Common Assessment Tools Pilot
in Three Communities:
Kitchener-Waterloo,
London,
Sudbury Anglophone
and Sudbury Francophone

Final Project Report

Project Partners:
Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo-Wellington
College Boreal
Literacy Link South Central
Sudbury Catholic District School Board
Thames Valley District School Board

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Executive Summary

Project Overview:
Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo-Wellington, in partnership with four agencies (College Boreal, Literacy Link South Central, Sudbury Catholic District School Board and Thames Valley District School Board) in four communities (Kitchener-Waterloo, London and Sudbury – Anglophone and Francophone) conducted a field test of four assessment tools and resources to ascertain how those tools informed and influenced transitions of learners and clients within the adult education and training system. We gathered information from Assessors, agencies and learners/clients on how useful and informative each tool/resource was across a variety of situations and goal pathways, including employment, employment training, academic upgrading and post-secondary preparation. In total, 754 assessments were conducted across the province. This project was a initial exploration of the key issues facing adult education and training including a common language for discussing learner/client skill levels, readiness for learners to transition to the next step in their pathway and the identification of goal pathways.

The assessment tools and resources utilized included CAMERA (Communications And Math Employment Readiness Assessment) Placement and Diagnostic tools, TOWES G2 (Test of Workplace Essential Skills) both paper-based and online, Ontario Skills Passport Check In and PDQ (Prose/Document/Quantitative) online assessment tool. Assessors could also choose to use "Other" assessments such as in-house tools or the TOWES G1. Most of the tools were directly based on the Essential Skills five level, 500-point scale. The CAMERA Assessment tools were based on the LBS levels and provided an outline of how the levels compared to the Essential Skills. Assessors were provided with extensive training on each of the tools as available by the tools originators.

Forty-one (41) service delivery agencies that provide a variety of programs were involved in each of the pilot communities including Literacy & Basic Skills (LBS), Job Connect, Adult Credit, English as a Second Language (ESL), Employment Assistance Services (EAS), WSIB, and Ontario Works. There was limited participation by two cultural streams, Native and Deaf/Hard of Hearing. There was significant participation by Francophone programs in the Sudbury pilot. Both French language and English language assessment tools were used with Francophone students in the Sudbury pilot.
(Please refer to the Appendix for a complete agency list)

Project READ provided overall project management including research, communications facilitation, design and implementation of evaluation, reporting, financial management and coordination of training for all assessment tools/resources. Project READ also provided local coordination of the Kitchener pilot. The other partners each provided leadership in their respective communities: London – Thames Valley District School Board and Literacy Link South Central; Sudbury Anglophone – Sudbury Catholic District School Board; Sudbury Francophone – College Boreal. In each community, the lead organizations involved many local agencies for the selection of field-test subjects. These subjects were adults (clients, students or learners) either already involved with their agencies or new to the system.

Key Results and Recommendations:

- All of the tools can be used in a variety of adult employment and training programs to assess Essential Skills levels and all reflect fair assessment practices. Although, some tools are more suited to particular goal pathways or transitions. Overall, **CAMERA tools (placement and diagnostic) were most preferred by assessors** for a variety of reasons (evaluation criteria). Recommendations for use of assessment tools/resources reflects their appropriateness to the goal pathway and/or program destination, specifically:

    o CAMERA for employment and further education and training (LBS or foundational training and employment-readiness). The tool was deemed very useful in determining Essential Skills (ES) levels. Please note that CAMERA is the only tool that measures Writing skills, but it does not test above Essential Skills Level 3. CAMERA was rated highly for ease of use, ease of understanding the results, being comfortable for learners, and useful for learners to know their Essential Skill levels.

    o PDQ for further education & training (LBS, academic upgrading, employment-readiness), employment, and independence. It was rated as very useful for determining ES levels.

    o TOWES G2 for further education & training (employment-readiness, higher level academic upgrading and apprenticeship) and employment in trades. TOWES G2 Online was rated as somewhat useful for determining ES levels and the G2 paper-based was rated as useful.

    o OSP Check In for employment, further education and training (employment readiness training), and independence. It was rated as useful for determining ES levels but it depended on self-report by the learner. OSP Check In is an exploratory tool that works best when used along with a more diagnostic assessment tool such as CAMERA or PDQ to confirm ES levels. It was helpful as an intake interview tool. It was rated highly for each of use and ease of understanding the results.

    It is important to note that while assessors reported that all the tools were capable of identifying Essential Skills levels and informing transitions, an assessment of skill levels is only one determinant of many when deciding if and when a learner/client is ready to transition to their next step.
    *For more information on the "Provincial Summary Results by Assessment Tools", refer to Table 5 in the Evaluation Report Appendix.

- **Profile of the average learner/client** who participated in the pilot: Female (52.5%), aged 19-24 (34%), had some high school education (51%), educated in Canada (83.5%), had further education and training as a goal (58.5%), had an average of Essential Skills levels of 3 in Reading, Numeracy, and Writing and level 2 in Document Use.

- **Training and professional development on the assessment tools/resources** along with experience with Essential Skills and previous knowledge and skills in the area of academic/educational assessments were **absolutely vital** to building an Assessor's capacity to administer the four assessments, interpret the results and provide guidance to the client/student. Training on assessment will be key to any broad roll out of assessment tools across the province. "*Individuals who do more explicit, detailed assessment (not intake interviews) really need a solid grounding in adult education and training. Without experience it was more difficult for people to explain to clients why they had certain results and to give clear examples of how to improve their skills.*" (best practice quote from Assessor) Also suggested in best practices was the opportunity to practice administering the tool within the Assessor's agency. Being able to discuss with other, more experienced assessors with thorough knowledge of the particular tool was another key support for Assessors learning a new assessment tool/resource.

- The project was successful in **building the capacity, knowledge and awareness of assessment tools and practices amongst a broad range of assessors, learners/clients and other stakeholders**. Most people involved found it a positive experience with the exception of the Sudbury Francophone community. While assessors in that community provided somewhat favourable results around project communication, training and expectations for the 184 assessments conducted, they expressed difficulties with language and vocabulary related to the assessment tools and results. This indicates that the language barrier played a significant role in the experience of assessors and learners. It is important to note that the Sudbury Francophone pilot tested both English and French versions of the tools with Francophone learners/clients, as available (PDQ, OSP Check In and TOWES G2 have French versions and CAMERA English version was used to assess English skills of Francophone students).

- "*All the tools have different strengths and weaknesses.*" "*Keep in mind that one size does not fit all. It is necessary to carefully choose which assessment to use.*" These comments from assessors highlight the recommendation that a "tool kit" approach to assessment is important in adult education and training. Assessors and clients/learners need a variety of tools for the diversity of needs, program contexts, skill levels and goal pathways. **Any mass implementation of common assessment should include 4 key elements**: professional development and training; guidelines for the administration and interpretation of assessment tools and results; mentoring by experienced assessors to guide the development of assessment best practices among peers; and a phasing in or practice piloting of various tools/resource over an extended timeline. This staged approach will result in a stronger knowledge base amongst assessors, more consistent use of assessment tools/resources and more informed learners/clients.

- The Canadian and World Literature Review of Assessment Practices in Adult Education that was prepared for this project indicates that Ontario like most other jurisdictions is making a concerted effort to develop effective, efficient and

meaningful assessment tools and reports that respect learners, communicate to stakeholders (employers among them) and truly recognize achievements in skills, knowledge and abilities. "*There is a need for a new assessment language that describes learning outcomes in terms of what learners will be able to do at the end of their training, describe learning gains in meaningful ways to key and various stakeholders, and clearly link skill levels to other models in use.* (Glass, Kallio, Goforth, 2007)" The Review also revealed that in **most jurisdictions a variety of tools** are used depending on the program context, goal pathway and key stakeholders expectations. "*Know the goal of the learner to help direct which tool to use. The flexibility of the tools with the client's goal in mind is outstanding.*" (Assessor best practice comment)While tools may vary country-to-country, province–to-province, agreement on best practices of assessment is common. In this respect Ontario is on track. We seek to provide assessments that are comfortable for the learner, provide clear, relevant results and are based around the needs of adults in their various life roles – parent, worker, citizen. (For a complete list of best practices, please refer to the Appendix – Literature Review.)

Context, Scope, Goals and Process

Context and Scope:
The *Ontario Learns* report identified the importance of local partnerships among delivery agencies and community organizations that create seamless pathways for adult learners and enrich the quality and variety of programming to meet local needs. Inherent in strong partnerships are mutual understanding and philosophy, compatible goals and protocols, and a common language to exchange information and support clients/learners. A common language is key to assessing prior learning and skills and being able to share that information with across agencies and educators.

Concurrently, the government funded the *Learner Skills Attainment* initiative, which sought to create a framework to communicate learner progress in a reliable, valid and transparent way. Further, the goals were to describe learning outcomes in terms of what a learner will be able to do or where a learner will be able to go (next step options) upon the completion of their literacy training and to describe gains in skills and knowledge in a meaningful way to key stakeholders such as Apprenticeship, Job Connect, Ontario Works and employers. The framework of assessment will include the critical skills needed in reading text, document use and numeracy (all part of the Essential Skills) for the following goal pathways (5 key transitions for LBS learners): Secondary Credit; Postsecondary Education; Apprenticeship; Employment; and Independence.

This project was built on the *Ontario Learns* and the *Learner Skills Attainment* foundation. Its purpose was to demonstrate a consistent and accurate approach to assessing learners skills using the Essential Skills scale across high school credit and literacy programs for adults using a variety of assessment tools and resources. As well, this project conducted field tests regarding the feasibility of the application of those tools in assisting adult learners to transition to the next step of their learning. Essential Skills (five levels, 9 domains, 500-point scale) provided the common language for the assessment tools and the common language for the assessors involved in this pilot project. The Common Assessment Pilot project was not focused on whether the tools/resources could accurately measure learning progress overtime rather it was on the ability of the tools/resources to identify Essential Skills levels and to inform transitions.

Three communities were identified for their variety of adult education and training programs, their cultural diversity and their capacity to conduct the assessment tool field tests. Kitchener-Waterloo, London, Sudbury-Anglophone and Sudbury-Francophone each had strong lead organizations ready to guide the pilot in their community. These organizations included Thames Valley District School Board and Literacy Link South Central (London), Sudbury Catholic District School Board (Sudbury Anglophone); College Boreal (Sudbury Francophone).

Goals/Outcomes:
By the end of the project, we planned to accomplished the following outcomes:

- Greater understanding of existing assessment tools and practices being utilized in Canada and other countries for entry and exit purposes
- Enhanced communication among key stakeholders involved in the Learner Skill Attainment Initiative
- Enhanced communication at the local level among the providers of employment, adult credit, postsecondary, apprenticeship and foundational training for adults
- Recommendations for best practices and tools for assessment in order to improve the capacity of school boards, colleges and community-based agencies in placing adults in the right program
- Deeper understanding amongst frontline staff in adult credit and non-credit, adult education settings regarding the effectiveness of specific tools
- Informed understanding enabling the forward movement of adult education policy development

Proposed Project Deliverables:
1. Establishment of local community networks
2. A representative to participate on the provincial pilot project advisory group (Learner Skill Attainment Initiative)
3. A literature review of recent Canadian and world research on assessment practices for adult learners
4. Results from field-testing (600 assessments conducted amongst the three communities) the capability of assessment tools and approaches (entry and exit assessments) based on the Essential Skills to demonstrate learner skill attainment and readiness for transition to learner destinations including employment, adult credit programs, postsecondary education and foundations for learning. The four assessment tools/resources are: CAMERA (Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment), TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills), OSP Essential Skills & Work Habits Check In and PDQ (Prose/Document/Quantitative Profile)
5. Best practices of using the assessment tools to improve the capacity of school board, colleges and community-based agencies in placing adult learners in the right program
6. An Interim Project Report and a Final Project Report including recommendations for the development of adult education policy framework

Field Test Process:
Our initial step was to gather as many agency representatives from adult education and training from each of the three communities to discuss the project's goals, outcomes and deliverables as well as to develop a common commitment to the project. From this initial meeting, community leads were identified for the four communities. In turn, these leads gathered local agency representatives to identify a community approach to the project within the parameters set out in the proposal. Each community decided on a slightly different approach to choosing learners/clients, involving various community partners and choosing Assessors. (Please refer to the local reports for more detailed information.) Each community was required to involve a wide variety of learners/clients with varying goal pathways from the range of Adult Education programs in the community. This

diversity helped us to address the issue of which assessment tools/resources benefit which type of learners/clients in which adult education contexts.

"*Training and professional development had a significant impact on building assessor capacity and awareness about effective assessment tools and practices.*" – Evaluation result

Providing training or professional development to all the assessment tools/resources was vital to the success of this project. Project READ coordinated training for Assessors from all Anglophone communities on the following tools: OSP Check In (3 hours on November 21, 2007) and CAMERA (13 hours on November 22 & 23, 2007). PDQ had a self-directed, online tutorial, which was available only in English. Assessors were responsible to access the PDQ tutorial individually and all were offered an opportunity to take the full online PDQ test. In Kitchener, Project READ Literacy Network coordinated a TOWES orientation (3.5 hours overview & debriefing on December 13, 2007 & February 13 & 14, 2008) to local Assessors in cooperation with the local college, Conestoga. The Network also provided an Essential Skills overview (2. 5 hours on November 16, 2007). London conducted TOWES orientation with their local college, Fanshawe. The Sudbury Catholic District School Board connected with their local college to access TOWES testing. College Boreal, the Francophone Sudbury Lead organization, held training for the PDQ and TOWES in French. As well, they accessed OSP Check In training via a representative from the Ministry of Education, which also provided the French version of the resource. All of the Francophone training took place in January 2008. The costs associated with accessing the tools/resources ranged from free to $65 per test. While the cost of training on each of the tools ranged from free to $450 per person. It is interesting to note that evaluation results indicate "the cost of the assessment tool did not have a significant impact on the assessor's perceived value of the tool or on the recommendation for purchasing the tool."

