Editorial

In this issue of Vocational Update we focus on the assessment of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN), and the implications of LLN and good assessment for effective vocational and workplace education and training. Jim Spithill looks at the ‘N’ in LLN and explains how language and literacy are crucial aspects to effective adult numeracy training. When you consider that numeracy tends to be a barrier to learning and workplace achievement for many adults, it’s high time we stopped treating it as the poor cousin in LLN training.

The need to target numeracy explicitly is also a key message in ACER’s submission to the Commonwealth Government’s review of elements of its Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program, as we outline in ‘The key to effective teaching and learning? Language, literacy and numeracy.’

A second key message in ACER’s submission is that while the Australian Core Skills Framework is a useful and effective tool for the assessment and benchmarking of adult LLN skills, there are a number of challenges in using it for assessment, particularly given the complexity of the framework and its breadth of content and levels.

We look under the hood of the AQTF Quality Indicator Service to see why this program is helping RTOs to collect quality standards information to support the delivery of their training programs.

We also look at new research to estimate the return to employers from investing in literacy and numeracy training, not only to evaluate the pay-off from their existing training programs but also to help plan future training investments.

As industry focuses more sharply on literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace, there is a need for writing assessment tasks specifically targeted to the contexts and abilities of learners in the VET sector that offer a robust reporting system to deliver accurate, valid and reliable information of value to teachers and learners. We look at a new ACER project to address that need through the computerised assessment of writing. We also look at the new Core Skills Profile for Adults, and how that’s being used to support members of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training.

With the second National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference just around the corner – it’s happening at Ultimo College, Sydney Institute, on 9–10 May – there’s never been a better time to read and talk about LLN. See you at the conference.

Dave Tout, Manager, Corporate and Vocational Assessment Services, Australian Council for Educational Research

To learn more about ACER’s Vocational, Adult and Workplace Education Services, visit www.acer.edu.au/vawe
Building on evidence to improve skills

The second National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference to be held in Sydney in May will bring together evidence-based research with industry and training perspectives so that participants can share and discuss issues around the assessment of language, literacy and numeracy and implications for effective vocational and workplace education and training.

Addressing the theme, ‘Building on evidence to improve skills,’ the National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference aims to build on the success of last year’s inaugural conference held in Melbourne.

ACER initiated its first National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference as a response to increasing national and state interest in addressing and improving the language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills of youth and adults participating in the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector and workforce. The first conference provided a valuable opportunity for key industry and business personnel and researchers, policy makers and training managers and coordinators from a broad range of training and educational contexts from around Australia to come together to address a common interest in adult LLN issues.

Last year’s 180 plus delegates were from a wide range of VET and industry organisations, public and private, government and non-government, and from across all states and territories. The largest single group attending the conference was from private RTOs – 27 per cent – with another 22 per cent from TAFE Institutes and public providers.

A series of half-day pre-conference workshops at this year’s National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference for delegates from private RTOs, TAFEs and public providers will provide an opportunity for extended professional learning around a number of topics related to the main conference.

The conference will bring together evidence-based research with industry and training perspectives so that delegates can collaboratively build on their understanding, following up on feedback from delegates and outcomes from last year’s conference.

The National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference will address performance measures, national and international research-based assessments, the implementation of LLN strategies across RTOs and TAFEs, online delivery, understanding the Australian Core Skills Framework, item writing methods, teaching and learning of LLN and implications for effective VET and workplace education.

The 2013 National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference ‘Building on evidence to improve skills’ at Ultimo College, Sydney Institute, NSW, is on 9–10 May 2013, with pre-conference workshops on 9 May and the conference on 10 May. For more information or to watch highlights from the National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference 2012, visit www.acer.edu.au/nallmac
2013 National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference:  
*Building on evidence to improve skills*

The 2013 National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference will be held on 9 and 10 May 2013 in Sydney, following the highly successful inaugural conference last year.

**The conference will:**
- bring together evidence-based research with industry and training perspectives;
- explore key issues around the assessment, teaching and learning of adult language, literacy and numeracy; and
- discuss implications for effective vocational and workplace education and training.

