided a design to engage groups of employers in dialogue on these issues. Our target groups of employers were in manufacturing, community services and health, local government, and group training companies. We were interested in their perceptions and in their workplace actions to address the development of these skills. Our premise was that adequate *provision* will always be problematic and we might be better served by giving more attention to the workplace *development* of these capacities.

Research questions

Our inquiry was informed by the following primary research questions:

✧ How do employers understand the literacy, numeracy and generic/employability skills requirements of their own workplaces and the current arrangements for the provision or development of these capabilities?

✧ How well (or to what extent) do employers' perceptions and understandings reflect contemporary research findings about the nature of adult/workplace literacy, numeracy and generic/employability skills?

✧ What are the consequences and/or implications of employers' understandings of these issues?

These questions suggested further subsidiary questions such as:

✧ How do employers make their judgements about these capabilities with respect to work and workers?

✧ How do employers' understandings affect their judgements about the current provision(s) for the development of these capabilities?

✧ What role do their understandings play in enabling and/or disabling capacities to address literacy, numeracy and employability skills development within the workplace?

✧ What potential exists to facilitate and encourage the development of these skills within workplaces? What are the constraints to realising this potential?

✧ From the point of view of employers, what strategies, models, resources and/or programs might be developed and/or improved to enhance the provision, growth and demonstration of these capabilities?

✧ What are the implications of these findings for workplaces and for VET and adult and community education (ACE) policy and practice?

Issues of definition: A pragmatic and holistic view

As already noted, the issues of definition for these skills are not as simple as many people might assume. Recent research, both in Australia and overseas, has highlighted the complexity and multiplicity of 'literacy (and numeracy) in the new millennium' (Lonsdale & McCurry 2004; McKenna & Fitzpatrick 2004; Adult Learning Australia 2004; Krusche & Yeomans 2005). Various studies have

shown that it is no longer helpful to think of literacy and numeracy capacities as simple decoding or calculation skills, which are foundational, discrete, autonomous and generic by nature. Such studies have included those looking at ethnic communities (Miralles 2004), Indigenous communities (Kral & Falk 2004), rural and regional settings (Hayes, Golding & Harvey 2003) workplace settings (Gowan 1992; Sefton, Waterhouse & Deakin 1994; Waterhouse & Virgona 2004; FitzSimons et al. 2005; Jackson 2004) and new technologies (Snyder, Jones & Lo Bianco 2005).

Put simply, the shift is from understanding literacy as a single, static foundational skill to understanding that people use language and texts in diverse ways, according to their differing contexts, purposes and values. The talk is of multi-literacies, rather than a single or universal literacy, and each literacy is laced with values, culture and politics (Street 1984; New London Group 1996; Lonsdale & McCurry 2004). As Meek (1991, p.231) pointed out, 'there is no single, neutral literacy that contrasts with illiteracy, or non-literacy … only a continuum of social practices on which social attitudes depend'.

Lonsdale and McCurry (2004, p. 5) note similarly, that:

> The research shows that literacy has no single or universal definition and that its meaning has changed over time from an elementary 'decoding' of written information to a range of more complex and diverse skills and understandings.

Furthermore, Waterhouse (1999) highlighted how differing theoretical and philosophical approaches to education and learning tend to generate quite different conceptions and practices of literacy—and therefore what is deemed adequate or satisfactory. A behaviourist orientation to learning and training, for instance, tends to see literacy mechanistically—as a value-free set of discrete skills and sub-skills associated with coding and de-coding text. A humanistic orientation to learning sees literacy learning more in terms of personal growth, empowerment and identity formation—a way to enable learners to find their 'voice' and develop their meanings. While adopting a critical approach to learning, we see literacy shift again; it becomes a means for social and political change. Such a critical orientation leads us to writers such as Freire (1983, p.10) who emphasises the dynamic relationship between reading the word and reading the world: 'Even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world'. Each orientation carries its own values, purposes and judgements.

Although such research suggests the complexity and the plurality of literacies, Lonsdale and McCurry (2004, p.38) point out that there appears to be a mismatch between the understandings of researchers and those of policy-makers.

> Despite the research that shows literacy to be situated social practice, government policy currently is more closely aligned with the concept of literacy as a set of foundational and, by implication, transferable skills.

It was against this complex, contested, and sometimes contradictory background that this study sought to investigate the understandings Australian employers hold about workplace literacy, numeracy and employability skills, as they apply in their workplaces. We adopted a grounded, pragmatic, and holistic approach informed by recent research on these issues. The understandings informing our approach are discussed below.

On workplace literacy

By a 'grounded' approach we mean our focus was on the practical interpretation and utility of these skills as they were perceived by employers in their workplaces. Virgona et al. (2003) noted how discussion of generic and employability skills is inevitably complicated by the different positions which stakeholders adopt within the debates being played out in the field. With respect to literacy, numeracy, generic and employability skills, there is a policy rhetoric which is inevitably couched in abstract terms. At the policy level these skills are clearly important. However, what they actually mean on the ground, in practice, in a workplace is, as Stevenson (1966) pointed out, 'not the same'

as the abstract conception carried in policy. We were more interested in the meanings carried on the ground than the abstractions of academic or policy language.

In this sense our approach was also pragmatic. Most employers are not particularly interested in, or engaged with, the subtleties of academic (or policy) debates about classifications or definitions of skills. They are concerned with the realities of their workplaces. Hence we talked in practical ways about their own understandings of work-related reading, writing, numeracy and communication requirements. We offered our informants a 'broad blank canvas' and invited them to paint us their own 'picture' of these skills in action.

However, our own understanding of workplace literacy was consistent with Hull's definition. This reflects a contextualised view, appreciating that literacy is tied to language, purpose(s) and workplace relations.

> To be literate in a workplace means being a master of a complex set of rules and strategies which govern who uses texts, and how, and for what purpose. [To be literate is to know] … when to speak, when to be quiet, when to write, when to reveal what was written, and when and whether and how to respond to texts already written. (Hull 1995, p.19)

Note that such a view also sees literacy as a socio-cultural process which is tied to 'reading the world', at least the world of the workplace, in the manner discussed by Freire above.

On workplace numeracy

Similar observations have been be made in relation to workplace numeracy. Many commentators (Buckingham 2003; Kelly, Johnson & Yasukawa [eds] 2003; FitzSimons et al. 2005; Balatti, Black & Falk 2006) have noted how numeracy in and for the workplace is also situated and shaped by culture, context and circumstances in various ways.

We noted above that we also tended to adopt a holistic view of these skills in action. So numeracy was not considered as discrete, entirely separate from literacy. In workplace practice, these skills are often used in conjunction with one another. To address a work problem or complete a workplace task might entail gathering and analysing information; using number or mathematical skills; reading, writing and reporting (verbally and/or in writing); using a computer or another piece of plant or equipment; working with other people, perhaps in a team; and quite possibly demonstrating some initiative. In this way, language, literacy, numeracy and generic or employability skills are linked with notions of employability and work performance.

Our approach to workplace numeracy was informed by understandings such as that offered by FitzSimons et al. (2005).

> The worksite influences both the type of numeracy skills needed, as well as how they are deployed. In other words, the task, the history of the task (for example, how previous records were taken), and the equipment used determine the sorts of calculations people must be able to make. Once these are learned, they have to be embedded through practice. … Workplace numeracy education cannot be approached from a traditional 'school mathematics' mentality. Workplace numeracy requires training that reflects workplace practices and incorporates authentic problem-solving in real or simulated tasks in small groups with shared responsibilities. It also needs to incorporate the development of metacognitive skills, such critical thinking, learning to learn, planning and problem-solving.

From generic to employability skills

References to skills, such as critical thinking, learning to learn, planning, and problem-solving in the workplace numeracy discussion above highlight once again the interconnections between the skills areas which were the focus of this study.

The research was also informed by literature on the suite of skills identified through various frameworks as 'key competencies' (Mayer 1992; Gonczi 2002), 'generic skills' (Kearns 2001;

Virgona et al. 2003; Gibb ed. 2004) and, with various personal attributes included, as 'employability skills' (Curtis & McKenzie 2001; Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002). These skills typically include those noted immediately above, as well as skills for effective communication, teamwork and using technologies. They are widely recognised as skills essential for work, regardless of the particular occupation or industry of employment. Studies such as those by Stevenson (1996), Hagar (1999), Kearns (2001) and Virgona et al. (2003) have highlighted how discussion of generic and employability skills is confused by the differing ideas and positions adopted by various stakeholders.

