ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Reframe, rename, revitalise: Future directions for the language, literacy and numeracy National Reporting System

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

▶ THE NATIONAL REPORTING SYSTEM for adult English language, literacy and numeracy was the result of a project jointly commissioned in 1994 by the then Department of Employment, Education and Training and the Australian National Training Authority. It was conceived as a way of reporting outcomes of students in the vocational education and training (VET) system, in labour market programs and in the adult community education sector.

The National Reporting System was designed to explain and track literacy and numeracy progress, and developers aimed to base it as closely as possible on a model reflecting real-life performance. Although intended to accommodate a range of underlying theoretical approaches to literacy, this was initially problematic as no one theory of language or learning was sufficient to provide a firm basis for the project. Nevertheless, a system utilising the five-point scale developed for the International Adult Literacy Survey was created and has achieved substantial acceptance.

The system was trialled and evaluated in 1997. It was found to provide a valid framework for reporting adult language, literacy and numeracy outcomes across a range of sectors, contexts and learners. It was also noted that the system was already in use for non-reporting applications—in curriculum development and review; program, regional, state and system planning and reporting; and the integration of language, literacy and numeracy in vocational education and training.

For the last eight years, the system has been used to report on several government programs—most adult basic education curricula have been mapped against it, and after 1997, it was used as a guide for incorporating language, literacy and numeracy skills into training packages. Since 1998, the National Reporting System has been the required reporting system for the Workplace English Language and Literacy Programme and the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme. It continues to be put to other uses.

▶ The research

If the National Reporting System is to continue to be used and further developed and applied, a number of issues need to be resolved.

The research aimed to examine the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the National Reporting System, to highlight issues that might influence future applications of it, and to identify options for developing it further. The research involved targeted consultation with:

■ academic experts in literacy and numeracy

■ practitioners experienced in the National Reporting System

■ members of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy

■ federal and state training authorities

■ the initial developers of the system

■ moderators and verifiers operating in the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme.

► **The findings**

The research found that the National Reporting System has built a strong following among those with the background knowledge and experience to become expert users. Although in need of an update, its conceptual underpinnings were generally considered academically sound.

It appears that the system has had a wider impact than might at first be obvious, especially in ensuring that adult literacy and numeracy curricula have appropriate scope, developmental sequences and support resources. However, as a reporting tool for funding bodies, it is accepted by some more than others.

Many practitioners do not use the National Reporting System outside the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme and the Workplace Language and Literacy Programme. This is partly because it has not been endorsed as a national system, but also because it is not quick and easy to learn and apply. Lack of necessary professional development to support its uptake has been a problem since its inception. There is almost unanimous support for a review of the system.

Most of those consulted wanted the conceptual framework retained, but revised to take into account changed conceptual understandings of language, literacy and numeracy, including the emergence of information communication technologies and associated texts. A revision would allow the National Reporting System to be streamlined as a reporting tool, with the potential of transforming it into a new framework for thinking, analysing and discussing language, literacy and numeracy in multiple contexts.

As presently constructed, there are four requirements for effective use of the National Reporting System:

■ having background knowledge of language, literacy and numeracy to appreciate and interpret conceptual elements of the system

■ experiencing regular interactive professional development

■ having access to relevant support materials

■ time to use the system.

► **Implications for policy and practice**

Although there are some reservations about developing a new national literacy framework, there was also support for the idea. Without reducing the role and capacity of the system as a tool for expert use, the new framework could be developed in several formats for a wide range of audiences and users to raise awareness and increase understanding of adult literacy and numeracy issues.

It is suggested that improvements to the system should include:

■ maintaining a detailed National Reporting System for literacy and numeracy specialists

■ developing a simplified language, literacy and numeracy framework with a new name, based on the revised National Reporting System, and integrating it into mainstream VET (and possibly adult and community education), thereby providing a new emphasis for literacy and numeracy in training packages

■ promoting the revised system through interactive professional development programs tailored for different groups.

The full report of *Reframe, rename, revitalise: Future directions for the language, literacy and numeracy National Reporting System*, by Kate Perkins, will be available from the NCVER website at <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

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