

adult literacy
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Reframe, rename, revitalise

Future directions for the language, literacy and numeracy
National Reporting System

Kate Perkins

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Future directions for the language, literacy and numeracy
National Reporting System

Kate Perkins
Kulu Pty Ltd

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of ANTA, DEST or NCVER.



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Key messages

- ✧ The National Reporting System (NRS) for adult English language, literacy and numeracy has influenced the content and emphasis of literacy and numeracy curricula nationally, and played a role in the literacy and numeracy aspects of training packages.
- ✧ Those interviewed for this study all agreed it was time for the NRS to be reviewed.
- ✧ It was felt that a review would provide an opportunity to:
 - ◆ streamline the conceptual framework
 - ◆ develop a set of user-friendly support materials
 - ◆ revise the rules for reporting within Commonwealth programs
 - ◆ consider how best to provide adequate and ongoing professional development, with an opportunity to build national ownership of outcomes
 - ◆ further explore ideas for broader applications.

Executive summary

Funded jointly by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), and the then Department of Employment, Education and Training, the National Reporting System (NRS) was intended as:

... a mechanism for reporting the outcomes of adult English language literacy and numeracy provision, in the vocational education and training system, in labour market programs and in the adult community education sector. (ANTA 1995)

It has long been used in other ways as well—as a means of evaluating the content and emphasis of adult basic education curricula, as a framework for the development of curriculum and assessment materials, and in the consideration of the language, literacy and numeracy requirements of training packages. However, its uptake by literacy and numeracy practitioners has been confined mainly to those required to use it as a reporting tool for the Commonwealth-funded Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program, and the Language Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP).

Project aim

‘The NRS Future Directions’ project was designed to provide initial insights into how the NRS is currently being used and how it is perceived by a group of people familiar with its concepts and use. This exercise was seen as a necessary precursor to any changes that might be made, and was not meant to be a full-scale review in its own right.

The methodology involved:

- ✧ a review of relevant literature
- ✧ monitoring of relevant sessions at the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) national conference
- ✧ detailed interviews with a core group of 50 interested parties, some recommended and others selected at random. A further 30 people provided input during less structured discussions.

During the study, the NRS was considered as an instrument for describing language, literacy and numeracy competence; as a reporting mechanism within the WELL and LLNP, and as a mechanism for non-reporting applications. Information was gathered about its strengths and weaknesses and the types and degrees of support required for effective application for different purposes. Interviewees were asked to identify key issues and possible future directions for the NRS, as well as current and future priorities in regard to adult literacy and numeracy, and in relation to education and training generally.

Key findings

The NRS as an instrument for describing language, literacy and numeracy

Responses suggest that the NRS has built a strong following amongst those with the background knowledge and opportunity to become expert users. Expert practitioners reported finding the NRS

an extremely useful tool for thinking about a student's strengths and weaknesses, for planning, for designing appropriate assessment materials, and for curriculum development and evaluation.

Academics interviewed generally considered the conceptual underpinnings sound. However, they, and most practitioners, suggested that the conceptual base be streamlined to produce a more straightforward instrument. Almost all agreed that there was no need to start again from first principles, but that the process should aim, as one interviewee explained, to make the NRS 'more elegant'. While a revised NRS would incorporate new knowledge and understandings about literacy and numeracy, and reflect practitioners' experience after eight years of application, it should maintain the tool's current ability to capture the richness and complexity of language, literacy and numeracy across contexts.

The NRS as a tool for reporting within the Workplace English Language and Literacy, and Language, Literacy and Numeracy programs

There is a need to separate the NRS instrument from the rules and logistics associated with reporting to funding bodies. Practitioners of the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program identified some rules that appeared to go against the principles of the NRS and had issues with the logistics and time involved in reporting to funding bodies. However, most stated that the NRS framework had influenced the way they thought about their students' skill levels, the way they taught and the way they assessed. However, some WELL practitioners were more critical of the usefulness of the tool, questioning the effort that went into learning about the NRS, its limited application within the program, and its lack of real impact on teachers or learners.

Support required for effective application as a reporting tool

Interviewees identified four essential components of an overall 'package' to support its use as a formal reporting tool. These were:

- ✧ a level of background knowledge of language, literacy and numeracy sufficient to be able to appreciate the conceptual aspects of the NRS and interpret them appropriately
- ✧ regular opportunities for interactive professional development activities
- ✧ accessible, relevant support materials
- ✧ time.

If any one of these were missing, many felt it would be hard to sustain the NRS (current or revised) in the future.

Non-reporting applications

This survey confirmed that the NRS continues to be 'more than a reporting tool'. For example, it found strong support for the NRS as a tool for reflective practice, and widespread application as a framework for developing curriculum and assessment materials. Some interviewees had developed simplified versions of the NRS—in effect, its key concepts only—as part of processes to raise language, literacy and numeracy awareness in industry. In the vocational education and training (VET) sector, training package developers are required to use the NRS as part of their design brief, although interviewees familiar with the results of this application felt that this directive had operated with varying degrees of success.

Plotting future directions

In considering the future of the NRS, several possible goals were discussed:

- ✧ to maintain the status quo

- ✧ to make the current NRS more user-friendly and accessible
- ✧ to increase uptake of a current or revised NRS in order to improve practice
- ✧ to push for national uptake as a reporting mechanism
- ✧ to reframe and reposition the NRS as a general language, literacy and numeracy framework
- ✧ to link the NRS directly into the mainstream of education and training.

No interviewee wanted to maintain the status quo. There was strong support for a review and revision of the NRS to make it more user-friendly, in the hope that this would increase take-up by other practitioners. There was little support for the idea of simplifying the NRS for use as a reporting tool by non-practitioners. However, those who were already using the NRS for non-reporting purposes supported the idea of reinventing it as a general language, literacy and numeracy framework which would raise awareness of key concepts outside the small language, literacy and numeracy field. Some interviewees could also see a specific role for a simple, conceptually elegant framework, based on the current NRS, as a key tool for addressing language, literacy and numeracy issues within revised training packages.

There was little interest in (and indeed some resistance to) any push for adoption of the NRS as a reporting system at state and territory level.

Conclusions

There are indications that the NRS is more firmly entrenched within the adult language, literacy and numeracy context than may be immediately apparent. Importantly, the NRS appears to have a base of support amongst influential people in the field, and has become an integral part of the philosophy and methodology of a number of expert—and highly regarded—practitioners.

Although once recognised as ahead of its time, the instrument now needs updating, particularly in light of developments in information and communication technology. It also needs streamlining conceptually. Thus, it is timely to conduct a formal review focused on ways of improving a useful tool. If this review is specifically designed to facilitate constructive exploration and sharing of ideas across the language, literacy and numeracy field, it could also contribute to general professional development, and build a broad sense of ownership of the revised version. There is no point in going ahead with the development of new applications for the NRS until a review has been completed. However, discussion of future directions and possibilities should be considered by professionals in the field.

If broader uptake is envisaged, face-to-face professional development opportunities for both new and experienced users should be envisaged and resourced as an integral part of any future NRS ‘package’. A new look, streamlined NRS will undoubtedly be more user-friendly, but it will never be easy to grasp and use as a reporting tool. Its very strength in managing diverse aspects of language, literacy and numeracy in context provides challenges for new users that can be more effectively addressed through interactive professional development than via print-based manuals. More experienced users also benefit from the chance to hone their understandings through opportunities to share ideas and insights.

Although the NRS has gradually become interwoven into the fabric of adult literacy, it does not have a high profile, and has not become an integral part of mainstream adult education, despite recognition of the need to increase literacy and numeracy understanding and skills within the VET sector. However, the concepts encapsulated within the NRS could be extremely useful in this regard, and could be promoted as part of the revision of training packages. Nevertheless, even a revitalised NRS is likely to present as ‘too much information’. A literacy and numeracy framework,

based on key NRS concepts, would provide an effective awareness-raising tool, be easier to promote, and be more likely to be adopted.

Since its implementation, the NRS has been 'more than a reporting tool'. Any revision should involve the exploration of the potential for a new framework for thinking, analysing and discussing language, literacy and numeracy in multiple contexts. Despite some people's reservations about the term, a *framework* provides the scaffolding upon which many things can be built. The NRS has already proved to be flexible enough to become the support structure for multiple purposes. Developing a new entity, and calling it a literacy and numeracy framework, would signal a formal recognition of multiple applications which has not been possible with the NRS.

The framework could be developed in several formats for various purposes and audiences. A full (revised) version would still offer the richness of the original NRS, while a simplified version might introduce key concepts about literacy and numeracy to non-specialist audiences, and thus become an important tool in the push to improve general workplace understanding of language, literacy and numeracy. Even though there might be different versions of the framework, they would all be built on the same foundations, using the same terms and levels. Besides maintaining consistency, this would provide a link between specialists, workplace trainers and industry.

Recommendations

- ✧ Continue to use the NRS as a key tool in reporting on adult literacy and numeracy performance.
- ✧ Review and revise the current NRS. Develop a package incorporating the instrument itself, a revised set of rules for use for reporting within Commonwealth programs, a set of user-friendly support materials, and professional development activities designed for specialist users. Design the review process as a vehicle for professional development in its own right. Use it to further explore a range of options for future directions for the NRS and build a sense of ownership of the outcomes.
- ✧ Explore the potential to use the key concepts and structure underpinning a revised NRS as the basis for the development of a literacy and numeracy framework (with a new name) which could be presented in different formats and levels of complexity for a range of audiences and purposes. This option could also be incorporated into the proposed review.
- ✧ Review the arrangement for provision of NRS training and ongoing mentoring within the Language, Literacy and Numeracy and Workplace English Language and Literacy programs. Consider ways of funding and delivering ongoing language, literacy and numeracy training to other target groups, for example, through Industry Training Councils and professional bodies.
- ✧ If a new language, literacy and numeracy framework is developed, promote it through interactive professional development programs tailored for different groups to enhance their understanding of language, literacy and numeracy.
- ✧ Devise a strategy to ensure that a new framework (or failing that, the revised NRS) plays a key role in determining the language, literacy and numeracy aspects of revised training packages.

Introduction

Background

Funded jointly by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), and the then Department of Employment, Education and Training, the National Reporting System (NRS) was intended as:

... a mechanism for reporting the outcomes of adult English language literacy and numeracy provision, in the vocational education and training system, in labour market programs and in the adult community education sector. (Coates et al. 1995)

It was designed to provide:

... a national framework and common language that would act as a reference point for providers, facilitate student pathways and contribute to national information systems for accountability and planning purposes. (Cumming 1997, p.7)

A range of prospective purposes and user groups was envisaged. The original document suggests that the NRS could be used by:

- ✧ students who need a report describing their achievements
- ✧ curriculum developers who need consistent statements for the development of courses for accreditation
- ✧ program providers who need to be able to report to funding bodies on the achievement of individuals in terms of language, literacy and numeracy outcomes
- ✧ Commonwealth Employment Service staff who need consistent and commonly used reporting information from providers when considering clients' English language, literacy and numeracy development and future training needs
- ✧ funding authorities who need to receive reports on student outcomes as one source of data to account for expenditure
- ✧ industry and training personnel who need a common reference point for describing English language, literacy and numeracy within competency standards and training programs.

(Coates et al. 1995, p.1)

Since its publication, the NRS has been used as a means of reporting on adult language, literacy and numeracy within the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program, and the Language Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP). It has also been used to evaluate the content and emphasis of adult basic education curricula, and for assessing the language, literacy and numeracy requirements of training packages. However, the NRS has never become a genuinely national reporting framework.

The NRS was primarily created for use by specialist language, literacy and numeracy practitioners, but anecdotal evidence suggests that few use it outside WELL and LLNP, with some professionals reportedly unwilling to expend the effort required to work out what the NRS is about, or how it might apply to their practice. This has led to calls for its simplification. There have also been criticisms that the NRS is too complex and difficult for use by those who do not have specialist training, and suggestions that it should be simplified to make it more accessible to workplace trainers.

On behalf of the Department of Education, Science and Training, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) has undertaken to conduct this first phase of an exploration to identify possible future directions for the NRS.

Project aim

‘The NRS Future Directions’ project was designed to provide initial insights into how the NRS is currently being used, how it is perceived by a group of people familiar with its concepts and use, and its potential for adaptation to a broader range of applications.

Scope

It was not intended that the project be a full review of the NRS, or a detailed examination of its various applications, such as within WELL and LLNP or in the design of training packages.

The project was designed as a scoping exercise to seek feedback to inform decisions concerning next steps. Thus it was intended to:

- ✧ provide information on key people’s perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the NRS
- ✧ highlight issues that might have a bearing on future applications
- ✧ identify options that might be appropriate for more in-depth exploration and development.

Methodology

The project was conducted in three stages.

Stage 1: Project planning

- ✧ background reading of NRS-related documents
- ✧ literature search and review
- ✧ initial discussions with several government officers, practitioners and academics
- ✧ attendance at an introductory workshop designed for practitioners new to the NRS
- ✧ finalisation of a list of those to be consulted, and initial contact by telephone or email to invite their participation.

Stage two: Targeted consultation

- ✧ development of draft questions, trial and modification
- ✧ conduct of face-to-face or telephone interviews with identified participants
- ✧ analysis of data
- ✧ development of a draft report highlighting current strengths and key issues as identified by interviewees and containing options for change.

Stage three: Testing of conclusions and recommendations

- ✧ monitoring of NRS-related sessions at the Australian Council for Adult Literacy 2004 conference
- ✧ informal discussions about the NRS and proposed options with conference attendees
- ✧ development of final report.

Sources of information

Some 50 people provided input through formal interviews conducted in person or by telephone. Interviewees included:

- ✧ academic experts in the field of adult literacy and numeracy
- ✧ practitioners experienced in the use of the NRS (as well as some who had received NRS training but did not use it)
- ✧ members of the Australian Council for Adult Learning and other professional bodies
- ✧ representatives of federal and state training authorities
- ✧ representatives from industry bodies
- ✧ members of the initial NRS development team and academic reference groups
- ✧ moderators and verifiers operating in the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program.

Informal discussions were also conducted with another 40 people, including adult and community education (ACE) practitioners attending an introductory NRS workshop, and with many attendees at the Australian Council for Adult Literacy 2004 national conference. Conference sessions focusing on NRS applications and on LLNP and WELL were also monitored.

