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Glossary of Abbreviations

ABLE	Adult Basic Learning Examination
AEO	Adult Education Officer
ALO	Adult Literacy Organiser
ALS	Adult Literacy Service
AQTF	Australian Quality Training Framework
BKSB	Basic and KeySKILLSBUILDER (Assessment Tools)
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CABES	Clare Adult Basic Education Service (Co. Clare VEC)
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CTAD	Cambridge Training and Development
CTC	Community Training Centre
DES	Department of Education and Skills, (formerly Department of Education and Science) Republic of Ireland
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, UK
EDC	Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ESTYN	Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
FE	Further Education
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ITABE	Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education
ITB	Institute of Technology Blanchardstown
LLNP	Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (Australia)
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency Northern Ireland
ILP	Individual Learning Plan
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association
MLJ	Mapping the Learning Journey
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Educational Research
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NRS	National Reporting System
NIACE	National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
NRDC	National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, UK
PLA	Pre Learning Advice
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, UK
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
STTC	Senior Traveller Training Centres
TABE	Test of Adult Basic Education
TES	Traveller Education Strategy
VEC	Vocational Educational Committees
VET	Vocational Education and Training (Australia)
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
WELL	Workplace English Language and Literacy Program (Australia)
WRAT	Wide Range Achievement Test

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<i>Helen Casey</i>	Executive Director National Research and Development Centre for Adult University of London
<i>Gerard Griffin</i>	National Co-ordinator Senior Traveller Training Centres
<i>Cath Hamilton</i>	Further and Adult Education Division, Government of Scotland
<i>Sylwia Kazmierczak</i>	Research Associate, Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra
<i>Bryony Lanham</i>	Basic Skills Agency, Wales
<i>Dr. Catherine Maunsell</i>	Lecturer in Education (Psychology), St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra
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<i>Rosemarie McGill</i>	County Co-ordinator for Research & Development and Literacy Services, Co. Dublin VEC
<i>Valerie McLoughlin</i>	Administrator, Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College Drumcondra
<i>Gerry O'Shea</i>	FÁS
<i>Toni Schiavone</i>	Executive Director. Basic Skills Agency Wales
<i>Irene Schwab</i>	Institute of Education, London
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The IVEA-NALA Assessment Committee commissioned research, funded by the Department of Education and Science (now the Department of Education and Skills), with the aim of making available nationally standardised initial assessment tools for literacy. It is envisaged that this initial piece of research will inform awareness regarding the possible development of a standardised literacy initial assessment tool for use by adult literacy practitioners in further and adult education in Ireland. This research report examines international literature on initial assessment and screening, including specific tools used internationally, as well as engaging in two phases of consultations with VECs throughout Ireland. One phase involved an online survey of VEC's practices and views on the area of initial assessment and received a very high response rate with 29 out of 33 VECs responding. The second phase involved consultation seminars with VEC representatives where 17 VECs participated.

From the review, it is evident that no one international standardised tool can be endorsed as appropriate for an Irish context. Existing tools provide limited sensitivity to cultural bias, offer little culturally relevant themes for communication, are largely silent about test-retest reliability and in computerised form raise other issues regarding creating an additional barrier to learning across the digital divide, especially at the lower levels (i.e., not FETAC levels 4-6). There is a widely held view in the international literature that norm referenced assessment in general has negative educational and social effects. In recent years there has rightly been a move away from norm referencing. Criterion referenced assessment is more likely to be used when, among other things, there is a desire to remove barriers in access to education. Any tools as part of an initial needs and skills check process must not be norm referenced but rather criterion based, as well as self-referenced to the previous performance of the learner.

The survey results show that most of the tools currently in use by VECs have been developed outside Ireland and have not been adapted. Some have derived their normative standard from children and others, though normed on adults, have not been normed on a representative sample of Irish adult learners nor on ethnic minority groups. Current assessment is not normative for the Travelling community and this clearly needs to be addressed to give expression to the Traveller Education Strategy and to provide adequate meeting of concerns regarding cultural sensitivity. Any tools developed must occur not simply through trialling them with members of the Travelling community, but also through centrally involving them in their design.

Strong views were expressed by VEC representatives about the language used in the assessment process, with concern raised about the appropriateness of the word 'assessment' and how it might impact on learners approaching adult education services for the first time. Similarly concerns are raised in the international literature regarding the term 'test'. The language of this identification process needs to reflect a learner centred rather than institution centred agenda and therefore the terms 'screening' and initial 'assessment' must be replaced both in language and in substance. Movement from such loaded terms conjuring up associations with medical diagnosis and school exams has already occurred in other jurisdictions. There is a need to move beyond deficit models of understanding. Interviews, for example, have been shown to play an effective humanistic role in answering learners' questions, reassuring learners where necessary and providing an opportunity for dialogue between a learner and a practitioner/education provider. Such interviews must not be abandoned but rather strengthened. Guidelines on how to conduct interviews, suggestions for topic questions and training should be provided in order to create a situation in which the

interviewer and the learner can get the most out of their initial meeting. Having an assessment protocol, which protects the use of interviews and places tools firmly within a holistic process of assessment but not as the assessment is essential. Of the 26 VECs who responded to the question on information provided to the student, all reported that they gave some information to the student following the assessment process. Nevertheless, the level of information provided was highly variable. The suggestion at the VEC consultation seminar of 'a manual of learning tools – a menu from which they could select tools' is a pertinent one. VEC representatives were aware of the economic climate and concerns were raised about the resources available to provide, operate and train staff needed to successfully put in practice any new initial assessment tools.

In VEC respondents' comments it was clear that an assessment tool has to be measured against the ability of a centre to use it and to respond to it with appropriate support for the learner. The VEC consultation seminar emphasis on a welcoming environment and non-threatening assessment is strongly supported by international research on overcoming fear of failure. The concern regarding a mechanistic, institution centred tool versus a humanistic, learner centred tool needs to be firmly addressed in any future development of initial assessment. 22 out of 29 participating VECs reported that learner self-assessment was a feature in their assessment procedures. Many VEC participants noted that they would like to see tools that support self-assessment, encouraging self-reflection and continued assessment from entry to exit points, allowing students chart their progress. International research which advocates avoiding using a standardised test with learners when they first begin a programme is to be endorsed, due to the fact that adult learners may be nervous and frightened and therefore their abilities may be underestimated. This is particularly relevant for lowest FETAC levels and together with the vital need to provide an initial welcoming environment, it highlights the importance of an initial semi-structured informal interview in a supportive setting, rather than an initial testing and 'screening' with a tool. Personal development, consciousness raising, self-confidence and social awareness of citizenship, as well as cultural, empowerment and community development features are all possible social benefits of participation in classes and courses where the learner may not fit the initial criteria, based on the results of a screening and initial assessment process. The demotivating effects of being removed from a common cohort of friends for reasons based purely on academic performance need to be recognised. A concern also arises that any putative screening process could have the effect of deterring already fearful men and women from particularly marginalized backgrounds from accessing adult education courses. The use of such an initial needs and skills check must be for an agenda that serves not only the academic learning needs of the learner but also these wider needs, including personal and social needs, as well as community needs, given full priority in the Irish White Paper on Lifelong Learning.

Any initial needs and skills check process must provide scope for the learner to construct meaning rather than simply process decontextualised information. The language being used needs to be meaningful to the life and culture of the learner and the process requires one where the learner is in control of and has scope for choice within the features of the needs and skills identification process. Adult education is traditionally committed to principles of active learning and these also need to be applied to the learner's active learning regarding their own learning needs. These issues rule out the use of multiple choice testing and cloze tests in any form of this needs and skills identification process. The VEC consultation seminar suggestion of the possible use of IT tools at levels 4-6 only is to be endorsed. However, it is important to be as inclusive as possible and the option needs to be given to an individual even at these levels to choose between a paper based or computer format; social class bias may also occur in an initial assessment process that is ICT based.

Development of a free writing task checklist accords with international best practice as it allows for construction of meaning, culturally relevant linguistic expression, and relevance to the individual's life experience. Similarly, the informal interview conversation, which is nevertheless semi-structured, allows for best practice of self-assessment, offering the learner control over the process with consequent benefits for self-esteem and motivation as part of a strengths based dialogue which is also realistic about identifying needs. To accord with best practice, the proposed standardised tools would be culturally sensitive, equality proofed also in the sense that they would not indicate a social class or dialect bias. Any putative standardised assessment tool must not be used in isolation and must be part of an initial needs and skills check which commences with an informal, welcoming, semi-structured interview that gives scope for self-assessment.

Careful steps must be taken to ensure that this initial needs and skills check, including a range of standardised tools, does not become a kind of barrier for entry or prerequisite for entry to a course; it must be a tool for inclusion not exclusion. The issue of ownership of the initial needs and skills check data, noted in the consultation process with VECs, needs to be firmly addressed as being the property of the learner to be distributed by him/her to the institution through formal consent procedures. Standard consent procedures need to be developed to ensure the process of the standardised initial needs and skills check allows for ownership of the learner over the process and to ensure that intentions of a learner centred process are realised in outcomes. Placing the learner at the centre in taking responsibility for interpreting and acting upon the results of the initial needs and skills check ensures that such a check is used as a tool of inclusion, not as a barrier or exclusion; it provides a guidance, not a compulsion towards decision-making.

From a review of tools and practices in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, Australia, New Zealand, the US, as well as Ireland, four dimensions of initial assessment are recommended, now to be termed an initial needs and skills check. These aspects of a holistic process are: An initial semi-structured interview involving self-assessment; A piece of writing on a theme of relevance and interest chosen by the learner to be examined according to simple and transparent standardised criteria, such as those in Northern Ireland elucidated by The Free Writing Task Assessment Checklist, produced by the LSDA; A short tool with a menu of options for examining literacy with thematic content which can be chosen by the learner from a range of possibilities and which have been proofed for cultural sensitivity in direct dialogue with representatives of not only ethnic minority groups such as Travellers but also for social class bias proofing; Development of an individual education plan in dialogue with the learner, where the learner retains ownership over all of the needs and skills check information and is assured from the outset that the results are not being used in an exclusionary way.

The report concludes by outlining the key features of high quality Initial Needs and Skills Check tools to be developed in an Irish context, as part of an Initial Needs and Skills Check Process, to be distinguished from screening.

Introduction: Background to the Project

Vocational Education Committees (VECs) were established in 1930 and their original remit was to offer technical and vocational education to young people. Their role however has broadened significantly since then. They are the main providers of adult education in the state and have played a critical role in the development of adult education in Ireland (Maunsell et al. 2008). Each year, thousands of learners walk through their doors. Many learners also re-enter education through VECs. Learning may take place in a variety of different programmes, contexts and environments, including community colleges, colleges of further education, Gaeilcholaistí, Youthreach Centres, Senior Traveller Training Centres (STTCs) and within the prison service. The VECs provide further education and vocational training for both young people and adults. Further education includes adult literacy and a range of adult literacy services are offered including one-to-one tuition, group tuition and intensive literacy provision. Basic education programmes, including part-time options, for early school leavers, Travellers and the unemployed are also offered to allow adults obtain qualifications equivalent to upper secondary education.

This research examines the practices of initial assessment and offers recommendations on how best it can be used to strengthen the learner's experience. In the summer of 2008, the IVEA-NALA Assessment Committee commissioned research, funded by the Department of Education and Science (now the Department of Education and Skills) (DES), with the aim of making available nationally standardised initial assessment tools for literacy. The Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, undertook to carry out the initial phase of this research. It is envisaged that this aspect of the research will inform awareness regarding the possible development of a standardised literacy initial assessment tool for use by adult literacy practitioners in further and adult education in Ireland. The project was conducted in consultation with the project committee, which included representatives from the DES, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA).

While the experience of educational disadvantage for the individual learner may have changed little, the institutional environment enveloping that learner has altered substantially. As a result of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999, the National Framework of Qualifications, a 10 level system based on standards of knowledge, skills and competence, was introduced in 2003. The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) incorporates all qualifications and it allows learners to chart their progress and see what progression routes are open to them. The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) is the awarding body at levels 1-6 in the framework.

At levels 1-6 there is no formal procedure for screening for literacy. There is also no nationally consistent process of initial assessment in further education services. The increase in numbers of adults returning to education has raised the issue of a nationally consistent standardised procedure for screening and initial assessment, particularly for adults entering the adult basic education service and Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) provision, with low levels of formal education (typically below Junior Certificate). Youthreach, STTCs and Community Training Centres (CTCs) have also highlighted the need for some such procedures and drawn attention to the fact that there is no clear requirement that all centres should prioritise literacy provision and should provide literacy support (Ad hoc Working Group, 2008). A survey, conducted by the national coordinators of the centres, revealed the extent of the problem. There were no formal procedures for assessing literacy levels when a learner joins the centre in 28% of Youthreach centres, 20% of STTCs and 25% of CTCs. It is envisaged that there is a need for structured procedures, especially

due to the fact that learners in these centres are largely drawn from communities, which traditionally experience high levels of educational disadvantage.

Various screening and initial assessment tools do exist but no instrument has been standardised against the Irish National Framework of Qualifications. Practice in VECs varies widely and demand for supports for initial assessments and assessment of learners has been strongly expressed in recent times.

Multiple reports have indicated the need for adult education provision in Ireland (DES, 1998; Report on the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning, 2002; DES, 2005). In 1997, the OECD *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) revealed the scale of the adult literacy problem in Ireland with almost 25% of adults scoring at the lowest level. Denny et al (1999) attributed this relatively low level of literacy to a cohort effect – the presence of an older age group who had less access to secondary education due to fees being required prior to 1967. While the survey did clearly demonstrate substantially lower levels of literacy in older age groups it also revealed poor levels of literacy among the 16-25 age groups which indicates that free secondary education and more educational opportunities have not eradicated the problem. In 2002 the Adult Literacy Survey was replicated in prisons in Ireland and a comparison between the two surveys revealed that the Irish prison population has a much larger group with very poor literacy skills compared to the general population. It also provided a much more detailed breakdown of results at Level 1 or below than the general IALS survey did. Both surveys gave participants a 'screening test' that measured literacy at an elementary level – participants had to complete two out of the six tasks at this level before being allowed to proceed. In the prison survey however, due to the large number of prisoners who were unable to complete this screening test, a level called 'Pre Level 1' was introduced – the presence of which is indicative of the low levels of literacy. Almost 23% of male respondents and 17% of female respondents were unable to complete the screening test. The results of the prison survey revealed that half the prison population was at Level 1 or below. The survey indicated that a significant number of prisoners have almost no literacy skills and a large number of prisoners, young males in particular, have limited skills that would make it difficult for them to meet the challenges of modern life (Morgan & Kett, 2003).

The IALS has been the subject of much critique. However, despite this, the results of the 1997 survey in Ireland did serve as a catalyst for action in the area of adult education leading Share et al (2007) to note that while adult education was once one of the most neglected sectors in education provision it is now one of the most rapidly rising. Funding in the education sector for adult literacy increased from a base of €1,079m in 1997 to €16,476m in 2002 (Downes et al, 2006). In 2007 the funding for adult literacy totalled €26 million (NALA, 2007). Increase in funding has been matched by the increased presence of adult education issues at policy level. *Towards 2016: the ten-year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015* prioritises adult literacy in the area of adult education with a focus on helping adults from 'disadvantaged communities' to acquire literacy, numeracy and IT skills. In the current *National Development Plan (2007-2013)* €2.2 billion has been allocated for further education with priorities given to addressing the low literacy levels in the adult population and those who have not completed upper secondary school. *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy* (2007) published by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs identifies Ireland's current skills profile and specific objectives for Ireland's future skills requirements. The range of targets set include upskilling 70,000 adults from NFQ levels 1 and 2 to level 3 and aiming to ensure that by 2010 the proportion of the population aged 20-24 with an NFQ level 4 or 5 qualification should be increased to 93%. The National Action Plan

for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 has also set a target of reducing the proportion of the population between 16 and 64 with literacy needs to 10-15% by 2016. However recent budgets have impacted however on the Adult and Further Education sector with cuts to both BTEI programmes and STTCs.

The Irish government's White Paper on Adult Education (*Learning for Life*, 2000) and the *Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning* (2002) identified adult literacy and basic education as priority areas. The holistic nature of adult education in Ireland was illustrated by the priority areas of the White Paper which included not just economic concerns such as competitiveness but also priority areas of consciousness raising, citizenship, cohesion and cultural and community development. The targets of the White Paper on Adult Education for the National Adult Literacy Programme include 'a continuous increase in the numbers of clients reached' and 'prioritisation of those with lowest literacy levels'. The White Paper drew attention to the fact that the expansion in numbers of people participating in post-compulsory education in Ireland has been nothing short of dramatic. It notes that in 1966, 45% of people continued their education after the age of 15, while at the time of the White Paper's publication (2000) over 81% of school leavers had completed their Leaving Certificate leading the White Paper to acknowledge the widening gap in educational attainment between younger and older age groups. More recent statistics have indicated that the percentage of young people completing their Leaving Certificate is continuing to rise. In 2008 the DES published a report based on retention rates of pupils in second level schools. Results revealed that almost 84% of pupils who started their second level education in 1999 completed second level compared with just over 81% three years earlier.

In general, the report notes that retention rates in cities are lower than elsewhere. Furthermore it only takes into account students who begin second level education and thus the numbers of children (estimated to be around 1,000 according to the DES, 2005) who do not make the transition from primary to secondary level education are not included. It should also be noted that as retention in the education system increases, the consequences of 'failure' become more serious (Kellaghan, 2002). The DES acknowledges that their retention figures do not include students who did not complete the Leaving Certificate but who embarked on other educational pathways such as Youthreach or apprenticeship training. The Economic and Social Research Institute's School Leavers Survey of 2003/04 (ESRI, 2006) suggests that 53% of those who left school prior to the Leaving Certificate did participate in further training within a year of leaving school while the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2006) estimates that almost 12% of people aged between 18-24 have left school early i.e. their highest level of education is lower secondary or below. Worryingly a report into literacy levels in primary schools found that more than 30 per cent of children in primary schools designated as 'disadvantaged' suffer severe literacy problems (Eivers et al 2005).

These numbers put in context the challenges faced by the Adult and Further Education sector in Ireland, in working with both an older cohort who have literacy needs and a younger cohort who have been left behind. It underlines the diversity of learners who may have different motivations for learning and bring with them different life experiences. They may also have a range of physical, social, emotional and economic barriers (Looney, 2008). The increase in the number of adults returning to education raises the issue of developing a standardised procedure that is sensitive to individual learning needs and also fair and transparent. It is clear that an effective, strengths based assessment method for adults, which optimises the student learning experience and makes effective use of institutional resources is a priority. This research recognises the importance of establishing best practice in the area.

For the purposes of this research it is important to define clearly what we mean by literacy, screening for literacy and initial assessment. Literacy has been defined in many ways. In this project, literacy was understood to have many facets including listening, speaking, reading writing, numeracy and the ability to handle information. The complexity of the term 'literacy' is illustrated by the following definition.

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions (NALA, 2007).

This definition emphasises the many dimensions of literacy and may help to explain why some tools referred to in this report assess the broader term 'communications' and why some tools are also assessing Information Technology skills.

In this report the terms 'procedures' and 'process' are used in relation to assessment – it should be noted however that the use of these terms implies much more than just the use of tools.

A screening for literacy process may be viewed as taking place when learners first apply to join a course before they are enrolled. **Screening for literacy tools** (which may be used as part of this process) seek to identify whether a learner has a literacy need. It does not assess the extent of that need but simply ascertains if there is one. Many learners for example have a varying profile with different levels of skills, some skills may be strong in some areas but not so strong in others. Screening for literacy can be used to support adult learners to develop their learning by guiding their appropriate entry level. If a screening tool reveals that a learner has a literacy need, then the learner can avail of an initial assessment to discover the extent of that need.

Initial assessment is used to identify the extent of the literacy needs of adult learners. It should also identify learners' strengths and competencies. While screening for literacy will offer a rough indication of this, an initial assessment is much more thorough and as such it can inform decisions and provide a guide for placement on an appropriate course or programme of learning.

Formative assessment takes place during a study programme and involves assessments of the learner's progress. Formative assessment is ongoing and allows both the tutor and the learner to review progress against a learning plan.

Summative assessments measure the achievement of a learner at the end of a study programme.

Initial assessments are part of a process of assessment, which also includes formative and summative assessment. The remit of this research however did not include analysis of formative or summative assessment, nor did it include English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) assessments, nor examination of learners with special learning needs. Consulting with learners and listening and documenting their views on screening and initial assessment was also not part of the research remit however in the review of literature learners' views on assessments were sourced and included in this report. It is recommended that learners' perspectives (from diverse social and cultural backgrounds in Ireland) on new initial assessment tools be given central priority in future.

Methodology

As part of this initial piece of work, the Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra carried out a review of international and Irish literature on assessment of adults with a specific focus on screening for literacy and initial assessment. A review of some of the main English language screening and assessment tools, which have been developed as part of adult literacy strategies internationally, was also undertaken and can be found in Chapter Two.

This review also consisted of a survey of Adult Education Officers (AEOs) and consultations sessions with representatives from the VECs. The purpose of the survey was to gather information on the initial assessment and screening systems currently in place in each VEC, to discover how effective such systems were judged to be and to establish what people's views were in relation to a new assessment tool or tools. The online survey was designed in consultation with the project committee. A link to the survey was sent via email to all AEOs with the request that one AEO in each of the 33 VECs take responsibility for completing the survey on behalf of the Adult and Further Education service. 29 out of 33 VECs responded in this part of the process. Results from the survey can be seen in Chapter Three and a copy of the survey is contained in Appendix 2.