Virgona et al. (2003) also highlighted important connections between literacy and generic/employability skills. Interviews with displaced workers, focusing on generic skills, showed how some individuals had skills of which they were not fully aware. Participants in the study repeatedly commented on how the interview process itself helped them to identify, appreciate and articulate skills they had developed unconsciously over time. The research showed that having generic skills is not necessarily sufficient to empower job applicants in the labour market—even where such skills are in high demand. The skills and attributes need to be carried *consciously*; and they need to be named, articulated, and often documented in particular ways for their potential employment power to be realised. Thus the study with displaced workers suggested there is, in effect, a literacy of generic skills which plays a part in developing and maintaining employability.

Against this background, the following understanding of employability skills was adopted from the research conducted by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia.

> Employability skills are defined as skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions.
> (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002, p.3)

We note the shift from earlier conceptualisations of key competencies and generic skills to the Employability Skills Framework developed by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia, which has incorporated elements such as employee (or job applicant) attitude and other attributes for employment, which were not included in earlier frameworks. The inclusion of variables such as attitude and personal attributes for employment is contentious and problematic (Payne 2000; Virgona et al. 2003). Nevertheless, it was clear to us that these issues were part of the agenda as far as employers were concerned. In the remainder of this report the term 'employability skills' is used to refer to those capacities, including attitude and personal attributes, identified in the Employability Skills Framework (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002).

A moving feast with 'no single measure'

A common theme running through all of the studies cited above is that literacy, numeracy, and employability skills are inevitably embedded within a particular context. These capacities do not exist within a vacuum. They are formed and demonstrated within social and cultural contexts. They are 'situated'. As Venesky (quoted in Allison & Brennan 1990) puts it:

> Social concepts such as literacy and poverty are integrally tied to their labels. Like jelly and sand they are without intrinsic shape, defined and redefined by the vessels that hold them. Who is literate depends on how we define literacy.

It can be appreciated that these concepts and skills are not fixed or constant. They are 'shape shifters' which need to be understood in context. Furthermore, since contexts change and people move between contexts, these skills need to be learned and re-learned throughout the lifespan.

We can make the same kinds of observations about 'numeracy' and 'employability' as Venesky makes above about literacy and poverty. Who is literate, numerate, or employable is very much a matter of who you ask and their particular point of view. The judgements are determined by

culture, context, circumstances and values within the social settings where these questions are being asked. The research suggests there are no single or simple answers on these questions. As Wickert (1989) noted nearly two decades ago, there is 'no single measure'—not for literacy, or numeracy, or for any of these complex socially determined capacities.

We recognise that there are continuing debates about the interpretations and applications of all of these terms and they are not synonymous. Language capability does not imply literacy skills; spelling and writing ability does not confer numeracy skills; mathematical capability does not ensure employability and so on. It was not possible within this project to investigate comprehensively each of these skill areas in every case. Nevertheless, in practical terms we found employers were able to talk about their interpretations of these skills and focus on the particular skills which were of interest or concern in their own context.

Once our overall intentions and interests were clear with our participants, on some occasions we did use the term 'essential skills' as a cover-all label. This term is used at times in this report when referring to the collective skill areas which were the focus of this study.

A separate support document discusses some of the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings to our approach.

Research method and participants

This summary provides an overview of the research process and the contributing employers. A fuller account is available in the support document.

Focus groups and/or interviews were conducted with 27 employer representatives from four areas: community services and health, local government, and manufacturing sectors, and group training companies.

Group training companies were one of the target groups of employers, identified through support from Group Training Australia (Victoria), the peak body for group training companies. These organisations perform an 'agency' function for employers, apprentices and trainees, and the community, in that they hire out their employees or apprentices to host employers. Field officers monitor the progress of the apprentice at work and at 'trade' school, liaising with the relevant stakeholders. Six companies participated in the study. These were all registered training organisations and were based in other metropolitan regions. They included four larger companies, one of which provides service throughout western Victoria; one industry-specific organisation, and another working with a disadvantaged group.

Four community service and health organisations contributed to the study. They tended to have a strong community focus and strong ethical values, which underpinned the activities in which they were engaged. Their internal cultures appear to be supportive of people experiencing difficulties. The community service and health organisations included a large metropolitan hospital, a medium-sized aged and disabled care facility, a health support agency and a large ancillary service provider.

Four manufacturing companies agreed to participate, including the Australian operations of three large multinationals involved in producing, respectively, engineering components, packaging and industrial tracks and belts. The fourth company, a branch of a well-established national company, produces mattresses and bedding for the Australian and New Zealand markets.

Eight municipal councils participated through a focus group conducted with the assistance of the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA). From this event, four councils agreed to one-to-one interviews. These were large councils, two in metropolitan Melbourne and two on the southern and eastern urban fringes. Of note was the similarity in the issues confronting this group and those in health and community services.

Three main themes emerged from the focus groups and interviews; namely, organisational culture and learning, workplace processes and practices, and relationships with providers. These themes were fed back to the contributors for validating. The validation exercise was also broadened via 'snowball sampling' to include feedback from additional employers in the target groups.

In the validation exercise (see support document) the initial findings were encapsulated in a series of statements about the principles and practices vis-a-vis workplace literacy, numeracy and employability. Employers were asked to express their degree of agreement or disagreement using a Likert scale. The findings from the validation exercise are discussed in the following chapter.

Findings

Validation feedback

As noted above, the validation exercise invited employers to provide feedback on our initial analysis of the interview and focus group data using a Likert scale. Despite a very tight timeline, of the 40 validation exercises circulated, 27 were returned, giving a response rate of approximately 69%. The validation exercise consisted of three clusters of statements based upon the themes identified in the analysis of the interview and focus group data.

Organisational culture and learning

The first group of statements dealt with findings relating to organisational culture, and learning and development processes. These were statements that reflected organisational values, ethics and an understanding of the principles of effective workplace learning, particularly in relation to the perceived essential skills that were the focus of our study. For instance, the finding that 'employers successfully addressing literacy, numeracy and employability skills will have a strong person-centred learning and development focus which is reflected in their organisational strategy and culture' was supported by 91% of respondents. The finding that employers successfully addressing these issues would 'understand that learning and development takes time, resources and commitment' was supported by 96% of respondents. In addition, a statement asserting that 'developing trust and confidence in the worker–learner is fundamental' was supported by 92%.

Summing up, the validation exercise confirmed that these employers appreciate the critical role of the organisational culture in the development of workplace literacy, numeracy and employability skills and their responsibilities towards facilitating this.

Workplace processes and practices

The second cluster of statements focused on findings that concerned work processes, procedures and practices, and the application of understandings about learning for essential skills in the everyday reality of a workplace.

These statements asserted that employers successfully addressing these issues 'take responsibility … by making use of programs provided by the training system, as well as developing and implementing their own internal skill development programs'. This statement reflected the finding that provision alone is unlikely to effectively address the needs, and that therefore workplace development of these skills is necessary. There was agreement from 75% of respondents on this statement, with 8% disagreeing and 17% not sure—or perhaps not ready to commit to this position.

Another finding asserted the value of integrated approaches to the development of essential skills in the workplace and this was supported by a very clear majority of 69% with, again, a few disagreeing, and 11% unsure. Another finding highlighted the value of formal and informal mentoring systems. This was supported by over 81% of respondents, with no one disagreeing, but with 19% responding 'don't know'. The thrust of these statements was to test the overall findings on the perceived value of an approach that recognises the need for developmental approaches to these skills in the workplace.

It was expected that employers would have strong views about workplace processes, having had direct involvement and experience with them. This was the case, with 73% of respondents in agreement with the developmental approach and with only 7% disagreeing. However, what was interesting to us was the middle ground, with approximately 20%, who answered with a 'don't know' on these findings. Without further investigation, a task beyond the scope of this project, it is difficult to get to the nub of this residual uncertainty.

However, the results in this cluster may be showing us the 'gap' between agreement in principle and confidence in practice. Although 67% of our respondents claimed to be 'Doing OK' with these developmental policies and practices in their own workplace, none claimed to be 'Very effective'. We also note that 17% admitted they were 'Not doing OK' and 16% of respondents 'Don't know'. These findings seem to reflect the difficulty that some employers may have in managing the identification and/or implementation of learning and development processes at the shop floor level. Notwithstanding this, the validation exercise clearly confirmed the findings on these issues.