Report structure

Chapter 1 introduces the project's aims, scope and stages and describes the methodology employed.

Chapter 2 provides a brief background to the NRS for those unfamiliar with its history and features.

Chapter 3 outlines the project methodology.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of findings, with examples of feedback from interviewees.

Chapter 5 discusses possible goals for change, and potential strategies to achieve them.

Chapter 6 outlines conclusions and recommendations.

The NRS

Origins

As noted in the introduction to this report, the establishment of the NRS was jointly funded in 1994 by the then Department of Employment, Education and Training and the Australian National Training Authority to support the development of a system to report the outcomes of adult English language, literacy and numeracy programs in VET, adult and community education and the workplace.

The NRS was developed by the Adult, Community and Further Education Division of the Office of Training and Further Education in Victoria.

Although it drew heavily on the work of others, the NRS was something completely new, and it was developed in a context of intense philosophical and political debate (Coates 1995, 1996). Indeed, some respondents to this project were amazed that the NRS had ever emerged, given that, 'no one theory of language or learning was, as yet, sufficiently developed or uncontested to provide the basis for the project' (Coates et al. 1995, p.3). A set of guiding principles and minimum specifications was developed based on extensive consultation with potential users and academics, whereby it was determined that the NRS should:

- ✧ satisfy a variety of purposes and the requirements of a range of prospective users
- ✧ reflect and promote good educational practice
- ✧ be fair to participants, valid and reliable
- ✧ be functional in practice.

The NRS was designed to explain and track progress along a continuum, and developers aimed to base it as closely as possible 'on a model reflecting real life performance' which aimed to be inclusive of a range of theories, philosophies and curriculum approaches (Coates et al. 1995, pp.1–4).

The instrument

The instrument to emerge from the NRS development process was no simplistic measuring tool. Using a five-point scale based on that used in the International Adult Literacy Survey, the NRS went further than the international survey in attempting to address the complexity of adult language, literacy and numeracy development. This involved a recognition of the importance of context, and the potential for an individual to perform at different levels of competence, depending on mode, aspect, and degrees of support. The NRS also broke new ground by incorporating a measure of an individual's learning strategies.

Box 1: Key features of the NRS

The NRS incorporates indicators of competence in five **modes**: reading, writing, oral communication, learning strategies and numeracy.

An individual's performance in each mode is measured across 5 levels, taking into account factors such as task and text complexity, numeracy complexity, familiarity of context, learning strategies employed and the nature of support provided.

Different aspects of communication are also recognised through six **aspects** of communication: procedural, technical, personal, cooperative, systems and public. (Coates et al. 1995)

More than a reporting system

The NRS pilot program was trialled and formally evaluated in 1997.

The evaluation found that the NRS provided 'a valid framework for reporting adult language, literacy and numeracy outcomes across a range of sectors, contexts and learners' (Cumming 1997).

Interestingly, even in these early days of its use, the evaluation also found that the NRS was being used in non-reporting applications, for example, in curriculum development and review; program, regional, state and system planning and reporting; and the integration of language, literacy and numeracy in vocational training (Cumming 1997, pp.8–9). Although the potential for such application had been foreshadowed to some extent by the NRS development team, the discovery that it was actually happening informed the choice of title for the evaluation report, *More than a reporting system*.

It was originally intended that the NRS be used to report outcomes of the Special Intervention Program and the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP). A change of government at the end of 1996, and a restructuring of labour market programs saw the Special Intervention Program discontinued. At the same time, a decision was made within the Adult Migrant Education Program not to adopt the NRS, but to continue to report against the Certificate in Spoken and Written English because it was seen as 'a tried and tested system which is widely accepted by teachers, service provider management and policy making and funding organisations' (Cumming 1997, pp.68–9).

With the change of political direction, the role of the NRS became unclear for a time and, due to lack of support from some states, it was never officially ratified by the state education ministers. Although it was eventually decided that the NRS would be used to report against the new Commonwealth Literacy and Numeracy Training program, the professional development originally planned to launch and support NRS implementation did not occur. One member of the development team noted that this combination of events meant that, 'people were forced to use the NRS, but without rigorous professional development it never achieved its potential'.

Over the past eight years, the NRS has been used to report on two Commonwealth-funded programs—Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL), and the Language Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP). It has also demonstrated its value in non-reporting fields, for example:

- ✧ Most adult basic education curricula used in Australia have been mapped against the NRS.
- ✧ From 1997, the NRS was used as a foundation document for the development of advice to training package developers about how to incorporate language, literacy and numeracy skills within the training packages. This policy coined the phrase 'built in not bolted on', which has since become synonymous with all approaches to integrated literacy provision.

Although there has not been any formal updating of the original NRS publication, support materials have continued to be produced. In 1999, the NRS document and case studies demonstrating education and training applications were placed online, and in 2001, a set of

industry-validated workplace sample activities was developed to augment the existing sample activities of the NRS. Many of the professional development resources associated with the NRS are posted on the Department of Education, Science and Training Literacynet website <<http://www.dest.gov.au/literacynet>>.

Project methodology

Major areas of investigation

Prior to considering the potential future uses of the National Reporting System, it was important to seek feedback on how it is currently being used and to gather perceptions about its effectiveness.

During the project the NRS was considered:

- ✧ as an instrument for describing language, literacy and numeracy competence
- ✧ as a reporting mechanism within WELL and LLNP
- ✧ as a tool for non-reporting applications.

Information was gathered about the strengths and weaknesses of the NRS in each situation, and about types and degrees of support required for effective application for different purposes. Interviewees were asked to identify what they saw as key issues and possible future directions for the NRS. They were also asked about the context within which they operate, and what they saw as key needs and priorities in regard to adult literacy and numeracy, and in relation to adult education and training generally.

Project key questions

Formal interviews sought to discover answers to the following key questions under each heading:

- ✧ The NRS as an instrument for describing language, literacy and numeracy competence
 - ◆ Do people accept the theoretical construct?
 - ◆ What do people perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the tool, conceptually and in practice?
 - ◆ Is the NRS seen to be applicable in a range of contexts and with different individuals and groups?
- ✧ The NRS as a reporting mechanism within WELL and LLNP
 - ◆ Is the NRS perceived to be effective as a reporting tool?
 - ◆ How do the current reporting rules impact on funding bodies, providers, teachers and learners?
- ✧ The NRS as a mechanism for non-reporting applications
 - ◆ How is the NRS being used and by whom?
 - ◆ What options do users envisage for the future?
 - ◆ What are their responses to a range of suggestions?
 - ◆ What can be learnt from overseas experience?
- ✧ Requirements for effective application
 - ◆ What do new users need in order to be able to understand and apply the NRS effectively for different purposes (for example, background knowledge and experience, professional development, support materials)?
 - ◆ What do experienced users need?
 - ◆ How far are these needs currently being met?

✧ The context

- ◆ What are the key issues and trends relevant to adult literacy and numeracy provision?
- ◆ What political drivers and opportunities might provide an opportunity to increase the impact of the NRS?

The full question list (see appendix 2) was framed to provide detailed responses in each area; the questions provided a general framework for each interview. However, given the range of experience and background knowledge of the interviewees, it was not envisaged that each person would be asked to cover all aspects.

The interviewees

The interviewees who contributed to this project possessed a wealth of knowledge about adult language, literacy and numeracy development. Although it was not intended that this initial survey be large enough to encompass a statistically valid representative sample, efforts were made to consult with a broad cross-section including:

- ✧ those who had been involved in the NRS conceptualisation process, had been part of the development team, and/or who had developed support materials following implementation
- ✧ practitioners
- ✧ federal and state policy-makers and funders responsible for adult literacy and numeracy programs
- ✧ industry representative bodies such as trade unions and Industry Training Councils.
- ✧ academics from the adult literacy and numeracy field.

In relation to consultation with practitioners, the majority had used the NRS extensively, but some were new users, and a few were familiar with the NRS, but did not use it. NRS users came from five states and one territory, and were experienced in the application of the NRS for various groups such as native English speakers, Indigenous people and migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds, the deaf, and people with disabilities. Some were closely associated with government-funded programs in VET or ACE. Others were employed in industry, some in technical and further education (TAFE), and others as not-for-profit or private providers.

See appendix 1 for a list of contributors.

Interview process

Sixty-six individuals were approached to provide formal input. All those who were contactable were pleased to participate, and fifty interviews were conducted during July and August of 2004. It was occasionally possible to schedule a face-to-face meeting, but most interviews were conducted by telephone, and took between 45 and 60 minutes.

There was some variation in the content and focus of each interview. Given that the focus was on qualitative rather than quantitative information, and because the interviewees came from diverse backgrounds, it was accepted that not everyone would be in a position to comment on all areas. Interviewees were also given the opportunity to identify those aspects they considered most important if they had not already been mentioned.

Findings

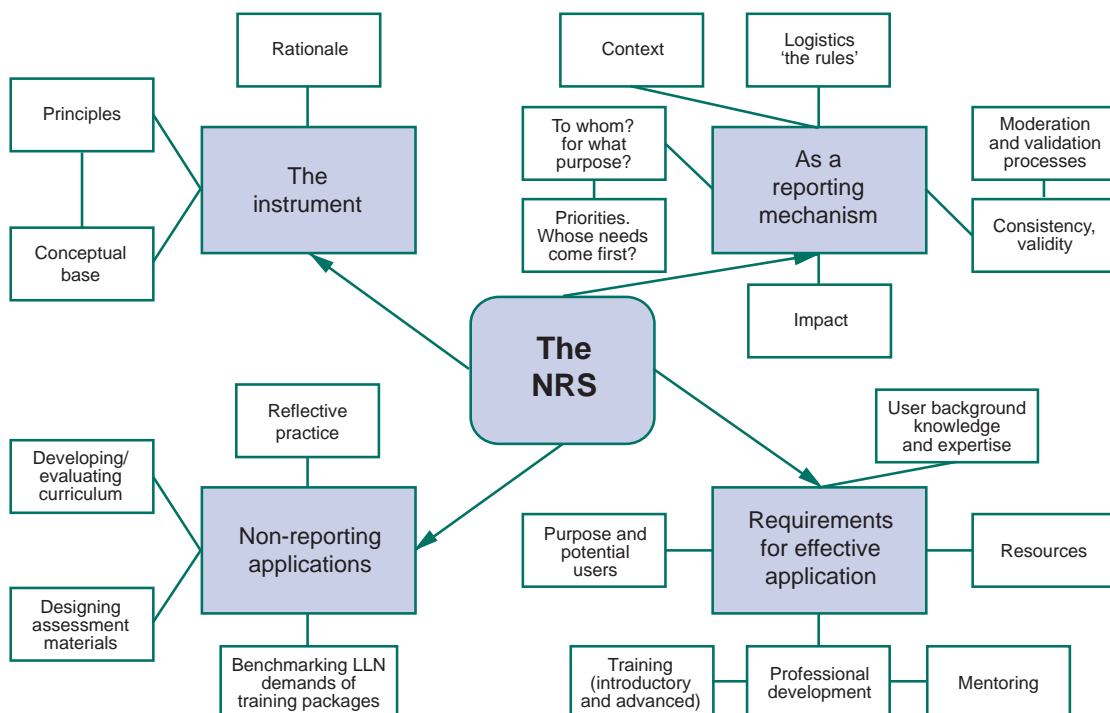
In exploring current perceptions of, and uses for, the NRS, it was considered both as an instrument for describing language, literacy and numeracy competence, and in its capacity as a formal tool for reporting. This made it possible to separate discussion of its conceptual underpinnings from perceptions of reporting processes and rules. Non-reporting applications were also considered, as were interviewees' perceptions of the qualifications, training and resources required to utilise the NRS effectively in both reporting and non-reporting functions (see figure 1).

This section outlines the major findings under the four main headings used:

- ✧ the NRS as an instrument for describing language, literacy and numeracy competence
- ✧ the NRS as a reporting tool
- ✧ non-reporting applications
- ✧ requirements for the effective use of the NRS.

Quotes from interviewees have been selected as indicative of the range of responses to each question.

Figure 1: Project focus areas



The NRS as an instrument for describing language, literacy and numeracy competence

Perception of rationale

Those interviewees who had been involved in the development of the NRS had first-hand knowledge of the rationale behind its development. Amongst this group there was general acknowledgement of the need for a mechanism to describe language, literacy and numeracy competence, and of the need for accountability. Comments included:

Given the vast complexity of stakeholders and curriculum applications, there was a need for a kind of operating system.

We knew programs were getting good outcomes, but we couldn't show it.

The Commonwealth wanted an empirical basis for demonstrating progress. It had to fit the ANTA framework of the time and go into the mainstream and relate to competency-based training.

The original purpose of the NRS was as a national reference point. We still need this. It means you can say, 'This learner is here'—regardless of the curriculum.

It is important for people to have a record of progress. You can't do literacy without measures of how we are going—some kind of accountability.

When asked what they saw as the purpose of the NRS, practitioners who had not been part of the development had a range of responses.

The NRS is for reporting progress. It supports people who are moving around.

We have had huge discussions about its purpose—we decided you need benchmarks and TAFE must be accountable. The NRS gives consistency and a framework for this.

The NRS is important so that people can have a record of progress.

We knew from the title that the NRS was meant to make it easier for skills to be transportable, and so that we could have a common language.

General response to the NRS

Most of those familiar with the NRS were positive about it overall.

I really like it. It's the best way we've ever had to describe language, literacy and numeracy skills.

It can be very useful for determining language, literacy and numeracy needs.

The best thing since sliced bread (but I don't think vocational teachers get it).

If I didn't have to use it? Well I probably would now. I'm used to it and it's a way of thinking about people's skills and describing their achievement.

However, there were occasionally other perspectives.

To be honest, the NRS is a pain in the neck.

The richness of teachers' processes is not captured by systems such as the NRS.

Although most interviewees were not of this mind, some believed that there were other practitioners who did not understand the NRS or appreciate its value. Some raised concerns about this perception, and about uptake and influence of the NRS.

The NRS has raised awareness and established a common language and identified a potential for pathways and articulation where existing courses have been mapped. The question is, is this still happening or is it falling by the wayside?

If it had been able to produce what was intended, it would have been astonishing but the anaemic level of take-up justifies a revisit.

Several academics commented that there was nothing equivalent elsewhere, and reported that overseas groups admired the multi-dimensionality and richness of the NRS.

