

Improving Learning

*Review of the Australian Core Skills Framework and Digital Literacy Skills Framework and relevant assessment tools*

**Final Report**

Prepared for the Department of Employment and  
Workplace Relations

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## About this report

This is the final report of a project commissioned by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (the Department) to review the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) and Digital Literacy Skills Framework (DLSF) and tools available to support assessment using these frameworks.

The review explored the development and history of the ACSF and DLSF, their use and application in the Australian context and examined features of selected international adult skills frameworks and curriculum.

Through this desktop research and range of consultation activities with stakeholders, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) has investigated current use of the ACSF and DLSF and identified issues that indicate a need for framework reform or change.

This report documents the findings from the review and proposes recommendations that will better position the frameworks to support agile responses to swiftly changing skill needs.

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- managers and practitioners of nationally-funded programs that use the frameworks: Adult Migrant English Program, Foundation Skills for Your Future, Skills for Education and Employment, and VET Student Loans
- practitioners from vocational education and training and adult community education sectors, including those who provided valuable indigenous perspectives
- assessment tool developers, curriculum owners, training package developers, and curriculum or resource developers
- state and territory training authorities and other commonwealth and state or territory government representatives
- representatives of key professional associations and bodies, including Adult Learning Australia, the Australian Council for Adult Literacy, the Australian Council of TESOL Associations, and the *Reading Writing Hotline*.

## Acronyms and abbreviations in this report

ACAL	Australian Council for Adult Literacy
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACE	Adult and Community Education
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACFE	Adult Community and Further Education
ACSF	Australian Core Skills Framework
ACTA	Australian Council of TESOL Associations
AISC	Australian Industry and Skills Committee
ALA	Adult Learning Australia
ALNCC	Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curriculum
AMEP	Adult Migrant English Program
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
ASQA	Australian Skills Quality Authority
bksb	Basic Key Skills Builder
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment
CGEA	Certificates of General Education for Adults
CSPA	Core Skills Profile for Adults
DLSF	Digital Literacy Skills Framework
EAL	English as an additional language
FSfYF	Foundation Skills for Your Future
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
ICT	Information and communications technology
IT	Information technology
ISLPR	International Second Language Proficiency Rating
LLN	Language, literacy and numeracy – also referred to as ‘core skills’
LLND	Language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy
NRS	National Reporting System
OALCF	Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Ofqual	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
OLNA	Online Literacy and Numeracy Assessment
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PSTRE	Problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments
RTO	Registered training organisation
SEE	Skills for Education and Employment
SRTOs	Standards for Registered Training Organisations
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission (New Zealand)
VET	Vocational education and training
VRQA	Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority



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## Executive summary

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to review two Australian government frameworks: the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) and the Digital Literacy Skills Framework (DLSF).

The ACSF has a long history. It was developed in 2008 from a national framework for reporting adult English language, literacy and numeracy (LLN): the *National Reporting System* (Coates et al., 1995). The ACSF describes features of five core skills – reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy and learning – across levels of complexity from 1 to 5. The framework was revised in 2012 following trialling and validation, and a ‘Pre Level 1’ supplement was added in 2017.

The DLSF was developed for use in the *Foundation Skills for your Future* Australian government program, a program that subsidises training aimed at building digital and LLN skills. Released in draft form in 2020, the DLSF has yet to be trialled on a large scale or validated.

The purpose of the ACER review was to:

- research current uses of both frameworks by vocational education and training (VET) and adult and community education (ACE) stakeholders, as well as of the tools available to support assessment using them; and
- recommend areas for reform or change to support the frameworks in meeting identified stakeholder needs.

As broad stakeholder engagement was critical to the effectiveness of this five-phase review (Figure 1), the initial discovery phases consisted of research and preliminary consultation. The discovery explored the nature and scope of potential issues that then informed the identification of individuals and groups who could offer both representative and nuanced perspectives.

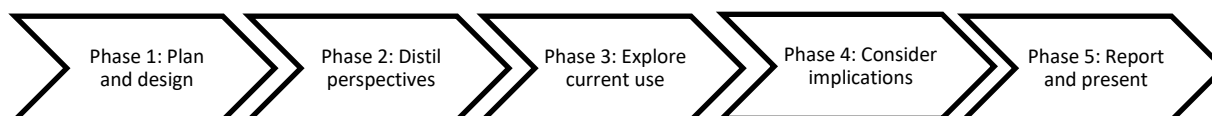


Figure 1 Phases of this review

Consultation approaches were tailored to stakeholder types so as to capture the perspectives and uses of the frameworks by multiple users.

Findings from the extensive consultation were then analysed and the recommendations set out throughout this report were identified. These recommendations are provided in summary below and detailed in Section 4 (p. 61).

### **Recommendation 1: Consider the Digital Capability Framework (when available) as a replacement for the DLSF**

The DLSF was developed for a specific program purpose and is currently unvalidated. It was based on the structure of the ACSF, with a view to digital literacy becoming a sixth core skill. However, users have indicated that this structure is not suited to describing digital literacy.

The increasing use of digital technologies is impacting all core skills. There is widespread agreement that the ACSF should be updated to acknowledge the impact of digital texts, materials, devices, and technological tools and processes – and that LLN practitioners need opportunities to learn about how digital literacy intersects with core skills. However, as a stand-alone skill, many consider that digital literacy is better aligned with employability skills than with the traditional literacies. There is concern that adding an ill-defined sixth core skill to the ACSF would undermine the credibility of this established existing



framework. The review also determined that digital literacy would be better embedded within the existing core skills than as an additional core skill.

Considerable evidence-based research and analysis informed the development of the *Digital Capability Framework* which was recommended by the Australian Industry and Skills Committee's Digital Transformation Expert Panel. The *Digital Capability Framework* will provide a common language that is accessible to employers, educators, governments and individuals, and has potential to become the pre-eminent Australian framework for describing digital capabilities in multiple contexts across the workplace and everyday life.

### Subsidiary recommendations

*1a. Do not introduce digital literacy into the ACSF as a sixth core skill*

*1b. Develop a range of Sample Activities and support resources that would enable use of the new Digital Capability Framework as a replacement for the DLSF and trial them in foundation skills delivery contexts*

*1c. Provide professional development for foundation skills practitioners on using the new Digital Capability Framework and related resources*

### Recommendation 2: Continue to maintain the ACSF as the pre-eminent Australian framework for LLN

The ACSF is widely recognised as the pre-eminent Australian framework to describe adult English LLN skills. It has been applied effectively by diverse users in a wide range of contexts over many years. Critique of some aspects of the framework point to improvements that could be made to its coverage and currency and to the way in which it accommodates the cultural diversity of the Australian population.

With relatively minor adjustments, the ACSF will remain a robust and valuable framework with utility across ACE, VET and employment contexts. Stakeholders advise that the uptake and informed use of the ACSF would be enhanced by the availability of authoritative support resources and professional development, and that a clear authorising environment would help to cement the ACSF as the recognised national framework for adult LLN.

### Subsidiary recommendations

*2a. Make revisions to ACSF components to address their currency and coverage*

*2b. Improve ACSF design and usability*

*2c. Develop an ACSF Companion Volume and support resources for broad stakeholder use*

*2d. Establish community of practice opportunities and a program of professional development*

*2e. Establish policy and governance arrangements that provide a stable environment for the revision and ongoing use of the ACSF*

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background to the project

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (the Department) commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to conduct a review of the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) and the Digital Literacy Skills Framework (DLSF), and tools available to support assessment using these frameworks. The aim of the project was to report on how the frameworks are used in the vocational education and training (VET) and adult and community education (ACE) sectors and identify any updates that are needed to ensure they meet the needs of stakeholders.

The project methodology employed a range of input-gathering approaches to reflect the diverse uses and users of the frameworks.

The following activities were undertaken to identify options for improving the frameworks and supporting their use. Summary details of the review methodology are in Appendix 1.

<b>Discovery</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk research explored the history of the frameworks and recent international language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (LLND) framework experience.</li> <li>• Targeted interviews and forums with commonwealth and state or territory government representatives gathered information on framework use in policy and programs.</li> <li>• A roundtable discussion with framework experts considered lessons that can be learned from the experience of framework development and implementation.</li> </ul>
<b>Stakeholder consultation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-invitation forums gave 110 interested stakeholders an opportunity to hear and respond to initial research findings.</li> <li>• Strategic conversations captured the perspectives and experiences of key framework users, including assessment tool developers and training product or curriculum owners.</li> <li>• A public online survey gathered insights from 328 practitioners, program managers, and other interested stakeholders.</li> </ul>
<b>Expert advice and analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Themed focus group discussions with invited participants reflected on project findings to articulate issues and potential solutions.</li> <li>• Follow-up interviews with framework experts explored ways forward to improve the frameworks and support their use.</li> <li>• Written advice from subject matter experts documented how specific changes to the frameworks could be achieved and why they are needed.</li> </ul>

*The ACSF is a significant document as it represents the way that adult literacy skills (and other core skills) are conceptualised in Australia. This review is a wonderful opportunity to ensure that our shared understanding of these skills is founded in up-to-date research and that people in Australia with low literacy skills receive the best possible support and instruction.*

Survey respondent

## 1.2 Background to the frameworks

While the origins of the ACSF date back to 1995, the DLSF was created much more recently. The timeline in Table 1 highlights key milestones in the development of both frameworks.

*Table 1 Milestones in the development of the foundation skills frameworks*

<b>1995</b>	<b>Release of National Reporting System (NRS)<sup>1</sup></b>	The NRS (Coates et al., 1995) was developed as a mechanism for reporting the outcomes of adult English language, literacy and numeracy provision. It was used in Australian government-funded programs, such as the <i>Workplace English Language and Literacy Programme</i> , to report the outcomes of training delivery, and to inform the <i>built in not bolted on</i> approach to representing language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) demands in the early development of training packages.
<b>2008</b>	<b>Publication of draft ACSF</b>	The development of the ACSF drew on concepts from the <i>International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)</i> . <sup>2</sup> Trialling and validation of the draft ACSF were conducted in diverse contexts, including community and workplace-based training, senior secondary, VET, and higher education.
<b>2012</b>	<b>Release of revised ACSF</b>	Release of the revised ACSF coincided with the release of the <i>National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults</i> (Council of Australian Governments, 2012a), which committed all Australian governments to the use of the ACSF as the standard framework for measuring foundation skills. The revised ACSF included a Pre Level 1 supplement in an appendix to assist the recognition of skills below ACSF Level 1.
<b>2017</b>	<b>Release of ACSF Pre Level 1</b>	The original Pre Level 1 supplement was expanded to bring it into line with the detail provided for other ACSF levels. Pre Level 1 was divided into two stages (1A and 1B) in recognition of the incremental steps that learners work through at this level.
<b>2020</b>	<b>Publication of draft DLSF</b>	The DLSF was developed specifically to support the Australian government-funded <i>Foundation Skills for Your Future (FSfYF)</i> program. At the time of its design, there was the potential that the digital skills described in the framework sit as a sixth core skill, alongside the other core skills in the ACSF, to reinforce the concept that digital literacy is part of an integral suite of core skills that are fundamental for individuals to participate in society and work.

<sup>1</sup> For further information on the National Reporting System, see <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A2406>

<sup>2</sup> Conducted between 1994 and 1998, the IALS was the first-ever large-scale international comparative assessment designed to identify and measure a range of adult skills and to help assess the impact of literacy in the 20th-century global economies. The released data in IALS provided a rich set of information on the literacy skills of adults (ages 16-65 years old) in 22 countries and regions — data that were comparable across cultures and languages. Trend items from IALS were included in the 2003 [Adult Literacy and Life Skills Study](#) (ALLS) and the 2012 [Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies](#) (PIAAC), allowing data from IALS to be linked to trend data from participating countries in ALLS and PIAAC.

## ACSF

The ACSF (DIISRTE, 2012) is a framework that describes five core skills of learning, reading, writing, oral communication, and numeracy. Together with the Pre Level 1 supplement (DESE, 2017), the ACSF describes performance across levels from Pre Level 1 (low-level performance) to Level 5 (high-level performance).

Each core skill is described using **Indicators, Focus Areas, Performance Features, and Sample Activities**.

The framework recognises that core skill performance:

- is influenced by **4 performance variables**: support, context, text complexity, and task complexity
- applies to **3 domains of communication** where the core skill can be used: personal and community, workplace and employment, and education and training.

In combination with findings from international survey data,<sup>3</sup> ACSF levels have informed policy thinking and underpinned program design across government in Australia.

As an established nationally recognised framework, the ACSF provides a common language for describing core skills in a wide range of contexts and can be used to:

- benchmark an individual's core skill performance for placement and diagnostic purposes
- map core skills requirements in education and training
- tailor approaches to teaching and learning
- describe core skills relevant to the workplace and employment
- inform decisions regarding funding and referrals.

The ACSF, and details on its content, can be accessed at: <https://www.dese.gov.au/skills-information-training-providers/australian-core-skills-framework>

## DLSF

The DLSF has been in use since 2020 but has not been validated and is still regarded as a draft. Developed specifically to support the FSfYF program, the DLSF enables FSfYF providers to report the incremental achievement of digital literacy skills by learners in their program, in accordance with funding requirements.

While the DLSF was intentionally designed with a structure that mirrors that of the ACSF, it spans only four levels of performance from Pre Level 1 to Level 3. In all other respects it is consistent with the ACSF.

The DLSF, and details on its content, can be accessed at: <https://www.dese.gov.au/foundation-skills-your-future-program/resources/digital-literacy-skills-framework>

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<sup>3</sup> The major international survey conducted as part of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies in over 40 countries is the *Survey of Adult Skills*. The survey measures adults' proficiency in key information-processing skills – literacy, numeracy and problem solving - and gathers information and data on how adults use their skills at home, at work and in the wider community. Further information on the survey may be found at <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/>.

### 1.3 Australian foundation skills landscape

The draft *National Foundation Skills Framework 2022 to 2032* sets out a 10-year model for collective action by governments working with stakeholders to improve the foundation skills of Australian adults. The framework recognises the critical role foundation skills play in equipping Australian adults with the skills needed to participate confidently in the community, the workplace, and in education and training. It provides a transparent approach for Australian governments and other stakeholders to achieve the framework's aspirational vision that:

*Australians can access quality education and training to continuously develop the foundation skills they need to actively and confidently participate in the economy and the community.*

In 2012 the term 'foundation skills' started to be used in the Australian context to refer collectively to LLN and employability skills. This term was used in the *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*<sup>4</sup> (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment, 2012a) and the *Standards for Training Packages 2012* (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment, 2012b).

In broad terms foundation skills are defined as the combination of:

- English language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) – listening, speaking, reading, writing, digital literacy, and use of mathematical ideas; and
- employability skills, such as collaboration, problem solving, self-management, learning and information and communications technology (ICT) skills required for participation in modern workplaces and contemporary life.

*(Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment [SCOTESE], 2012a, p. 1)*

Despite having been explicitly represented in policy and nationally recognised training products for over ten years, the term 'foundation skills' is still not consistently understood or applied. Since the introduction of the term, the discourse on the relationship between LLN skills and lists of employability skills and the way in which these are referenced in policy, literature and frameworks has been inconsistent (Hayes, 2020). The relationship between employability skills and the core skills described by the ACSF under the broad definition of 'foundation skills' remains a challenge for practitioners.

The use of the word 'foundation' in the term means that these skills are often, erroneously, interpreted as low-level skills. Practitioners also assume that the skills described as employability skills are only applied in workplace or employment contexts – but these skills, such as 'planning and organising', are required in all aspects of life.

In project discussion forums, several participants specifically questioned the relationship between the ACSF, DLSF and the *Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework*.

*I would like to see employability skills represented in the ACSF – but I know that is a big ask.*

VET practitioner

<sup>4</sup> The COAG (2012) 10-year strategy set aspirational targets for the foundation skill levels of working age Australians

While direct consideration of employability skills was not within the scope of this review, these skills play a significant role in the core skills of learning, reading, writing, oral communication, and numeracy. The core skills are key underpinning skills that are developed, practised and demonstrated as part of employability skills, such as problem solving and teamwork. Core skills and employability skills are interdependent and are frequently developed and demonstrated together.

#### 1.4 ACSF and DLSF in the national context

Several national frameworks are used to describe skills in the Australian skills landscape. Together these frameworks describe skills that enable individuals to participate in work, learning and personal life.

- 1 **Technical skills:** Job or discipline-specific skills required in the workplace that are described in industry qualifications and are underpinned by the *Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)*.
- 2 **Employability skills:** More general skills that support someone to achieve their potential and contribute successfully within the workplace. These are described by 2 government-supported frameworks used equally in developing nationally recognised training products: the *Employability Skills Framework* and the *Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework*.
- 3 **Language, literacy and numeracy, or ‘core’ skills:** The five skills described in the *Australian Core Skills Framework*: Learning, reading, writing, oral communication, and numeracy.
- 4 **Digital skills:** Skills that are currently described by the Digital Transformation Expert Panel<sup>5</sup> as being typically grouped by commentators into digital literacy skills, general digital skills, or advanced digital skills. The former (digital literacy skills), are described in the framework developed for the government’s *FSfYF* program – the DLSF – and integrated throughout the other three skill types.

While the Australian government has at various times supported the development – and in many instances the maintenance – of these frameworks, there is no overarching policy that supports their cohesive implementation. The frameworks were developed at different times, and for different stakeholders and purposes. Each framework reflects the definitions and terms that were current at the time of their development and no information is provided to users on how these terms, or the frameworks themselves, relate to each other.

In project consultations, many stakeholders commented on the array of frameworks used in the Australian education and training system and expressed a desire for the relationships between them to be clearly articulated. Some consultation feedback also pointed to a lack of understanding among VET practitioners of the relationship between ACSF and AQF levels.

*I think fewer frameworks is better – poor VET and LLN teachers have to dig into so many different frameworks. It would be great to streamline and consolidate the current, confusing array of frameworks.*

Survey  
respondent

<sup>5</sup> The Digital Transformation Expert Panel was established by the Australian Industry and Skills Committee (AISC) in late 2019 to ‘provide advice on how Australia’s VET system can most effectively respond to digital change underway across industry and its impact on the nation’s workforce’. For further information: <https://www.digitalskillsformation.org.au/>, accessed 16 June 2022

This review established that there are pockets of practice in skill description and development contexts where the ACSF is considered a useful tool, but that the framework's 'brand' has neither the reach nor the gravitas of the AQF. Creating a single authorising environment for the four frameworks would signal government imprimatur of the ACSF, which in turn would broaden and embed its uptake in VET product design and delivery.

