

▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Literacy support for Indigenous people: Current systems and practices in Queensland

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▶ MORE INDIGENOUS STUDENTS in vocational education and training (VET) are now studying for lower-level qualifications than for non-award or enabling skills courses. However, their pass rates are low, and withdrawal rates are high compared with non-Indigenous students.

One of the reasons for these results, particularly in remote areas, is the proportion of Indigenous students whose first language is not English. More general difficulties with literacy and numeracy also result in Indigenous underperformance in the VET system.

To see how these difficulties can be alleviated, the study examined literacy and numeracy support structures for Indigenous students in three TAFE (technical and further education) institutes and one independent registered training organisation located in urban, regional and remote areas of Queensland. The study showed support remains inadequate across many areas of the VET sector, even though effective systems are available.

These systems include:

- specialist language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) teachers, who offer in-class tutorial help with assessments and assignments
- student support officers
- learning support centres
- peer support systems using either trained peer tutors or students with the ability to help their fellow students
- mentoring programs
- family and community support.

There are several reasons why these systems are not being used to their full potential.

- Student difficulties are not always recognised as being related to literacy and numeracy.
- Where learning support centres are available they are often located away from the campus with operating hours which do not suit students' study and other commitments.
- Students assessed as having difficulties are themselves expected to seek out support, which they are not confident enough to do. Students (and teachers) also may not know about the available support systems and how to access them.
- There is a lack of long-term funding which would ensure certainty and continuity of programs for both teachers and students.

▶ Guidelines for overcoming these barriers

The study developed the following guidelines for literacy and numeracy support for Indigenous students based on the views of teachers, students and Indigenous community members.

Employing adult learning best practice by:

- developing a positive relationship with each student
- respecting the student as an adult learner with prior knowledge and skills
- understanding the student's individual cultural and educational background

- finding out the student's expectations and goals
- encouraging collaboration between language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) specialists and vocational teachers
- administering relevant, pre-course assessment that specifically identifies literacy and numeracy levels.

Employing Indigenous-specific best practice by:

- understanding cultural protocols and attitudes to family, time and community
- being aware that Indigenous students may not always ask for help or clarification, and therefore frequently asking if students understand, subsequently offering explanations in plain English
- being aware that, for many Indigenous students, English is their second, third or fourth language, which may call for English-as-a-second-language strategies
- undertaking cultural awareness and cross-cultural competency training, as well as seeking out Indigenous advisors and mentors.

Using appropriate resources by:

- ensuring teaching materials are relevant and customised to individual needs and literacy levels, as well as being culturally appropriate
- recognising that in-class, one-on-one tutorial support is usually the best form of help for the student
- building strong working relationships with learning support centres, if students are being referred to these
- attempting to have class sizes of around ten students to ensure there are enough people to make individual students feel comfortable and part of a group, but not lost in the crowd.

Having Indigenous input by:

- encouraging Indigenous formal and informal input at all stages including design, development and delivery of courses

- collaborating with Indigenous staff and the local Indigenous community
- seeking out successful models of collaboration, including community advisory boards.

► Implications for policy and practice

A number of issues with implications for policy and practice emerged from the study.

- Supporting Indigenous learners: applying the best practice literacy and numeracy support for Indigenous adult education outlined in the Department of Education, Science and Training publication, *Getting into it! Working with Indigenous learners*. This calls for flexibility in funding allocations and institute structures.
- Employing more Indigenous staff throughout the VET sector: revising recruitment procedures and refocusing the current emphasis on prescribed selection criteria and written applications. To aid the retention of Indigenous staff, employment prospects have to provide more security, permanent employment opportunities and defined career pathways.
- Providing cross-cultural training for teachers, particularly those delivering mainstream courses: going beyond the current emphasis on cultural awareness, to providing skills in intercultural competency.
- Providing professional development for both LLN and vocational teachers: using incentives and encouraging teachers to participate in professional development. These should include institute support, relief teacher provision and funding.
- Reviewing TAFE teacher training: although the revised Certificate IV in Training and Assessment includes a unit of competency designed to address LLN issues, it is not a core unit and it is not available to students undertaking the related and higher-level Diploma of Training and Assessment.

Literacy support for Indigenous people: Current systems and practices in Queensland, by Narelle McGlusky & Lenora Thaker, can be downloaded from the NCVET website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1659.html>>.