Two consultation sessions took place in October 2008. Three representatives from each of the 33 VECs were invited to take part in the sessions. The aim of these consultation sessions was to build on information already learnt from the survey and to provide a qualitative aspect to the research. A full description of the sessions and the issues that emerged from them can be seen in Chapter Four. In the course of the research many experts, familiar with the issues both in Ireland and in other jurisdictions, were consulted and their comments and insights have informed this research. A full list of all those we consulted with is contained in the Acknowledgement section.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Screening for literacy – International Perspectives and Concerns

A screening tool for literacy checks the literacy skills of an individual and indicates if there is literacy need but does not indicate the extent of that need. As such it is usually a relatively quick process. Early identification of literacy needs is recognised as a critical component in supporting learners' needs (Scottish Executive, 2001; Watson, 2001, Looney, 2008). Learners however may be unaware that they have literacy needs. The Moser report (1999) in Britain drew attention to the fact that there can be a discrepancy between tests of adult literacy and people's perceptions of their own problems:

Various surveys have shown that many adults underestimate their need for help. Less than 5% of adults say they have a problem with reading and much the same small proportion acknowledge a difficulty with numbers. Only spelling is acknowledged as a problem by significant numbers - around 10%. Many people are unaware of their poor skills, and many, even if aware, don't regard it as a problem. And of course there is often a strong stigma in admitting to it (1999, 2.22).

Anecdotal evidence in Ireland suggests that adults, who have literacy needs that are unidentified, may struggle and find it difficult to complete programmes, particularly programmes at level 3 and above in the NFQ. The situation is compounded by the fact that many adult learners in Ireland who are returning to education have had a negative experience of education previously. Thus, unsupported, there is a danger that previous negative experiences of education are reinforced and emphasised. The stigma of admitting to a literacy need presents a significant challenge to providers, particularly in light of the view that early identification is key in supporting learners. Watson (2001) highlights the importance of identifying the literacy needs of learners early on and notes the absence of reliable data in Australia of how literacy levels affect participation in vocational educational programmes:

Current systems do not readily flag literacy and numeracy issues, with difficulties often being masked by absence, attritions or failure (p.1).

A plethora of educational theorists and educational psychologists recognise the danger of labelling learners as 'failures' (e.g. Glasser 1969; Warnock 1977; Handy & Aitken 1990; Casby 1997; Kellaghan et al 1995; MacDevitt 1998; Kelly 1999; Downes 2003). MacDevitt (1998) highlights that one direction for educational reform in a European context is 'the recognition of achievement for all' (p.47) (see also Kelly 1999 p.141). A focus on achievement would require a focus on developing primarily the strengths of the learner (see also McKeown, Haase & Pratschke 2001). Rosenberg (1965) describes self-esteem as feeling that you are 'good enough'. Self-esteem is positively associated with academic achievement (Purkey 1970; Brookover et al 1964; Hay, Ashman & van Kraayenoord 1997).

The words of Handy & Aitken (1990) would predict alienation and loss of identity for the less academic learners in a narrowly focused teaching and assessment process:

the loss of identity and sense of anomie of many students [occurs] in an organization where such academic values are overemphasised and other experiences and achievements are under-expressed (p.28)

Gardner's (1993) examination of multiple types of intelligence in educational psychology proposes numerous different types of intelligence, e.g., linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic and personal. MacDevitt (1998) expands on this theme of recognising different types of intelligence and achievement and emphasises the need for avoiding labelling less academic students as failures (see also McDermott et al. 2001 on differences between verbal and non-verbal learning). Kellaghan et al (1995), commenting on the experience of U.S prevention of early school leaving schemes, emphasise that:

success in one kind of target domain may have a snowball effect on other kinds so that the net beneficial effect may be greater than predicted for any one domain (p.90).

Kelly (1999) criticises educational models predominantly based on education as transmission of knowledge and curriculum as content (see also Hunting 2000, p.245) as being simplistic and failing to be learner-centred:

The idea of education as transmission or of curriculum as content ... is simplistic and unsophisticated because it leaves out of the reckoning major dimensions of the curriculum debate. In particular, it does not encourage or help us to take account of the children who are the recipients of this content and the objectives of the process of transmission, or of the impact of that content and that process on them, and especially their right to emancipation and empowerment (p.53).

His words equally apply to the context of adult education. Moreover, Banks (1994) argues that insufficient attention to personal development is an important contributory factor to alienation in learning contexts.

It is clear that initial assessments should be strengths based, recognising wider goals of education and demonstrating what learners can do as well as their literacy needs. Issues of fear of failure and the need to go beyond negative labelling need to be firmly recognised in any proposal for standardised initial assessment.

In the adult learning field, there is considerable debate about terminology and different terms are in use in different countries e.g. basic skills, essential skills, core skills, foundation learning etc. Other countries too use different terms for screening. In England, for example, the term 'screening' has been replaced by 'skills check'. One of the key priorities of the Skills for Life Strategy in England was the establishment of a range of assessment processes, including screening. *Good Practice Guidelines for the Skills Check and Initial Assessment* issued by the Department for Education and Skills in England noted that a 'skills check' usually takes around 10 minutes. A skills check may involve an informal one-to-one interview followed by an assessment tool, which usually consists of a short series of tasks designed to check literacy and numeracy skills. A selection of common screening tools is reviewed in Chapter Two. It is worth noting that screening instruments are generally simple straightforward tools in which there is no pass or fail.

Since 2004, in Wales, all post 16 learners entering publicly funded learning programmes are screened to identify basic skill needs, schools are also included in this strategy. Welsh versions of the Fast Track screening tools have been developed for this purpose. In 2001 the Scottish Government published the Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland report, which recommended that:

awareness training and screening processes should be developed to improve the identification of need within communities, workplaces and post school education (p.3).

Learning Connections, the adult literacy and numeracy curriculum framework for Scotland does not specifically refer to 'screening tools' but instead uses the term 'alerting tools'. Alerting tools fulfil the same function as screening tools, namely they are used to initiate a discussion with the learner about possible literacy needs and give the learner an opportunity to demonstrate what they can do. As with a screening tool, an alerting tool is designed to alert the learner and interviewer as to whether or not a fuller assessment or an offer of literacy or numeracy tuition might be appropriate.

Since 2003 the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) Northern Ireland has been providing curriculum and development support services to Essential Skills providers. Their good practice guidelines *Essential Skills Good Practice: The Assessment Process* outline the three elements to their initial assessment process, the first of which is an initial interview. Based on findings from the initial interview the learner is placed in a class according to their appropriate level. The importance of this initial interview is stressed in the guidelines and there is evidence from international literature that assessment embedded in conversation is more likely to yield information regarding new learners' needs (Looney, 2008). At the initial interview the Northern Ireland guidelines recommend that the learner should be put at ease and given the opportunity to ask questions. Learners should then be asked general questions about their learning experiences, life and work and future plans. The guidelines recognise that interviewing is a skill and they stress that the person carrying out the interview should have received some training in the interview process. They also state that information from the initial interview should be recorded in a standardised format and be forwarded to the class tutor. It is important to note that the guidelines state that the interview process reveals that if the learner has a certain level of qualification in English/Maths then the assessment process would normally end. This highlights the use of proxy measures which do not take into account learners whose literacy skills have declined over time. Even those who have completed secondary school may have literacy needs. Foley and Cavallaro (2007) point out that in Australia there are an increasing number of school leavers participating in Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) programmes.

Significantly, the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit based in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills in the UK does not recommend specific tools for screening. Instead it advises providers to use whatever screening materials best suit their learners, provided the tools result in a reliable indication of a learner's general ability in basic skills. They do however offer a short list of examples of screening tools which includes the Fast Track screening tool which was developed by the Basic Skills Agency. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) in the UK is commissioning the BSA to update Fast Track and two additional versions of Fast Track are to be produced – one for use in general settings and one specifically for use in the workplace. The Fast Track screening tool is reviewed in Chapter Two.

The relationship between screening and initial assessment in the adult learner's experience of assessment is illustrated in **Figure 1**.

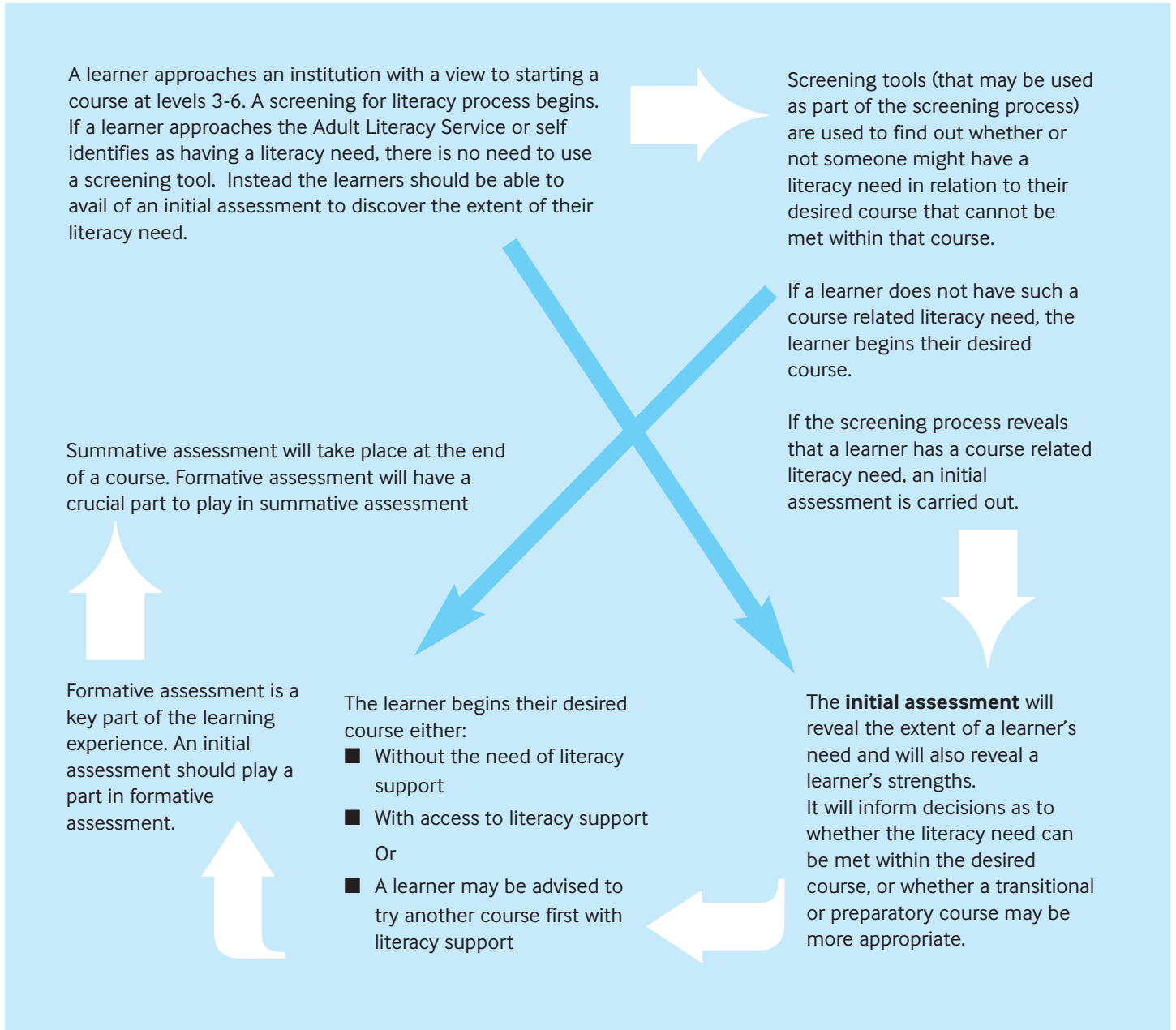


Figure 1: Relationship between screening and initial assessment

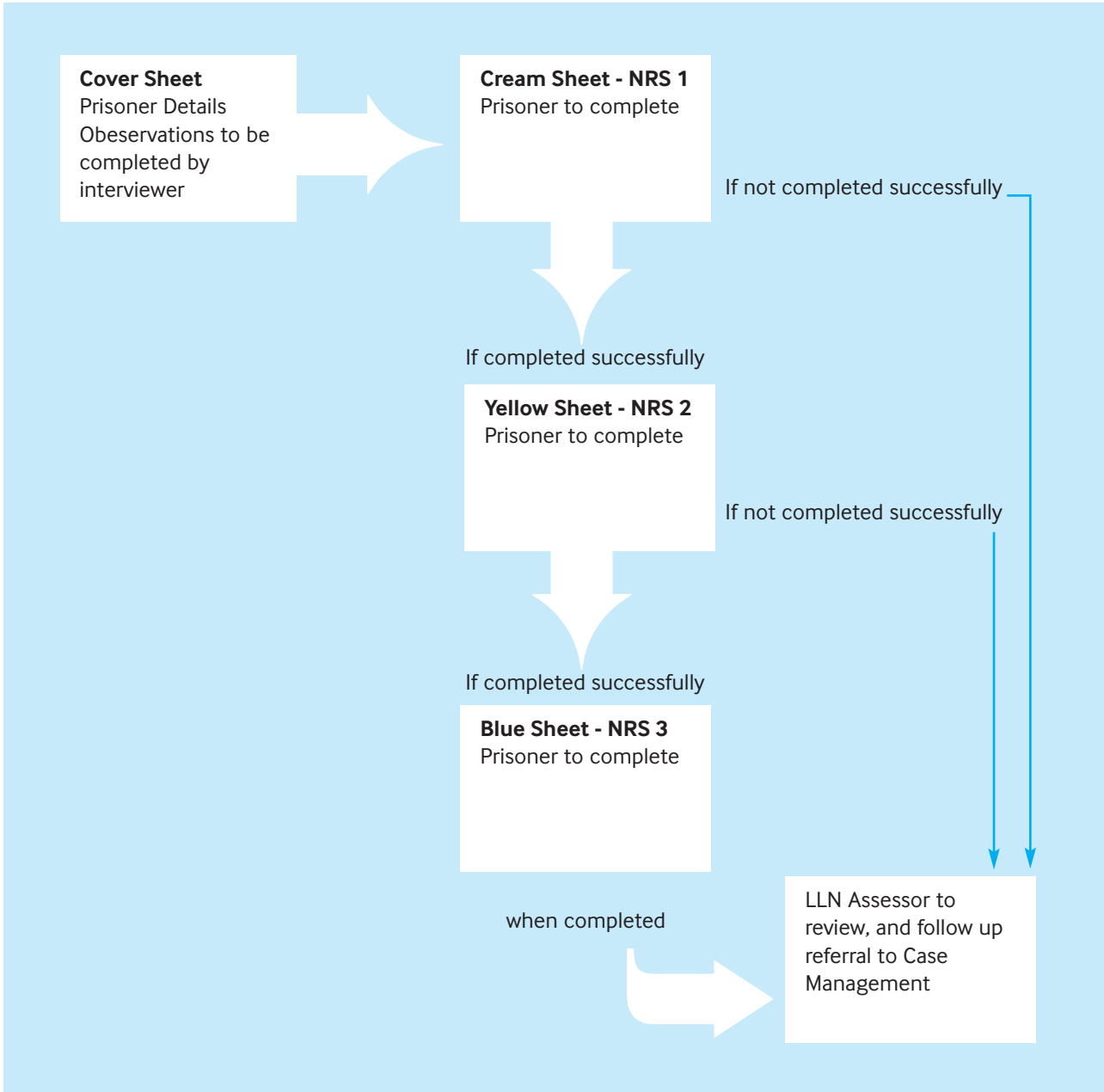
In Australia, assessment for literacy has been identified as a key area. The AQTF (Australian Quality Training Framework) which contains the national set of standards for Australia's vocational education and training (VET) system requires registered training organisations who are providing nationally accredited Vocational and Educational training (VEC) to identify and support learners who may require or request literacy support. Registered training organisations are obliged to ensure not only that learning needs are assessed but also that learners know how to access the services they require to successfully complete their training and assessment programme. The framework also states that assessments must be valid, reliable, flexible and fair and contain provisions for appropriate feedback to learners. Misko (2008) notes that while there are no specific tools mandated to be used in the assessment process 'there is a various array of assessment materials and resources to help practitioners in all programs to implement effective assessment practices' (p38). These resources include audio, print, video and CD material as well as national websites and a national newsletter, which provides practitioners with information on Training Packages. A set of 10 guides has been developed in the Training Package Assessment Materials Project. Australia, like the US, has also developed a National Reporting System (NRS).

Clayton et al (2004) acknowledge that using the NRS essentially involves practitioners collecting evidence and forming a judgement about what competencies have been demonstrated. Through a literature review and focus groups with practitioners, Clayton et al examined the factors that impact on making assessment judgements. A number of key issues emerged including: the lack of consistency in assessment, the demands placed on practitioners carrying out assessments, the lack of a rigorous quality assurance process and concerns about staff training and support for practitioners carrying out assessments. A fundamental issue to emerge was how well skilled practitioners were to develop valid assessment instruments in order to determine competence. Ideally, the model in use in Australia could empower practitioners and allow them to contextualise assessment tools for particular programmes and particular populations. A similar approach is found in New Zealand where there are no standardised assessment processes or instruments in the adult literacy sector (Sutton and Benseman, 2006).

There was however evidence of a specific screening tool in use within the Australian prison service. The National Literacy Assessment Project Working Party devised this tool. Previously LLN screening was the responsibility of each state and territory however this meant that skills were not always assessed consistently and in some cases screening did not take place at all. Prison education managers and prison based literacy co-ordinators met in 2005 and agreed on the following issues:

- A screening tool was to be developed based on the NRS
- The screening tool could be used in a variety of ways including a stand alone assessment but also could be incorporated into a more comprehensive and holistic LLN assessment system
- The new screening tool would be a tiered tool with a common entry point
- It would assess all prisoners sentenced to six months or more.

Figure 2: Internal Flowchart



An example of each form can be seen in the appendix, however in brief, key features in the tool are self-assessment statements, writing exercises, some maths questions (in the second and third form) and questions asking the learner about what they are interested in. Again it should be stressed that the mandatory screening of all prisoners (sentenced to over six months) regardless of whether they are interested in education classes, as is done in Australia would not be consistent with the ethos of adult education in Ireland.

Ireland

Co. Dublin VEC has identified the need for an initial assessment tool to be used in their service and have produced a tool, which is about to enter a pilot phase shortly. A working group has been established and they see initial assessment as a process, which helps to establish baseline information of learners' literacy skills for learners who wish to enrol on courses at levels 4-6. Initial assessment thus acts a sign-posting of the possible need for intervention and learning support.

It is envisaged that part of the assessment process would begin with a semi-structured interview, using a standard form which, among other things, contains statements and asks the student to self assess their ability in a number of areas. The form would act as a framework for discussion and begin the process of dialogue. The second part of the assessment process would consist of a free writing exercise. The working group has established three sets of writing exercises with three different themes set at the levels 4, 5 and 6 according to the NFQ. The marking scheme for each exercise is linked again to the description of the framework levels. At the end of the process, the interviewer/practitioner conducting the assessment will decide if the applicants can 1) meet the key skills required in a level 4,5 or 6 course, 2) the applicant needs learning support in order to meet those key skills or 3) applicant may need further guidance or re-direction.

Two notable features emerge; firstly the use of self-assessment statements and secondly the assessment of writing samples. It is clear that writing can provide insights relatively quickly into a learner's literacy skills. Some providers dealing with large volumes of learners may however find it difficult to implement assessment of learners' writing in practice. Spontaneous writing places strong conceptual demands on learners and therefore may require a structured system of relevant and meaningful prompts to encourage the writer to begin. Nonetheless this development in Co. Dublin VEC emphasises the need to have an effective initial assessment process, one that is both humanistic and supportive in nature.

Why is an Assessment Process Needed?

Across the education sector nationally and internationally it is clear that an assessment process has become an important element in the process of learning. Different stakeholders however may want to know different things from assessment and this can, admittedly, lead to conflicting pressures (Ecclestone 2005). Adult learners may look to an assessment process to help identify their strengths and areas that may need further support and also possible progression routes available to them. There is growing evidence, for example, that assessment can play an important role in motivating learners and encouraging learners to take control of their own learning. Practitioners may be eager to use assessment to motivate, increase the learner's confidence and also as a way to help teaching and planning. Providers, in a climate of accountability, may need an assessment system that provides evidence of quality control, effectiveness and maintenance of

standards and they may also need an assessment system that provides them with information on how best to plan provision.

Adult education assessment, whether initial, formative or summative is not an end in itself but must exist as part of a process. Also, assessments do not reveal everything that someone can do but only tells us what we ask about, as Merrifield's report notes:

Assessment tells us how well someone can do something. It identifies, describes and demonstrates evidence of a person's current skills and knowledge (2001, p.3)

The information given in an assessment is also time-bound in that it only informs us what a learner can do at a specific moment in time. Ecclestone notes that an assessment involves making a judgement, using either a standard or a scale, based on evidence. The standard or scales involved measures an individual against one of three things: an absolute criterion (criterion referencing), performance of a cohort/group (norm referencing) or the learner's own previous performance in the assessment (ipsative assessment or self-referencing, see also Kelly 1999).

As this research project is concerned with evaluating screening and initial assessment, only norm referencing and criterion referencing will be discussed in detail. Brooks et al note that some initial assessment tools (such as BSA Initial Assessment and Target Skills) have been used for summative purposes; however there is a danger in using initial assessment tools in this way. Firstly, it may implicitly encourage practitioners to 'teach to the test' and consequently impact negatively on teaching and learning. Secondly, the conditions under which a learner attempts an assessment at the end of a course are likely to be very different from the conditions at the beginning (e.g. the learner may be more confident, relaxed and/or have developed a comfortable rapport with their tutor) and thus this will impact on the reliability of the assessment.

There is a widely held view that norm referenced assessment in general has negative educational and social effects (Ecclestone, 2005). Criticisms of it include the fact that norm referencing derives its criteria from the norms of achievement set by other learners with the overall aim of producing a standardised level of achievement within each cohort. In recent years there has been a move away from norm referencing towards the use of external measures and criteria. A criterion reference assessment, instead of comparing a learner's score to other scores, compares a learner's performance with such externally defined, explicit criteria. FETAC levels assessments and awards, for example, are criterion based. Ecclestone notes that criterion referenced assessment is more likely to be used when, among other things, there is a desire to remove barriers in access to education. This is because it makes clear to learners what they can do and the requirements for grading are clear and understandable. Ecclestone also argues that a criterion-referenced assessment underpins the learning and teaching process and judgements are made about learners' strength using the same publicly available criteria. In an Irish context, benchmarking any initial assessment tasks against the NFQ would be a criterion-referenced assessment using criteria that is available and transparent to all stakeholders.