*We try to embed foundation skills specifically in the performance criteria of a unit of competency so that we can limit what we include in the unit's Foundation Skills section.<sup>6</sup> If they [the foundation skills] are not clear, we put them in the Foundation Skills section, but we don't reference the ACSF. We give an example of the type of thing that might need to be read, e.g. a contract. Each Skills Service Organisation takes a subtly different approach to how they describe foundation skills.*

Training  
product  
developer

Stakeholders are confused by the multiple frameworks in use in the national VET system. While these have been developed at different times and for different purposes, the absence of a common structure and language between the frameworks prevents whole-of-system approaches to skill development.

There would be value in articulating how the frameworks relate to each other and how they each apply to the concept of 'foundation skills'. This may require centralised government oversight and coordination to establish a consistent policy position on the purpose of existing frameworks and the process for establishing new ones.

## Course content based on the ACSF

The ACSF has a long history of informing the content of training package qualifications and units of competency, accredited courses, and entry and exit level advice in related Implementation Guides.

Training packages and accredited courses, often referred to as training products, are key features of Australia's VET system. They are used as the basis for most programs delivered by registered training organisations (RTOs) and are developed and reviewed in accordance with national standards.

Courses are accredited by one of the following three course accreditation agencies; the choice of agency being dependent on the jurisdiction in which the course is developed.

- Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA)
- Training Accreditation Council Western Australia
- Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA)

Courses accredited by any one of these authorities can be delivered and recognised nationally.

<sup>6</sup> The unit of competency template in the *Standards for Training Packages 2012* states that the foundation skills section 'describes those language, literacy, numeracy and employment skills that are essential to performance'.

The following are examples where the ACSF has been used in nationally recognised accredited courses.

- The VRQA-accredited Victorian **Certificates of General Education for Adults (CGEA)**, the **EAL Framework** curricula, and **Certificates in Mumgu-dhal tyama-tyt** have unit content that is based directly on ACSF Performance Features from core skills at various levels. Entry and exit level statements are often included in unit descriptors and addressed in Implementation Guides for these courses (see Figure 2 for an example of reference to the ACSF in a unit descriptor).
- The ASQA-accredited **Core Skills for Learning Framework** curricula, developed by TAFE Queensland, includes ‘courses in’ and Certificates that have units based on ACSF content. All exit outcomes from these curricula map directly to ACSF levels.
- The ASQA-accredited TAFENSW developed **Certificate I in Access to Work and Training; Certificate I in Preparation for Work and Training** and **Certificate II in Career Preparation** all mention the ACSF level in the Course Description, Course Outcome and throughout the individual enterprise units in the curriculum. The ACSF is then included in the Teaching and Assessment Strategy which guides delivery and implementation of these courses.
- The **FSK Foundation Skills Training Package** is based on the ACSF. Units in this training package are aligned with the ACSF and cover the core skills from Pre Level 1 to Level 5. A review of the training package in 2019 strengthened direct references in the units to the related ACSF Indicators. Assessment conditions for the training package require that assessors ‘have sound knowledge of the ACSF and Performance Features of the ACSF level being assessed’.

<b>Unit Code VU22580</b>	
<b>Unit Title</b> <b>Recognise and copy extremely familiar words</b>	
<b>Unit Descriptor</b>	This unit describes the skills and knowledge to recognise and copy letters and common letter combinations of the alphabet and copy extremely familiar words.
	The outcomes described in this unit relate to:
	The Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). They partly contribute to the achievement of ACSF indicators for Writing at Pre level 1.
	and
	The ISLPR (International Second Language Proficiency Ratings) descriptors for Writing. They partly contribute to the achievement of Writing 0+.

Figure 2: Example unit from EAL Framework

A search of the national training register (training.gov.au) for reference to the ACSF indicates that a small number of units of competency in the TAE Training and Education Training Package and the CHC Community Services Training Package require learners to demonstrate knowledge of the ACSF. It is possible that other current training products also contain references to the ACSF, but this information is not readily available because it is not possible to search the content of accredited courses on training.gov.au or to search the ‘foundation skills’ section of units of competency.

From 1997, the NRS (precursor of the ACSF) was used as the basis of policy and practical advice on incorporating LLN into training packages and a series of resources was developed to support training package developers and practitioners.<sup>7</sup> Through the *Workplace Communication in Training Packages* project (1997-1999) the Australian National Training Authority funded industry bodies and RTOs to develop approaches for supporting LLN in training packages.

<sup>7</sup> Workplace Communication in National Training Packages: a practical guide (1997), Built in not Bolted On: Information kit for language, literacy and numeracy coordinators on incorporating communication skills into Training Packages (1998), A New Assessment Tool: Information kit for assessors and workplace trainers incorporating language, literacy and numeracy skills into Training Package (1998), Ten Fold Returns: Information kit for HR managers and training managers on incorporating language, literacy and numeracy skills into Training Packages (1998).



The increasing interest in LLN beyond specialist teacher audiences was an influencing factor in the development of the ACSF. After its release in 2012, various industry-specific resources based on the ACSF were developed by (then) Industry Skills Councils and the Australian Industry Group<sup>8</sup> with funding from the Australian government. Due to the restructuring of industry arrangements between 1998 to the present, from Industry Training Advisory Boards to Industry Skills Councils to Skills Service Organisations, and the cessation of the *Workplace English Language and Literacy Programme* and its Innovative Grants, many of these resources no longer have a public profile – some are now archived on VOCEDplus<sup>9</sup> or are in the *Reading Writing Hotline* resource database.

Course materials and resources relating to the ACSF in non-accredited or pre-accredited ACE delivery vary widely across jurisdictions. In some programs, such as WA's *Read Write Now*, references to the ACSF are only made at reporting level to the State; in Tasmania's *26TEN* program the ACSF is used to design individual learning plans, with an online reporting tool having been developed to accommodate them. In Victoria, the Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board has funded courses such as *Skills for Work and Study*<sup>10</sup> that map to the lower ACSF levels for use by Learn Local providers. In 2020 and 2021 ACFE also ran the *Adult Literacy Practitioner* professional development program, developed by Adult and Community Education Victoria and Adult Learning Australia (ALA), which had a Moodle module on using the ACSF. ALA also has a separate online literacy and numeracy resource toolkit that includes more than 220 resources, many of which have been mapped to the ACSF.<sup>11</sup> However, the resources are only available to members of ALA's LLN network.

### Course content based on the DLSF

While the DLSF was developed as a reporting tool for the FSfYF program, it has also been used as a resource to develop course content such as the *Digital Essentials* curriculum and teaching resources developed by ALA for ACFE in Victoria.

The course is delivered by Learn Local providers and includes two options:

- **Digital Essentials Level 1:** A 30-hour pre-accredited program designed to help learners understand the basics of various areas of technology, including different digital devices, their functionality and the ways people can use these devices to connect with others and access services over the internet.
- **Digital Essentials Level 2:** A 30-hour pre-accredited program designed to build on the Digital Essentials Level 1 program. It extends learners' understanding of the technology required to succeed in life and accredited training and includes use of day-to-day technology.

The DLSF has also been used by various developers to underpin assessment item design for online tests, to create a digital literacy licence for young people (aged 15-25), and to inform learning and teaching resources.

<sup>8</sup> *4 Steps to Taking the Lead: professional development for trainers and assessors* (Service Skills Australia, 2014), *Unlocking Workforce Potential* (Australian Industry Group, 2014)

<sup>9</sup> VOCEDplus (<https://www.voced.edu.au/>): NCVET's international tertiary education research database

<sup>10</sup> <https://learnlocal.org.au/resources/sfws/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://ala.asn.au/lln-network/>

## 1.5 International foundation skills landscape

### *OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies*

Australia's best source of information about the literacy and numeracy of Australian adults is derived from its participation in the *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC), auspiced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). PIAAC aims to measure the key cognitive and workplace skills needed for individuals to participate in society and for economies to prosper.

The last round of assessment was conducted in Australia in 2011-12 (OECD, 2019). The results demonstrate that a significant number of people aged 15 to 74 do not have sufficient foundation skills in reading and numeracy to cope with life and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (ACER, 2013).

PIAAC also included an assessment of adults' problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments (PSTRE). This domain reflects the capacity to use ICT to solve the types of problems adults commonly face in modern society. Almost 40% of Australians who sat the computer assessment performed highly in PSTRE, one of the highest rates among participating countries. However, Australia also had a relatively high share (14%) of adults who opted out of taking the computer-based assessment (OECD, 2017).

The PIAAC frameworks for reading and numeracy were updated in 2021 to reflect recent technological and digital advances across society and the growing awareness of critical literacy and numeracy as key elements of 21<sup>st</sup> century life.

Intelligence gathered through PIAAC is valuable for understanding the skills of the Australian population and informing policy and program decisions. While ACSF levels and PIAAC levels are not directly comparable, (Tout, Perkins & Teo, 2022), the ACSF has drawn from theoretical frameworks relating to text and task complexity that have informed the IALS and PIAAC.

The updated PIAAC frameworks for literacy and numeracy provide examples of the connection and interaction between core skills and technology and digital devices that are informative for the revision of Australian frameworks. Any revisions made to the ACSF to include digital literacy skills should be informed by the PIAAC frameworks.

### *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*

The ACSF remains a unique instrument internationally. While some countries have developed frameworks and curriculum for particular learner demographics, few have the overarching character of the ACSF – a framework intended for multiple purposes. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) is a framework that was also intended for several purposes: to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency.

The 2001 CEFR was considered in both the development and revision of the ACSF. It has recently been extensively updated and extended through the publication of the *CEFR Companion volume* (Council of Europe, 2020). The revision has retained the original construct but incorporated the most recent research while drawing on widespread input from subject matter experts and practitioners.

A comparison between the ACSF and the *CEFR Companion volume* conducted for this project found significant similarities between the conceptual base, general progressions and descriptors of the two frameworks. However, several CEFR concepts and/or content areas do not have an equivalent in the ACSF. For example, the CEFR seeks to be relevant to the learning of any additional language, and champions plurilingualism – the ability of an individual who is competent in more than one language to switch easily from one linguistic code to another in order to communicate effectively in a particular set of circumstances. The CEFR Companion Volume highlights strategies used by non-native speakers to, for example, ‘call upon the knowledge of a number of languages (or dialects, or varieties) to make sense of a text’ or ‘recognise words from a common international store in a new guise’ (Council of Europe, 2020 p. 30).

### *New Zealand’s Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy*

Like the ACSF, New Zealand’s *Learning Progressions* (Tertiary Education Commission [TEC], 2008a, 2008b, 2008c) ‘...are neither a curriculum nor a teaching and learning programme’ but a set of descriptors designed to ‘show what adult learners know and can do at successive points as they develop their expertise in literacy learning’. Teachers and managers of adult learners are ‘invited to use the progressions as a basis for developing or adapting their own curricula, programmes, assessment tools and teaching and learning activities’ (TEC, 2008a, p. 4).

The *Learning Progressions* show the development of expertise in listening, speaking, reading and writing in New Zealand English, and seek to embed listening, speaking, reading, writing, and numeracy skills into a range of daily tasks. Some examples include words from Te Reo that are commonly used in New Zealand. ‘This acknowledges Māori iwi as tangata whenua and reflects the fact that Te Reo is one of our official languages’ (TEC, 2008a, p. 5).

While the introduction to the ACSF states that it ‘reflects contemporary use of English in Australia’ (DIISRTE, 2012, p. 2), it has been suggested that the use it reflects does not represent the diversity of cultural and language backgrounds found in Australia.

The 2021 census revealed that 27.6% of Australians were born overseas and almost half of the population have a parent born overseas (48.2%).<sup>12</sup> The census collected information on over 250 ancestries and 350 languages. More than 5.5 million people in Australia use a language other than English at home, including in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households with 167 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages spoken at home among 78,656 people.<sup>13</sup>

### Recommendations

2a(vii) **All core skills:** Revise all core skills and Sample Activities to acknowledge the cultural diversity of Australian English learners, including migrant, refugee and First Nations learners

2b(i) Include **an explanation of the purpose of the ACSF** in the introductory section of the ACSF that describes features of the contemporary use of English in Australia, recognising the diverse language backgrounds of Australians

<sup>12</sup> ABS, 2021 Census: Nearly half of Australians have a parent born overseas, <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/2021-census-nearly-half-australians-have-parent-born-overseas>

<sup>13</sup> SBS, Census 2021: Almost half of Australians had a parent born overseas, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/census-2021-almost-half-of-australians-had-a-parent-born-overseas/5r9mi7esi>

### *United Kingdom's Skills for Life*

In the UK, the *Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curriculum* (ALNCC) developed in 2000 by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, now replaced by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, formed the basis for the UK's *Skills for Life* program.

The ALNCC provided detailed criteria, standards, examples and guidance at five levels and was used by teachers, trainers and school leaders. It was designed to meet the needs of three particular demographic groups in the UK population. ALNCC entry levels 1 to 3 were designed for learners who need intensive and specialised assistance to build their skills. Levels 1 and 2 provided curricula for learners who have greater difficulty and need more specific and in-depth help and for those who need help to 'brush up' their skills to the required level.

The standards set out in this curriculum defined the range of LLN skills and capabilities that adults need in order to function and progress at work and in society and informed the development of adult literacy and numeracy qualifications.

The ALNCC levels still underpin the levels of a set of accredited Level 1 and 2 *Functional Skills* courses. The *Skills for Life* initiative<sup>14</sup> has recently been injected with new funding under the UK *Shared Prosperity* Fund and a new *Multiply* program,<sup>15</sup> launched to increase the focus on building numeracy and digital skills. An online national *Numeracy Challenge*<sup>16</sup> tool that allows the general public to check and improve their numeracy skills has a range of supporting resources relating to workplace numeracy, financial literacy and the use of numeracy in everyday life.

Lessons for Australia from *Skills for Life* include:

- A national *Skills for Life Strategy* for the UK has continually driven responses, resourcing and system capability and created a national 'narrative' to support adult learning and functional skills acquisition.
- Products for specific learner cohorts were developed, including a pre-entry curriculum framework to support access for learners with learning difficulties and physical disabilities. Reference materials for teachers of English for speakers of other languages form a separate set of resources and professional development materials.
- Despite changes in government agencies, legacy products relating to the ALNCC are housed by the Education and Training Foundation on their Excellence Gateway site.<sup>17</sup>
- New online tools to support an individual's independent engagement in skills development have been funded.

A more recent development from the UK is the Scottish Citizen Literacy Community Interest Company White Paper (Casey, 2020) which aimed to raise the profile of the challenges associated with UK adult literacy and propose viable solutions. While primarily focused on native English speakers, the arguments presented in the paper also extend to adults learning in English for speakers of other languages contexts.

A key message in the paper was the need to better understand learners' lived experiences and the ways in which they impact on their capability in areas such as language and digital literacy, with an important consideration being the need to improve 'the textual literacy of learners as the key foundational skill for access to information in a digital world and the basis for inclusion and participation in digital citizenship' (Casey, 2020, p. 11). Strategies to achieve this goal included ways of using smartphones and services to support literacy development and, in turn, digital literacy development. In response to the paper, various

<sup>14</sup> <https://skillsforlife.campaign.gov.uk/courses/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2021/10/27/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-multiply-programme/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/what-numeracy/challenge>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/>

initiatives were developed as part of the *Citizen Literacy* adult literacy programme.<sup>18</sup> These included a free Learner Smartphone application and a Classroom/Teacher application, accompanied by a comprehensive list of resources and exercises for teachers to use with learners on their smartphones, including touchscreen and handwriting accessibilities.

### *Employment Ontario's Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework*

The *Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework* (OALCF) is the foundation of the Ontario *Literacy and Basic Skills* program. The OALCF supports program design that focuses on integrating skills, knowledge and behaviours to perform authentic, goal-related tasks. The framework allows for contextualised programming based on the learner's goals and takes into account the learner's culture and language.

The background to the OALCF (OALCF, 2015) indicates that developers of the framework drew on a range of existing frameworks from in Canada, as well as from Australia's ACSF, England's *Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curricula*, and the United States' *Equipped for the Future Standards*.

The OALCF outlines six generic categories of learner competencies across task groupings or contexts, and three levels of difficulty to highlight learner proficiency. These competencies are embedded into tasks '*that show how literacy learning transfers to goal-related activities*' and have been designed to go '*beyond traditionally narrow concepts of reading, writing, and numeracy...[to] allow for the integration of thinking and interpersonal skills, as well as behaviours that help learners apply their skills to manage at work, in the community, and in other education settings*' (Government of Ontario, 2021).

While the OALCF is more narrowly defined than the ACSF, and has simpler and less detailed structure and content, a point to note is the user-friendliness of its numbering system that is more comprehensive than that used in the ACSF. The OALCF approach reflects one of this framework's underpinning principles, which is to make practitioners' jobs easier by providing clear direction as they work with learners to select appropriate content.

### *Canadian Language Benchmarks framework*

The *Canadian Language Benchmarks framework* is designed specifically to support the teaching of English as a second language for adults. A notable feature of these benchmarks are the learner-facing resources that summarise clear task outcomes at differing levels.

The framework's *Can Do* statements present benchmark information in a format and language accessible to learners (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, n.d.). The statements are intended to be used by teachers to facilitate discussions with individual learners about what they have accomplished and what they still need to develop, and in group discussions between learners.

Consideration of the international context for foundation skills indicates that the:

- UK's ALNCC demonstrates the range of curriculum and resources that can be developed to reach targeted learner cohorts and encourage the public to engage in skills improvement
- Scottish *Citizen Literacy* adult literacy programme highlights the potential to build adult literacy skills through the provision of digital tools and resources for learners and teachers
- Canadian models highlight how clarity of purpose and design can support teachers' ease of use of the frameworks and enable their direct use with learners.

<sup>18</sup> <https://citizenliteracy.com/>

## 2 Review findings

### 2.1 Use of the ACSF

#### Examples of use in States and Territories

Discovery phase consultation with state and territory representatives indicated that although the ACSF is not mandated in policy it has widespread and diverse use across the country.