**Keynote speakers include:**
- Dr John Mitchell, JMA Analytics
- Professor Geoff Masters, CEO, ACER
- Robin Shreeve, CEO, Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency
- Pam Christie, Managing Director, TAFE NSW.

Pre-conference workshops will be held on 9 May 2013.

View the full program and register at: [www.acer.edu.au/nallnac](http://www.acer.edu.au/nallnac)
The key to effective teaching and learning?
Language, literacy and numeracy

The Commonwealth Government in August called for feedback to support its review of elements of its Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program. ACER’s submission focused on the assessment of language, literacy and numeracy skills, as Dave Tout explains.

ACER’s submission to the Commonwealth Government’s Creating a More Flexible LLNP in 2013–16 discussion paper argues that the assessment of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills is the key to effective teaching and learning in the VET sector.

There’s now a general consensus across industry, VET and governments that improving the LLN skills of Australians is vital to our economy and society. Recognition that Australia has a significant core skills gap and that core skills are directly related to workforce training and productivity has resulted in a number of key reports on the challenges, and programs and strategies to improve the LLN skills of the Australian workforce.

As the 2011 No more excuses report from the Industry Skills Councils and AgriFood Skills Australia noted, the challenges are manifold. According to the No more excuses report, we need to better identify the LLN skills of learners before they commence training, and target funding to address identified LLN skill gaps. We need to increase capacity in the VET system to support the LLN skill development needs of learners and workers. In sum, we need better-targeted solutions for building the LLN skills of learners and workers.

Research indicates that assessment plays a critical role in effective teaching and learning. ACER Chief Executive Professor Geoff Masters has described...
Language, literacy and numeracy

the process that teachers take in addressing the learning needs of their students as a ‘decision making loop’ in which a teacher’s understanding of a student’s current level of understanding, knowledge of how to address the situation and the resources required are translated into action, which leads to improved learning outcomes.

This approach needs to be encouraged and supported in the LLN sector within VET. Consistent and effective methods of assessing and reporting allow trainers to better understand individual learner strengths and weaknesses; set goals and targets for learners; direct attention, resources and expertise; and adapt teaching practice to achieve greater student success.

However, as the ACER submission noted, evidence suggests that there are low levels of knowledge of effective LLN assessment practices among the VET training workforce. This includes a lack of high-level understanding of the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). While the ACSF is a useful and effective tool for the assessment and benchmarking of adult LLN skills, there are a number of challenges in using it for assessment, particularly given the complexity of the framework and its breadth of content and levels. Trainers require specialist LLN knowledge and experience in order to unpack and translate the ACSF into practice. As well, the ability to develop and write good assessment tasks, that are valid, reliable and fair, is not an easy task, and is one that is often undervalued. To write good assessment tasks against a sophisticated framework like the ACSF is an added challenge. Given the concerns over VET workforce capacity in LLN this is a critical issue we need to address and support.

Another critical issue that the ACER submission highlighted was the need to target numeracy explicitly. The shortage of qualified and experienced trainers with expertise in numeracy means that training providers need to carefully manage and monitor the provision of numeracy teaching and support for effective LLN service provision.

References


Dave Tout is the Manager of Corporate and Vocational Assessment Services at ACER.
Teaching numeracy with adults

It is well known that the ‘N’ in LLN is a barrier to learning and workplace achievement for many adults. Yet it has tended to be the poor cousin in LLN training. Jim Spithill explains how LL supports N in adult numeracy training.

The internationalisation of perspectives on adult numeracy has been a feature of the last two decades. The OECD has picked up on the significance of numeracy from economic, social and personal perspectives. In late 2013 it will release the report on the first survey in its Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies, PIAAC. This data will provide evidence on where 26 countries, including Australia, stand in relation to their LLN skills and capacities.

There is now more consensus on what is meant by adult numeracy. In PIAAC, ‘Numeracy is the ability to access, use, interpret, and communicate mathematical information and ideas, in order to engage in and manage the mathematical demands of a range of situations in adult life.’

Closer to home, in the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF), ‘Numeracy is about using mathematics to make sense of the world and applying mathematics in a context for a social purpose.’