Standardised Assessments

A standardised test contains data on reliability and validity and is administered and scored according to specific instructions, unlike an informal test. In a standardised test for example, a

learner would read the same material and answer the same questions on it while observing the same time limits and conditions. It can be norm referenced or criterion based i.e. to interpret the score it must be referenced to the scores of other people who have taken the test (Sticht, 1999).

Kruidenier (2002) in his overview of literacy assessment in the US recommends the use of reliable and valid methods. The National Literacy Act in 1991 in the US increased accountability requirements of providers and incorporated new literacy assessment techniques including using standardised tests. Under the National Reporting System, implemented in 2000, every adult entering a federally funded adult education programme in the US was required to be pre-tested in order to determine a beginning literacy level and summatively tested in order to determine progress. Kruidenier notes that a wide variety of assessment instruments may be used as long as they are either standardised norm or criterion referenced tests or performance assessments with standardised scoring rubrics. The NRS describe the pre-test as the initial assessment. Its purpose is to place students at an appropriate level (according to either NRS levels or state definitions) and it is also used as the baseline from which to measure progress later on. Mandatory pretesting has been driven by the need to demonstrate accountability and quality indicators. The situation is further complicated by the fact that often summative assessment is 'high stakes' which means it carries funding implications for the programmes and consequently may create a narrow focus on the curriculum. While tests can play a role in teaching, Kruidenier makes the point that standardised tests in the US were often not chosen for instructional purposes but rather priority was given to ease of administration. Kruidenier's description of the US context serves as a reminder that assessment motivated purely for accountability purposes can lose sight of the learner and tutor and the value assessments can have in terms of improving learning and teaching. There is a need to firmly resist an institution centred rather than learner centred approach in the Irish context. A brief description of some of the most common tools used in the US is given in Chapter Two.

Key principles for assessment emerge from the literature. Brooks et al (2005) stress that those taking part in the assessment should find the experience and outcome useful to them, the purpose of assessment should be clear, instruments used should be valid in relation to their intended area and instruments should be as unbiased as possible. The Quality Improvement Agency in the UK provide an Initial Assessment and Diagnostic Assessment checklist; among their recommendations are that methods and tools used are 'fit for purpose' and reflect the context for learning and that a range of methods is used as part of the initial assessment process.

Assessments play an important role in teaching and learning. Two distinct aspects of assessments should be noted, assessments for learning and assessment of learning. While formative and summative assessments are assessments of learning, screening and initial assessments are intended to be assessment for learning. Screening for literacy and initial assessment should facilitate a process of learning. Outside of the literacy services, it is clear from the literature that mapping standards to the NQF may have positive benefits for the learner. The IVEA's Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) Evaluation (2006) notes that mapping to NQF/FETAC levels clearly provided stimulus to tutors to encourage portfolio building even in groups where accreditation was not part of the programme.

Initial Assessment – International Perspectives

A key purpose of an initial assessment is to establish the extent of a learner's literacy need. It should be undertaken at the beginning of a course and is more in-depth than screening. From a provider's perspective, an effective initial assessment can ensure the value and success of programmes. The process should allow both the provider and learner to identify appropriate progression routes. It can also help set the tone and direction for learning (Looney, 2008). There is evidence that a learner centred initial assessment process offers many benefits to learners. Reid and Denny's (2003) New Zealand report states that a learner-centred initial assessment process, needs to both engage learners and be of benefit to them and their learning and help learners feel positive about themselves and their potential to learn. Based on international empirical research, Downes (2003) has noted that "lack of autonomy is well recognised in western cultures as damaging student motivation" (p.134). Tutors also have much to gain from an effective initial assessment process as it can be used to inform a more effective teaching plan and identify learners who may need assistance with certain elements. Initial assessments have been described as the most widespread form of assessment and the least controversial (Merrifield et al, 2001). However concerns about initial assessment and the form it should take have been identified and are referred to at the end of this chapter, as well as subsequently.

Ecclestone (2005) notes there is growing evidence that assessment can play an important role in motivating learners and encouraging learners to take control of their own learning. A report (Warner et al, 2008) from the UK's National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) underlines this point and reveals positive comments from learners in relation to national tests in the UK. The comments focus on how the tests have motivated learners and enabled them to gain a qualification. Warner et al note that this was particularly welcome in the prison context where timing was crucial in supporting learners' sense of progress. A previous report from the UK's National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), Watters et al (2000), which examined learners' views of assessment in non-accredited courses, found that the most important dimension of assessment for learners was the satisfaction of knowing their own progress.

In 2003 the then Department of Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovations, Universities and Skills) issued guidelines on initial assessment. The guidelines state that 'initial assessment identifies a learner's skills against a level or levels within the national standards' (p14). The Department's Skills for Life Strategy Unit has developed a suite of screening and initial assessment tools in order to more effectively identify people with possible learning needs in literacy, language and numeracy. The guidelines acknowledge that an initial assessment process will take much longer than a screening process – they note it can take forty minutes and is even longer in some cases. They describe three elements to the process; the initial interview, the use of an initial assessment tool and lastly, providing information to the learner. The guidelines also stress the importance of the learner receiving feedback on the initial assessment and state that a record of the assessment and information gathered should be discussed, agreed with the learner, and kept on file. It is notable in these guidelines the huge importance given to the interview process.

These guidelines provide a number of topic questions that could be used in an initial interview. Topic questions suggested in the guidelines include asking the learner about:

- Their reason for coming to the centre
- Their previous learning experience
- Their aspirations and ambitions
- Their previous and current employment
- Whether they have any literacy, language or numeracy difficulties.

The guidelines note that most learners will express a view on what they believe they find difficult, they acknowledge though that many may underestimate their ability. The guidelines make clear the distinction between screening and initial assessment; however they do state that it is a matter for individual providers to consider if screening is needed. A range of tools, aligned to the national standards and the core curricula has been designed.

Good practice guidelines from Northern Ireland emphasise the shared responsibility between the learner and the (Essential Skills) tutor in the assessment process. The initial assessment process in Northern Ireland involves, among other things, the use of a baseline tool. The LSDA do not recommend any one tool and indeed their guidelines stress that it is doubtful that any one tool can provide enough information on their own to adequately identify literacy needs. Their guidelines for best practice argue that on their own one tool will provide insufficient data for a tutor to determine accurately a learner's strengths and weaknesses and consequently the most appropriate level on their framework for the learner to work towards. Instead they note that diagnostic assessment tasks are available commercially or can be downloaded free. They warn however that many literacy diagnostic assessment tools do not assess writing – therefore they argue that one of the tasks in the initial assessment process must be to include a piece of free writing. They provide a free writing assessment checklist, which can be seen in Appendix 4. Brooks et al (2005) also recommend that writing be assessed. The National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) note that in many current assessment tools the focus is not on providing a writing sample but rather on reading skills and the more technical aspects of writing such as spelling and punctuation (Briefing note on assessment provided by the NRDC).

Estyn, the Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales note that most providers of post-16 education in Wales are using one of two initial assessment tools – the BSA Initial Assessment and the West Nottinghamshire College Basic and key SKILLSBUILDER (BKSB) initial assessment. Both of these tools are reviewed in Chapter Two. The curriculum framework in Scotland does distinguish between what they term 'alerting tools' and 'placing tools'. A placing tool in the Scottish context is used to identify the most appropriate class for a learner to join. The report notes that the two most commonly used placing tools are the Plato Diagnostic Core Skills Toolkit and Cambridge Training and Development (CTAD) Target Skills. Both of these tools are computerised and are reviewed in the next chapter. The presence of the Plato Diagnostic Tool in Scotland was the result of public and private collaboration. The Clackmannan Consortium's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) project was a partnership between eight Further Education (FE) colleges and a private sector partner, PLATO learning. The aim of the project was to develop an online diagnostic tool that could be used to identify a learner's core skills in numeracy, communication and IT. The

Scottish Further Education Unit carried out an evaluation of the tool in 2003 and, in general, reported a positive view of the tool although they did make suggestions for its improvement including more specific feedback on results. A fuller account of the tool is contained in Chapter Two.

McKenna and Fitzpatrick (2004) note that New Zealand is moving closer towards UK and Australian approaches where adult literacy standards are mapped onto national qualification frameworks. Ireland is also following this approach. The lack of research into teaching, learning and assessment of literacy in New Zealand has been identified by Benseman et al (2005) and in particular the fact that much of the research to date has been small scale and context specific (NZCER, 2006). The New Zealand Council for Educational Research in their research into assessment practices in adult foundation learning settings found limited use of standardised assessment tools in the 12 case studies analysed as part of their report (2006). In most programmes purpose-developed tools were used. As these tools are specific and contextualised to the programme, the report acknowledges that this places a demand on tutors – they must be skilled in diagnosing literacy needs, have a thorough knowledge of the programme and understanding of the learner. The report also acknowledges that there is often a tension between reliability and validity, with most programmes giving priority to validity:

emphasising validity usually means working with the students to ensure that the assessment focuses on meeting their goals, in contexts that are authentic for them (p.xiii)

The New Zealand Centre for Workforce Literacy Development (Workbase) who works with business, unions, industry training and tertiary education organisations issued a tutor's guide into initial assessment in 2003. In their approach no standardised tool is used. Instead tutors are provided with a guide for creating and analysing their own initial assessments with the recommendation that the assessment should use writing tasks and reading texts from the tutor's own course. Each initial assessment is therefore contextualised to the tutor's own course. Their emphasis is on the potential of the initial assessment to enable tutors to be more effective in their teaching and to help learners be more effective in their learning. The importance of feedback being provided to the learner, as soon as possible after the assessment, is stressed and so too is that feedback should be used to motivate and increase the learner's confidence and self-awareness. The lack of a standardised tool to assess a learner's literacy strengths and weaknesses means that this system is only as effective as the practitioner using it. Nonetheless, it may be of considerable interest for practitioners and providers who want to embed literacy within all courses or levels of courses.

Australia, like the U.S., has developed a National Reporting System (NRS). Using the NRS is mandatory for reporting outcomes in two government programmes, the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) and the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) programmes; however there is no compulsion for it to be used outside of these programmes (Misko, 2008). The NRS, which was developed in 1994, observes five skills: reading, writing, oral communication, learning strategies and numeracy. Associated with each skill are five levels of competency with each level having increased levels of complexity. The indicators of competencies comprise statements about achievement in terms of the five skill areas. An example of the indicator of competence for level 1 reading is:

- Reads and identifies letters of the alphabet in the context of whole words, numbers, signs and symbols relating to personal details and immediate environment.
- Identifies specific information in a personally relevant text with familiar content which may include personal details, location or calendar information in simple graphic, diagrammatic, formatted or visual form.

The NRS provides sample activities that could be used to examine a learner's competency and they also provide a list of case studies where the NRS has been used successfully. Although the NRS has been described as a tool for initial placement assessments, formative assessments and curriculum development, it is more useful to consider it as a framework or guide for assessment as it is clear that it is up to each programme to devise suitable assessments but that all assessments must be mapped to the NRS. In one of the case studies described for example (McKenna and Fitzpatrick 2004), the tasks were integrated into the initial assessment process e.g. the informal chat that the assessor had with the learner over coffee was enough to establish oral competencies. The interviewer also has a personal information form and a self-assessment form, which s/he goes through with the learner. Written and verbal instructions are given and how the form is filled in allows the interviewee to form a judgement on the learners' reading and listening skills. In this case study writing was also assessed through how a learner filled in the form. The process also involved the learner self-assessing his/her own skills. The total time it took for this initial assessment was 50 minutes.

Canada does not have one standardised tool for screening or initial assessment for literacy. A survey undertaken in order to document the assessments tools used by adult education providers and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of those tools revealed that 26 different types of commercial instruments were used to assess literacy, numeracy and essential skills (Campbell, 2006). Of the 26 tools only three were developed within the last ten years for an adult Canadian population. Campbell advocates that educators use multiple measures when gathering information about learners' literacy needs which may be complex.

Characteristics of an Effective Initial Assessment:

- The purpose of an initial assessment is clear and transparent to all stakeholders
- It is learner-centred
- It is non-threatening to the learner
- Feedback is provided to the learner
- It indicates what learners can do as well as ascertaining if they have a literacy need
- The assessment is valid and reliable
- The assessment is culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive
- Any standardised tool is not used in isolation
- It is relatively quick and straightforward to carry out
- Initial assessment is part of a continuum of assessment and should be used to inform both learning and teaching
- An initial assessment is part of a process of assessment.

Initial Assessment: Further Concerns and Challenges

There is evidence from numerous sources indicating considerable anxiety about assessment among both learners and tutors (Merrifield, 2001; Watson, 2001; Campbell, 2006, Looney, 2008). Many learners may have had negative experiences of school. Owens (2000, 2007), for example, in exploring the barriers to education and training experienced by men in Ireland, noted that participants who took part in the focus groups characterised their schooldays as being marked by the struggle to preserve their dignity in the face of discrimination, labelling and streaming. A concern thereby emerges from any putative screening process which could have the effect of deterring already fearful men and women from particularly marginalized backgrounds from accessing adult education courses (see also Downes 2007 on the danger of courses, or services more generally, filtering those who may be more marginalized in order to manufacture ostensibly better outcomes in a climate of evaluation). Due to the fact that the notion of assessment can give rise to fears and anxiety, Looney notes that there are different views as to whether the assessment should be formal or informal. Several 'exemplary programmes' used informal initial interviews in order to avoid stirring learners' anxiety. Nevertheless she acknowledges the importance of asking the 'right questions' at interview stage and a validated instrument will ensure that the process is as fair and unbiased as possible. Kruidenier (2002) also acknowledges the concerns around issues of assessment, particularly when standardised tests are used but argues that when used professionally and carefully, any possible negative effects can be minimised and the assessment process can be a beneficial one.

Sticht (1999) advocates avoiding using a standardised test with learners when they first begin a programme due to the fact that adult learners may be nervous and frightened and therefore their abilities may be underestimated. Campbell (2006) argues that the Canadian government should consider developing a standardised test, based on a set of Canadian standards, for adult education learners with immediate or advanced competencies. However, echoing Sticht's concerns, she recommends that:

Students who are emergent readers and writers should not be subjected to formal, standardized tests during intake assessments, as these are reminiscent of their early school experiences. (p.65).

It is recognised that standardised tests have also been critiqued as being inadequate assessments of populations who are culturally and/or linguistically in a minority. According to Fagundes et al (1998), they may contain a number of biases e.g. cultural bias or format bias, such as when someone who has never read a book is asked to answer questions relating to an extract from a book. Many of Fagundes et al's concerns relate to ESOL learners but nonetheless these concerns should be addressed in the development of any new standardised tool. Fagundes et al's (1998) concerns are also indirectly supported by the recognition in social psychology of 'demand characteristics' (Orne 1962) affecting a person's response, namely, the individual's preconceptions and hypotheses regarding the purpose of the test situation. These preconceptions, including a fear of 'the system' and alienation from the system (Downes and Maunsell 2007), are another dimension to differential cultural impact of testing upon traditionally marginalized groups of individuals.

Chapter Two: A Review of Screening and Initial Assessment Tools

The remit of this DES funded project includes a desk review of existing instruments, which have been developed as part of adult literacy strategies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. A variety of government and commercially produced assessment tools are available in the UK, many of them linked to the various national qualification frameworks. Consultation with the NRDC revealed that this allows providers to have some degree of choice in using what assessment tool may be appropriate for their learners and this flexibility seems to work well. In general, screening for literacy and initial assessment will assess some if not all of the following areas: reading, punctuation, spelling, listening and numeracy.

Validity and Reliability

It is important to consider issues of validity and reliability when evaluating assessment tools; however, there is often a tension between the two. Validity means that an assessment measures what it claims to measure. Reliability means that an assessment should produce consistent results over time and across different contexts and learners. A standardised test prioritises reliability whereas the approach favoured in New Zealand in which assessment tools are designed by practitioners in relation to specific courses gives priority to validity. In the US the three most frequently used tests are, the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), the Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE) and Wide Range achievement Tests (WRAT) (Kruidenier, 2002; Kutner et al, 1996). While the TABE may have high reliability, its validity has been questioned. Wolf et al (2000) acknowledge that the test is widely used for adults in the US but they argue that most items reflect school content and as such probably underestimate the real life literacy skills of adults. Due to the fact that mandatory testing is a feature of federally funded adult education programmes in the US, multiple-choice tests are pervasive. As a result assessment of writing is not a feature in the most common tools. In assessing reading, for example, the TABE measures reading by asking learners to answer multiple-choice questions about what they have just read. Similarly, ABLE in testing reading includes a series of cloze items. Brooks et al do not recommend that US tools be used by the NRDC for research purposes in England. They argue that reliability and validity of tests are compromised because of cultural differences and, as such, if these tools were to be used in the UK, they should be anglicised and re-standardised against the appropriate population. The same, of course, would apply to an Irish context; tools used in other jurisdictions must be adjusted (to allow for dialectical variations and cultural differences) in order to provide meaningful assessments.

The validity and reliability of assessment instruments can be compromised by the confusing items or questions posed. Brooks et al raise other concerns over validity particularly in the area of writing assessment. In *Target Skills: Initial Assessment*, for example, no actual writing is assessed. Brooks et al would consider multiple-choice assessment of writing to be of 'particularly doubtful validity' (p21).¹ In the Initial Assessment (1st Ed), the testing of spelling and punctuation is problematic with regard to validity as no actual writing samples are required and rather than focusing on reading for

¹In the United States, standardised testing is often mandatory with funding implications. This has led to the widespread use of the multiple-choice format. Combined with the cultural differences, Brooks et al argue that this would hugely impact on the reliability and validity of US instruments used on any non-US population (p20).

meaning, it focuses on technical accuracy (p.73). The concerns of Wolf et al (2000) with real-life relevance of the literacy skills, allied to Brooks et al's emphasis on developing skills that transfer beyond immediate contexts of use (unlike multiple choice testing), are centrally recognised in educational and cognitive psychology generally, as the problem of ecological validity (e.g., Neisser 1967, 1976; Bronfenbrenner 1979; Gibson 1979). In other words, real world use and relevance of the language and writing being examined is often lost through artificial modes of testing; context transferability of skills tends to be lost through testing through isolated words outside meaningful use in sentences on topics of relevance to the learner. The leading US educational psychologist, Jerome Bruner (1990) has similarly highlighted the centrality of an individual capacity for 'construction of meaning' through language rather than a narrower focus on information processing. In other words, a key concern in any examination of language skills is to draw writing from meaningful, including culturally meaningful contexts, of relevance and interest to the individual learner (see also Glasser 1969; Bruner and Amsterdam 2000). Multiple choice tests can be presumed not to achieve this level of capacity for construction of meaning, while cloze tests offer only a limited form of doing so.

Another issue is test-retest reliability where scores on an assessment may be influenced by repetition and practice effects, including memorisation of optimal answers. This issue is somewhat neglected in the common descriptions often offered of these tests. There is also the related issue of 'educational triage', namely, what Booher-Jennings (2005) and Gillborn & Youdell (2000) highlight as the filtering process involved in U.S and U.K contexts respectively, where preoccupation with test scores tended to result in a diversion of resources away from those viewed as least likely to pass and towards those on the threshold of passing the test. Nevertheless, this issue is somewhat less central to initial assessment tools given that they do not offer pass/fail dimensions. However, educational triage is a salutary warning with regard to potential uses of such standardised initial assessments and screening.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the importance of assessing writing during an assessment process has been increasingly recognised in the literature. Its lack of presence in most assessment tools is an indication perhaps of the priority given to producing an assessment tool that is quick to administer and score – in other words, an absence due to an institution centred rather than learner centred agenda. However, the Free Writing Task Assessment Checklist, which is produced in Northern Ireland by the LSDA, is impressive. It is designed to be used after an initial interview and baseline tool has been completed. The checklist is available in Appendix Three. As part of the initial assessment process, learners are asked to write on a particular topic. A tutor then assesses their writing. The checklist is divided up into various levels: entry level 1, entry level 2, entry level 3 and level 1. With entry level 1, for example, the tutor will check that the learner can:

- Write a simple sentence.
- Punctuate a simple sentence with a capital letter and a full stop.
- Spell correctly some personal key words and familiar words.

With Level 1, the tutor will check that the learner can do all of the previous levels (entry level 1, 2 and 3) plus:

- Write in a logical sequence using paragraphs where appropriate.
- Use correct grammar (e.g. subject-verb agreement, correct use of tense).
- Punctuate sentences correctly and use punctuation so that meaning is clear (e.g. capital letters, full stops, question marks, exclamation marks, commas).
- Spell correctly words used most often in work, studies and daily life.

Cultural Bias

In his review of 15 assessment instruments, Brooks et al concluded that having 'general cultural knowledge and background' would be considered 'an advantage' in most of them. Cultural bias can arise by the choice of language or tasks in the assessment. Some of the topics from which prisoners had to choose from (in exercise 3) of the screening tool used in Australian prisons, seemed insensitive at best (e.g. 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks' and 'If I could make the world a better place I would'). Brooks et al noted for example that cultural bias could arise when there is no cultural mix of names in the items of an assessment tool. In the Target Skills instrument, which is computer based, the reviewers acknowledged that voices on the soundtrack did mirror somewhat a multi-ethnic society. However Brooks et al also found that in one of the items in Target Skills, background knowledge connected with bank accounts, in particular being able to recognise the format of sort codes is required. This is an example of a cultural bias. It may not be possible to remove all cultural biases from assessment – Broadfoot (2001, as cited in Cahillane-McGovern 2006) argues that:

educational assessment is imbued with the bias and subjectivity inherent in human interaction' due to the fact that it is human who design the assessment, take the assessment and interpret and use the results (p.33).

