

WHAT WORKS IN INNOVATION AND EDUCATION IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR ADULTS WITH BASIC SKILL NEEDS THROUGH FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

STUDY OUTLINE

The OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) will conduct a two-year international study of exemplary teaching and assessment for adults with basic skill needs. The study will address significant gaps in understanding of "what works", for whom and under what circumstances, and will identify policy levers to improve the quality of provision for this population.

Improving teaching and assessment for adults with basic literacy and numeracy skill needs is crucial to meeting lifelong learning goals for greater equity of opportunity, raising overall levels of productivity, and promoting improvements in individual well-being and social cohesion. Data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) illustrate the scale of the challenge for policy systems. According to the 1998 International Adult Literacy Survey, in the majority of the 20 countries surveyed, between 14 and 23 per cent of adults are able to meet only the lowest standards of literacy and numeracy proficiency (Level 1). (Among the participating countries, the percentage of adults not meeting this standard range from a low of 8 per cent to a high of 43 per cent.) The more recent Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey (ALL) (Statistics Canada and OECD, 2005) of adult skills across six countries, finds that between one-third and two-thirds of adult populations do not attain Level 3, the level considered by most experts as the "suitable minimum" for meeting the demands of daily work and life. Communities as well as individuals with basic skill needs are thus likely to realise significant economic and social benefits in addressing these challenges.

At the policy level, lack of knowledge on results may affect public investment in education for adults with basic skill needs. Programme data on outcomes other than employment or even for longer-term employment are rare and there is little attention to ongoing evaluation and programme adjustment to meet learner needs (OECD, forthcoming).

Adults with low basic skills are the least likely to participate in lifelong learning opportunities. Lack of motivation and poor quality programmes, poor instruction, and/or lack of knowledge regarding results are also major factors (OECD, forthcoming).

Aims of the Study

The CERI initiative will address these challenges, fulfilling the following four objectives:

1. *Develop studies of exemplary teaching and assessment practice for adults with basic skill needs.* Working with a team of country-based and international experts, CERI will conduct case studies of exemplary practice in a range of settings (community centres, work-based programmes, and initiatives aimed at non-traditional learners). The studies will pay special attention to "formative

assessment”– that is, how instructors assess learner progress, and tailor subsequent teaching to meet identified learner needs. The exemplary cases will also highlight the ways in which information on learner progress is used to strengthen the quality of basic skills programmes or initiatives and to generate new knowledge about what works and why.

2. *Bring together international scholarship on teaching and assessment for adults with basic skill needs.* CERI will commission reviews of literature on teaching and assessment for adults with basic skill needs from different linguistic traditions. The international reviews will provide a view of the range of conceptual approaches to teaching and assessment for those with low basic skills, and will identify and draw upon existing and ongoing evidence-based research. The reviews will inform the CERI analysis of the policy and practice identified in background reports and case studies.
3. *Identify effective policy levers for improving the quality of provision in the adult basic skills sector.* The CERI study will identify the guiding principles or ideas that have influenced the development of policies related to assessment and teaching in the adult basic skills in the participating countries. It will identify barriers to wider practice of effective assessment and evaluation, and explore how programme leaders and practitioners in exemplary cases have addressed those barriers. The study will also explore policy approaches to creating or strengthening “cultures of evaluation”, and to ensuring that assessment and evaluation are relevant and useful to learners, practitioners, programme leaders, and policy officials.
4. *Create opportunities for policy officials, researchers and practitioners to exchange insights and ideas on promoting effective teaching, assessment and evaluation.* Country-based researchers participating in the study will be involved in the international CERI network throughout the study. They will participate in case study development and analysis of findings. At the conclusion of the study, policy officials, researchers and practitioners from OECD countries will gather to discuss the study findings and implications.

The study will be conducted under the auspices of CERI’s What Works in Innovation series. The series, developed to provide timely international analyses of significant innovations in education, is aimed at a broad audience of educational policy-makers, practitioners, learners, and the general public.

