

**Evaluation of Common Assessment in the Literacy Field:
A Case Study of the Educational Essential Skills Assessment**

Final Report

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June 28, 2010

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Note: It should be noted that the Learning Networks of Ontario are not funded to provide centralized assessment. This is currently a fee-for-service model. As such, providing centralized assessment is a capacity building venture and does not impact or change the focus of the funded services of networks.

1.0 Introduction and Context

Assessments are tools that sample a person's knowledge in order to develop a pathway for the planning of learning. Many factors affect the outcomes of assessment. Some of these -- such as reliability (being consistent for different people) and validity (measuring what it is intended to measure) -- pertain to the assessment tool itself. Other components pertain to the context in which the tool is used. Is the assessor both knowledgeable and neutral? Is the pathway recommended in the assessment actually feasible given constraints of time, budget and other factors?

This report focuses on the second set of components, those that go beyond the actual tool itself. In particular, it focuses on common or centralized assessments in the literacy field, defined as assessments administered by a trained assessor who has a neutral interest in a client's potential pathways. Using the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) as a case study, it examines the strengths and weaknesses of common assessment in Ontario.

EESA is an assessment tool developed by the Adult Basic Education Association of Hamilton-Wentworth (ABEA). The assessment is individualized, indicates both the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) and the Essential Skills (ES)¹ levels the client requires to achieve their goal, and provides an Educational Action Plan to move a client from a current level of skill to a required level of skill for their training and employment goal.

In 2009, the EESA was piloted in several regions of Ontario to explore the concept of centralized assessment, and to expand an already identified process and practice to a broader region. The target audience was clients accessing Second Career (SC) and Ontario Skills development (OSD). A recommendation in the first report on the pilot project stated:

More research is required to determine the full impact of the benefits of centralized assessment--its efficiency, the value of having streamlined

¹ Essential Skills are the skills needed for work, learning and life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change. The nine Essential Skills are reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, continuous learning, thinking skills, and computer use.

processes and the value of a consistent approach to the assessment of functional skills. ... Further exploration and study will be required to assess the suitability of centralized assessment for these groups in regions outside of Hamilton.²

This report details research that seeks to fulfill this recommendation.

2.0 Overview of Research

This research had three primary objectives to

- examine and evaluate the value of implementing independent, common assessment services, with a specific focus on the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA)
- provide a preliminary assessment regarding whether an independent, centralized service is viable in all regions of Ontario
- report findings of the research, including recommendations

There were three components of the research: a general literature review using select key words, interviews with executive directors of the regional literacy networks, and interviews with community partners already using the EESA process in Hamilton.

Literature review. The literature reviewed consisted of an electronic search of major academic databases of peer-reviewed articles from January 2000 to present via Scholar's Portal. The following key words were used alone and in combination with each other: assessment, evaluation, educational, literacy, common/neutral/centralized/third party, adult basic education/adult learning. In addition, relevant websites were searched, including Ontario Literacy Coalition, ABC Canada, National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), Phi Delta Kappa, and Movement for Canadian Literacy. Finally, several documents were obtained from Ontario literacy networks.

Interviews with Ontario regional literacy networks. Between May 10 and June 3, 2010, telephone interviews were held with 14 executive directors or coordinators

²Adult Basic Education Association, *The Central Ontario Educational Essential Skills Assessment Pilot Project Report: Supporting the Pathway to Successful Re-Training* (Hamilton: ABEA, June 2009), p. 16.

of literacy networks (listed in Appendix A). The interview template consisted of six open-ended questions (included in this report as Appendix C).

Interviews with service providers. Telephone interviews were held with five service providers in Hamilton, all of whom had experience using EESA (listed in Appendix B). Interviews were based on a template of six open-ended questions, five of which were the same questions used for the literacy networks (see Appendix C).

In addition, interviews were conducted with two Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) staff with experience in the literacy field and familiarity with EESA.

3.0 Literature Review

The Scholar's Portal database search yielded very few relevant articles. As such, this literature review is for the most part based on several reports produced by the public and not for profit sectors.