Awareness of the dangers of bias should be noted. Wolf et al (2000) in their description of the difficulties of devising an assessment instrument argued that 'assumptions made by others on behalf of minority groups can be patronising as well as wrong' (p.224) (see also Bryan, 2007). While their assessment tool was specifically for ESOL learners, the lessons learnt have application for assessment instruments in general. Firstly, they found that tasks should not include factual content or vocabulary that only certain sub-groups would understand. Secondly, they warned against assuming that tasks commonly found in assessments are necessarily appropriate – amongst the examples they gave were tasks involving train timetables and completing cheques. They also found that using 'authentic texts' created problems as they argued that many official documents were often badly written and difficult to decipher.

In an Irish context, it is important that issues such as cultural bias be addressed. The White Paper for Adult Education (2000) notes the need to frame education policy and practice (including modes of assessment) in the context of serving a diverse population. It is recognised, for example, that Irish Travellers suffer significant discrimination in Irish society and as such it cannot be

presumed that education providers, educators and assessment designers are free from bias. In this context, the Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College, has stressed the importance of culturally appropriate assessment for Travellers (Downes 2004; Downes, ed., 2004a). Moreover, this issue is a pervasive concern in the National Traveller Education Strategy (2006). At primary level it observes that 'appropriate instruments (free from cultural bias etc.) should be designed (such as positive profiles that concentrate on what the pupil can do)' (TES p.42) with regard to assessment, a point reiterated for post-primary instruments (TES p.56). The emphasis in this strategy on 'a wide range of personally tailored supports' (TES p.65) and the need to be 'always sensitive to differences between their Traveller culture and the culture of the settled population' (TES p.71), combined with the recognition that 'Cultural issues often conflict with academic issues for Travellers' (p.77) require cultural-sensitivity-proofing of any putative screening and initial assessment proposal. This can only be done through not simply including Travellers in initial trials for a needs or skill check method, but also through direct involvement of representatives of the Travelling community in the design of methods of screening and initial assessment.

Cahillane-McGovern (2006) notes that one of the difficulties of assessments that allow learners to demonstrate what they know, is the difficulty surrounding the role of language in the process. Bernstein's theory of how children from different socio-economic backgrounds develop different codes or forms of speech, which consequently impact on their academic performance, is of relevance here. In particular, Bernstein was interested in the relatively poor performance of working class students in language based subjects which led him to develop his theory of restricted and elaborated codes. A restricted code is bound to a particular context; the language used may contain unstated assumptions which speakers expect others to know. Middle class children, on the other hand, acquire an elaborated code of language. Bernstein's theory did not imply that a restricted code was inferior but his argument was that an academic environment understood and accommodated an elaborated code of language much more easily (Giddens, 1997). Though Bernstein's structural focus is not without criticism, nevertheless, in the Irish context, Cregan (2006) has also recently focused on if and how linguistic variations may contribute to educational disadvantage. Social class bias needs to be recognised as one potential form of cultural bias in standardised tests in Ireland more generally. Moreover, it needs to be recognised that a learner's oral language skills or 'oracy' may be a vital asset in their participation on a course, even where their written language skills require additional support.

Description of Commonly Used Initial Assessment Tools

In this section, the name and format of the tools, who developed them, and a brief description of each tool is provided. Finally, there are comments made in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of each tool. The review of tools was influenced by Brooks et al's (2005) review in the UK. In this review, Brooks et al identified, obtained and analysed 15 quantitative, summative instruments using a checklist and framework derived from theory, previous analyses and the team's experience. The criteria was that the instrument be secure, mapped to the new QCA standards and contain parallel forms. Not one of the instruments was found to be wholly suitable for the purposes stated. Although this study did concentrate on summative assessment, a number of initial assessments were reviewed as Brooks et al acknowledged that some are being used for summative purposes.

This chapter contains a review of some of the most common screening and initial assessment tools that were encountered in the course of this research. In brief, the following table outlines the main areas of what is assessed.

Table 1: Screening and Assessment Tools Reviewed

Screening Tools Reviewed	Areas covered in the questions
Fast Track 20 Questions <i>This is a structured questionnaire in which an assessor reads out the questions to the learner in a one-to-one interview</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Two questions are asked about learners' previous qualifications ■ Literacy assessed through asking learners 12 questions about their everyday reading and writing habits ■ Numeracy is assessed through asking learners about the problem solving strategies when dealing with everyday numeracy activities
Smart Move Skills Check	The 'Smart Move' skills check has 12 literacy questions and 12 numeracy questions, all multiple-choice and graded in terms of difficulty. The literacy questions focus on spelling, comprehension and listening.
Core Skills: Initial Screening Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Communications (reading and writing) ■ Numeracy ■ Information Technology skills
Initial Assessment Tools Reviewed	Areas assessed
Plato Diagnostic Core Skills Test toolkit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Communications ■ Numeracy ■ Information Technology
Target Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reading ■ Numeracy ■ Speaking ■ Listening ■ Writing
Initial Assessment (BSA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Literacy is assessed through reading and spelling questions. Reading questions range from sentence completion exercises to questions based on a variety of texts. Spelling questions vary from a multiple choice approach at the beginning to proof-reading tasks. ■ There are a mixture of multiple choice and open response questions based on numbers, measures, shape, space and handling data.
Basic and KeySKILLSBUILDER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Literacy ■ Numeracy ■ ICT

Screening Tools

Name of tool: Fast Track 20 Questions

Developed by: Basic Skills Agency. In 2007 the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) merged with NIACE and work in alliance with the company Tribal. Fast Track is available to purchase through NIACE.

Format: Fast Track is a paper based assessment tool.

Description: Fast Track takes about 10 minutes to complete. It consists of 20 questions to be used in one-to-one interviews. The interviewer reads each question and the selection of answers and the learner chooses one of the answers. While some questions (4) involve yes or no answer, most answers allow for three or four responses

e.g.

How often do you read a newspaper?

Everyday. Every week. ***Sometimes. Never.***

And

How often does a friend/member of the family help you fill in forms?

Always. Sometimes. Never.

During the interview, the interviewer will circle each answer given by the learner. In the questionnaire some of the answers are in bold and italics. If an answer in bold and italics is circled, then the interviewer at the end will tick a box in the right hand column of the question. In the example question given above 'sometimes' and 'never' are in bold and italics. Fast Track recommends that learners should be referred for further assessment or support if they score 7 or more ticks.

The first question in this tool asks the learner if they have any of four qualifications. All the qualifications they note are linked to their National Framework of Qualifications and if the learner answers yes to any of them, the interview can skip to question 14 which contains another list of qualifications. Again, if they answer yes to this question the screening process is effectively ended.

Reliability: One way of testing the reliability of a screening tool is to test the results against another tool. The BSA report a high correlation (77%) between scores from this screening tool and the BSA's Initial Assessment Tool. A Home Office Report (McMahon et al, 2004) which evaluated basic skills provision in the probation services in the UK found that Fast Track 20 questions was an appropriate screening tool – the evaluation team carried out their own reliability check on the tool and found a significant association between scores for the screening tool and the initial assessment tool they were using.

Comments: Fast Track 20 Questions was piloted in twenty-three organisations in the UK. It is quick to administer and the questionnaire does offer providers a way of ensuring certain questions are asked. This tool is mapped to the Qualifications Framework in England.

The advantages of Fast Track are that it is easy to administer, can be marked easily and quickly and by non-specialists. It also has the advantage of being very un-test like in that it does not contain questions that have a right or wrong answer e.g. a question about how you work out the price of something that has been reduced to half price does not ask you to calculate the new price but rather asks if you were working out the price would you guess, ask a friend, work it out in your head or work it out with a calculator.

A major disadvantage is that it is quite a crude instrument, which does not assess listening, speaking or writing. Moreover, it involves the limitation of multiple choice testing. This is apart from the limitation of pervasive issues of cultural sensitivity and test-retest reliability.

Name of Tool: Smart Move Skills Check

Developed by: This tool was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills. It has been devised for use in the context of the Skills for Life strategy in England, which now comes under the remit of the newly formed Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

Format: Paper based and computer based versions can be downloaded from www.toolslibrary.co.uk. The computerised version has the advantage of being adaptive and full use is made of colour and sound. Scoring is also automatic and the results can be printed off at the end of the process.

Reliability: No specific data on reliability could be sourced however the Quality Improvement Agency in the UK states "if the skills check you use is recognised nationally, such as Smart Move, then you can be confident that it is accurate, fair, reliable and valid".

Comments: The tool is designed to take about 15 minutes to complete the screening process including the initial interview. There are two parts to this tool Part A and Part B. Smart Move produce a standard skills check tool and a workplace version. Both tools contain twelve literacy questions followed by twelve numeracy questions and the questions are set in everyday contexts e.g. questions relating to an appointment card from a doctor. The assessor guide includes in its guidelines the need to do a preliminary interview in order to put the user at ease and to elicit what qualifications they have. If the learner has an appropriate qualification already, they may be directed to start with Part B.

The literacy questions consist of a number of extracts of texts with questions testing comprehension. One question asks learners to select a misspelling in a text and to write the correct spelling. All are multiple-choice questions.

An example of one of the questions is:

"Lost! _____ you seen this dog since last week?"

The learner is then given a choice of four words and asked to select the correct one. If the learner does not reach the target score for each section, it is recommended to suggest to the learner that they do an initial assessment at an appropriate time.

The advantages of this tool are that it is quick and relatively straightforward to administer. It is also available in both print and computer versions. The disadvantages are that it has a multiple choice format which does impact on validity. Also unlike the Fast Track screening tool in which the interviewer reads the questions to the learner, in Smart Move, the learner is given a copy of the skills check tool and asked to complete a series of tasks.

Disadvantages, apart from pervasive issues of cultural sensitivity, test-retest reliability and the digital divide, include that although the user guide recommends that the learner be reassured at the preliminary interview that this is not a test, the format of the screening tool is very test like.

Name of Tool: Core Skills: Initial Screening Tools

Developed by: The Scottish Qualifications Authority. The initial screening tool is designed to support learners and tutors involved with Core Skills in Communication, Numeracy and ICT. The questions have been written at levels 2-6 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework which corresponds to levels 1-5 in NFQ in Ireland (NQAI, 2005).

Format: The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has chosen a paper-based approach for initial screening of learners' ICT skills while an on screen approach has been adopted for initial screening of Communication and Numeracy. All are mapped to national standards. The computer versions are available on CD and they provide a series of questions in a quiz like format. It is also adaptive meaning that the learner can go up or down a level depending on how questions are being answered – this means that unlike a paper based model a learner does not have to keep going through questions they cannot answer or even ones that they find too easy. It should take about 15 minutes to complete although the SQA recognise that learners who are between levels may take longer to reach the end. Once a learner has reached the end, a result screen will be displayed. This identifies the level the learner is working at according to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

The ICT initial screening tool offers five applications from which to choose from (Word Processing, Spreadsheet, Database, Graphics and email) and the information sheet advises learners to discuss with their tutor which application they are most familiar with and which would be the most useful in their learning programme.

Reliability: No specific data on reliability of this tool could be sourced however two of the SQA's principles of assessments are that an assessment must be valid and reliable.

Comments:

Advantages: This tool seemed very user-friendly. It offers a demo on how to answer questions for people who are not confident IT users. The SQA note that this tool could be repeated at a later stage in order to gauge progress made. The SQA envisage that this tool will be particularly useful to FE colleges and also the Prison service because of the volume of potential learners that need to be screened quickly and with as little tutor intervention as possible.

Disadvantages: Apart from pervasive issues such as the digital divide, test-retest reliability and absence of clarity regarding cultural sensitivity dimensions, another disadvantage is that it does not have a storage facility for results, which means that either learners or tutors must print the

result page. The tool gives a rough indication of a learner's skill level but it does not provide feedback on the amount of questions answered, how many were answered correctly nor does it publish answers.

Initial Assessment Tools

Name of Tool: Plato Diagnostic Core Skills Test toolkit

Developed By: Plato

Format: Computer Based

Reliability: No specific data could be sourced.

Comments: The SQA note that if tutors require more detailed feedback than their own screening tools offer (see above) then they should use another tool and they specifically mention Plato. This tool is designed to identify strengths and weaknesses in three core skills: communication, numeracy and information technology. Core skills are defined according to five levels: Access 2, Access 3, Intermediate1, Intermediate 2 and Higher.

In communications students are tested on their reading ability, spelling, punctuation, grammar syntax and use of vocabulary. No writing is assessed. Students will begin with 7 questions based at the Access 3 level on the Core Skills Framework. 6 or 7 correct responses moves the student up to the next level while 4 or 5 triggers another 3 questions at the lowest level and offer another chance for students to progress to the next level. Three or fewer (from the initial 7) questions answered correctly moves the student down to Access 2 where the process is repeated.

When a student completes the test, an on screen message reveals that they are ready for a certain level – all the core skills have been built into the Scottish National Qualifications Framework.

The Scottish Further Education Unit carried out an evaluation of the tool in 2003. Four FE colleges who were using the tool took part in the evaluation. A quantitative and qualitative approach was used in the evaluation in which both staff and students took part. The results were mainly positive. Staff in general felt that the tool was a more efficient way of screening than a paper based model, it saves staff time correcting material and it was viewed as more successful in holding students' attention. The main improvement suggested by students and staff was more detailed feedback on the results. The evaluation noted that it took around two hours for students to complete all three tests and it also noted that on a few occasions students were unhappy that their current level of ability in a core skill was lower than previously gained certificates in that core skill. Other pervasive issues of cultural sensitivity, test-retest reliability and the digital divide would also need to be better addressed.

Name of Tool: Target Skills

Developed by: Cambridge Training and Development (CTAD)

Format: Available on CD

Reliability: No specific data could be sourced.

Comments: This tool assesses learners against curricula for Entry 1, 2, 3 and Levels 1 and 2 in the national standards in England and should take about thirty minutes to complete although the time allowed will vary based on the needs of the learner. Brooks et al (2005) reviewed this tool and was particularly critical of a number of features. He noted that the CD version was awkward to use and that no actual writing is assessed and rated the usefulness of the results to learners and tutors as low. Brooks et al stressed the need to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of this particular tool and noted that the results of the assessment are linked with further products which are available as part of a package. There is a separate literacy and numeracy test and Brooks et al notes that the literacy test begins with an initial screening test. If the learner cannot complete the ten items they are advised to seek advice from their tutor – as Brooks et al states, the whole process of logging a student in, going through the practice test and answering the questions may have taken as much as half an hour to effectively learn what could have been achieved in a couple of minutes through a quick interview and a paper based test.

Brooks et al describe this tool as broadly free of cultural bias and note that the voices on the sound track do reflect to some degree a multi-ethnic society and the on-screen figure who appears to learners who have failed the screening tool included, is from a multi-ethnic background. However Brooks et al conclude that 'the materials may discriminate against those unused to the technology and to the assessment methods' (p98).

Name of Tool: Initial Assessment (2nd edition)

Developed by: Basic Skills Agency

Format: Paper-based

Reliability: The BSA report that this tool has undergone two rounds of trials with participation of over two thousand learners and two hundred tutors in a variety of settings including prisons, adult community colleges, voluntary organisations and family literacy and numeracy classes. Brooks et al question the validity of the Initial Assessment (2nd Ed) in relation to their use of the multiple-choice format. This instrument is considered inappropriate for research purposes due to its poor validity. The testing of spelling is based on the presentation of a list of incorrectly and correctly spelled words and the confusion this brings affects its validity.

Comments: This was revised in 2002 to align it to the national standards in England. Three parallel sets of items for numeracy and literacy have been developed with 72 items for literacy and 50 for numeracy in each set. Writing is not assessed in this tool. Results for numeracy and literacy are reported in levels.

In this tool literacy seems to mean reading and spelling – Brooks et al noted that the literacy materials are unbalanced because of the high proportion of marks given to spelling. Reading is assessed by use of cloze passages while spelling is assessed by learners being asked to correct the incorrect spellings provided.

Examples of questions are:

Circle the correct spelling.

Sam had _____ children, two boys and two girls.

One word in each sentence is underlined. Write the correct spelling of the underlined word in the box. Ring me wen you can.

In assessing punctuation learners are given sentences and asked to correct them. Brooks et al reported the usefulness of this tool to learners as low and to tutors as low/medium. Background notes on assessment made available by the NRDC note that the language used in this tool tends to be stilted and unnatural and that few of the reading items require any depth of understanding.

Healy-Eames (2000) observation in a different context of Irish schools is apposite here, namely, that there was a “strong emphasis on the teaching of secondary skills such as punctuation and spelling” although when questioned, teachers identified “developing effective expression and communication of ideas” as most important in their writing instruction” (pp.217-218).

This assessment takes about 40 minutes to complete and has the advantage of being able to be marked by specialists and non-specialists. It is also suitable for both individual and group use. Apart from pervasive issues of cultural sensitivity and test-retest reliability, a major disadvantage is its multiple choice format and its overemphasis on spelling rather wider literacy issues such as for example, phonological, semantic, sequencing problems, as well as other grammatical ones, or personal and fictional narrative skills (see also Schleppegrell 2004 on distinctions between factual, analytical, imaginative and narrative language) .

Name of Tool: Basic and KeySkillsbuilder (Initial Assessment Tool)

Developed by: West Nottinghamshire College

Format: Interactive web based formal and paper versions

Reliability: No specific data available

Comments:

BKSB state that they “specialise in Basic, Key and Functional Skills assessments and learning resources for Literacy, Numeracy and ICT”. The assessment for literacy and numeracy are specified to national standards and referenced to the Adult Core Curriculum. While the BSA initial assessment identifies skills up to Level 1 on the national framework in the UK, BSKB identifies skills up to and including level 3.

Through consultations with stakeholders in other jurisdictions, this tool was mentioned specifically as being a popular one among FE providers in particular – however it should be clarified that this should not be taken as an endorsement. Its format makes it particularly attractive for providers because it is computer based and allows large numbers to be assessed at the same time.

This tool includes a screening tool. In the interactive demonstration provided the questions test comprehension and grammar. The tool asks questions in a variety of ways, including using multiple choices, highlighting text and dragging and dropping words into boxes. While this is certainly very engaging, some IT skills are necessary. In reviewing the literature, it is noticeable that this tool seems to be particularly popular with FE colleges. A disadvantage to its use is the length of time involved. It may take up to 75 minutes for learners to complete the initial assessment. Estyn (2006), who inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales, noted that one of the four colleges they visited has switched from using BKSB to BSA precisely because of the time involved. However the format is very attractive, with bright lively images used and interesting texts chosen e.g. the first questions in the practice test consists of a gym timetable with learners being asked if there are any classes suitable for beginners on the timetable. The use of a gym timetable does however does raise of danger of cultural bias in assessments.

Test Instruments and a Learner-Centred Agenda in an Irish Context

An additional concern regarding the review of the assessment tools used in English and Scottish contexts, particularly regarding the potential of screening for exclusion, is the difference in social policy goals for lifelong learning in those jurisdictions compared to Ireland. The overwhelming focus on lifelong learning in England and Scotland is on employment related themes and the assessment tools, in so far as they could have a ‘screening’ role, need to be viewed as operating against this backdrop. As Holford et al (2007) state, ‘in countries like England and Scotland, accreditation and funding systems have driven home the message that the state will only resource programmes which contribute to the individual’s employability’ (p.9). While the Scottish system places significant emphasis on community based learning for social inclusion, Professor Sheila Riddell, University of Edinburgh is of the view that:

there is an issue of emphasis here. It is true that in Scotland the government funds

community based learning - but principally with a view to increasing a person's employability. The SNP Government emphasises even more strongly than the previous Labour administration that lifelong learning must be geared principally towards enhancing economic growth (*email communication to Paul Downes, June 2009*)

Though there is a focus on employment in England, particularly as a result of the skills strategy (see Leitch Review of Skills 2007), it is recognised that there are a huge range of learning opportunities for adults including a focus in the last two years on 'informal' learning. Nevertheless, Professor John Holford, University of Nottingham, states that:

The DIUS [Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills (formerly DfES [The Department for Education and Skills], now BIS [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills]) position in recent years has been very firmly to prioritise adult learning for vocational purposes. It is true that there has recently...been a white paper on informal learning, but this makes few firm commitments and does not promise to reverse the trend of recent years in any significant way. It is - to my mind - at best a belated acknowledgement that things may have gone a bit too far in the vocational direction (*email communication to Paul Downes, June 2009*)

The exclusionary potential of such a prevailing ethos is recognised by Holford et al's (2007) report: 'Concerns have been expressed that despite European and national statements that lifelong learning should be a means of increasing equality, the concentration on labour market policies has the effect of increasing social stratification' (p.30) (see also Holford et al 2008).

In contrast to the strong neo-liberal perspective pervading lifelong learning in England especially, and also to some degree in Scotland, the Irish White Paper (2000) sets out much wider goals for lifelong learning. In the words of Maunsell et al (2008), 'Rather than being merely a tag on to the economic rationale for lifelong learning, the White Paper prioritises the issue of social cohesion through personal, community and cultural development' (p.1). The White Paper thus expresses strong traditions and schools in adult education generally (see for example, the work of Lindemann, Mezirow, Brookfield, Freire). These wider humanistic, social and community development goals for adult education and lifelong learning have been pivotal to adult education in Ireland, also prior to the White Paper (see, for example, Bane 2007, Waters 2007 and Higgins 2007). In a European context, Power (2007) also emphasises the key importance of sustaining and developing humanistic concerns: 'A learning society founded on a narrow-skills driven agenda is not only a restricted notion of education, but an abandonment of the rich liberal-humanist traditions which have characterised European education in the past'. (p.49)

Underpinning the overall framework of lifelong learning are six areas of priority in the Irish White Paper on Lifelong Learning:

- Consciousness Raising: to realise full potential; self-discovery; personal and collective development
- Citizenship: to grow in self-confidence, social awareness and social responsibility and to take a proactive role in shaping the overall direction at societal and community decision-making
- Cohesion: to enhance social capital and empower those particularly disadvantaged
- Competitiveness: the role in providing a skilled workforce
- Cultural Development: the role of adult education in enriching the cultural fabric of society

- **Community Development:** the role of adult education in the development of community with a collective sense of purpose

Personal development of consciousness raising, self-confidence and social awareness of citizenship, as well as cultural, empowerment and community development features are all possible social benefits of participation in classes and courses where the learner may not fit the initial criteria based on the results of the screening and initial assessment process. The educational context offers what Berger & Neuhaus (1977) would term 'mediating structures', as an important part of participation in society. An analogy can also be made with research in the area of grade retention, admittedly for youths, though nevertheless pertinent to the issue of benefits of attending course with peers – there are demotivating effects of being removed from a common cohort of friends for reasons based purely on academic performance².