Relationships with providers

The final cluster of statements in the validation process tested findings on employers' relationships with VET and ACE providers. Once again there was clear support for the findings. The finding that employers successfully addressing these issues will have 'good relationships with the VET sector based on getting value for money from investments in training' was supported by 78% of respondents. There was also confirmation of findings on the importance of effective negotiation and contracting with providers to ensure that programs are aligned with organisational needs and the expectation that providers should be able to provide advice on how essential skills can be identified and developed within the context of business goals.

Overall, the responses to the validation exercise corroborated the findings of the initial data analysis. These findings are further discussed in the following sections.

Sectoral issues and characteristics

It needs to be stated at the outset that three of the four target groups of employers: local government, group training companies and community services and health, can be described as service industries or people-oriented organisations. All are dedicated to the improvement and wellbeing of individuals and communities. The researchers are aware that this focus is a likely manifestation of the service philosophy and operations of the organisations. A more random sample of industry sectors may provide a quite different set of findings.

Also of significance is that our advisors introduced us to organisations and employers who were interested in, had addressed, or were attempting to address literacy, numeracy and employability skills within their workplace or jurisdiction. Hence, the findings of the study will inevitably reflect their interest and orientation. Notwithstanding these qualifications, the following section outlines the findings in relation to each of the target groups of employers.

Group training companies

As noted previously, the sample of respondents was small, and generalisations must be very cautious and qualified. However, on the basis of this study, the following were the key issues emerging for group training companies.

✧ It was important that apprentices/trainees possessed strong personal attributes for employment (such as enthusiasm for the work, physical aptitude, the 'right' attitude) and generic skills, which may be more significant than literacy or numeracy skills, particularly where there is a perceived shortage of job applicants.

◇ Resourcing and/or tapping into systemic support through other providers/programs to provide literacy and numeracy support that is geared appropriately to the apprentice at the appropriate level is a challenging process.

◇ Provincial group training companies may act quite differently, even more pragmatically than metropolitan based companies, as their provider range is narrow and their apprentice pool smaller.

◇ Group training companies, unless they have a particular mandate to work with less skilled or disadvantaged adolescents and adults may screen out those who do not present with what they describe as a 'basic' prerequisite literacy and numeracy skills.

Group training companies recognise that their linkages, networks and strategic partnerships (with clients and training providers) affect the quality of their outcomes. This is true for all their trainees and apprentices, not just those with literacy, numeracy and employability issues. For this reason these companies may be described as provision-oriented.

The income of group training companies is constrained by the funding agreements made with governments, which in turn constrains the level of support and resources available to individual apprentices. The quality, relevance and amount of numeracy, literacy and employability support or intervention are often shaped by the extra funds or support that can be procured from government agencies and programs, including technical and further education (TAFE) institutions. Informants report that the quality and availability of support for literacy, numeracy and employability varies between TAFE institutions. They report significant variation even within a given institution, according to the particular department and/or staff involved. However, most expressed satisfaction with the services offered.

All companies, except those with a mandate to work with disadvantaged groups, used some form of initial literacy and numeracy assessment and other performance information to select recruits. Group training companies must market their employees to the host employers. It is therefore important that they understand the needs and attitudes of, not only the host employer, but those of supervisory staff who may be responsible for the work performance of the apprentice.

Skill shortages or skill demands provide group training companies with the opportunity to market employees who, in circumstances of oversupply, may be rejected because of perceived literacy and/or numeracy difficulties. A number of informants provided examples of situations where the applicant, although demonstrating 'sub standard' literacy skills or poor school performance, had a clear passion for the work he/she had chosen, a positive attitude and a demonstrable work ethnic. In these circumstances literacy, numeracy and school performance issues were not indicative of future success at work. The placement proved to be extremely successful.

Those group training companies that were also registered training organisations perceived a benefit in the cross-fertilisation that occurred between the 'GT [group training] bit and the other bit' of their business. Some felt that their response to learning issues was much quicker as a result of their dual role and capacity.

> The fact that it's under one roof means that you can whiz from one side of the building to the other, grab someone who's got a really good understanding and address the issues … As soon as someone is [seen to be] slipping behind, there's notification. Is it non-attendance? Is it literacy? Whatever it happens to be … [then] our field staff are aware and they're in the workplace, 'Right, what's the story? What's behind it?' And then looking at alternatives.
>
> (Group training company)

There are ongoing tensions in this sector between developing and maintaining a profitable business and providing a quality service. The size, location and business orientation (for example, towards profit, service or community) have an influence on the structure and culture of each organisation, and on the way outcomes are measured. The degree to which literacy, numeracy and employability strategies feature in organisational responses may be affected by these business characteristics.

While recognising the commercial tensions involved, the group training companies contributing to this study stressed their commitment to building effective relationships with their apprentices and trainees, their client companies and other training providers. These relationships are directed towards ensuring that their people attain success, even where individuals might lack some skills.

> It's not a barrier. I don't believe it's a barrier. People learn in different ways, it's a flexible approach, anything goes to get them through to the end. It's not a major problem for us.
>
> (Group training company)

Community services and health

Bearing in mind the reservations about generalising expressed above, the key issues emerging in this sector appeared to be:

✧ Organisational responses to compliance regimes (such as external regulations and quality assurance standards) mean that care workers, for instance, are required to compile formal reports that would not have been necessary in the past.

✧ The demographics of this industry, particularly in areas such as aged and community care, mean there is an older, and ageing, workforce. The challenges of addressing adult literacy, numeracy, and employability issues, as well as weak or 'rusty' study skills are a well-recognised 'part of the territory' for training providers engaging with this industry.

✧ The skills profile of this workforce is biased towards caring skills, and will continue to be so. Our informants saw language, literacy and numeracy skills as only some of many important skills, the caring type taking precedence. Much of the professional development provided internally is certificate III and IV level training, in which language, literacy and numeracy training plays a part.

✧ New technologies in some areas of practice are requiring specific new literacy and communication skills, such as SMS texting and internet browsing.

✧ The strength of literacy, numeracy and language programs is determined by how the enterprise decides to spend its professional development budget.

Employers in this sector are well aware of the demographics of their mature-aged workforce, which is also gender-biased (predominantly female), particularly so in some sectors such as aged care. There are significant numbers of workers engaged in, or entering the industry without high levels of formal education and training. Work-related literacy and study issues are recognised as a 'fact of life' within this workforce. In aged and community care the work has been described as difficult, intimate, stressful and unattractive. It is also relatively poorly paid. Only those really committed or suited are attracted to the work and, given the skills shortage, these qualities are highly valued in the selection and employment process. In simple terms then, the employability skills tend to outweigh literacy and numeracy skills.

Mentoring by trainers and supervisors was a key part of ensuring that new employees were able to perform tasks assigned to them. In one case operating procedures were available in a varying hierarchy of materials, from the predominantly visual, using graphic communication, to complex texts highly dependent on the literacy level of the employee.

On the other hand, the strong impact of compliance, regulation, and profit motives, particularly in the community and aged care sectors, has shifted many reporting responsibilities to personal care workers, who traditionally have not been required to demonstrate such skills. This has created major structural and procedural issues for organisations.

Manufacturing

Employer representatives in this target group were critical of the secondary and tertiary education institutions that provided their recruits. Their criticism was levelled at the literacy and numeracy abilities of recruits.

However, despite these criticisms of the educational system, they accept the realities of the labour market and act accordingly by developing their own orientation, learning and development programs to shape the performance of their employees. These employers were aware that, generally speaking, VET institutions and structures could not provide entirely the kind of quality skill formation that their enterprise required.

In some cases, particularly in larger enterprises, employers had conducted exhaustive interrogation of the training system in order to find the right partnership. For others it was a case of 'go it alone'. The following perceptions, themes or issues emerged from consultations in this sector:

✧ University graduates do not have the expected report-writing skills.

✧ Employees, including many graduates, lack 'learning to learn' skills; hence, there is a need to develop these in the workplace.

✧ Training providers and their practitioners sometimes lack up-to-date technical knowledge and the ability to act flexibly and creatively in response to enterprise needs.

✧ The training bureaucracy does not understand how training packages are supposed to work at the enterprise level, particularly in relation to the design of customised developmental programs which may not reflect an orthodox or straightforward delivery of competencies.