Even so, the literature was scant. One article decried the lack of comprehensive and reliable information available to track participation in adult learning in Canada, and noted that what does exist "does not paint a very positive picture."³ According to this source, there are few established benchmarks, little systematic follow-up, and a lack of consistency and collaboration in the collection and dissemination of data by institutions and organizations providing adult learning programs. The recent work of University of Glasgow Education Professor Dr. Ralf St. Clair was informative -- including not only his written work but also his presentations on assessment made to the Learning Networks of Ontario - SouthWest Workshop in April 2010 -- though more from a conceptual point of view rather than based on relevant data.

This review covers some basic findings about assessment, including what is assessment, types of assessment, common assessment, and the benefits of combining various assessment tools.

³Praxis Research and Consulting. *Mapping the Field: A Framework for Measuring, Monitoring and Reporting on Adult Learning in Canada*. Working document prepared for The Monitoring and Reporting Group of the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre – Canadian Council on Learning (Halifax, June 2007), p. 50.

3.1 What is assessment?

According to MTCU, assessment is:

the gathering and analysis of information about the abilities, needs, interests, learning styles, and achievements of learners.... Assessment tools and methods are the formal or informal means through which literacy practitioners gather valid, reliable, and relevant information about the progress of learners.⁴

The Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) views assessment as a fundamental component of literacy programming.⁵ As presented by St. Clair, “Assessment tries to capture what people actually learn in a given situation” – what progress they have made. He goes on to state that assessments must be collected and collated in a systematic way, and they must be “carefully tailored to the expected learning and the context in which [they] will be used.”⁶

It is helpful to differentiate evaluation and assessment in the literacy field by conceiving of evaluation as looking at program level indicators and assessment as focusing on individual learners. Assessments can be used in different ways.

Initial assessments could be used as

diagnostic tools, to help the learner and educator get some sense of where to start. **Formative assessments** can help to check that learning is on track, or to find out if some instructional approaches are more effective than others for that learner. **Summative assessment** tries to capture the entire span of learning. Assessments can also be paired, as in pre-assessment and post-assessment, to provide evidence of learning over time.⁷

Formative assessment is the subject of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) publication *Teaching, Learning and Assessment for Adults: Improving Foundation Skills Source* (2008) which examines programs for adults with low language, literacy and numeracy skills. Another report mentions further types of assessment: authentic, diagnostic, standardized, and competency-based.⁸

⁴MTCU, *Literacy Ontario: Common assessment in the literacy and basic skills program* (Toronto: Literacy and Basic Skills Section, Workplace Preparation Branch, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2000), p. 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ralf St. Clair, *The dilemmas of accountability: Exploring the issues of accountability in adult literacy through three case studies* (ABC-Canada Literacy Foundation, March 2009), p. 4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pat Campbell, *Student Assessment in Adult Basic Education: A Canadian Snapshot* (February 2006).

The literature also distinguishes between “assessment of learning” and “assessment for learning.” Whereas the former focuses what learning had already occurred, the latter is “the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.”⁹

3.2 What is common assessment?

Common assessment refers to the use of assessment tools and approaches that are based upon the common language of learning outcomes. With common assessment, learners are able to move among service provider agencies without being unnecessarily reassessed. Also, it “facilitates communication about the achievements of learners with other stakeholders of the Literacy and Basic Skills Program, such as training programs and employers.”¹⁰

In 2007 and 2008, Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo-Wellington partnered with College Boreal, Literacy Link South Central, Sudbury Catholic District School Board, and Thames Valley District School Board to investigate the use of common assessment in two areas of the province. The project collected detailed information on the experience of 42 assessors in 41 agencies conducting 754 assessments over a period of approximately four months. It focused on four assessment tools -- TOWES G2, CAMERA, PDQ and OSP Check In - all of which are based on the federal Essential Skills. The final report provides indicators as to the most appropriate use of the tools for learners in the three key pathways - employment, further education and training, and independence. The report’s authors assert that the project “is a basis for moving forward and beginning the development of common assessment practice and policy across the adult education sector.”¹¹

3.3 What is centralized assessment?

Centralized assessment refers to a model in which one agency in a region delivers the assessment. That agency may also be the first point of contact for a client. Assessments may take place at the agency itself or at another location, for example, at the service provider location.