Whenever I talk about it at international conferences I get a lot of requests for the manual (but there aren't any available!).

You should hold onto the NRS. It is far ahead of what we have in the UK. We looked at it but felt our people were not ready for it.

However, some other academics felt that the world had moved on. They suggested that the NRS be revisited in light of overseas developments, particularly in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

It is an incredibly rich instrument that was conceptually sound for its intended purpose. However, I do wonder if it is sound any longer.

It should be seen as an artefact of its time. It reflects a conceptual understanding and environment of 20 [sic] years ago.

It was ahead of its time, but perhaps not so any more.

We need a less protective approach to evaluation. We need to be informed by those who are now ahead of us. The US and South Africa offer very good options.

Theory base

Amongst those interviewed, there was a strong consensus that the NRS was based on sound principles and theoretical constructs. It was seen by most to provide an effective framework and common language to analyse, discuss and report on language, literacy and numeracy.

The theoretical underpinnings are sound, and very rich. It is an outstanding framework for understanding language.

The construct makes sense. I use it every day. I think it.

The basic premise is sound—it's holistic with contextualised realistic tasks.

It's a solid useful framework.

There were common threads running through interviewees' views on the strengths of the conceptual base, and major issues associated with its use.

Key strengths

- ✧ acknowledgement of the complexity of language, literacy and numeracy, and the recognition of the importance of the range of factors that need to be taken into account in skills development and assessment
- ✧ recognition that language, literacy and numeracy are contextual
- ✧ recognition that individuals are likely to function at a different level in each mode, and acknowledgment of the impact of various levels of support
- ✧ sequencing of development across the levels, which was thought to 'make sense' and 'reflect real life'
- ✧ inclusion of numeracy and the importance of a focus on numeracy not maths
- ✧ recognition of learning strategies and the fact that they, and levels of support, have a bearing on language/literacy/numeracy learning performance

- ✧ acknowledgement of a practitioner’s expert judgement (for example, the NRS design provided a useful level of detail without becoming prescriptive)
- ✧ its applicability to different client groups, and potential to be used in conjunction with a range of curricula, training packages and assessment materials.

Key issues

Questions raised about aspects of the conceptual base included:

Content and focus

There is no evidence of critical literacy pedagogy in the manual. If there were, the document would be entirely different.

Technology-related factors may not be reflected adequately in materials.

Imaginative communication has been left out. For a significant number of people, ‘literacy is an invitation to move to the space of personal imagination’.

The NRS needs to acknowledge multi-modality. For example, level 5 refers to skills for interacting with people from other language backgrounds yet, even people at level 1 are going to have to communicate with people from other languages.

The emphasis on context and meaning making in literacy is not captured to the same extent in numeracy.

The approach to learning strategies *really* needs to be revisited!

Conceptual complication

Most interviewees felt that the NRS was conceptually complicated.

There’s some terrific stuff in the NRS but it tried to be too many things for too many people. It was produced by a committee! It needs to be simpler and much more useable.

The progressive table is far too confusing. There are too many indicators of competence and the sequencing and numbering don’t align. The writers seem to have jumped around.

It needs sophistication and elegance without complexity.

It’s a matter of overly complicated theory vs necessary complexity.

Although wanting some form of simplification, all interviewees rejected any attempt that might undermine the potential of the tool to recognise and manage the complexity of factors impacting on language, literacy and numeracy performance. As one person said, ‘You can’t dumb it down’. Rather it was a question of streamlining. Most interviewees agreed—often quite vehemently.

Problems with the levels

Although most people felt that the levels represented a natural sequence of development conceptually, there were issues raised. Many of these came from moderators of the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programs and verifiers who have had the opportunity to test the instrument extensively across a range of users and contexts. Issues included:

- ✧ too big a jump between levels 2 and 3 in both reading and writing
- ✧ a confusing progression table (does not follow through from one level to the next)
- ✧ not enough distinction between levels for oral communication
- ✧ descriptive wording does not change enough between numeracy levels 1 to 3 to make clear distinctions
- ✧ too many indicators of competence generally (for example, a need to capture *learning strategies* more clearly).

Observations included:

A lot of teachers think there is almost room for another level between 2 and 3.

When I first started using it, each level seemed to be saying the same thing! Now I can see fine distinctions. Moderation workshops and other things from the verifiers really helped with that.

Another issue raised was that the NRS simply did not ‘go low enough’, particularly for people with some types of disability.

The UK tools for literacy are very good and very clear—and they go below the NRS.

Others felt that the NRS Level 1 was quite appropriate, and some suggested it should not be adjusted to try to cope with people with some forms of mental disability. Most practitioners reported that they had found ways of interpreting and managing NYA (not yet achieved), although one provider was critical that this should be the case.

We’ve had to create a sheet called, ‘What is an NYA’ for our new trainers.

A few practitioners were uncomfortable about labelling someone NYA for fear of undermining their self-esteem, although on reflection, they acknowledged this did not seem to be a problem in reality.

Degree of detail and level of clarity

Most interviewees remembered finding the lack of detail in the manual very challenging when they first started using the NRS, and this was borne out by those ‘first timers’ attending an introductory workshop. Two interviewees wanted to reduce ambiguity by developing more extensive checklists, but most respected the need to provide only a limited level of detail, and were comfortable with developing their understanding of how to interpret levels and indicators through involvement in moderation.

It [the NRS] recognises professional expertise. I like that.

It is not cut and dried and allows for teacher judgement.

It is presented as being objective but it is really quite subjective.

You develop a gut feel after a while.

Some observed that incorporating more detail would turn the NRS into a kind of checklist and take the ‘thinking’ out of it.

Teachers got drowned in the detail provided by some outcomes-based frameworks in schools.

It didn’t work at all.

Sharing examples and detail in moderation meetings is essential, but don’t put any more into the document!

Interviewees felt that a distinction should be made between lack of prescriptive detail and lack of clarity. Some NRS statements were simply too vague to be useful, for example:

Derives meaning from sustained oral text. What does that mean? No one has any idea!

This aspect was seen as an issue that needed to be addressed.

Numeracy

A numeracy expert was pleased that numeracy had at least been included in the NRS, and agreed with the spirit in which it was addressed, but felt that it was not anywhere near as well developed as the literacy and language aspects. She suggested that this was largely due to the fact that significantly less time had been put into the development of the numeracy aspect, and was concerned that there had been no opportunity for those involved in the ‘pressure cooker’ activity to reflect on the basic construct. Nor had there been time to get practitioner input.

Several other academics held similar views, as did some practitioners.

It is harder to see the developmental sequence with numeracy compared with other modes.

There are a lot of arguments at moderation!

Despite these concerns, practitioners with adult numeracy training generally reported finding the numeracy component of the NRS an appropriate and useful tool.

It's a way of talking about the numeracy skills people have. It's a reasonable representation of progression. I'd use it even if I didn't have to—at least to talk to others who understood it.

It's a helpful framework for numeracy.

In literacy there's a big jump between levels 2 and 3 but numeracy is more logical. Someone at level 2 in numeracy can function in everyday life, but level 3 is more abstract. It's a reasonable point of difference.

Verifiers raised concerns that some practitioners had not grasped the difference between *adult numeracy* and school maths. They reported that some practitioners were still 'setting sums' with little real-life relevance. However, they recognised that using real contexts could create other problems, because they usually involved reading. Issues could arise when a person's low literacy skills influenced their numeracy performance. One practitioner did not agree.

It is easy to see how someone is functioning in numeracy, even if they don't read and write well.

Practitioners identified specific aspects of numeracy that could be reviewed, or presented more clearly.

I wonder if there need to be four indicators at each level when literacy only has two.

Four numeracy indicators is overkill.

The wording isn't always clear, and it can be hard to make distinctions between levels. The sheets put out by the verifiers often explain things much better.

It should be in plain English. I mean what about changing things like, *The exchanging of goods for services?*

Appropriateness for different groups

A number of practitioners could speak from first-hand experience of using the NRS in diverse settings with diverse groups for diverse purposes. They saw this as an indication that the NRS had achieved its original intention of being useful in a range of contexts with people of different backgrounds.

I've worked all over and used the NRS everywhere in different ways. The workplace is different from TAFE [which] is different to community literacy programs. You don't need all of the NRS for every situation, but you can tailor it to suit. I take from it what I need. For example, the levels are really useful in the workplace but we don't use the aspects at all. They aren't relevant.

The flexibility to contextualise is very important when working with Aboriginal people.

People with a disability may have low oral competence. The NRS makes it possible to demonstrate that they may well be much more competent in other areas—but you do need expertise with disabled people and with the NRS to show this!

Since its inception, there have been disagreements about the ability of the NRS to cater for both native and non-native speakers (including users of AUSLAN [Australian Sign Language]). Some interviewees felt the NRS was not entirely suitable, but others found it quite applicable.

It is difficult to have one system for reporting on literacy and ESL [English as a second language] issues—they have different scripts, and different ways of organising that may not be immediately obvious.

It works really well with migrants, especially those with high skills levels in their own language.

I am TESOL-trained and find the NRS works well for ESL and native speakers in the workplace. There's no need to use different approaches.

In numeracy one word can make a difference to how you interpret a problem. This can make a difference to an ESL person's assessment as they can have an interpretive problem, but actually be good at numeracy. You have to watch for this.

Some people say it lacks the subtleties of the ELS documents, but I think it's mostly that people are wedded to the frameworks they know! The upper levels of the ISLPR [International Second Language Proficiency Ratings] have no subtleties at all!

Several practitioners who worked with Indigenous learners from non-English speaking backgrounds reported finding the NRS culturally appropriate overall because it allowed them to develop curriculum and assessment materials relevant to the learner's context and aligned to NRS levels. Although there were cultural differences, such as the emphasis placed on oral language in Aboriginal culture, they reported finding the NRS framework and reporting rules flexible enough to allow them to interpret the indicators appropriately for their clients.

The name

There were mixed responses to the name, and the possibility of a change.

The name is misleading. It was intended as a reporting mechanism—it is not really a 'system' at all. A system would collect a range of data re outcomes of learning. The NRS would be one component only.

It doesn't really tell you what it is does it? But I guess we are used to it.

The NRS as a reporting tool

When used as a formal reporting tool, there are two components to be considered—the instrument itself, and the structures, processes and rules designed to ensure that 'reporting' produces the information required by identified stakeholders in a way deemed to be valid, consistent and fair.

This section considers interviewees' views on the effectiveness of the instrument for evaluating language, literacy and numeracy competence, and of the appropriateness of the formal processes associated with the LLNP and WELL. The focus was kept on the capacity of the NRS to fulfil general reporting requirements. It was not within the scope of this study to consider issues associated with the detailed logistics of WELL and LLNP, so issues raised in this regard were recorded but not explored in depth.

Where is the NRS used for reporting?

The NRS is currently mandated for use in reporting on two programs funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training—the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) and the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program. Although both are concerned with adult language, literacy and numeracy, the programs have quite distinct purposes and requirements, and the NRS is used differently in each.

In the LLNP, the NRS is used to determine the eligibility of an individual for funding to cover the cost of participation in general adult literacy and numeracy programs, and for setting benchmarks against which to measure a learner's progress. The expectation is that a learner will make measurable progress over time. The Department of Education, Science and Training uses the information collected to report on job seekers' language, literacy and numeracy proficiency gains at an aggregated level, and to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the LLNP.

Providers are required to conduct pre- and post-training assessments. They must maintain detailed documentation, including assessment material used and explanations of the thinking behind the

assignment of an NRS level. These are submitted for validation, and receive extensive feedback from an experienced team of validators. Practitioners may also attend yearly moderation sessions designed to promote consistent interpretation of levels. Both validation and moderation are conducted by highly skilled professionals, appointed through a tendering process.

The WELL program aims to provide workers with the language, literacy and numeracy skills they need to meet the requirements of current and ongoing employment and training. NRS levels are only used formally at the end of the program. Reporting against the NRS is seen by the funding body as a way of reinforcing the workplace focus on language and literacy as opposed to general training. It also provides a profile of the language and literacy levels of the group involved. This helps the Department of Education, Science and Training to determine whether the funding has been used for the target group, predominantly those with an NRS level of 3 in at least one mode. Level 3 has generally been recognised as a minimum requirement for effective functioning in most workplaces, and an assumption behind the program has been that individuals with NRS levels below this would be more suited to a different approach (although interviewees reported an increase in participants operating at lower levels in the mode(s) or aspect(s) on which a particular workplace program focused).

There is no formal moderation/validation process as in the LLNP. However, site data are entered electronically by providers and checked for anomalies by state and Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training staff.

Table 1 provides a comparison of the role of the NRS in these two Commonwealth-funded programs, while appendix 3 contains two contrasting practitioner perspectives on the NRS.

Table 1: Use of the NRS within LLNP and WELL

	LLNP	WELL
Program focus	To assist those with low levels of language, literacy and/or numeracy	To improve workplace language, literacy and numeracy
Target group	Clients at 'Not yet achieved' or L1 and 2 May not be in workplace but intention to improve potential to gain employment as well as to operate effectively in the community	Target group NRS L3 Workplace-based
NRS purposes	Pre-training: assessment to determine eligibility for program and allocation of hours Post-training: to indicate progress	Post-program to provide a snapshot of participants, and demonstrate that WELL is reaching main target group
Focus	Individual	Snapshot of all participants in program No individual progress mapped
Assessment	Across all 13 NRS indicators	Only indicators and aspects relevant to training focus
NRS determination	Area of lowest performance reported pre-training	Area of highest performance reported post-program
Funding body expectations	Participants will move up a level	Participants may stay within level but will develop specific skills within current context and potential to transfer these to other contexts
Validation	Formal documentation submitted for validation; written feedback Interactive moderation process—provider participation once a year	Electronic reports of highest level achieved
NRS professional development	Introductory courses held regularly in some states (e.g. SA funded by state bodies) Internal mentoring Moderation meetings	Responsibility of provider Internal mentoring Industry Training Councils and professional bodies may be included in professional development program

Perceptions of the effectiveness of the NRS for reporting

Most interviewees stated they accepted the need to show progress, set standards and be accountable for funds.

You need a reporting tool. Otherwise you can't have standards. You can't benchmark.
It shows progress. How else can you really do that?