There is also consensus on describing and understanding how a numerate...
Language, literacy and numeracy

A person tackles a problem that includes some mathematical information. The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment survey of 15-year-old students identifies three processes that pertain to the use of mathematics in context:

- **formulating** mathematics involves identifying opportunities to apply and use mathematics
- **employing** mathematics involves applying mathematical reasoning and using mathematical concepts, procedures, facts and tools, and
- **interpreting** mathematics involves reflecting upon mathematical solutions or results and interpreting them in the context of a problem or challenge.

The ACSF describes three indicators of numeracy:

- **.09** identifying mathematical information and meaning in activities and texts.
- **.10** using and applying mathematical knowledge and problem solving processes, and
- **.11** communicating and representing mathematics.

Numeracy applies across the life cycle of a problem, as shown in Figure 1.

Throughout this process, of course, there is a strong interaction with literacy skills in being able to read and interpret a numeracy problem and describe its solution. The Newman Error analysis method recognises that as much as 50 per cent of errors occur before the learner even starts to apply a standard mathematical method or algorithm.

Anne Newman’s work arose from research into language issues in mathematics in the 1970s. It influenced teaching programs such as ‘Counting On’ in NSW schools. It provides a structured model for numeracy study.

She proposed an ‘interview’ model as a means of addressing the literacy issues that affect numeracy performance. The trainer asks a series of prompts that help the learner to understand the problem.

- Please read the question to me. If you don’t know a word, leave it out.
- Tell me what the question is asking you to do.
- Tell me how you are going to find the answer.
- Show me what to do to get the answer. Talk aloud as you do it, so that I can understand how you are thinking.
- Now, write down your answer to the question.

The point is to be patient with a problem and take time to understand it, rather than rushing to apply rules haphazardly. Practical problem solving is not something that occurs in isolation or in the abstract. Actively engaging the LS leads to better performance in N.

Numeracy practitioners seeking more information on these developments should consider a workshop offered through the ACER Institute: A Beginners Guide to Writing Numeracy Items in Assessments for Adults.


Jim Spithill is a Research Fellow in the Assessment and Reporting: Mathematics and Science research program at ACER.
When it comes to the assessment of writing for VET, there are some common, and sometimes vexed, questions. What is an appropriate task to use? How should it be marked? Who will mark it? How much time will this take? Can I rely on the results? Often, it has been easier to avoid assessments of writing altogether, yet as industry focuses more sharply on literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace, there is a need for writing assessment tasks specifically targeted to the contexts and abilities of learners in the VET sector that offer a robust reporting system to deliver accurate, valid and reliable information of value to teachers and learners.

The assessment tool

A new writing assessment – part of ACER’s new Core Skills Profile for Adults – meets that need. Delivered online and automatically marked, it provides instant reports that can give summative, formative and diagnostic feedback to learners and teachers. The assessment builds on learners’ intrinsic motivation to use computers and, because of the automated marking system, frees up teacher time.

How the tool was developed

After writing a series of assessment tasks and piloting these with students from a variety of training organisations, we selected two for a full-scale trial. Both tasks addressed the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) Personal and Community domain of communication and were suited to learners working within and towards ACSF Levels 2 – 4. The tasks do not require learners to draw on specialised knowledge but they do require writing to two different audiences for two different purposes, in line with the ACSF writing focus areas of range, audience and purpose, and register.

A criterion-referenced guide identifies eight marking criteria, each defined by an assessment focus and elaborated by between two and four ordered scoring categories, or ‘subskills.’ Exemplar scripts that show the marking standard for each ‘subskill’ are used by expert markers to obtain consistent, valid and reliable judgements. To develop the measurement scale, and to build computer scoring models, each trial script is double blind marked by expert markers and if scores are discrepant, adjudicated by a third marker.

Computer marking

Using the enormous analytic and computational power of computing and some smart programming, the parameters for machine marking pieces of writing are developed using a ‘training set.’ The training set consists of more than 300 scripts, all addressing the same writing task, and their accompanying set of finely calibrated human scores. The machine builds a scoring model, using algorithms derived from the training set, to score new, unseen essays written to the same topic. In the case of the two ACER writing assessments, two scoring models have been developed.