Project READ engaged an Evaluation Consultant, Cindy Davidson, to develop the evaluation tools and process. This was a key step since we needed a common evaluation approach across the four communities for consistent data gathering and reporting. A great deal of discussion tool place amongst the lead organizations, Project READ staff, and Ministry staff (TCU – Training, Colleges and Universities and ED – Education) to develop the evaluation tools and process. It was decided that for each client/learner assessed, an assessor would complete an evaluation of the assessment itself including feedback from the learner, a follow-up with the learner after twenty-four hours of intervention and feedback from the agency receiving the transitioning learner, if possible. Each learner who participated was provided a gift card from a local business as an incentive to stay in communication with the assessor and answer the evaluation questions. Intervention was considered to be any program, service or employment that the client/learner would participate in over the course of the pilot timeline, e.g. LBS classroom program at a college. The twenty-four hours could take place over a week or more depending on the program or service, e.g. twenty-four hours of one-to-one LBS tutoring might take a few weeks to accumulate, where as 24 hours might be accomplished over one week in a full time employment training program.

In all, three evaluation tools were developed for this project, specifically: an Assessment Evaluation Online Survey (one completed for each assessment conducted); an Assessors Evaluation Online Survey (one completed by each assessor); and a Stakeholder Overall Project Evaluation Online Survey (one completed by each project partner and stakeholder). The Assessors Evaluation was conducted at the end of the field test period to gather hindsight reflections and practices. The Overall Project Evaluation focused on the project outcomes and deliverables as well as the process and approaches used. The tools were provided via the Internet through "SurveyMonkey", an online survey website, because of the geographic spread of the communities (two in southern Ontario and two in northern Ontario). As well, the website allowed for tracking of inputs, generating of reports and ease of data entry. An orientation document and a teleconference was provided to all Assessors for each evaluation tool to clarify its use and parameters. This personal communication ensured that everyone involved had a thorough understanding of the purpose and timing for each evaluation tool. As well, the Evaluation Consultant provided ongoing support to all leads and communities in the case of minor technical glitches and extended reporting deadlines.

Project READ developed a bi-monthly reporting template for leads to document their ongoing progress. (Please refer to the Appendix for a copy of the report.) We also developed several other templates including an invoice for services rendered, letters of agreement outlining project activity commitments for each agency, participation agreements for clients/learners including a release of information clause, and a project overview. These templates ensured accurate financial management as well as accountability for performance of project objectives.

Project Timeline:
October to December –
- Gathered participating agencies in local groups and oriented them to the project goals and expectations; ensured all agencies signed letters of agreement
- Finalized field test protocol and evaluation tools and process
- Orient all participating assessors to evaluation tools via teleconference
- Provided initial training for assessment tools/resources, purchased adequate number of tools, as well as access codes for online tools – PDQ, TOWES G2 online

January to April –
- Field tests conducted in all communities with local communication facilitated by lead agencies
- Ongoing support provided to all communities by Project READ including assessment tool support and expertise, financial administration, and evaluation guidance and reporting
- Bi-monthly reports on progress submitted by all communities to Project READ

May to July –
- Completion of all assessment evaluations, completion of Assessors Evaluation and completion of Stakeholders Overall Project Evaluation
- Analysis of all data and results and completion of final project report
- Submission of all invoices, reconciliation and preparation of financial report

Local Reports – Kitchener-Waterloo, London, Sudbury Anglophone and Sudbury Francophone

The following section contains the Local Reports as written by the Project Partners in each community:

- Kitchener-Waterloo: Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo-Wellington
- London: Thames Valley District School Board and Literacy Link South Central
- Sudbury Francophone: College Boreal
- Sudbury Anglophone: Sudbury Catholic District School Board

Common Results and Findings

Amongst the four pilot sites, 41 agencies participated in the field-testing of assessment tools/resources and they conducted 754 assessments. Specifically: Nineteen agencies participated in the Kitchener-Waterloo area conducting 268 assessments; in London, eleven agencies provided 275 assessments; Sudbury Catholic District School Board conducted 27 assessments; and the Sudbury-Francophone community involved eight agencies in 184 assessments. In this section of the report, common trends and results amongst all pilot communities have been documented with some regional differences noted. The Local Community Reports contain specific regional trends and results as do the Evaluation Reports (see Appendix).

All of the assessment tools/resources were used to some degree within the pilot communities. OSP Check In was used 32% of the time, PDQ 24%, CAMERA tools 23% and TOWES G2 paper 21%. The least used tool was the TOWES G2 online (less than 1%). When looking at the use of tools and learner/client profile the following trends occurred: TOWES G2 online was used with predominantly females (60%), aged 25 – 44 with post secondary education (60%), not educated in Canada (40%) with a goal path of employment; OSP was used with mostly females, aged 25 – 44 with some high school, 18% not educated in Canada with a goal path of further education and training (employment was a close second); PDQ was used with mostly females, aged 25 – 44, with some high school, only 17. 5% not educated in Canada with a further education and training goal path; and CAMERA was used with both males and females, ages 25 – 44 with some high school, 21% not educated in Canada with education and training and employment goal paths. We cannot necessarily conclude that the tools are the best options for each of these profile groups because all communities were asked to used all tools with all types of learners.

In 67% of assessments, the tools were used to assess learners skills at an ongoing progress point, in other words the learner was already in the program and had been given an initial assessment. For 13%, the tool was an initial assessment of their skills levels. An important note about measuring progress – *"Most of the assessors said they used the tools at a time for measuring ongoing progress, but overall not a significant number of assessors said any of the tool were useful for this purpose. This could be due to confusion around the interpretation of the 'timing of assessment'."* (Evaluation Report, Executive Summary). To accurately judge a tool's ability to measure progress over time, a field test over a longer time period in merited. The tool could then be administered consistently over time including initial, ongoing and exit periods and compared with the results of other validated tools for measuring Essential Skills levels to check for accuracy in skills measurement.

Of the adults assessed, 52.5% were female and 47.5% were male. They were predominantly aged 19 - 24 years (34%) or 25 – 44 years (33%) and had either completed high school (22%) or had some high school education (51%). A regional difference emerged in the age ranges and goal pathways. In Kitchener and London, the average learner profile was a female, aged 25 – 44 with employment as the goal path. While in

both Sudbury communities, the goal path was further education and training, aged 19 – 24 and split between female (Francophone) and male (Anglophone). The vast majority of learners was educated in Canada (83.5%) and had either further education and training (58.5%) or employment (36%) as their stated goal pathway. Of those adults who had further education and training as their goal pathway, 26% were interested in adult credits and 17.5% were interested in post-secondary education including Apprenticeship. There was an interesting regional difference in goal pathways amongst the four communities. In both Sudbury communities 'Further Training' was the main goal path and 'Employment' was the main goal in London and Kitchener. All learners were assessed for their reading skills, the majority for document use and writing, though less than the other domains. The average Essential Skill levels of participating learners/clients were as follows: Level 3 in Reading Text, Level 2 in Document Use, Level 3 in Numeracy and Level 3 in Writing. It is important to note that not all of the assessment tools/resources tested the Writing domain only CAMERA and OSP had that option. Since the CAMERA results were based on LBS levels and required translation to ES levels, the question arose whether all Assessors accurately translated and documented the ES levels on the Assessment Evaluation Survey.

During the pilot, 42 assessors participated across the four test communities. 68% of assessors came from the LBS (Literacy and Basic Skills) sector with the next highest sector being Employment Assistance Services (EAS). All sectors were represented even minimally including Job Connect, Adult Credit, Academic Upgrading, Ontario Works and LINC/Language Assessment. Experience in academic assessment formed an important basis for administering and interpreting assessments. 50% of assessors had over five years experience in conducting assessments in their current job and another 33% had between one and five years experience. Assessors were asked about their previous experience with assessment in other sectors and 80% of assessors stated they had previous experience mostly in LBS, school system and labour adjustment contexts. In regard to training on the various tools, all but one Assessor took part in the professional development sessions. We asked Assessors about any training on the tools that they had received prior to the pilot project. Most reported that they had taken training on assessment and Essential Skills and a few had training on OSP web site and TOWES. We also asked Assessors to check off which of the tools they had used prior to the project. They responded that 6% had used the OSP website, 5% had used the TOWES G2 paper-based tool and 3% had used the CAMERA Placement and Diagnostic Tools. No one had used the PDQ tool. Therefore for most Assessors, this project provided an opportunity to receive training on and administer tools new to their practice.

An important area of concern was how useful the tool was from the assessor's perspective and what factors influenced their decision to use one tool over another. Assessors were asked to identify all the ways in which the assessment tool/resource enhanced their decision-making process in regards to supporting learners. They were provided with six options including: "Providing an assessment of the learner/client's Essential Skill level; Indicating the learner/client's goal path; Planning intervention strategies (instruction/training); Identifying readiness for transition to the next step in the learner/client's goal path; Using this tool did not enhance decision-making process

compared to the tool/resource I would typically use; and Other". 77% of the time Assessors said that using the tools enhanced their decision-making around determining the learner's Essential Skills levels. 38% of Assessors said that the tool enhanced their planning of intervention strategies (instruction or training) and 29% of the time it enhanced their ability to identify a learner's readiness to transition. The tools were least helpful in determining a client's goal path. A learner's skill level is only one of several factors that Assessors take into account when identifying a goal pathway. The skill level is informative but not definitive. Only 10.5% of the time did Assessors state that the tools did not enhance their decision-making compared to what they typically use.

We wanted to know the factors that influenced an Assessor when it came to choosing an assessment tool/resource. Assessors were given a list of eight factors including an open-ended "Other" category for their comments. The results illustrated that many factors influenced their choice of assessment tool and no one single factor was a strong determinant. Ease of understanding the results (37%) and ease of use (34%) were the strongest factors closely followed by professional development received (29.5%), their perception of the learner's Essential Skill levels (27%) and client's stated goal path (26%). 28% of Assessors did say "Other" factors influenced them including the requirements of the pilot (being asked to try all the assessment tools/resources) and random choice. Interestingly, less than 25% of assessors said that familiarity with the tool, timing of the assessment, and the amount of time available to the assessor and learner were factors in choosing an appropriate tool. A concern about assessment tool vocabulary and understanding the results was strongly voiced by the Sudbury Francophone community. This result suggests further investigation to clarify whether the issue is about culturally sensitive translation of an assessment tool(s) or some other usage problem.

From the learner/client's point of view, 73% said the testing helped them to know their Essential Skill levels. The tools that clients found most useful were CAMERA (London, Kitchener, Sudbury Francophone) and both OSP and TOWES (Sudbury Anglophone). CAMERA was top rated by learners in London, Sudbury Anglophone and Sudbury Francophone communities for knowing their Essential Skill levels while learners in Kitchener rated PDQ as the best tool for Essential Skill levels. The learners identified that the testing also helped them to decide on their next step (44%) and to set goals (39.5%). This is a positive endorsement of assessment as a supportive and informative process for learners/clients. The majority of clients (88%) agreed that the testing was a useful or somewhat useful process. When asked about how comfortable learners felt during assessment, 73% responded positively and a further 21% said it was somewhat comfortable. 45% of learners found the TOWES uncomfortable or somewhat comfortable. This result supports comments by some Assessors that the TOWES Assessment process takes too much time (3 meetings in total per learner) and assessment results take too long to return from the test centre, Bow Valley College. By pilot community, clients reported that CAMERA (Kitchener & Sudbury Anglophone), OSP (London) and PDQ (Sudbury Francophone) were most comfortable. While Assessors can't completely reduce test or assessment anxiety, this shows that most learners can be made comfortable through the process. A notable exception to this positive trend was

11.5% of learners said that assessment was not helpful in any way with majority of these responses coming from Sudbury Francophone field-test community. There were many comments from Francophone learners about the tests being too hard and their lack of English skills being a factor in taking the English version of the assessment tools/resources. This results supports the Francophone Assessors comments in the previous paragraph concerning the vocabulary on the English assessments.

Each Assessor attempted to conduct a follow-up interview with each of their learners/clients after the twenty-four hours of intervention (participation in a program, service, placement or employment). Assessors were able to follow up 93% of the learners involved in the pilot. We asked Assessors to report on several aspects including: whether they had to conduct another assessment; if the learner had transitioned to their next step; whether that was the right step; and if the assessment results provided to the next step (program, employer, etc.) were found to be useful and informative. Only 6.5% of learners had a second assessment. In most cases the second assessment was an in-house, non-pilot tool such a demonstration, but OSP was also used. When a reason was given for conducting a second assessment, it was mainly to measure progress. Most learners (65%) had not transitioned to their next step with the timelines of the pilot, but of the minority who did, 84% reported that the next step was appropriate and 7.5% said it was somewhat appropriate. When Assessors shared assessment results with the next step, 70% were told the information was useful (62%) or somewhat useful (8%). The OSP and CAMERA were noted as the tools used most when the results were shared and deemed useful by the next step. The overall positive reception to assessment results demonstrates that the results are in a format that can communicate to a variety of next step stakeholders. A notable and curious exception to this was the 8%, which responded that the next step stated that the assessment results were "not useful". The comments section for this question revealed that instructors at other training programs did not want the assessment results to influence how they worked with the client and their expectations of the client.