Building Cultures of Evaluation

Since OECD countries adopted “lifelong learning for all” as an overarching goal for education in 1996, countries have made important strides in strengthening systems and expanding learning opportunities for adults with low basic skills. As identified in the OECD Thematic Reviews on Adult Learning, there are new national qualification systems and pathways for progression, strengthened guidance and counselling for adults with basic skill needs, improved access, and financing mechanisms to support lower-income individuals and small firms (OECD, 2003; OECD 2005).

These are significant developments. Yet there are still important challenges for policy – particularly in improving the quality of teaching and assessment and programme evaluation. High-quality empirical studies in this field are limited. A recent English-language review of controlled trials on adult literacy and numeracy interventions and outcomes found very few attempts at rigorous evaluation (Torgerson, *et al.*, 2004). A separate review of the English language literature on assessment to promote adult learners’ confidence found no material of direct relevance (although they did identify literature of indirect relevance, but again, only a few high-quality empirical studies) (Torrance and Coultas, 2004).

The Thematic Reviews on Adult Learning also note that programme data on outcomes other than employment or even for longer-term employment outcomes are rare. The task of gathering outcome information is made more difficult by the complexity of the adult basic skills sector, and the fact that learners have idiosyncratic goals and may participate in programmes for limited or non-continuous periods of time. The lack of information regarding programme quality and outcomes can lead to inefficient investment, or alternatively, under-investment in basic skills education and lost opportunities to address goals for equity, economic productivity and social cohesion.

In response to these challenges, several OECD countries are placing greater emphasis on programme accountability, building stronger cultures of evaluation, and promoting effective approaches to learner assessment. A few countries have also made investments on what works to bolster the quality and quantity of research of effective teaching, learning and assessment for adults with basic skill needs.

The CERI initiative will build on and complement the Thematic Reviews on Adult Learning. It will include analysis of the range of policy approaches to improving learner assessment and evaluation and will link policy officials, researchers and practitioners in an international network. It will place a particular emphasis on “formative” approaches to learner assessment and evaluation – that is the use of assessment or evaluation data not only to judge individual or programme performance, but also to shape improvements in instruction, programme delivery and policy strategies.

Learning from “What Works” in Formative Assessment and Evaluation

The focus on formative approaches to assessment and evaluation is motivated by very positive results found in the compulsory sector. CERI’s recent study on formative assessment in lower secondary schools found that formative assessment, when practiced systematically, promotes greater equity of student outcomes, and builds “learning to learn” skills (OECD, 2005). In their 1998 review of the English-language literature, Black and Wiliam described the achievement gains associated with formative assessment as “among the largest ever reported for educational interventions” (Black and Wiliam, 1998). These results suggest that formative approaches merit attention in adult education, as well.

Formative assessment may be particularly appropriate for adults with basic skill needs. Instructors using formative approaches interact with learners to assess their progress and understanding, and to adjust teaching strategies to better meet identified learner needs. Teaching and learning are thus tailored more closely to the needs of diverse learners (diverse in terms of age, life experience, approaches to learning, culture, ethnicity, and so on). Formative assessment also places an explicit focus on identifying and building upon learners’ prior knowledge and skills – whether gained in formal education settings, or informal work or other settings.

The “individualisation” of learning implied by the model also holds significant promise for adults who have not performed well in prior educational experiences, yet bring a variety of life and work experiences to the learning setting. The emphasis on tracking progress toward learning goals (a criterion-referenced approach to assessment), rather than comparing their progress with other learners (a norm-referenced approach to assessment) may also be particularly appropriate for learners who have developed an aversion to the competitive nature of formal, “summative” tests and examinations of their capabilities. At the same time, the explicit focus on progress toward learning goals and on ensuring that teaching strategies are responsive to individual learning needs helps to maintain a focus on high quality outcomes.