According to recent research, for example by Lawrence Rudner, Veronica Garcia and Catherine Welch, and by Mark Shermis and Ben Hamner, there is increasing evidence that machine scoring can replicate human markers’ scores at least as well as human markers can replicate each other’s scores. Even so, there are concerns about the effect on teachers and test takers. As researchers such as Joanne Drechsel and Sara Weigle have noted, if machine scoring focuses only on the mechanics of writing (syntax, spelling and punctuation) at the expense of the cognition of meaning making, this may have washback to teaching and test taking situations. For this reason, we’ve investigated the quality of score replication of the two ACER writing assessments.

We found that, on both tasks, when all eight criteria scores were summed, correlations between each of the expert human markers and the machine were as high as the correlation between the two human markers. There was also little difference in the quality of machine scoring across tasks. On all but one of the eight criteria scores across both tasks, machine
Language, literacy and numeracy

scoring replicates the human markers’ scores at least as well as human markers can replicate each other’s scores. Interestingly, machine scoring did not score any better than human scoring on criteria that address the mechanics of writing. In fact, it appears to be more reliable than human markers when scoring criteria that address audience, purpose and meaning making.

Is the machine infallible?

There are rare cases when writing cannot be scored by the machine, such as when a piece of writing consists of only a few words, contains overwhelmingly poor spelling or many foreign words, lacks punctuation or is off topic. In such instances, there is either not enough writing provided for the computer to score, or the content is so unlike the scripts in the training set that the computer cannot apply the scoring model. Since a copy of each student’s writing is always available in the reporting system, however, non-scored scripts can be reviewed by the teacher.

The reports

The individual student report provides a graphical display of the student’s scale score on the assessment continuum and mapped to ACSF levels. Scores for all writing subskills assessed on both tasks are overlayed on the assessment continuum and shown numerically. Strengths and weaknesses are highlighted and teachers gain rich information for developing learning plans for individual students.

The student response report contains writing submitted for scoring and can be used by both the teacher and student as a basis for discussion.

The group report in graph form enables teachers to see at a glance the achievements of all students against the ACSF and writing subskills and use this to plan learning that targets the whole group.

The computerised assessment of writing aims to provide you with an accurate and efficient way to assess literacy skills in the VET sector to support you and your students in teaching and learning.

References


Martina Bovell is a Senior Research Fellow in the Assessment and Reporting research program at ACER. She worked on the computerised assessment of writing for VET with Jocelyn Cook, also from Assessment and Reporting, and Mette Hoeyberg, Blanca Camacho and Rebecca Simpson from Assessment Services at ACER.
ACER is developing return on investment (ROI) instruments to document the productivity benefits arising from employer provision of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) training for employees, and the costs involved in such training, in order to provide a basis for estimating the return to employers from investing in LLN training.

The ROI indicates the extent by which the benefits or outputs of training exceed the costs or inputs. The higher the ROI, the greater the pay-off to employers, and the stronger the case for investing more in training.

**Purposes**

The project builds on recommendations from the Ai Group’s 2012 *When Words Fail: National workforce literacy final report*, which demonstrated the importance of employer engagement in the provision of LLN training in the workplace. Employers identified indicators that would represent successful LLN training for them in their workplaces. That project’s emphasis was on the perceived outputs and improvements arising from training, and did not involve formal collection of data from companies.

This research is intended to strengthen the knowledge base about the economic pay-offs from workplace training in foundation skills, and thereby help guide employers in their investment decisions and policymakers in their initiatives to encourage such forms of workplace training.

The instruments are also intended by the Ai Group to be a resource that employers can use to evaluate the pay-off from their existing training programs and to help plan future training investments.

The Commonwealth Government through the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education is funding the work. The research will be completed in mid-2014.

**Framework and design**

The instruments are being trialled in selected Workplace English Language and Literacy programs. Workplaces have been selected to provide a range of industries, training programs and locations. The participating workplaces include manufacturers, construction firms, aged care providers and utilities.

The focus is on drawing together information that is already available in the workplace and minimising the burden of any new data collection. Generic ROI instruments, based on a simple spreadsheet format, are specifically tailored for participating workplaces, depending upon industry and enterprise characteristics, and already existing data.
Care therefore needs to be taken in classifying various indicators and avoiding double-counting.