Once the field test assessments were completed, we conducted an evaluation with Assessor's to gather their reflections and best practice suggestions. We asked them about the role of professional development and training on each tool/resource, about future use of the tools, supports needed to increase their capacity to use the tools/resources, and the increases, if any, in their personal knowledge and capacity to use the tools. We also asked them to rate the ability of the various tools to assess for the variety of pathways. As well, we solicited their comments on the future purchasing of tools and the factors influencing those purchases. Lastly, we invited their comments on the various aspects of communication amongst project participants (agencies, leads, fellow Assessors).

Overall Assessors felt supported and informed during the project. 89% of Assessors either agreed or strongly agreed that they had access to relevant, quality training and support during the project. When asked about their knowledge and capacity to use the assessment tools, 91.9% agreed or strongly agreed that it had increased as a result of participating the project. Training and professional development on the tools was the main factor for increasing capacity of Assessors; in fact 84.2% felt training increased their overall understanding to use the tools effectively during the project. *"Become very*

knowledgeable about the assessment tools before administering them." (Assessor comment) Assessors sought out various informal supports including support from local community leads (76.9%), support from other Assessors in their region (61.5%) and regular networking with others involved in the project (53.8%). When asked if the informal supports increased their capacity to use the assessment tools and resources effectively, 92.3% either agreed or strongly agreed. This finding emphasizes the importance of peer support and guidance in developing professional practice in assessment. "*Take training on the tools and perhaps set up some sort of mentoring system for future use.*"(best practice suggestion by an Assessor)

A very important question for this project was to identify which tools were best suited for assessing a learner's readiness to transition to specific goal pathways, namely employment, further education and training (e.g. foundational skills (LBS), academic upgrading/adult credit, employment readiness training and post-secondary including apprenticeship) and independence. Before addressing this question and to establish a foundation of comparability, we asked all the Assessors to rate whether the tools were able to assess a learner/client's Essential Skill levels. All the tools were rated as being able to do this with some positive ratings for the following tools, PDQ, TOWES G2, CAMERA. Both OSP and CAMERA received split ratings indicating more need for investigation. 18.2% of Assessors disagreed that CAMERA could assess ES levels and 20% of Assessors disagreed with the OSP. As mentioned before, OSP was designed as an intake interview more than a diagnostic tool and it relies on self-report by learners. CAMERA has not yet been articulated to the Essential Skills; this would be a very helpful development for this positively valued tool. Only 36% of the learners assessed had employment as a goal and of those, CAMERA was the tool most used. When asked to rate the capability of each tool to demonstrate readiness for transition to employment, 73% of Assessors either agreed or strongly agreed that CAMERA was able to do so. 72% of Assessors agreed or strongly agreed that the TOWES was capable and 63% of Assessors agreed or strongly agreed that the PDQ was capable. 63% of Assessors agreed or somewhat agreed that the OSP Check In was capable.

In looking at the further education and training pathway, we requested ratings of tools for the following transitions, foundational training (language and/or literacy programs), employment-readiness training, adult credit, post-secondary including apprenticeship and other education and training programs. During the project, 58.5% of learners had further education and training as their goal pathway. In examining readiness to transition to foundational training, CAMERA was most highly rated. Keeping in mind only 2% of learners identified foundational training as part of their goal, 91% of Assessors either strongly agreed or agreed that CAMERA was capable. 68.2% of Assessors agreed or strongly agreed that PDQ was capable, 55.6% of Assessors gave the same rating to TOWES and 40% of Assessors gave the same rating to the OSP Check In. Many times, learners engage in employment-readiness training after or during academic upgrading and before employment. For this transition, the tools were rated in the following order for their capability, TOWES G2, CAMERA, PDQ and OSP Check In. In looking at a client's readiness to move on to some other employment and training program in the community, Assessors favoured the TOWES and PDQ.

Approximately one half of the 58.5% of learners in the further education and training pathway were specifically interested in adult credit. None of the tools were proven particularly capable of assessing a client's readiness to transition to adult credit. In rating PDQ, 36.4% of Assessors strongly agreed or agreed that it could assess for adult credit. 38.9% of Assessors strongly agreed or agreed that the TOWES G2 paper-based could do the job. While 45.5% of Assessors strongly agreed or agreed that the CAMERA was capable of assessing for adult credit but 22.7% of Assessors disagreed. The OSP Check In had a split between strongly agreed/agreed (30%) and disagreed (43.3%). In examining the post-secondary transition, TOWES G2 and PDQ received positive praise with 66.7% of Assessors either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the first tool was capable and 45.5% of Assessors agreeing or strongly agreeing to the second tool. In contrast, 43.3% and 27% of Assessors disagreed that the OSP and CAMERA, respectively, were capable of assessing for readiness to transition to post-secondary.

A related question to the issue of readiness to transition was the ability of each tool to demonstrate learner skills attainment (progress). We did ask Assessors to rate each tool on this basis, but the results are inconclusive and beg further investigation. While most of the tools were rated as being able to measure progress (TOWES G2, CAMERA, PDQ) the results were polarized with a minority of Assessors disagreeing about a tool's ability to measure progress. This is due in part to the fact that there were indications that the Assessors were confused about the wording "timing of assessment". Most Assessors stated that they were conducting an ongoing progress assessment. Ideally, at least two assessments using the same tool would be conducted on a learner to compare gains in each skill domain. As well, the learner would be assessed using a second tool to contrast the results from each tool.

'Ease of use' turned out to be the strongest factor (82.4%) influencing recommendations for the future purchase of assessment tools/resources while 'Cost of tool" was a minor (41.2%) factor. Second strongest factor was 'Tool's ability to assess Essential Skill proficiency' followed by both 'Tool's ability to assess readiness for transition to employment' and "Tool's ability to assess readiness for transition to employment-readiness training program'. Other influential factors were 'Tool's ability to assess skill attainment (progress)', 'Readiness to transition to post-secondary (including apprenticeship) programs', and "Readiness for transition to foundational training (language and/or literacy programs)'. These results will be influenced by the fact that most Assessors came from the LBS sector, which has three key goal pathways, employment, further education and training, and independence. "*Know the goal of the learner to help direct which tool to use.*" (Assessor best practice suggestion)

Integral to in any successful assessment and transition is communication among local agencies and educators. The project took a look at whether the field tests encouraged increased communication and enhanced networking within the communities. When it came to communication amongst local adult education, training and employment agencies, almost half (48.6%) of Assessors agreed or strongly agreed that it had increased as a result of the project and another 35.1% somewhat agreed. The majority of Assessors

(86.4%) reported that local leads and project administrators provided adequate support and resources for participating in the project. 75% of Assessors rated the assessment evaluation process as clear, manageable and user-friendly. All these efforts of support and communication enabled the Assessors to focus implementing the tools with learners/clients and documenting the results.

Further to the issue of communication was overall project communication and process. A separate evaluation tool was used to gather opinion and feedback from the project partners. . Based on their participation in the project, all partners agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge and awareness of assessment tools and resources had increased. Overall, the partners felt that the project was successful at meeting the project deliverables with positive results in organizing the assessment field tests (85.8% very successful or successful), training and support (85.7%), project communication (80%) and administration (paper work and reporting) (75%). Partners agreed that the reporting processes were clear, manageable and user-friendly and that adequate resources and support were provided to meet the requirements of their roles. Adequate resources and time are important keys to any successful initiative in which wide spread agreement and compliance to new procedures and tools, such as assessment tools, is the goal.

Outcomes and Recommendations

The adult education and training field in Ontario is diverse and has many players with as many funding bodies. Ranging from employment training and preparation to literacy, academic upgrading, and preparation for post-secondary education and apprenticeships, the system is in place to address the diverse needs, goals and pathways of adults who seek to improve their knowledge, skills and lives. This project set out to move forward the practice and communication among the various stakeholders and players in the adult education field. It sought to use the domains and levels of Essential Skills as a common language amongst educators to facilitate communication about learners/clients' goals and progress. Without communication, the system stumbles and fails to effectively support learners along their pathways. Part of that communication is having tools to document and share information about learner progress and skill attainment. This project focused on four such tools/resources: CAMERA (Communications And Math Employment Readiness Assessment) Placement and Diagnostic tools, TOWES G2 (Test of Workplace Essential Skills) both paper-based and online, PDQ (Prose/Document/Quantitative) online assessment tool, and Ontario Skills Passport Check In.

By the end of the project, we hoped to accomplish the following outcomes:
- Greater understanding of existing assessment tools and practices being utilized in Canada and other countries for entry and exit purposes
- Enhanced communication among key stakeholders involved in the Learner Skill Attainment Initiative
- Enhanced communication at the local level among the providers of employment, adult credit, postsecondary, apprenticeship and foundational training for adults
- Recommendations for best practices and tools for assessment in order to improve the capacity of school boards, colleges and community-based agencies in placing adults in the right program
- Deeper understanding amongst frontline staff in adult credit and non-credit, adult education settings regarding the effectiveness of specific tools
- Informed understanding enabling the forward movement of adult education policy development

What did we accomplish on our outcomes?

♦ Assessors strongly agreed or agreed (92%) that their knowledge and capacity to use the assessment tools and resources had increased as a result of participating in the project.

♦ All the project partners/stakeholders strongly agreed or agreed that their knowledge had also increased especially in regard to Essential Skills, Assessment practices and Learner Skill Attainment. A Project READ representative exchanged information about the Common Assessment Pilot with the agencies in the Learner Skill Attainment Initiative.

♦ Local networking was enhanced with 65% of Assessors either agreeing or somewhat agreeing that communication among and knowledge about programs in adult education and employment agencies increased as a result of the project.

♦ Through Assessors comments and ratings of the tools for specific pathways and transitions, we have identified some important trends in the appropriate use of assessment tools. Assessor comments: "*All the tools have different strengths and weaknesses.*" "*Take training on the tools and perhaps set up some sort of mentoring system for future use.*" "*Keep in mind that one size does not fit all. It is necessary to carefully choose which assessment to use.*" "*Choose an assessment tool that best compliments the learner's goal.*" Recommendations based on evaluation results:

- OSP Check in and CAMERA placement tools were recommended the most for ease of use and ease of understanding results
- CAMERA placement tool was recommended to assess learner's readiness for transition to foundational (literacy) training
- TOWES G2 paper-based tool was recommended for being able to assess Essential Skill levels (though all tools were useful for this)
- CAMERA placement tool was recommended as useful for learners to know their Essential Skills levels
- CAMERA placement tool was recommended for providing a comfortable process for learners

♦ A wide range of assessors and agencies in a variety of sectors participated in the four field test communities including Literacy & Basic Skills (LBS), Academic Upgrading (AU), Adult Credit, Job Connect, Employment Assistance Services (EAS), English as a Second Language and Ontario Works. There was also participation by three cultural streams Native, Francophone, and Deaf/Hard of Hearing. The majority of Assessors came from LBS/AU sector with the next highest from EAS, then Job Connect and finally Adult Credit. Workplaces were the only sector not participating. Assessors agreed that the project deepened their understanding of the effectiveness of specific assessment tools. 77% of the time Assessors said that using the tools enhanced their decision-making around determining a learner's Essential Skill levels. 38% of Assessors said that the tools enhanced their decision-making around planning intervention strategies (instruction, programming or placements) as well as their decisions around readiness for transition (29%). The tools were least helpful in determining a client's goal path (only helping 17% of the time). There are many factors that go into determining a learner's pathway including learner's choice, current skill levels, long-term and short-term objectives/needs, and current employment/income status, among others.

♦ This project is a snap shot of assessment practices for the four tools. It is the beginning of an investigation into common assessment and building communication among the players in adult education and training, which can move the field forward in meeting the needs of adults in Ontario. It does provide detailed information of the experience of 42 Assessors in 41 Agencies conducting 754 assessments over a period of approximately four months. While the project is not exhaustive, it does provide comprehensive data to build further projects and initiatives upon. It also provides indicators as to the most appropriate use of the tools for learners in the three key pathways – employment, further education and training, and independence. It is a

basis for moving forward and beginning the development of common assessment practice and policy across the adult education sector.

Deliverables:

The project proposed the following deliverables:

1. Establishment of local community networks

2. A representative to participate on the provincial pilot project advisory group (Learner Skill Attainment Initiative)

3. A literature review of recent Canadian and world research on assessment practices for adult learners

4. Results from field-testing (600 assessments conducted amongst the three communities) the capability of assessment tools and approaches (entry and exit assessments) based on the Essential Skills to demonstrate learner skill attainment and readiness for transition to learner destinations including employment, adult credit programs, postsecondary education and foundations for learning. The four assessment tools/resources are: CAMERA (Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment), TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills), OSP Essential Skills & Work Habits Check In and PDQ (Prose/Document/Quantitative Profile)

5. Best practices of using the assessment tools to improve the capacity of school board, colleges and community-based agencies in placing adult learners in the right program

6. An Interim Project Report and a Final Project Report including recommendations for the development of adult education policy framework

What did we accomplish?

1. Local community networks – As mentioned above, 65% of Assessors felt that communication among adult educators and trainers increased in their local communities as a result of this project. This result was echoed by the community leads. "Groups liked the idea of a common language (Essential Skills) and saw this [project] as an exhaustive, tiring, but positive step into working together with other adult educators and employment training staff." (Kitchener Community Report) Each community held local meetings providing opportunities to build relationships, enhance communication and provide peer support. One community commented that this project clarified what exactly is meant by Literacy and Essential Skills to employment agencies. It took the agencies beyond a superficial understanding of LBS programs as places to upgrade reading and writing.