While not all countries participating in the study have explicit policies promoting formative assessment in adult basic skills education, per se, there is a common concern with the potential for data gathered in assessment and evaluation processes to help shape improvements in the quality of provision. Instructors and programme leaders who use data to shape teaching and learning strategies often generate

new knowledge about what works and are better able to share that knowledge with colleagues – within institutions or through broader networks. High quality evaluation data on adult basic skills education may also inform policy decisions regarding investments in adult learning, and approaches to improving rates of participation in basic skills learning, and creating greater coherence among educational, economic and social policy goals. These approaches – at classroom, programme, or policy level – may be considered formative, whether formally labelled as such, or not.

Identifying and Addressing Barriers

Programmes for adults with basic skills needs are very likely to face some of the same barriers to formative practice found in the compulsory school sector. The study, *Formative Assessment: Improving Learning in Secondary Classrooms* (OECD, 2005) found major barriers to formative practice, including:

- Perceived tensions between high-visibility “summative” tests of learner performance (and to hold schools accountable) and formative assessments of student learning.
- A lack of coherence between system, school and classroom approaches to assessment and evaluation.
- Objections that resource and organisational implications of formative assessment make it impractical.

In the adult basic skills sector, new qualifications and certification systems, while important for ensuring transparency and quality in training and education, may also influence many instructors to teach solely “to the test”, overlooking the development of learners’ problem-solving or critical thinking skills. As noted above, data on long-term outcomes for adult basic skills programmes are rare. Where data are gathered, the information may not necessarily be used to shape improvements in programme delivery. Within programmes, instructors may point to the difficulty of teaching groups of students with extremely varied learning needs, open enrolment schemes that allow students to join or leave classes at any point, increasingly detailed curriculum requirements associated with new qualification schemes, and the lack of staff and materials to meet learner needs.

By focusing on “what works” (as opposed to what doesn’t work – also a valid approach), the case studies will highlight how programme leaders and instructors have identified and addressed these and other challenges. The exemplary case studies will allow a close examination of what effective formative assessment looks like in practice, how instructors respond to a variety of student needs, and conditions at programme and policy level that are essential to successful implementation.

The exemplary cases will also provide a glimpse in to how research and innovation are disseminated within the adult basic skills sector. There is a relative dearth of information in this field regarding effective programme and organisational management, networks for professionals, professional development programmes, the development of new training programmes, or tools and support for assessment and instruction.

Study Methodology and Country Involvement

CERI is inviting two levels of participation for this What Works study. All countries (or regions) are invited to prepare background reports on the landscape of teaching and assessment for adults with basic skill needs. These reports (described in more detail below) will help further understanding of challenges for policy, research and practice in this emerging field of interest.

Systems that are developing or have recently launched initiatives related to teaching and assessment for adults with basic skill needs should participate at a more intensive level. Studies of exemplary practice in these countries – which will be at the heart of the What Works research – will help advance understanding not only of what works, but also why, for whom and under what circumstances. The case study systems will also be able to share strategies for promoting effective teaching, assessment and evaluation in this field.

Those wishing to contribute to the CERI study will be asked to appoint a country or regional expert to develop a background report and to attend a meeting in Paris to help develop the parameters for these reports (the meeting was held 4-5 July 2005). In systems contributing case studies, the expert will also be responsible for identification of potential cases (based on criteria outlined below), participation in a week-long OECD country visit, and co-authorship of the case studies (with the OECD-appointed expert).

To summarise, the two levels of participation for this study are:

- Participation in the development of a **country background report**, OR
- Full participation, which will involve identification and development of **exemplary cases of innovative practice**, in addition to a country background report.

CERI will also commission reviews of relevant international literature to clarify concepts and approaches to teaching and assessment for adults with basic skill needs.

An initial meeting of OECD and country and regional experts was held at OECD Headquarters in Paris 4- 5 July 2005. The research and data gathering phase will last through March 2006; findings and analysis will be presented to the Board in October 2006, and published as a final report the following December. The final report will serve as the focal point for international dissemination and networking.