✧ Given the shortage of labour in some areas of manufacturing, generic skills and personal attributes for employment (such as positive attitude, good work ethic etc.) may outweigh consideration of literacy and/or numeracy skills.

✧ Literacy, numeracy and employability skills are best learned as integrated aspects of whole work tasks; hence, there is a reluctance to use stand-alone literacy or numeracy programs. In some respects this means 'getting around' the literacy and numeracy issues in order to give competent workers due recognition.

In these companies, literacy and numeracy skills are often embedded in broader skill development programs, such that they become *invisible*. As one manufacturing representative noted, 'We try and roll those issues into existing curriculum. So in other words we try and keep those issues within a context that is interesting to the apprentices.'

For instance, issues of communication and generic skills may be considered as an integral part of the learning programs of apprentices. Hence there is no particular emphasis on literacy as a discrete problem in terms of dedicated resources or expertise. Literacy, numeracy and communication issues at the manufacturing process level are also dealt with informally within teams. Some of these strategies are discussed later (see section, The story of development).

The objective of training programs in the manufacturing sector tends to be towards effective, efficient, quality production, and not necessarily to have a highly literate or numerate workforce. Where apparent, these qualities are considered virtually by-products of the training system.

All of the manufacturing organisations we spoke to had a strong commitment to lifelong learning and an understanding that 'learning to learn skills' were important. They recognise that trust and confidence are keys in developing learning skills, of which employability, literacy and numeracy form part.

Local government

The councils we spoke to generally use performance-monitoring systems to target learning needs within the organisation and consequently have focused programs that respond to the learning needs identified through performance or appraisal interviews.

Again reiterating the caution about generalising from this study, we note that in this sector the following key issues emerged:

✧ Changing systems of work organisation and technological changes in the work skills required of outdoor, gardens, maintenance, meals on wheels, and garbage collection staff have 'lifted the bar' for workplace literacy and communication skills, in the process 'outing' some employees.

✧ New communication protocols (for example, email) for all staff have highlighted inadequacies in the methods that councils use to communicate policies and procedures to staff and contractors.

✧ As councils aim to engage community participation across culturally and linguistically diverse constituencies, there are challenges in developing the relationship and communication skills staff need to engage effectively with diverse community groups.

✧ Councils that provide home and community care services are faced with the same challenges as the health and community services sector noted above.

Some informants in the local government sector also identified managing diversity and council employment policies as key factors. It was argued that local government has a responsibility to reflect its constituency (through employment policies and practices) as well as serve it. Hence in some areas basic education and employability issues present a particular challenge, as job applicants from particular constituencies may not have all of the expected skills.

Within council settings the provision of adult literacy and numeracy programs is usually the result of technological or organisational change within the workplace. Typically in the case of local government, these programs will target workers in the areas of outdoor maintenance, waste management and community care.

However, programs may also include such areas as report-writing, presentation skills and email protocols. Such programs are moving beyond a simplistic conception of employees having the 'basics' in the traditional three Rs of Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic. In some cases, particularly for workers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, even professionally qualified individuals may need support and in-house training (or professional development) to enable them to practise effectively within the culture of the Australian and local government workplace.

> We've been involved in a program with engineers, for example. These are fully qualified people, with overseas qualifications and we've got a shortage of people with these skills. But we found that they were having difficulty getting jobs and they were having problems fitting into the Australian workplace—our ways of doing things here … so it is about employability and it's about culture and communication, but these are tertiary qualified people.
>
> (Local government)

Those councils with dedicated organisational development personnel report better take-up of programs and a more effective transfer of skills into workplace performance. This is seen to be due to thorough and consistent cross-communication and rapport-building at all levels of the organisation.

All of the councils which engaged with this project voiced a commitment to lifelong learning. This was expressed through professional development and learning opportunities addressed to specific identified needs, which simultaneously enabled lifelong learning. Typically, these opportunities were strategically linked to performance appraisals and to organisational objectives as well as personal and/or professional goals.

> The other thing is that when you see people developing skills in this area it helps in so many different areas of their lives. We have had instances of people bringing in their bills and letters and things they haven't been able to understand.   (Local government)

Another local government manager reported, 'We've tried to provide programs that help people with their own life, so we do wills, a lot of health and wellbeing stuff … because we see it all working together'.

A senior manager from the health care sector made a similar observation:

> It wasn't just literacy, we also did stuff on balancing work and home life and that sort of stuff because each person's gaps are different … [the program] has more of a support feeling to it, and it seems to lift their self-esteem and all those things that go with it.   (Health care)

The story on provision

As noted above, the researchers were not directed or introduced to employers or their representatives who had negative or narrow beliefs about the language, literacy or employability issues. As such, what we report is overwhelmingly positive and hopeful.

While there were differences in employer perspectives, as outlined above, the four target groups also revealed some common issues, perspectives and practices with regard to the provision of literacy, numeracy, and employability skills. These are discussed below.

It's not 'basics' that are the problem

One recurring theme was concern about the lack of expertise available to support literacy, numeracy and employability skills development in the workplace. Of particular concern is the ability of industry and workplace trainers to provide literacy help to apprentices, trainees and worker–learners, at levels that some describe as 'beyond basic'. Our informants report a perceived gap in provision for adult literacy at this level. In formal Australian Quality Framework (AQF) terms this seems to relate to provision for learners at the certificate III level or above. This was articulated in various ways.

Reference has already been made to local government initiatives, with overseas-qualified engineers needing cross-cultural communication skills. But there were other examples:

> There are university graduates now who we take on who don't know how to write … they don't know how to write a report. They don't even know how to structure a sentence … somewhere along the line those kind of structured writing skills have been lost. So now we're putting together a program that will teach them how to write business stuff.   (Manufacturing)

Most often where assistance was given, it focused on getting in, around, over and through the formal assessment maze, avoiding as much as possible literacy and numeracy performance skills, which appear to these employers to be in place for the sake of assessment. There was a perception that training package requirements and training for training packages (that is, the actual delivery methods adopted by providers) demand literacy and numeracy skills that are not necessarily mandatory for effective performance on the job. This was particularly the case at certificate III level and beyond. Hence the approach adopted was essentially pragmatic—finding a way to get by without compromising the actual skills required for the work.

> It gets back to RTOs [registered training organisations] being flexible in the ways they assess people's competency … whilst there's compliance issues around all of that, that's what workplace assessment is all about, verbal questioning and answering. All the choices are there on our training plan in terms of how you're going to assess. It's *supposed* to be fluid so it *can be* changed and modified … if they're obviously struggling one way. It's about finding [other] ways for them to demonstrate competency, not about 'Sorry it's got to be this way, or no way'.   (Group training company)

In various ways employers from all target groups voiced this commitment to flexibility and pragmatism. However, concerns were expressed about the difficulty of addressing learning and development needs and the difficulty of accessing support for worker–learners on these issues. When it all seems 'too hard', there is a danger that employers will abandon the cause.

It was the perception of some respondents that some TAFE institutions seemed to be ill equipped to assist employers in this area. It was suggested this may be because they lack specialist expertise in

literacy, numeracy and work-related basic education, or because traditional training delivery methods fail to capture the interest of trainees, their employers or their industry clients.

Integrated approaches to workplace literacy and numeracy skills have promoted the understanding that these skills can be developed concurrently with vocational skills (see Sefton, Deakin & Waterhouse 1994; Wignall 1998; Bradley et al. 2000). An integrated approach addresses language, literacy and numeracy requirements as *integral* elements of the work. Hence these skills are 'built in not bolted on' (Wignall 1998). Instead of developing a separate curriculum in a remedial or 'withdrawal' program, the integrated approach focuses on the identification and development of skills within the context of the work concerned. Attention is focused upon the language, literacy and numeracy requirements and learning strategies in the context of the work. It seems that notions of integrated curriculum have not reached some sectors of the training system, even though employer groups, training packages and national policy encourage such approaches.

Educational leadership is required

Some of our informants expressed the view that some sections of the TAFE workforce had not kept up with pedagogical developments or the latest innovations in their industry. They perceived that the training offered and sometimes delivered was not acceptable to them.