State and territory government departments reported that they had been encouraged to think about how they might measure foundation skill outcomes due to their involvement in developing the draft *National Foundation Skills Framework 2022 to 2032*.

Many States and Territories have policy and program purchasing arrangements that reference foundation skills rather than the ACSF or core skills directly. However, behind the scenes, the framework informs the development of accredited and pre-accredited course content, assessment tool and resource design, and approaches to teaching and assessment in these foundation skills programs.

A number of commercial online assessment tools – such as the Basic Key Skills Builder (bksb), RUReady (a version of the bksb), LLN Robot and the Core Skills Profile for Adults (CSPA) – are used variously across providers in different States and Territories to assist them to identify the support needs of learners and to ensure appropriate placement into courses according to the requirements of the *Standards for Registered Training Organisations (SRTOs) 2015* (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Learner support requirement mandated in the SRTOs 2015

For example, in South Australia a key requirement for delivery of subsidised courses is an 'upfront assessment of need' using the *Snapshot Reading and Numeracy Indicator* tool for all learners wanting to undertake a Certificate II or III qualification. Where a learner does not demonstrate an ACSF exit Level 2 rating they are directed to the *Literacy and Numeracy Comprehensive Assessment* that provides a further diagnostic report of their core skills. Both these tools are related to the CSPA and based on the ACSF. Results are assessed by an LLN specialist and bridging units from the *FSK Foundation Skill Training Package* are offered to learners. Anecdotal evidence points to completion rates being 40-50% higher for those learners who chose to do the FSK units as part of their course over those learners who had FSK units recommended but chose not to do them.

At the time of writing, the Victorian Department of Education and Training and the ACEF Board are both in the process of identifying assessment tools suitable for pre-training assessment for *Skills First* programs and pre-accredited funded programs. Requirements for the ACEF tool include the capacity to assess ACSF Pre Level 1 learners.

State and territory representatives recognise that the purpose of assessment tools is to support learners by enabling providers to identify where the ‘educational and support services’ (Figure 3) are required. However, this raises the issue of VET workforce capability in regard to using tools effectively and then addressing those identified foundation skill needs. The issue is complicated by the wide variety of practitioners, including volunteer tutors, VET trainers and assessors, and teachers of standalone LLN courses; coupled with the wide range of courses offered within ACE and VET.

Establishing and articulating the extent of LLN skills and knowledge required by practitioners has been a continuing difficulty in the sector that was raised by several state and territory representatives and the *Reading Writing Hotline*.

*Finding LLN specialists is still difficult – though the TAE skill set [TAESS00009 Address Foundation Skills in Vocational Practice] is still valued there has been a move in 2022 toward the units from the Community Services Training Package that offer more ‘what to do’ strategies than the TAE skill set. Practitioners need a basic to deep understanding of the ACSF.*

Survey  
respondent

Examples of how the ACSF has been used by States and Territories in a variety of programs include:

- **Skills for Work and Study curriculum project**<sup>19</sup> (Victoria) – mapped pre-accredited course unit outcomes to the ACSF
- **Adult Literacy and Numeracy Practitioners Program**<sup>20</sup> (Victoria) – provided a specific Moodle unit on the ACSF for non-specialist practitioners working in Learn Locals
- **26TEN literacy initiative** (Tasmania) – uses the ACSF in innovative ways to report small increments of learner gain in Libraries Tasmania programs and in a range of workplace and community projects
- **Read Write Now program** (Western Australia) – uses ACSF levels from Pre Level 1 to 2 to report to government, although program tutors report against specific program measures that do not require them to use the ACSF directly
- **Programs for First Nations People** – use the ACSF to report literacy and numeracy gains for First Nations peoples in programs such as *Yes, I Can!* (Boughton, 2022) and those provided by STEPS Education and Training (Northern Territory) and other targeted initiatives
- **Year 12 minimum standard** – several States set ACSF exit Level 3 in reading, writing and numeracy as a minimum standard for successful year 12 completion.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.vic.gov.au/skills-work-and-study-pilot-programs>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.vic.gov.au/adult-literacy-and-numeracy-practitioners-program>

<sup>21</sup> At least 2 States have developed an online tool to administer the minimum standard tests:

NSW (<https://ace.nesa.nsw.edu.au/ace-4062>) and WA (<https://senior-secondary.scsa.wa.edu.au/assessment/olna>)

## Examples of ACSF and DLSF use in Australian government programs

### *Adult Migrant English Program*

The *Adult Migrant English Program* (AMEP) is the Australian government's largest settlement program. It aims to assist new migrants and humanitarian entrants to learn English language skills that enable them to participate socially and economically in Australian society. The ACSF is used to measure client initial language proficiency and English language progression.

Further information on AMEP is available at: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/amep/about-the-program/background>

### *Skills for Education and Employment*

The *Skills for Education and Employment* (SEE) program has been operating since 2002. Formerly known as the *Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program*, SEE is the government's primary program for helping eligible jobseekers improve their LLND skills and enable them to participate more effectively in further training or obtain employment. The SEE program uses the ACSF to assess client LLND skills at a pre-training interview and then to report LLND progress at 200-hour intervals.

Further information on SEE is available at: <https://www.dese.gov.au/skills-education-and-employment>

### *Foundation Skills for Your Future*

The FSfYF program announced in 2019 supports eligible Australians to further develop their LLN and digital skills for up-skilling or re-skilling to undertake new roles, obtain employment, or participate in further education and training. The ACSF and DLSF are used to assess client pre-training LLND skills, and then to report on LLND progress.

Further information on FSfYF is available at: <https://www.dese.gov.au/foundation-skills-your-future-program>



## Survey and forum feedback on use of the ACSF

Stakeholders consulted in the project included but were not limited to program managers and practitioners from the three major Australian government foundation skills programs: AMEP, FSfYF and SEE.

Respondents to the survey and attendees at forums included LLN practitioners and program managers or coordinators; practitioners involved in broader vocational programs, state-funded literacy programs and non-accredited programs; product developers, including assessment tool developers, training package developers and curriculum or resource developers; representatives from professional associations, such as Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL), Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), ALA; and government representatives.

While there were comments throughout the review consultation and survey about the size and complexity of the framework, and the need to refresh content to reflect current tasks and texts, these comments did not detract from it being generally well regarded. Overall, stakeholders reported that the ACSF is widely recognised as reliable, authoritative and useful.

*I enjoy using the ACSF. It is very usable – the way it is set out. The levels. I've found it easy to teach others to use. It's a very useful tool for initial assessment – quick and easy. I use it with all students – although not with all pre-accredited (only some).*

Forum participant

Recognition of the multiple uses of the ACSF is high among stakeholders (Figure 4). More than 95% of survey respondents knew that the ACSF could be used to benchmark an individual's skills performance and close to 90% knew it could be used to map skill requirements. Fewer respondents (55.7%) were aware that the ACSF can be used to inform funding and referral decisions.

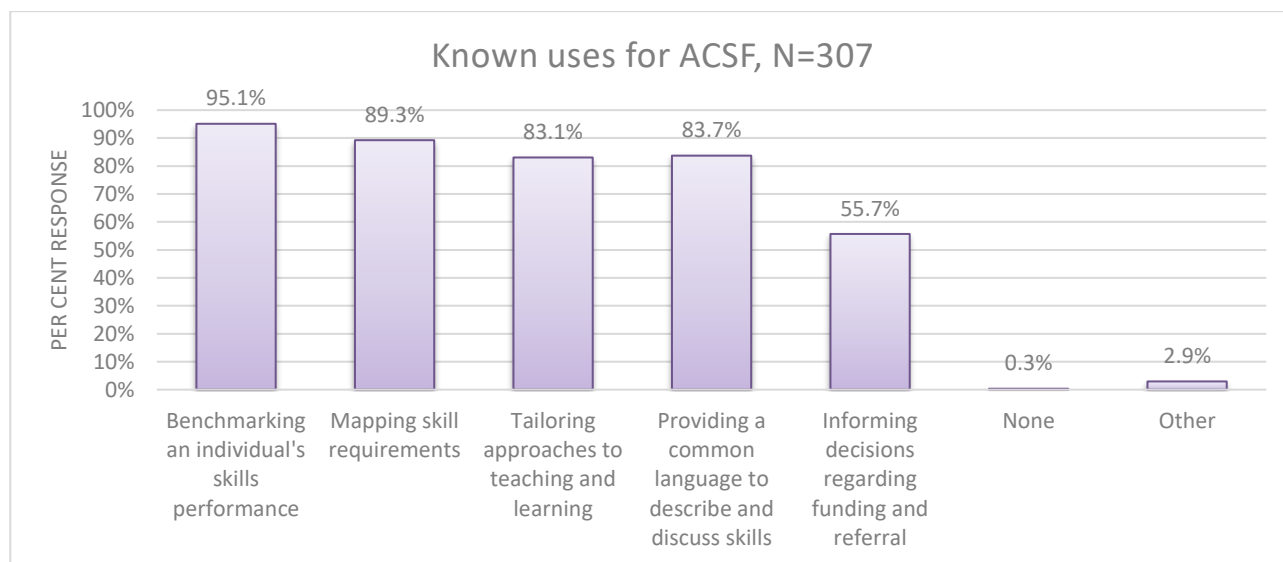


Figure 4 Uses for the ACSF reported in online survey

The review's online survey went on to gather information on the variety of ways that stakeholders use the ACSF. These are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Summary of use of the ACSF

Summary of use of the ACSF	
<b>Who?</b>	<p><i>The ACSF is used by a range of stakeholders, including:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• program managers and teachers in Australian government-funded programs (AMEP, FSfYF, SEE)</li> <li>• trainers and assessors in state and territory-funded delivery</li> <li>• workplace trainers and assessors</li> <li>• policy makers at national and program-specific level, e.g. aspirational targets and reporting criteria for foundation skills strategies; eligibility criteria in the <i>VET Student Loans</i> program</li> <li>• developers of commercial or state-based assessment tools (bksb, CSPA, LLN Robot, VETASSESS, Online Literacy and Numeracy Assessment [OLNA])</li> <li>• training package and accredited course developers</li> <li>• pre-accredited program managers, course and resource developers and teachers</li> <li>• volunteer tutors in state-based programs (<i>Read Write Now</i>, <i>26TEN</i> programs).</li> </ul>
<b>Where?</b>	<p><i>The ACSF is used in:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Australian government-funded programs</li> <li>• ACE/pre-accredited programs</li> <li>• skill development and non-accredited programs</li> <li>• senior secondary schools</li> <li>• VET programs.</li> </ul>
<b>How?</b>	<p><i>The ACSF is used for various purposes, including to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support course selection and placement</li> <li>• benchmark, track and report progress and outcomes</li> <li>• develop resources, including learning materials, online learning platforms, and assessment tools</li> <li>• design programs, including training needs analysis.</li> </ul>
<b>When?</b>	<p><i>The ACSF is used at various points in the training cycle, including:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pre-training</li> <li>• program planning and design</li> <li>• training product development</li> <li>• during delivery and assessment</li> <li>• as an exit point measure.</li> </ul>
<b>Why?</b>	<p><i>The ACSF is used for multiple reasons:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 74% of survey respondents use the ACSF because it is a program requirement, with that figure far higher among respondents in the AMEP, FSfYF and SEE programs (93%, 90% and 81% respectively)</li> <li>• 40% of survey respondents with the choice to use the ACSF or not, chose to use it in their context</li> <li>• 70% of survey respondents use the ACSF because it provides a common language for talking about core skills.</li> </ul>

Those consulted in the project were also aware of other frameworks in use in the ACE and VET sectors and expressed a desire for more ‘joined-up’ policy and tools, particularly in relation to how the ACSF relates to:

- employability skills in VET and associated frameworks
- *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* (‘NAPLAN’) in school education
- *International English Language Testing System* in English as an additional language
- the alignment of qualification levels in the AQF and the future use of general capabilities proposed in the AQF review
- the ten core competency levels described in the Australian Skills Classification online tool.<sup>22</sup>

Although the ACSF was initially developed for use by LLN specialists its uptake has expanded over time to include a wide range of users in a variety of contexts. The ACSF is used widely to support programs that involve a diverse range of learners. As a result, changes to the ACSF have the potential to impact many users across all States and Territories.

This diversity of its application also means that ACSF users want to understand how this framework relates to a multitude of other frameworks in the school and post-compulsory education and training landscape.

### Recommendations

2e(iii) Establish communication channels that reach the diversity of ACSF users and stakeholders to source input into the review and validation of the ACSF and support resources, and advice on preferred professional development options

2e(iv) Allow for a testing period of at least six months, after completion of the revised ACSF, to trial and validate it with the range of users across adult community education and vocational education and training and employment contexts

2e(v) Launch the validated ACSF and implement a communication strategy to inform all ACSF users of changes to the framework and the availability of support materials

2e(vii) Maintain a watching brief on related developments in employability skills, general capabilities and digital literacy

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/australian-skills-classification>

## 2.2 Assessment and delivery tools based on the ACSF

The ACSF is not an assessment tool. It was designed to be a high-level framework that can provide a reference point for undertaking assessments of an adult's performance of core skills. While the ACSF describes the different dimensions of each core skill, it does not specify how (or even if) these should be assessed.

The fundamental purpose of assessment in education is to establish and understand where learners are in an aspect of their learning at the time of assessment. Establishing where learners are in their learning usually means establishing what they know, understand, and can do. (Masters, 2014).

Across the education and training system, various methods are used to establish 'where learners are in an aspect of their learning at the time of assessment' such as standardised tests, classroom observations, written examinations, or performance assessments of authentic tasks carried out in a range of environments.

Assessment can be carried out at varying points in time, for example:

- assessment **for** learning – what can be demonstrated before embarking on a particular course
- assessment **of** learning, conducted at formative or summative stages – what can be demonstrated at a particular point, or at the end, of a specified period of learning.

Depending on the type of assessment task, the results will provide information about a learner's skills, knowledge, and understandings at differing levels of detail. Developing an assessment tool based on the ACSF involves selecting which Performance Features of a core skill need to be demonstrated.

As Masters (2014) contends:

*'[D]iagnosis' is not so much a matter of kind as it is of degree. Assessment instruments differ in their diagnostic power in much the same way that microscopes and telescopes differ in the level of detail that they are able to reveal.*

An assessment tool written against the ACSF should have a construct that includes:

- a bank of items that:
  - are explicitly written against the relevant ACSF dimensions
  - address aspects of the associated core skill (Indicators, Focus Areas, Performance Features, etc.)
  - specify the ACSF level they are mapped to
- a description of the type and number of items to be used.

### Pre-training assessment

Survey responses in this review indicated greater use of ACSF-based assessment tools for pre-training assessment and placement than for any other purpose. More than 90% of respondents reported that they used ACSF-based assessment tools at this point in the learner life cycle in stand-alone LLN programs, pre-accredited programs and mainstream VET programs.

The use of ACSF-based assessment tools in the VET system to support educational needs was widely supported by respondents. These tools identify what a learner knows and can do and any gaps in their core skills, allowing providers to design courses and training programs to address the gaps that would negatively impact on successful course completion. The tools have the potential to support providers in matching learners to the right courses, and to identify and provide targeted and nuanced core skill support.

Table 3 identifies three broad categories of pre-training assessment tools that are informed by the ACSF. They are used for different purposes and are administered in different ways.

Table 3 Pre-training assessment tools informed by the ACSF

Pre-training assessment tools informed by the ACSF		
Category	Purpose	Administered by
<b>Referral and placement tools for LLN programs</b>	<p>These generally use an interview process and a combination of paper-based kits and sometimes online items to place learners in stand-alone LLN programs.</p> <p><i>Examples include Initial Assessment and Pre-training Assessment kits developed for the AMEP and SEE program, and RTO-specific kits used in ACE.</i></p>	<p>Conducted through face-to-face interviews by experienced LLN practitioners in a program placement role.</p> <p>These practitioners require knowledge and experience to use Australian government approved kits and to design or customise approaches to suit the needs of specific learner groups.</p>
<b>Pre-training assessment tools to identify 'capacity to benefit' for VET learners</b>	<p>These include tools for use with general pre-training assessments for clients entering VET to address eligibility requirements for Australian government programs or to identify LLN skill gaps as required by state or territory systems.</p> <p><i>Examples include tools used for establishing eligibility for VET Student Loans, providing a snapshot of existing skills to indicate the need additional support, and providing more detailed diagnostic assessment to clearly identify skill needs.</i></p>	<p>Often administered online by administrative staff in registered training organisations, with results interpreted by program managers and/or individual trainers/assessors.</p> <p>In best-practice models, these tools are used to interpret skill gaps and inform the development of specific delivery and assessment plans.</p> <p>In some cases, results are generated by the online tool provider for compliance purposes and are not further interpreted by practitioners or program managers or connected to subsequent delivery or assessment practice.</p>
<b>Informal tools led by learner needs</b>	<p>These encompass informal assessment methods used in pre-accredited programs that are aligned with the ACSF.</p> <p><i>Examples include tools used for Yes, I Can!, Read Write Now (WA), and 26TEN programs (Tasmania).</i></p>	<p>Often administered by volunteer tutors with no knowledge of the ACSF and interpreted by program managers with a knowledge of the ACSF to inform program design and outcome reporting for funding bodies.</p>

Although consultation revealed strong acknowledgement of the value of these pre-training assessment tools, it was frequently noted that once a person is placed in a course, then the outcomes of the course – rather than subsequent ACSF mapping and assessment – should drive indicators of progress.

### Meeting program requirements

Consultation participants reported that there is sometimes a tension between assessing to meet government program reporting requirements and assessing for educational purposes. Some participants suggested that use of the ACSF and associated assessment tools for mandatory reporting purposes can lead to distorted and onerous assessment that does not serve the best interest of learners.

*The reporting in the SEE program is onerous and not a good match for the many training packages or curricula that can be used in the program, so it presents an extra unnecessary layer of assessment linked only to the funding and of no actual use to students.*

Survey respondent

The SEE program requires reporting of learner progress in whole ACSF levels, i.e. learners are expected to achieve at least 1 ACSF indicator increase per 200 hours (Initial Stream) or 2 indicators per 200 hours (Basic or Advanced Stream) of training. Quality assurance processes are used to monitor provider assessment and delivery practices, including reviewing client files to verify that assessment results are reported against the ACSF and have been recorded accurately by the provider. During consultation for this project, some SEE providers reported that satisfying the program's quality assurance processes required atomistic mapping of assessment outcomes against ACSF Indicators and Performance Features. This process was not only considered burdensome but was also viewed as artificially skewing learning and assessment activities towards those that would most effectively provide evidence of ACSF outcomes rather than those that were of value to, and valued by, individual learners.