This is not an argument against a standardised initial needs and skills check per se but rather an argument for a learner centred agenda - for the use of such an initial needs and skills check for an agenda that serves not only the academic learning needs of the learner but also these wider needs, including personal and social needs, as well as community needs, given full priority in the White Paper. Placing the learner at the centre in taking responsibility for interpreting and acting upon the results of the initial needs and skills check ensures that such a check is used as a tool of inclusion, not as a barrier or exclusion; it provides a guidance not a compulsion towards decision-making. Its purpose is not merely to 'process' the individual into a mechanistic system (see also Downes 1993). It is against this backdrop that any putative standardised tool needs to be developed in an Irish context.

What type of questions should be part of any putative assessment?

As Brooks et al and Kruidenier (2002) note the requirement for standardised testing has led to the widespread use of multiple-choice tests throughout the US educational system. Brooks et al highlight that multiple-choice questioning is not 'reliably embedded in UK test culture' and multiple-choice assessments of writing are of doubtful validity. They also argued that the most obvious disadvantage with multiple-choice assessments is that writing is not assessed. Their report recommends that writing be part of an assessment process. Brooks et al acknowledge that cloze passages (and sentences) are popular as tests of reading, not least because they may be machine scorable or easily produced – however they do not recommend using them.

Brooks et al discuss the advantages and disadvantages of computer-based tests. They note that for a reliable estimate of a learner's level of attainment using paper-based instruments, statisticians argue that 25 items are a minimum and that 30 is preferable. Brooks et al argue that the strongest advantage of adaptive computer based tests is that it presents one item at a time, chooses each item on the basis of the learner's performance on previous items and it can 'zero in' on an estimate of the learner's level of attainment using significantly fewer items and much quicker than a paper based test. However there are strong design requirements, there must be a large number of items and these items must be very finely graded in difficulty and must be extensively trialled. Reviewers in this NRDC report emphasised that all ICT based materials, among other things, required additional skills over and above those being assessed and were biased against those without ICT

²A vast amount of educational research which has failed to find support for any form of grade retention as an effective intervention for most students with low achievement or significant socioemotional stresses (Hauser 1999; Jackson 1975; Holmes & Matthews 1984; Fowell & Lawton 1992; Smith & Shepard 1987; McGill-Frantzen & Allington 1993; Jimerson et al 1997; Jimerson 1999; Ferguson, Jimerson & Dalton 2001).

experience. Also Brooks et al noted that computer based approaches contained the limitations of multiple-choice questions.

Brooks et al recommend that computer based assessment should not be used. It should be remembered however that their research was fundamentally concerned with summative assessments. Computer based assessments have been used in jurisdictions similar to Ireland. *Learning Connections: An Adult Literacy and Numeracy Curriculum Framework* for Scotland reports on case studies in two Further Education colleges in Scotland that used the Plato diagnostic tool which is an online assessment tool for the core skills: communication, numeracy and IT. In one college, student levels in numeracy and IT were assessed using this online tool – staff were happy that this accurately placed students and student feedback was also positive. It is interesting to note that staff did not consider this tool to be sufficient to place students in the communication module as it could only assess students' ability with regard to spelling and punctuation. Instead, this college used a paper-based assessment, which involved 'free writing'. The report also detailed a case study in a large Further Education College, which has been screening students to identify levels of literacy and numeracy for many years. This college felt that ICT screening software would appeal to the younger 16-25 years old. They used a package created by CTAD, which was able to generate a detailed print out of students' literacy and numeracy levels. Though this college's experience of screening seems to be a positive one, this case study would have been strengthened by feedback from those who may have left the course. Furthermore, it should be noted that the ICT tool does not exist in isolation; following the assessment, in this case study, all students experienced a one-to-one interview. Students who expressed an interest in additional support were invited to attend literacy and numeracy support groups and all students who requested support negotiated an Individual Learning Plan with their tutor.

A number of reports in Ireland have expounded upon the potential of ICT in the field of adult education. A report by the Information Society Commission (Building a Capacity for Change – Lifelong Learning in the Information Society, 1999) recommended optimising the use and relevance of ICT in teaching and learning and also recommended increased investment in adult literacy using new technology to the full. The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) also drew attention to the 'enormous potential of ICT to be recognised as a means for widening access to information and education' (p.68). A major proposal for the White Paper for example was the provision of an Adult Basic ICT Skills Programme as part of the BTEI programme. The White Paper acknowledged that its support for ICT was based on three reasons; firstly vocational and economics reasons and in particular its relevance to employability, secondly it acknowledges that ICT can induce a higher level of motivation for learners and indeed provide a more exciting learning environment and thirdly, it notes the social benefits that can be gained and the importance of avoiding a two-tiered society marked by a digital divide. More and more people in Ireland have computer access. The CSO (2008) reported that in 2007 almost one million households had a computer, indicating that almost two out of three households in Ireland have a computer. The percentage of household who have a computer and who also have internet access has also increased to 57%. However, such resources cannot be presumed to be available to those living in relative poverty, especially in the current economic recession. It would be naïve to think that a digital divide does not exist in contemporary Ireland. McGill and Morgan (2001) cite stark evidence from a survey (ISC, 2000) detailing such a divide. The survey noted that while 69% of students and 42% of those who were working had used the internet, only 13% of those who were not working had. It should also be noted that evidence of access to the technology does not imply confidence to use the appropriate tools. Power's (2007) words, while surveying EU research, are apposite in this context: "New technologies...have been heralded as a means of simultaneously transforming

learning, widening participation, reducing social exclusion and aiding European integration. In reality, the research reveals that they are marginal to most people's educational experiences and, even if they were to be more widely made use of, it is more probable that they would only recreate (or even strengthen) educational inequalities rather than reducing them" (p.47)

Use of Frameworks to Guide Assessment

Through reviewing the literature it emerged that a number of visual frameworks have been developed to help guide the assessment process. These visual frameworks do not include 'tests' or formal assessments and depend on 'self report methods' in relation to literacy.

In Youthreach a form of learner assessment is done using the Wheel profiling tool, and this can be considered to represent a form of support intervention in itself. The Wheel examines sixteen factor areas, taking the form of a series of interviews between key worker and learner. The learner is invited to reflect on themselves under each of the factor headings, to rate their situation in terms of whether they perceive it as positive or negative and to identify goals for themselves in relation to that aspect of their lives. An individual action plan is developed out of the Wheel process. Gordon's (2007) *Report of a consultative process with stakeholders of Youthreach, Senior Traveller Training and Community Training Centres* notes that the Wheel process has the advantage of being learner centred with the learner fully involved in setting their own goals and education plan, it is also holistic and encourages self-reflection. Learner involvement in the assessment process is a key component in the assessment tool used in ITABE and its popularity among all stakeholders was documented in the ITABE Evaluation Report (2006). The tool itself is comprised of a series of checklists from which a staff member in consultation with the student, ticks off a series of statements, which are related to specific abilities. The statements are mapped to NFQ levels 1-3 and broken down into three further stages equivalent to Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced. The purpose of the assessment process in ITABE was to identify and record learners' strengths and weaknesses in four areas – speaking and listening, reading, writing and numeracy with the same checklists used pre and post course in order to measure progress. An important consideration to note is that this tool was not used for accreditation purposes but rather used to measure learner progress and to support the development of lesson plans. The guidelines stress that gaps identified by the learner in the pre-course assessment should not dictate the curriculum but rather addressing those gaps should be embedded into the planned learning outcomes.

In Scotland, the Adult Literacy Numeracy curriculum is represented as a wheel with the learner at the centre. The Wheel is designed to act as a visual reminder to tutors and learners of what is available to be taught and learnt and the principles that inform and underpin them. Circle 1 illustrates the many contexts for learning that a learner has and acknowledges the importance of the learner's life is this process and their motivations for learning. Circle 2 states Understanding, Knowledge, Skills and this circle underlines the fact that this process will involve practicing skills, acquisition of knowledge and the development of critical understanding. Circle 3 represents the SQA's core skills of Communication and Numeracy. The fourth circle reflects the remaining SQA core skills while the outer circle serves as a reminder of the principles that underpin the curriculum framework.

The CABES (Clare Adult Basic Education Service) framework has similarities to other visual frameworks. Its stated aims are to help tutors and learners to:

- examine literacy activities in the context of learning goals and/or course expectations
- make links with the learners' existing literacy practices
- identify possible areas of difficulty
- choose/modify strategies, texts, activities to address issues
- check progress
- identify and accumulate successful literacy strategies to meet further needs

Unlike the Wheel in Scotland, the CABES framework is not aligned to national standards in Ireland. However, Clare VEC did report using it as part of their assessment process and we note that CABES is beginning to introduce the framework to tutors outside the literacy service (BTEI, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Youthreach). CABES noted that it has generated awareness among tutors, outside the literacy service, that some of their learners may have literacy needs. CABES also report that tutors in these programmes have been requesting more literacy training as a result. However they report that some tutors remain resistant to the idea that they have a responsibility to make their classroom 'literacy inclusive'. This may be due to other relevant perceived benefits of the learning context, for an individual's personal and social development, active citizenship and participation in community development.

Consultation with the National Learning Network Assessment Service provided details on an adult profiling tool that has been developed by the National Learning Centre in collaboration with the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) and the Dyscovery Centre in Wales. The three centres initially worked together on a two-year EU funded project from which the adult profiling tool emerged.

While the tool was initially designed as a paper-based assessment, is now computer based and it identifies strengths and weaknesses in four areas:

1. Reading, writing, spelling
2. Co-ordination
3. Social skills
4. Attention and concentration

It takes around 20 minutes to complete however it is not diagnostic; it only identifies strengths and weaknesses. It is usually done in a group setting and can work well with a group of 30-40 students although there may need to be 2-3 people administering the test with such a number. It is worth noting too that those administering the tool do need training. A feedback sheet is provided immediately after the test but the results are taken away to be scored.

In practice, most of the first years in ITB are currently being profiled using this tool and if learners are found to have a difficulty they are invited back for further one-to-one assessment. It has been used in a variety of settings, including one Youthreach service and a secondary school.

The tool however does not test cognitive ability and works only after students have been selected for a course in order to support student learning and teacher planning. While the tool may be useful for practitioners to know about, it is not a screening or assessment tool.

Emerging Issues:

- A multiple-choice format while allowing for assessments to be easily scored, has doubtful educational merits and would not be a format familiar to many learners in Ireland. A multiple-choice format also impacts on a tools validity.
- Tools tend to examine the more technical aspects of literacy e.g. spelling. None of the tools reviewed, for example, require the learner to provide a writing sample.
- Choice of language, tasks and names can introduce cultural bias. Awareness of the dangers of bias should be noted.
- There is a need for initial assessment which can capture the individual learner's real-life use of language, and construction of meaning rather than a language scoring that does not involve transferable skills to other contexts of use and meaning.
- Some tools reviewed are including IT in the assessment. The absence of this in the assessment process in Ireland was noted by two VECs in the survey (Chapter Three). The presence of a digital divide in Ireland and a potential social class bias in computer based initial assessment must be recognised.
- The central goals in the Irish White Paper on Lifelong Learning regarding personal development of consciousness raising, self-confidence and social awareness of citizenship, as well as cultural, empowerment and community development features are all possible social benefits of participation in classes and courses where the learner may not fit the initial criteria based on the results of the screening and initial assessment process.
- Evaluation of test instruments and their use from the context of the UK needs to be cognisant of the broader lifelong learning goals espoused in the Irish White Paper than the overwhelmingly employment related goals in much of the UK.
- Visual frameworks are in use both nationally and internationally and seem to offer a user-friendly guide to the assessment process for all stakeholders including learners.

Chapter Three: Survey Analysis

A number of studies were influential in the construction of the survey of VECs, most notably a survey on assessment that was conducted amongst adult education practitioners in Canada (Campbell, 2006). The purpose of the survey used in this project was to gather information on the screening and initial assessment systems in place in each VEC, to establish the effectiveness of such systems and to collate views of what is needed in a new assessment tool. An online survey was designed in consultation with the project committee.

The survey consisted of 21 questions and a copy of the survey can be found in Appendix Two. A link to the online survey was sent to all AEOs requesting that one AEO in each VEC take responsibility for completing the survey on behalf of the adult and further education service. The response rate was very high, with 29 out of 33 VECs participating – it should be noted however that not every VEC answered every question, hence the disparity in numbers responding to different questions. Results from the survey were analysed using SPSS (version 14). All the VECs who did not participate in the survey did take part in the consultation sessions and a description of those sessions can be seen in Chapter Four.

Screening for Literacy and Initial Assessment in VECs

Screening for literacy was carried out in the Adult Literacy Service (ALS) in all the VECs who responded to this question (26). It was not carried out in all programmes as the chart below indicates.

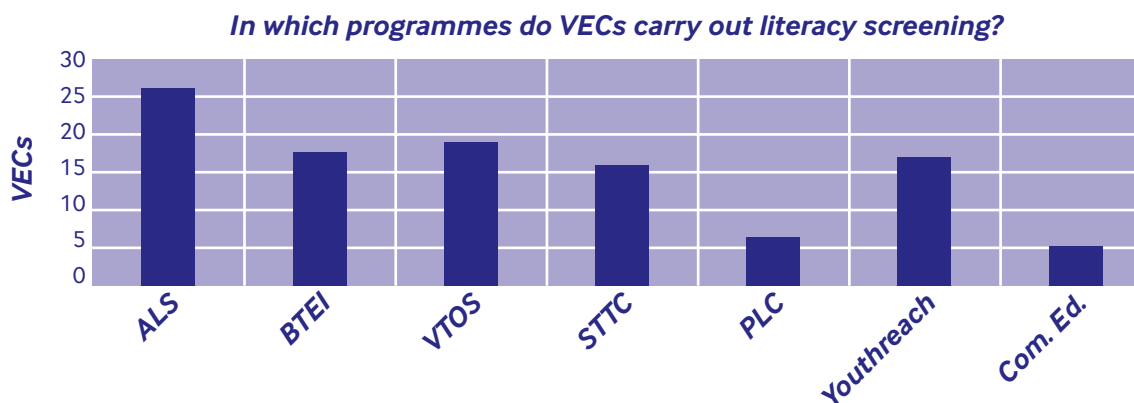


Figure 3: Programmes that carry out screening

As can be seen in Figure 3, 19 VECs carried out literacy screening in VTOS, 18 VECs in BTEI, 17 VECs in Youthreach programmes, 7 VECs in Post-Leaving Certificate courses and 5 VECs in Community Education programmes.

Initial assessments, as expected, took place mostly within the ALS. However 19 VECs conducted initial assessments in Youthreach programmes. 15 VECs carried out initial assessments in VTOS, 14 VECs in STTCs and 11 VECs carried out initial assessments in BTEI. Similar to the figures for screening, Post-Leaving Certificate Courses and Community Education Programmes had the lowest levels of VECs carrying out initial assessments (4 and 3 respectively).

These results indicate that while screening and initial assessments for literacy are established practices in the Adult Literacy Service there is not uniformity across the sector.

Approaches Used in the Assessment Process

VECs were asked to name approaches that are used in the assessment process. Almost all VECs used a wide range of approaches. Respondents were asked if they used any of the following approaches in their assessment procedure:

- Informal interviews without formal schedule
- Informal interviews with formal schedule
- A writing sample
- A reading sample
- Observation
- Learner self-assessment

Observation was by far the approach most commonly adopted with all VECs, with the exception of one, using it as part of their assessment process. Interestingly, 22 VECs reported that learner self-assessment was a feature in their assessment procedures. Reid and Denny (2003) argue that self-assessment introduces an element of personal control into the assessment process and it allows learners to gain a sense of ownership of the assessment process. It is worth noting though that many adult learners may underestimate their skills. This may be particularly evident from learners from a working-class background (Ivers, 2008). The importance of the interview, noted in the literature, is reinforced in this survey with informal interviews, with and without formal interview schedules, proving equally popular; 25 VECs reporting using them in their assessment process. Due to how this question was asked, however, it is not possible to distinguish between differing approaches that may have been used in the screening and initial assessment process.

Who carries out the assessment?

VECs were asked who carried out the assessment in their service and the following checklist was provided:

- Programme Co-ordinator
- Adult Education Officer
- Tutor/Instructor
- Adult Guidance

In all 29 VECs who participated in the survey, the programme co-ordinator was reported as being the person who carried out the assessment, with 23 VECs also noting that the tutor also carried out assessments and 10 VECs noted that the Adult Guidance Service was involved in this process. A number of VECs also noted that other personnel were involved in this process, with 9 VECs specifically mentioning the Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs) and 5 VECs mentioning the involvement of resource workers. One VEC also drew attention to the fact that the Pre Learning Advice (PLA) Assessor for SKILLVEC carried out assessments.

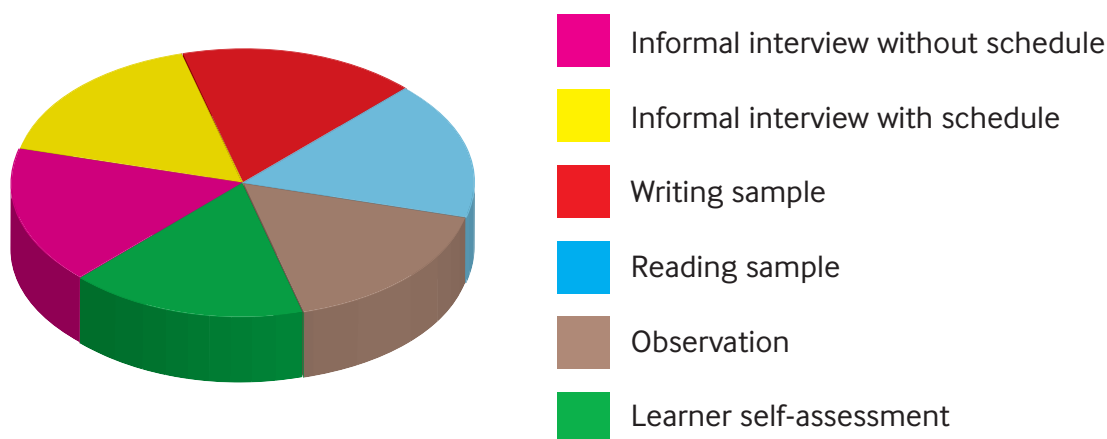


Figure 4: Different approaches in use

Is the assessment devised by your own service?

Respondents were also asked if the assessment was devised by their own service and 19 (67.9%) indicated that it was.

The creativity of VECs in adapting a variety of tools and approaches was explained by many respondents as being fueled by learners' needs:

Our priority is the needs of the learner and all services use the approaches outlined above to ascertain that information. In responding to the needs of the learner there is ongoing consultation adjustments to approaches and content of programmes. (VEC, no. 3)

... in the majority of cases they [the tools] are adapted and developed by practitioners to respond to the specific needs of the learners presenting. (VEC, no. 1)

A number of VECs qualified their answer and stressed that there are different practices within each VEC. One respondent noted for example that

The Adult Literacy, Youthreach & STTC programme have all devised their own assessment materials and are used as part of the admission criteria for each programme. The type of assessment used depends on target group. (VEC, no.18)

Which tools are used to support assessment?

A variety of tools were used to support assessment. The most popular tool mentioned was the ITABE checklist, which 19 VECs made specific reference to. This was followed by Mapping the Learning Journey which was reported by 8 VECs. All VECs reported using more than one tool. One VEC noted that in their service 'the most frequently used tool is also the most difficult one to quantify in that it is the semi-formal interview'. Indeed 4 VECs specifically referred to the informal interview in this section and 5 VECs reported that the registration form given to learners also supported the assessment process.

Other tools reported in this section included Dolch word lists (6), the Basic Skills Agency Initial Assessment Tool (5), Schonnel Tests (5), FETAC checklist (1) and IALS document (1). Some VECs reported assessments that were being used in their Youthreach programmes including the Web Wheel approach and the Wide Range Achievement Tests (WRAT).

The results from this question were very similar to results from a survey of STTCs in 2007. That questionnaire gave an overview of literacy provision in STTCs and was distributed to centre directors. It revealed a vast number of tests in use for assessing literacy with no one measurement emerging as the most popular. It also noted that in one fifth of centres surveyed, there is no formal procedure for assessing literacy levels when a learner joins the centre.

The results of our survey show the use of tools that are clearly inappropriate. The Schonnel tests for example are now more than half a century old and were designed for use with children. Their continued reported use is perhaps an indication of how tools, which are easy and cheap to use and obtain, can gain acceptance in the absence of an appropriate range of tools.

How satisfied are you with the assessment tools that are used in your VEC?

VECs were also asked to rate their satisfaction with the assessment tools that are in use in their VEC in terms of very satisfied, satisfied, somewhat satisfied and not satisfied. The pie chart below gives a visual indication of the results.

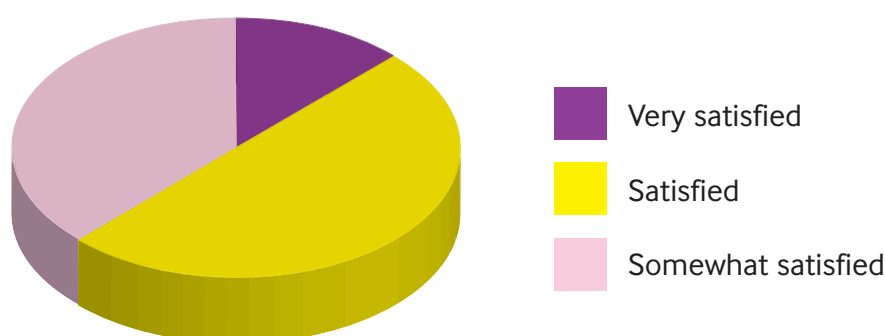


Figure 5: Satisfaction with Assessment Tools

It is notable that 50% of VECs stated that they were satisfied with their assessment tools, though only four VECs stated that they were very satisfied with their assessment tools and 10 VECs (35.7%) claimed they were only somewhat satisfied. Further analysis of the tools being used by VECs who were very satisfied did reveal an interesting result, quite simply those who were most satisfied tended to use a greater variety of tools. All four VECs who were 'very satisfied' used a range of tools; three of them specifically referred to ITABE, two mentioned using both initial interviews and registration forms as part of the process. British models of assessment also featured in one VEC, while another reported using, among other things, Mapping the Learning Journey.