It can be difficult to attribute a monetary value to training outcomes, many of which are intangible – such as improved self-confidence – and may be difficult to relate directly to enterprise performance. The practical challenges of collecting and analysing such data suggest that the benefits being documented will almost certainly underestimate the full value of training and hence the ROI.

ROI calculations need to be kept in perspective. Enterprises are complex entities operating in challenging and dynamic environments. It is difficult to isolate the impact of training on employee behaviour and enterprise outcomes when so many other factors are potentially at play. Decision making that draws on ROI calculations needs to recognise that these are estimates that are critically dependent on the quality of the data available on benefits and costs, and on other information about an enterprise’s operations and environment. The research is intended to develop a set of resources that enable ROI to be documented and disseminated in a more systematic way.

References

Phillip McKenzie is Research Director of the Teaching, Learning and Transitions research program at ACER. Michael Taylor is the Policy and Projects Manager, Education and Training, at the Ai Group. Justin Brown is a Senior Research Fellow in the Teaching, Learning and Transitions research program at ACER.
Improving learners’ and workers’ core skills

Improving learners’ and workers’ core skills is being supported by the new Core Skills Profile for Adults. Blanca Camacho takes a look at this new assessment tool.

The new Core Skills Profile for Adults (CSPA) enables educational institutions and registered training organisations (RTOs) to identify the reading, numeracy, writing and reasoning skills of candidates beginning vocational education and training, or any working-age Australians who need to develop high-level skills or complete qualifications to participate effectively in today’s competitive labour market.

The assessment is written and aligned to the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). Reports show overall ACSF performance levels and also performance indicators per question, and can be used to undertake a gap analysis of learners or workers who sit the assessment.

Results for the CSPA enable providers to identify the resources they need to allocate to teaching and learning in terms of time and materials, where and when to concentrate literacy and numeracy specialists for support, which interventions to implement and what professional learning specialist staff might need in order to implement those interventions. The core purpose of the CSPA is to enable providers to collect, analyse and use data to improve learning and completion rates.

Features

CSPA is delivered online and automatically marked, providing
Language, literacy and numeracy

instant reports that give formative or
diagnostic feedback and summative
feedback to learners and teachers.
The assessment builds on learners’
intrinsic motivation to use computers
and, because of the automated marking
system, frees up teacher time.

CSPA provides:
• online diagnostic assessment in
  reading, numeracy and writing, and
  abstract and mechanical reasoning,
  using general everyday and work
  contexts
• instant secure online delivery with
  timer option
• enhanced user engagement through
  the use of colour and interactivity
  attractive to the user cohort
• in-built introduction messages,
  end-note messages and navigation
  controls to provide learners who
  have not been in contact with
  computers with support to navigate
  the assessment easily as well as a
  practice assessment
• diagnostic reporting on the abilities
  demonstrated by students
• common scale scores to track
  student progress
• items that address the current
  ACSF
• ease of administration, so teachers
  can devote time to teaching that
  might otherwise be spent marking
• an initial integrated core online
  screener test in each domain to
  take respondents automatically
  to the most appropriate basic,
  intermediate or advanced ACSF
  level
• a wide variety of item types,
  including multiple choice, complex
  multiple choice and simple numeric
  or text entry

• automatically generated scores
  online, with individual and group
  reports generated on the fly
• view and print options of group
  results displaying candidate and test
  statistics with ACSF performance
  indicators and levels
• access to test results as a csv file
  which can be analysed by clients
  themselves
• low cost and easy test
  administration
• single sign-on functionality for
  large institutions and employers
  integrating learning management
  systems, and
• a dashboard view of all assessment
  usage and performance to drill
  down into statistics at the level of
  the individual learner or institution
  or employer.

Development of CSPA
ACER developed CSPA following
strict quality assurance processes
supported by comprehensive
psychometric and administrative
support mechanisms.

These have included:
• quality assessment development
  processes
• alignment to an agreed and
  recognised framework
• the use of psychometric
  measurement scales
• high-quality, customised reporting
  options
• robust and effective assessment
  administration processes
• professional learning support for
  trainers and administrators, and
• client-focused customer service and
  support.