2. Communication with the Learner Skill Attainment (LSA) Initiative – Project READ kept in regular contact with the agencies involved in the LSA Initiative via email (through the LSA lead contact), written project updates and a meeting in Toronto.

3. Literature Review of Assessment Practices – This document was completed and submitted to the lead project representatives from Ministry of Education and Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The information gained through the review reinforced the results of this project. "Just as no single teaching strategy is effective

for all learners in all situations, no single assessment instrument of process is adequate in providing quality information for all purposes." (M. Taylor, p.34 of the Literature Review) We found that most jurisdictions are using a range of assessment tools for the variety of learners and settings. (For more information, please refer to the Review in the Appendices.)

4. Results from the field-testing of the four Assessment Tools/Resources – We targeted 600 assessment and achieved 754 across the four communities – Kitchener (268), London (275), Sudbury Anglophone (27) and Sudbury Francophone (184). All of the tools were used with a variety of learners/clients. Within this deliverable there were key questions or evaluation deliverables related to the capability and use of each assessment tool/resource.

   a. The capability of each assessment tool to demonstrate Essential Skills proficiency – All the pilot tools were used to assess the four main domains of Essential Skills (Reading Text, Document Use, Numeracy and Writing) and all were successful in begin able to do this. The majority of Assessors felt that all the tools enhanced their ability to determine ES levels. The majority of learners said all the tools were helpful in them knowing their ES levels. PDQ, CAMERA and TOWES G2 were favoured for ES level identification.

   b. The capability of each assessment tool to demonstrate readiness for transition to employment – Most assessors said that TOWES and CAMERA were the most able to demonstrate readiness for transition to employment. It is important to note that only 36% of learners in the pilot had employment as a goal and very few made that transition during the project.

   c. The capability of each tool to demonstrate readiness for transition to adult credit and/or further employment training programs – While most learners being assessed had further education and training as a goal and half of those were specifically interested in adult credit, none of the tools were particularly able to demonstrate readiness for adult credit. However, Assessors did say that most of the tools were able to identify readiness for transition to other foundational or employment training programs. CAMERA was best for this purpose.

   d. The capability of each tool to demonstrate readiness for transition to post-secondary including apprenticeship – Though most learners (58.5%) assessed had further education and training as a goal, a small minority identified post-secondary including apprenticeship as a goal. Assessors were not overwhelmingly convinced that any of the tools were able to demonstrate this type of readiness but without many clients in this target group, it is difficult to make substantial conclusions. TOWES and PDQ were cited the most by Assessors for this type of transition.

   e. The capability of each assessment tool to demonstrate learner skill attainment or progress – Results for this are inconclusive. Most Assessors said they used the tools at a time for measuring ongoing progress, but

overall not a significant number of Assessors said that any of the tools were useful for this purpose. Ideally, the same tool needs to be administered with a learner over a long period of time (initial, ongoing and exit) in order to compare assessment results that would indicate progress or skills attainment. The timeline for this project did not allow that and the focus on the project was how well the tools informed readiness to transition. Further investigation into the issue of measuring progress is recommended.

    f. Determine if the administration of each assessment tool follows far assessment practices – All tools reflected fair assessment practices based on the experience of Assessors using the tools, the ease of sue of the tools, usefulness of the results, and learner comfort level.

    g. Identify the training, professional development and support required to build Assessor capacity – Training, professional development and support in learning each of the tools had a significant impact on building Assessor capacity. All Assessors said that training considerably increased their capacity and understanding of the tools. The vast majority said that the training was relevant and high quality.

    h. Determine if there can be a consistent approach to assessing Essential Skills across a variety of adult education, training and employment program settings through the use of common assessment tools and resources – The four main tools can be used in a variety of program settings to assess current Essential Skill levels. Being able to assess current ES levels was of high value to both Assessors and learners/clients. Each tool, regardless of the setting and client group, showed consistent ability to assess. There was some variation in the frequency of tool use amongst settings and age groups, etc. and in turn which tools were then deemed to be effective, the difference was very insignificant.

5. Best Practices – Based on comments provided by both the Assessors and the Community Leads, we have a wealth of "reflections on practice" from this project. A future step would be to implement these reflections to confirm that they are valid and tested best practices. Each community was asked to include, in their local reports, a list of pros and cons for each tool based on their field-test experience. This information also provides a great deal of insight into the effectiveness, appropriate use, and benefits of each tool/resource. "The assessors felt they gained very valuable experience through this project. [Learners] found the assessments interesting and informative and appreciated the results." (London Community Report) The following are some of the key best practice recommendations:

    a. Assessors must have experience, knowledge and skills in conducting academic assessments.

    b. Assessors must have in-depth knowledge of Essential Skills levels and the 500-point scale.

      c.   Assessors must have access to training and support to learn a new assessment tool/resource.

      d.   Peer mentoring and pilot testing should accompany initial training for the implementation of any new assessment tool/resource.

6. Interim and Final Project Reports – An Interim Project report was submitted to the funders in February 2008, approximately five months after the start of the project (October 2007). The Final Report was completed in July 2008 and submitted to Ministry of Education and Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

Recommendations

It is important to preface the following recommendations with a reiteration that this project was only the first step in examining the key issues of learner skill attainment, readiness for transition, and the use of Essential Skills as a common language throughout the fields of adult education and training and employment. The project has solicited some insights into those issues but further, long-term study and research is merited. There is clarity from the results of this project regarding some helpful changes to current assessment practices in the field.

1. Encourage **access to and use of the four field-tested assessment tools** (TOWES G2, CAMERA, PDQ and OSP Check In) by all adult education and training agencies in Ontario. Encourage employment training and preparation agencies to directly access OSP Check In and to engage with educational agencies to access TOWES, CAMERA and PDQ assessments for their clients. Each of the tools has different strengths, uses and benefits for learners/clients, assessors and agencies. As outlined in the Results, Findings and Outcomes sections, each tool is appropriate for specific goal pathways and transitions. As well, many of the tools require a great deal of assessor knowledge in the area of educational and academic assessments for proper test administration and interpretation of the results.

2. Provide **funding and professional development to secure access to and use of the tools**. Time and time again, each community and all assessors emphasized the absolute importance of training, professional development and ongoing support from peers with tool expertise in order to learn how to use each of the assessment tools and to interpret the results. All the tools are based on the federal Essential Skills (ES), therefore training in ES is a vital foundation. Most of the tools have an associated cost for the tests themselves (ranging from $9 to $65 per test) and/or for the training on the tool. Funding of those costs will determine wide spread access to the tools.

3. Ensure that all assessors, educators and trainers have a **thorough and in-depth knowledge of HRSDC's 9 Essential Skills and the 500-point scale**. Since all the tools use ES as their common language for assigning a domain and level, it is vital that all assessors fully understand the complexity levels and the domains. A cursory awareness of Essential Skills is not sufficient for the interpretation of assessment results. Assessors are not only responsible for presenting the assessment results to learners/clients, but explaining the significance and benefits of an individual's skill

levels and how it impacts on their goal pathway and possible interventions (programs, services, training, placements, etc). If we are to act as an integrated system of delivery agencies then a common language is integral to inter-agency communication, sharing of learner information, and program development.

4. Ensure that these tools are part of a **tool-kit approach** to assessment. A tool kit contains a variety of tools providing many options from which to choose. Assessors confirmed that having tool options for a variety of learners/clients in a range of settings is important. As one assessor said, "one size does not fit all". One assessment tool cannot fulfill all the needs. As assessors broaden their knowledge of various tools and increase their depth of assessment skills, it directly benefits the learner resulting in more effective assessments and guidance. It is important to note that identification of skill levels is only one of many factors that assessors take into account when deciding upon a goal pathway or readiness to transition to the next step. Learner choice, labour market statistics, requirements of the next step and many other factors influence goal pathways and transitions. Further investigation into the range of influencing factors would be helpful.

5. Continue **investigation and research** into three areas: 1) the capability of assessment tools to demonstrate learner skill attainment or progress; 2) effective Francophone assessment tools (both French and English language tools appropriate for Francophone students); and 3) assessment tools that would specifically demonstrate readiness to transition to Adult credit. In each of these areas, we had inconclusive or negative results suggesting further investigation was merited.

Thank you for the investment into this exploration of assessment tools and practices. This project provided an excellent opportunity for the four communities to build expertise in assessment tools and practices as well as expanding and enriching relationships amongst adult education, training and employment agencies. Overall, agencies, assessors and learners rated it as a positive and informative, growth experience. We would encourage the government to provide this opportunity to more communities as part of a larger adult education development initiative. A comprehensive roll out of these tools could make a significant positive impact upon the agencies serving the education and training needs of adults in Ontario. It would contribute to the utilization of a common language, in this case Essential Skills, throughout the system thus supporting the seamless transition of adults between steps (agencies, programs, placements). As we look to the future and the prediction by the Canadian Council on Learning* that Ontario will have 42% more adults in Essential Skills levels 1 and 2, educators and trainers need to be adequately prepared, professional trained, and realistically resourced to address the growing demand for training.

Reading the Future: Planning to Meet Canada's Future Literacy Needs, June 2008, Canadian Council on Learning, www.ccl-cca.ca

Appendices

- Literature Review of Assessment Practices in Adult Education
- Project Partners Contact Information
- Evaluation Report prepared by Davidson Communications & Training (this report has a separate table of contents)

Literature Review of Assessment Practices in Adult Education

Prepared by:

Sara Gill, Adult Basic Education Association of Hamilton-Wentworth (ABEA)

For:

Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo-Wellington

Canadian and World
Research and Assessment Practices for Adult Learners

Assessment practices for adult learners in Canada and abroad are as varied and unique as the learners themselves. Assessments serve various functions for multiple stakeholders, including learners, instructors, programs, community agencies, and funders.

Assessment is the process of documenting knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999). There are two main types of assessment: summative and formative. Summative assessments are usually completed at the end of a course or program. Formative assessments are carried out throughout a course or program in order to identify needs and inform teaching (Looney, 2008). The focus of formative assessment is on the process of learning as well as the outcomes (Looney). A common type of formative assessment is a diagnostic assessment, which measures learners' current knowledge and skills in order to identify a training plan. Performance-based assessment is similar to formative assessment as it also focuses on achievement. These types of assessment usually use standard-based scales which identify whether learners are meeting, falling below, or exceeding a performance standard (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council of Measurement in Education).

Assessment can either be objective, where there is a single correct answer (such as true/false or multiple choice questions), or subjective, where there could be more than one correct answer (such as extended-response questions and essays) (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999).

There are generally two ways to compare assessments: criterion referenced and norm-referenced. These are usually standardized tests. A standardized test is administered and scored according to specific instructions and has information regarding its reliability and validity (that being that the assessment consistently achieves the same results with the same cohort and it measures what it is intended to measure respectively) (Sticht, 1999). Norm-referenced tests relate the scores in reference to the scores of other people who have taken the test. The results are interpreted by comparing scores to how well the referenced group normally performs on the test (Sticht). Criterion-referenced tests establish an absolute standard of performance. Learners are scored in relation to that standard (Sticht).

Assessments can either be formal or informal. Formal assessments usually result in a written document, such as a test or paper. These assessments are given a score or grade based on performance. Informal assessments are more

casual and could include observation, inventories, checklists, rubrics, portfolios, peer and self evaluation, and discussion (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council in Measurement in Education, 1999).

There are several types of adult programming available where assessment plays a key role in identifying outcomes of learning and to identify if learners have acquired certain skills and competencies (Black, 2002). These include the following types of programs: literacy upgrading; English as a Second Language (ESL); high school completion or equivalent - credits, General Educational Development (GED), or Academic and Career Entrance (ACE)/Academic Upgrading (AU); post-secondary, apprenticeship, pre-employment, and workplace-based programs.

Assessment Practices in Adult Literacy and Upgrading Classes

As defined in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS, Statistics Canada, 1994)/International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALLS, Statistics Canada, 2003), literacy is the ability to understand and employ printed material in daily activities at home, at work, and in the community. This ability helps people achieve goals and develop knowledge and potential. Literacy is the continuum of interrelated skills, practices, and learning that contribute to an individual's ability to understand and communicate (Saskatchewan Literacy Network and Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006). Literacy includes: listening and speaking, reading and writing, observing, viewing and representing, spelling, numeracy, and the use of technology. Literacy skills influence learners' ability to think critically, make decisions, solve problems, and resolve conflicts (Saskatchewan Literacy Network and Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment).

Canadian Literacy Assessment Practices

There are a plethora of assessment types and models utilized for this population.

The Essential Skills (ES) is a skills framework developed as a result of the Essential Skills Research Project in the early 1990's by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). Essential Skills are the skills needed to carry out a variety of everyday life and work tasks (HRSDC, 2005). Essential skills help people perform the tasks required by their occupation and other activities of daily life. They also provide people with a foundation to learn other skills and enhance a person's ability to adapt to change. There are nine essential

skills: reading text, document use, writing, numeracy, oral communication, thinking skills, working with others, computer use, and continuous learning. The Essential Skills framework defines these skills using a 5-point complexity scale (or in some cases 1 to 4), in line with the IALS levels (1-4).

A number of assessments have been developed using the Essential Skills framework that could be or are being used in literacy and upgrading programs. Those include: Prose Document Quantitative (PDQ), Common Assessment of Essential Skills (CAES) – formally Common Assessment of Basic Skills (CABS), Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment (CAMERA), and the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES).