*The current model in the SEE program is assessment-focused. Teachers and students are overwhelmed with the amount of assessment that is required to evaluate student progression.*

Focus group participant

Providers who deliver accredited English as an additional language (EAL) units, reported that learners must sometimes be assessed twice to satisfy program reporting requirements. This is because a learner's completion of the EAL units in a course may not provide evidence of achieving all required ACSF Indicators. Additional assessment tasks aligned with specific ACSF components are then needed to gather the evidence required to report program outcomes. This scenario represents a significant, but ultimately unnecessary, time investment by both the teacher and the learners.

Practitioners and program managers from Tasmania reported positively on reporting mechanisms used for the 26TEN initiative. Smaller increments of learner gain can be reported within and across levels using Focus Areas, Performance Features, and the performance variables grid. This 'finer gradations' approach to reporting enables providers to report what learners achieve through learner-centred programs.

### Perception of ACSF-based tools as fair, valid and reliable

Approximately half of those responding to the review's online survey considered that assessment tools and support resources based on the ACSF provided 'fair, valid and reliable results for all users', while over a quarter considered that the results 'only work for some learner cohorts or in some contexts' (Figure 5).

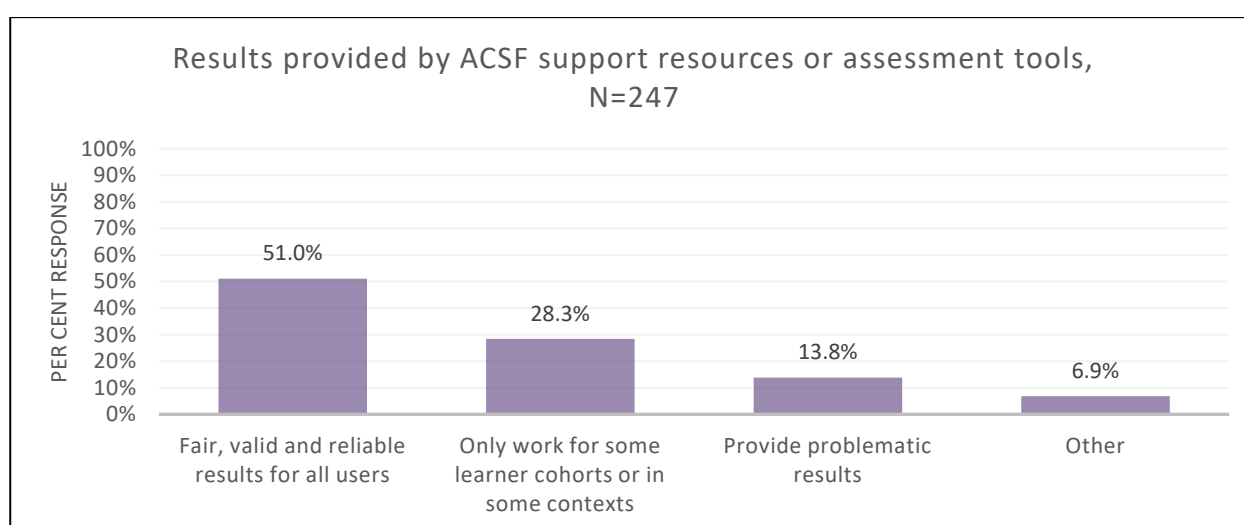


Figure 5 Results provided by the ACSF support resources or tools used

Reasons that survey respondents gave for why they did not find the results provided by ACSF support resources or tools fair, valid and reliable included:

- Online tools are not suitable for all skills and all levels**  
 Respondents reported that online tools can provide quick assessments of learners' core skills, but that they require a level of digital literacy skill and familiarity that not all learners have. Respondents noted that support is an important performance variable in the ACSF, but it is missing in the online assessment context. Online assessments therefore cannot accurately assess the skills of individuals with low level reading, writing and digital literacy skills. They are also not appropriate for assessing many Focus Areas and Performance Features in the core skill of writing.
- There can be access and equity issues associated with ACSF-based assessment tools**  
 Some respondents identified issues with online assessment tools that can prevent them being used by people with a disability, for example, vision impairment that prevents tool users from navigating the online environment. Respondents also reported that the content of the ACSF, in particular the Sample Activities, can disadvantage some people as it does not satisfactorily represent the education and cultural backgrounds of all potential users.
- Most ACSF-based assessment tools do not report incremental progress**  
 Respondents reported that assessment tools can only provide a brief snapshot of learners; a snapshot that may not fully represent their skills. However, for their implementation to be realistic and manageable, assessment tools and tasks cannot be detailed enough to assess every aspect of the core skills described by the ACSF.

*Pre-training LLN assessment is completed by prospective students in isolation using a computer. The test is overseen by an administration assistant. People completing the test often give up or click random answers because they lack confidence, are unsupported and find the experience confronting and alienating.*

Focus group participant

## Creating and customising assessment tools

Many survey respondents indicated that they developed in-house assessment tools based on the ACSF.

The range of examples provided by respondents included assessment tools:

- mapped to accredited curricula
- for use in SEE and FSfYF programs
- aligned with vocational requirements from training package qualifications
- to support accredited and non-accredited program delivery
- for initial and progressive assessment of learners.

In consultation, participants emphasised the benefit of contextualising assessment tools for specific purposes, contexts and learner groups. This was viewed as important for the lower levels of core skill performance because, at those levels, learners often have greater difficulty with unfamiliar contexts and are less able to use online assessment tools. Many participants regarded the performance variables grid as critical for understanding learner performance at the lower levels.

Some practitioners recommended a blended approach to assessment – including online tasks, discussion and paper-based demonstration of skills – to provide the most accurate sense of what the learner can do.

*We need to provide assistance for students to do an online test. If left alone they do worse than what they can achieve in class. If they are borderline, we do some extra interview and observation to see if the test itself has put them off.*

Student  
placement  
specialist

For entry into vocational programs, some practitioners reported that contextualised assessment items were better than the generic assessment items in online tests. They reported developing and using their own tools matched to vocational areas, including community services, business and aged care.

Providers of programs for Indigenous learners also reported that contextualising assessment tasks for different communities and locations was necessary to reflect familiar language and concepts. They noted that a sound understanding of the ACSF is needed to contextualise for different learners while still maintaining the comparability of outcomes across contexts.

### Interpreting assessment outcomes

Some consultation participants reported difficulty interpreting and using the results of assessment tools based on the ACSF.

Because it is not an assessment tool, the ACSF does not provide parameters, benchmarks or rubrics to make judgements about an individual's skill levels. These must be developed as part of an assessment tool, and some are more robust than others.

No guidance is provided in the ACSF to assist the development of an assessment tool and, as a result, many consultation participants expressed confusion about what is required for an individual to demonstrate achievement of a core skill exit level. For example, participants have differing views on:

- whether an assessment tool should cover all Performance Features at a level
- whether some Performance Features should be weighted more heavily than others
- whether achievement must be demonstrated against all assessment items
- whether multiple sources of evidence are needed to demonstrate performance.

These are all questions that should be answered by assessment tool developers in line with the purpose of their tool and the context in which it will be used.

Some consultation participants reported that quality assurance auditors interpret ACSF assessment outcomes differently. They claimed that past use of the ACSF to underpin assessment had relied more on the professional judgement of LLN specialist practitioners, while current practice requires greater alignment of evidence against ACSF Focus Areas and Performance Features.

Feedback from assessment tool developers and focus group participants suggested that outcomes from pre-training assessments conducted in VET contexts are not always used by providers to inform program design or the provision of learner support. It was suggested that in some cases these, usually online, assessments are conducted to satisfy requirements of the *Standards for Registered Training Organisations (2015)* rather than to guide approaches to delivery.

Examples were also provided of VET practitioners being unsure how to best use the information on learner core skills provided by ACSF-based assessments, and in particular, how they might relate to the requirements of a specific vocational qualification.



Many consultation participants reported that the ACSF performance variables grid is helpful for differentiating between levels of the ACSF. Participants also mentioned the significant role that the performance variables grid can play in professional development when introducing new users to the ACSF and helping them understand what performance looks like at different levels.

*The performance variables grid has a marked impact on assessment, and I think is overlooked by many users.*

Survey respondent

The project consultations found widespread demand for more guidance, professional development and opportunities for moderation to build the understanding and capability required to develop, implement and interpret assessment tools based on the ACSF.

*We are delivering courses that require ACSF Level 5 across four core skills. This level of complexity is difficult to test reliably without being overly complex. The skills of practitioners in determining the required levels, even with good benchmarking and testing tools, is limited because they find the ACSF document overly complex and daunting to use. It needs a specialist and experienced practitioner to use it effectively.*

Survey respondent

There are some misperceptions among ACSF users and broader stakeholders about the framework's role in the assessment of core skills. This can in turn influence users' views of the validity and reliability of the ACSF itself.

Sometimes the mandated use of assessment tools in government programs can result in practice that is burdensome for providers and does not benefit learners. However, there are also examples of good practice and innovative approaches to assessing and reporting learner core skills.

### Recommendations

2b(ii) **Clarify in the introductory section of the ACSF that it is not an assessment tool**, but can be used to inform assessment design

See also recommendations relating to a Companion Volume 2c(ii) and 2c(vi) and professional development 2d(iii) and 2d(iv).

## 2.3 Use of the DLSF

There is widespread recognition, at both policy and practitioner level, of the centrality of digital skills for effective participation in work and life.

Consultation for the project found a high level of interest in the DLSF among stakeholders, although, given its more recent development, it is not as well-known as the ACSF.

A variety of uses of the DLSF were identified in the online survey (Table 4). It is noted however that almost a quarter of survey respondents (24.7%) could not identify a use for the DLSF, while only 1 survey respondent (representing 0.3% of the total) could not identify a use for the ACSF.

Table 4 Summary of use of the DLSF

Summary of use of the DLSF	
<b>Who?</b>	<p><i>The DLSF is used by a range of stakeholders, including:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foundation Skills for Your Future providers</li> <li>• Victorian ACE providers in Digital Essentials pre-accredited curriculum and teaching resources<sup>23</sup></li> <li>• commercial assessment tool developers</li> <li>• training package and accredited course developers.</li> </ul>
<b>How?</b>	<p><i>The DLSF is used for various purposes, including to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support course selection and placement</li> <li>• benchmark and track progress</li> <li>• develop resources, including learning materials, online learning platforms, and assessment tools</li> <li>• design programs, including training needs analysis, micro-credential development, professional development workshop design.</li> </ul>
<b>When?</b>	<p><i>The DLSF is used at several points in the training cycle:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pre-training</li> <li>• program planning and design</li> <li>• during delivery and assessment.</li> </ul>
<b>Why?</b>	<p><i>The DLSF is used for multiple reasons:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 54% of survey respondents use the DLSF because it's a program requirement.</li> <li>• 42% of survey respondents choose to use the DLSF in their context.</li> <li>• 64% of survey respondents use the DLSF because it provides a common language for talking about core skills.</li> </ul>

Stakeholder consultation highlighted confusion about the place of the DLSF among the plethora of other digital skills frameworks currently in existence or under development.

The variety of framework approaches in this space may be attributed to the wide-ranging impact digital technologies are having on all areas of work and life, and the lack of an agreed definition or understanding of the skills required to interact with those technologies. In addition to digital literacy, concepts of digital skills, digital fluency, digital proficiency and digital mastery are being explored in various contexts.

<sup>23</sup> <https://learnlocal.org.au/resources/>

Other Australian frameworks include:

- **AMEP Digital Literacies Framework**<sup>24</sup> and a web-based *Digital Literacies Guide* (under development at the time of writing) aim to promote understanding of important pedagogical principles that underlie the effective teaching of digital literacies in the AMEP sector.
- **Digital Fluency Standard in Manufacturing**<sup>25</sup> (part of a pilot project developed by the Digital Skills Organisation Pilot<sup>26</sup> being trialled at the time of writing) aims to deliver an industry-endorsed definition of digital fluency that reflects the needs of Australian manufacturing.
- **Australian Skills Classification**<sup>27</sup> is intended to be a common language for skills. It includes core competencies that are aligned with definitions of foundation skills, specifically the *Employability Skills Framework*. The classification uses 10 core competency skill levels, based on the US O\*NET database and is unconnected to the ACSF and DLSF.
- **Australian Workforce Digital Skills Framework**<sup>28</sup> was developed in 2019 to provide a consistent approach to identifying and developing digital skills in the Australian workforce, specifically the workforce not directly employed in ICT occupations.

Of particular note is the *Digital Capability Framework*,<sup>29</sup> which is currently under development. This framework was commissioned by the Australian Industry and Skills Committee (AISC) in response to the report, *The learning country: Digital Transformation Skills Strategy*, from the AISC's Digital Transformation Expert Panel.

The *Digital Capability Framework* identifies and classifies a range of digital skills applicable across the economy and describes them using a common language. It was created by adopting and modifying the European Union's *DigComp Framework*<sup>30</sup> which forms part of the European Skills, Competences and Occupations skills taxonomy. The *DigComp Framework* has been developed and modified over the last 10 years and there is substantial investment in its ongoing application and development.

The *Digital Capability Framework* groups digital competencies into five focus areas:

- Information and data literacy
- Communication and collaboration
- Digital content creation
- Protection and safety
- Technical proficiency and problem solving.

Each of the five focus areas in that framework contains a number of digital capabilities – 21 in total (Mason et al., 2022). The capabilities are described across four broad levels of proficiency (each with two sub-levels) organised around concepts of complexity and autonomy. Plain English titles for the proficiency levels are Foundation, Intermediate, Advanced and Specialised. The Foundation level is focused on the basic skills required to participate in society and work and captures simple tasks undertaken with some level of guidance; tasks that correspond closely with the proficiency level addressed by the DLSF.

<sup>24</sup> <https://research.monash.edu/en/projects/amep-digital-literacies-framework-and-guide-supporting-pedagogies>

<sup>25</sup> <https://ibsa.org.au/consultation-project/digital-fluency-standard-in-manufacturing/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.dese.gov.au/skills-organisations/digital-skills-organisation-pilot>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/topics/australian-skills-classification>

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.ncver.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/5744123/Skilling-the-Australian-workforce-for-the-digital-economy.pdf](https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/5744123/Skilling-the-Australian-workforce-for-the-digital-economy.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.digitalskillsformation.org.au/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128415>

Although, at the time of writing, trialling and validation of the *Digital Capability Framework* have primarily concentrated on the framework's potential use in VET training products, the informing European *DigComp Framework* has a focus on citizenship. Extensive resources developed to support the *DigComp Framework* are compatible with the *Digital Capability Framework* and may be useful in the Australian foundation skills context.

### **DLSF development and purpose**

The DLSF was developed relatively swiftly for a specific purpose – to meet a need in the Australian government's *Foundation Skills for Your Future* program. The program supports employed or recently unemployed individuals to identify and address LLND needs through subsidised accredited and non-accredited training delivered by service providers in a registered training organisation or workplace setting. The DLSF was developed specifically for the program to assist practitioners to describe participants' digital literacy skills performance. The framework is in draft form and is yet to be validated.

Confusion around the purpose, status and application of the DLSF was evident in stakeholder feedback. More than 60% of survey respondents indicated that they were 'not sure' whether changes were needed to the DLSF. However, approximately a quarter of respondents identified a need for change with 23% saying that additional content was needed and 25% saying that content needs updating for currency. Some consultation participants felt that the framework was narrowly focused on 'digital technical skills for learning and work' and was not as broadly applicable as the ACSF.

Desk research for the project noted that while the DLSF reflects the structure and underpinning foundations of the ACSF, it does not appear to harvest the theoretical underpinnings or critical elements of other digital skills frameworks. In consultation, stakeholders also raised concerns about the structure of the framework and the potential for the approach used to describe digital literacy skills to become outdated as technology advances. Issues identified through the project research and consultation are outlined in the following sections.

### **Performance variables**

There is recognition among stakeholders and the literature that digital literacy skills are highly context dependent. Individuals can be familiar with some devices and applications but not others depending on what is accessible to them. Familiarity with a device or application will influence the ease with which a user can perform a digital task. In the ACSF and DLSF, the way that context and familiarity can influence an individual's performance of a skill is captured by the *performance variables*.

The DLSF uses the same four performance variables as those in the ACSF:

- support
- context
- text complexity
- task complexity.

Stakeholders expressed a view that the first two performance variables – support and context – are appropriate for thinking about the performance of digital literacy skills. However, some stakeholders questioned the suitability of text complexity and task complexity. It was suggested that the term 'text' in *text complexity* does not translate well to the digital environment. Also, defining *task complexity* according to the number of steps required is seen as unhelpful for capturing the complexity of digital skills. It was suggested that it may be more helpful to focus on digital activities and actions, the complexity of interface design, and clarity of instructions.

*The DLSF seems based on a narrow range of digital competencies. The activities outlined at each level do not reflect a consistent level of complexity, required knowledge and digital skills. The DLSF as an assessment tool is limited to English speakers and does not necessarily accurately reflect digital skills, but rather comprehension of instructions.*

Survey  
respondent

## Indicators

The DLSF includes two Indicator statements at each level. They are:

- .12 Active awareness of self as a digital user
- .13 Knowledge, use and application of digital literacy skills

One stakeholder observed that the self-awareness Indicator could be problematic because individuals' digital literacy skills vary widely depending on context.

The numbering system used for these Indicators is consistent with that used in the ACSF and the definitional approach is similar to that used for the core skills of learning, reading and writing. However, it was suggested during consultation that an additional Indicator should be adopted for digital literacy following the pattern established for numeracy in the ACSF. A third numeracy Indicator focuses on *communicating and representing mathematics*. A new third Indicator for digital skills could therefore focus on the ability to articulate digital skills.

Stakeholders working with Indigenous learners reported that English language was the biggest barrier for their learners in achieving the digital skills described by the DLSF. The ability to express or explain digital concepts is highly correlated with English language skills. A third Indicator focused on articulating digital skills may be helpful in identifying exactly which aspect of digital literacy is causing difficulty. On the other hand, a language-based Indicator could entrench an existing barrier.