ACER undertook extensive
consultations to ensure the CSPA
meets the requirements of clients’
cohorts of test-users. Key test
constructs were identified and
developed in conjunction with clients
to ensure appropriate test content
and item difficulty. Once constructs
were agreed, ACER’s team of
experienced test developers wrote,
reviewed and revised items. The
process included the use of cognitive
laboratories to obtain feedback from
test-takers on draft items and delivery
mechanisms, as well as follow-up with
focus groups.

Administration of CSPA
CSPA has a secure, robust and
flexible administration system that
supports:
• flexible online administration
  for just-in-time diagnostic and
  formative assessment
• data analysis, reporting and
  interpretation services
• instant scoring and reporting for
  online assessment
• customised reporting options:
  cut-scores, descriptive, framework
  alignments, diagnostic,
• professional learning support for
  administrators and trainers, and
• cyclical reviews and analyses, and
  research analyses.

For more information on CSPA, visit
www.acer.edu.au/tests/cspa

Blanca Camacho is a Senior Project
Director in Corporate and Vocational
Assessment Services at ACER.
Addressing core skills in the 21st century
An ACER and ACPET partnership

A new partnership has led to a program offering support to members of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training in relation to language, literacy and numeracy issues. Dave Tout explains the aims and content of the program.

Government and industry have in recent years argued for and acknowledged that adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills are crucial underpinning skills for the 21st century. LLN skills have been recognised as essential in enabling people to be productive in their work, to continue to learn and develop, and to participate fully in society. This belief has led to a wide range of initiatives over the last few years, about which registered training organisations (RTOs) need to be knowledgeable.

Last year, the Commonwealth Government released a National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults which sets out a range of targets and initiatives for LLN skills in the 21st century. This has coincided with the release of the revised Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) and a new framework addressing employability skills called the Core Skills for Work Framework. As well, new LLN qualifications have been developed and new targets established for up-skilling the VET workforce in relation to LLN.

The challenge for RTOs is to develop and maintain their knowledge about core skills and the impact these have not only on the delivery and assessment of their courses, but also in relation to the upskilling of their trainers. This increasing demand, both from a practice and a compliance perspective, can be very taxing and demanding on private RTOs.

In order to support their members to efficiently address LLN needs and grow their own workforce capability around LLN, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) has partnered with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to offer a series of workshops around Australia to ACPET members this year.

The workshops look at the potential training impacts of low LLN skills on an adult’s capacity to improve and learn in the VET system and discuss what options, strategies and activities RTOs and their teachers and trainers can undertake to address any literacy gaps that are identified.

The workshops also look at the ACSF, and at how RTOs can assess the LLN skills of their learners against the ACSF, key aspects of addressing the LLN issue at the provider level.

As part of the agreement between ACPET and ACER, ACPET members who attend the workshops also have access to ACER’s new Core Skills Profile for Adults (CSPA) assessment tool at a reduced fee. The CSPA is an easy-to-use LLN diagnostic online assessment that automatically generates results on students’ LLN needs, from basic to advanced (covering ACSF levels 1 to 5) in reading, numeracy and writing.

The aim of the partnership program is to bring participants up to speed on understanding and dealing with LLN in training and the workplace, and on the importance of addressing LLN in assessment at all levels. While LLN is part of an RTO’s compliance obligations, it’s also worth considering it as a best practice approach to enhancing the learning and training outcomes of all trainees and workers.

Feedback from initial participants in the workshops has been very positive.

Dave Tout is the Manager of Corporate and Vocational Assessment Services at ACER.

To learn more about ACER’s Vocational, Adult and Workplace Education Services, visit www.acer.edu.au/vawe
AQIS and continuous improvement

ACER’s recently released AQTF Quality Indicator Service 2011–12 Report shows exactly how AQIS is helping RTOs to collect quality standards information to support the delivery of their training programs, explains Steve Holden.

The AQTF Quality Indicator Service (AQIS) draws on survey resources from the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) Quality Indicators developed in 2007 to help RTOs collect and use feedback from learners and employers to enhance the quality of their training activities. The AQTF Learner Engagement and Employer Satisfaction surveys were designed to collect valid and reliable data, providing a foundation for evidence-based and outcomes-focused quality assurance and a structure for enhancing conversations within the Australian VET sector about strategies for developing and delivering high-quality training.

