

▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

The professional development requirements of Workplace English Language and Literacy Programme practitioners

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▶ THE WORKPLACE ENGLISH Language and Literacy (WELL) Programme is an Australian Department of Education, Science and Training initiative created as a result of the 1991 Australian Language and Literacy Policy. It funds language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) tuition to enable workers to meet the demands of their current and future employment and training.

Using a literature review, a questionnaire, interviews and two focus groups with WELL practitioners and managers, the research examined the extent and nature of current professional development activities and the future requirements to ensure WELL practitioners have the requisite competencies to do their job.

▶ WELL practitioners

WELL practitioners are typically employed by public or private registered training organisations to specialise in workplace literacy. They are expected to perform a multitude of roles, encompassing training delivery in the workplace (both specialist LLN tuition and that which is integrated into vocational training), curriculum development, assessment, project management and advisory responsibilities.

At the very least, the WELL practitioner must be able to:

- understand that workplace learning is context-dependent since each workplace has its own specific cultural and social environment which shapes LLN requirements
- determine and provide any LLN support required by individuals

- integrate the LLN requirements of the workplace, learners and units of competency in training packages
- address LLN issues and requirements in the design of teaching and assessment tools.

Findings from the respondents in this study helped to build a current profile of WELL practitioners. They were predominantly female, with half between 51 and 60 years. Nineteen per cent were under 40 years of age and none was under 30. The majority came to teach in the WELL Programme after some other form of teaching, and had two or more qualifications. Most held an undergraduate teaching qualification. (Note that there is currently no agreed minimum national benchmark for entry as a WELL practitioner.)

▶ Access to professional development

Practitioners believe there are few professional development opportunities available to them, either when they entered the field or on an ongoing basis, noting that they are largely responsible for their own learning and development. This was despite the expanding nature of their jobs, not only as LLN practitioners within the vocational training system, but also as consultants to industry, roles for which they had rarely received training.

The views of WELL practitioners and their managers diverged somewhat on how to maintain professionalism.

- *Practitioners* want the opportunity to participate both in informal discussion about the practical application of customising materials and training delivery on specific worksites, and formal professional development to support teaching/learning practice.



- *Managers* want their practitioners to have the capacity to work more closely with industry content specialists and to acquire web-based skills for use in development of resources and their subsequent customisation to meet the needs of a range of learners.

► Implications for policy and practice

The report makes recommendations on ways to offer professional development for both new and current practitioners.

New entrants

New entrants are unlikely to have both the practical working knowledge of adult LLN in the workplace *and* experience in a workplace culture and environment. They would therefore benefit from access to both shadowing and mentoring.

Current practitioners

Current WELL practitioners tend to work in isolation from other LLN practitioners, with limited opportunities for support from colleagues. They need networking opportunities which allow for sharing of ideas and issues and also time to reflect on their practice.

A minimum qualification may be required for practitioners wishing to be involved in WELL in the future to ensure the quality of the program. The Advanced Diploma of Language, Literacy and Numeracy Practice in VET would be an appropriate qualification in this context. However, it should also be noted that WELL (and potentially other programs that require LLN specialists) could be facing a skills shortage in the next five to ten years, a situation which calls for a more immediate policy solution. Clarification of the qualification pathway into the WELL Programme supported by an effective induction program and professional development opportunities would assist with addressing this problem.

The role of the WELL Secretariat

There are a variety of ways in which the WELL Secretariat, who administer the program, could help WELL practitioners to gain access to appropriate professional development by:

- arranging an annual national conference
- funding the development of both an induction handbook for practitioners and a resource handbook for managers of WELL Programmes
- hosting quarterly networking meetings in the states, or by funding industry skills councils/state industry training boards to conduct regular networking meetings
- supporting further research, in particular into emerging skills needs within industry and the role the WELL practitioner can play in meeting these needs.

Such measures would contribute to overcoming the ad hoc nature of current professional development opportunities for WELL practitioners and begin to address the urgent issue of maintaining a workforce which can confidently and competently meet the challenges of delivering LLN in the changing work environment.

The professional development requirements of Workplace English Language and Literacy Programme practitioners, by Tina Berghella, John Molenaar & Linda Wyse, will be available shortly from the NCVET website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.