Interestingly no VEC said that they were not satisfied with their assessment tools. It should be noted however that this measurement is quite crude and needs to be qualified somewhat. One VEC encapsulates this in another section when they report that "there are mixed views across the VEC depending on the service: some services are not satisfied with their tools".

Strengths of the tool used most frequently

In outlining the strengths of the tool used most frequently, the importance of the informal interview was frequently stressed. One respondent noted that the informal interview's strength is "that it is responsive to the needs of the learner" (VEC, no.1).

One theme to emerge was the importance of a learner centred approach to assessment with a non-threatening assessment tool that allows the learner to tell their story and is not just based on assessing skills. One respondent summed this up by saying "In our view, there is no substitute for getting to know your learners over an initial period" (VEC, no. 20). This VEC noted that the Wheel in Youthreach and the CABES framework, both referred to in Chapter Two are useful in guiding this process. However, they also stated that while a range of assessment tools can assist the process, they should never be used in isolation.

Weaknesses or limitations of this tool

Respondents noted a wide variety of weaknesses of the tools they used. A number of key themes emerged. Firstly it was noted that many staff operate under time constraints and this impacts on the assessment process:

Where working tools have been developed, there is a consensus that these are often time-consuming if they are to yield accurate and comprehensive data. (VEC, no.4)

Secondly, although many VECs reported using informal approaches, they were also acutely aware of the difficulties of such an approach, including the fact that it was dependent on the expertise of the practitioner:

it can be subjective and is almost entirely dependent on the expertise of the practitioner (VEC, no.1)

Not very specific - does not give an objective measurement. Based on personal interpretation. [It's] difficult to measure improvement. (VEC, no.11)

Walsh's (2009) cautionary note in the context of examining different dimensions to narrative that "Lack of understanding of the difference between compound and complex sentences and/or subordinate clauses could cause difficulty for an inexperienced examiner" (p.41) is apposite here.

McGill and Morgan (2001) in their study of educational disadvantage in Ireland recommend the need for developmental work in the area of assessment in adult literacy and note as an example 'it is striking that there is a scarcity of appropriate tests that are suitable for adult learners' (p64.) A number of respondents in this survey noted the inappropriateness of the tools in use:

They are not normed on the Traveller Community (VEC, no. 6)

Tests not written for adults (VEC, no. 13)

Two VECs drew attention to the fact that IT skills were not assessed as part of the assessment process.

Demand for a nationally standardised assessment tool was voiced by 3 VECs with a number of VECs (4) reporting that the tool they used most often was unstructured and leads to inconsistencies. However, it should be qualified that there are differing views on this with one VEC noting that:

despite these limitations, the reflection/engagement process is always preferable to the use of a 'standardised assessment tool' in adult education.

Some respondents were conscious that learners might not feel comfortable with the assessment process at all and that nervousness was a barrier to assessing ability. This echoes the fear of failure themes emphasised strongly in international research, as noted earlier. Other respondents reflected on the fact that any assessment may not give a full picture of a learner's ability:

The test given is very basic and designed in-house. It does not capture all of the difficulties that the student may have and is not 100% accurate in deciding what level the student is at. (VEC, no.18)

Procedures and Practices

This section consisted of a number of questions that required respondents to rank statements in order of importance. The first question invited each respondent to rank statements related to the purpose of screening. Of the 21 VECs who responded to this question, there was agreement among the majority that the most important purpose of screening in their VEC was to determine³ literacy and numeracy needs. Figure 5 shows the range of answers to this question and it was notable that out of the 12 statements of purpose people could choose from there was a general consensus.

³It is recognised that this term 'determine' is too extreme and that 'inform' is a more appropriate word, however, for the survey the more extreme term 'determine' was used as an indicator of the strength of opinion of a given respondent.

Statement	Frequency
To determine literacy and numeracy needs	12
To help plan tuition	3
To determine placement	3
To establish a benchmark or skill level	2
To provide information to the learner	1

Table 2: *The most important purpose of literacy screening*

If we take the top three statements, ‘determining literacy and numeracy needs’ features in 18 (out of 21) VECs answers.

Respondents were also asked to rank in order of importance the purpose of initial assessment of literacy in their VEC. 25 VECs responded to this question and again the most important purpose noted by the vast majority of VECs (19) was ‘to determine literacy and numeracy needs’.

If we analyse the top three answers in this section, a picture begins to emerge of how initial assessment is viewed. Figure 6 displays the most popular statements as ranked in the top three.

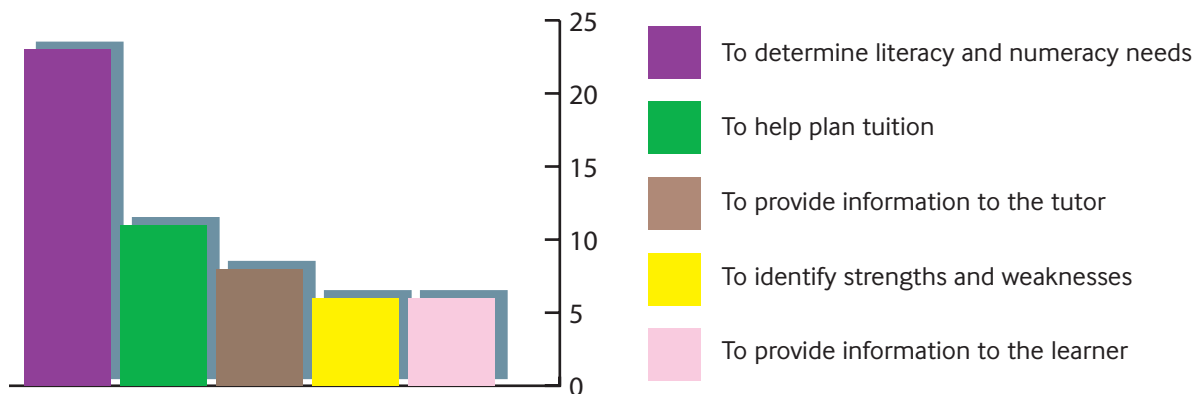


Figure 6: *The most common statements featured in the top three rankings of purpose of initial assessment*

Respondents were also asked to read nine statements, which referred to assessment practices and were asked to rank them in order of importance to their VEC.

The following list of statements were provided to respondents:

1. Initial assessment and screening is a collaborative and reflective process, encouraging meaningful student involvement.
2. Initial assessment and screening assist in the ongoing planning of the individual's goals and learning activities.
3. The assessment emphasises what students can do rather than what they cannot do.
4. The purpose and nature of the assessment is explicit and clear to the student.
5. Assignment results are shared with the student.
6. Interpretation of assessment results takes student's cultural and personal histories into account.
7. Assessment is fair and unbiased.
8. The assessment is conducted in a non-threatening manner.
9. The student is ensured of confidentiality.

The statement ranked number one by most of the respondents was the first statement: 'initial assessment and screening is a collaborative and reflective process, encouraging meaningful student involvement'. Respondents were asked to order these nine statements and by taking the most popular statements to feature in the top three rankings a fuller picture emerges.

The following chart serves as a visual illustration of the results.

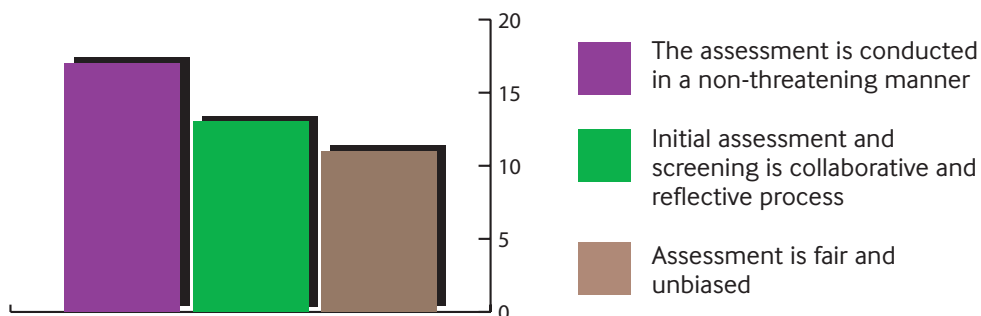


Figure 7: The most common statements featured in the top three rankings of importance of practices in VECs

Taking the top three ranked statement into account does present a more rounded picture of what practices are given priority. Key features to these results are the importance given by VECs to an assessment that is non-threatening to a learner. Indeed the word non-threatening featured prominently in both the open-ended questions in the survey and in the consultation sessions. The results convey the importance of learner involvement in the assessment process and the idea that assessment is indeed part of a process is recognised. Furthermore the practice of an assessment being fair and unbiased also features in the top three rankings.

In the survey we also asked questions in relation to recording a learner's prior learning experience, recording the assessment and if the assessment was recorded according to a level.

20 VECs reported recording learners' prior learning experience in the screening process, while 24 recorded it in the initial assessment. A similar figure emerges in the recording of the screening and initial assessment, with 20 VECs recording the screening and 25 recording the initial assessment.

Of the VECs who were recording the results of screening and initial assessment, a further question was asked regarding whether these results were recorded according to a level and if so what level was used. 20 VECs reported recording to results according to a level and the levels mentioned ranged from:

- Literacy levels 1,2 and 3 as defined by the DES
- Levels used in ITABE
- FETAC levels

One VEC noted that they were recording levels as per the Aston Index. The Aston Index refers to a range of screening and assessment tools, which are designed for children, aged 5-14. One VEC specifically mentioned recording levels according to levels 1,2 and 3 in the National Framework of Qualifications. It should be noted that the DES, which gathers data on VEC adult literacy services has concluded that previous definitions reported by the VEC adult literacy services are no longer suitable and a more appropriate reference is to the National Framework of Qualifications and the national standards of FETAC levels 1-3. Guidelines have been circulated to VECs advising them of the change in definitions (NALA, 2008)

The survey also asked about the information provided to the student once the assessment process was completed. Respondents were given the following checklist to choose from and asked to choose all that applied.

- None
- Assessment scores
- Literacy basic education, numeracy level
- Description of assessment results
- Description of instruction they will receive
- Description of the programme they will be placed in
- Programme expectations
- Role and responsibilities of tutor and student
- Individual Learning Plan
- Other (please specify)

Of the 26 VECs who responded to this question, it was interesting to note that all gave some information to the student following the assessment process. However, some of the information provided was limited to a description of the programme learners would be placed in (2 VECs). It was

clear that some VECs provided much more information than others. Only 4 VECs gave learners their actual mark on the assessment. This seems to indicate that assessment is being used to guide others apart from the learner (e.g. providers, policy makers, practitioners). Cahillane-McGovern (2006) notes that if an assessment is for learning rather than of learning then feedback is of critical importance. Furthermore, Black and William (1998, as cited in Cahillane-McGovern) argue that if assessment information is used to inform learning decisions then the learner should be the key user of this information. 15 VECs reported that they provided the learner with an Individual Learning Plan, in dialogue with the learner, once the assessment was completed.

Key challenges in the area of screening and initial assessment

Respondents were asked to note the key challenges faced by their VEC in relation to screening and initial assessment. A checklist and comment box was provided. All 27 VECs who answered this question selected the need for more staff training in assessment as a key challenge. 14 VECs reported that there was not enough time to administer and follow up assessments, while eleven VECs cited the need for an increase in staff as a key challenge.

A number of key themes emerged from this question, notably the need for a comprehensive screening and assessment system and more trained staff with more co-ordination between staff. One VEC reported that different members of the centre had different experiences of assessment:

Different views were expressed: ALOs did not experience any significant challenges; others found co-ordination of assessment with a combination of full-time and part-time staff a challenge. (VEC, no. 13)

One VEC argued that there is a need for a common assessment that can be implemented universally and easily and while ITABE had accomplished this to some extent, it should be built on.

It was clear that a number of VECs are using tools that are not designed for adults and this fact was highlighted as a significant weakness.

A previous study of literacy provision in Youthreach, STTCs and CTCs documented the key challenges faced by each centre (Ad Hoc Working Group, 2008). All three centres identified a number of key challenges, including the need to integrate literacy across the curriculum with all staff taking responsibility, the need for more resources, the need for staff training and the challenge of accessing relevant and age appropriate measures and materials for engaging learners.

What type of assessment tools would you like to see developed in the future?

There was wide consensus that what was needed was a tool that was user-friendly, not time-consuming, was easy to administer and gives accurate information regarding learners' abilities and needs and allows for appropriate placement. This is reflected in respondents' comments:

There is a consensus in our VEC that tools for screening assessment need to be reliable and relatively straightforward to carry out. They should be used in order to support students' inclusion rather than 'tests for exclusion'. (VEC, no. 4)

The words 'non-threatening' in relation to an assessment tool featured strongly in this section. Some respondents also emphasised the role of the learner and self-assessment in the process. The need to have age appropriate assessment tools for adult learners was reported and one respondent voiced the need to have initial assessment tools that were normed on the Traveller community.

In respondents' comments it was clear that an assessment tool has to be measured against the ability of a centre to use it and to respond to it with appropriate support for the learner. Otherwise, as is clear, from a comment from one VEC, any benefits from doing the assessment are lost:

assessing students without having the means to respond to assessment outcomes can be misleading to students and frustrating to staff. (VEC, no. 4).

Ryan and Downes (2007) have highlighted elsewhere in an Irish educational context an overreliance on assessment without subsequent follow up supports.

The idea of an assessment tool that was practical given the resources was also stated by a number of respondents. There were clear demands for both a common tool that could be used across different programmes and a range of standardised tools that could be utilised. One respondent noted that:

To facilitate progress for the learner from one sector to another, there needs to be put in place assessment tools, which are linked. These tools, while being specific to each sector need to be linked to the next set of assessment tools, in the next sector. This, for us would enhance the work that is being done already, in the area of linking all the services, under one umbrella. The purpose of ONE Service is to facilitate the student in entering education at whatever level they are at, and then making their journey as seamless as possible. (VEC, no. 10).

Emerging Issues:

- A variety of screening and assessment tools are currently in use in VECS. There is a demand for assessment tools that are linked to the national framework with many VECs recognising that there are inconsistencies in the assessment process and acknowledging the significant weaknesses of some tools currently in use. There are however concerns about maintaining a learner centred approach to screening and assessment. A key priority is a non-threatening process.
- Observation, informal interviews and learner self-assessment were, in practice, the most common features in the assessment process
- The majority of VECs were designing their own assessment tools.
- Most of the tools currently in use have been developed outside of Ireland and have not been adapted. Some have derived their normative standard from children, and while others have been normed on adults they have not been normed on a representative sample of Irish adult learners, nor on ethnic minority groups, including members of the Travelling community.
- Outside of the ALS, screening and initial assessments are carried out in varying degrees. The low figures in relation to screening in particular indicate that learners may be at risk of being in programmes that place undue pressure on them. However, the issue is one of informed choice for the learner rather than a paternalism that has no place in an education system committed to learner centred educational principles.

Chapter Four: Consultation Sessions with VEC representatives

Aims/objectives

In addition to the distribution of the questionnaire to all VECs, the research included two consultation seminars in order to give qualitative dimension to the study and to develop and expand on the issues raised in the survey. The aims and objectives of these consultation sessions were to allow the key stakeholders the opportunity to discuss their own views of screening and initial assessment and to interact with the ideas, propositions and suggestions of other VECs.

Two sessions took place in October 2008 and seventeen VECs were represented. For discussion purposes the following three questions were proposed:

1. What does the (a) screening and (b) initial assessment process involve in your service?
2. What works?
In the (a) screening and (b) initial assessment process what works well? What doesn't?
3. What would you like to see in new assessment tools for (a) screening and (b) initial assessment?

The intention of the first question was to differentiate between screening and initial assessment and to clarify the process involved in each particular VEC that was represented. The purpose of the second question was to encourage discussion of the different tools and practices that work and clarify the ones that do not work. The third question focused on the features of tools/ instruments participants would like to see used in screening and initial assessment. Participants were asked to refer to specific programmes they used or were familiar with.

Issues Arising from the Consultation Sessions:

Different Approaches to Screening and Initial Assessment

In asking what the screening and initial assessment process involved, it became apparent that very few tools are being used in screening. In general, the screening strategies that were adapted were informal in nature. The most popular tools used in the screening process were the use of the 'informal interview' and the use of application forms. Some participants' felt that a "simple straight-forward chat, placing the needs of student as a priority" was an effective strategy.

A number of participants mentioned the importance of self-assessment in the screening process, while some mentioned using taster sessions and group information sessions as part of the screening process.

In general, the impression given was of a much more formal or structured approach to the initial assessment process than to screening. Specific tools were mentioned including the Basic Skills Agency Initial Assessment, Schonnel tests, Mapping the Learning Journey and ITABE. However, there was overwhelming recognition that that some of these tools were not adequate for the purpose of initial assessment. The variety of tools in use in initial assessment re-iterates the

findings from an earlier survey of practices in CTCs, Youthreach and STTCs (Ad Hoc Working Group, 2008). It also supports the findings from the survey done as part of this project.

In both consultation sessions the importance of an assessment skills process that recognised 'soft skills' was mentioned, in particular it was noted that Mapping the Learning Journey (MLJ) acknowledged such skills, although some participants did feel that the MLJ was too time-consuming and consequently cumbersome to carry out. In the absence of any nationally accepted initial assessment tool, it was made clear that practices could vary widely not just between VECs but within them too.

Language

Some participants felt strongly that the language associated with the process is off-putting to learners and felt that 'assessment is not a good term' and may cause anxiety to the learner if they feel they are being tested. A "Skills Check" was mentioned as an alternative term for assessment and it is interesting that this is now the term used for 'screening' in the UK. The term 'needs analysis' instead of 'assessment' was also suggested.

The point about language in the assessment process has been made by a number of research studies. Laird et al (2003) in evaluating an online tool in a number of FE colleges noted that the word 'test' increased anxiety among some students. A NIACE project which sought to examine learners' views on how achievement was identified in non-accredited learning also noted that 'assessment' was not a term generally used by learners and noted that it was viewed with antipathy by some learners who associated it with negative connotations (Watters et al, 2001).

Language is a powerful and complex tool. The phrase in the title of this project 'what's the score?' has two meanings. Firstly it can be understood (but not necessarily by everyone) as a colloquial phrase meaning 'what is happening?'. Secondly, it also has a more literal meaning. It is hoped it may serve as a reminder of both the multifaceted ways language can be understood (and the consequence of that for assessment tools) and a reminder of the danger of an assessment process being reduced to a score. It is acknowledged that people are not at levels, skills are, and a meaningful assessment process, in keeping with the ethos of Adult Education in Ireland, is to reinforce that.

Pressure to fill places and the impact on screening

The VEC provide a vast range of programmes all operating with a degree of independence from each other. This structure was noted in the sessions and in particular its impact on having an effective screening process. In both consultation sessions participants raised the issue of the screening process being undermined because of the need to fill places on courses:

Sometimes screening isn't done because of the need to fill places.

This seemed indicative of a fragmented organisational structure and consequently a fragmented approach to learners' needs and one that could impact on the effectiveness of any new initial assessment process. As Conlon (2004) states:

Adult learners approaching the local adult education service care little about acronyms like VTOS or BTEI or PLC. Their need is deeply felt and all they want of the service is to be welcomed and

matched to the most appropriate educational programme (p.66).

The practice of not effectively screening for literacy due to pressure to fill course places lead a number of participants in one session to argue for a screening process to be carried out independently with the guidance service being suggested as the preferred option.

Standardised Tool V. Flexibility

There was general acceptance of the need to have an initial assessment and screening tool that was linked to national standards and to have a process that was standardised in order to avoid inconsistencies and biases.

However, as with the survey, the word standardised was often quickly followed by the word 'flexibility'. The consultations at least provided the opportunity to tease these seemingly contradictory concepts out. One participant felt that ITABE was a tool that although it was 'standardised' allowed practitioners the flexibility of using it with learners from a variety of different levels. However, it should be noted that although ITABE is mapped to national standards, it is not a standardised tool as it is based on a method of self-reporting.

Some participants also suggested 'a manual of learning tools – a menu from which they could select tools'. The word flexibility in this context seemed to refer to flexibility in use in order to accommodate the diversity of needs and abilities of a particular learner.

Ideal Features of Assessment Tools

Tools should be time efficient, concise, effective and easy to use. One participant stated that there was a need to have tools that were 'culturally appropriate' and gave a specific example of a tool in use that was American based and contained culturally specific references. In one session, the potential of a screening tool that could be completed on computer was raised. There was not consensus on this issue with some feeling that 'the service should not alienate people by the tool they use'. There was some debate around this topic, however, with some suggesting that people may feel more comfortable using a computer while others felt that those who were not computer literate would be discouraged. Others argued that in a world which increasingly forced people to become familiar with technology (banking and booking flights were mentioned) using IT to aid the screening process was feasible and sensible for some learners – it should be noted that specifically learners at level 4-6 were mentioned in this context.

For initial assessment many participants recommended a range of tools that could be used across the board and would suit all programmes. There was however a recognition of the importance of resources and trained staff to implement them. Many participants noted that they would like to see tools that support self-assessment, encouraging self-reflection and continued assessment from entry to exit points, allowing students chart their progress. In initial assessment one participant felt that the focus was on literacy and there is a need to focus also on numeracy and digital learning too.

Training and Resources

It was recognised that the screening process can be inconsistent and largely dependent on the

skills of the person carrying out. One participant noted that this means in practice that the skill in screening people accurately is not transferable but is an accumulation of experience.