The context within which the NRS was used for reporting may be a factor influencing perceptions of the NRS as a whole. Although some had complaints about the logistics and time involved in reporting to funding bodies, most LLNP practitioners interviewed felt that the NRS had improved their ability to work with learners in a range of capacities. However, WELL practitioners tended to be more critical, with some questioning the effort that went in to learning about the NRS for so little valued return for teachers or learners.

The NRS and the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program

Experienced LLNP practitioners were generally comfortable with using the NRS for reporting purposes. They found the NRS was helpful in determining where a person was and in tracking progress, and useful for developing assessment tasks.

They also took it very seriously.

[In the LLNP], the NRS is critical. If you got it wrong you would lose funding and set people up for failure. You've got to get your head round it to use it effectively. It's almost more important than the curriculum.

No one who actually used the NRS reported feeling that it had a negative impact on the learner. On the contrary, they generally believed it was an asset.

My personal philosophy is that everything must help the learner to be successful. The NRS supports this.

It is helpful and effective. It doesn't undermine relationship building, teaching or learning.

Consistency and validity

All LLNP practitioners interviewed felt they were able to conduct an NRS pre-training assessment appropriately and use it to show progress over time. Some said they found preparing a report very productive because it promoted reflection on student progress, and helped them weigh up where to go next.

It's part of the work, not an added burden.

Those who had never used the NRS in the field were more inclined to doubt its efficacy and question its validity. Several non-users mentioned hearing of practitioners who conducted pre-assessments by getting clients to begin at level 1 and work their way up until they could not cope any more.

One interviewee who had observed NRS pre-training assessment processes as part of research into the LLNP's predecessor, the Literacy and Numeracy Training Program felt that the needs of the learner were forgotten in the push to provide reporting data. In studying six practitioners she observed:

- ✧ pre-training assessment interviews that went as long as two hours, with a 'bizarre' switch mid-way, from 'getting to know you' to 'now do this test'
- ✧ assessors overwhelmed by the complexity of the NRS requirements trying to work their way through the document as they interviewed
- ✧ an (unsustainable) notion that the NRS was in some way 'objective and scientific'.

She believed that the needs of the learner were being ‘sacrificed’ to the need to please the verifiers and was highly critical of a process she believed was leading to stress, skewed results and impaired relationships.

In contrast, LLNP practitioners interviewed made a point of stressing the lengths to which they went to minimise negative impact on people’s self-esteem; several referred to the videos available to model appropriate approaches and the focus on this issue in training and moderation sessions.

Critics also questioned the validity of a process in which the provider had a vested interest in identifying someone as a level 1 or 2 in order to qualify for funding, and who was then under pressure to demonstrate a result.

I’d question how it is really being used. Anecdotal evidence suggests it is easy to report so you can get the funding for the LLNP.

It was not possible in this study to ascertain the validity of the differing perspectives. However, the fact that there is a degree of cynicism regarding the validity of the process amongst some influential non-users is of potential concern.

LLNP practitioner issues

Practitioners identified a range of issues associated with the structures and processes relating to rules of reporting. There was strong consensus on the following issues:

One-number reporting and ‘rounding down’

These issues were the hot topics in a consideration of reporting rules.

A number of interviewees expressed concern about the need to reduce a learner’s varied levels of performance across all modes to a single level equal to their lowest level of competence. Although this practice of ‘rounding down’ is formally endorsed within the LLNP (Fitzpatrick, Wignall & McKenna 1996, p.13), a number of people spoke about the practice as if it were somehow ‘cheating’. During the introductory NRS workshop, it was a topic of debate between the presenter and a practitioner working with English as a second language clients outside the LLNP, who felt that rounding up was more applicable to her clients’ actual skills. Those who were not part of the LLNP saw rounding down as an example of questionable practice. They suggested that it left the system open to manipulation by providers who would benefit from an allocation of more hours. Interestingly, a private provider reported that her organisation had not been using the practice because it did not align with the tailored approach they used, but that the decision had reluctantly been made to round down in order to ensure that each client was eligible for the appropriate number of hours.

Several interviewees were uncomfortable about one-number reporting because they saw it as a reductionist approach which labelled a person with the lowest level when this did not reflect their actual range of performance. However, on reflection, they decided that their initial reaction was more an indication of the importance they placed on building learner self-esteem, and their feeling that the client would feel bad about being a ‘level 1’. They acknowledged that, in practice, this did not seem to happen, and that, in fact, it was more likely to work in the learner’s favour, because it meant the learner was eligible for the maximum hours of training.

Reporting across all indicators

Assessors are required to assess and report on the 13 NRS indicators of competence across all modes in a level. This is reinforced by the software design, which will not accept a report until all fields are filled, and by the verification process, where verifiers follow up on anyone who has not provided sufficient background information to support an entry.

Several practitioners, and a verifier, suggested that there were instances when it was not appropriate, or possible, to assess all areas, or provide the level of detail required. In these cases, they felt the requirement undermined the basic principles of the NRS concerning fairness, functionality in practice, and the promotion of good educational practice.

Providing evidence

All those interviewed were very positive about the interactive nature of the LLNP moderation and validation processes. Despite the time involved in preparing documentation, most valued the opportunity to reflect in a structured way on each learner's progress, and felt that it contributed to their effectiveness as teachers. However, there were specific problems in supporting their assessments, particularly in numeracy.

It is very difficult to demonstrate for moderators that a student can estimate and self-correct.

In relation to 'Reflecting on the answer', this indicator is probably very sensible, but it is very hard to provide evidence for this.

Plateauing

Another concern was the necessity to show that a learner has progressed to a higher NRS level within a mode as a result of training. Several practitioners reported that some learners reach a point where they do not seem to be able to progress any further upwards. However, they are usually broadening their skills by learning 'sideways' across competencies within the level. Practitioners were comfortable that this was appropriate for the individuals involved, and was not a negative reflection on their teaching, but felt it was unfair that attaining further competencies within a level was not captured and valued by the LLNP reporting system.

Non-completion

Several interviewees mentioned that some of their clients left the LLNP before a final assessment could be conducted. However, most were not overly concerned from the learner perspective because they felt their clients knew they had made gains, and because many left to take up newly found employment. However, there were concerns where this prevented the provider from documenting the learner's success, or where it could be used as an indictment of the program.

Time

Several practitioners stressed the importance of preparing reports as soon as possible after an assessment.

I always try to write it up immediately. The more time that passes the harder it is to stay focused, especially for learning strategies and oral communication. I'm OK, but I'm aware of other trainers who simply don't have the time and can't make the time.

The time taken to enter results electronically was often raised as an issue, but most said that this became less of a problem as they became more familiar with the instrument and with the software. However, no matter how streamlined the process, they pointed out that there would always be a time factor involved. There were indications that some organisations were better than others at factoring this into workloads, or at providing specific assistance to make the task less onerous. For others, it was not so easy.

I've been a bit too proactive and managed to double our client load. The trouble with this is that the administrative allowance hasn't changed!

The NRS and the Workplace English Language and Literacy program

WELL practitioners interviewed were highly supportive of the WELL program itself, but tended to be less positive about the use of the NRS within it than were LLNP practitioners.

Few of those in WELL were able to identify a useful purpose behind the application of the NRS because it was only used to show the level of each member of the group at the end of the course, not as a way of tracking progress, and no individual records were submitted.

Some assumed that the funding body expected progress to occur, yet did not ask for NRS evidence. Several were critical of this.

WELL needs to pull itself up [re the NRS]. The NRS is not being utilised as well as it could be. You actually need to assess each person involved so you can show progress, but there is no requirement to do this, even though it's easy and quick to do in an industry context. What's the point?

However, most did not actually want to go to the trouble of formally assessing and reporting on individuals, believing this would be unnecessarily time-consuming and that it would undermine the positive interaction of WELL programs. Some practitioners said they had difficulty in teasing out specific competencies for the purpose of reporting, given that language, literacy and numeracy are being used in context, and courses tend to be of short duration.

Two interviewees described the use of the NRS in WELL as 'overkill', questioning the amount of effort that went in to learning about the NRS when it was 'not really used'. They each suggested that this was an important issue that needed to be addressed for several reasons:

- ✧ decreasing levels of background knowledge and experience of practitioners, and poor availability of professional development generally
- ✧ the high turnover rate, meaning that providers were forever needing to train newcomers in the use of the NRS, using funds that could have gone into the program itself, or into further professional development
- ✧ the high proportion of sessional trainers employed in WELL programs who were unlikely to receive enough professional development on the NRS. It was suggested that some people using the NRS had received no formal instruction at all.

However, there were several practitioners who questioned the reporting requirements but still found the instrument of value. One, working with people from English as a second language (ESL) backgrounds in the textile industry, felt that:

The NRS acknowledges that you need to cover a number of aspects and competencies. It can put pressure on people to go broader and wider than they might otherwise. The descriptors are really good when you are trying to think about how you might approach developing materials and assessing.

Reporting outside Commonwealth programs

It does not appear that any states or territories have formally adopted the NRS as a reporting tool within their own programs. Several state education and training personnel interviewed had considered the possibility, but decided against it.

If we want to report the levels of literacy of those who undertake VET courses, we look at the certificate levels, which have been mapped against the NRS. An NRS report would duplicate what has already been done.

We've already got enough reporting requirements to ANTA and others. You can't ask people to do too much.

There were also concerns that information from an NRS assessment might be misused as a screening tool if, for example, prescribed NRS levels were required within the New Apprenticeships and traineeships scheme.

Although it is not required within ACE programs, several of those practitioners who attended a recent introductory workshop had enrolled because they wanted to be ready if the NRS was made mandatory. (A representative of the state funding body involved said that there were no plans to introduce the NRS as a requirement. However, the conversation has led to a renewed interest in utilising the NRS as a professional development tool and as a consistent framework for describing language, literacy and numeracy across the state ACE sector.)

Several interviewees also raised the potential of using the NRS to report on language, literacy and numeracy levels of school leavers. The NRS could act as a bridge between the schools sector, ACE and VET. A model incorporating this approach is currently under discussion in one state.

Non-reporting applications

Although developed primarily as a reporting tool, it had always been anticipated that the NRS would be useful for a range of purposes. However, some academics who had been involved in the conceptualisation of the NRS questioned the appropriateness of using it for non-reporting purposes.

It was designed for a purpose and you can't fiddle with it.

We need to review the NRS and its intentions and explore whether it's the kind of instrument to deliver in other areas.

You have to ask: What do you want it to do? Was it designed for this?

However, other interviewees were already using the NRS—or at least its concepts—to inform a variety of adult literacy and numeracy activities.

The NRS as a tool for reflective practice

There was strong support for the NRS as a tool that facilitated reflective practice. Some practitioners wondered what they had ever done without it. Many talked about the importance of having a common language. The role the NRS now plays in this regard was evident at a recent Australian Council for Adult Literacy conference, where participants often referred to NRS levels in workshop conversation as a shorthand for a parcel of descriptors of performance.

As one practitioner educator observed:

The NRS gives the teachers something with which to analyse what students are doing. Before the NRS they worked more haphazardly in assessing literacy and numeracy levels, sometimes forgetting things. The NRS provides them with a 'language' with which to convey 'where a person is at'.

However, another experienced teacher–trainer observed that, although the NRS certainly helped teachers to gain insights, it was still a complicated mechanism.

If using it in training, you must look at the NRS every time and know how to do it to genuinely change pedagogy. This is a Big Ask!

She felt the key was to have a clear purpose for using it. It was not a tool you could somehow learn and use in isolation. This message about purpose came through from many practitioners.

The NRS as a tool to develop or evaluate curriculum

The NRS pilot evaluation (Cumming 1997, p.8) reported:

An unexpected outcome of the project was the extent to which participants identified a role for the NRS in curriculum development and review. This occurred both for general basic education and for language, literacy and numeracy embedded in vocational education.

Eight years on, several interviewees who had been involved with the NRS since its inception identified this role as one of its most important.

It's biggest value is as a curriculum framework. It helps you to map what you are doing. Once you are familiar with it, you don't have to go back all the time.

The NRS works for mapping curriculum. It helps that the state curricula are all from the same family, informed by the same theories and influenced by cross-fertilisation.

It is not set up as a curriculum framework but it would be more useful if it were.

There was occasional confusion about the use of the NRS as a *curriculum framework* or as a *curriculum*, with several practitioners expressing concern that any move to make the NRS a national requirement would actually mean that it would become the standard curriculum for basic adult literacy and numeracy. They did not like the idea of giving up the state curriculum they were comfortable with.

Mapping to the NRS

The general adult language, literacy and numeracy curricula in use around Australia have all been mapped to the NRS. Practitioners interviewed for this survey were all aware that this mapping had occurred in relation to the curriculum they used, although there were mixed responses to the usefulness of the process.

Our curriculum preceded the NRS. It was easy to map to it, but it was not informed by it.

The GCEA [General Certificate in Adult Education] *numeracy* doesn't map together with the NRS very well, but in practice we get round it by using different tasks for the NRS assessment.

One practitioner who did not actually use the NRS for reporting felt that mapping existing curricula to it gave 'a sense of security'. Another who had been involved in a mapping process conducted soon after the publication of the NRS, remembered:

It created a lot of dissent and was not done very well because we were not really familiar with the NRS. Lucky it's up for review soon!

However, she acknowledged that the discussion at the time had been valuable, even though the outcome was less than perfect.

A different view was put by an academic who suggested:

We should question the relationship between the NRS and the curriculum—there does not seem to be much of a relationship ...

And another was concerned that the NRS could be used to justify anything.

Most people use their own curriculum and map it to the NRS if they have to. It doesn't matter if the curriculum is reactionary. It will still map to the NRS because there is not enough detail to drive good practice.

Developing new curriculum

There were concerns raised that some practitioners might be treating the NRS as a sort of curriculum in itself, but most interviewees found it hard to imagine how this could happen.

Several reported finding the NRS helpful when developing new curriculum. For example, a Queensland trainer has used the NRS as a framework to develop an accredited course in the retail sector which helps workplace trainers explicitly address the language, literacy and numeracy requirements of certificates I, II and III.

NRS as a tool to identify and benchmark communication demands of training packages

The integration of language, literacy and numeracy into training packages has been ANTA policy since 1995, and is captured by the phrase, ‘built in not bolted on’. Developers of training packages are required to take account of the NRS as part of the development process. There is no required format, but a model based on the NRS is provided for use by standards developers and training package reviewers (ANTA 2001a, p.8).