PDQ was the assessment developed for use in the International Adult Literacy Survey (1994) and later the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (2003). The original assessment was composed of test questions designed to measure three sets of skills: prose (the skills needed to use information from texts), document (the skills required to locate and use information in various formats), and quantitative (the skills required to perform arithmetic operations) (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998). Assessment results were reported in 5 levels for each domain or scale. For each domain, proficiency is denoted on a scale from 0 to 500 (Statistics Canada and Organization for Economic and Community Development, 2005). Cut scores are as follows: level 1 = 1-225, level 2 = 226-275, level 3 = 276-325, level 4 = 326-375, and level 5 = 376-500 (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998). The Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (Statistics Canada and Organization for Economic and Community Development, 2005) employed a similar assessment but changed the quantitative scale to numeracy and added a problem solving domain which involved assessing goal-directed thinking and actions in situations where no typical solution procedure is defined. Problem solving is assessed on a scale from 1 to 4 (level 1 = 0-250, level 2 = 251-300, level 3 = 301-350, and level 4 = 351-500). In both studies, assessments were administered in homes. Respondents first participated in an interview about their history and then asked to complete a booklet containing 6 tasks. Respondents that were able to complete at least 2 of these tasks were given a wide variety of tasks to complete for further analysis. This assessment was not timed to give respondents maximum opportunity to demonstrate their skills (Statistics Canada and Organization for Economic and Community Development, 2005).

Common Assessment of Basic Skills (CABS) was created in 1995 by Literacy Link Eastern Ontario. CABS was designed to identify learners' initial abilities and gaps, inform training plan development, facilitate appropriate referrals to literacy programs or other agencies, eliminate duplication of services, and prepare learners for educational opportunities. This assessment uses learning outcomes demonstrations (real-life activities related to learner goals) to assess Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) levels (Lee & Strohmaier, 2001). LBS levels were created by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities in Ontario to

assess adult skill levels below the high school level (approximately grades 1-9). There are 5 LBS levels for reading, writing, speaking and listening, numeracy, and computers (Lee & Strohmaier). The Common Assessment of Essential Skills (CAES) was developed to assist practitioners to tie the LBS levels to Essential Skills. Currently, in the project phase, this assessment articulates the CABS demonstration activities to the Essential Skills levels for reading, document use, and numeracy.

Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment (CAMERA) is part of a workforce literacy system that contains a set of standardized tests using workplace tasks to inform instructors and learners about placement level, skill gaps, areas of proficiency, and employment readiness. The purpose of CAMERA is to make programming more relevant for employment-bound learners and to better prepare learners going directly to employment. The CAMERA has 3 stages that relate both to Essential Skills levels (1-3), and also to the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) levels (1-5) (Preparatory Training Programs of Toronto, 2004).

Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) is a competency-based assessment tool that uses workplace documents to measure reading text, document use, and numeracy skill levels. It can be used by instructors, trainers, and literacy tutors to place learners into programs, or design programs to meet individual educational needs (Bow Valley College, 2008).

Drawing in part from the Essential Skills framework mentioned above, The Saskatchewan Adult Literacy Benchmarks were created by the Saskatchewan Literacy Network and Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment in 2006. The Literacy Benchmarks are specific points of reference for evaluation and comparison based on the Circle of Learning outcomes: interpersonal, communication, numeracy, and lifelong learning. In this model, authentic assessment techniques are used where learners are asked to perform real-life tasks (Saskatchewan Literacy Network and Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment).

Other standardized tests are also employed with adult literacy learners, namely the Canadian Adult Achievement Test (CAAT) and the Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA) (Campbell, 2006). The CAAT measures current functional levels in math, reading, and language. It consists of nine sub-tests. There are 4 levels of CAAT which correspond to years of education. This test is both norm-referenced and content-referenced. CAAT provides grade equivalency and stanine scores. In a study of the use of assessment tools in Canada, the CAAT was ranked as the most frequently used standardized assessment (Campbell, 2006). This test is easy to administer and cost effective because it can be administered in a group. However, due to the nature of standardized tests it could be intimidating, especially to low level learners (Campbell, 2006).

The Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA) is an assessment package that results in information about how learners read. More specifically, it identifies four types of reading patterns: print based, meaning-based, integrative, and non-integrative (NWT Literacy Council, 2004). The CARA levels are correlated with the adult literacy and adult basic education programs offered through each province and territory (Campbell, 2006). In the study of the use of assessment tools in Canada it was reported that the CARA is the most frequently used diagnostic assessment across delivery agencies (Campbell, 2006).

Authentic assessments are used informally in adult basic education classrooms. The assessment tasks reflect skills that are used at home, in school, at work, and in the community. These tools are usually developed by practitioners for initial, ongoing, and exit assessments. Authentic assessments usually occur during regular programming. This allows instructors to provide the learners with immediate feedback (Campbell, 2006). Examples of authentic assessment techniques include: checklists, portfolios, journals, instructor/learner conferences, and learner contracts (NWT Literacy Council, 2004). Authentic assessments can be customized to meet the needs of specific programs or learners, and can reflect learning outcomes and/or course content. However, a concern with this type of assessment is that it is usually not recognized by other institutions and they can be quite time consuming to develop (Campbell, 2006).

Other informal assessment tools include: learner progress logs, learner self-assessments, group projects, presentations, peer evaluation, simulations, observations (NWT Literacy Council, 2004), life-skills demonstrations, exercises and workbooks, writing samples, and reflection sheets (Saskatchewan Literacy Network, 2000).

Portfolios are also used to give literacy practitioners a meaningful way to showcase student success. The portfolio process collects meaningful information to identify if learning objectives have been met (MacDonald, 2002). Portfolios could include checklists, rubrics, learner self-assessments, goal-setting charts, and samples of work to highlight the attainment of learner goals and the benchmarks that they have achieved (Saskatchewan Literacy Network and Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006).

Similar to the idea of a portfolio is an Electronic Learning Record (ELR) which is a digitally stored inventory of skills and knowledge gained through either formal or informal learning (Barker, 2000). A learning record is a tool that allows learners to express their learning in a standardized and credible way to a wide variety of stakeholders for personal, economic, and education and training development (Barker, 2000).

PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) is also used in upgrading classes. The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment defines PLAR as the systematic process that identifies, documents, assesses, and recognizes learning. This learning is acquired both through formal and informal

studies, including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel, hobbies and family experiences (New Brunswick, 2002). There is some evidence that PLAR is being used in literacy programs. In the Circle of Learning project, prior learning is assessed and demonstrated and, based on this information; learning outcomes are selected in order to achieve a particular goal (Saskatchewan Literacy Network and Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006).

Literacy Assessment Practices Abroad

The international study, "Teaching, Learning, and Assessment for Adults – Improving Foundation Skills" (Looney, 2008) focused on formative assessment techniques within adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) classrooms. Nine countries participated including Australia, Belgium, Denmark, England, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Spain, and the United States. The interest in formative assessment stems from a 1998 study that described the achievement gains with formative assessment as among the largest ever reported for educational interventions (Black and William, 1998). Instructors used formative assessment as a deliberate strategy for identifying the needs of individual learners and tailoring teaching to suit them. Both formal and informal assessment methods were used including standardized diagnostic tests, checklists, portfolios, self-assessment, peer-assessment, dialogue (feedback, questioning, and scaffolding), and recognition of prior learning. Informal formative assessment practices were seen as more appropriate for learners with a history of negative school experiences. From the case studies it was reported that formative assessment procedures had improved teaching and learning, including increased learner self-efficacy, and improved rates of persistence (Looney).

In the United States, Equipped for the Future (EFF) is a standards-based system reform initiative that seeks to improve the quality and outcomes of the adult literacy and lifelong learning delivery system (Ananda, 2000). This initiative recommends using performance-based assessment that requires the learner to complete cognitively demanding, hands-on activities (Ananda). Examples of performance-based assessment methods are written scenarios, project assessments, and portfolio assessments. A written scenario is a type of on-demand writing that requires learners to respond in writing to an assessment prompt and complete the task within a relatively short time frame. A project assessment is an in-depth, hands-on exploration of a topic, theme, idea, or activity that results in a product, performance, or event. Portfolio assessments, mentioned above, involve a structured collection of learner work that documents

the application of knowledge and skill in a variety of authentic contexts. These methods - in combination - speak to a comprehensive assessment system which results in a valid picture of learner achievement related to real-world outcomes. These assessments are also valuable as they are intrinsically motivating because they emphasize the relevance of the learning content for the learner (Ananda).

The EFF, however, does advocate for a range of assessment instruments that include both standardized and performance-based tests. Examples of standardized tests used are the Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE), the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS), and the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) (Ananda, 2000). The ABLE measures several basic education skills of adults including vocabulary, reading comprehension, spelling, language, number operations, and quantitative problem solving. There are 3 levels of the test that correspond with grades 1-4, 5-8, and 9-12 respectively (Sticht, 1999). The CASAS assesses a learner's ability to apply basic listening, reading, and math skills to common, everyday situations. There are 4 levels of the test for developmentally delayed, normal beginning, intermediate, and moderately advanced learners respectively (Sticht). The TABE measures reading, writing, and math achievement. There are 7 sections that measure vocabulary, reading comprehension, language mechanics, language expression, spelling, mathematical calculation, and mathematical concepts/applications. There are 4 levels for grades 2-4, 4-6, 6-8, and 8-12 respectively (Sticht).

These tests are used to determine if adult programs are achieving certain goals or mandates. They are also used to determine if learners have met an external criterion for performance (Ananda, 2000).

England has national qualification exams that include literacy qualifications. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was created by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to more precisely recognize levels of qualifications. Entry level examinations result in a certificate in life skills and in skills for working life. Exams are based on 'functional skills' which they define as practical skills in English, mathematics, and information technology that assist learners to get the most out of work, education, and everyday life (QCA, 2008).

Scotland and Australia have similar infrastructures. The Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) sets out twelve levels of qualifications, ranging from access learning (literacy level 1) to core skills (level 2), to doctorates (level 12). Official curricula provide the frameworks for instruction and learning (Looney, 2008). In Australia, certificates are designed for adults who have left school early and need to improve their literacy, basic math, and general education skills. These courses result in a Certificate in General Education for Adults (Certificate 1 - Foundation, Certificate II or Certificate II – further study) (National Language and Literacy Institute of Australia, 1996).

Conclusion

Assessment practices in adult literacy and upgrading classes are varied and include formal standardized assessments as well as informal activity-based assessments. The research does not suggest one over the other, but rather a combination of tools to gather accurate and complete information about adult literacy learners and their progress.

Assessment Practices for Immigrants

Two issues emerge when discussing assessment practices for immigrants to Canada: English as a Second Language (ESL) assessment, and assessment of foreign credentials and accreditation.

English as a Second Language (ESL) Assessment

The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB) has established and maintains standards that govern a comprehensive national CLB assessment system for use in adult ESL classes (CCLB, 2007). Assessment centres are located in every province of Canada. These centres employ certified CLB assessors to administer the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment, the Canadian Language Benchmarks Placement Test, and the Canadian Language Benchmarks Literacy Assessment. The CLB assessors test learners' language skills and recommend placement in an ESL program that suits their needs (CCLB).

The Canadian Language Benchmarks are the national standard used for describing, measuring and recognizing the second language proficiency of adult immigrants for living and working in Canada. The CCLB contends that the Canadian Language Benchmarks are a practical, fair and reliable national standard of second language skills. The CLB cover four skill areas: reading, writing, speaking, and listening and range in complexity from level 1 to level 12. The assessment uses real-life language tasks to measure language skills (CCLB, 2007).

ESL Assessment Practices Abroad

In England, examinations are developed by external providers. These institutions also administer and score the tests. English language learners demonstrate listening and speaking skills through structured dialogues assessed by a trained evaluator, either in person or on audio tape. These tests are criterion-referenced (Looney, 2008).

In the United States, standardized or commercially available tests such as the Basic English Skills Test (BEST), Comprehensive Adult Survey Achievement System (CASAS) (described above), English as a Second Language Oral Assessment (ESLOA), and the Basic Inventory of Natural Language (BINL) are often used in adult ESL programs to identify English language proficiency (Centre of Applied Linguistics, 1998). The BEST assesses speaking, listening, reading, and writing of low-proficiency non-native English speakers (Sticht, 1999). There are two sections: an oral interview and a literacy skills assessment. There is only one level of this test (Sticht). The ESLOA is used to effectively measure the ability of non-native English speakers to understand and speak English. The tests have 4 levels that get progressively more difficult. The learner must respond orally (Sticht). The BINL is a measure of oral proficiency in thirty-two languages. It can be used for placement in appropriate programs. The test uses photographic posters to illicit oral responses. Testing is done individually and takes approximately 10 minutes. Scores are related to grade levels from kindergarten to Grade 12 (ERIC, n.d.).

However, there is no generally accepted definition of proficiency of English in the United States. There are no guidelines for speaking, listening, reading, and writing for adult ESL programs for comparative purposes. Many adult ESL programs use a combination of standardized and more informal program-developed tools to assess learner progress, including portfolios, checklists, interviews, observations, and performance-based tests (Centre for Applied Linguistics, 1998).

Assessment Practices Related to Accreditation

In the paper entitled, "Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training" (Government of Quebec, 2002), it is stated that the situation of immigrants around education should be stressed because their social integration and job entry depends on the full recognition of their prior learning and competencies by the education system, and also from professional associations and the workplace. Too often immigrants are not recognized for their prior learning or credentials. This necessitates practicing trades well below their real competencies. This population does, however, need

access to training that would address the Canadian context of their profession – laws, regulations, technologies, etc. (Government of Quebec).