⁹ Helen C. Barrett, *Electronic Portfolios as Digital Stories of Deep Learning: Emerging Digital Tools to Support Reflection in Learner-Centered Portfolios*, draft (2004), p.4.

¹⁰ MTCU, p. 7.

¹¹ Project Read, p. 20.

3.4 The benefits of variety

This review focuses as much as possible on the merits of common assessment as opposed to the characteristics and ideal qualities of actual assessment tools and approaches. However, it is worth noting the agreement within the literature that every assessment tool has its strengths and weaknesses, and that a “one size fits all” approach may not work for all learners.¹² As stated in the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) report on common assessment:

The ability to use a range of assessment approaches and tools has clear benefits for the learner and for the LBS [Literacy and Basic Skills] agency. Foremost among these benefits is the capacity to tailor the assessment plan to the nature of the LBS agency and to the goals and needs of the individual learner.¹³

According to St. Clair, standardized assessment tools have certain benefits that are not the same as those of individualized tools. It is easier to compare results of standardized assessments, but individualized tools have more educational usefulness for learners. This underscores the need for a variety of assessment tools, to fit the needs of the learner as well as the service provider.

Though the research did not include Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA), the Project Read findings and recommendations are nonetheless useful for anyone thinking about central assessment in Ontario. Most notably, the research found that most jurisdictions employed a variety of assessment tools to accommodate the variety of learners and settings and viewed this as desirable. Assessors confirmed that having tool options for a variety of learners/clients in a range of settings is important, that is, a tool kit approach. The authors cite M. Taylor as stating: “Just as no single teaching strategy is effective for all learners in all situations, no single assessment instrument or process is adequate in providing quality information for all purposes.”¹⁴

The literature was not specific but seemed to refer to the benefits of variety in terms of having a variety of assessment options. The implication was that each option would be contained in a separate tool. However, it must also be noted that a variety of types of assessment may be included in a single assessment tool. Returning to St. Clair’s discussion of standardization v. individualization, for example, it might be possible to have both elements contained within a single tool.

¹² See, for example, MTCU, St. Clair presentation 2010, and Project Read.

¹³ MTCU, p. 6.

¹⁴ Project Read, p. 21.

4.0 Findings from Regional Networks

To obtain their views on the benefits and drawbacks of using common assessment in Ontario, representatives of 14 regional literacy networks in Ontario were interviewed by telephone. The findings presented in this section are based on responses to a common template of open-ended interview questions. The template is included as Appendix C to this report.

4.1 Experience with EESA

All of the networks had participated in Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) training, but only a minority of regions had actually delivered this assessment. In several cases, the networks' boards of directors were not supportive of EESA. In other cases, the lack of experience with EESA stemmed from the lack of resources (both time and money) to successfully market it to local service providers. As a result, there had been little demand from service providers. Several interviewees mentioned the lack of clear messaging from Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) managers about covering the costs of the assessments, resulting in some confusion among service providers.

In a few cases, networks were already using other assessments or interviews that were viewed as serving a similar purpose to EESA. For the most part, executive directors were very informed about EESA and supportive of it, but they faced barriers to seeing it implemented in their regions.

With the Employment Ontario Transformation occurring at the same time as this project, employment agencies were uncertain of their future. This in turn, resulted in uncertainty of becoming involved in a centralized assessment process in communities where this did not exist previously.

4.2 Differences between EESA-type assessments and those given by delivery agencies

Some network directors were not familiar with assessment given by employment service and Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies at intake, throughout delivery, and on exit. In most cases, these vary from agency to agency.

Directors who were familiar with other assessments stated that, aside from asking about formal education, they almost always lacked an educational

component. Some Employment Services do address literacy, but respondents were not sure how this was done.

EESA, in contrast, is more in-depth, honing in on clients' goals and then identifying their current levels with respect to Essential Skills. The customization and specificity of EESA, and its step by step approach that even identifies potential learning challenges, was viewed as a unique approach. It provides for a type of bridging or preparation step that can help adult learners succeed when returning to school.