Interviewees generally supported this application of the NRS, but identified problems with it in practice—along with more general issues associated with language, literacy and numeracy in training packages.

Several interviewees felt that some package designers had not really embraced the NRS, and were only going through the motions because they were paid to. Their lack of expertise in the NRS could lead to misinterpretation of NRS levels.

In discussions with interviewees for this study, some suggested that the real problem with the application of the NRS was not so much with the designers, as with workplace trainers who had little or no literacy and numeracy knowledge. It was not just that the NRS was not understood or appreciated in the workplace, it was that issues related to language, literacy and numeracy were not understood. This feedback aligned with the findings of various research projects that the theory of integrated language, literacy and numeracy has not necessarily been translating into practice (Haines & Bockmore-Brand 2000; McGuirk 2000; Wyse & Brewer 2001).

Although supportive of the notion of *embedding*, most interviewees were concerned that this actually made it harder for workplace trainers to focus on literacy and numeracy, and cited many occurrences in their experience in the workplace.

The problem with embedding was powerfully demonstrated during an Australian Council for Adult Literacy national conference workshop (Yeomans & Krusche 2004), when some 40 experienced practitioners attempted to identify the literacy and numeracy competencies required in two different training packages. Although possible, it was a challenging task, made even more difficult because the NRS was not used as a mechanism to identify and evaluate the expectations built into the two packages. Besides demonstrating the inherent difficulties facing trained practitioners (and therefore raising questions about the potential for workplace trainers without this background to tackle this effectively), it was also interesting that the workshop presenters had not used the NRS as part of their Masters’ research study. However, several participants asked about the NRS levels, and it appears that, in most small groups, there were practitioners who used the NRS indicators as a way of making sense of the tasks and of establishing a common base for discussion.

The NRS and the Australian Qualifications Framework

Several interviewees drew attention to the fact that there is no simple correspondence between NRS levels and Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels generally, or between the language, literacy and numeracy requirements of certificates at the same level in different industries when measured against the NRS. They did not see this as a fault with the NRS, but as a reflection of the reality that it is crucial that the language, literacy and numeracy demands of any work context be considered individually. However, some suggested that this basic message was not necessarily getting through to trainers, who lacked the background knowledge to grasp what it meant. Again, they argued that it was not the fault of the NRS. It was the complexity of language, literacy and numeracy in context that caused the problems and highlighted the need for training for non-practitioners.

Some interviewees cited examples of a misalignment between the literacy and numeracy requirements within a workplace, entry requirements for training, and literacy and numeracy levels required to achieve competence in a course. The NRS can be used to highlight such issues, but its impact is limited, due to a general lack of understanding of the instrument and its underpinning concepts.

The NRS and workplace trainers

One suggestion posed as part of this brief was that the NRS be simplified to make it more accessible to workplace trainers without specialist literacy and numeracy training. However, no interviewees supported this notion if it meant that the NRS lost its bite. Nor were most practitioners comfortable with the images conjured up by a simplified NRS—which they tended to associate with a checklist that could be used to misjudge and misreport.

However, there were also those who could imagine a simplified version with positive applications because they had already developed and used them to raise awareness of language, literacy and numeracy issues amongst non-specialist trainers and industry members. Several of these simplified outlines had been produced, although it was important to note that they were not presented as ‘stand alone’ documents, but were used within workshops and seminars. It was reported that non-specialists had no problem grasping the basic concepts when presented in this context. The issues only arose if they tried to move to the full NRS and saw the manual!

The NRS and assessment

One practitioner who had developed a range of context-specific assessment materials mapped to the NRS stated:

The professional development sessions pushed the fact that the NRS was only a reporting tool, but it has always been used more broadly than intended. For example, you weren’t supposed to base assessment on it but we always have!

This was an interesting perception, because using the NRS as an assessment framework was always part of the NRS scope and intention. However, it reflects some confusion over use of language. Often when people reported ‘using the NRS for assessment’, closer questioning revealed that they actually meant they had designed assessment tasks relevant to the learner’s context which had helped to identify appropriate levels. Many of those interviewed worked in organisations which had developed ‘assessment kits’ that could be used as part of pre- and post-assessments. They reported that these offered enough choices, and were appropriately contextualised to meet the needs of different individuals.

For example, one large government organisation had used WELL funding to develop a tool based on the NRS to help identify where employees would need language, literacy and numeracy support. Modified many times over the years, it has become an integral part of the program to improve language, literacy and numeracy in its workforce, and provides a consistent way of talking about people’s proficiencies and progress across an organisation with over 14 000 employees.

Within this organisation, job and person specifications are analysed by a literacy and numeracy specialist against the NRS, and used to inform recruitment—but not to screen people out of a job. The NRS simply helps identify when an applicant who meets other requirements will benefit from additional support in literacy or numeracy in order to do the job effectively. Although this is an application that was identified by NRS developers as problematic, it is reported to be working well for individual staff, while raising awareness amongst management about language, literacy and numeracy and demonstrating that a focus on adult literacy and numeracy can make a difference for both the individual and the organisation.

Requirements for effective use of the NRS

There was general agreement that the current NRS was not easy to learn or to apply initially. Even those who had been using it for some time wanted opportunities to compare their interpretations and share ideas about assessment materials. Interviewees identified four essential components of an overall ‘package’ to support NRS use as a formal reporting tool. These were:

- ✧ a level of background knowledge of language, literacy and numeracy sufficient to be able to appreciate the conceptual aspects of the NRS and interpret them appropriately
- ✧ regular opportunities for interactive professional development activities
- ✧ accessible, relevant support materials
- ✧ time.

If any one of these were missing, many felt it would be hard to sustain the NRS (current or revised) in the future.

Interestingly, although all interviewees raised issues about the ‘daunting’ nature of the original manual, and accessibility of later support materials, they were more concerned about the lack of ongoing NRS professional development. They also identified looming problems associated with an ageing specialist workforce, and a trend towards less qualified practitioners with limited access to either NRS professional development or workplace mentors. Without a strong training support program, this had the potential to undermine the future effectiveness of the NRS as a reporting tool.

Background knowledge

The NRS was originally developed for use by literacy and numeracy professionals. This approach was endorsed by those interviewed. There was strong resistance from many to any move to allow non-professionals to use the NRS for assessment and reporting purposes, or to simplify the instrument in an attempt to make this feasible.

It could be a dangerous tool in the wrong hands. It must be used in a safe professional environment.

Arguments about qualification levels required for the NRS reflected broader discussions currently occurring in the adult literacy and numeracy field about qualifications generally, and in relation to the literacy and numeracy components of the Training and Assessment (TAA) Training Package.

Interviewees suggested that the NRS required a sophisticated conceptual understanding. Most argued that users needed a background in adult literacy and numeracy, preferably with post-graduate qualifications, and probably a teaching degree. Although some interviewees were hesitant to be too prescriptive, most said: ‘More than a certificate IV!’ At the same time, the small number of interviewees who did not have post-graduate qualifications raised the issue themselves in light of ongoing debates about qualifications, and expressed annoyance at any suggestion that they were not effective in their roles. They believed they were quite capable of interpreting the NRS appropriately, and were doing so on a daily basis.

A few interviewees with qualifications felt there was a need to be pragmatic and recognise the trends—an ageing workforce, casualisation, and few young people entering a profession that offered little in the way of a career path. With very few people actually willing to pay for post-graduate qualifications (at one university numbers had fallen from 60 per year to 6), they might soon become a thing of the past. This group argued that a Certificate IV in Literacy might become one of the only forms of specialist training available. While no one thought that the current literacy and numeracy component of a Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment was sufficient to enable a person to assess and report against the NRS, they were hopeful that the new Training and

Assessment Training Package would provide a solid grounding so that a trainer would have a better idea of when to get a specialist in to help.

Professional development

All interviewees saw interactive professional development as one of the most crucial aspects associated with the effective use of the NRS, and most felt it had not been adequately addressed. The key point made was that the NRS is conceptually challenging and not easily learnt from a book or website.

The NRS doesn't suddenly become knowledge for new people because they attend a half-day workshop. It will have zero effectiveness if it is used independently of regular professional development.

Interviewees were universally critical of the fact that there was no organised approach to NRS professional development, and concerned about the limited availability of any kind of professional development in the language, literacy and numeracy field.

The professional development aspects need updating. The NRS can't expect to stay live for 10 years without it!

It was argued that professional development should go beyond a familiarisation with the instrument and an introduction to the requirements of WELL or LLNP. Increasing proficiency in its use only came with time, experience and regular opportunities to explore, reflect and share ideas. Therefore, interviewees suggested that several different types of professional development should support the NRS in its current form and roles or in any future guise:

- ✧ an introduction to the NRS from a conceptual point of view
- ✧ an introduction to the rules of formal reporting within WELL or LLNP
- ✧ regular updates and opportunities to discuss NRS application with other practitioners.

Learning the NRS

To further explore the best ways of introducing the NRS to new users, practitioners were asked what supports had been most helpful to them in developing their understanding.

Learning from others

Some people had no formal introduction, but learnt from others within the organisation.

I would have found it much harder, but the program coordinator had prepared an assessment kit and selected key aspects that made it much easier to get into the NRS.

The mentoring approach worked well if these instructors were experts, and had the time. However, this was not always the case.

It's very complicated for coordinators and lecturers to explain how the NRS works to hourly-paid who are only there for the time they are actually working.

Given the high turnover in some places, there were reports that the chain of experienced NRS practitioners helping newcomers was being broken. When this happened, information and observations about how to use the NRS were being passed on by an inexperienced practitioner. Over several iterations, key messages were being watered down. It was also possible to reach a point where no one actually had any knowledge any more. Interviewees from several states reported that representatives from some organisations had been sent to a recent NRS introductory workshop in another state for just that reason—because there was no longer anyone with any NRS background available who could show them what to do.

Attending provider professional development programs

It is Department of Education, Science and Training policy that the provider be responsible for ensuring that WELL practitioners are trained in the use of the NRS as a reporting tool, while the LLNP has a built-in moderation and verification component that acts as an effective professional development mechanism for those able to attend. Some providers (such as ACE NSW, Mission Australia and some state TAFE systems) have strong professional development programs for those working in adult literacy and numeracy, and regularly cover the NRS for those required to use it within Commonwealth-funded programs.

However, most practitioners interviewed, from whatever background, reported that professional development generally was a 'thing of the past'. It had become the individual's responsibility and was unlikely to be paid for, or even supported with time release, by their organisation. In these circumstances, NRS professional development was hard to find, and most people relied on Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program moderation meetings as a way of developing their knowledge and skills regarding its use. However, these were not available to non-LLNP personnel, and as all sessions are oversubscribed, this avenue is not currently open to everyone involved in the LLNP either.

Although representatives of funding bodies felt that it was quite acceptable for providers to include the cost of professional development in tenders, practitioners and some providers made the assumption that this was not appropriate. There was also evidence of a widespread belief across most practitioners that the funding bodies mandating the use of the NRS should be directly responsible for the professional development associated with it.

Participating in LLNP moderation

Moderators interviewed for this project reported designing the workshops to encourage reflection and extend understanding of literacy and numeracy through the inclusion of guest speakers, and reviews of resources. Interviewee feedback suggests that this approach has been highly successful. Those interviewed identified moderation meetings as the major source of learning for LLNP practitioners, and spoke highly of the experience. All found it extremely helpful, not only in terms of NRS use as a reporting tool, but as a way of reflecting on their practice and sharing ideas with peers. Although they were keen to ensure they reported accurately, they placed a high value on the opportunity for structured professional interaction offered by moderation meetings.

However, lack of places meant that most organisations could only send one representative a year. There were also issues raised about access for practitioners working in regional and remote areas.

Receiving feedback as part of LLNP validation

Practitioners reported being initially concerned about 'being marked', but then found that the validation process was a positive experience that tended to validate their approach as well as their assessments while also extending their thinking and practice.

However, one validator was not so sure. She reported that she had taken on the role because she saw it as an opportunity to provide professional development, but had found she spent far too much time 'ticking boxes' and checking whether people had included enough information. She was also critical that the 'professional development' aspect tended to focus on compliance and rules of reporting rather than on concepts and strategies that could lead to good teaching practice. Nor did she believe there was much opportunity to develop any continuity. Given the high turnover of trainers, and the time between meetings, she found that each meeting had to 'go back to the beginning'.

State-funded programs

Some state education and training agencies provide funding for introductory and advanced NRS courses, which may be offered several times a year. However, this practice does not necessarily occur in all states.

Through professional and industry bodies

An Industry Training Council representative described how his body provided literacy and numeracy training because it was felt someone had to ‘fill the gap’. The program was extremely well attended and attracted practitioners who did not actually work in the industry sector. NRS training was offered about once a year as part of a general program.

Resources

The NRS document

Although one person described the original NRS manual as ‘ingenious’ and another as ‘an architectural and engineering marvel’, interviewees were almost unanimous in their criticism of the original NRS document, suggesting that its complexity created a psychological hurdle—it simply *looked* too hard.

As soon as you open it, it looks daunting.

It’s daunting.

I can remember being daunted by it!

It’s really hard to juggle all the different aspects at once.

Oh that book!

Its tone and style also worked against it.

It’s verbose and scary, yet as a literacy document it should be easy to read.

Accessibility is a huge weakness.

Those who had overcome initial barriers and become experienced users complained that the original NRS manual was very difficult to get hold of, and asked that more be made available.

Support materials

A wealth of materials has been developed since the publication of the original NRS manual. Most are available on the web, but not all in the same place. (Initial searches for this project took a long time and were not straightforward.) Some long-time NRS users were not even aware of much that had been published post-1996. However, those who were, spoke highly of the work that had been undertaken to make the NRS more accessible, and wondered why it had never been incorporated into the original package.

Although interviewees from Commonwealth and state bodies placed a lot of emphasis on the materials that had been developed and made available on the web, others sounded a cautionary note.

No matter how good the documents are they can never take the place of interactive workshops and structured meetings.

Time

A new user needs time to become competent in the NRS. Even a well-qualified practitioner needs to use the NRS for several months (with support). Everyone interviewed told a similar story:

It took a long time to get comfortable with it, but now it’s second nature!

When the NRS was first introduced everyone hated it. There was so much else to deal with at that time, and it takes so long to get your head round this as well as everything else.