A detailed timeline is presented in the annex to this report.

The Country Background Reports

As noted above, there are promising new developments in research on effective instruction and assessment for basic skills education. But there is also a need to understand how research and programme development in this field can make its way to the realm of policy and can impact wider practice. The purpose of the country background reports, therefore, is to better understand the ways in which policy, research, and practice may address challenges in adult basic skills education.

Background reports, ranging from 10 to 20 pages, should include description of:

- *The nature and scale of challenges facing countries in regard to adult basic skills education.* When possible, the background report should include information regarding the target population (socio-demographic information including age, ethnicity, gender, urban or rural dwelling, and so on), the percentage of individuals identified as having low basic skill needs, and known impact on social and economic development.
- *Any major national or regional programmes or policies developed to meet the needs of adults with low basic skill needs.* The report should include information on underlying principles and goals shaping adult basic skills education and any ongoing debates, specific programme or policy goals and priorities, and their scope and scale. When possible, the report should include

information regarding the extent to which programmes or policies focus on literacy and/or numeracy for adults with basic skill needs.

- *Profiles of instructors.* The profile should include description of instructor's professional status, working conditions, as well as opportunities for training and professional development.
- *Gaps in provision and take-up.* The report should identify major gaps in provision and barriers to addressing identified needs.
- *Assessment policies/structures.* The report should include information on formal assessment for adults with basic skill needs, including qualification examinations, participation and performance targets, and so on.
- *Formative assessment.* The report should include any information on studies, major programme evaluations and/or inspectorate findings regarding the "state of the art" in instruction and formative assessment in adult basic skills education. The reports should also include promising innovations or research directly informing policy and practice in teaching and formative assessment for adults with basic skill needs in the country, and avenues for wider dissemination (such as professional development programmes, and formal and informal networks).

Note that the background reports do not need to provide in-depth reviews of the literature on adult learning. The Secretariat will commission in-depth reviews of international empirical research from different linguistic traditions on teaching and assessment for adults with basic skill needs, as described below.

The Innovative Cases

As with previous What Works studies, case studies on innovations and exemplary practice will be at the heart of the work. The case studies are intended to further understanding of what works and, importantly, how instructors and programme leaders have put innovations into practice.

Each of the case study countries should identify two to three exemplary cases meeting the criteria outlined below. The case studies should:

- *Be from initiatives designed to meet learning needs for adults with basic skill needs.* While the cases selected should be specifically targeted to meet the needs of adults with low basic skills, they may be drawn from a range of settings (*e.g.* community centres, work-based programmes, and initiatives aimed at non-traditional students in further or higher education or other) and include learners from a variety of socio-demographic backgrounds. They should offer lessons of relevance to practitioners across the field of basic skills instruction and provide insight as to how practitioners share and build new knowledge. Cases should therefore feature organisations, networks, or initiatives where practitioners are working in partnership to promote innovations in teaching and assessment.
- *Focus on formative assessment used in connection with deliberate teaching strategies.* The studies should provide examples of approaches to interactive assessment of learner progress and understanding, to tailoring subsequent teaching to meet identified needs, and to balancing instruction to meet a variety of needs within a group. The cases should pay particular attention to how instructors draw upon evidence of effective teaching and assessment practice, as well as how they build communities of practice and share knowledge.

- *Provide evidence of what works.* The cases selected should be able to demonstrate systematic practice of formative approaches to assessment and teaching, and show that those approaches are associated with changes in learning processes. The cases should include some demonstrable evidence or indicators of ways in which the formative assessment process has improved learner performance, increased self-confidence, and improved rates of learner persistence. Learner and instructor views on the impact of assessment methods on their progress toward individual goals will also be important. Experts should look to a broad range of indicators in order to understand formative approaches in the various case study settings. Evidence on short-term (and where possible, long-term) social and economic outcomes may be included.