In one region, networks actually did a project that examined the processes followed by employment services. They found that employment service agencies, if they used assessment at all, relied on assessment tools that did not fully measure literacy and essential skills levels. They were more likely to be giving Canadian Achievement Test (CAT) and other employment readiness tests that lacked any literacy component. As a result, the network developed a literacy awareness guide for employment resources centres. There is evidence that the guide is being used.

Respondents spoke of the gulf between literacy and employment services, stemming from how these had been organized previously at the federal level. Now that these programs are all funded within the same provincial ministry, silos are being broken down, but slowly in some cases. The legacy of the former system is that former federal employees focus was employment rather than literacy. Time and training would be needed to increase awareness on how literacy fits within the employment picture. It was felt that support from Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) was required to motivate employment service providers to integrate literacy concerns into their practices. A related challenge is that high turnover in the employment services field creates a constant need to go out and re-educate about literacy.

4.3 Benefits of centralized assessment

Directors identified a number of benefits of having a centralized assessment. The benefits most commonly identified were impartiality and efficiency.

Impartial knowledge. Almost every respondent stated that a benefit of centralized assessment was neutrality, impartiality, credibility, or transparency. It was felt that having assessments conducted at the network level increased their legitimacy within MTCU and even among learners because networks did not have any vested interest in sending clients to certain services. Referrals were viewed as being more transparent. Moreover, the tool itself presented only options for services rather than recommending specific service providers.

Similarly, it was felt that networks may be aware of more options for learners than would the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) providers: they have a broad knowledge of a wider range of programs as opposed to knowing one program really well. Networks are more likely to be aware of changes to programs than would delivery agencies. In the words of one interviewee, "That's the biggest selling point we have in the community. We are a one stop information source for clients because we can direct people appropriately."

Efficiency. Assessments such as the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) were viewed as preventing wasted investment in costly skills development options where clients are unlikely to succeed. In the words of one interviewee:

Right now, we have a glass ceiling where people with literacy challenges cannot go any further. Often, they don't know where they are starting, don't know their own skill level. This creates a revolving door syndrome: They are in and out of different services and jobs.... If a client knows what they need, it helps us all. Satisfied and successful clients mean successful programs, and the success of all other stakeholders.

Respondents felt that the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) tool provided a very specific pathway to clients and service providers. This was seen as exceptional among assessments, and of great benefit to clients as well as practitioners. One interviewee noted, "It's very specific to the goals of the client and identifies the training they need to get to that goal." Also, EESA identifies potential learning challenges to inform learning and training plan development.

Another aspect of efficiency identified was that service providers would have one point of contact for assessments.

Other benefits of centralized assessment were identified by multiple respondents:

Timeliness. The assessment reports are timely and completed quickly. The timeliness is good for clients and service providers. Reliance on a tool such as EESA may also reduce wait list times for Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) services (because intake assessments are already completed).

Works well in the context of large layoffs, particularly in situations where many people may have been in the workforce a long time and lack a strong educational background.

Consistency. Service providers become very familiar with the standardized nature of the report format. Once they get used to it, it is easy to understand and they can find what they need quickly.

Broad view of trends. Centralized assessments make it easier to identify client trends. This is a good fit because networks are responsible for community planning, and centralized assessment results can be compiled into data for this purpose. Programs are often not interested in data in this way.

Potential to market to larger audiences, beyond Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU). Could be marketed to Ontario Works (OW), Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), employers, even to individuals not associated with an Employment Ontario (EO) program. (One network already works intensively with OW on a common assessment.)

Proprietary. Comes with training and back-up supports.

Ensures that LBS concerns are addressed, and that literacy is part of the very first plan written for someone. The plan will move with them through their steps, and literacy is never left out.

Showcases the “value added” provided by the networks. It provides a unique analysis that includes a concrete starting point, and it does not replicate any other intake or assessments. In the context of EO transformation, centralized assessment can be used outside the context of Second Career, e.g., the value of getting a neutral opinion to reinforce own perspective.

4.4 Drawbacks of centralized assessment

When asked about the drawbacks of having an impartial assessment process such as the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) in place, almost every respondent identified the issue of **cost**. Most respondents felt that the cost of EESA was reasonable given the results. However, service providers were balking at having to pay for assessments and did not always see the value added. Concerns about cost pertained to resistance from Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) and employment service providers who were not used to paying for assessments as well as lack of clarity about discretionary funds available to providers to cover such costs. As stated earlier in this paper, the timing of the project with the EO transformation was an issue. Focus of employment agencies had to be on the transformation; uncertainty of their future positions resulted in a lack of focus regarding expansion or even the ability to develop new partnerships.