Canadian employers use a wide variety of approaches to assess the credentials of foreign-trained candidates (Sangster, 2001). These differences in approaches reflect the occupation being sought (Sangster). In a study focused on employer assessment practices of foreign credentials, employers recruiting in professions which require formal certification had the clearest education recognition requirements. In other occupations, however, employer practice varied widely. Some employers took credentials at face value, where others sought out a credential assessment service (usually contained within universities or provincially mandated credential assessment agencies). Others still consulted with informal networks from specific countries to get information around the granting institutions of other countries (Sangster).

However, a number of employers used a competency-based assessment process that acknowledged that relevant experience was valued over paper credentials and regularly required an on-the-job demonstration of skills and competence (Sangster, 2001). Some employers have developed occupational standards so that all potential employees can be assessed in a transparent manner. The principles of PLAR were used in these approaches (Sangster).

In "Moving Forward: A Strategy for the Integration of Internationally Trained Workers in Ottawa" (Internationally Trained Workers Project, 2004), several recommendations were made around the issue of accreditation including the development of a easy-to-understand flowchart of the accreditation process. Also mentioned was the need for a 1-800 number that is widely known to get information and a more widespread use of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition. It was also recommended that Human Resources and Skills Development Canada work with accrediting bodies to improve recognition. It was suggested that competency-based tools need to be developed and work needs to be done with the provincial bodies in order to develop pathways for mutual recognition which could allow assessments to become portable across sectors (Internationally Trained Workers Project).

Assessment Practices for Secondary School Completion

In Canada, there are several ways in which to complete secondary education. Those being: complete a Grade 12 diploma, complete the GED (General Educational Development), or complete Academic and Career Entrance (ACE) or Academic Upgrading (AU) through a community college (Ontario).

In a study of Canadian assessment practices it was noted that credit-granting institutions (such as community colleges, school boards, and learning centres) prefer standardized tests over diagnostic tests (Campbell, 2006). Approximately 1 in 5 respondents in the study who worked in a credit-granting institution reported that they used competency-based assessments (Campbell).

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education approved the use of PLAR in May of 2003 for use with mature students. PLAR is used as the formal evaluation and credit-granting process where learners can obtain credits for prior learning. Prior learning includes the knowledge and skills that learners have acquired in both formal and informal ways (as discussed above). Learners can have their knowledge and skills evaluated against curriculum expectations to earn credits towards a secondary school diploma (Ministry of Education, 2003).

The PLAR process for mature students involves 2 components: equivalency and challenge. The equivalency process involves an individual assessment in order to grant Grade 9 and 10 credits or to assess other credentials in order to grant Grade 11 or 12 credits. The challenge process is the process where learners' prior learning is assessed in order to grant Grade 11 and 12 credits. All credits granted through the PLAR process must represent the same standards as credits granted to learners who have taken the courses (Ministry of Education, 2003).

Boeing Canada, an aviation manufacturing company in Western Canada, offers their employees courses to obtain their Mature Student Diploma. Here they use the PLAR process to assess prior learning to determine which credits are still needed in order to complete the requirement. The PLAR process includes: reviewing the learner's resume and training records, interviewing the learner around prior knowledge and how they might satisfy course outcomes (WWestnet, 2006).

Through the Boeing Canada Mature Student Diploma, immigrant candidates are eligible to write a special language exam for Grade 12 credit. The province of Manitoba provides this opportunity to anyone who speaks 1 or more of sixty-nine different languages (WWestnet, 2006).

More informally, in Saskatchewan through a literacy-to-credit bridging program, learners can use their portfolios to earn credit for prior learning (Saskatchewan Literacy Network and Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006).

General Educational Development (GED) Assessment Practices

The General Educational Development (GED) is a norm-referenced, international testing program for adults who have not completed high school. GED tests are available in all Canadian provinces and territories, as well as the United States and several other countries (Independent Learning Centre - ILC, 2008). In an international study of assessment practices it was noted that the GED is increasingly being used as a stepping stone into enrollment into post-secondary studies (Looney, 2008). The GED tests measure knowledge and academic skills against traditional high school graduates (American Council on Education, 2008). The GED tests measure the level of educational maturity gained through experience, which is often equal to (or above), the level of a high school graduate (ILC, 2008).

There are 5 tests in the GED that cover the core high school curriculum areas: reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, and science. The tests measure the ability to understand and apply information; the ability to evaluate, analyze, and draw conclusions; and the ability to express ideas and opinions in writing. Multiple choice tests are used for each of the tests, however, the writing test includes an essay component (ILC, 2008).

GED Official Practice Tests are available to help learners determine whether or not they are ready to write the test, and what areas still need improvement. The practice tests cover all areas of the GED, but are only about half as long as the actual tests. There is only one level of the practice test, but various forms are used depending on which country they are used in (Sticht, 1999).

Academic and Career Entrance (ACE)/Academic Upgrading (AU) Assessment Practices

Academic and Career Entrance (ACE)/Academic Upgrading (AU) (terms used synonymously) is an adult upgrading certificate program delivered in all community colleges in Ontario. It has been provincially developed and is a recognized credential for high school equivalency. This credential is for adults seeking admission to a college program or apprenticeship who did not receive their OSSD (Ontario Secondary School Diploma) or have an OSSD but they are missing the courses required for admission. There is an assessment completed at intake which determines the courses required based learner goals. The time required to complete this course is dependent on participants' previous education and skills (usually 6-9 months). The outcome is a college certificate recognized as an equivalent to the OSSD by colleges (College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading, n.d.).

Within the program there are guidelines for the assessment of ongoing assignments and demonstrations. A 4-point evaluation scale is used as an

assessment tool/rubric to assess learner demonstrations. It lists performance indicators for the learner's reference (Goforth Consulting, 2005).

Secondary School Assessment Practices Abroad

Programs offering primary or secondary school certification in the international study of assessment (Looney, 2008) are much more formal than community-based programs. There is usually official curriculum and time tables. Summative assessments are employed and there are stricter requirements for accountability. Instructors in these programs often have to balance learner goals with the needs of the formal curriculum and certification requirements (Looney, 2008).

Assessment Practices in Post-Secondary Education

Aside from standard entrance criteria procedures, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is used both in Canada and abroad in order to identify relevant experience towards post-secondary credit. In a New Brunswick policy statement on adult and lifelong learning it was forecasted that PLAR will increase in post-secondary institutions and will increase the number of recognized credit transfers among institutions (New Brunswick, 2002). This report suggests that access to, and progress within, post-secondary education and training programs can be enhanced by the effective use of prior learning assessment and recognition methodologies. PLAR can facilitate program entry for individuals who lack formal credentials but have the capabilities to succeed in post-secondary programs. This report advocates for a centralized approach to PLAR to facilitate seamless transitions between institutions (New Brunswick).

The Canadian Steel Trade and Employment Congress (CSTEC) use PLAR to assess prior formal education, training, work and life experience to grant credit equivalencies when enrolling in college programs (Network to New Approaches to Lifelong Learning - NALL, n.d., d). Similarly, James Madison University in the United States uses experiential learning portfolios to assess prior learning (NALL, n.d., c). Knightsbridge University in the United Kingdom also utilizes an Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) system in order to grant points towards degree requirements (NALL, n.d., b).

The use of standardized tests for college entrance has also been noted in the United States. Most community colleges test students as part of their admissions process, regardless of whether they have a Grade 12 diploma or GED. Most colleges use commercially designed tests specifically designed for post-secondary placement such as the ACCUPLACER, ASSET, and COMPASS.

The ACCUPLACER assesses math, English, and reading skills to determine appropriate course selection. The ASSET is a testing and advising program for post-secondary placement and the COMPASS is a computer-adaptive college placement test that evaluates reading, writing, essay writing, math, and ESL skills for placement purposes. Results from these tests help college advisors locate where learners might make a successful start in courses offered. Learners who place below the skill level needed for entrance are referred to developmental or remedial education (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, a number of countries (for example, England, Scotland, and Australia) have national qualification exams at various educational levels, ranging from literacy to doctorial studies. In England, the National Qualifications Framework has 5 levels ranging from entry level (life and working skills) to professional diplomas, certificates, and awards. This system connects with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications ranging from certificates to doctorates (Qualification and Curriculum Authority, 2008).

Assessment Practices in Apprenticeship Training

Apprenticeship training is a way to gain skills for a specific type of occupation in the skilled trades. This type of learning combines on-the-job experience with technical training. A certified journeyperson trains the apprentices. During the apprenticeship the apprentices also attend classes for theory (Community Employment Resource Centre, n.d.).

In Ontario, in order to become employed in certain skilled trades, workers must complete a Certification of Qualification. This certification states that they have passed the provincial qualification exam that assesses their knowledge in their trade. To write this test, applicants must prove that they have experience in that particular trade (i.e., completion of an apprenticeship contract, documentation showing that training time meets industry standards, or proof of sufficient experience as a skilled worker). When the Certification of Qualification has been completed, the apprentice receives a Certificate of Apprenticeship (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2008).

The EARAT (Evaluating Academic Readiness for Apprenticeship Training) is an assessment that was designed to determine whether an apprentice has all of the appropriate skills (i.e., math, communications, and sciences) needed for the in-school portion of the training. This assessment can be used during an apprenticeship selection process. The staff of the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities usually administers the assessments. A person can ask for an EARAT assessment by requesting it from a training consultant at the Workplace Support Services Branch once they have decided on

a specific trade. The assessment report categorizes the results of each skill area using the following scale: knowledge demonstrated, partial knowledge, and apparent difficulty. The assessment does not result in a pass or fail, but rather what – if any - skills need to be improved (Community Employment Resource Centre, 2008).

The Red Seal Program was established in 1958 in order to provide greater mobility across Canada for certified journeypersons. Once certified, qualified trades people are able to practice their trade in any province or territory in Canada without having to write additional exams. The Red Seal is noted on the Certification of Qualification and Apprenticeship. The Red Seal designation can be obtained by graduating from a recognized apprenticeship training program or obtaining a journeyperson-level certificate. A Red Seal designation can also be obtained by passing the Inter-provincial Standards Exam for a specific trade. A National Occupational Analysis (NOA) has been developed for each Red Seal trade and is used as a base document for the development of inter-provincial standard examinations (Community Employment Resource Centre, 2008).

In non-compulsory trades, employers can hire individuals without certification, although they usually require certificates of technical training. Increasingly, PLAR-based approaches have become among the most effective practices for assessment (Sangster, 2001). In Prince Edward Island, the apprenticeship training program is developing a PLAR strategy for trade qualifiers (4th Atlantic Region Workplace/Workforce Institute, 2003). New Brunswick is also using PLAR to help individuals gain quicker access to apprenticeship training and to potentially reduce training times (New Brunswick, 2002).

PLAR is also being utilized as an international assessment practice of trade skills. The National Office of Overseas Skills and Recognition (NOOSR) in Australia provides a trade skills assessment service to those from any country outside of Australia who are considering migration. They use a portfolio style assessment of the training, experience, and competencies of prospective migrants (NALL, n.d., a).

Pre-Employment Assessment Practices

In a study involving a workers-in-transition program it was found that portfolio development and workshops helped participants assess and identify their occupational skills, their transferable skills, their Essential Skills, and how these linked to the job market and potential occupations (The Centre for Education and Work, 2006). Participants stated that developing a portfolio was helpful in the job application and search process because it helped them to clarify job interests and define an employment focus. It was also reported that the

portfolio assisted candidates to prepare for and conduct job interviews and it also increased participants' confidence in work skills and experience levels. This process seemed to help participants create a stronger understanding of whether their skills matched employer expectations and helped them apply transferable and occupational skills to a wider range of jobs. It was noted that developing a portfolio can help overcome a lack of formal credentials for some jobs. It also can help identify the need for additional education or training (The Centre for Education and Work, 2006).

The Career Preparation Assessment (CPA), used in the United States, is another example of portfolio development. This assessment method was originally designed for high school students to be used with a number of instructors and subject areas to demonstrate mastery of both the Career Preparation Standards – a series of generic workplace readiness skills which include personal skills, interpersonal skills, thinking and problem solving, communication, employment literacy, and technology literacy - and academic standards. The portfolio includes multiple entries in order to provide learners with a variety of ways to demonstrate expected performance (Ananda, 2000). To be included in this portfolio is a personal statement of goals, a resume, a completed job application form or an application to further education, a letter of recommendation, two work samples, a writing sample, and an evaluation of interpersonal skills. Although the CPA was designed for high school students it has clear relevance for adult learners (Ananda, 2000). Career Passports are also used that contain formal documents that identify and describe a learner's marketable skills for potential employers (Ananda, 2000).

There are also portfolios and other tools that individuals can use online – an Electronic Learning Record (Barker, 2000). ESPORT (Essential Skills Passport) is a basic skills assessment and planning tool that helps people prepare for entry level occupations. Contained within the site is an interest inventory, a self-assessment, an occupation search, a portfolio builder, and a learning plan creation tool (Essential Skills Porfolio, n.d.). Similar to this is SkillPlan's "How do you measure up?" website which gives individuals an opportunity to practice Essential Skills needed in all occupations. Assessments are offered in reading text, document use, and numeracy. This tool can be used as a study tool for the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) assessment discussed earlier (SkillPlan, n.d.).

PLAR is also being used in this area. The government of New Brunswick supports the use of PLAR in its employment counseling agencies (New Brunswick, 2002). PLAR is seen as both time and resource efficient. By validating skills and comparing them to standards for training or jobs, PLAR can reduce the need for repeating courses or training. PLAR can provide a reliable means of matching skills to workplace needs to establish a basis for career development and planning (New Bruswick, 2002).

