

Summary: Learners with English

Literacy Needs (R011RSc)

2000 PROJECT REPORT

Access and Equity in Online Learning

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The Project

Access and Equity in Online Learning – Stage 1 Strategy 2000

The project initiated national discussions in States and Territories with stakeholders in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector on the relevance of cultural, learning style differences to the delivery of learning by information and communication technologies. The full report on this website addresses the background, issues and barriers for the following ANTA targeted equity groups:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners;
- Learners with disabilities; and
- Learners with English literacy needs.

The following few pages briefly summarise the main issues arising from the report.

Readers who are looking for the results of national focus groups should read the full report.

Learners with English literacy needs

- * **Generic issues** for the three target groups
- + **Specific issues** for learners with disability

Background

+ Definition of Literacy

Definition of Literacy: “how adults use written information to function well”.

Two pages of discussion on what this means is a **‘must read’** for managers and practitioners.

ABS survey 1996

+6.2 million Australians between the ages of 15 and 74 have poor and very poor literacy and numeracy skills. A full discussion of the literacy issues from *‘Aspects of Literacy: Assessed Literacy skills’, 1996.*

Some key points:

Definition: Literacy was defined as a continuum of each of three types of literacy, prose literacy, document literacy and quantitative literacy. Progression along the continuum was characterised by an increased ability to process information. To make reporting easier five levels were characterised.

Level 1: very poor literacy skills including those not able to complete tasks and those experiencing considerable difficulty with many of the printed materials.

2.6 million Australians had poor level skills.

- Approximately 1 million of this group did not speak English as their first language.
- 22% had a post school qualification.
- 11to12% are employed, 30 to 31% unemployed.
- 41% to 47% of Indigenous Australian people were at level 1.
 - ✓ 62% did not complete the highest level of secondary schooling. (This survey did not include remote areas).
- 36% read books weekly.
- 14% wrote more than a page at least weekly.

Level 2: experiencing some difficulty in using printed materials of everyday life.

3.6 million Australians estimated to have this level of ability with Literacy and numeracy.

➤ 11 to 12% employed, 30 to 31% unemployed.

Level 3: ability to cope with a varied range of material found in everyday life and extract numbers embedded in complex displays.

4.8 million Australians are able to cope with varied material in every day life and at work but not with a high level of proficiency.

Level 4: good literacy skills, ability to use higher order skills matching and integrating information and able to perform arithmetic operations.

2.0 million Australians have good skills.

Level 5: very good literacy skills, high level inferences, process conditional information and multiple operations sequentially.

300,000 Australians estimated to have high-level skills.

The literacy skills of more than 6 million Australians have been shown to fall short of those which software developers, Web designers and others in the ICT industry often appear to take for granted as normal and in the natural possession of all users.

The ABS survey heavily underlines the gap between level 1/2 and 4/5 and the danger that online learning will exaggerate the gap where access and equity policies demand that the gap be closed.

Planning

* **Providing advice at the local level** for access and equity groups needs to feed into state and national planning and be informed by it.

* Access and Equity needs to become part of the online learning culture.

* **There is a danger of placing over-much trust in technology** and telecommunications to serve the education and training needs of the Target Groups.

* **Critical input and advice from target groups and the specialists** is needed at all levels from policy development, program development and translation to the online environment.

Learner Support

+ Adults with low levels of literacy will often experience inhibiting emotional blocks when endeavouring to master computer skills.

*** Critical input and advice must be sought from target groups and specialist officers** in the system for their support needs.

*** New manipulative skills such as typing, mouse clicking**, scrolling, drop-down boxes and the specialised way language is applied to technology.

*** Negotiation of the learning process** with online individuals as a genuine partnership to achieve the learning outcomes is critical to success.

*** Human interaction is critical** and engagement with other learners can be crucial to learning effectively.

*** Collaboration between institutions, providers and their local community** is seen as ameliorating the isolation of the online learner.

*** Successful delivery of online learning must include technical support** and student services support.

Content and Delivery

+ Teaching via the Internet requires learning materials for students with low literacy that are:

- intrinsically and actively interesting in themselves;
- directly relevant to their own concerns and information and action needs;
- graduated in complexity of both content and literacy demand to enable basic skills to be acquired as soon as possible without unnecessary distractions, and yet to build the students' capabilities for dealing with all forms of text that they will encounter in real life; and
- enhanced by interaction with other people – the teacher, fellow students, family or community members, workmates – discussing ideas, confirming progress, getting help.

*** Learners with low English literacy levels will encounter major barriers** in the forms of language, including the specialised grammar, syntax and vocabulary characteristics on Web pages. They must understand this language and be comfortable with it if online learning is to work for them.

Curriculum

* **Learners with low literacy levels are concentrated at the lower end** of the hierarchy of accredited programs, particularly pre-vocational programs that are far less available in the current system.

Professional Development

* **Teachers should be proficient in the use of computers** and in accessing, navigating and otherwise utilising the Internet.

* Infrastructure

- Learners with English literacy needs tend to have low socio-economic status. Ready access to the essential hardware and software must not be assumed or taken for granted.
- Successful delivery of online learning must include technical support and student services support in cost structures and resource management strategies.

* Marketing

- Lack of information to target groups showing the learning opportunities and services they can make use of within the VET sector is a serious issue. Learners with English literacy needs are totally unaware that there are new ways available for them to improve their literacy and numeracy skills through working online.

Some Common issues of design

Layout

- Use large print;
- Audio format is often preferred to print;
- Multimedia documents are often preferred;
- Simple high contrast fonts for optimum readability;
- All graphics should have text alternatives and labels;
- Consistent page layout;
- Navigation bars;
- Site map; and
- Tables of contents.

Design

- Directions broken down to simple steps;
- Avoid jargon;
- White space and bullets help focus the learner;
- Orientation information; and
- Simple language.

*** Other issues discussed in the report**

- Sources of information on copyright; and
- Explicit guidelines needed for plagiarism.

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This report documents information gained from students and practitioners working in online learning areas of a selection of TAFE institutions and VET provider organisations across Australia. Their time and input are very much appreciated, without which this project would not have been possible.

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