## Levels 4 and 5

The DLSF does not go beyond Level 3, and there are differing views as to whether it should. While many stakeholders would like the DLSF to match the ACSF and include Levels 4 and 5, there is not a consensus view on what those higher levels should describe. Concepts of digital fluency and mastery are being explored in work underway in other parts of the VET sector on digital capability.

Stakeholders question where the boundary is between digital literacy and the skills of information technology (IT) specialists. Some worry that if DLSF Levels 4 and 5 were developed, their content may stray into territory that is more about the vocational skills of IT workers than general digital literacy.

Some stakeholders suggested that Levels 4 and 5 of the DLSF could focus on the skills required to generate digital content, as opposed to the skills described at lower levels for accessing and consuming digital content. Others felt that Levels 4 and 5 should describe a broadening awareness of how to use technology to achieve a purpose. This would involve the skills required to select the appropriate technology to use for different purposes and recognise the potential offered by emerging technologies.

Feedback from a digital literacy expert suggested that computational thinking is an essential component of digital literacy that is currently missing from the DLSF. Computational thinking has been included in recent definitions of digital literacy by the OECD, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

If the DLSF levels were to be extended to Levels 4 and 5, based on contemporary research (Fraillon, 2019; ACARA, 2021; OECD, 2022), it is suggested that a stronger emphasis would be needed on:

- evaluating the credibility and relevance of information from electronic sources when selecting information to organise, display and communicate to others
- understanding that computation can be used to solve real-world problems
- interacting with computational models and simulations as an information source.

### Maintaining currency

Continual change in the availability and use of technology represents an ongoing currency issue for the DLSF. Stakeholders noted that the DLSF is vulnerable to being quickly out-dated due to its emphasis on the use of tools and technologies, rather than on underpinning concepts. Over time, digital technologies and processes change in importance as newer technology is adopted, e.g. touch pads replacing the use of a computer mouse. To address this issue, some stakeholders suggested that the DLSF should focus on what the individual is 'trying to achieve' rather than the technology they are using. Instead of referring to a mouse or a touchpad, digital literacy skills might include objectives such as sending a message, creating content, accessing information, or managing security.

*We should aim to future proof the framework by labelling the capability rather than the technology – looking through the lens of 'what I can achieve through technology'.*

Focus group participant

While this suggestion may avoid referring to applications and devices that could quickly become outdated, there is another impact of changing technology that cannot be as easily addressed. Stakeholders reported that the DLSF uses a dated understanding of the complexity of some digital tasks and technologies. This is because the complexity of digital tasks and technologies is not fixed. Over time, many digital technologies become easier to use through a combination of improved design and increased familiarity. For example, scanning QR codes to access or provide information is a simpler and more ubiquitous process now than it was pre-COVID19.

*Currently the DLSF has substantial utility. That is NOW. In 12 months, it won't.*

Survey respondent

### Future of the DLSF

Although some stakeholders would like to see the DLSF added to the ACSF as a sixth core skill, many were not convinced that it was ready or fit to be included.

The ACSF is a mature framework that was developed from an established theoretical base and validated over many years before publication in its current form in 2012 for use in a wide range of contexts. By comparison, the DLSF is a relatively recent, unvalidated draft framework that was developed primarily to meet the needs of a single government program. Many stakeholders and framework experts are concerned that adding the DLSF to the ACSF could undermine the longevity and credibility of the latter.

There is intense interest in digital capability across all education sectors but the definition of digital literacy and its place in educational frameworks is not yet settled. Until there is a degree of consensus on where responsibility lies for describing and reporting digital literacy skills, and how those skills relate to other foundation and vocational skills, it is too early to include digital literacy as a sixth core skill in the ACSF. Framework experts and users see more value in addressing aspects of digital literacy within the existing core skills of the ACSF. This has been addressed in Section 3.1 (commencing p. 35).

Although stakeholders identified suggested improvements to the DLSF that could make the framework applicable beyond its narrow original purpose, new national approaches to describing digital capability have been progressed since the DLSF was developed.

Development of the *Digital Capability Framework* is nearing finalisation and promises to provide a broader, validated tool for representing digital capability across contexts. With appropriate support resources, the *Digital Capability Framework* would be a suitable replacement for the DLSF in the FSfYF and SEE programs.

Because the *Digital Capability Framework* has been adopted and adapted from the European Union's *DigComp Framework*, there is a wealth of European resources<sup>31</sup> that may be suitable for use in, or adaptation for, the Australian context.

### Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Consider the *Digital Capability Framework* (when available) as a replacement for the DLSF

1a. Do not introduce digital literacy into the ACSF as a sixth core skill

## 2.4 Assessment and delivery tools based on the DLSF

Although the DLSF was developed for the FSfYF program, there has been no formal trial of the framework within that program. However, a trial of the DLSF *Initial Assessment* kit in the AMEP was commissioned by the Department of Home Affairs (2021).

The trial gathered responses from a total of 75 AMEP assessors. While a majority of respondents (56%) reported that the DLSF *Initial Assessment* kit accurately captured their client's digital literacy skills, a third of the responding assessors reported that it did not.

Many assessors reported that the reason the initial assessment was not accurate was because their client's low English language proficiency affected their ability to demonstrate digital skills. However, the trial report concluded that:

*'to measure the ability to communicate and engage with digital literacy in Australian educational settings and workplace contexts, it is necessary to ensure ability to engage with digital technologies is demonstrated in English, not in a client's home language. Further training for assessors on the links between English language and digital literacy in Australia may be required.'* (DoHA, 2021, p. 15)

Subsequently the Department of Home Affairs commissioned the development of an *AMEP Digital Literacies Framework* and a web-based *Digital Literacies Guide* to facilitate planning, teaching and assessing digital literacies to complement the *EAL Framework* accredited curriculum to be used in the future AMEP contract.

Through the survey for this project, some stakeholders reported on their experience using the DLSF *Initial Assessment* kit in other contexts.

<sup>31</sup> DigComp resources available online: <https://www.digcomptest.eu/index.php?pg=competenciasDigitais>

*I trialled the DLSF Initial Assessment kit, but it blew my assessments out. In my assessments, I've made up my own digital questions to identify where they're at, and I pass that on to the teacher.*

Program  
placement  
assessment  
expert

It should be noted that although the DLSF was specifically designed for use in the FSfYF program, only 10% of survey respondents who said they used assessment tools aligned with the DLSF were FSfYF providers. Survey comments reflect stakeholder views on the DLSF in a range of delivery contexts that were not its intended primary use.

DLSF users were less certain about the validity of results provided by support resources and tools than ACSF users. As seen in Figure 6, only 36% of respondents indicated that DLSF support resources or tools provided 'fair, valid and reliable results for all users' while 51% selected that response for the ACSF.

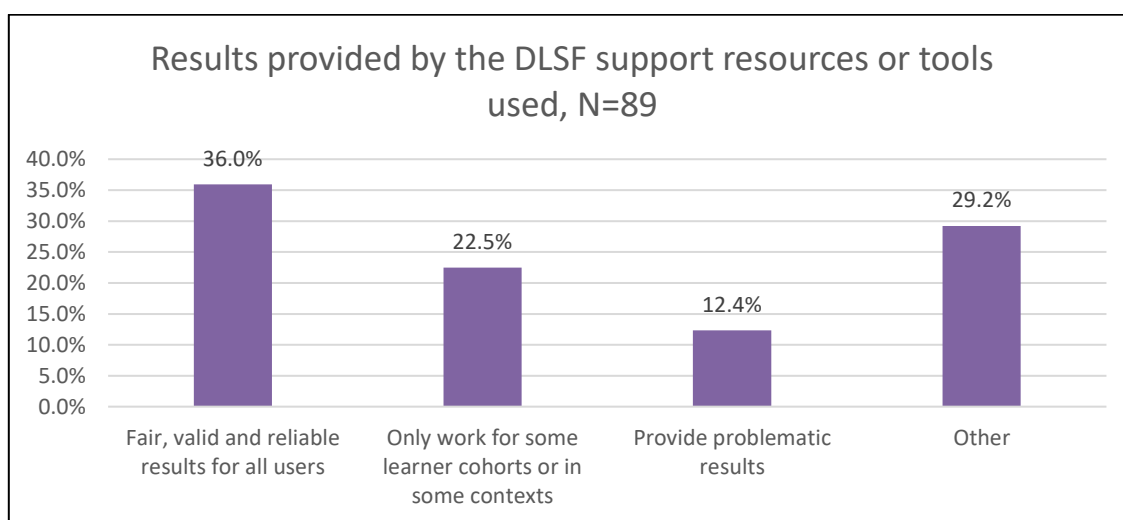


Figure 6 Results provided by the DLSF support resources or tools used

In responding to the survey question on DLSF results, 29% of respondents selected the 'other' response in order to provide written comment explaining their views. These included:

- Not suitable for all users**  
 Consultation participants reported difficulty in assessing EAL learners and Indigenous learners who did not have sufficient English language skills to engage with the vocabulary used in the assessment kit. Problems were also encountered in assessing the skills of learners who had previously had minimal exposure to computers. Providers felt that unreliable assessment outcomes for these learners meant that they risked designing programs that would not meet learner needs.
- Does not accommodate all contexts**  
 Survey respondents recognised that digital literacy is highly context dependent. Some claimed that the DLSF has an office-based slant while others reported that it is too broad and generic to assess the exit level skills of individuals in specific contexts.
- Does not reflect the way digital skills are acquired**  
 Learners bring a range of existing skills that they have acquired across various contexts. Consultation participants reported that aligning learner skills with the DLSF is often problematic because people don't develop their digital skills in a continuum that reflects the framework structure. They noted that there can be significant variation in an individual's digital literacy between devices or operating systems and that these skills do not necessarily transfer between devices, e.g. individuals with high levels of digital literacy using apps on a phone may not be as fluent when using Windows on a PC.



- **Has gaps in coverage**

Consultation participants reported that the Department's DLSF assessment kit does not provide a sufficient range of tasks to assess a participant's skill levels. They also noted that some tasks in the pre-training assessment kit are artificial and may be difficult for those learners who are nervous or uncomfortable to demonstrate in an interview. The currency of web-based resources and suitability for different operating systems, e.g. Windows versus iOS, were also identified as issues.

*DLSF assessment tools measure a student's understanding of English instructions rather than their digital literacy skills.*

Survey  
respondent

The review received mixed stakeholder feedback on the utility of assessment tools based on the DLSF. While it was not within the project scope to comprehensively review the efficacy of assessment tools in the FSfYF program, learnings from AMEP experiences may be informative for both SEE and FSfYF.

If the *Digital Capability Framework* is adopted (when available) within the SEE and FSfYF programs, Sample Activities and support resources will need to be developed to support its use.

#### **Recommendations**

1b. Develop a range of Sample Activities and support resources that would enable use of the new *Digital Capability Framework* as a replacement for the DLSF and trial them in foundation skills delivery contexts

1c. Provide professional development for foundation skills practitioners on using the new *Digital Capability Framework* and related resources

### 3 Future requirements for the ACSF

One of the priorities of Australian governments is to provide stronger support for foundation skills and ensure access for all Australians with low levels of language, literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy. To ensure that the ACSF serves as a useful tool for reporting in this context, it must be revised in a way that makes it accessible to a broad range of audiences using it for specialist and non-specialist purposes.

#### 3.1 Core skill updates

##### Coverage of digital literacy skills content

Survey respondents and consultation participants recognise that digital literacy has become an integral component of all core skills and many feel that it should be better integrated into the ACSF. Almost two thirds (65%) of survey respondents agreed that changes to the ACSF are required to accommodate the increasing need for digital literacy (a further 28% were unsure, while 16% disagreed). The highest support for changing the ACSF to accommodate digital literacy was reported by training package developers (80% agreed) and LLND program managers (75% agreed).

*It is no longer enough to aim to be literate in reading, writing, oral communication, learning and numeracy as people need to be literate in all these areas in the digital space as well. It's a life-skills demand. Therefore, digital skills really need to be embedded in all the core skills areas, not treated so much as an entity alone.*

Survey  
respondent

Given that the current ACSF dates from 2012, it does not provide contemporary examples of digital skills and their application. Stakeholders suggested a range of approaches to address this shortcoming. These included:

- **Updating Sample Activities** to include a wider range and greater depth of examples that involve varying levels of sophistication and digital skill
- **Including new concepts** to reflect changes in technology use, such as:
  - inputting data into a device as part of the writing core skill
  - embedding computational thinking into the core skills of numeracy and learning
  - reflecting the digital demands of learning in the learning core skill, e.g. accessing online learning platforms, sourcing advice or instructions online and critically evaluating search results, creating digital profiles, using social media for collaboration
  - updating the approach taken in the numeracy core skill to reflect changes in technology use, e.g. the impact of GPS and mapping applications on traditional map reading skills
- **Redefining or reconsidering use of terms**, moving away from the concept of continuous and non-continuous text types to acknowledge the more mixed and diverse texts used in the digital environment and weaving the digital medium into the Performance Features as another way to communicate
- **Updating language** to remove references to dated technologies or concepts, e.g. DVDs, TV guide in newspaper, and to accommodate changing societal understandings, e.g. 'google that'

- **Reviewing expectations of performance at level** where they are impacted by changes in technology use, such as:
  - reconsidering the emphasis on handwriting when more written communication is now electronic
  - considering how the use of ‘speech to text’ and ‘text to speech’ functions and other assistive technologies may necessitate a recalibration of what represents effective performance
  - reducing the emphasis on use of traditional maps, e.g. use of street directories and simple coordinates, and increasing focus on use of digital tools for directions.

While participants in a project focus group on digital skills were largely in favour of adding digital literacy to the ACSF as a sixth core skill, most survey respondents were not convinced that digital literacy is a core skill in its own right. Of the 118 survey respondents who provided their view on how digital literacy content can best be included in the ACSF, only 21 suggested that it should be a sixth core skill. For many respondents the question provoked unresolved musings on the nature of digital literacy and its complex interrelationship with all other core skills.

*From a usability perspective, it is probably easier to add the DLSF as another core skill, even though there are questions about whether it actually is a core skill..*

Survey  
respondent

One survey respondent suggested that if digital literacy is a core skill, then so too are media literacy, critical literacy, and the broader employability skills described by the *Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework*.

Most consultation participants felt that embedding digital literacy concepts into the existing core skills is necessary to maintain the currency and relevance of the ACSF. However, stakeholders also highlighted the following issues that may arise from embedding digital literacy into the core skills.

- There is huge variation in individuals’ capacity for digital literacy that is not correlated with their traditional LLN skills. As a result, if digital literacy is included within core skills, individuals may have spiky profiles *within* each core skill. **There may be a need to ensure that more fine-grained reporting is possible against ACSF Indicators and Focus Areas.**
- Access to digital technology is not universal. Some stakeholders are concerned that the digital divide will impact the performance of individuals against ACSF levels. This concern highlights a common misconception that individuals should achieve everything contained within an ACSF level, but the ACSF is a mechanism for identifying and talking about skills, not a required assessment. **By recognising digital literacy skills that are increasingly critical, the ACSF will help to highlight the challenges faced by those on the wrong side of the digital divide.**
- The inclusion of digital literacy in core skills is confronting for teachers who may themselves have limited digital skills. **Considerable guidance and professional development may be required to help LLN practitioners use the ACSF** to inform the design and delivery of LLN programs that include digital literacy.

*When it comes to digital skills – the greatest issue is practitioner skills before worrying about learners. If teachers of courses are not proficient, they have limited chance of assessing or assisting others to gain skills.*

State Training  
Authority  
representative

There is widespread support for improving the currency of the ACSF by embedding digital literacy concepts – digital texts, materials, devices, and technological tools and processes – into all core skills.

Recently published frameworks for the international PIAAC (OECD, 2021) include examples of the connection and interaction between core skills and technology and digital devices. In addition, the European CEFR includes a set of highly nuanced descriptors that could provide a useful starting point for developing digital literacy content for the ACSF.

### Recommendation

2a(i) **Digital literacy:** Embed digital literacy concepts in all ACSF core skills by adjusting or adding Focus Areas and related Performance Features; where appropriate, drawing on other relevant frameworks

## Consolidation of Pre Level 1 supplement into framework

### *Clear differentiation between levels*

The ACSF Pre Level 1 supplement was included in the 2012 ACSF and further developed in 2017, in response to practitioner feedback that in one or more core skills many adult learners begin their learning journey below ACSF Level 1. The 2017 version of Pre Level 1 assists users to describe, assess and report skill performance, and skill progression over time more accurately. It is divided into two stages – Pre Level 1A and Pre Level 1B – in recognition of the incremental steps that adult learners work through at this level.

To cover the range of performance of skills across the Australian population it makes sense to formally integrate the Pre Level 1 content into the ACSF. However, framework users and experts consulted through the project advised that integrating Pre Level 1 will require some adjustment to the framework. No adjustments were made to Level 1 of the ACSF when Pre Level 1 was developed. It has become clear through subsequent use that some of the language used to define Pre Level 1B and ACSF Level 1 is not differentiated clearly enough.

*ACSF Level 1 used to be the lowest ACSF level before the pre levels were introduced. However, it appears no one readjusted Level 1 in light of these new levels and as a result there are Performance Features in Level 1 which make it difficult to distinguish between a Level 1 and a Pre-Level 1B client.*

Survey  
respondent

This is an issue because framework users report that the lack of clarity is a hindrance to identifying performance levels, tracking progress, and moderation in government programs that require clear entry and exit points. For example, providers using the ACSF and ACSF Pre Level 1 for reporting pre and post assessment in the SEE and FSfYF programs often find it difficult to clearly ascribe a base level of performance and this subsequently impacts the ability to note learning progress.

To address this issue, adjustment is needed to some Performance Features of Pre Level 1B and Level 1. More explicit Sample Activities may also need to be included. In many instances this will require greater specificity around the level of support required at each level. An example of the required change is shown in Table 5 for the Focus Area of Learner Identity in the core skill of learning. Similar adjustments will be needed in Focus Areas across other core skills.