If I hadn’t had to learn how to use it I never would have made the effort. I had too much to do as it was!

Those consulted reported that, with increased workloads, it was becoming increasingly difficult to find time to explore the NRS, or to provide assistance to others, and one potential new user lamented:

It takes too much of your own (unpaid) time to work out what it's about.

Discussion

Level of support

Responses to this survey suggest that the NRS has built a strong following amongst those with the background knowledge and opportunity to become expert users. Although in need of an update, the conceptual underpinnings were generally considered sound by those academics interviewed. Practitioners who had managed to get past its initial conceptual and logistical complexity reported the NRS to be an extremely useful tool for gauging a student's strengths and weaknesses, for planning training, and for designing appropriate assessment materials. Those who had used it for curriculum development or evaluation had also found it helpful. Many interviewees wondered how they had ever managed without it.

As noted previously, as a tool for reporting to funding bodies, responses were mixed. Those involved with the LLNP appeared to be more comfortable with the NRS because they felt it contributed directly to teaching and learning outcomes. Those involved with WELL were less satisfied, possibly because it was not perceived to help learners, but rather seen as a somewhat onerous task to ensure funding continued for a worthwhile program.

Breadth of application

Despite concerns about the adoption of the NRS, this study suggests that it has had a wider impact than might at first be obvious.

The NRS is being used directly by literacy and numeracy practitioners within the LLNP and WELL programs. It is also being used by specialists in some workplaces not involved with WELL and LLNP to inform the design of accredited training, and as part of organisational moves to build employees' language, literacy and numeracy skills.

The NRS appears to have become the accepted mechanism for ensuring that adult literacy and numeracy curricula have the appropriate breadth and depth, and acknowledge developmental sequences, levels of support and learning strategies. All major adult language, literacy and numeracy curricula have been mapped against the NRS.

In a field that appears to be wedded to locally produced curriculum this is the most convenient way of providing a kind of standardised national accreditation process that is not narrowly prescriptive. However, as the curriculum evaluation process does not occur often, the impact of the NRS in this area may have been downplayed. The usefulness of the NRS in this role may need to be better promoted as part of future curriculum reviews.

The NRS is being used to inform language, literacy and numeracy aspects of training packages, even if there are questions about the effectiveness of interpretation and impact on the quality of literacy and numeracy provision in workplace training.

However, there is concern that it is not being taken up by practitioners who are not formally required to use it.

Barriers to uptake

Despite the current breadth of application, most contributors to this project felt that uptake by practitioners and systems could be greater. Barriers to take-up identified included:

- ✧ The NRS has no ‘system legitimacy’. There is no widespread requirement to use it.
- ✧ Practitioners will only make the effort to use it when they can see a benefit for themselves and for their students.
- ✧ Some practitioners will only make the effort to learn it if compelled to do so. Many of those who operate outside the LLNP and WELL cannot see a good reason to do this.
- ✧ It is too much trouble to learn. It is hard to ‘get into’. It is not easy to understand.
- ✧ NRS resources are scattered or hard to get, but even if they were more accessible, trying to gain an understanding of the NRS from documents alone is difficult.
- ✧ There is not enough NRS professional development available to help people develop their proficiency.

Need for a review

Despite the level of support for the NRS identified by this initial survey, there was also an almost unanimous belief that it was time for a review.

I’m worried it isn’t firing people up. So much went into it. We must revisit it to see what we can do.

It is important to note that only one interviewee believed that this should involve a complete re-conceptualisation.

Current understanding suggests that an ICT [information communication technologies] approach cannot simply be ‘bolted on’. The whole framework needs revisiting/rethinking if it is to reflect literacy and numeracy in the current workplace.

Most felt the foundations were solid, and would be able to incorporate aspects such as new technology.

There is a need for an interpretive and critical element ... However, an enormous amount of work has gone into it. It would be bizarre to just throw it out.

It was suggested that the conceptual base be streamlined to produce a simpler instrument that retained the ability to capture the richness and complexity of language, literacy and numeracy across contexts. The intention would be to strengthen the NRS by drawing on what has been learnt through eight years of application, and by incorporating new knowledge and understandings about literacy and numeracy, not only as applied to adults, but across all education sectors.

Keep the open construct and the coherence of the theory, but add aspects.

Use what is already there, informed by the new multilingual orientation (but with a sense of practical constraints).

A review would also provide the basis for the preparation of user-friendly manuals and other resources aimed at literacy and numeracy practitioners, and this in itself could reduce some of the current barriers to uptake. Several believed a review could also provide the basis for a ‘public conversation’ on literacy and numeracy theory and practice that would be very healthy.

Try to use its pedagogical capabilities. Anything that informs people about the complexities of language is good.

There were several people who wondered if a review would open up old tensions. However, others who had been involved in the original NRS development process, felt that many things had changed since that time, and that the climate was more conducive to a constructive review. They

also felt that there was no way of avoiding a review, and that the NRS would not be able to sustain itself without it.

It was ahead of its time and therefore it's still not 'old'. But it needs updating. You can't keep something like this alive for 10 years without revisiting it.

Future directions

Key questions

In considering the way forward, the situation can be considered from two different perspectives.

One option is to focus on the NRS itself and say: ‘Well, we have this instrument that we know is actually very powerful. Should we be maintaining it as is, improving it, extending its use or finding new applications for it?’

In this case, there are three key questions:

- ✧ Is the current situation satisfactory?
- ✧ If not, what are the problems we should seek to address?
- ✧ If we do change anything, what goal do we want to achieve?

The second option moves the focus away from the NRS itself and onto the broader context of adult language, literacy and numeracy.

In this case, we need to ask:

- ✧ Where are the areas of greatest need in adult literacy and numeracy provision?
- ✧ Could the NRS (in its current role and guise, or in a new one) be useful in addressing any of these needs?

The most appropriate options are likely to be those which meet an identified priority in the broader context. Insights into the way this might happen can be found by considering the inherent strengths of the existing instrument and learning from the ways in which it has been applied to date.

Questions pertaining to both perspectives are explored further below, the discussion incorporating relevant input from interviewees as outlined in earlier sections.

Exploring options for the NRS

What is the *real* problem?

Many of those interviewed identified what they saw as ‘the real problem’ confronting the NRS.

There is no problem. Leave things as they are.

The real problem is that the NRS is not easy to understand.

The real problem is that the NRS is not being used by enough people.

The real problem is that the NRS is not in fact a *national* reporting system.

The real problem is that the NRS is a wasted resource. It is not just for reporting and needs to be recognised, and used, as a multi-purpose tool.

The real problem is that the NRS is not formally part of the mainstream of adult education and training.

In setting future directions, the perception of the key problem will affect the choice of goals and strategies setting the tone of future development. Therefore each option is explored further below with reference to interviewees' responses. Table 2 at the end of this chapter provides an overview and identifies potential consequences of each action, both intended and unintended.

Discussion

There is no problem. Leave things as they are

Potential goal: Maintain the status quo.

No one actually wanted to leave the NRS instrument exactly as it was. All interviewees felt the NRS was overdue for revision, and were unanimous in calling for a review. However, almost all wanted to build on the existing contextual framework, not replace it. Although there was some potential to stir up philosophical and pedagogical disagreements, those interviewees who had been privy to the animosity surrounding the birth of the NRS felt that a review was unlikely to cause the same divisions. Despite the risks, a critique could give the NRS a new legitimacy, and the discussions involved could be a vehicle for professional development, while also raising the profile of the NRS itself.

Some interviewees did want to maintain the status quo in terms of limiting the NRS to its role as a reporting mechanism, and could not envisage its being used for any other purpose. Others felt that the NRS was already being used in many different ways—but that there needed to be greater recognition of this, perhaps through repackaging and a name change that better reflected its multi-purpose nature.

The real problem is that the NRS is not easy to understand or use

Potential goal: Make the NRS more user-friendly and accessible.

A major criticism of the NRS is that it is 'not easy to get your head around'. Even experienced practitioners must invest time and effort just to understand it, let alone to become competent users. It does not help that the original manual is 'daunting', or that support materials can be hard to track down.

Almost all interviewees felt that the NRS could be streamlined conceptually without undermining its ability to manage the complexity of factors associated with language, literacy and numeracy competence. Most were keen to improve the NRS by incorporating new academic knowledge and drawing on the knowledge of experienced users. In particular, the LLNP moderation/verification process could provide a wealth of data and many insights into what works and what doesn't and why.

Interviewees made a distinction between *streamlining* and *simplifying*. There should be no attempt to 'dumb the instrument down' just so that non-specialists could use it as a reporting tool. What would be the point anyway? However, there was potential to make key NRS concepts more accessible to non-specialists such as workplace trainers. Indeed, several simple 'versions' have already been developed and are reportedly proving effective in this regard.

Another suggestion was that the NRS could be revised and presented as a type of training package in its own right, or that it could be explained using headings and terms used in competency-based training. This alignment with what is now 'mainstream' would make it more accessible to both specialists and non-specialists.

Even though the print and web-based materials need to be revisited and made more user-friendly, interviewees were adamant that any attempt to make the NRS more accessible to specialists must involve a recognition that interactive professional development is the key to initial understanding of the NRS conceptually, and to the development of expertise in its use. As new specialists do not

necessarily have access to NRS workshops, current resourcing of professional development should be reconsidered as a matter of urgency, or the NRS will founder.

The real problem is that the NRS is not used by enough people

Potential goal: Increase uptake of the NRS in order to improve practice.

A minority of interviewees believed that the NRS has had only a limited effect on adult literacy and numeracy, and saw this as an indictment of the tool itself, or of the system. However, there is evidence to suggest that the NRS has actually had a greater impact than is immediately apparent. It may be that it has not been heavily promoted. People are not actually aware of the degree of influence it has had on the practice of specialists around the country, or of how far it has informed curriculum development and evaluation, or of its role in the design of training packages.

It all depends on what counts as 'uptake'. It may be useful to make a distinction between *specialists* and *non-specialists*.

If the aim is to increase the number of specialist users adopting the NRS, it would be helpful to have a better understanding of the current breadth and depth of uptake in the profession, and some insight into what prevents some practitioners from using the NRS. (Is it, as some interviewees claim, simply too hard? Is it lack of time or support to learn it? Is it lack of understanding of the potential of the NRS to help them in their work?) It might then be possible to design strategies to raise the profile of the NRS amongst specialist non-users and encourage them to try it.

Interviewees generally agreed that the NRS in its current form is not a reporting tool for the *non-specialist*, and few argued that addressing this situation should be a future goal. However, if the ultimate goal of any future NRS strategy is to influence practice, there could be a place for a version of the NRS that captures its key concepts.

This could be used as a tool to raise awareness about language, literacy and numeracy issues relevant to a workplace training or community context. It could be incorporated into professional development activities to give people across the VET or ACE sectors a nodding acquaintance with critical language, literacy and numeracy concepts. It would also increase the mainstream legitimacy of the NRS.

However, the existence and widespread promotion of a simplified NRS alongside a full NRS has the potential to create confusion.

The real problem is that the NRS is not in fact a *national* reporting system

Potential goal: Push for national uptake as a reporting mechanism.

There was little support for this as a way forward. A number of interviewees were happy that the NRS was used within LLNP and WELL if only because this kept it alive, but no one was keen to see it mandated for reporting elsewhere. Only one practitioner thought it should be national for the sake of consistency, and was concerned that transportability only worked if a student went from one LLNP to provider. Others argued against any push for a single national reporting system on the basis that total consistency would stunt growth by removing the current diversity and potential for cross-fertilisation.

At least one state training authority had rejected the idea of adopting the NRS, believing it would not achieve any useful outcome and could in fact do some harm if information was misused. There were also concerns about many reporting requirements within the VET sector. Adding the NRS would not actually achieve anything other than practitioner overload and anger.

There was a close connection in some people's minds between making the NRS national (and therefore compulsory) for reporting purposes, and a move to bring in one adult language, literacy

and numeracy curriculum. There was strong resistance to the latter, with most interviewees preferring the current situation, with several different curricula and state-based programs which could be compared and evaluated as required using the NRS. Any move to nationalise the NRS would need to anticipate and address this potential misinterpretation. It would also need to counter the immediate resistance that accompanies any bureaucratically imposed compulsory requirement.

The sheer energy required to push for a single mandated reporting process, and the degree of resistance this is likely to produce, suggests that this is not a useful pathway, unless some genuinely useful purpose is found to justify the collection of data. One possible avenue of investigation might be in relation to data for comparison with overseas International Adult Literacy Survey data. (The NRS was originally designed to align with the International Adult Literacy Survey although it actually provides much broader information.)

Interestingly, the flexibility of the NRS and its application in curriculum mapping and training packages may mean that it is already in a position to achieve at least some of the goals of a national system without actually being 'national'.

The real problem is that the NRS is a wasted resource. It is not just for reporting and needs to be recognised and used as a multi-purpose tool

Possible goal: Reframe and reposition the NRS.

Possible strategy: Use as the basis for the development of an adult literacy and numeracy framework or profiles.

Some interviewees were asked about the idea of using the NRS structure and concepts as a framework for describing and analysing language and literacy, or as the basis for the development of a set of Australian literacy and numeracy profiles with levels and descriptors of behaviour and skills.

Some rejected the suggestions, feeling that the NRS had to remain true to its original purpose—which was primarily as a reporting tool. They argued that conceptually it could not ever be anything else. If it were redesigned for other purposes, it would not be the NRS anymore. Several interviewees were worried about introducing yet another 'framework', referring back to an 'Australian Literacy and Numeracy Framework' which predated the NRS and contributed to it, but was never used extensively in its own right. However, they seemed to think it could not be replaced.

Not surprisingly, those who were actually using the NRS in a variety of ways disagreed. They were particularly supportive of the role of the NRS in professional development, and as a curriculum framework, and were interested in ways of supporting these existing applications more extensively. However, they identified difficulties associated with promoting the National *Reporting System* as a multi-purpose tool, if only because the name suggests such a specific purpose.

Most interviewees felt that one of the most important contributions of the NRS was the provision of a common framework and language for talking about and analysing language, literacy and numeracy within the profession. It would not take a great deal to rework its elements as a formal literacy and numeracy framework to replace the one that had gone before. A new framework could fill this role and provide the basis for development of versions of varying complexity without compromising the most detailed and sophisticated version, which would still be used for purposes such as formal reporting and curriculum evaluation.