It was also suggested that screening should “involve all staff including front line staff” and again that the guidance service could be integrated into this process. It was generally felt that staff training in both screening and initial assessment is paramount to consistent and accurate assessment of learners’ needs and in order to ensure that learners are properly placed. With some tools, the tool was only effective if someone was well trained in it. One participant mentioned the WebWheel tool used in Youthreach and felt that while it was effective it was only so if someone was well trained to use it.

There was agreement that resources and trained staff were vital to efficient assessment but concerns were raised about these issues. The issue of resources in relation to initial assessment were very similar to those needed for the screening process, training and time were needed to implement the tools and the common denominator for this was financial resources. A number of participants felt that the reliance on part-time tutors presented the service with challenges in terms of training. Some participants spoke of learners being screened after placement, because of time and staff restraints.

A Learner-Centred Approach to Assessment

The importance of a welcoming environment and a non-threatening assessment were frequently mentioned in the consultation session. The need to have a learner-centred approach was frequently raised in relation to the assessment process. One participant asked “is the motivation to create a tool humanistic or mechanistic?” A number of concerns were raised as to “how learner centred is a standard measurement tool” outlining a fear already apparent in the discussion between a standardised test and the need for flexibility. Gilligan (1982) contrasts a contextual, relational approach based on assumed connection between self and other, with an impersonal approach based on assumed separation. This important distinction in psychology between a mode of assumed connection and assumed separation, echoed subsequently across different cultures (Downes 2003a; 2010), supports a concern that engagement with a traditionally marginalized learner through an initial ‘screening’ tool rather than for example, an informal semi-structured interview, would bring a change in relation from one of assumed connection with the learner to one of assumed separation and possible alienation.

Challenges faced by Different VECs

It became clear that just as learners are not homogeneous, neither are education providers. The different needs of rural and urban communities were raised with participants noting feelings of isolation and a lack of cohesive approach. The issues faced by smaller VECs were voiced with one participant concerned that not all programmes and levels were available in his area and this would impact the screening process.

Bigger VECs are not immune from challenges but the nature of the challenge can be different. In the survey, for example, one VEC reported as their key challenge the fact that their VEC is a particularly large one, which meant there were logistical difficulties in developing a standard, reliable and comprehensive system of assessment.

One participant also stressed the need for an Irish language version of any new standardised tool.

Emerging Issues:

- Dialogue with learners and a welcoming environment were frequently stressed as vital for any assessment process. So too was the need for a learner centred, non-threatening approach. Numerous tools are in use in initial assessment although screening is very much characterised by informal interviews and application forms. However, it was made clear that what is often described as non-formal does not necessarily mean unstructured or undocumented.
- Although new screening and initial assessment tools are not being considered for ESOL, and it was not part of the remit of the research, how ESOL learners fit into this process was mentioned as a cause of concern and is certainly an ongoing issue for some VECs.
- There was some unease about what would happen after an effective screening tool was put in place, in other words how will it impact on programmes particularly ones in which there is pressure to fill places. Questions were also asked about who owns the information, who is responsible for giving feedback and in particular what happens when a learner is adamant about the course they want to do, regardless of what the screening tool indicates. These concerns underline the work that has to be done in order to convince practitioners that any new tools on screening and assessment are fuelled not simply by humanistic rather than mechanistic intentions but also will have learner centred consequences. It is an acknowledgement that screening has the potential to be used for exclusion.
- Strong views were expressed about the language used in the assessment process with concern raised about the appropriateness of the word 'assessment' and how it might impact on learners approaching adult education services for the first time.
- Participants were aware of the economic climate and concerns were raised about the resources available to provide, operate and train staff needed to successfully put in practice any new screening/initial assessment tools.

Key Findings

1. It is evident from this review that there is no one international standardised tool that can be endorsed as appropriate for an Irish context. Existing tools provide limited sensitivity to cultural bias, offer little culturally relevant themes for communication, are largely silent about test-retest reliability and in computerised form raise other issues regarding creating an additional barrier to learning across the digital divide, especially at the lower levels (i.e., not FETAC levels 4-6).
2. Other key issues regarding use of potential standardised tools include the fear of failure and anxiety generated in learners, many of whom have had a history of failure in the formal educational system. This point is emphasised by a plethora of international research studies and educationalists and was prioritised as a key aspect to be addressed by VEC representatives. Based on survey results, the primary importance given by VECs to an assessment is that it is non-threatening to a learner. Indeed the word non-threatening featured prominently in both the open-ended questions in the survey and in the consultation sessions. The second priority conveyed the importance of learner involvement in the assessment process where any initial assessment and 'screening' is a collaborative and reflective process, encouraging meaningful student involvement. It is striking that there is a strong consensus between both international research on these themes and these concerns raised in practice by VEC representatives.
3. The VEC consultation seminar emphasis on a welcoming environment and non-threatening assessment is strongly supported by international research on overcoming fear of failure. A concern arises that any putative screening process could have the effect of deterring already fearful men and women from particularly marginalized backgrounds from accessing adult education courses. The related concern regarding a mechanistic, institution centred tool versus a humanistic, learner centred tool needs to be firmly addressed in any future development of initial assessment.
4. Current practice reveals the use of inappropriate tools, which are not capable of accurately assessing adults' literacy skills, and needs. Some screening and initial assessment tools in use in Ireland have been normed on children rather than on an appropriate adult learner population. Information gleaned from these assessments has doubtful merit. Similarly, some tools in use are from other countries – they have not been normed on a representative sample of Irish learners and crucially have not been adapted to an Irish context.
5. While the aim of this research has been to inform the development of an initial assessment tool and potential screening for inclusion tool, it is clear that screening has also been used to exclude people e.g., learners on the basis of previous qualifications are deemed not eligible for literacy support.
6. Early identification of learners' literacy needs has been identified as crucial in supporting learners and their choice of course.
7. Despite the absence of one international standardised tool which could be endorsed, nevertheless, key features of an appropriate process of initial checking of a learner's needs and skills can be developed in light of existing research and practice, internationally and in Ireland.

8. Any process of devising and employing appropriate tools for learning needs to include scope for the learner to construct meaning rather than simply process decontextualised information. The language being used needs to be meaningful to the life and culture of the learner and the process requires one where the learner is in control of and has scope for choice within the features of the needs and skills identification process. Adult education is traditionally committed to principles of active learning and these also need to be applied to the learner's active learning regarding their own learning needs.
9. These issues rule out the use of multiple choice testing in any form of this needs and skills identification process.
10. Interestingly, 22 out of 29 participating VECs reported that learner self-assessment was a feature in their assessment procedures. The positive motivational dimension to self-assessment needs full recognition. There is growing international evidence, for example, that assessment can play an important role in motivating learners and encouraging learners to take control of their own learning. This can increase the learner's confidence as well as helping teaching and planning.
11. Many VEC participants noted that they would like to see tools that support self-assessment, encouraging self-reflection and continued assessment from entry to exit points, allowing students chart their progress.
12. Sticht (1999) advocates avoiding using a standardised test with learners when they first begin a programme due to the fact that adult learners may be nervous and frightened and therefore their abilities may be underestimated. This is particularly relevant for lowest levels and together with the vital need to provide an initial welcoming environment, it highlights the importance of an initial semi-structured informal interview in a supportive setting, rather than an initial testing and 'screening' with a tool. Based on the two consultation seminars where seventeen VECs were represented, it is significant that very few tools are being used in screening. In general the screening strategies that were adapted were informal in nature. The most popular tools used in the screening process were the use of the 'informal interview' and the use of application forms. Some participants felt that a "simple straight-forward chat, placing the needs of student as a priority" was an effective strategy.
13. The existence of informal interviews and the benefits of them both to the learner and the interviewer were noted in both the survey and the consultation sessions with representatives from the VECs.
14. There is a widely held view in the international literature that norm referenced assessment in general has negative educational and social effects (Ecclestone, 2005). In recent years there has rightly been a move away from norm referencing towards the use of external measures and criteria. FETAC levels assessments and awards, for example, are criterion based. Ecclestone notes that criterion referenced assessment is more likely to be used when, among other things, there is a desire to remove barriers in access to education. Any tools as part of an initial needs and skills check process must not be norm referenced but rather criterion based, as well as self-reference based. Examination of a learner's needs according to criterion based approaches and in relation to their previous learning offer a more practical direction for providing them with supports.
15. Models in Northern Ireland are of particular interest. The good practice guidelines of The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in Northern Ireland outlines three elements to their initial assessment process, the first of which is an initial interview. Based on findings

from the initial interview the learner is placed in a class according to their appropriate level. The importance of this initial interview is stressed in the guidelines and there is evidence from international literature that assessment embedded in conversation is more likely to yield information regarding new learners' needs (Looney, 2008).

16. At the initial interview the Northern Ireland guidelines recommend that the learner should be put at ease and given the opportunity to ask questions. Learners should then be asked general questions about their learning experiences, life and work and future plans. The guidelines recognise that interviewing is a skill and they stress that the person carrying out the interview should have received some training in the interview process. They also state that information from the initial interview should be recorded in a standardised format and be forwarded to the class tutor.
17. The Free Writing Task Assessment Checklist, which is produced by the LSDA, is impressive as it allows for construction of meaning and cultural relevance within a framework for standardisation. It is designed to be used after an initial interview and baseline tool has been completed. As part of the initial assessment process, learners are asked to write on a particular topic. A tutor then assesses their writing. The checklist is divided up into various levels: entry level 1, entry level 2, entry level 3 and level 1. With entry level 1 for example, the tutor will check that the learner can:
 - Write a simple sentence.
 - Punctuate a simple sentence with a capital letter and a full stop.
 - Spell correctly some personal key words and familiar words.

With Level 1, the tutor will check that the learner can do all of the previous levels (entry level 1, 2 and 3) plus:

- Write in a logical sequence using paragraphs where appropriate.
 - Use correct grammar (e.g. subject-verb agreement, correct use of tense).
 - Punctuate sentences correctly and use punctuation so that meaning is clear (e.g. capital letters, full stops, question marks, exclamation marks, commas).
 - Spell correctly words used most often in work, studies and daily life.
18. IT tools offer much potential at higher levels, the VEC consultation seminar suggestion of the possible use of IT tools at FETAC levels 4-6 only is to be endorsed. However, it is important to be as inclusive as possible and the option needs to be given to an individual even at these levels to choose between a paper based or computer format. Otherwise the danger exists that the process is examining the person's IT skills rather than their literacy skills, though there may be contexts where literacy is to be defined more broadly as including IT skills.
 19. Reviewers in the NRDC report emphasised that all ICT based materials, among other things, required additional skills over and above those being assessed and were biased against those without ICT experience. Brooks et al noted that computer based approaches contained the major limitation of multiple-choice questions. Social class bias may also occur in an initial assessment process that is ICT based.

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20. Strong views were expressed by VEC representatives about the language used in the assessment process, with concern raised about the appropriateness of the word 'assessment' and how it might impact on learners approaching adult education services for the first time.
 21. The language of this identification process needs to reflect this learner centred rather than institution centred agenda and therefore the terms 'screening' and initial 'assessment' must be replaced both in language and in substance. Movement from such loaded terms conjuring up associations with medical diagnosis and school exams has already occurred in other jurisdictions. There is a need to move beyond deficit models of understanding (see also Spring 2007; Gilligan 2007; Derman Sparks 2007). It is recommended that, as part of a learner centred agenda, the process would be termed a needs and skills check, or an initial needs and skills identification process.
 22. An additional concern regarding the review of the assessment tools used in English and Scottish contexts, particularly regarding the potential of screening for exclusion, is the difference in social policy goals for lifelong learning in those jurisdictions compared to Ireland. The overwhelming focus on lifelong learning in England and Scotland is on employment related themes (see Holford et al 2007; 2008) and the assessment tools, in so far as they could have a 'screening' role, need to be viewed as operating against this backdrop. The exclusionary potential of such a prevailing ethos is recognised by Holford et al's (2007) report: 'Concerns have been expressed that despite European and national statements that lifelong learning should be a means of increasing equality, the concentration on labour market policies has the effect of increasing social stratification' (p.30).
 23. In contrast to the strong neo-liberal perspective pervading lifelong learning in England, especially, and Scotland, the Irish White Paper (2000) sets out much wider goals for lifelong learning. In the words of Maunsell et al (2008), 'Rather than being merely a tag on to the economic rationale for lifelong learning, the White Paper prioritises the issue of social cohesion through personal, community and cultural development' (p.1). Underpinning the overall framework of lifelong learning are six areas of priority in the White Paper:
 - a. Consciousness Raising: to realise full potential; self-discovery; personal and collective development
 - b. Citizenship: to grow in self-confidence, social awareness and social responsibility and to take a proactive role in shaping the overall direction at societal and community decision-making
 - c. Cohesion: to enhance social capital and empower those particularly disadvantaged
 - d. Competitiveness: the role in providing a skilled workforce
 - e. Cultural Development: the role of adult education in enriching the cultural fabric of society
 - f. Community Development: the role of adult education in the development of community with a collective sense of purpose
 24. Personal development of consciousness raising, self-confidence and social awareness of citizenship, as well as cultural, empowerment and community development features (see also Bane 2007, Waters 2007 and Higgins 2007) are all possible social benefits of participation in classes and courses where the learner may not fit the initial criteria, based on the results of any screening and initial assessment process. The educational context offers what Berger & Neuhaus (1977) would term 'mediating structures', as an important part of participation in society. An analogy can also be made with international research in the area of grade retention - albeit for youths, though nevertheless pertinent to the issue of benefits of attending course
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with peers; there are clear demotivating effects of being removed from a common cohort of friends for reasons based purely on academic performance .

25. Ivers (2008) has recently highlighted the role of even one other peer as a key motivating factor for individuals in North Inner City Dublin to continue with further education. The social dimension as a primary motivation for learning is also emerging as a leading motivation in a large scale European wide study (Boeren et al, 2008) of lifelong learning across thirteen countries, in a sample of over 1,000 respondents in each participating country.
26. This is not an argument against a standardised initial needs and skills check per se but rather an argument for a learner centred agenda - for the use of such an initial needs and skills check for an agenda that serves not only the academic learning needs of the learner but also these wider needs, including personal and social needs, as well as community needs, given full priority in the White Paper. Placing the learner at the centre in taking responsibility for interpreting and acting upon the results of the initial needs and skills check ensures that such a check is used as a tool of inclusion, not as a barrier or exclusion; it provides a guidance not a compulsion towards decision-making, in contrast, for example, to US contexts. It is against this backdrop that any putative standardised tool needs to be developed in an Irish context.
27. An institution centred rather than learner centred 'screening' and initial assessment process would potentially be the death-knell for the wider goals of lifelong learning, prioritised in the White Paper.
28. The presence of cultural bias, including social class bias, particularly in standardised assessments, is a real danger and needs to be firmly addressed.
29. Current assessment is not normative for the Travelling community and this clearly needs to be addressed to give expression to the Traveller Education Strategy and to provide adequate meeting of concerns regarding cultural sensitivity. Any tools developed must be done so, not simply through trialling them with members of the Travelling community, but also through centrally involving them in their design.
30. All VECs reported using more than one tool with huge variance in the tests used. One VEC noted that in their service 'the most frequently used tool is also the most difficult one to quantify in that it is the semi-formal interview'. It is notable that those VECs most satisfied with their assessment tools used a greater variety of tools.
31. Of the 26 VECs who responded to the question on information provided to the student, all reported that they gave some information to the student following the assessment process. However, some of the information provided was limited to a description of the programme learners would be placed in (2 VECs). It was clear that some VECs provided much more information than others. Only 4 VECs gave learners their actual mark on the assessment. 15 VECs reported that they provided the learner with an Individual Learning Plan once the assessment was completed.
32. In VEC respondents' comments it was clear that an assessment tool has to be measured against the ability of a centre to use it and to respond to it with appropriate support for the learner. Otherwise, any benefits from doing the assessment are lost as assessing students without having the means to respond to assessment outcomes can be misleading to students and frustrating to staff.

33. The suggestion at the VEC consultation seminar of 'a manual of learning tools – a menu from which they could select tools' is a pertinent one. The word flexibility in this context seemed to refer to flexibility in use in order to accommodate the diversity of needs and abilities of a particular learner. This would need to also include an 'open door' policy for learners.
34. An alternative to using standardised tools for screening and initial assessment is to develop support systems for providers to enable them to use course specific initial needs and skills check tools.
35. The questions raised at the VEC consultation seminar of ownership of the information and what happens if the learner is adamant about the course they want to do, need to be directly addressed and goes right to the heart of the potential for conflicting agendas with regard to screening and initial assessment.
36. It is vitally important that any needs and skills check tool and process is viewed not as an essentialising label upon the learner but rather as a snapshot of the learner's needs and skills at a particular point in time in the learner's life and educational history.
37. VEC Representatives were aware of the economic climate and concerns were raised about the resources available to provide, operate and train staff needed to successfully put in practice any new initial assessment tools.
38. The temporal dimension to a learner's engagement needs to be recognised as competencies and confidence may develop during attendance on a given course. Moreover, a learner's oral language skills or 'oracy' may be a vital asset even if their written language skills require additional support. This furthers the argument for any initial assessment tool to be used at a slightly later stage in the learner's process especially where they are attending their first course and are at course levels 1-3. The key issue here is learner choice and ownership over the needs and skills check process.

Recommendations

1. It is clear that a learner centred, humanistic approach to lifelong learning and assessment has been and is a cornerstone of adult education in Ireland. Any new tools must not weaken that approach and must be resonant with the six guiding principles of the Irish White Paper on Lifelong Learning (2000), Consciousness Raising, Citizenship, Cohesion, Competitiveness, Cultural Development, and Community Development. Interviews, for example, have been shown to play an effective humanistic role in answering learners' questions, reassuring learners where necessary and providing an opportunity for dialogue between a learner and a practitioner/education provider. Such interviews must not be abandoned but rather strengthened. Guidelines on how to conduct interviews, suggestions for topic questions and training should be provided in order to create a situation in which the interviewer and the learner can get the most out of their initial meeting.
 - 2.1 Having an assessment protocol, which protects the use of interviews and places tools firmly within a holistic process of assessment but not as the assessment is essential.
 - 2.2 General features of an appropriate initial needs and skills check include: culture relevance, cultural sensitivity to dialect, opportunity for construction of meaning rather than decontextualised information, language material (and mathematics material, see also Dooley and Corcoran 2007) needs to be relevant for the life experience of the learner. The process

needs to give central recognition to fear of failure for those who were marginalised within the school system through a non-threatening and welcoming environment which places the learner's needs at the centre.

3. Evidence from literature suggests that many learners who have literacy needs have had negative experiences of schooling, thus the notion of being assessed or tested may have extremely unhelpful connotations for them. It is recommended that the language used in the assessment process be reviewed. Screening for example is often used in a health context in order to find evidence of a disease or ailment. Using it in the context of adult education seems to support a deficit model of education. In the UK 'screening' has been replaced with the words 'skills check'. Language can be powerful and emotive and in that context it is suggested that alternative words to assessment and screening are used, such as describing it as an initial structured needs and skills check.
4. Adult and Further Education Services in Ireland will benefit from effective initial structured needs and skills checks in relation to literacy and more broadly, but only if a wide range of concerns are built into the process including incorporating learners' perspectives on assessment and clarifying contentious issues. Many entering Adult and Further Education are availing of second chance education and it is imperative that new tools are inclusive. In developing a standardised assessment tool, priority should be given to developing a culturally relevant tool, which supports learning. Mindful of Wolf et al's (2000) contention that assumptions made on behalf of minority groups can be both wrong and patronising, it is clear that new tools must not only be trialled with the appropriate population, but also that minority groups, such as Travellers be centrally involved in the design of the content of such tools. Consideration to the dangers of bias in standardised testing must be addressed in future.
- 5.1 Four dimensions of initial assessment are proposed, now to be termed an initial needs and skills check. These aspects of a holistic process which maintains a satisfactory balance between standards and flexibility are as follows:
 - An initial semi-structured interview involving self-assessment.
 - A piece of writing on a theme of relevance and interest chosen by the learner to be examined according to simple and transparent standardised criteria, such as those in Northern Ireland elucidated by The Free Writing Task Assessment Checklist, produced by the LSDA.
 - A short tool with a menu of options for examining literacy and numeracy (if relevant), with thematic content which can be chosen by the learner from a range of possibilities and which have been proofed for cultural sensitivity in direct dialogue with representatives of not only ethnic minority groups such as Travellers but also for social class bias proofing.
 - Development of an individual education plan in dialogue with the learner, where the learner retains ownership over all of the needs and skills check information and is assured from the outset that the results are not being used in an exclusionary way. The substance of this assurance is that the learner retains the right of choice to participate in a course of his/her choice, in recognition of the wider goals of the White Paper on the benefits of lifelong learning, not only for employability aspects but also for active citizenship, personal and community development goals.

1	An initial semi-structured interview involving self-assessment.
2	A piece of writing on a theme of relevance and interest chosen by the learner to be examined according to simple and transparent standardised criteria
3	A short tool with a menu of options for examining literacy with thematic content which can be chosen by the learner from a range of possibilities and which have been proofed for cultural sensitivity and social class bias
4	Development of an individual education plan in dialogue with the learner, where the learner retains ownership over all of the needs and skills check information and is assured from the outset that the results are not being used in an exclusionary way.

Table 3: *Four Dimensions to a High Quality Initial Needs and Skills Check*

- 5.2 Development of a free writing task checklist accords with international best practice as it allows for construction of meaning, culturally relevant linguistic expression, and relevance to the individual's life experience. Similarly, the informal interview conversation, which is nevertheless semi-structured, allows for best practice of self-assessment, offering the learner control over the process with consequent benefits for self-esteem and motivation as part of a strengths based dialogue which is also realistic about identifying needs. To accord with best practice, the proposed standardised tools would be culturally sensitive, equality proofed also in the sense that they would not indicate a social class or dialect bias (see also National Forum on Educational Disadvantage, Gilligan, ed. 2002, on the need for such proofing generally)⁴.
- 5.3 Any putative standardised assessment tool must not be used in isolation and must be part of an initial needs and skills check which commences with an informal, welcoming, semi-structured interview that gives scope for self-assessment.
- 6.1 It is evident from the consultation process and a review of the international research that the first phase must be a conversation based semi-structured interview, and not a standardised 'screening' tool.
- 6.2 While there is some flexibility as part of an initial needs and skills check regarding the order of the writing process and putative standardised tools as second and third phases of the holistic process, this process is an assessment for learning and not of learning. Careful steps must be taken to ensure that this initial needs and skills check, including a putative standardised tool, does not become a kind of barrier for entry or prerequisite for entry to a course; in other words, it is not in practice to become a quasi-leaving certificate hoop through which the learner must jump in order to gain access to a given course. The language of 'screening' split from a holistic process of an initial needs and skills check brings the danger of the importation of a barrier for entry or course entry requirement which would make any putative standardised tool a tool for exclusion, rather than inclusion.