> It's outdated. They are not leading the way by any stretch of the imagination. They are playing catch up … same old same old, there is no energy for the learning. TAFE should be leading the way, but the delivery is just not there, it has zero credibility, lack of flexibility, [no] new learning styles, [no] integration of learning or new content. (Manufacturing)

There is a perception that many trainers, perhaps most, whether based in workplaces or in registered training organisations, do not usually have the skills to provide what is perceived as specialist literacy and numeracy support.

> What was happening was our trainer was spending a lot more time out there than they normally would and his work was falling behind. So he might do an average of a three-hour visit which is the normal to do an on-the-job training, but he might be there for six hours. So in that instance we actually employed a skilled trainer or educator to come out and work with him, not on the automotive books, more to do with general reading and writing to help that person get through, and we actually got some additional funding as well from the disability support agency. (Group training company)

Another group training company manager commented on perceptions of TAFE being constrained by bureaucracy.

> TAFE's are TAFEs, they have their own issues. They're big and because of that size they can be outrageously bureaucratic at times ... it's the timeframes that are the biggest issue … it seems to take just too long to get around to everything ... particularly when you get to these sorts of issues because you're looking at things that are a little more out of the box, not the common occurrence and the less common the occurrence, then often the harder it is to drive things through rapidly … (Group training company)

But not all of the comments on providers and provision were so critical, as shown in the following from a local government representative:

> We seem to be able to work with them really well, we've got a good relationship with the providers that we do work with and they have an understanding of what we need from them and it tends to work really well because they understand where we're coming from and what we need.

Partnerships and dialogue are required

This same local government participant stressed that the provider relationship is not simply one of passively receiving 'delivery' of training from external authorities. She stressed 'it's really a two way discussion', which goes to the very heart of what the client/customer organisation is on about.

> We don't just take what they give. We expect them to come in here and we'll say what we want … whatever's happening at that time, we go through all that with them and we want that incorporated into their programs. So it's part of our culture, part of what we're working on, we don't just want anything off-the-shelf … we expect them to work with our staff, with our values and beliefs and whatever we've got going. (Local government)

This sophisticated consumer profile was particularly evident amongst our local government participants. Yet another of whom commented:

> The way that we tend to brief the providers is that we involve a range of people that will be attending the program … We do the initial brief, but then I'll take the trainer around and we'll go visit some people on-site and we'll talk through with them what are some of the issues and what they're looking for. So that helps with buy-in of the program but it also helps make sure the provider is definitely across what's really going on and what the issues are.
>
> (Local government)

It is apparent that leading employers are prepared to 'shop around' in order to find and negotiate the type of provision and partner relationship that they require. Indeed the employers whom we spoke to took particular care during the contracting phase of their negotiations with training providers to ensure that programs delivered were aligned with, and designed around, their organisation's values, strategic plans, and desired performance outcomes.

Hence education and training providers need to be approaching workplaces with a curious, almost schizoid, blend of confidence and humility. The confidence is based on knowing that a well-considered understanding of adult learning and development processes, and language, literacy and/or numeracy processes can inform creative approaches to authentic workplace problems. The humility, on the other hand, comes from knowing that the teacher is a guest in the workplace. This is not the teacher's place; it 'belongs' to the employer and the employees, it's their place, they know it so much better (and differently) than the teacher does, and ultimately the teacher (no matter how qualified or skilled) can't really solve their problems for them.

For those organisations like group training companies who are employers yet provide services within the national training system, the funding arrangements and availability of funds is the key determinant in whether they have the capacity to provide effective literacy and numeracy support to apprentices. Whether appropriate services exist is, of course, of importance. Group training company profitability is predicated on providing an efficient and cost-effective service for their host employers. This constrains the level of educational support that trainers can provide.

Despite some of the criticisms noted above, the employers' relationships with the training sector were generally strong, ongoing, and based on getting value for money. Even where criticisms were voiced, there was, for the most part, recognition that providers and the training system have their own constraints and there was relatively little blame laid by these employers.

The story on development

One of the key findings of this study was that these employers, on the whole, accepted responsibility for the development of the skills essential for effective performance in the workplace, including literacy and numeracy skills.

Most of the organisations contributing to this study demonstrated a degree of social and community awareness, some of which is translated into action through the programs they access or develop, or through recruitment policies. All claimed a deep commitment to the care and development of their people as a central plank in their business development philosophy.

> Does it cost us dollars? Probably. But it's also part of what our deal is … our performance agreements with governments include an element of disadvantage … we've got a strong commitment to that, obviously contractually; but also just from an ethos of the organisation. We're more than happy to try and tackle those things. We see it as part of what we should be doing anyway. (Group training company)

When questioned on the difficulties of managing the tensions between commercial imperatives and developing an inclusive and caring workplace culture, these employers acknowledged the difficulties. However, their responses suggested that they accept the challenges as part of their day-to-day working lives. 'Manage the tensions? We just do. We just do,' said the health care manager who made the comments immediately above. She added a little later that staff are allowed the room to provide the necessary support, in fact, 'it's not only allowed, it's expected'.

The organisations we spoke to also tended to have a continuous improvement focus linked to performance issues and feedback from employees, which meant that learning programs were targeted and well supported by staff, by management and by the organisational culture.

> We've had a real commitment to employee development and I think that's one of the benefits of working with this particular council, that strong ethic of continuous learning and lifelong learning … we've been able to do quite a lot of training and development for people and there's a lot of opportunities if people want to take them up … We've got good relations with the directors and we never get knocked back when we put forward ideas for training or learning, it's just 'Yep, Yep. No worries' … but we also make sure that it's also aligned to where the organisation's going. (Local government)

It was not surprising that these organisations took some responsibility for the skills development of their people. In so doing, it was recognised by them that a systemic and organisational development approach was necessary.

> You can't see it [literacy] in isolation; you've got to see it with all those other things, like the culture within the place, with the systems that provide back-up. It can't be just one thing, it's got to be congruent right across the organisation … It's all encompassing and you've got to take an holistic approach and everything's got to be working in alignment otherwise it's not going to be effective. (Local government)

Building a supportive workplace culture

The comment above reflects the importance of the workplace culture. It was acknowledged that building improvements in these essential skills requires effective support structures for the learners. This finding is consistent with the findings of Figgis et al. (2001), Billett (2001), Dawe (2004) and others who have highlighted workplace culture as a significant factor in shaping learning at work. The employers contributing to this study highlighted the importance of the learners developing self-confidence and trust in the organisation and vice versa.

The majority of respondents (94%) who participated in the validation process agreed that learning, and particularly the development of literacy, numeracy and employability skills, is predicated on developing trust and confidence in the learner. Indeed, they described the process as developing mutual trust and confidence.

> Look, a lot of it is around confidence. [It]greatly depends on confidence. People lose literacy skills being out of the workforce, but they can get them back. (Health care)

> We probably have a reasonable [low] drop out rate. We probably have about an 80% completion rate and it wouldn't be that if wasn't for some quite careful support with specific people: And it has to be around not letting them get too far behind, so they get bogged down.
>
> (Group training company)

Effective support and confidence-building seemed to be provided most often in mentoring arrangements where trainers or supervisors took as much time as necessary to enable learners to perform work functions competently.

> Identifying early that they need help, and sitting with them and working one to one on the stuff.
>
> (Group training company)

On the issue of employability skills, for instance, several managers referred to the significant challenge for some novice workers to consistently 'turn up' at work. Here again we see evidence of support strategies which some other employers would consider extraordinary.

> I've known our staff, working with people who have been unemployed for a very long time, and for them even the notion of coming to work on a daily basis is difficult. And even on their days off the staff that work with those people will set their alarms so they can get in touch with that person and say, 'It's time to get up and come to work', and that's what they'll do.
>
> (Health care)

This support also included the modification of work instructions and procedures (for example, providing safety data sheets in multiple languages) so that all sections of the workforce were better able to access the information.

A pragmatic performance-based approach

While designing work processes to accommodate these worker–learners and providing the necessary support may seem expensive, those whom we spoke to stress that such activities were not a drain, nor did they compromise quality or productivity. Like providing an access ramp to a public building, efforts to build an effective learning culture in the organisation provide wider benefits to all, including the enterprise. The emphasis is upon enhancing and optimising the worker–learner's performance of the whole work task to a competent level. Literacy or numeracy issues and skills were embedded in work performance and not treated as discrete.