TOWES is also used as a pre-employment assessment, specifically through colleges. TOWES can assist college and employment preparation programs to address Essential Skills and strive to ensure all prospective workers have the skills they need to succeed in the workforce (Glass, Kallio, & Goforth, 2007). For career counselors, TOWES can provide an accurate assessment of skills required by front line occupations (WWestnet, 2002). TOWES is also being used as a pre-test in the Workplace Readiness Program (WRP) which assists transitioning workers by providing basic Essential Skills training and job exposure through work placements, as well as the Ready to Work tourist pre-employment program (WWestnet, 2006). TOWES is used to benchmark and upgrade participants' Essential Skills (WWestnet, 2005).

More formal ways of assessing pre-employment skills are found abroad. The Functional Skills assessment, offered as part of the National Qualifications Framework in England, is used with young people and adults who need to develop vital problem-solving skills in order to be well equipped for success in employment (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2008). As well, in Germany, both quantitative and qualitative diagnostic tests are used. For example, DIA-TRAN measures existing competencies, potential, attitudes, and behaviours in order to give test takers a better idea of what they could do with their vocational future. KODE and KODEX, both online systems, evaluate basic competencies related to personal, activity-based, technical/ methodical, and social and communicative competencies. These assessments are widely used in employment agencies across German-speaking countries. Trainers and/or counselors need a license to administer these tests. These tests act as tools to help users to reflect on their competencies and learning needs (Looney, 2008).

Assessment Practices in Workplace-Based Education

In a study about assessment in adult basic education it was noted that workplaces tend to develop contextualized performance-based assessments that assess the Essential Skills used in the workplace or specific occupation. This process is typically informal and may be carried out in an interview and a range of activities where learners are able to self-assess and choose activities that they are comfortable with. The assessment results are used to customize training programs for the participants (Campbell, 2006).

Competency-based assessments are also used to measure skills and knowledge as they relate to predetermined competencies (Campbell, 2006). Types of assessments used are portfolio assessments with custom-designed activities that are work-specific as well as general activities. Questionnaires and interviews are used to gather data about skill improvements and get feedback about instructors, supervisors, union representatives, and managers (Kelly, n.d.).

The Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board (2001) developed the Guide to Essential Workplace Skills to be used by employees to promote the use of self-assessment of the essential workplace skills needed to complete job duties. This tool includes information about where to go for training, how to get support in the workplace, and how to use peer coaches.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) can also be used in the workplace environment. PLAR can be used to assess employees' (and potential employees') skills. PLAR is useful for individuals who lack formal credentials but who have acquired relevant knowledge and skills through informal learning and/or workplace experience. PLAR can help adults make a rapid and successful entry into the workforce (New Brunswick, 2002).

Standardized tests are also commonly used in workplace-based education programs. Among the most commonly employed are the Canadian Adult Achievement Test (CAAT), the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), and the Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE) (discussed above). These tests can be used to assess progress by comparing pre and post tests. The differences in the scores provide program evaluators with an indication of the effectiveness of the program (Kelly, n.d). Other standardized tests used in the workplace include: Work-Related Foundation Skills (WRFD), Test of Applied Literacy Skills (TALS), Basic English Skills Test (BEST) (described above), Measurement, Reading and Arithmetic, Wide Range Achievement Test 3 (WRAT3), and the Metric Skills Assessment (Taylor, 1997).

The WRFD is a series of norm-referenced tests designed to measure basic skills in reading, mathematics, and language. This assessment uses appropriate content and language to represent the workplace context and assesses skills and individual needs required to function in the workplace. The WRFD has four forms: health, trade-technical, business-office, and general. This assessment evaluates reading, mathematical computation, applied mathematics, and language skills (Taylor, 1997). The TALS assessment measures prose, document, and quantitative literacy. Prose literacy tasks involve the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts. Document literacy tasks require knowledge and skills related to locating and using information contained in documents, and quantitative literacy focuses on arithmetic skills. Each of these tests estimate proficiency with materials encountered at work, at home, and in the community (Taylor, 1997). The Measurement, Reading, and Arithmetic assessment is a criterion-referenced test. Work-related tasks are used to assess measurement, reading, and arithmetic skills (Taylor, 1997). The WRAT3 is designed to measure the development of reading, spelling, and arithmetic skills in people ages 5-75. These tests helps to identify learning disabilities in reading, spelling, and arithmetic when used in combination with a test of general ability (Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc., 2005). The Metric Skills Assessment is a competency-based assessment designed to measure

pre-developed metric learning experiences. This test can be used as a pre/post testing tool (Taylor, 1997).

Assessments have also been developed for employers. The Industrial Workplace Reading Writing and Math Assessment was created by the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters. It was designed to assist employers in identifying individuals who possess the skills required in entry level occupations. It can be used to identify applicants who possess the required Essential Skills, and those who may be suitable candidates with Essential Skills training. This assessment is targeted to the skill requirements of the manufacturing sector. The content is taken directly from the workplace. It assesses workplace skills as opposed to academic skills. Problem-solving skills are also addressed. This assessment allows employers to get a current snapshot of specific skills (WWestnet, 2002).

The Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) assessment can also be used by employers to determine training needs, to assess job applicants, and to assist with succession planning (WWestnet, 2002). For the employer, TOWES provides an objective measure of skills that relate to international standards. TOWES can be used to target the Essential Skills that should be included in training programs. It can also act as a pre and post test to measure learning gain, help employees move from one position to another by targeting the skills for advancement, assess worker abilities that do not have Canadian credentials, and help identify candidates for new positions (WWestnet, 2005).

Trends in Assessment Practices for Adults

As explored in this study, there are many ways in which to assess adult skill levels. Assessment practices are varied, and yet have several similarities across different program niches, those being literacy upgrading, English as a Second Language (ESL); high school completion or equivalent; post-secondary, apprenticeship, pre-employment, and workplace-based programs. Throughout all of these niches there is a focus on assessing a common set of core skills, using both formal and informal assessment methods in combination, and, increasingly, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is used for assessment and accreditation purposes.

Common Assessment of Core Skills

There seems to be an assessment trend, both across Canada and abroad, that focuses assessment around a similar core set of skills. "While there is some variation in how countries define 'literacy', generally it refers to the ability to read, write, use numbers, interpret information, make decisions, and solve

problems in personal, work, and community life. Several countries identify 'functional' literacies, or competencies, in each of these areas" (Looney, 2008, p. 31). The assessment frameworks have different names, for example, Essential Skills (HRSDC, 2005) in Canada, Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) levels (Lee & Strohmaier, 2001) in Ontario, Equipped for the Future Content Standards in the United States (Ananda, 2000) or Functional Skills in England (QCA, 2008).

Combination of Formal and Informal Assessment Tools

"Just as no single teaching strategy is effective for all learners in all situations, no single assessment instrument of process is adequate in providing quality information for all purposes" (Taylor, 1997, p. 1). The International Reading Association recommends that instructors use multiple measures of assessment (Campbell, 2006). Respondents to a study on assessment practices in adult basic education reported using a battery of both commercial and informal tools (Campbell). An international report on adult assessment practices suggests that there should be a wide range of assessment tasks that are grounded in context and are not culturally biased (Looney, 2008). The "Equipped for the Future" report (Ananda, 2000) contends that a comprehensive assessment system must include multiple assessment techniques.

In a study of workplace education programs it was reported that a combination of assessment practices be used in order to assess skill improvements of program participants (Kelly, n.d.). As well, many adult ESL programs use a combination of standardized and program-designed tools to assess learner progress (Centre for Applied Linguistics, 1998).

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)

Current research shows that many adults do not have a full understanding of the range and depth of their skills and learning that they have acquired throughout their lives through life and work experience, as well as formal and informal education and training. PLAR is a process that would

enable individuals to identify their strengths and gaps fully (New Brunswick, 2002).

In a paper entitled, "Building a Pan-Canadian Strategy on Literacy and Essential Skills" (ABC Canada, n.d.), it was recommended that Human Resources and Skills Development Canada should support and fund continued research, practice, and applications of PLAR in order to implement a model where it can be applied universally toward academic credit, training programs, or for certification. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has acknowledged PLAR as the most promising area of innovation as it is the achievement-based assessment of human capital (Barker, 2000).

Tools are being developed that centre around the PLAR process. For example, the concept of the Electronic Learning Record is imbedded in national and international work around PLAR. A learning record seems to be one logical outcome of the PLAR process as both PLAR and a learning record can be used for career planning and development purposes (Barker, 2000).

In relation to assessing foreign-credentials, specifically for uncertified occupations, PLAR-based approaches are becoming the most effective (Sanster, 2001).

General Recommendations for the Assessment of Adults

Adult learners are a unique population as they have had a wide variety of life experiences that shape who they are in the learning environment. Many have had negative past educational experiences and, therefore, it is important to discuss best practices around the assessment of adult learners. The field of adult education is also constantly changing so it is important to continue to develop appropriate and relevant assessment tools into the future.

Best Practices in Assessment

In order for learners and practitioners to get the most of out assessments and for learners to feel comfortable through the process the following assessment practices are recommended:

- Screening is embedded in conversation
- Learners are involved in designing assessment procedures and evaluate their own work
- Learners receive information on why and how they will be assessed
- Assessments are voluntary and kept confidential

- Assessments take place on intake, during the program, and on exit
- Assessments are linked to instruction and act as a guide for planning
- Assessments are flexible to adapt to different learning contexts
- Assessment tasks are clearly written in order to ensure understanding
- Assessment content revolves around the things that are important to adult roles as parents, citizens, and workers
- Assessment tasks are engaging, thought provoking, and motivating
- Assessments provide a range of tasks to accommodate learner differences
- Learners' prior learning is documented as part of the intake process
- Assessments identify any special learning needs
- Learning disabilities or other learning challenges are accommodated using any reasonable means
- Based on assessments, learner goals are reviewed and modified
- Learners receive immediate and meaningful feedback on a regular basis
- Scoring rubrics are developed to assist instructors to identify work that meets the performance expectations
- The outcomes of the assessments are clear and provide learners with copies of their progress
- Assessments include information around the validity (that the assessment measures what it is supposed to measure) and reliability (that the assessment is consistent) of the tool

(Ananda, 2000; Looney, 2000; NWT Literacy Council, 2004; Saskatchewan Literacy Network, 2000)

Future Assessment Development

There is a need for new forms of assessment, recognition, management, and utilization of learning (Barker, 2000). Well-designed assessment tools and guidelines provide structure and help instructors to become more systematic in their teaching processes (Looney, 2008). In a review of Essential Skills within the Ontario college system it was stressed that there is a need for a more valid, reliable, and manageable approach to assessment. There is a need for a new assessment language that describes learning outcomes in terms of what learners will be able to do at the end of their training, describe learning gains in

meaningful ways to key and various stakeholders, and clearly link skill levels to other models in use (Glass, Kallio, Goforth, 2007).

There is also a need for publicly available assessment tools to assist with the initial screening of learners and to measure their progress. These could be made available through libraries, health centres, etc., so that potential learners could access them confidentially. This could be one way to reduce the stigma attached to literacy upgrading programs (Ottawa, 2005). In addition, there is a need for workplace education materials that adapt workplace materials for use in essential workplace skills training (Curry, 2001).

Along with the development of new assessment tools is the need for practitioner training in order for the implementation of the tool to be successful (Ananda, 2000; Curry, 2001; Looney, 2008; MacDonald, 2002).

Adult learners are involved in diverse programs. However, current and emerging assessment practices for this group are similar and intertwined. Future research and development in this area should focus on further streamlining assessment processes in order for assessments to be portable across programs and services. The continuous study of assessment practices and assessment development is paramount to ongoing best practices in adult education in order to foster learner success.

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Common Assessment Tools Pilot Project

EVALUATION REPORT
Executive Summary

Prepared by Davidson Communications & Training (Cindy Davidson) for
Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo-Wellington

June 6, 2008

Overview of Evaluation Process

There were three phases of evaluation and three different tools used to collect data for the project:
1. Evaluation and feedback of the common assessment tools/resources.
2. Evaluation of the professional development related to the use of the assessment tools/resources and a cost-effective analysis of the assessment tools/resources.
3. Evaluation of the overall project outcomes and participation.

This collection process occurred between January and May 2008, though there was some preliminary testing of the tools in December and at other intervals of the project.

All tools were developed online using the program SurveyMonkey which allowed for results to be collected electronically. Results were tabulated and analyzed by regions and by assessment tools and then rolled up into provincial summary reports.

Assessors and learners were asked to provide feedback as part of the Assessment Tool Evaluation Survey (Evaluation Report Appendix 7). As well, through this tool, contacts at next step transitions were provided an opportunity to provide input about the usefulness of assessment results and appropriate transitions.

Assessors and key project stakeholders were asked to provide feedback at the end of the project duration and upon reflection of their experiences. This was collected through the Assessor Evaluation Survey (Evaluation Report Appendix 8) and the Stakeholder Overall Project Evaluation Survey (Evaluation Report Appendix 9).

Assessors and key stakeholders were also told they may be required to participate in an external evaluation conducted by an outside evaluator contracted by the provincial government funder(s). Results of those evaluations are separate from, and not included in, this report.

Support around the evaluation process was provided to participants in the way of two orientation and training conference calls in December 2007 and Evaluation Guidelines distributed to all assessors and stakeholders.