Table 5 Example of Focus Area change to accommodate Pre Level 1

Example of Focus Area change to accommodate Pre Level 1			
Learning core skill Focus Area: Learner Identity			
Content	Pre Level 1A	Pre Level 1B	Level 1
<b>Existing content</b>	Engages in learning activities that involve minimal risk	Engages in learning activities that involve some risk taking	Engages in learning activities where scaffolding reduces the need for risk taking
<b>Revised content</b>	Engages in learning activities where scaffolding removes risk taking	Engages in learning activities where scaffolding minimises risk taking	Engages in learning activities that involve some risk taking

### *Use of the performance variables grid*

The performance variables grid is an important component of the ACSF and is often overlooked in the assessment of a learner's capability to complete a task independently or operate with texts that are unfamiliar.

Consultation participants suggested that the performance variables grid can be used to help framework users differentiate between levels in the ACSF.

The integration of Pre Level 1 into the ACSF could be supported by the provision of more detail on differentiating performance. This may be included in an ACSF Companion Volume that provides examples and visual illustrations to explain how:

- performance of core skills happens on a continuum of development and that the levels of the ACSF have been imposed on this continuum of development
- performance of core skills at all levels is affected by the performance variables – support, context, text complexity and task complexity
- the ACSF can be used to track skill development and guide teaching, assessing and moderation.

Framework users have identified a need to differentiate more clearly between Pre Level 1B and Level 1. This is particularly an issue for those delivering Australian government-funded projects where there is a requirement to demonstrate learner skills gain across ACSF levels.

### **Recommendations**

2a(vi) **All core skills:** Integrate Pre Level 1 into the ACSF by adjusting Performance Features and Sample Activities as appropriate across all core skills

See also recommendation relating to a Companion Volume 2c(vii)

## Inclusion of low-level reading concepts

Through the survey and consultation, the project gathered specific feedback from teachers who work with adults who struggle to learn to read. These teachers reported that the ACSF does not explicitly reference underpinning English language acquisition concepts such as phonological and phonemic awareness and orthographic mapping that are central to the way that they work with learners with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia. Many practitioners working with learners with reading difficulties in Pre Level 1 and Level 1 report the need for planned and explicit ‘acts of teaching’ to assist these learners to translate print to meaning.

There is a substantial body of research that highlights the interconnected nature of mastery of these skills and the impacts on reading, writing and speaking English.

Ehri (2014) explains the skills that need to be in place before orthographic mapping can take place:

*‘To form connections and retain words in memory, readers need some requisite abilities. They must possess phonemic awareness, particularly segmentation and blending. They must know the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences (letter-sound knowledge) of the writing system. Then they need to be able to read unfamiliar words on their own by applying a decoding strategy.’ Doing so ‘activates orthographic mapping to retain the words’ spellings, pronunciations, and meanings in memory.’ (p. 7)*

The current ACSF Performance Features at Pre Level 1 include some references to the ‘dominant sound’ of a letter of the alphabet and ‘sounding out of familiar words’ (PL1.04 Decoding and fluency, Stages A and B) but could be adjusted to include a few additional Performance Features that might indicate a learner was demonstrating decoding techniques in order to read.

In responding to the project survey, reading specialists provided the following advice for addressing phonological and phonemic awareness in the ACSF.

- **Revise Focus Areas** for Pre Level 1A to Level 2 in relation to:
  - ‘Decoding and Fluency’ in Reading Indicator .04 to include one or two Performance Features based on phonological and phonemic awareness
  - ‘Spelling’ in Writing Indicator .06 to include the concept of phonological and phonemic awareness.
- **Add new Sample Activities** for the changed Performance Features to illustrate demonstration of phonological and phonemic awareness in context.
- **Revise introductory text** for the reading and writing core skills to help non-specialist practitioners understand the concepts and theoretical underpinnings that relate to phonological and phonemic awareness.
- **Develop guidance material** to support interpretation and understanding of the revised Performance Features, including:
  - references to current research
  - explanations of skills acquisition in phonological and phonemic awareness – decoding using blending and encoding using segmenting
  - advice on the place of these skills and options for instruction, within the context of adult literacy instruction and learner objectives and preferences.

Language is a complete system of making meaning, with words functioning in relation to each other in context.

Adults, who may not be able to read sustained prose, will have been exposed to many words and memorised some of these familiar words across their lifetime that relate to familiar contexts. However, despite having memorised a selection of ‘meaningful words’ they may not be aware of the underpinning concepts that might help them consistently decode the English language.

*Not all struggling readers need to work on their phonological awareness or decoding skills, and those who do will have different degrees of need. We need to know if a learner with low literacy has weak phonological awareness and decoding skills, and we need detailed information about the extent of their abilities so that educators can provide targeted and efficient instruction.*

Reading and dyslexia expert practitioner

While it is recognised that additional material in the lower levels of the ACSF might be useful, an analysis of the literature relating to reading reveals contested views on the best ratio of attention to place on phonics versus whole language instruction (Cambourne, 2021). For adults, a combination of approaches appears to be recommended in relation to their individual learning needs, which combines their need to understand underpinning concepts and rules about the English language with andragogical instruction that is meaningful and applicable to their daily lives. Sufficient signposting of these skills in the ACSF would support teachers in identifying and using the most appropriate teaching strategies for their learner cohort.

Stakeholder feedback consistently reinforced the importance of ACSF content representing realistic Performance Features, not being overly complicated, and not being 'jargon heavy'.

*Our literacy program is pitched at low-level learners in non-formal learning and works to develop reading skills for that cohort. Drawing on the best available evidence, we work with learners on their phonemic awareness as an underpinning skill. There are no performance indicators [in the ACSF] to track this.*

Survey respondent

Specialist reading practitioners indicated that the addition of content relating to phonological and phonemic awareness and orthographic mapping would strengthen the ACSF.

### Recommendations

2a(iii) **Reading and writing:** Introduce concepts of language acquisition into Pre Level 1A to Level 2 of the reading and writing core skills by adding and revising Performance Features in the Focus Areas for Decoding and Fluency, and Spelling

2a(viii) **All core skills:** Update Sample Activities across all levels of the ACSF to provide current examples of applied core skills and demonstrate concepts or connections introduced by framework updates

See also recommendations relating to introductory material 2b(iii) and a Companion Volume 2c(ii).

## Coverage of the core skill of learning

Stakeholder feedback through the consultations revealed varied views on the value and fitness for purpose of the core skill of learning.

*I would say learning is the number one core skill.*

Focus group participant

While some ACSF users regard the learning core skill as fundamental to all other skills, others find it problematic.

Issues that were reported through the project consultation include:

- A lack of understanding of how the learning core skill can be demonstrated means that program designers, managers and coordinators, teachers, trainers and assessors can tend to ignore this core skill in training and assessment or interpret it in a very narrow sense.
- The learning core skill reports on behaviour, which doesn't always correlate to ability to learn and may be counterproductive.
- Learners of English as an additional language may have many learning skills that they cannot demonstrate due to lack of language, making their assessed level inaccurate.
- ACSF Performance Features, Focus Areas and Sample Activities are culturally specific to the Australian learning context and conception of what learning entails.

Additionally, some stakeholders suggested that the learning core skill could be expanded to encompass various related concepts that impact an individual's capacity to acquire and apply learning skills, such as mental health and mindset, emotional intelligence, citizenship, cultural awareness, media literacy, and critical literacy.

### *Application to all domains*

Learning is a core skill that can be acquired and demonstrated across a person's lifetime in a variety of personal, learning and employment contexts. In the ACSF, these contexts are captured in three Domains of Communication:

- Personal and Community
- Workplace and Employment
- Education and Training.

These domains are intended to support an approach to learning that is relevant and meaningful to the adult learner. However, although learning skills can be acquired and demonstrated in all three domains, some ACSF users reported a bias in the learning core skill toward classroom-based notions of learning. They suggested that the learning core skill should be revised to ensure it is interpreted as a holistic skill that underpins an individual's capacity to develop and apply other core skills in contexts beyond the bounds of formal education and training.

*I use the ACSF extensively with Indigenous programs. Works fine, though more detail needs to be provided for the learning core skill.*

Focus group participant

Updating the learning core skill to address contexts beyond the classroom will mean refining the language used in the Performance Features and Sample Activities at all levels. Framework experts suggested that the use of language and terms from employability skills may help to broaden the contexts in which learning skills can be recognised, developed and demonstrated.



Some examples of where current content could be updated to encompass a workplace setting are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6 Example of content revisions in the core skill of learning

Example of content revisions in the core skill of learning		
Indicator	Focus area	Example of current text to be revised
PL1.01	Goals and Pathways	<i>need to attend class, although may be inconsistent</i>
PL1.02	Locating, evaluating and organising information	<i>begins to use a picture dictionary</i>
	Locating, evaluating and organising information	<i>builds a word bank</i>
	Goals and Pathways	<i>develops a simple short term learning plan with assistance</i>
2.01	Learning with and from others	<i>asks questions of a teacher/training, mentor or expert in the field</i>
2.01	Locating, evaluating and organising information	<i>uses a small range of strategies to assess the potential of a text, e.g. scans the cover, title or illustrations</i>

Framework users identified some issues with the applicability of the learning core skill to contexts beyond the classroom. They also identified an opportunity to strengthen the connection of the ACSF to employability skills through the learning core skill.

### Recommendations

2a(ii) **Learning:** Refine language used in Performance Features and Sample Activities to show that the learning core skill can be acquired and demonstrated in personal and community, and workplace and employment contexts, as well as in education and training settings

See also recommendations relating to a Companion Volume 2c(v) and 2c(viii).

## Currency of numeracy skills

21st century mathematics and numeracy practice are integrated with technology and the use and application of digital skills and devices, especially in workplaces. In our daily lives we now use GPS and Google Maps for navigating and getting around, and we use a range of online applications and automated calculators to work out the options or solutions to various financial tasks and for other calculations or mathematical processes.

Work-related skills required in the 21st century include a range of mathematical capabilities, such as understanding and interpreting graphical information, interpreting measures in terms of what the data are saying about a manufacturing process, making use of spreadsheets, interpreting visual, computer-generated 3D representations or virtual images, all often driven by the need to improve production processes and productivity (e.g., see AAMT & AiGroup, 2014; Gravemeijer et al., 2017; Hoyles et al., 2010). This has implications for how numeracy is currently described in the ACSF.

For example, we are now living in a digital age where many of the Performance Features in the numeracy core skill, which were previously assumed to be demonstrated using mathematical processes and calculations, can now be routinely demonstrated using digital literacy capabilities (Geraniou & Jankvist, 2019).

*Young people are sometimes assessed lower in numeracy because they do not know how to use a traditional map – they may have only ever used Google maps.*

Survey  
respondent

Currently, learners in programs that report their ‘core skill gains’ using the ACSF can be affected because they no longer routinely demonstrate some Performance Features mathematically and instead can demonstrate them digitally. The Performance Features and the Sample Activities of numeracy need to be reviewed and adjusted to ensure that the ACSF numeracy core skill and its levels do not become irrelevant to current learners and teachers and to allow learner’s actual skills to be accurately documented.

Another issue in relation to numeracy, is the growing awareness that critical numeracy, like critical literacy, is a key element of 21st century life that goes beyond a merely functional perspective on numeracy. Apart from the interactions between numeracy and technology and digital skills mentioned above, 21st century mathematical skill requirements are more demanding, requiring more critical, reflective reasoning skills and the ability to interpret and understand a broader range of texts and materials.

The numeracy core skill in the existing ACSF needs to also be updated to more strongly address this issue, across all Indicators, Focus Areas, Performance Features and Sample Activities. The revised and enhanced framework for numeracy in PIAAC Cycle 2 (OECD, 2021) is a relevant framework that could be used to review the ACSF, along with other research about the intersection between the world of mathematics, numeracy and digital and technological developments (Lawrence, 2014; Preece, 2016; and Clark-Wilson, 2021).

As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century age, the increasingly complex interaction between the world of mathematics/numeracy and technology and digital skills has reshaped some aspects of numeracy.

### Recommendations

**2a(v) Numeracy:** Revise the numeracy core skill Indicators, Focus Areas, Performance Features and Sample Activities to reflect 21st century technological and digital literacy implications

See also recommendations relating to core skill introductory material 2b(iii), Sample Activities 2A(viii) and a Companion Volume 2c(iv).

## EAL considerations

The ACSF was developed to reflect contemporary use of English in Australia (DIISRTE, 2012, p. 2).

Over the course of the past decade, the use of the framework in government programs with specific EAL learners, such as AMEP and SEE, has seen debate around its appropriateness for describing the skills gains of EAL learners. These discussions have included practitioner comments such as ‘the ACSF is not specifically designed for TESOL [and] not very contextualised to us as English language teachers’ (ACTA, 2019, Appendix C p. 10).

Despite the ACSF being recognised internationally as a comprehensive framework, throughout the project, stakeholders commented that the ACSF does not adequately address the cultural implications of people’s diverse ethnic origins and nationality. For instance, those representing First Nations learners, and also those representing migrants and refugees, suggested that the ACSF does not sufficiently recognise those from cultures where language is predominantly spoken rather than written, or those who are literate in their first language but who may have to learn a new script or alphabet to read and write in English.

The literature review indicated that many EAL practitioners familiar with the International Second Language Proficiency Rating (ISLPR) believe that its twelve levels of progression ranging from 0 (zero proficiency) to 5 (native-like) with formally recognised in-between improvement steps (i.e., 0+, 1-, 1+, 2- and so on) are better suited to describing increments of EAL learner progression. The ISLPR concentrates on linguistic evolution, portraying candidates in terms of Language Behaviours (e.g., unable to communicate, able to satisfy transactional and social needs). It includes language-specific criteria such as fluency, pronunciation, ability to communicate, and vocabulary accuracy.

There should, however, be no reason to claim that the ACSF is a ‘blunt instrument’. Although the ACSF framework describes core skills across five levels, the detailed Performance Features associated with each Focus Area make it possible to report learner gain in all areas covered by the ISLPR – and more – in very fine gradations, across levels and at multiple points of time. The ACSF also recognises that an individual may be operating across different levels within a core skill, demonstrating some Performance Features across two or more levels or performing more strongly in one domain of communication than in another (DIISRTE, 2012, p. 12). Described as a ‘spiky profile’, this way of representing an individual’s core skills assists in identifying what the person can already do, what they are developing, and where they might need specific assistance through education or training.

Despite the inherent capability of the ACSF to provide nuanced skill descriptions, over time there has been a tendency for governments and program managers to talk about core skill gain at full Indicator level against a specified timeframe. There is an expectation that learners should be able to make uniform gains across all Focus Areas and associated Performance Features, and that teachers in government-funded LLN programs will test at the Indicator level, rather than at the Performance Feature level. This has artificially positioned the ACSF as a blunt instrument and has fed into the critique of the ACSF as an inappropriate tool for describing finer gradations of gain by EAL learners given that they are more likely to achieve spiky increments.

*In an EAL context the (ACSF) levels are too broad. Often EAL clients fall between ACSF levels in a pre-assessment context, and the results finally awarded are not a true indication of their English ability. In other words, it can be a blunt instrument for this cohort. There are better tools available.*

Survey  
respondent

The review's examination of the literature, stakeholder views and program requirements suggests that this issue may be more about the way the ACSF is used to support assessment design and reporting than about deficiencies in the framework itself.

In 2019 the Department of Home Affairs, in response to the evaluation it commissioned of the AMEP (DoHA, 2019), recommended a review of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the ACSF to describe English proficiency of EAL learners for the purposes of initial assessment and progress reporting. Based on stakeholder feedback obtained in that evaluation, the Department of Home Affairs has revised the future AMEP business model ('the revised business model') and stated that the ACSF 'will not be used as the measurement of English language proficiency in the AMEP in the revised business model. English language progression will be measured against the AMEP national curriculum, the EAL Framework. The Department will consider inclusion of ACSF alignment information where appropriate or useful'.<sup>32</sup>

The robust and positive participation in the forums held as part of this ACER review generated some program-specific critique but in general an overall level of acceptance and support was expressed in regard to the applicability of the ACSF to EAL learners. It is generally viewed as 'good for using with migrant learners, if you count the pre-level supplement, [as] it allows a pretty accurate snapshot across the core skills and to evidence progress' (Venuto, 2022).

Through discovery consultations, a specialist program assessor with over ten years' experience placing students into AMEP, SEE and state-funded LLN programs indicated that the ACSF and the related program assessment tools allowed for 'useful individual in-depth language analysis and analysis of skills such as learning and numeracy that are not represented in other frameworks'.

*When we have to do the verifications. We drill down into every aspect of the interview that we've done. Although it is broad, and you could look at other aspects of language, I find the ACSF is sufficient to tell what level a student is at.*

EAL expert  
practitioner

## Oral communication

Apart from commentary on the general lack of suitability of the ACSF for use in the AMEP, few stakeholders provided specific feedback on changes that could be made to enhance the core skill of oral communication.

Practitioners working specifically with First Nations learners (some of whom have English as an additional language) found the ACSF suitable to describe learners' skills but indicated the need for acknowledgement within the ACSF of First Nations peoples. They also identified an opportunity to develop and use culturally safe assessment resources and methods that build learner's confidence. This is an important consideration, given that the ACSF is 'based on the view that language is a social everyday event, which is shaped by purpose and context' and that significant power dynamics can exist in spoken interactions.

*When it comes to oral communication, the concept of 'register' needs unpacking – what does that mean? Learning the nuance of crafting what to say and how to say something to differing audiences to achieve different outcomes is a complex skill.*

EAL expert  
practitioner  
working with  
First Nations  
learners

<sup>32</sup> Reform of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) Responses to commonly asked stakeholder questions, p. 2, < <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/PDFs/reform-amep-responses-commonly-asked-questions.pdf>>

Research for the project (Tout, Perkins & Teo, 2022) found that the CEFR, which describes in detail the progressions an individual will take when learning any foreign language, has important similarities to the ACSF. Each framework has been developed based on research and extensive consultation with practitioners, and there appears to be a close alignment between approaches to fundamentals relating to language performance. In other words, the authors of the ACSF and the CEFR have identified the same things as being critical to effective performance. The ACSF covers virtually all of the areas described in the original CEFR and, although the staging points are slightly different, the general progressions in each framework align. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two frameworks – they have been designed within different frames of references and associated expectations, so although the CEFR descriptors look remarkably similar to those of the ACSF, a trained CEFR user accepts that they relate to non-native speakers learning another language. Interestingly, the CEFR itself has few descriptors that make that explicit.