> Literacy is important, but it is only one of the skills that they need. (Health care)

> Literacy will be built up where they may have to do a small report on a particular aspect of something that they're actually doing. It's always tied into a [workplace] need. It's never out of context.
>
> (Manufacturing)

This element of pragmatism or a balanced approach seemed to be an important factor in the success of the organisations to which we spoke. Their reality was that literacy and numeracy, while important, were not the main game. In most cases what they required was a combination of embedded literacy and numeracy, plus employability skills and the explicit competency demands of the particular job or industry. As one manager from the manufacturing sector noted:

> We may as well bite the bullet ourselves and say we'll take the best of what we can get, based on their qualifications, the work they are going to do and the interpersonal skills they have; they are much harder to teach, the interpersonal skills. So we might as well buy those in and teach the written skills within a context that maybe makes sense for them to finally learn it, because they haven't learned it up til then.
>
> (Manufacturing)

Many of the employers we spoke to were prepared to overlook literacy standards at the recruitment stage, particularly if the employment candidate showed the required commitment to working and a genuine interest and enthusiasm for the task. This seemed to be even more likely where skills shortages were an issue, as indicated by a representative from a group training company: 'if someone is desperate to get someone in, they will put up with someone who may not have those skills to a high level and then work with them to gain those skills'.

We mentioned earlier that the informants who were flagged to us tended to have a positive and proactive stance in relation to literacy and numeracy *provision* as well as *development*. Each reports no effect on the 'bottom line', because there is an equally proactive focus on task competence.

However, that literacy and numeracy support from these employers for their people was not unlimited. We also note that the literacy and/or numeracy, and technical or professional prerequisites do exclude some candidates from some positions.

> It totally depends on the position, because we have other positions that are more skilled positions, but if I feel that position is a position that doesn't require someone with qualifications, then that's what I'll do.　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Manufacturing)

Leadership and adopting a positive approach

Notwithstanding this thinking, we were struck by how frequently these employers were able to positively (re)frame the apparent absence of so-called essential skills, or employee weaknesses in these areas. For instance:

> We often see cases where perhaps people have a little bit of a difficulty and when you look at that person in the bigger context perhaps they'll be secretary of the social club … or they've produced the *Croatian News* and all this sort of stuff. These people are literate, no problem with that. Now we put them into a work environment and we class them as not literate or with literacy problems. Hold on, that's not actually right … It's amazing what your workforce will do outside the workforce, they demonstrate competence to an extraordinary degree and yet somehow we badge them sometimes as having problems. Really I don't see that. It's just that we simply haven't provided them with an opportunity to demonstrate literacy as it naturally is at the time … People will do amazing things if you give them a break and I think that applies to literacy from what we've seen.　　　　　　　　　　(Manufacturing)

We have seen that organisations that respond positively to learning issues have organisational structures and cultures that nourish individuals and groups. These organisations see themselves as highly competitive and in some cases are industry leaders. They are people-centred and take responsibility for their own development. They still hope and appeal for better external provision of these skills. However, they take the view that proactive developmental strategies on their part offer the best chance of success in addressing the competitive business pressures and external conditions they face.

One organisation in the health sector stood out from all the other organisations investigated by us. The difference was in the underpinning mission that defines and directs all work. Through this mission each staff member had a clear understanding of his or her responsibility to the parts, individuals, and to the whole.

> This is an organisation where we have 49 different nationalities working together and it is a part of what we do, we employ and welcome cultural diversity. It is kind of an organisation that nourishes, particularly people from difficult backgrounds … It's more than a workforce, it's our sense of a community of people that care for each other. We don't resile from the fact that we need to be productive and we need to be efficient and effective because this is a big organisation, over 3000 staff over five sites. So that is a part of what we do; the rest of what we do is a very effective workforce.　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Health care)

While it may sound trite to state it, those organisations that are actively engaged, that respond positively to literacy, numeracy and employability challenges in their environment, 'just get on with it'. They are adept at managing diversity in their workplace. These strategies have been built into their systems over many years through strong leadership.

These organisations are able to support differences in the abilities of their workforce and utilise diversity to create opportunities for growth. Because they have this perspective or ethic, they are able to fashion formal and informal communication which is accessible to all. As such, literacy and

numeracy weaknesses are not the debilitating factors that they have the potential to become in less supportive environments. It is not surprising then that almost all informants were also keen to point out that an inability to perform literacy or numeracy tasks did not equate to a lack of intelligence.

While there may be issues with the standard, breadth and funding available for such provision and development, from our perspective a defining factor in the landscape is the leadership of the organisation itself. The understanding and attitude of the employer and the way this cascades down, creating and supporting learning opportunities within the organisation, is critically important. All of our informants report qualified support from senior management where planned interventions align with organisational goals and strategies.

The 'fit' of skills in practice

All of the organisational representatives we spoke to demonstrated an understanding of literacy and numeracy concepts that went beyond the simplistic notions that appear regularly in the popular press. In fact, somewhat to our surprise, while these employers did not use academic language to articulate their understandings, particularly in relation to multi-literacies, their ideas were not dissimilar to those found in the academic literature.

The data reflect the employers' understandings that it is not so much a question of skills 'level' as it is 'fit'. In other words, is the literacy, or numeracy, or generic skill, fit for purpose?

> Sometimes, if some of the jobs are a mundane job, a lot of people wouldn't want to take it on, because in some cases it's so repetitious … What we required on the bagging machine was another pair of hands to be able to help with the lifting and movement of goods. That's all. We didn't want a mechanic. I employed a young guy with a learning difficulty to work on that bagging machine. He's there to help put goods into boxes and things like that. So he gets paid a normal wage. (Manufacturing)

There was also recognition by participants that, as discussed earlier and in the literature review, literacy, numeracy and employability skills are relational and shifting: they are neither absolute nor fixed.

> We were also undergoing a lot of organisational change where we put in this broad continuous improvement programme where it required people to participate in on-line surveys and team meetings and stuff. And when we started digging, what we found, that it was starting to surface up these literacy and communication needs … because we were there saying you need to participate in this on-line survey, every employee needs to do it, and they were saying 'Hmmm, maybe I can't do it, maybe I need some help', or they'd come up with some other excuses why they weren't doing it, but we found there were quite a few who were using it as an excuse to hide their literacy and numeracy skills. (Local government)

Concerns discussed were not just in relation to entry-level employees such as those involved with certificate II or III level courses. In the context of group training, for instance, the problems weren't perceived as belonging only to apprentices and trainees. One manager commented:

> Probably where there is a big issue is with staff, I've found with some staff we've employed who have completed year 12, I've been amazed at their lack of numeracy, or literacy … I've asked them to write a letter and their grammar, spelling, the way they put the letter together is just amazing. (Group training company)

Such comments on the skills development required reflect observations made earlier that the skills required are not simply those associated with 'basic' level reading, writing and numeracy. They are particular literacy (or numeracy) or work practices which are determined by the culture, circumstances and particular purposes of the work setting.

'That terrible word—literacy'

Notwithstanding the use of Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) programs, mentioned elsewhere, our informants also reported that organisational intervention programs *labelled* as adult literacy programs were generally not supported by employees. They suggest that many employees still perceive that, if they commit to such programs, they will be exposed or stigmatised within the organisation. As a consequence most of our contributing employers talked about the sensitivity and the subtlety required to engage employees effectively.

> When you try and use that terrible word 'literacy' … for a start 90% won't understand what you're talking about … and even if they do understand they won't touch it. They won't come anywhere near it with a barge pole, because to admit that you don't understand can be seen as a problem, that somehow you're devaluing your worth to the company by even sticking your hand up … I'm not saying it's a rational situation … but nonetheless if you hold that fear yourself it's perfectly rational. (Manufacturing)

This manufacturing employer, like others, talked about strategies for integrating, or embedding literacy and numeracy development into other work and training activities such as courses on computers, the internet, information technology, teamwork or occupational health and safety.

> The programs that have worked here have always had a hidden agenda … We've discovered it's the only effective mechanism we've located to date for those people with the fears I have listed, or the disinterest, or perhaps they're not even realising they are being limited by literacy and numeracy problems … So you really have to lure them out of that environment into something that's interesting, into something they can stand up and admit their kids know more about than they do. Then as a side benefit of that you really discover the depth of the problem along the way and you can intervene as required. So that has worked. (Manufacturing)

Shifting work practices—new demands

Respondents highlighted how the changing nature of work leads to the creation of new literacy and numeracy challenges in the workplace. Consequently, organisations were taking steps to meet this challenge.