The key would be that the central constructs of the framework would align across all versions, and provide a bridge and a common language from specialist to workplace trainer to volunteer to employer.

Most were more interested in the idea of a framework than they were in that of 'profiles'. However, there were very different interpretations of what 'profiles' meant, so this may not be an indication of resistance per se. If discussions are to continue in this direction, the terms *profile* and *framework* will

need to be used cautiously, and time invested in developing the concepts without necessarily labelling them in advance.

The real problem is that the NRS is not formally part of the mainstream of adult education and training

Possible goal: Find a way of making the NRS ‘part of the way we do things round here’.

The importance of language, literacy and numeracy is increasing within the VET sector, at least in theory, with recent ANTA documents stating that:

The National Strategy for VET recognises that language, literacy and numeracy has to be *here there and everywhere*. (ANTA 2003, p.6)

Does this mean that the NRS should also be all-pervasive?

Discussions are currently occurring about how best to ensure that literacy and numeracy are addressed adequately within vocational education and training. A review of the NRS in this context may identify ways in which it could contribute to better understanding of language, literacy and numeracy. As a starting point, interviewees were asked to consider two different strategies for linking the NRS to the mainstream.

- ✧ Incorporate the NRS into ‘employability skills’.
- ✧ Position the NRS as a means to bring literacy and numeracy ‘upfront and central’ within revised training packages.

Incorporate into employability skills

LL&N competence underpins employability skills. Clearly the ability to use technology, manage change, communicate and work constructively with people is underpinned by a plethora of speaking, listening, reading, writing and numeracy practices. (ANTA 2003)

This concept of literacy and numeracy as *enabling skills* underpinning employability skills was embraced by the developers of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Business Council of Australia employability skills, but they rejected the idea of incorporating language, literacy and numeracy directly.

With literacy and numeracy sitting ‘behind’ or ‘beneath’ the employability skills, could the NRS provide an explicit link?

A study by Walker (1996) determined that each of the seven Mayer Key Competencies could be mapped to the NRS competencies and learning strategies, although there is no neat alignment of the numbers. (Key competency performance level 1 equates to NRS levels 2 and 3, performance level 2 to NRS level 4 and performance level 3 to NRS level 5.) Although experienced practitioners can appreciate how the key competencies and NRS connect, there is no simple way of demonstrating this to others. A similar situation exists with the more recently developed employability skills.

Some interviewees were unsure of the usefulness of attempting to combine the NRS and employability skills, citing the confusion between different sets of ‘levels’, the potential for over-simplification and the accompanying loss of detail that currently gives the NRS its power.

There was also a broader discussion of the potential damage that could occur if literacy and numeracy were in fact treated as ‘generic’ skills.

Would this undermine the message about the importance of context and reinforce a concept that literacy and numeracy are basic skills and entirely transferable?

Several interviewees were concerned that trying to subsume literacy and numeracy under the heading of ‘employability skills’, would narrow the focus of language, literacy and numeracy teaching to the workplace. Others criticised this stance as naïve, citing research that demonstrated a clear connection between literacy and numeracy performance, employability, effective functioning in life and personal self-esteem.

The NRS and training packages

The high-level review of training packages (Schofield & McDonald 2004, p.15) identifies literacy and numeracy education as among ‘specific needs not directly connected to a job outcome which are either not amenable to or fully covered by a training package approach’.

However, this review also recommends that generic skills be ‘front and centre’ in revised training packages. Although it is not made clear, there is an implication that the term *generic* is being used more broadly than within the Mayer Key Competencies or employability skills, and includes literacy and numeracy.

As previously discussed, a number of interviewees were concerned about the status of literacy and numeracy within training packages, and as approached within workplace training in practice. Several saw a role for the NRS—or the concepts it encapsulates—in helping to raise understanding of language, literacy and numeracy within workplace training. They believed it could provide the common framework and language to support the discussions about language, literacy and numeracy that obviously need to occur. A further suggestion was that specific training package units could be developed based on NRS levels, or that much more specific advice and training should be given to designers to ensure that appropriate NRS levels were assigned to language, literacy and numeracy-rich units.

However, a major stumbling block is that the NRS is not particularly accessible in its current form. Even if designers get specific and extensive training, will this have much impact on workplace trainers and training? Could a simpler version of the NRS (or better still a new LLN framework), provide a way of raising awareness for them without undermining the role of the full NRS as a reporting tool for specialists?

Even allowing for the fact that training packages are ‘not synonymous with VET provision’ (Schofield & McDonald 2004), and that the VET sector does not embrace all those in need of adult literacy and numeracy assistance, a version of the NRS could be linked more prominently to both the design and delivery of training packages. This would ensure that key concepts and messages become part of mainstream understanding.

A purpose for change

Each aim and strategy outlined above had supporters and detractors, but it should be noted that when *any* of these options was put to those interviewed, a common response was a pause, followed by a comment like, ‘Well I suppose you could, but why would you?’

This highlights the piece that is currently missing in this picture: ‘What is the purpose of change?’ There is still a decision to be made in this regard, and the question provides a lead-in to a consideration of the context within which the NRS operates.

In charting a way forward, it is useful to identify needs and priorities in adult literacy and numeracy first and then consider whether the NRS, in some form, could support the achievement of broader goals. This would provide the *raison d’être* for any significant reworking. This perspective is discussed below.

Priorities and needs in the field

The NRS cannot be viewed in isolation. In considering future directions, it needs to be placed not only within the adult literacy and numeracy field, but within the broad context of adult education and training and Australian social and workforce development. This is a project in itself. Thus, the following discussion is necessarily brief, and focuses mainly on the relevant input of contributors to this project. However, their comments provide useful insights into issues that may need to be taken into account in deciding where and how the NRS might assist with the achievement of national priorities.

Crucial issues

In designing future directions for the NRS, the following issues should be considered:

- ✧ the current lack of a high-level strategy for language, literacy and numeracy
- ✧ formal endorsement of the need to integrate language, literacy and numeracy within general adult education and training
- ✧ the recommendations of the high-level training package review
- ✧ the blurring of the distinction between the schooling sector and VET
- ✧ the influence of overseas strategies and priorities
- ✧ characteristics of, and trends affecting, the adult literacy and numeracy workforce.

Discussion

Crucial issues can be seen as stumbling blocks or barriers, but they can also provide indicators of potential opportunities.

The NRS and the development of a new literacy and numeracy strategy

The NRS will never be widely used if it remains, in effect, a stand-alone mechanism. However, it cannot be linked effectively to other strategies to achieve agreed high-level goals because there is currently no overarching strategy or set of agreed priorities to give the current (or revamped) NRS a national purpose. Nor does there appear to be any one body able to take responsibility for driving high-level change.

There are moves to frame a new national strategy for adult language, literacy and numeracy. This has grassroots support, and may be given increased political impetus if the results of the planned 2006 International Adult Literacy Survey show that Australia has made little progress in addressing adult literacy and numeracy issues. Poor results in the last survey galvanised the United Kingdom into action and a similar situation may occur here. Other countries are placing greater importance on (and increasing resources to support) adult literacy and numeracy, and this too may have a political impact in Australia.

Discussions about language, literacy and numeracy provision go beyond the NRS, but within these conversations, it will be important to ask how the NRS might be utilised within a renewed effort to raise the levels of adult literacy and numeracy competence in Australia. This could be as a formal reporting tool, as part of a professional development program, as a recognised curriculum framework, or as a basis for literacy and numeracy profiles. It all depends on the priorities identified within a high-level strategy.

It may take some time for such a strategy to be developed and endorsed, but this should not preclude a review and revision of the NRS, its reworking as a reporting tool, or its continued use in non-reporting applications. However, as long as there is no strategy, it may be difficult to make a case for funding for major professional development programs, incorporating the NRS.

Link to the professional development of the literacy and numeracy workforce

A grand plan for language, literacy and numeracy is needed, but even if it is developed, it will come to nothing without people with the skills and knowledge to make it happen on the ground. Indicators are that there is a growing need to develop the capacity of the language, literacy and numeracy workforce.

- ✧ The majority of those in the professional language, literacy and numeracy workforce are ageing, and there are few young people entering a profession that offers a limited career path, low pay and the uncertainty associated with sessional work.
- ✧ Formal professional development is limited, and heavy work demands, casualisation and high staff turnover in some contexts mean few opportunities to talk professionally with peers.
- ✧ With few new entrants to post-graduate courses, and a reduction in the availability of such courses, the trend is towards language, literacy and numeracy qualifications requiring less formal study and of lower academic status.
- ✧ A recent plan to increase the level of language, literacy and numeracy training in the new Training and Assessment Training Package was rejected by professional bodies resisting the 'lowering of standards' so one potential avenue for language, literacy and numeracy professional development had been minimised.

Clearly, the maintenance of a trained workforce requires a raft of integrated strategies, but one of these could be the provision of professional development workshops for members of the following groups. Whether they are the 'right' people for the job or not, they may well be increasingly responsible for improving adult language, literacy and numeracy skills:

- ✧ professional practitioners working as specialists in language, literacy and numeracy fields. They have post-graduate qualifications and may be involved in delivering accredited curriculum in adult basic education
- ✧ language, literacy and numeracy practitioners (often ex-teachers) with some training in language, literacy and numeracy (for example, Certificate IV in Literacy)
- ✧ vocational teachers with little or no background who are responsible for managing the language, literacy and numeracy requirements and needs within vocational certificates in their fields
- ✧ community literacy providers who may be volunteers with limited formal training (for example, Volunteer Tutoring Certificate).

These workshops would encompass more than the NRS, and provide an appropriate context within which to raise awareness of its concepts and applications. It becomes easier to envisage this having an impact if NRS concepts were to be translated into a general literacy and numeracy framework.

Link the NRS to training package reform

Training packages are now an accepted part of the VET sector. The importance of raising the language, literacy and numeracy awareness of designers and workplace trainers has been acknowledged for some time, but more as a theory than as an effective practice. In light of experience, a strategy to increase competence will have to go much further than a requirement for developers to take notice of the NRS. Once again, a national language, literacy and numeracy framework has the potential to begin a process of change by making key concepts accessible and by providing consistent standards and a common language for industry members, workplace trainers and specialist practitioners.

Use the NRS to cross-educational boundaries

There is little alignment between school-based approaches to literacy and numeracy and those adopted in vocational education and training. Worrying numbers of young people are leaving school early with low levels of literacy and numeracy skills, and many are turning to ACE for

assistance. This is raising questions about funding responsibility and accountability: the schools sector is funded to support these young people, while the ACE sector is not.

Does the schooling sector need to learn new approaches from those in adult literacy and numeracy? Is there a role for the NRS to help cross the divide? Some interviewees were keen to develop this idea further, and it is interesting that the potential of the NRS to provide a bridge has recently been raised in at least one state. On the other hand, the schooling sector has learnt a lot about conceptualising, presenting and implementing profiles, and this could be useful. Some adult literacy and numeracy experts already cross the divide regularly, and successfully, and expressed interest in assisting with the cross-fertilisation process. However, any mention of the potential to learn from the schools sector was greeted with derision by most interviewees. This is not necessarily a reason not to pursue this further, but such a strategy might need to be addressed carefully!

Table 2: Overview of possible goals, strategies and outcomes

Potential goals	Possible strategies	Outcomes
If the goal is to ...	We could ...	This may lead to intended and unintended consequences, such as
1 Maintain the status quo.	Leave things as they are.	NRS maintains low profile amongst non-users. NRS use gradually falls away as ageing practitioners retire and NRS professional development remains difficult to access. NRS fails to keep up with changes in understanding, expectations re literacy and numeracy, technology etc.
2 Increase uptake of the NRS.	Make the NRS more accessible and user-friendly for specialists. Streamline the instrument. Revise materials and simplify presentation for specialists. Develop appropriate professional development as major vehicle for increasing understanding and proficiency.	NRS formally reviewed as basis for revision. Better understanding of what works/doesn't work and why. Development process becomes vehicle to encourage discussion about language, literacy and numeracy across the field. Updated, relevant instrument and materials. Increased understanding of and respect for NRS. Reduced psychological barriers for new users. Potential to build capacity of profession through high-quality professional development that incorporates NRS. Potential to interest current non-users. Potential to start new controversies if not well managed.
... for non-specialists	Design and promote simplified version for non-practitioners. Promote through professional development.	Increased understanding of key concepts re literacy and numeracy. Increased awareness of when and why to get specialist help. Increased awareness of/legitimacy for NRS in broader VET community.
3 Push for national uptake as a reporting mechanism.	Persuade states/territories to implement. Mandate for all Commonwealth programs.	Standard reporting format to give national consistency. Widespread appreciation of NRS framework. Potential to compare range of language, literacy and numeracy-related aspects across ACE and VET. High-profile discussions of NRS. Resistance to interference; conflict, rekindling of previous disputes, even refusal to use NRS at all.

Potential goals	Possible strategies	Outcomes
If the goal is to ...	We could ...	This may lead to intended and unintended consequences, such as
4 Reframe and reposition the NRS.	Use as basis for development of Australian literacy framework with multiple applications.	New name, image and concept that better encapsulates the multi-purpose nature of the NRS. Increased acknowledgement of non-reporting applications. Vehicle for promoting professional discussion and reflection. Confusion? Loss of 'brand' loyalty?
5 Link the NRS into the mainstream.	Position NRS as part of major push to make language, literacy and numeracy 'upfront and central' in training packages. Incorporate into employability skills.	Increased understanding amongst non-specialists of language, literacy and numeracy complexity within workplace. High profile for NRS as framework for discussing, analysing, benchmarking. Years of argument and frustration trying to get initial agreement. One set of essential skills. Confusion over generic levels vs need to contextualise language.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Degree of impact and level of support

When the NRS was first released, one of the NRS developers reported feeling that it would survive if it was actually good enough. Despite widespread initial resistance, the hiatus that followed a change of government, the cancellation of programs and the lack of planned professional development, indications from this preliminary survey suggest that it has indeed survived, and proved its worth.

The NRS has provided feedback on the impact of language, literacy and numeracy funding—as was originally intended. Although there is a strong perception that it has not had the impact it should have done, there are indications that it is more firmly entrenched within the adult language, literacy and numeracy context than might at first appear. It has the support of some prominent and influential people in the field, and has become an integral part of the philosophy and methodology of some expert and highly regarded practitioners. It sits quietly behind the major adult language, literacy and numeracy curricula, and will play a role in mapping these again as they come up for re-accreditation. The NRS has also been integrated into a limited number of workplaces in its own right, while having an indirect influence through its role in WELL.