Although the CEFR would never be suitable as an alternative framework to the ACSF, analysis has identified several CEFR concepts and/or content that could be further explored as part of any ACSF revision of the core skill of oral communication. In the CEFR, oral communication is described under three distinct headings: Spoken Production, Listening and Spoken Interaction. In the ACSF, descriptors of interactive oral communication are split between the Speaking Indicator (which includes productive and interactive performance features), and the Listening Indicator (which includes receptive and interactive performance features).

The introduction of a third Indicator to the ACSF's oral communication core skill could provide a context within which to better describe the skills required to navigate the often complex and nuanced exchanges that involve speaking and listening skills, but which take on a life of their own. This would have benefits for native and non-native speakers alike.

There could also be value in considering aspects of the CEFR's recently developed approach to plurilingualism – the ability of an individual who is competent in more than one language to switch easily from one linguistic code to another in order to communicate effectively within a particular set of circumstances. The CEFR highlights strategies used by non-native speakers to, for example, 'call upon the knowledge of a number of languages (or dialects, or varieties) to make sense of a text' or 'recognise words from a common international store in a new guise' (Council of Europe, 2020 p. 30). The CEFR examples capture powerful meaning making strategies that are used by, and can be taught to, non-native speakers of a language.

*The ACSF is limited in its ability to report oral communication for EAL/D learners. Could the speaking Indicator be broken into 2 or 3 parts?*

Survey respondent

The ACSF is not specifically designed as a framework to describe additional language acquisition.

Given its broad use across the country to support the building of core skills in a variety of personal and community, education and training, and workplace and employment environments, it is not advisable to change the orientation of the ACSF to become a specialist language acquisition framework, such as the CEFR. However, the ACSF-CEFR mapping demonstrates that the ACSF covers almost all areas identified as critical for additional language learning.

It may be useful to work with EAL teachers to develop more explanatory text to accompany the oral communication core skill and to review and refine some of its Performance Features to ensure that learner gain in speaking production and spoken interaction can be separately reported, drawing on the best of other frameworks, such as the CEFR, where these can genuinely add value. Enhanced descriptors would benefit both native and non-native English speakers.

### Recommendations

2a(iv) **Oral communication:** Revise the ACSF oral communication core skill to enhance Performance Features where appropriate to distinguish speaking production and spoken interaction more clearly, and consider the benefits of introducing a third Indicator to expedite this

See also recommendations relating to core skill introductory material 2b(iii), Sample Activities 2a(viii) and a Companion Volume 2c(ii).

## 3.2 Other framework changes

### Reporting finer gradations

There was strong consultation feedback from practitioners working in the AMEP and SEE program that requiring a full Indicator gain within a prescribed timeframe was unrealistic for many learners. Additionally, the need to provide multiple pieces of evidence<sup>33</sup> to demonstrate a full Indicator gain was seen as placing an untenable burden on teachers and sometimes driving teaching and assessment practice that does not serve learner needs. This led many survey respondents to comment on the perceived gap between ACSF levels.

*The gaps between the each ACSF level are too great especially where there is a requirement to meet KPI targets for progressive assessments.*

Survey  
respondent

Many practitioners called for the ability to report ‘finer gradations’ of performance so that learner progress can be recognised when it is less than a full level increment. While some of those making the request may have imagined additional detail or extra ‘half-levels’ added to the ACSF, reporting ‘finer gradations’ does not require additional ACSF content. Rather, finer gradations can be reported by using the ACSF internal structure of Indicators, Domains and Performance Features and the performance variables grid (level of support) to describe learner gain in smaller increments than a full core skill Indicator increase.

This approach has been used effectively in programs funded under Tasmania’s 26TEN initiative to enable a more learner centric approach. Providers can develop programs and report outcomes that focus only on the aspects of skill development that are relevant to the learner. To allow practitioners to describe increments of gain that are smaller than a full level, a reporting system has been developed that recognises finer grained outcomes.

The 26TEN reporting system uses Performance Features and the ‘support’ performance variable to record progress in a single Indicator. Progress is measured by performance in all, or all relevant, Performance Features at a higher level ACSF Indicator where the performance is achieved with the level of support of that higher level.

This reporting of finer gradations has been operationalised in a variety of workplace and community programs funded through 26TEN to enable the development and delivery of flexible, learner-centred programs. As reported by LINC Tasmania,<sup>34</sup> the system renders learner progress that is evident to teachers, and important to learners and employers, visible to funding bodies and program evaluation.

*Many of our clients have learning difficulties and spiky profiles, or they are from culturally or linguistically diverse background with or without learning difficulties. They face specific issues, for example, Focus Area ‘Pronunciation and fluency’ in oral communication can really derail a person’s ability to communicate but they may be quite ok in the other Focus Areas. We have long used a finer gradations approach, unpacking each Focus Area into specific components in order to capture and report more accurately.*

Survey  
respondent

<sup>33</sup> The Department’s guidelines for SEE providers state: ‘Two pieces of separate curricular evidence should be provided when claiming an ACSF indicator. Where curricula assessment from a unit of competence (*sic*) (UoC) is not sufficiently broad enough to cover a full ACSF Indicator, a provider may use a non-curricular piece of assessment to show the additional performance features of that ACSF indicator. SEE Providers should review and/or expand curricula assessment tasks so they are broad enough to fully cover the required performance features of ACSF indicators.’

<sup>34</sup> Getting more bang for your buck from the ACSF, presentation Anita Planchon, Manager Adult Literacy, LINC Tasmania

## Improved navigation

Although 84% of survey respondents agreed that the ACSF provides a common language to describe and discuss skills, a lack of aids to navigate the framework hinders communication. Current numbering in the ACSF is limited to the Indicators in each core skill – no other ACSF component is numbered. Expanding the numbering system to Focus Areas and their respective Performance Features would aid skill identification, assessment item design, training support, and concise reporting of learner gain at finer increments.

Table 7 and the explanatory text below it demonstrates how an internal numbering system for the ACSF could be used as a navigation and communication aid.

Table 7 Example of an ACSF internal numbering system for Level 1 of the core skill of reading

Example of an ACSF internal numbering system for Level 1 of the core skill of reading			
Reading Level 1			
<b>1.03</b>	Identifies personally relevant information and ideas from texts on highly familiar topics		
SUPPORT	CONTEXT	TEXT COMPLEXITY	TASK COMPLEXITY
Works alongside an expert/mentor where prompting and advice can be provided	Highly familiar contexts Concrete and immediate Very restricted range of contexts	Short and simple Highly explicit purpose Limited, highly familiar vocabulary	Concrete tasks of 1 or 2 steps Processes include locating, recognising
FOCUS AREA:	PERFORMANCE FEATURES INCLUDE:		
<b>A:</b> Purpose	<b>(i)</b> Identifies personally relevant reasons for reading		
<b>B:</b> Complexity	<b>(ii)</b> Understands a limited range of short, highly explicit and culturally accessible texts, some of which may be ICT based, e.g. SMS texts <b>(iii)</b> Understands texts with clear consistent formats that are written in simple sentences		
<b>C:</b> Prediction and prior knowledge	<b>(iv)</b> Makes some predictions about content on the basis of the title and illustrations <b>(v)</b> With assistance, makes some connections between prior knowledge and text content on a subject relevant to needs and interest		
<b>D:</b> Critical reading and text analysis	<b>(vi)</b> Recognises some simple ways in which visual features like layout are used to send a message and how this may influence interpretation, e.g. the placement of a photo or heading in a newspaper		

Using the numbering system in Table 7, internal components of the ACSF could be concisely and accurately recorded. For example **1.03:C:iv** represents:

**[1.03]** *Identifies personally relevant information and ideas from texts on highly familiar topics* **[C]** *using prediction and prior knowledge* **[iv]** *to make some predictions about content based on the title and illustrations.*



The introduction of a consistent numbering system would simplify the documentation of ACSF content for a variety of purposes, including:

- mapping against curriculum
- reporting assessment outcomes
- describing learner progress
- identifying skill gaps
- referencing ACSF components in training products.

In addition, such a system might make it possible for funding requirements to move away from expectations of full level increases for all learners.

However, a degree of caution is warranted in this matter, as a more clearly numbered ACSF might unintentionally drive forensic auditing behaviour that often works against educational integrity and holistic consideration of learners' skills.

Feedback from survey respondents suggested that the current .01 format for Indicator numbering is unnatural in sequence. Further thought could be given to a more user-friendly and intuitive numbering design.

Stakeholders suggested that the ability to report in finer gradations against the ACSF would enable teachers to focus delivery more closely on learner objectives and record learner progress more accurately.

Establishing an internal numbering system for the ACSF would support this type of reporting.

#### **Recommendations**

2b(iv) **Develop and apply a consistent numbering system** for internal ACSF components (Focus Areas and Performance Features)

2e(vi) Consider the potential for ensuring that all programs that seek to measure LLND progress for reporting/funding purposes enable more varied measures of learner progress based on finer gradations of learner gain within and across ACSF levels

### 3.3 Framework support

The diversity of approaches and perspectives identified in this review indicated conclusively that in addition to the potential updates discussed in Section 3.1 (commencing p. 35), there are several simple but potentially high-impact support measures that would facilitate better use and understanding of the ACSF.

#### Updated theoretical underpinnings

The 2012 release of the ACSF sets out key theoretical underpinnings and approaches behind the framework.

Mainstream (non-specialist) ACSF users are primarily interested in interpreting and applying the key features of the ACSF to their practice. As a result, they did not refer to ACSF theoretical underpinnings during review consultation. However, specialist ACSF users did. They noted that the informing theoretical and curriculum references are mostly based on research from 1990 to 2006.

Background research for the review (Tout, Perkins & Teo, 2022) identified that the theoretical and curriculum references listed in the 2012 ACSF document, and in the 2017 Pre Level 1 supplement, are dated from the 1990s through to 2009. While many of these are still relevant, new research and evidence about core skill development for adults and young people has emerged since these documents were developed which could inform a new iteration of the ACSF. There have also been some significant technological changes with implications for core skills.

*A bit of a curve ball.... What is writing now? What is reading now? How does digital technology now help us view what writing is?*

Focus group participant

Without deconstructing the entire framework, it is not possible to revise the theories that underpinned its original development. However, the introduction to the ACSF could be revised to acknowledge more recent theories and approaches and their relationship to adult core skill development.

*I would like to see a clearer explanation of how research for the ACSF is interpreted and used. I feel this was done well for Kirsch and Mosenthal but not for all of the research.*

Survey respondent

The history of the framework and related theory is of interest to some readers but certainly not all. While it is not advisable to entirely retrofit the ACSF to imply that more contemporary theory informed its development, it is possible to add research references in core skill introductions relating to any added content and expand on these in ACSF Companion Volume material.

#### Recommendations

2b(iii) **Update introductory material** for each core skill to ensure readability and reflect any updates to core skill content including references to underpinning theory

See also recommendation relating to Companion Volume 2c(i)

## Content accessibility

As stated in Section 2.1 (p. 15), the ACSF is widely recognised as useful. However, users suggested that its availability in a format other than PDF and hard copy would help them to locate, retrieve and adapt content to meet their individual needs. Some users suggested that an online version of the framework would promote access and use, however this was less frequently suggested than the review team expected.

*There are other changes to the framework that would need to be made and validated first before going to the expense and bother of creating an online version.*

LLN practitioner  
in the course of  
discussing an  
online version

Benefits proposed by stakeholders of an online version of the ACSF included that it could enable exportable skills profiles, provide links to topic-specific support resources, and serve as the connection point for an online community or for moderation activities and sharing of examples of practice and templates.

Practitioners said that an online format for the ACSF would be useful, provided that:

- it was intuitively designed and its constituent elements were organised in a way that supported easy access and navigation
- it was comprehensive and existing essential ACSF content was retained
- its content was version controlled
- it included links to useful related sources of information.

*I would love there to be the capacity to download Indicators separately – part sections of the whole document. It would save me so much time when I'm creating templates and building skills profiles.*

Focus group  
participant

Given the variety of purposes that an online ACSF could support, stakeholders should be given an opportunity to consider its potential benefits and implications in greater depth. Their feedback and insights would be vital to ensuring that the alternative format was fit for purpose and its functionality met users' needs.

However, before considering the feasibility of an online version of the ACSF, there are significant ownership and ongoing maintenance issues that would first need to be addressed.

*I would be interested to see whether a more sophisticated online digital variant could be designed so people can have definitions pop up and/or show different levels side by side, etc. Those kinds of innovations to the features may assist new users to find it more engaging but I think that ultimately for the novice user the printed framework has an accessibility and logic that is hard to match on a screen.*

Survey  
respondent

While there was some stakeholder interest in a fully digital version of the ACSF, most users were primarily interested in accessing specific components of the framework that were useful in their context, e.g. all of Pre Level 1 and Level 1 of the core skill of reading; all core skills at Level 3. Providing access to downloadable files of discrete ACSF components would be less cost intensive than a fully online version of the framework.

### Recommendation

2b(v) **Establish a central online repository for the ACSF** that includes all related resources and a searchable database that allows users to access and retrieve individual components of the ACSF

### Support material that meets audience needs

*The performance variable grid is a great starting point for me when I want to describe someone's LLN performance.*

Practitioner  
(ACE sector)

As noted in Table 2 (p. 19), the ACSF is used in contexts as diverse as pre-accredited and non-accredited training, government-funded programs, and low-level through to high-level vocational courses. During consultation, many stakeholders commented on the diversity of ACSF users and suggested there was a need to simplify the language of the framework to accommodate the range of audiences. Some stakeholders reported that the specialist language and concepts included in the ACSF are daunting for new users, however many others saw a need to provide a range of support material that targets different audiences.

*I would resist calls (that have been about for the entire life of the ACSF) to make it 'user-friendly' or more accessible to the layman. It is a tool that can be utilised in surface ways by many but like any other industry if you want to use the tool to its fullest you need to learn the language and undertake some training.*

Survey  
respondent

The need for support material was often raised during consultation, particularly material that elaborates on framework content in specific contexts and does so concisely and in plain English.

Stakeholder suggestions for new material to support the use of the ACSF included the following.

- **Guidance within the ACSF**, including:
  - A clear index
  - Clarity on the purpose of the ACSF, who it applies to and different ways that it can be used
  - Definitions of specific terms, e.g. 'order of operations' in numeracy
  - Information on the scholarship and theoretical underpinnings that have informed the ACSF
  - Comparison tables inclusive of all six levels in all core skills and domains
  - Sample Activities in an appendix as well as in the body of the ACSF

- **An accompanying resource** containing user guidance, case studies and examples, including:
  - Sample client profiles/assessments, including examples of what constitutes a level achievement or not
  - Examples of assessment and learner results with commentary of what those results mean, e.g. an LLN profile identifying the gaps that are shown and what the practitioner should focus on for that learner
  - Examples of developed LLN training resources and how a practitioner could adapt those to assist learners to develop skills, e.g. by changing a performance variable up or down
  - Sample activities relating to units of competency showing trigger words at different levels, e.g. 'locate' suggests the learners need to be around ACSF Level 1 for reading compared to 'interpret' for Level 3
  - Examples of how to use the ACSF to write assessments and develop learning material based on the framework
  - Advice on unpacking Indicators at each level to aid interpretation
  - Visual representations of how the key components of the framework fit together
- **Information for different audiences**, simple and specific information for a range of users, including:
  - *Training product developers* who could be directed to draw on the language of the Sample Activities when populating the required core skill descriptions in a unit of competency's Foundation Skills section
  - *Volunteer tutors* who could be directed to the performance variables grid when planning a supported learning environment
  - *New users* who could be given an explanation of the basics of using the ACSF
  - *Teachers/trainers* who could be given advice on how to assist a learner with identified needs and activity ideas and real-world connections for teaching content at appropriate ACSF levels
  - *Assessors* who could be directed to requirements around evidence-based assessment that meets the principles of assessment and rules of evidence
  - *VET trainers* who could be given support to identify and compare the skills required by training products with the skills of the learner
  - *Learners* who could be provided with 'Can do' statements that simply articulate what they can achieve at different levels.
- **'How to' video resources** to support practical capability building, including:
  - How to use the ACSF to determine levels across all core skills
  - How to apply the ACSF in the workplace
  - How to use outcomes from an ACSF assessment tool to inform the development an individual learning plan
  - How to modify delivery and assessment to suit learners at different ACSF levels

In addition, stakeholders noted that resources developed on the release of the 2012 ACSF remain useful and could be updated and re-released, e.g. *Unlocking workforce potential: An employer guide to using the ACSF in the workplace*, AiGroup, 2013<sup>35</sup> and the *What Works for LLN* video library, Commonwealth of Australia, 2015.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.readingwritinghotline.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ACSF-Unlocking-Workforce-Potential-LR.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.ideasthatwork.com.au/what-works-for-lln/>

A strength of the ACSF is that so many different types of stakeholders use it.

Users include developers and owners of training product, curriculum and associated support material, managers of funded programs, literacy practitioners in the ACE and VET sectors, and commonwealth and state or territory government program managers. Each stakeholder type uses the ACSF for a specific reason in their specific context.

Given this, support approaches should be equally nuanced. A 'one size fits all' support approach would result in minimum gain. Consultation participants provided clear advice about the types of support and resources that would serve their various needs.

### Recommendations

2c. Develop an ACSF Companion Volume and support resources for broad stakeholder use

*And include in Companion Volume:*

2c(i) Information on the history and theoretical underpinnings that informed the development of the ACSF

2c(ii) Links to contemporary theories and strategies that relate to adult core skill learning including teaching and learning approaches for diverse learner groups such as disengaged youth, migrants and refugees, First Nations learners, and learners with specific learning difficulties

2c(iii) Links to current, publicly available ACSF support material

2c(iv) Advice that builds understanding of the digital literacy concepts that will be embedded in the ACSF and their implications for digital literacy skills development within core skills provision

2c(v) Explanation of the relationship between core skills and employability skills, and advice on developing employability skills within core skills provision

2c(vi) Guidance for using the ACSF to underpin consistent approaches to assessment

2c(vii) Advice for using the performance variables grid to differentiate between levels in the ACSF

2c(viii) Examples of practice to illustrate how the advice included in the Companion Volume can be applied in personal and community, workplace and employment, and education and training contexts

*And develop as separate support resources:*

2c(ix) A bank of resources for learners based on a selection of Sample Activities at level, e.g. 'can do' statements

2c(x) Concise guidance material targeted to the needs of training product developers and vocational trainers and assessors

## Moderation of assessment examples

The benefits of, and need for, moderation are firmly established in the VET sector. Moderation establishes the comparability of processes and outcomes across multiple practitioners to ensure they are valid, reliable and fair. It is widely recognised as a marker of good practice. It is not surprising therefore that the need for moderation to support consistent application of the frameworks and help users interpret assessment outcomes was frequently raised during consultation.