In some cases organisations sought to improve the accessibility of operating procedures and process control information by developing systems that were not necessarily print-based. This included the colour-coding of components to differentiate between batches or the use of graphics and picture stories to demonstrate key tasks.

> We don't see it as addressing literacy and numeracy. It's a way of addressing the work required in that environment. We don't see it as separate goals, it's just a matter of meeting the work required. (Manufacturing)

One particular manufacturing employer articulated most clearly what we would describe as an integrated and holistic or systemic approach to these developmental challenges.

> Literacy, numeracy, and essential skills are deeply embedded into the program itself so that these skills are an integral part of the training program to the extent that they are hardly noticed … Yes it is literacy and numeracy but perhaps we don't see it as separate goals. It's just the way the system works; that you do something and you'll be required to provide some form of report, or you'll be required to interpret somebody else's information before you can do your part of it. So it's hidden so far as we are concerned. There's no folder anywhere that says here are our literacy and numeracy guidelines. There's just a philosophy that we have, which is embedded within the curriculum as deeply as possible so nobody actually knows you're doing it. And if it's in line with what is required in the workplace no one will object to it and most of the time they'll actually enjoy it. (Manufacturing)

Previous research (Sanguinetti 2000; Sanguinetti & Bradshaw 2000; Sanguinetti & Hartley [eds] 2000) has raised concerns about the extent to which the 'invisibility' of integrated approaches to these skills can lead to a lack of action, transparency and accountability on the part of employers. Like any other strategy, the true test lies in whether the employer truly 'walks the talk' or merely espouses the rhetoric. The employers with whom we spoke in this study seemed to be committed to these approaches, not for appearances or the sake of the rhetoric, but because they believed them to be effective in addressing workplace concerns.

It is worth noting, however, that some of these employers did articulate concerns about the challenges of effectively *reporting* on the outcomes of integrated approaches, where literacy, numeracy and generic skills are embedded in other training.

> You run a computer course, the goal of which is to improve literacy and numeracy, but it actually shows up as a computer course as opposed to a literacy program and that's a bit of a problem externally … for government subsidies or whatever their goal, their reporting requirement is very much about developing literacy and numeracy. It's a bit awkward to have a computer course as the actual content because people will look and go 'What are you doing here?' We understand why we're doing it that way – but it's difficult externally.
>
> (Manufacturing)

As stated earlier, most of those who chose to participate in the study also used Workplace English Language and Literacy programs as a means by which they service the needs of employees and the organisation, in terms of literacy and numeracy performance. Examples of training providers used for this purpose included public and private VET providers as well as some ACE providers. The use of this Commonwealth funding by these employers to address perceived workplace and employee needs reflects their awareness and their proactive stance on these issues. As noted earlier in the comments relating to the research method, we cannot claim that these employers are typical or representative of their industry.

The organisations that had a particular focus on developmental literacy and numeracy issues were those that required less complex skills sets in some sections of their workforce and recruited from traditionally less skilled sections of the available workforce. This was particularly characteristic of councils and the health care sector. An informant in the health care industry, who worked in disability care, reported that:

> Most people entering our area of the health industry are coming in as mature age workers having left school early, a long time ago. So their literacy skills and study skills are quite rusty and in a lot of cases they left school early at about 15, 20 years ago … We came up with 30 % who needed some kind of literacy support skills to come into the industry. (Health care)

This informant went on to explain that the nature of the work itself was also a factor in determining the types of people who entered the industry:

> Look you only work in our industry if you have the motivation … [it] has to come from within, you have to really want to be in that area … people don't come into the area for the money. A lot of people come into the area because they've worked with an elderly relative that's got a disability or a child or something like that, they've developed skills up that way, which we want. (Health care)

Similar issues were apparent in the local government sector.

> We found there [were] a lot [of literacy and numeracy issues] in the community care area, and also some in our operation centres that were our core workforce and also in our aged care facility, there were a few who refused. So it [surveying] sort of uncovered those three main areas. And also our meals on wheels service, we found a few people there as well needing a hand. (Local government)

In both these sectors the changing nature of work, particularly the use of computerised and electronic forms of reporting within an environment of increased compliance, necessitated a change in the skill sets required. Hence the increased need for literacy development.

> So before, where they weren't required to write anything down, now we're finding that we're multi-skilling, we're asking people that work in our parks and gardens that if they see something on the footpath or a street sign that might be down, then they need to jot it down and send it in to us. (Local government)

> I was down there the other day and I saw this guy I didn't think could ever work, and he's got a laptop now. He brings that out with him [on the job] and he logs all this data in the laptop and so it updates with our databases automatically out in the field. So it's really changing quite dramatically. (Local government)

The changing requirements of the workplace have also had the effect of 'outing' some employees who were effectively protecting their position in the organisation by hiding their difficulties. Sometimes this was a genuine surprise to employers. Here again the issues of trust, relationships and the organisational culture are highlighted.

In some cases the literacy needs are perceived to relate to underachievement or poor work performance. This can create tensions between team members in the organisations.

> Peer pressure. It becomes an issue when the other workers are getting frustrated because a person is not seen to be contributing and others have to fill in for them, and there's not a cohesive team. Or if the boss has real concerns because it's starting to lose him money … Then it becomes an issue for us and nine times out of ten we end up having to remove the apprentice because there's no quick fix for that. (Group training company)

However, other group training managers commented on how changing the workplace and/or the employer can make sometimes a significant difference for the same apprentice—demonstrating how contextual and relational these skills are in practice.

> It's not always the kid … sometimes it's the supervisor not having the skill, or the patience … and the culture is really important. They won't be able to use their potential if the environment is not right. (Group training company)

Gate-keeping processes

With the exception of the group training companies, as discussed earlier, the use of *general* literacy and numeracy assessments as gate-keeping devices appeared to be relatively uncommon amongst the employers participating in this study. Recruitment assessment processes appear to be more specific and targeted to the particular job that a recruit will enter, such as graduate recruits writing reports; administrative staff writing letters; or apprentices completing basic mathematics and communication tests.

Some of the participating organisations had a clear intention not to pre-screen on the basis of literacy/numeracy skills. As one group training manager commented, some training providers:

> Actually interview and test the applicant prior to pre-apprenticeship training. The student will pay for the course, so why have you got to be tested? I have quite a fundamental problem with it … these people are trying to learn skills *so they can get a job* … You shouldn't be testing these kids you should be getting them in the door. (Group training company)

Nevertheless, employers even where they were not pre-testing did use literacy-related information, which they used (such as that from an application form or a letter) to inform induction training or future formal training.

Many organisations were prepared to ignore literacy and numeracy assessments if recruits demonstrated desirable employability characteristics. These included perceived general intelligence, genuine interest in the work, and commitment—or 'work ethic'. In some instances, labour

shortages dictated that a 'physically fit body' and willingness to 'turn up' were a sufficient reason to employ somebody.

It should be noted here that, for some learners, the experience of schooling is not a positive or successful one, despite best efforts. The liberation provided by entry into the world of work may be just the catalyst that many learners need in order to bloom. In such circumstances the 'development' provided in and by the workplace becomes crucial. Smith and Comyn (2003) similarly found that some employers working with predominantly young novice workers played a critical role in facilitating the development of their generic skills.

Conclusion

While this was a small purposive sample, our findings may be indicative of the general position of informed employers with a particular interest in literacy, numeracy and employability issues. The study has clearly demonstrated that the issue is not simply one of provision *or* development of these essential skills. Rather it is apparent that both initial provision *and* continuing development of these skills are necessary.

The findings of the study are discussed below in terms of their implications for VET policy, then VET and adult community education practice; and finally the implications for employers.

Implications for VET policy

We began with the idea that the education and training system should provide a solid, consistent, immutable array of 'foundation' skills for all graduates. We can now see that 'foundation' is perhaps not the most helpful descriptor for indicating what is required. Generally speaking, a foundation is stable and fixed; it does not, or ought not, shift or change.

However, what now seems to be required is a dynamic set of continuously expanding skills, knowledge and attitudes in order to maintain employability over time. One must seriously question, as have many of our informants, the expectation that schools, universities and the adult education and vocational training sectors will ever be able to provide completely what individual employers would like: employees whose skills are 'just enough', 'just in time' and 'just for me'.