Time for review

Although once recognised as ahead of its time, the instrument now needs updating, particularly in light of developments in information and communication technology. It also needs streamlining conceptually. Although it may well have been a strategic move to give the NRS time to bed down, it is now timely to open it up for review. There is real interest. People want to talk about it. People want to critique it. Although there are doubtless those opposed to the NRS who were not interviewed, this preliminary survey suggests that the process could be stimulating for those in the field if it is specifically designed to facilitate constructive exploration and sharing of ideas.

There is no point in going ahead with the development of new applications for the NRS until a review has been completed. However, discussion of future directions and possibilities should be incorporated into the professional conversation.

The new NRS: Concepts + materials + professional development

A revision reflecting input from many expert users would provide a more accessible user-friendly tool and incorporate the best of the materials already developed. A revision should also involve a review of the rules for reporting within Commonwealth-funded programs to ensure that they do not inadvertently undermine the spirit of the NRS. At the very least, the process should produce a reporting tool that would make life easier for newcomers to the Language, Literacy and Numeracy and the Workplace English Language and Literacy programs. This in itself would be a valuable outcome in light of high staff turnover in some quarters, the lack of mentors, and the trend towards a lower qualified workforce generally—all of which may have an impact on the quality of NRS application in the future.

However, no matter how streamlined a new NRS may be, over-reliance on the value of print and web-based materials could still undermine uptake and effective application. The NRS will never be genuinely accessible—and will never therefore have the level of impact on practice that it could—without interactive professional development. This should be perceived and resourced as an integral part of any NRS ‘package’.

Specialists in the field are desperate for professional development. They want the opportunity to come together to share ideas, and learn. Workshops introducing a revitalised NRS as a framework for analysing language, literacy and numeracy (as opposed to a focus on how to use the NRS to report to funding bodies) could meet this priority need.

Built in, not bolted on

Although the NRS has gradually become interwoven into the fabric of adult literacy, it does not have a high profile, and has not become an integral part of mainstream adult education, despite recognition of the need to increase the literacy and numeracy understanding and skills within the VET sector. However, the concepts encapsulated within the NRS could be extremely useful in this regard, and could be promoted as part of the revision of training packages, where language, literacy and numeracy will doubtless play a prominent role. However, even a revitalised NRS is likely to present as ‘too much information’. A literacy and numeracy framework, based on key NRS concepts, would provide an effective awareness-raising tool. It would also be easier to promote to non-practitioners, and would be more likely to be adopted in practice.

More than a reporting tool

Since its implementation, the NRS has been ‘more than a reporting tool’. The revision of the NRS should involve the exploration of the potential for a new framework for thinking, analysing and discussing language, literacy and numeracy in multiple contexts.

Despite some people’s reservations about the term, a *framework* provides the scaffolding upon which many things can be built. The NRS has already shown that it is flexible enough to become the support structure for multiple purposes. Developing a new entity, and calling it a literacy and numeracy framework, would signal a formal recognition of multiple applications in a way that has not been possible with the NRS. It would be a more logical step than continuing to try to explain how a reporting mechanism can somehow actually be useful for many other purposes as well (an extremely convoluted process at the moment). The very fact that it is a recognised framework should make it clear that it can be used to underpin a range of different applications.

The new framework could be developed in several formats for various purposes and audiences. A full (revised) version would still offer the richness of the original NRS, while a simplified version might be used to introduce key concepts about literacy and numeracy to non-specialist audiences, and thus become an important tool in the push to improve general workplace understanding of language, literacy and numeracy. The revised NRS itself could still be used for reporting purposes, and remain the ‘national reporting system’. Despite current resistance to the idea, there may also be a place for the development of a broader national reporting system to provide relevant data on adult literacy and numeracy performance and provision, and using the NRS as a tool.

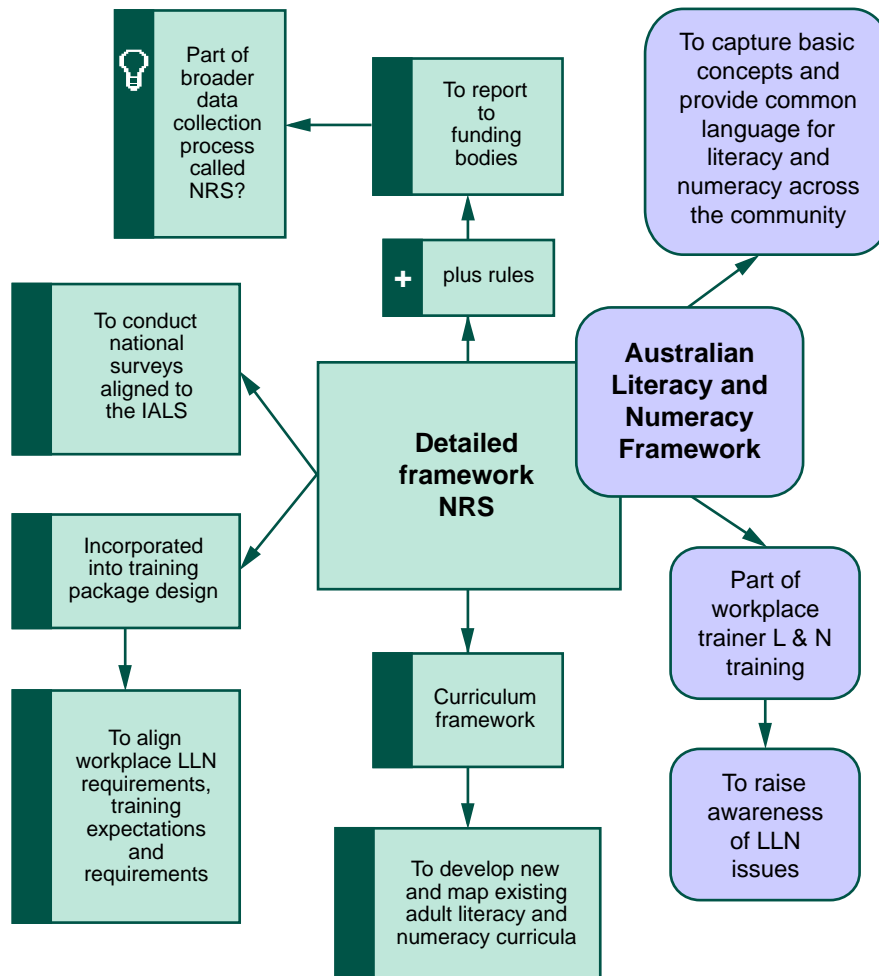
Even though there might be different versions of the framework, the crucial element would be that they would all be built on the same foundations, using the same terms and levels. Besides maintaining consistency, this in itself would build greater understanding and appreciation of language, literacy and numeracy concepts and issues, and provide a link between specialists, workplace trainers and industry. The formal launch of such a framework could be a vehicle for much needed capacity building within the adult literacy and numeracy field.

A literacy and numeracy framework might also be more easily placed ‘behind’ the employability skills to show what the enabling skills of language, literacy and numeracy look like, and how they

may impact on an individual's competency levels in, for example, communication or problem-solving. However, this would still need to be managed carefully to avoid confusion over differences in numbers of levels and degrees of detail.

The role of the NRS as a reporting mechanism should not be discounted in a push to broaden its application or appeal. It still has an important part to play in providing useful data to funding bodies, and in demonstrating the positive impact of training provision on individuals and workplaces.

Figure 2: The roles of an Australian literacy and numeracy framework



Recommendations

- ✧ Continue to use the NRS as a key tool in reporting on adult literacy and numeracy performance.
- ✧ Review and revise the current NRS. Develop a package incorporating the instrument itself, a revised set of rules for use for reporting within Commonwealth programs, a set of user-friendly support materials, and professional development activities designed for specialist users. Design the review process as a vehicle for professional development in its own right. Use it to further explore a range of options for future directions for the NRS and build a sense of ownership of the outcomes.
- ✧ Explore the potential to use the key concepts and structure underpinning a revised NRS as the basis for the development of a literacy and numeracy framework (with a new name) which could be presented in different formats and levels of complexity for a range of audiences and purposes. This option could also be incorporated into the proposed review.

- ✧ Review the arrangement for provision of NRS training and ongoing mentoring within the LLNP and WELL. Consider ways of funding and delivering ongoing language, literacy and numeracy training to other target groups, for example, through Industry Training Councils and professional bodies.
- ✧ If a new language, literacy and numeracy framework is developed, promote it through interactive professional development programs tailored for different groups to enhance their understanding of language, literacy and numeracy.
- ✧ Devise a strategy to ensure that a new framework (or failing that, the revised NRS) plays a key role in determining the language, literacy and numeracy aspects of revised training packages.

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Appendix 1 Project contributors

The project team would like to thank all those who gave so freely of their ideas, insights and time to assist with this exercise, and also those who indicated their willingness to contribute, but who were unable to do so due to time constraints.

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Appendix 2

NRS Question Framework

A. Background

A1	Name
A2	State
A3	Current position/role
A4	Literacy/numeracy background; years of experience, qualifications. With which groups?
A5	Experience with NRS – settings, # years
A6	Drivers. Why did you start using the NRS? or barriers. Why don't you use the NRS?
A7	NRS training. How did you learn how to use the NRS?

B. The NRS Instrument

B1	What is your understanding of what the NRS is for, and who is it for?
B2	Is it appropriate for this (these) purposes(s)? i.e. Does it do this job?
B3	How do you (have you) used it?
B4	What do you see as its strengths?
B5	Issues with use?
B6	Is it theoretically sound? Relevant? Need for critique?
B7	Connection to/comparison with IALS?
B8	Does it do any good? Any harm?

C. The NRS as a Formal Reporting Mechanism

C1	Background knowledge and experience in use of NRS in this context?
C2	Strengths of current arrangements?
C3	Issues?
C4	Impact on various stakeholders – learners, teacher, organisation, funder
C5	Who are stakeholders in an effective NRS? Who do you see as the priority stakeholder? Who should be?
C6	Resources needed. Time/cost/expertise.
C7	How are data used? Is it telling people what they need to know?
C8	Is it trusted/trustworthy? Is it fair? Does it do any good? Does it do any harm?

D. Requirements for effective use of NRS

D1	What is needed for current NRS to be effective?
D2	What background knowledge and formal qualifications do users need if they are to use the NRS effectively for different purposes? Minimum training/support required?
D3	Current training specifically in NRS What is available in your state? For whom? Accessibility? Frequency? Relevance?
D4	Best way to develop an understanding of the NRS? To become proficient? Should anyone be able to use it? Why/why not? Implications?

E. Non-reporting applications

E1	Who is using the NRS outside of LLNP, WELL and why?
E2	How is it used?
E3	Effectiveness for such purposes? Perception of greatest usefulness?
E4	Which learner groups does it 'suit'? Issues for any groups?
E5	If not used for a specific group, what tools are used?

F. NRS: Exploring future applications

F1	What do you see as the most important issues and trends in adult literacy and numeracy? In adult vocational and/or community education in general?
F2	The NRS and training packages or in employability skills
F3	The NRS as a national framework for discussing LLN – not specifically as a reporting system at all e.g. as set of national profiles.
F4	The NRS – potential for different versions for different purposes and audiences
F5	Should the NRS be simplified so anyone could use it?
F6	Should the NRS be 'national'? If so what does this mean and how might it be effected?
F7	Does it need a name change, and if so, what should it be called?

Appendix 3 Snapshots

The following snapshots provide a comparison of two different practitioner perspectives on the NRS.

Practitioner operating in the WELL program

I am not a literacy teacher. I teach communications, not how to read and write, and I run somewhat short focused, specialised courses on things like how to run team meetings, or improving food safety, not literacy.

This interviewee believes the WELL program itself is invaluable and does make a difference to people's skills. She also thinks it is reasonable for the funding body to expect some accountability, but she can see no benefit from using the NRS for this.

It's not that it is impossible to use when describing the language and literacy requirements of team meetings, but I can't see the point. It's just jumping through hoops.

Although she is quicker now that she is more confident, she reports that it, 'used to take hours to fill in the forms'. She believes it might make more sense if the NRS were used to describe progress, but at the same time, doubts that it would be possible to measure much progress over a 20-hour course.

It doesn't justify the amount of time it takes to learn how to use it, or the effort you have to put in to fill in the forms.

She can, however, see potential for the NRS within a professional development program as a language for discussing people's skills, but she would rather see more effort put into the sort of reading and writing requirements for workplace competencies, and does not see a great role for the NRS in this.

Her thoughts were echoed by a member of an industry training body who described the use of the NRS within WELL as 'overkill'.

Numeracy specialist working with learners in the LLNP

I find the NRS very useful now, but new trainers have a devil of a job with it, and I did too. It took 3–4 months to get familiar with it, and I found it tedious having to keep evidence on everything. But having to use it meant I was forced to get familiar with it, and now I find it does actually help me to see where someone is functioning in each area.

This practitioner believes one of the keys to effectiveness is making time to write up responses to the pre-training assessment as quickly as possible—'the further you get from the assessment the more difficult it is to keep focused'. She knows that some trainers cannot do this, often because their organisations do not have effective processes to support this. She felt her organisation was successful because it had good systems in place, having developed its own pre-assessment tasks mapped to the NRS, and internal processes to support trainers in keeping good records. However, it still took time to do the thinking and the paperwork, and she was currently struggling to find a way to manage her increased workload in this regard. Her own efforts in promoting the services of her not-for-profit organisation had led to a significant increase in client numbers, but the time available for administration had not changed at all.

The National Reporting System (NRS) was developed to report the outcomes of English language, literacy and numeracy provision in Australia's vocational education and training and adult and community education sectors, and in labour market programs. Since its introduction, however, the NRS has been used as more than a reporting tool. It has also been used for setting standards and for curricular and assessment purposes. This publication, based on a literature review and interviews, examines the strengths and weaknesses of the NRS and identifies options for more in-depth exploration and development in a full review of the NRS. This scoping study finds there is considerable support for the NRS, but that it needs to be updated.

NCVER is an independent body responsible for collecting, managing, analysing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education and training.

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