AQIS was established by ACER in 2012 following the decision by the National Skills Standards Council to cease funding of the national helpdesk for AQTF Quality Indicators survey data. According to Ralph Saubern, ACER’s Director of Professional Resources, the establishment of AQIS demonstrates ACER’s continued commitment to supporting RTOs, industry and regulators to participate in and benefit from a world-class continuous improvement and risk assessment process.

AQIS delivers a standard report that enables RTOs to fulfil their mandatory reporting requirements and gather the basic AQTF Quality Indicator evidence for quality assurance and continuous improvement analysis and planning. A customised benchmark report for each RTO adds another level, enabling RTOs to compare themselves with other RTOs in terms of their trainer quality, assessment, training, resources and the like, as well as overall student satisfaction, while a diagnostic report identifies areas where they are excelling or where they could improve.

The AQTF Quality Indicator Service 2011–12 Report includes a technical analysis of the data from the 2011–12 AQTF reporting season. ACER conducted a thorough analysis of the 2011–12 data from more than 5 000 employer satisfaction surveys and more than 70 000 learner engagement surveys.

What that analysis shows is that the AQTF Quality Indicator surveys continue to work as a robust, valid and reliable evidence base for quality assurance processes, says Associate Professor Hamish Coates, Research Director of ACER’s Higher Education research program.

According to Coates, ‘The analysis also reveals further opportunities for the use of AQTF Quality Indicator data to identify and drive continuous improvement at the individual RTO and system level.

‘The AQTF data collected and analysed through AQIS can help support continuous improvement processes in RTOs to ensure that the RTO provides quality training and assessment across all of its operations; the RTO adheres to principles of access and equity, and maximises outcomes for its clients; and management systems are responsive to the needs of clients, staff and stakeholders, and the environment in which the RTO operates.

‘With continuing demand for high-quality data to support RTOs to implement evidence-based policies and practices to drive continuous improvement, ACER plans to further develop its range of Quality Indicator Services,’ he says. ‘This will include enhanced reporting, additional survey tools, resources supporting quality assurance and continuous improvement, and seminars and professional development events.’

The AQTF Quality Indicator Service 2011–12 Report is available at http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=transitions_misc

For more information on AQIS, visit http://www.acer.edu.au/tests/aqis

Steve Holden is the Corporate Communications Manager at ACER.
The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation with a proven track record and a global reputation for excellence. Drawing on extensive expertise and experience, ACER works with providers, governments, industry, educational leaders, trainers and learners on a wide range of vocational, adult and workforce education programs.

ACER Research and Consultancy

ACER undertakes a broad range of research and program consultancies in youth and adult education, vocational and workforce education contexts in Australia and globally for providers, industry, governments and a wide range of stakeholders. This includes:

- curriculum and standards development
- policy and program evaluation
- surveys on pathways and transitions
- research on participation in VET by different social groups
- the impact of training on employability and incomes, and
- psychometric and statistical analysis.

ACER’s research draws on advanced quantitative and qualitative techniques and includes a strong focus on program impact and effectiveness.

To contact an ACER expert in your field, go to www.acer.edu.au/vawe/our-expertise

ACER Assessment Services

ACER provides assessment services for providers, training bodies, employers and governments, including the design, development and implementation of testing programs and the provision of external quality monitoring and benchmarking services. This includes:

- assessing skills in language, literacy and numeracy (LLN)
- quality and benchmarking services
- selection and recruitment testing services
- assessing graduate and professional aptitudes and skills, and
- test scoring, reporting and data interpretation services.

To find out more about our assessment services, go to www.acer.edu.au/vawe/assessment-services

Seminars, Conferences and Professional Learning

ACER organises forums for VET professionals, industry representatives and business clients including:

- conferences, seminars and round tables on key areas of vocational, adult and workplace education research and practice, and
- professional learning programs on the teaching and learning of LLN in vocational, adult and workplace education contexts, assessment development, data interpretation and monitoring.

To find out more, go to www.acer.edu.au/vawe/courses-and-conferences

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