The demands of peak employer bodies for better preparation of work entrants and ageing workers through the networks and systems of education and training provision are seen to be valid. There is no scope for complacency in the provision of these skills, from primary education right through to adult education, vocational, and lifelong learning programs. There are continuing and escalating needs for these skills across the target groups of employers involved in this study. It would also be surprising if similar needs could not be identified in other industry areas. VET policy needs to support resource allocations to address these continuing and expanding needs.

However, policies supporting the provision of these skills also need to reflect the emerging reality that these skills are not fixed in time or place—and what is required for effective performance in the future will continue to shift. Narrow prescriptive solutions to the teaching and reporting of literacy, numeracy and employability skills appear to be rooted in past practice.

Considerable diversity in strategies and approaches is called for to address the multiplicity—and the particularity, of the literacies, numeracies and employability skills required in the world of work. However, we also note that these skills are skills *for life*, not just for work. Therefore opportunities to attain and develop these skills need to reflect policy commitments to social justice, and to full and effective citizenship, as well as employability. Strategic policy support for this diversity of provision should be apparent. The diversity also has implications for reporting and evaluating what counts as progress in the development of these skills.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of the education and training system, particularly the adult and vocational education sectors, in providing a new range of skills and services to employers. In addition to providing capable graduates, as work-ready as possible, the sector needs

to be providing employers with educational development and consultancy services. Such services need to be customised or tailored to help employers address the pedagogical issues embedded within their workplaces and their work. The services required need to be premised upon effective collaborations and partnerships characterised more by a focus upon design, problem-solving and value-adding, than on traditional notions of program 'delivery'.

From a policy perspective we also note here the positive influence of the Commonwealth-funded Workplace English Language and Literacy program. As noted previously, most of the employers contributing to this study had involvement with or exposure to these programs. Their sophisticated understandings of the literacy, numeracy and employability skills issues within their own workplaces have been informed by the practice of adult educators who are specialists in these fields. The leadership of these practitioners and of these employers in developing effective partnerships and integrated strategies is to be highly commended. These partnerships and employer understandings are a valuable indirect outcome of the Workplace English Language and Literacy program. It is to be hoped that such developments will continue, as program providers and practitioners move further into workplace partnerships, and in consulting, and in capacity-building roles 'beyond provision' of these skills. Policy should support such developments.

Finally, policy for adult and vocational education and, in particular for adult literacy, numeracy and employability skills, needs to support professional and organisational development to enable providers to build new capability and make the necessary shifts. These challenges are further discussed below.

Implications for VET and ACE practice

It is unlikely that the large education and training institutions of the state, with their bureaucratic structures, will ever entirely catch up with the pace of change. Some of the literacy, numeracy, and employability skill demands on today's employees were not apparent even two years ago. There is a continuing need to develop effective organisational or enterprise learning cultures within workplaces—including within educational and institutional workplaces such as TAFE institutes, universities and government bureaucracies.

The adult and vocational education sectors are attempting to meet these challenges, to develop new practices and partnerships and to address resourcing issues and support services.

We have noted that employers need more than just program provision or 'delivery' from training providers. The literacy and numeracy issues in workplaces are not simply literacy (or numeracy) issues, but *pedagogical* issues. They are issues about how effective learning and development processes can be identified, implemented and sustained. It is not a question of literacy or numeracy for its own sake, but how these processes may enable and support the learning and change processes taking place—for organisations and for the people within them.

Hence the need is not simply for more discrete literacy and numeracy experts per se. Indeed in some circumstances literacy or numeracy might be part of the problem (rather than the solution), and taking a quite different path, such as using graphics, or colour-tagging or bar-coding might be a more practical, cost-effective and simpler strategy for the workplace and for the workers. In saying this, we do recognise that the needs of the workplace do not always coincide with the needs of the employees. Hence, we reinforce the comments above: the need for continuing investment in diverse forms of educational provision to enable second-chance, third-chance, and indeed lifelong learning.

However, we stress that creative pedagogical strategies are needed within workplaces. We see that without effective dialogue, critical analysis and careful (re)consideration, existing understandings of 'literacy needs', or 'numeracy gaps', or 'delivery strategies' could be part of the problem rather than the solution. Relatively few workplaces or workers will warm to the notion of what may be, in effect, 'remedial' programs for workers (even though they may not be named as such). Even the

terms 'learner' and 'teacher' in a workplace may be negatively loaded, rather than filled with positive associations, as it might be within a formal educational setting.

What is required are skilled 'hybrid' educational practitioners (Waterhouse et al. 2005) who can engage and consult with employers and worker–learners in the complex realities of their workplace settings. A great opportunity exists for the adult and vocational education system, including experienced practitioners engaged in adult literacy, numeracy, basic education and related fields, to assist employers in the development of organisational structures, leadership practices and systems that underpin successful organisational and individual learning.

The work required moves educational practice away from traditional notions of delivery or provision of predetermined literacy, numeracy or even generic skills. Indeed, new skills seem to be required for the educational and training practitioners, including skills in:

✧ active/effective listening, consulting and facilitation (not just teaching or training)

✧ learning environment analysis (not just raining needs analysis)

✧ identification and integration of learning strategies (not just training delivery)

✧ learning design (not just instructional design)

✧ assessment of work practices (not just workers) for their learning outcomes.

Continuing professional development of practitioners to provide these skills and support services is essential.

Furthermore, it is not only certificate II level or shop floor level workers who need to be learning—there are challenges and learning for individuals at all levels, including enterprise managers.

Specifically, there is a need for adult education and training practitioners to provide support for the particular literacy and numeracy skills at certificate III and higher, and in effectively integrated ways. At this level numeracy and literacy skills are more complex and require a greater level of time and expertise from educational practitioners. We often heard that the trainer's main role in this regard became one of finding ways to deal with literacy and numeracy requirements in assessment processes and endorsed competencies, rather than addressing the real learning issues of the workplace.

Implications for workplaces and employers

The employers we spoke to maintain an interest in and express concerns about the *provision* side of the equation. They would like to see continuing improvements in the quality, consistency and flexibility of the programs that address these essential skills offered through the education and training sector. However, that is not the end of the story.

The position our informants take shifts the basic question from provision or development to one of provision *and* development. The organisations we spoke to have taken a deliberate position on the continuing *development* of these skills within the domains over which they have some influence and control. They have accepted responsibility for the continuing development of these skills, for their businesses and for their employees. Whether from an enlightened position, or a purely pragmatic stance, they have taken the view that: *if it is to be, it is up to me.*

> Now we are putting together a program that will teach them how to write business stuff—that's anything from reports, email that people can read, to just making sure things are spelled properly; because it is very career limiting to come into a business and have lots of ideas and not be able to get that information across other than by just telling people.
>
> (Manufacturing)

Success factors in brief …

We have seen that the development of latent employee skills (including literacy, numeracy and employability skills) is often predicated on the work culture and structures around them. The employers engaged in this study were committed to building workplaces that allowed these skills to develop and grow.

Their approaches were underpinned by a strong set of ethics and values. Through their leadership, they were able to translate supportive principles into a culture and workable, pragmatic, yet inclusive, structures and procedures to facilitate ongoing development of these capabilities in the workplace.

To sum up, most of these employers did make effective use of the Workplace English Language and Literacy program, but perhaps even more importantly, they:

◇ usually have a strong person-centred learning and development culture as an integral part of their business strategy

◇ do not compromise quality, efficiency or service in order to address literacy, numeracy and employability issues within their workplaces

◇ recognise that such developmental processes contribute to improved organisational performance

◇ recognise that confidence, mutual respect and trust are key cultural factors in enabling people to learn; they value relationships and rapport

◇ promote and facilitate mentoring as a significant and systematic activity, both formally and informally

◇ develop work processes and procedures that maximise the accessibility and opportunity for all employees to understand what is required of them in the workplace

◇ take full responsibility for training all workers as a key component of the organisation's plans

◇ select training providers on their ability to appreciate and then integrate the organisation's culture, values and performance outcomes into all training interventions.

Many, particularly in the face of skills shortages, forego the minimum requirements for literacy and numeracy at the recruitment stage, where candidates demonstrate other key employability skills and attitudes.

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Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Whose responsibility? Employers' views on developing their workers' literacy, numeracy and employability skills—Support document.* It can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au/ publications/1989.html> and contains:

✧ Background to the study

✧ Research method

✧ Literature review

✧ References