

▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Current and future professional development needs of the language, literacy and numeracy workforce

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▶ THE ADULT LANGUAGE, literacy and numeracy (LLN) workforce requires continuous professional improvement to cope with changing responsibilities in the education and training environment. This study set out to determine the professional development needs of that workforce and to explore how these might be met.

The study drew on surveys and interviews with 200 teachers, trainers, tutors, program managers and providers of professional development from three states—New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. All were asked what skills they needed to do their jobs, what options they had for bridging skills gaps and what sort of professional development they preferred.

▶ Types of professional development

The research clearly shows that the sector of the workforce in which a practitioner is located—specialist teacher, vocational trainer or volunteer—is the single most significant variable in determining professional development attitudes and issues, with each requiring different strategies.

Language, literacy and numeracy specialists

LLN specialists need professional development which builds on their expertise and theoretical background. They believe some may perceive the LLN teaching support they provide as less relevant to the national training agenda than delivery of vocation-specific qualifications. However, they realise they need to know more about the industry they support.

Vocational trainers

Vocational trainers are not expected to become LLN experts, but more can be done to expose them to the principles of LLN teaching and to enhance communications with LLN specialists. At present, they are unlikely to be in a position to confidently incorporate LLN into their delivery. Encouraging vocational trainers to complete the elective 'Address language, literacy and numeracy issues within learning and assessment practice' in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment could be beneficial.

Volunteer tutors

Volunteer tutors are satisfied with their initial training. They highly value interaction with other LLN workers through informal networks and support structures, but recognise the difficulties in scheduling professional development opportunities for them.

▶ Accessing professional development

Access to professional development is affected by the employment status and geographical location of the practitioner. Only 31.8% of survey participants are permanent employees, yet part-time, casual and sessional language literacy and numeracy workers do not have equitable access to employer-funded professional development activities. Similarly, geographically remote workers have poor access to professional development. Redressing this inequity is critical to upskilling the language, literacy and numeracy workforce.



Two-thirds of those interviewed consider it the employer's responsibility to address professional development needs. At the same time the escalating administrative and reporting demands faced by educators are impacting adversely on the uptake of professional development when it is offered.

▶ What practitioners want

Educators are less concerned with professional development that is designed to fulfil the organisation's business or compliance needs. Their interest lies in improving their teaching practice.

The key professional development priorities identified by practitioners in the research can be summarised as:

- upskilling to meet the needs of disparate groups of learners, with the emphasis on equity target groups: to address issues such as critical incident procedures when working with traumatised people and techniques for interacting with people in correctional contexts or youth at risk
- developing learning materials and curricula
- implementing training packages
- achieving reliable and consistent assessment practices.

▶ How practitioners want professional development

Most LLN provision still occurs face to face and there is some resistance to technology-based approaches to teaching among LLN practitioners. They need encouragement to adopt new teaching and learning technologies to develop information communication technology skills in the workforce and to deepen understanding of digital literacy.

All practitioners value face-to-face interaction and peer learning with colleagues and a practical hands-on approach to their professional development sessions.

▶ Implications for policy and practice

Employing organisations must achieve a balance between professional development designed to fulfil business needs, and professional development focused on teaching practices so valued by practitioners.

Innovative and effective professional development opportunities are available for the LLN workforce in diverse forms, including national online initiatives, formal mentoring arrangements, and informal local community centre get-togethers.

Finding ways to share good practice is particularly important in an environment of diminishing resources for formal professional development programs. Certainly, more work is needed to ensure effective dissemination of information relating to professional development and the teaching materials available to the LLN workforce.

There is also a need to address the implications of the ageing LLN workforce and to encourage new entrants to the field. More dialogue is required between employing organisations and adult education teacher trainers in the university sector where adult LLN training programs may not be adequately addressing the practical skills needed in the workplace. This recommendation is reinforced by the strong view that the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment was inadequate for imparting the complex theory and practice underpinning adult language, literacy and numeracy teaching.

In summary, while there are three distinct sectors in the LLN workforce, all need to be supported in learning to understand not only what they have to do but also how best to go about doing it.

Current and future professional development needs of the language, literacy and numeracy workforce, by Sandra Mackay, Ursula Burgoyne, Diane Warwick & Jackie Cipollone, will be available shortly from the NCVET website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.