The Case Study Selection Process

In order to ensure that the exemplary case studies meet criteria outlined above:

- Country experts should preview selected programmes in order to ensure they meet criteria for the What Works study as outlined above. Country experts should observe the quality of instructor questioning, the variety and quality of learning activities (are instructors finding ways to avoid the “boredom factor”?), the quality of their relationships with learners, and opportunities for learners to interact. “Softer” characteristics of instructors, such as patience, listening skills, and empathy are also important.
- Initial interviews with instructors may also help to determine the extent to which instructors are able to articulate why they are taking specific approaches, and whether and how the strategies they use make a difference in learners’ performance.
- Case study experts should determine whether the programme will provide lessons of relevance to other adult basic skills programmes, and can describe the circumstances under which teaching is thriving.

Newly initiated or ongoing innovations or pilot projects would also be of interest for this study. While OECD cannot initiate pilot projects for the purpose of this study, there is no reason to exclude pilot projects, so long as they fit established criteria for case study selection.

The International Literature Reviews

CERI will take the lead responsibility for commissioning two to three in-depth reviews of international empirical research on teaching and assessment for adults with basic skill needs across different linguistic traditions. The literature reviews will look much more closely at the breadth and quality of evidence in the field, the conceptualisation of formative assessment and related teaching strategies in basic skills education, and what is known about the impact of specific approaches and techniques for different learners. The literature reviews will contribute to analysis of practice and policy across countries.

Country Contributions

Country participation through case studies involves voluntary contributions to cover the costs of travel. This is set at 12 000 Euros (6 000 Euros per year over two years). The costs related to the preparation of country reports and participating in international meetings (2005 and 2006), are met by countries themselves.

ANNEX: TIMELINE

PHASE ONE, Spring – Summer 2005: Country decisions regarding participation in the study

- Those countries wishing to contribute to the background study as well as those countries also wishing to feature two to three innovative cases of effective teaching and assessment for adults with basic skill needs were asked to make **a final decision regarding their participation by 20 May 2005**. Several countries have already indicated that they will participate in the CERI study. A few countries have indicated strong interest, but have yet to make a final decision. These countries are strongly encouraged to make final decisions by **15 September 2005**.
- The Secretariat will commission two to three international literature reviews on teaching learning and assessment for adults. These literature reviews will highlight research that has had an impact on policy and practice. If possible, the literature reviews will also identify gaps in research and practice.

PHASE TWO, Summer - Autumn: Finalisation of conceptual framework and design

- Meeting of country experts, those commissioned for overall literature reviews, and team involved in country visits, convened by the Secretariat **4-5 July 2005**. The agenda of the meeting included:
 - Clarification of concepts and exchange of developments in research, policy and practice in each participating country.
 - Agreement on study methods, and development of the broad framework for analysis.
 - Discussion of potential cases; and,
 - Planning of logistics for visits and gathering of data.

PHASE THREE, September 2005 - February 2006: Completion of background reports, case study visits by country and OECD experts and completion of case study analysis, completion of literature reviews

- Background reports, ranging from 10 to 20 pages, to be completed by November 2005.
- One week visits to each of the case study countries by the OECD Secretariat/consultant for data gathering, including interviews with a range of stakeholders, and observations between September 2005 and March 2006.
- Finalisation of international literature reviews by March 2006.
- Finalisation of case studies by early March 2006.

PHASE FOUR, March– September 2006: Analysis of results

- Analysis of the background reports, research reviews and case study evidence.
- Elaboration of policy implications.
- Drafting of Secretariat report.

PHASE FIVE, October 2006 Onwards: Finalisation of report, publication and dissemination

- Presentation of study findings to the Governing Board at the Autumn 2006 meeting.
- Incorporation of Governing Board comments and finalisation of the draft report.
- Organisation of a major conference and other dissemination events for participating and interested countries.

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