The report contains summaries of the information collected and the appendices provide raw statistical data. Even more raw data is contained on the SurveyMonkey website and in spreadsheets developed by the website. These results are the property of Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo-Wellington and will be kept for an appropriate amount of time should more detailed evidence be required.

Throughout the evaluation tools and other correspondence, participants being assessed were referred to as 'learner/client' in an effort to reflect the terminology of the various program sectors and agencies involved. When tabulating, analyzing, and reporting the results, the evaluator attempted to use the 'learner/client' phrase often however there are instances when the terms are used in intermittently and in isolation of each other. No inference should be made by the use of one word over the other and where 'learner' appears on its own it should be assumed that also refers to 'client' and visa versa.

Davidson Communication and Training, Walkerton, Ontario and its sole proprietor, Cindy Davidson, developed the evaluation tools and conducted the evaluation as a third-party contractor, independent of Project READ Literacy Network. As part of the evaluation, participants were asked to provide feedback about the process and 75.5% of assessors either strongly agreed or agreed that the assessment evaluation process was clear, manageable and user-friendly.

Pilot Community Agency Participation Breakdown

Community	Agency Name	Number of Assessments
London	1. Thames Valley District School Board	51
	2. Centre for Lifelong Learning	35
	3. Fanshawe College	35
	4. Literacy London, Inc.	30
	5. Youth Opportunities Unlimited	29
	6. ATN Access Inc	24
	7. Hutton House	19
	8. Nokee Kwe Occupational Skill Development Inc	19
	9. Goodwill	14
	10. London Employment Help Centre	10
	11. Pathways	7
	12. Other (blank)	2
Total	**11 Agencies/2 other**	**275**
Sudbury (Anglophone)	1. Sudbury Catholic District School Board	27
Total	**1 agency**	**27**
Kitchener-Waterloo	1. St. Louis Adult Learning Centre	50
	2. Conestoga College	34
	3. The Literacy Group	22
	4. Grade Expectations (PRLN)	21
	5. Project READ Literacy Network	18
	6. Open Door—LBS	14
	7. K-W English School	11
	8. K-W YMCA Newcomer Employment Centre	11
	9. Anishnabeg Outreach and Employment Training, Inc.	10
	10. Bridging Employment Supports	10
	11.Focus for Ethnic Women	10
	12. K-W Access-Ability	10
	13. Lutherwood	10
	14. The Working Group	10
	15. Ontario Works (PRLN)	9
	16. Northern Lights	8
	17. New Canadian Program	6
	18. Canadian Hearing Society	2
	19. Waterloo Region Employment Resource Centre	2
Total	**19 agencies**	**268**
Sudbury(Francophone)	1.College Boreal	95
	2. Cap sur l'Avenir Secondary School	25
	3. Carrefour Options + High School	24
	4. Centre alpha Cultural of Sudbury	19
	5. Job Connect Sturgeon Falls	9
	6. Job Connect Chelmsford	4
	7. Job Connect Elliott Lake	4
	8. Employment Services YMCA	4
Total	**8 agencies**	**184**
GRAND TOTAL	**41 Agencies**	**754 Assessments**

Executive Summary and Key Finds and Conclusions

Below are key findings and conclusions gleaned from the results of all three assessment tool evaluation results. The details of the specific findings are found in the tables throughout this report. Below represents a brief summary of key findings and conclusions which are repeated in other sections of the report where more detail is provided.

It's important that these findings also be viewed through the perspective of the average learner who was assessed as part of the project (see profile below). It's possible that given a different group of learners, results may be varied. For the most part, the project deliverables were met and met successfully, however, it needs to be recognized that the scope and timing of this project allows for these results and findings to only be a first step in a larger study that is needed before inconclusive results can be stated and an informed policy on adult education framework and assessment tools can be made.

In particular, it is recommended that a further study look at the ability of the tools to measure progress, readiness for transition to next steps and with learners who have less education and/or lower Essential Skills. Overall, this study was able to determine the tool's effectiveness and ability to assess Essential Skills with higher level learners/clients, primarily from the Literacy and Basic Skills sector.

Profile of the average learner/client who participated in the project
- Female
- Aged 19-24
- Has some high school education
- Educated in Canada
- Has further training and education as a goal
- Has average ES levels of 3 in Reading, Numeracy and Writing and ES level 2 in Document Use

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The findings and conclusions are not listed in any particular order.

1. The expectation to use a variety of the four tools was met during the project.

2. All the tools reflect fair assessment practices based on the experience of assessors using the tool, the ease of use of the tool, the usefulness of the results, and learner comfort.

3. The four main tools can be used in a variety of adult training programs to assess current level of Essential Skills. However, none of the tools were seen as being particularly useful for measuring ongoing progress. It should be noted however, that the scope of this project only called for one assessment and then a follow up. A project of longer duration and different scope would determine the tool's abilities to assess ongoing progress.

4. The profile of all the tools increased as a result of the project. Assessors used tools they typically didn't prior to the project accessed training on the tools they hadn't prior to the project.

5. The following recommendations for best practices are based on the evaluation results:
   - Assessor should have experience conducting assessments
   - Assessor should have experience with Essential Skills
   - Assessor should have access to training and informal supports related to the assessment tools
   - Tools chosen should be easy to use, provide useful results to the assessor and learner, and should help identify the learner/client's Essential Skill levels

- Assessment process should be comfortable for the learner/client
- Assessor should attempt to conduct follow up with learner/client to ensure appropriateness of next step
- Pilot testing opportunities should be offered to assessors and other stakeholders prior to making decisions about using assessment tools

6. The following recommendations for assessment tools are based on the evaluation results:
   - OSP Check-In and CAMERA placement tools were recommended the most for due to ease of use and ease of understanding results
   - CAMERA placement tool recommended to assess learner's readiness for transition to foundational (literacy) training
   - TOWES G2 paper-based tool recommended for being able to assess Essential Skill levels (though all tools were useful for this)
   - CAMERA placement tool recommended as useful for learners to know their ES level
   - CAMERA placement tool recommended for providing a comfortable process for learners

7. All the pilot tools were used to assess the four main Essential Skill domains (Reading Text, Numeracy, Writing and Document Use) and were successful in being able to do this. The majority of assessors felt all the tools enhanced their ability to determine ES levels during the project and the majority of learners said all the tools helped them know their ES level.

8. Most assessors said they used the tools at a time for measuring ongoing progress, but over all not a significant number of assessors said any of the tools were useful for this purpose. This could be due to confusion around the interpretation of 'timing of the assessment'.

9. Assessors were not overwhelmingly convinced that the tools were able to demonstrate readiness for transition to employment, but this could be because not enough learners either had employment goals originally or transitioned to employment during the project. However, most assessors did not feel any of the tools helped them determine goal path when it wasn't known.

10. While most learners being assessed were clear that they had further training and education as a goal, specifically adult credit, none of the tools were particularly able to demonstrate readiness for transition to adult credit. However, assessors said most of the tools were able to identify readiness for transition to other foundational (literacy) or employment training programs.

11. Though most learners assessed during the project had further training and education as a goal not a significant number were interested in post-secondary, including apprenticeship. Assessors were not overwhelmingly convinced any of the tools were able to demonstrate readiness for transition to post-secondary though without many clients in this target group it's difficult to make substantial conclusions.

12. Training and professional development had a significant impact on building assessor capacity and awareness about effective assessment tools and practices.

13. The cost of the assessment tool did not have a significant impact on the assessor's perceived value of the tool or on the recommendation for purchasing the tool.

14. Project READ was very successful in meetings all the project deliverables and the majority of all participants in the project, including assessors, learners and other stakeholders had a positive experience and increased their capacity, knowledge and

awareness about assessment tools and practices. The one exception was in the Sudbury Francophone community. While the assessors in this community still provided somewhat favourable results around communication, training and expectations, additional comments provided were almost all negative and focused on difficulties with language and vocabulary related to the assessment tools and assessment results, indicating that the language barrier played a significant role in the experience of assessors and learners in this community.

Reflection on Practice

The following feedback was provided by assessors and key stakeholders who participated in the Common Assessment Evaluation Project. While their suggestions and recommendations cannot be called 'best practices' because they have not been tested, they do reflect the participants' experiences during the project. The data has not been edited from how it was submitted.

General reflection
- For newcomers, know in advance their CLB (Canadian Language Benchmark) level in order to determine which tool would be more useful to get proper results and understanding their educational level (obtained in foreign countries).
- Know how proficient a client is with the use of a computer.
- Take training on the tools and perhaps set up some sort of mentoring system for future use.
- Become very knowledgeable about the assessments tools before administering them.
- Practice administering tool before you do it with a client.
- A lesson or some type of prep on Essential Skills with clients before assessments are administered for those who may not be familiar with them.
- Keep in mind that '*one size does not fit all'*. It is necessary to carefully choose which assessment to use. If the test taker is headed to the workplace then an objective test is the best choice.
- Sometimes it may take two assessments, such as OSP as an introduction, then PDQ or TOWES to provide as rational for upgrading or proof of skill to an employer.
- Ensure that websites are easy to access and are reliable.
- Keep the content Canadian for all assessments.
- 1:1 assessment worked best.
- Quicker turn around time for follow-up worked best.
- Ensuring confidentiality seemed to enhance performance.
- Ensure that clear communication is practiced diligently. Follow up with e-mails (where possible) with hard-of-hearing clients. Use a variety of communication devices when discussing results so that there are no miscommunications.
- Plan and start early.
- Ask questions and use other assessors for support.
- Schedule more time than you think you need for the assessments.
- Review material before each assessment.
- Have copies ready and filed in an organized manner.
- Have the support of your agency.
- Know the goal of the learner to help direct which tool to use. The flexibility of the tools with the client's goal in mind is outstanding.
- More integrated use of PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) strategies, in-line with current trends that recognize the benefit of these strategies.
- Individuals who do more explicit, detailed assessments (not intake interviews) really need a solid grounding in adult education and training. Without experience it was more difficult for people to explain to clients why they had certain results and to give clear examples of how to improve their skills. The results from the three detailed assessments were very generic, so you need to understand how to explain them and to make them work for the client using your own experience working with adult learners.

- If you think the results seem incorrect (too low or too high), check with the person on how they answered the questions (i.e. guessed) or how they were feeling taking the test (i.e. overly nervous, kind of sick, unsure, etc.). We still have to recognize that there are always outside factors where an adult is concerned (i.e. the baby is sick).
- We need a variety of assessment tools not just one. It is not a "one size fits all" approach.
- All the tools have different strengths and weaknesses.
- Teach learners about Essential Skills when they enter an LBS program or even a credit program; have examples of tasks that they can try on a regular basis.
- Get to know your client through interviews and questions before deciding which tool to use

OSP Check-in
- Have a lot of time available when doing the OSP Check-in tool. It is very time consuming.
- Meet with the client before administering the OSP Check-In tool to get to know him/her, their goals, weaknesses, and strengths, their personal and academic background; the ability to question properly can depend on how well you know the client.
- Short quantitative tests would be a useful adjunct to the OSP and would create a more comprehensive assessment. The OSP was by far the least intimidating tool for the clients. To combine the breadth of the OSP with the careful leveling of either the CAMERA or the PDQ as a second test would likely be the best scenario when transitioning a client to a program with acceptance criteria based on academic proficiency.
- Allow enough time to lessen the fear for clients of such an official test and assessment tool.
- Use OSP when basic literacy student has learned some Essential Skills and is able to communicate with the assessor well and able to ask questions to clarify the questions. Compare the online version (either facilitated or independently scored) with the student's NOC code for their job or future job, or a job that shows their skills and abilities (i.e. can use phone, type, organize, file, etc, compare to receptionist/admin. assistant). Follow up with another literacy assessment if needed.
- The OSP is an intake interview-like tool and not to be assumed as a "given" of someone's Essential Skill Levels.

PDQ Series
- Recommend clients do the PDQ tutorial and practice questions before taking the PDQ test.
- For the PDQ Series tool, be sure to get enough training and understand the limitations of the assessment.
- PDQ is useful for students heading to academic upgrading or on-the-job training, as the report indicates which literacy and Essential Skills they need to strengthen. Interview the student to obtain their background education and workplace and skill inventory before administering this test so that you have a good picture of the student and are sure they can do this test. Skill levels need to be developed to some degree to take this test, and they need to be okay using the computer. The tutorial was not at all indicative of the complexity of this test, as it was simple enough to be called boring, as opposed to the test which was extremely broad in scope regarding topics and ideas.
- The PDQ takes into account the skills people use in their everyday life, but requires good computer and mouse skills.

TOWES
- Use the TOWES website to prepare clients for the assessment.
- For the TOWES test, ensure each assessor has a great deal of time, well beyond what is recommended. This is due to clients' lack of commitment to show up for the various segments of the test.
- TOWES is especially useful for people in the trades and who have specific, productive work experience. It is a workplace credential. Taking this test requires an ability to be fearlessly diligent in trying unfamiliar things.
- Realize that the TOWES requires someone to have been in a workplace environment and recently and the individual cannot be ESL.

- Choose an assessment tool that best compliments the learner's goal; TOWES is most suitable for employment goals, but not necessarily for entrance to a credit program.

CAMERA
- Use Camera for low-literacy students, (intake, ongoing assessments) and follow up with a second CAMERA test after training has shown progress. The test has a writing skills component and this is very useful for lower level students or students who want a comprehensive literacy assessment. It delivers consistently good results for the student and for the program's assessor, and provides real-life, recognizable tasks.
- The CAMERA does not test above a low level ES-3. Always present results in a positive manner, even when they're low...find something they did well!
- The whole CAMERA system is very useful in an LBS program.