⁴These recommended features of international best practice are not yet at a gold standard level, which would include identification of broader needs and skills to give expression to Gardner's (1993) examination of multiple types of intelligence in educational psychology, e.g., linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic and personal.

-
7. Ideally having a range of standardised tools that are linked to the National Qualifications Framework would provide the flexibility that many providers seem to want. In the absence of a menu of standardised tools to choose from, the use of guidelines/support for providers in designing course specific tools may give providers the flexibility that is desired.
 8. Although the adult education sector has seen increases in funding in the last decade, it is still an under-resourced sector in our education system. Resources must be in place to ensure that assessment is an inclusion tool rather than an exclusion tool. Literacy staff and other staff must work together and have an integrated approach to literacy. In order to improve assessment procedures, staff must have access to training and continued professional development
 9. All of these four key holistic dimensions to initial needs and skills checking for literacy can also be included in the education of prisoners, a group of adults somewhat neglected with respect to adult education in Ireland (Maunsell et al 2008)
 - 10.1 The issue of ownership of the initial needs and skills check data, noted in the consultation process with VECs, needs to be firmly addressed as being the property of the learner to be distributed by him/her to the institution through formal consent procedures. This learner-centred needs and skills check must not be a barrier prohibiting access to courses, it is to be used to guide informed choices for the learner. There cannot be turn towards a paternalism, however apparently benign, where choice is taken away from the learner. The active learning tradition of adult education must be continued with initial needs and skills checking for literacy and numeracy, so that the learner has active control over this process.
 - 10.2 Standard consent procedures need to be developed to ensure the process of the standardised initial needs and skills check allows for ownership of the learner over the process and to ensure that intentions of a learner centred process are realised in outcomes.
 - 10.3 Without consent procedures there is the risk of slippage from intentions of a learner centred process of initial needs and skills check to consequences, which result over time, in an institution centred procedure eroding the centrality of the learner.
 - 10.4 Placing the learner at the centre in taking responsibility for interpreting and acting upon the results of the initial needs and skills check ensures that such a check is used as a tool of inclusion, not as a barrier or exclusion; it provides a guidance not a compulsion towards decision-making. It is against this backdrop that any putative standardised tool needs to be developed in an Irish context. Consistent with this learner centred perspective is the need to communicate to the learner that such initial needs and skills check is not mandatory but it is strongly recommended - and similarly that the recommendations for the learner emanating on the basis of the structured needs and skills check are recommendations and are not compulsory.
 - 10.5 As part of a learner centred rather than institution centred approach, where choice regarding engagement with the tools remains with the learner, it is absolutely essential that funding for any given learning institution not to be contingent on evidence of widespread use of these tools. This review of the international context of initial assessment tools reveals that such tools in other countries are commercially available tools rather than ones designed by State agents. While there is a strong rationale and convincing need for the Irish State to lead the design of a range of appropriate culture and social class sensitive tools for adults, suitable for the Irish context, this is only justifiable if any given centre for learning is not compelled to use them for all students as it is a matter of judgement in the individual learner's situation
-

whether use of such tools are appropriate in a given case.

- 11.1 Development of a range of high quality Initial Needs and Skills Check tools must be accompanied by clear, user-friendly guidelines for those implementing such tools, together with properly resourced training for those implementing and interpreting the tools – including training for their use as part of a wider process of engagement with the learner through learner centred principles.
- 11.2 Learners' perspectives must be centrally incorporated into the design and use of these tools, as well as in a future review of their adoption and of the wider Initial Needs and Skills Check process.
- 11.3 These tools are part of an initial assessment process, though not a screening process, and are now to be called an Initial Needs and Skills Check process
12. Development of a wide range of high quality Initial Needs and Skills Check tools as part of a wider process of initial needs and skills checking (as distinct from 'screening') is an important priority for this sector. This requires the presence of the following features (see 'Yes' column), the omission of other features (see 'No' column) and inclusion of a range of process dimensions (see 'Part of Process' column)

Table 4: Key Features of High Quality Initial Needs and Skills Check

YES	PART OF PROCESS	NO
Criterion referenced	Free writing plus meaningful prompts	Norm referenced
Learner centred	Learner charts own progress	Institution centred
Ecological Validity: Culture relevant content	Includes a free writing task checklist	Multiple Choice
Culture sensitive	Welcoming environment	Culture Biased
Age relevant	Interview recognises previous learning experience and previous and current employment	Digital for levels 1-3
Clear purpose	Opportunities for learner to ask questions	Compulsory for learner regarding digital or not for levels 4-6
Purpose communicated to learner	Non-threatening	Tool in isolation as the sole assessment
Self referenced related to previous performance – Ipsative assessment	Self-assessment	Used as first phase of communication with learner or to replace conversation/interview
Content validity	Interview discusses learner's aspirations and ambitions	Content not relevant to criterion for learning
Thematic content chosen by learner from a range of possibilities	Process embedded in a conversation with the learner	Mandatory for the learner
Test-Retest reliability		Memorization to improve score
Feedback to learner without delay	Information owned by the learner	No feedback to learner
Sentences not isolated words	Interview asks learner about reasons for coming to the centre	Cloze tests
Designed by minority groups and different social classes		Dialect bias
Trialled with minority groups and different social classes		Social class bias
Needs and skills check tools linked to next set of tools	Continuum of monitoring progress from entry to exit points	A prerequisite for entry to course – a screening tool
Results recognised as a time-bound 'snapshot'	Guidelines for staff to conduct interviews and interpret tools	Essentialising label
Menu of tools to select from	Leads to individual action plan set by learner	One test only as 'the' test
Visual e.g., The Wheel	Interview asks learner whether he/she has literacy, language or numeracy difficulties	Schonnel test only designed for children
User friendly	Tool not employed with learner when first beginning a programme	A barrier to entry to course
Assessment for learning	Assurances to learner that this tool is for learning and not an assessment of learning	Assessment of learning
Needs and skills check	Formal consent procedures for distributing results of the tool aspect of the needs and skill check process	Named as a 'test' or 'assessment' or 'screening'

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YES	PART OF PROCESS	NO
<p>Strengths based</p> <p>May distinguish factual, analytical, imaginative and narrative language (personal and fictional narrative): Focuses on phonological, semantic, grammatical and sequencing issues where relevant: Distinguishes simple, compound and complex sentences where relevant</p>	<p>Adequate training and resources for staff</p>	<p>Deficit model</p> <p>Narrow focus on spelling, punctuation</p>
<p>Tool integrated into a wider process of needs and skill checking to a level of detail dependent on the needs and wishes of the learner</p>	<p>Recognition of lifelong learning as giving expression to personal and social needs of the learner, as well as community needs: Cognisance of the Irish White Paper on Lifelong Learning goals of consciousness raising, citizenship, cohesion, competitiveness, cultural development and community development</p>	<p>Tool as the first aspect of a 'screening' role</p>

end

Appendix One (For Prisoner Intake Screening: Correctional Services Language, Literacy & Numeracy Indicator Tool) NRS 1 – PERSONAL DETAILS

Prisoner to complete Today's Date ___ / ___ / ___

First Name

Surname

Mail address

State..... Postcode

Date of Birth ___ / ___ / ___

EDUCATION HISTORY – SELF ASSESSMENT

What was the highest level of school you completed?

How old were you when you left school?

Have you ever attended a special school or classes? YES? NO?

What was the last school you attended?

Have you ever had a driver's licence? YES? NO?

Have you studied since you've left school? YES? NO?

If yes, what have you studied?

.....

Literacy and Numeracy	TAFE	higher education	Other
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>			

Have you studied in prison before? YES? NO?

If yes, where?

Do you think you will need help with:	Yes	Sometimes	No
Reading?			
Writing?			
Maths?			

Write something about this picture.



NRS 2 Name:

NRS 2 – A SELF ASSESSMENT

Tell us about your reading and writing skills.

Do you need help with:	Yes	Sometimes	No
Writing in paragraphs			
Using a telephone book			
Reading prison information			
Reading letters sent to you			
Writing a short letter			
Using a dictionary			
Using a calculator			
Using a computer			
Reading books I am interested in:			
Eg. Cars, gardening			
Reading and understanding the newspaper			
Keeping a journal for study purposes			
Writing job applications			
Studying alone and independently			
Calculating fractions, decimals and percent			
Writing an essay for study			

What areas do you need to improve?

NRS 2 – EXERCISE 1

Reading Comprehension

When you are in prison you are not eligible for any benefits or pensions, from Centrelink. This also includes payments from Abstudy or Austudy. It is your responsibility to tell Centrelink that you have been receiving a benefit or pension within fourteen days of imprisonment or criminal charges can be laid against you later on. Ask for help to make contact with Centrelink.

What must you do about Centrelink payments when you come to prison?

Why must you tell Centrelink about these changes?

NRS 2 – EXERCISE 2

Choose one of the following topics to write a paragraph about.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Where to go for a camping trip | <input type="checkbox"/> My favourite car |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My favourite food | <input type="checkbox"/> My favourite sport |
| <input type="checkbox"/> How I would spend a million dollars | <input type="checkbox"/> How to train a pup |
| <input type="checkbox"/> When I'm 64 | <input type="checkbox"/> My childhood |

NRS 2 – EXERCISE 3

Some maths . . .

Spike the dog eats a can of dog food everyday which costs \$1.20. How much does it cost to feed him for a week?	
If I had \$65 to share evenly between five people. How much would each person get?	
Tien collected an average of eight dollars a shift in tips when she works in the bar. If she works nine shifts how much money in tips would she earn?	
Seven people share \$8270 in X-lotto. How much does each person get?	
Dave ordered 12 large pizzas for a party. Each cost \$11.49. How much did it cost in total?	

NRS 3

Name:

NRS 3 – EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS

Describe the work you have done in the past.

What work skills do you think you have?

What study do you need to do to improve your employment options in the future?

Are you interested in career planning and educational counselling to assist you with your planning?

Do you want to do further education while you are in prison?
Explain your answer in detail.

NRS 3 – EXERCISE 1

Choose from the following list and write a few paragraphs explaining your opinions using examples.

- We get wiser as we grow older.
- Someone I admire.
- You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
- If I could make the world a better place I would.....
- Everyone needs to have good friends in their lives.

NRS 3 – EXERCISE 2

Jeans are normally priced at \$35 at the outlet shop. Today everything is reduced by 10%.

How much will one pair of jeans cost me?

How much change will I get from \$50?

What is 5% of \$58?

A survey of 560 people has revealed that $\frac{3}{8}$ smoke at least once a week.

How many people smoked at least once a week?

Convert these fractions to decimals. Show all working accurate to 3 decimal places.

a) $\frac{7}{12}$

b) $3\frac{3}{8}$

Work out the answers to these problems

a) $5\frac{2}{9} + 2\frac{1}{6} =$

b) $4\frac{1}{5} - 1\frac{1}{2} =$

I want to pour a concrete base measuring 6 m by 5 m with a depth of 10 cm for a shed.

How much concrete will I need in cubic metres?

A well maintained set of tyres on a car can last for an average of 50,000 kilometres?

Study the information and calculate how many return trips from Adelaide to Darwin and back again, a hire car can make before the tyres need replacing.

Show all workings.

Adelaide – Alice Springs 1525km

Alice Springs – Darwin 1493km

Appendix 2 Survey

Part One: Initial Assessment and Screening Approaches and Tools in Use

We use the terms initial assessment and screening in this survey.

Initial assessment is used to identify the literacy and numeracy needs of adult learners who enter the National Framework of Qualifications at levels 1 – 3. It identifies learning difficulties and learning styles to support the adult learner to succeed.

Screening is used to support adult learners to succeed by determining their appropriate entry level on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) which operate at levels 1-6. Screening recognises the importance of a meaningful and successful learning experience for adults. It supports opportunities to succeed.

1. Name of VEC:

**2. (a) In which of the following programmes does your VEC carry out (a) literacy screening and (b) initial assessment for literacy?
Check all that apply.**

(a) Literacy Screening	Adult Literacy Service	BTI	VTOS	STTC	PLC	Youthreach	Community Education	Other
(b) Initial assessment for literacy								

**3. Indicate the approaches that are used in the initial assessment.
(Check all that apply)**

- None
- Informal interview without interview schedule
- Informal interview with formal schedule
- Writing Sample
- Reading Sample
- Observation
- Learner self-assessment

4. Who carries out the initial assessment?

Programme Co-ordinator

Adult Education Officer

Tutor/Instructor

Adult Guidance

Other – please give details

5. Which tools are used to support Initial Assessment?

Please give as much detail as possible.

6. Is the initial assessment devised by your own service?

Yes

If yes, please provide details here.

No

7. Does the initial assessment and screening process provide information on the learner's strengths in any of the following areas?

- Oracy
- Aural Comprehension
- Reading
- Writing
- Spelling
- Numeracy
- Information Technology
- Other skills

If other, please provide a full description here.

8. How satisfied are you with the assessment tools that are used in your VEC?

- Satisfied
- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Not Satisfied

9. Describe the strength(s) of the tool you use most frequently.

10. Describe the weakness(es) or limitations of this tool.

Part 2: Procedures and Practices

11. (a) The following statements refer to the purposes of initial assessment in your VEC. Please rank them in order of importance.

(Assign number '1' to the most important, number '2' to the second most important and so on.)

To help plan tuition.

To determine placement.

To establish a benchmark or skill level.

To determine literacy and numeracy need(s).

To provide information to the learner.

To provide information to the tutor.

To identify strengths and weaknesses.

To motivate learners.

To determine the learners' motivations and goals.

To design and /or change programmes.

To obtain information for accountability.

Other (Please specify)

11. b The following statements refer to the purposes of screening in your VEC. Please rank them in order of importance.

(Assign number '1' to the most important, number '2' to the second most important and so on.)

To help plan tuition.

To determine placement.

To establish a benchmark or skill level.

To determine literacy and numeracy need(s).

To provide information to the learner.

To provide information to the tutor.

To identify strengths and weaknesses.

To motivate learners.

To determine the learners' motivations and goals.

To design and /or change programmes.

To obtain information for accountability.

Other (Please specify)

12. What information is provided to the student after the assessment process.

(Choose all that apply)

- None
- Assessment scores
- Literacy, basic education or numeracy level
- Description of assessment results
- Description of instruction they will receive
- Description of the programme they will be placed in
- Programme expectations
- Role and responsibilities of tutor and student
- Individual Learning Plan

Other (please specify)

13. Please rank in order of importance the following practices in your VEC centre.

(Assign number '1' to the most important, number '2' to the second most important and so on.)

Initial assessment and screening is a collaborative and reflective process, encouraging meaningful student involvement.

Initial assessment and screening assists in the ongoing planning of the individual's goals and learning activities.

The assessment emphasises what students can do rather than what they cannot do.

The purpose and nature of the assessment is explicit and clear to the student.

Assignment results are shared with the student.

Interpretation of assessment results takes student's cultural and personal histories into account.

Assessment is fair and unbiased.

The assessment is conducted in a non-threatening manner.

The student is ensured of confidentiality.

14. Is the learner's prior experience of learning recorded?

(a) In Initial Assessment

Yes **No**

(b) In Screening process

15. (a) Is the initial assessment recorded?

(b) Is the screening recorded?

16. Are results recorded according to level?

If yes, please describe the levels you are using.

Part 3: Views of VEC Representatives

17. What are the key challenges faced by your VEC in the area of initial assessment and screening? *(Choose all that apply)*

- None
- There is not enough time to administer and follow up assessments.
- There is a need for more staff training in this area.
- An increase in staff is required.
- Other (please specify)

18. What supports/resources are needed to enhance your assessment practices?

19. In your opinion what are the three most important factors in an assessment tool?*(Choose three)*

- Assesses readiness for an upcoming programme.
- Links to a programme's outcomes or requirements.
- Is user-friendly to the tutor.
- Does not intimidate potential learners.
- Provides diagnostic information.
- Predicts academic success.
- Provides information for placement.
- Provides information for tuition.
- Provides an accurate measure of the abilities being measured.
- Relates to the student's life.
- Is culturally appropriate.
- Assesses strengths and weaknesses.
- Measures non-academic outcomes.
- Has been standardised on an adult population.
- Other (please specify)

20. What type of assessment tools would you like to see developed in the future for the VEC Adult and Further Education Sector? Use the space below to describe how this tool would meet your needs.

May we contact you if necessary to explore these issues further? Yes No

If yes, please provide your name and contact details below.

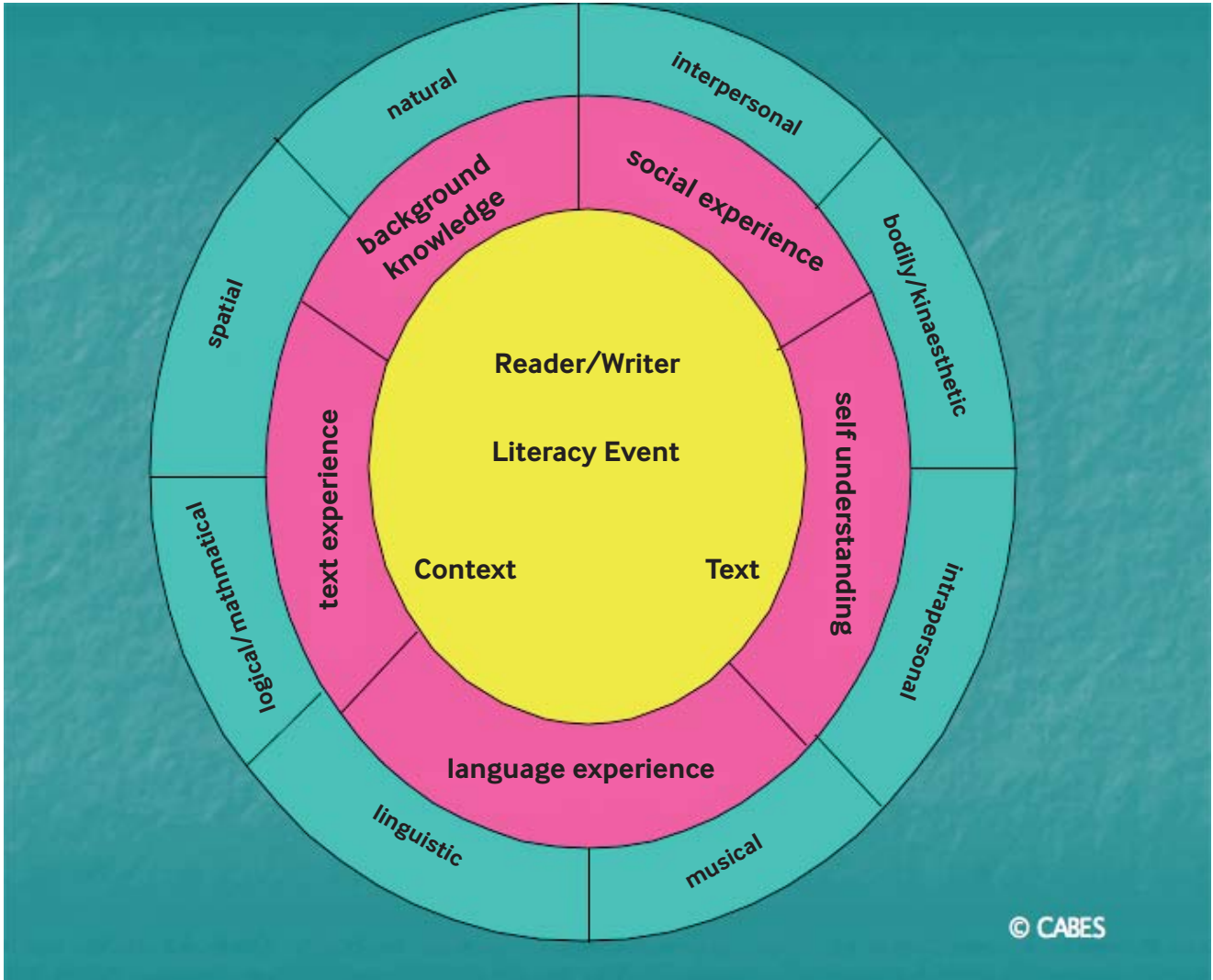
Thank you for taking part in this survey.

If you have further comments on the survey or issues arising from it please do fill in the comment box below.

Appendix 3: Free Writing Task Assessment Checklist Produced by the LSDA

Tasks that an adult at this level can complete	<input type="checkbox"/>	Additional Comments
<p>Entry Level 1 Write a simple sentence. Punctuate a simple sentence with a capital letter and a full stop. Spell correctly some personal key words and familiar words.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<p>Entry Level 2 As above plus ... Write compound sentences using common conjunctions. (eg as, and, but) Use adjectives in writing. Use punctuation correctly. (eg capital letters, full stops and question marks) Use a capital letter for proper nouns. Spell correctly the majority of personal details and familiar common words.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<p>Entry Level 3 As above plus ... Organise writing in short paragraphs. Use correct basic grammar. (eg appropriate verb tense, subject-verb agreement) Use punctuation correctly. (eg capital letters, full stops, question marks, exclamation marks) Spell correctly common words and relevant key words for work and special interest.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
<p>Level 1 As above plus ... Write in a logical sequence using paragraphs where appropriate Use correct grammar. (subject-verb agreement, correct use of tense) Punctuate sentences correctly and use punctuation so that meaning is clear. (eg capital letters, full stops, question marks, exclamation marks, commas) Spell correctly words used most often in work, studies and daily life.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

Appendix 4: CABES FRAMEWORK



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