Facilitating practitioners in comparing uses they are making of the frameworks, agreeing their understandings, and sharing their concrete framework outputs would be a valuable exercise. This comparing and sharing could involve practitioners' own judgements of learner core skill levels and identified levels of course or resource demand. Context-specific delivery resources aligned with course levels could be pooled and peer reviewed.

A strategically implemented program of facilitated framework moderation would likely increase practitioner confidence and capability, but more importantly provide the Department with greater assurance in the consistency and accuracy of program delivery and reporting.

*I loved hearing from attendees who use the ACSF as a means to identify learners' needs and how this can inform their teaching methodology and design of their delivery.*

Focus group participant

The project consultation demonstrated the value of enabling people to share and compare their experiences of using the ACSF in different contexts and for different purposes. Many participants appreciated the opportunity to hear about how others use and interpret the framework and recognise it as a key to building professional practice.

*The ACSF is very technical and hard to read. I read it twice and was confused. I have done PD, but it's not useful unless you put it into use straight away. It's also often aimed at RTOs and their use of it as a way of determining learner skill levels. And that's not what I use it for.*

Interview with training product developer

While the ACSF is a comprehensive framework and as a result is well-regarded, reference was consistently made throughout consultation to its complexity and size. Those consulted spoke positively of previous government-funded professional development that provided both an introduction to the framework and training for more advanced users. Many consultation participants spoke of the absence of similar opportunities in the current environment, despite how welcome they would be.

The success of grassroots professional development initiatives in the LLN field is evidence of the strong degree of support for these opportunities and of the willingness to promote them through stakeholder networks and newsletters. Examples include regular professional association activities, the *FSTeach* Facebook group<sup>37</sup> and other social media communities.

*Adequate and thorough training, and regular validation and moderation are essential. I don't think the ACSF has been fairly done by from this perspective.*

Survey respondent

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/FSTeach/about/>

Given the shift to online solutions for professional development, as well as greater familiarity and acceptance of online mediums, a series of online professional development sessions seem likely to be well received by stakeholders.

The expertise and interest generated from a diverse array of stakeholders during this project could be used to develop, trial and validate any resulting framework revisions and/or companion volume content.

Ongoing discussion and testing of materials, approaches and viewpoints are critical to the professional development of the vast array of practitioners working in the foundation skills space. Individuals are eager for opportunities to contribute and are a valuable resource.

The move to online consultation has allowed individuals from differing locations across the country to meet and share diverse perspectives. This has been a valuable offshoot of the project. There is potential to harness the interest in this project into broader notions of communities of practice that would support use of the ACSF.

#### **Recommendations**

2d. Establish community of practice opportunities and a program of professional development

*Provide professional development that builds capability to:*

2d(i) integrate digital literacy skills development into core skills provision

2d(ii) develop eligibility criteria, reporting mechanisms and performance measures

2d(iii) create and customise assessment kits and conduct initial assessment and placement interviews in a flexible way to meet learner needs

2d(iv) interpret results from online tools to inform training plans and support identified learner skill gaps

2d(v) design learner-centred learning plans and describe learner gain

2e(ii) Establish an ACSF Revision Working Group, with experts identified through the review project, to oversee the recommended revisions to the ACSF and development of support materials



### 3.4 Framework oversight

The ACSF is widely regarded as the pre-eminent framework for describing core skills. Its careful and considered development and validation have propelled it into a dominant position in VET and have set the benchmark for any future review and revision.

*I was stunned when I first came across the ACSF. I have taught for about 30 years across high school and VET. The ACSF is the only accessible, comprehensive taxonomy of core skills that I have encountered. I was delighted to find it. The ACSF can provide so much for our educators and learners. It must be better supported so that it becomes a widely used tool across all education sectors and helps educators and learners to build these fundamental skills for life.*

Focus group participant

The 2012 ACSF includes a Minister's statement that:

*'the ACSF underpins the quality management of Australian Government language, literacy and numeracy programs and is a key component of the infrastructure which exists to support and improve adult learning.'* (Minister Evans, ACSF Foreword, 2012)

Following the review, an opportunity exists to position the ACSF within the commonwealth government's vision for the future as part of an inclusive and cohesive approach to the development of core skills for adults. A new positioning statement – acknowledging the diversity of learners and users of the framework – should reaffirm the pre-eminent role of the ACSF in the Australian tertiary education system.

Recent changes to commonwealth government department structures may impact where overarching responsibility for the ACSF sits. It is important that the framework has an ongoing profile and exposure within relevant government departments so that it can inform and be informed by broader activity, such as skills reform and work on general capabilities and digital skills.

A central point of contact for the ACSF would strengthen its long-term and consistent use in the tertiary education system and provide an authorising environment for its ongoing maintenance.

The ACSF has become a tool that has broad and varied use across the post-compulsory education sector. However, prior to this review it had not been reviewed for 10 years. Given the extent of change across the VET sector, and the changing nature of study and work, a process for more frequent review of the framework should be established.

To ensure the ongoing fitness for purpose of the ACSF, the department responsible for the framework should put in place a review plan that:

- establishes a regular expected timeframe for a full review of the framework, preferably every five years
- specifies goals, objectives and specific measurable review criteria
- sets out expectations and processes for gathering stakeholder input into required changes and for validating any changes.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendation 2: Continue to maintain the ACSF as the pre-eminent Australian framework for LLN

2e. Establish policy and governance arrangements that provide a stable environment for the revision and ongoing use of the ACSF

2e(i) Establish protocols and responsibility for how the ACSF is revised, resourced, promoted and maintained within a regular five-year review cycle



## 4 Recommendations from ACSF and DLSF review

### Recommendation 1: Consider the *Digital Capability Framework* (when available) as a replacement for the DLSF

The DLSF was developed for a specific program purpose and is currently unvalidated. It was based on the structure of the ACSF with a view to digital literacy becoming a sixth core skill. However, users have indicated that this structure is not suited to describing digital literacy.

The increasing use of digital technologies is impacting all core skills. There is widespread agreement that the ACSF should be updated to acknowledge the impact of digital texts, materials, devices, and technological tools and processes – and that LLN practitioners need opportunities to learn about how digital literacy intersects with core skills. However, as a stand-alone skill, many consider that digital literacy is better aligned with employability skills than with the traditional literacies. There is concern that adding an ill-defined sixth core skill to the ACSF would undermine the credibility of this established existing framework.

Considerable evidence-based research and analysis informed the development of the *Digital Capability Framework* which was recommended by the Australian Industry and Skills Committee's Digital Transformation Expert Panel. The *Digital Capability Framework* will provide a common language that is accessible to employers, educators, governments and individuals, and has potential to become the pre-eminent Australian framework for describing digital capabilities in multiple contexts across the workplace and everyday life.

*1a. Do not introduce digital literacy into the ACSF as a sixth core skill*

*1b. Develop a range of Sample Activities and support resources that would enable use of the new Digital Capability Framework as a replacement for the DLSF and trial them in foundation skills delivery contexts*

*1c. Provide professional development for foundation skills practitioners on using the new Digital Capability Framework and related resources*

### Recommendation 2: Continue to maintain the ACSF as the pre-eminent Australian framework for LLN

The ACSF is widely recognised as the pre-eminent Australian framework to describe adult English LLN skills. It has been applied effectively by diverse users in a wide range of contexts over many years. Critique of some aspects of the framework point to improvements that could be made to its coverage and currency and to the way in which it accommodates the cultural diversity of the Australian population.

With relatively minor adjustments, the ACSF will remain a robust and valuable framework with utility across ACE, VET and employment contexts. Stakeholders advise that the uptake and informed use of the ACSF would be enhanced by the availability of authoritative support resources and professional development, and that a clear authorising environment would help to cement the ACSF as the recognised national framework for adult LLN.

*2a. Make revisions to ACSF components to address their currency and coverage*

2a(i) **Digital literacy:** Embed digital literacy concepts in all ACSF core skills by adjusting or adding Focus Areas and related Performance Features; where appropriate, drawing on other relevant frameworks

2a(ii) **Learning:** Refine language used in Performance Features and Sample Activities to show that the learning core skill can be acquired and demonstrated in personal

and community, and workplace and employment contexts, as well as in education and training settings

- 2a(iii) **Reading and writing:** Introduce concepts of language acquisition into Pre Level 1A to Level 2 of the reading and writing core skills by adding and revising Performance Features in the Focus Areas for Decoding and Fluency, and Spelling
- 2a(iv) **Oral communication:** Revise the ACSF oral communication core skill to enhance Performance Features where appropriate to distinguish speaking production and spoken interaction more clearly, and consider the benefits of introducing a third Indicator to expedite this
- 2a(v) **Numeracy:** Revise the numeracy core skill Indicators, Focus Areas, Performance Features and Sample Activities to reflect 21st century technological and digital literacy implications
- 2a(vi) **All core skills:** Integrate Pre Level 1 into the ACSF by adjusting Performance Features and Sample Activities as appropriate across all core skills
- 2a(vii) **All core skills:** Revise all core skills and Sample Activities to acknowledge the cultural diversity of Australian English learners, including migrant, refugee and First Nations learners
- 2a(viii) **All core skills:** Update Sample Activities across all levels of the ACSF to provide current examples of applied core skills and demonstrate concepts or connections introduced by framework updates

#### *2b. Improve ACSF design and usability*

- 2b(i) **Include an explanation of the purpose of the ACSF** in the introductory section of the ACSF that describes features of the contemporary use of English in Australia, recognising the diverse language backgrounds of Australians
- 2b(ii) **Clarify in the introductory section of the ACSF that it is not an assessment tool**, but can be used to inform assessment design
- 2b(iii) **Update introductory material** for each core skill to ensure readability and reflect any updates to core skill content including references to underpinning theory
- 2b(iv) **Develop and apply a consistent numbering system** for internal ACSF components (Focus Areas and Performance Features)
- 2b(v) **Establish a central online repository for the ACSF** that includes all related resources and a searchable database that allows users to access and retrieve individual components of the ACSF

#### *2c. Develop an ACSF Companion Volume and support resources for broad stakeholder use*

*Include in a Companion Volume:*

- 2c(i) Information on the history and theoretical underpinnings that informed the development of the ACSF
- 2c(ii) Links to contemporary theories and strategies that relate to adult core skill learning including teaching and learning approaches for diverse learner groups

such as disengaged youth, migrants and refugees, First Nations learners, and learners with specific learning difficulties

- 2c(iii) Links to current, publicly available ACSF support material
- 2c(iv) Advice that builds understanding of the digital literacy concepts that will be embedded in the ACSF and their implications for digital literacy skills development within core skills provision
- 2c(v) Explanation of the relationship between core skills and employability skills, and advice on developing employability skills within core skills provision
- 2c(vi) Guidance for using the ACSF to underpin consistent approaches to assessment
- 2c(vii) Advice for using the performance variables grid to differentiate between levels in the ACSF
- 2c(viii) Examples of practice to illustrate how the advice included in the Companion Volume can be applied in personal and community, workplace and employment, and education and training contexts

*Develop as separate support resources:*

- 2c(ix) A bank of resources for learners based on a selection of Sample Activities at level, e.g. 'can do' statements
- 2c(x) Concise guidance material targeted to the needs of training product developers and vocational trainers and assessors

#### *2d. Establish community of practice opportunities and a program of professional development*

*Provide professional development that builds capability to:*

- 2d(i) integrate digital literacy skills development into core skills provision
- 2d(ii) develop eligibility criteria, reporting mechanisms and performance measures
- 2d(iii) create and customise assessment kits and conduct initial assessment and placement interviews in a flexible way to meet learner needs
- 2d(iv) interpret results from online tools to inform training plans and support identified learner skill gaps
- 2d(v) design learner-centred learning plans and describe learner gain

#### *2e. Establish policy and governance arrangements that provide a stable environment for the revision and ongoing use of the ACSF*

- 2e(i) Establish protocols and responsibility for how the ACSF is revised, resourced, promoted and maintained within a regular five-year review cycle
- 2e(ii) Establish an ACSF Revision Working Group, with experts identified through the review project, to oversee the recommended revisions to the ACSF and development of support materials

- 2e(iii) Establish communication channels that reach the diversity of ACSF users and stakeholders to source input into the review and validation of the ACSF and support resources, and advice on preferred professional development options
- 2e(iv) Allow for a testing period of at least six months, after completion of the revised ACSF, to trial and validate it with the range of users across adult community education and vocational education and training and employment contexts
- 2e(v) Launch the validated ACSF and implement a communication strategy to inform all ACSF users of changes to the framework and the availability of support materials
- 2e(vi) Consider the potential for ensuring that all programs that seek to measure LLND progress for reporting/funding purposes enable more varied measures of learner progress based on finer gradations of learner gain within and across ACSF levels
- 2e(vii) Maintain a watching brief on related developments in employability skills, general capabilities and digital literacy

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## Appendix 1 Overview of review methodology

Table 8 sets out a summary of the methodology underpinning this review.

Full details relating to each of the 5 review phases and their associated activities are provided in the separate standalone Supplement accompanying this report.

*Table 8 Overview of review methodology*

Overview of review methodology		
Phase 1	Planning and research	<p>Development of Project Plan, approved by DESE in December 2021.</p> <p>Background desk research that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>explored the development and history of the ACSF and how the framework relates to other activities and issues in education</li> <li>examined how the ACSF relates to digital literacy and the DLSF, its relationship to international adult skills assessments, and how it compares to some overseas adult core skill frameworks.</li> </ul>
Phase 2	Framework expert meetings	<p>Six experts who had been involved in the development of the frameworks met to share their views on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>potential benefits or opportunities that this review presented</li> <li>issues or concerns they may be aware of to consider during the review</li> <li>reasonable and achievable adjustments to the frameworks that they have become aware of since the release of the frameworks.</li> </ul>
	Discovery interviews	<p>One-on-one or small group interviews with a range of 'critical friends', including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>commonwealth and state-based policy and program managers of nationally-funded programs that use the frameworks (AMEP, FSfYF, SEE, VET Student Loans), including the President of ACTA and her admissions manager</li> <li>LLN practitioners: vocational and ACE; six stakeholders with different indigenous perspectives (three x Tauondi College [SA], three x <i>Yes, I Can! Literacy for Life</i> program)</li> <li>professional associations and provider peak bodies (ACAL, ACTA, ALA, <i>Reading Writing Hotline</i>)</li> <li>nineteen different representatives from across all seven state and territory training authorities</li> <li>LLN practitioners: stakeholders with different indigenous perspectives</li> <li>Department of Home Affairs (AMEP) and NCVER</li> </ul> <p>Education and training representatives from peak bodies were also advised of the project by email: Australian Industry Group, Business Council of Australia, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Community Colleges Australia.</p>
Phase 3	Discussion forums	<p>Two discussion forums (17 and 31 March 2022) attended by 110 people aimed at raising awareness of the review.</p> <p>Participants represented a diverse range of stakeholder types beyond those funded by commonwealth programs.</p> <p>LLND practitioners and program managers/coordinators made up approximately half of the participants in the 2 forums.</p>

Overview of review methodology		
		<p>Other stakeholder types represented included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>representatives from professional associations: ACAL, ACTA, ALA</li> <li>product developers: assessment tool developers, training package developers, curriculum or resource developers</li> <li>vocational trainers and assessors</li> <li>government representatives.</li> </ul> <p>Forum promotion was through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Department program contacts (LLND practitioners in SEE, FSFYF and AMEP)</li> <li>Professional associations (ACAL, ACTA and ALA)</li> <li>Provider peak bodies (TAFE Directors Australia, Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia, Community Colleges Australia)</li> </ul>
	Targeted interviews	<p>19 targeted one-on-one interviews were held to refine and consolidate team understanding of the ways that stakeholders were using the frameworks. The interviews were with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Online tool developers: bksb, CSPA, LLN Robot, VETAssess, OLNA</li> <li>Training product developers: IBSA, Skills Impact, Artibus, PwC's Skills for Australia, Australian Industry Standards</li> <li>Curriculum owners: EAL, CGEA Victoria, Certificates in Spoken and Written English, AMEP NSW, CAVSS WA, <i>FSK Foundation Skills Training Package</i></li> <li>Curriculum maintenance managers: Manufacturing, Nadia Casarotto (General Studies), Mandy Penton (General Studies and Transport and Logistics)</li> <li>Government representatives: ACFE (ICDET, Working on pre-accredited Quality Framework)</li> </ul>
	Online survey	<p>The project online survey explored views (in relation to the 2 frameworks and assessment tools based on the ACSF). Its 2 main focus areas were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How the frameworks are used</li> <li>Participants' views of required changes to the frameworks.</li> </ul> <p>Survey promotion was similar to that above for the forums. Advice of the survey was emailed to all those on the project database as well as to Department-provided contacts.</p> <p>Open for approximately three weeks in March/April 2022, the survey received 328 responses, with just over half from those delivering or managing commonwealth-funded programs. The State with the largest number of respondents was Victoria, followed by Queensland and then NSW; ACT and the Northern Territory had the fewest respondents – a response distribution similar to Australian population demographics.</p>
	Focus groups	<p>Four focus groups were then held to explore survey responses or topics of interest, each group with approximately 10 invited participants and focusing on a different theme.</p>
Phase 4	Collate and analyse findings	<p>Findings from the research and consultation were consolidated and considered within the context of changes required in response to the findings.</p> <p>Further input from the framework experts informed this stage, as did input from stakeholders identified in the course of the review with a specialist perspective of relevance.</p>

Overview of review methodology		
Phase 5	Draft final report	<p>This final phase consisted of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Briefing meetings (x2) with DESE representatives to provide an overview of project activities and findings and discuss implications arising</li> <li>• Drafting of this report to represent stakeholder feedback and contentions and provide recommendations in regard to the ACSF and DLSF.</li> <li>• Submission of draft report and recommendations to DESE for review and input</li> <li>• Revision of report to reflect DESE feedback</li> </ul>