Numerous respondents felt that Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) should better inform service providers that discretionary funds could be

used to cover the costs of EESA and ensure consistent clear messages are given in each area. Others stated that funds did not exist in their regions to cover the costs of centralized assessment. This finding highlights inconsistencies among the regions, or at a minimum inconsistent messaging by MTCU from region to region. One respondent stated that service providers felt that MTCU agencies should not have to pay other MTCU agencies for assessments.

A related concern was that of **changing relationships with service providers**. Under a fee for service model such as EESA, networks must negotiate with various service providers around the cost and location of assessments. Written agreements would have to be reached. Some respondents felt that this required resources that were simply beyond the means of a small network. Similarly, some regions have a large number of service providers, and it would be not be feasible to connect with all of them.

The above two concerns pertain to the **difficulty of securing “buy in” from service providers**. Related concerns identified include hesitancy among service providers to give away an opportunity to get to know their clients to a third party. For service providers with a specialized client group -- e.g., immigrants, Francophones, disabled persons -- there are fears that a third party may not be as adept at handling the unique needs of the group.

Another drawback identified by multiple respondents **was capacity or staffing issues, namely how to maintain capacity and quality when demand is inconsistent**. Some of the networks have only a few staff members and lack the capacity to hire staff dedicated solely to assessment. Finding independent assessors who are willing to work sporadically is a challenge. (Retired Literacy and Basic Skills people were identified as ideal candidates.) It was stated that even persons trained to administer the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) may not really be qualified to do the assessment. This could be more of a concern in remote locations where there is little supervision. In sum, these are quality control issues.

Three respondents noted another potential drawback: the presence of centralized assessment **could entail an additional step for clients**. Service providers will continue to have their own intake process, which means that clients will have to provide some basic information about themselves one more time. Going to another location for an assessment also does not seem to fit with the new “one stop shop” model promoted by Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU). One respondent stated that local service providers were better located for clients than are the networks. (In some regions, however, assessments are provided on site so that a client does not have to make a trip to a separate location.)

Other points raised were that centralized assessment **distracted networks from their primary role of program support**. Networks would become service providers, and this was too far outside their desired scope. One respondent stated:

EESA is admittedly about coordination, but it is direct work with clients rather than program-focused which is what we usually do. It spreads us too thin and takes us away from our primary role. If we were going to expand, I would like to look more at the coordination piece rather than assessment.

One respondent felt that service providers would “lose control” of the process if centralized assessment became the norm.

Finally, one respondent felt that assessments are too formal for persons with literacy needs. It appears too much like “test taking” and can intimidate adult learners, especially those who struggled in school. This respondent felt that a more informal interview was a better option.

4.5 Regional challenges to adopting a third party assessment tool

The most common response to this question focused on **geography**. Numerous network directors either had experienced or foresaw difficulties in trying to cover the large geographic areas and regions marked by rural-urban mix with competent assessors. Even some of the regions characterized by large population bases cover considerable territory and would require significant time investment to travel across the region, particularly if an assessor used transit. One respondent spoke of the need for a larger assessor pool because not all assessors were willing to travel. Another spoke of the rural-urban divide in Ontario, noting that rural areas are generally underserved compared to large urban areas. This respondent felt that rural areas were underserved with regard to literacy supports as well.

Other respondents spoke of the lack of consistent messaging hampered by changeover of TCU staff, the EO transformation and in some cases lack of support for centralized assessment by their MTCU field representatives (reasons for this varied and included uncertainty to delivery of centralized assessment in larger geographical areas). In some cases, high turnover of field representatives prohibited the establishment of bonds with service providers and networks. Respondents spoke of the need for doing the type of outreach with ministry staff prior to training assessors. It was felt that advance outreach to ministry

representatives would better allow assessors to start working while their training was still fresh.

Some respondents identified **volume** as a challenge to centralized assessment. In some cases, the sheer volume of assessments required did not leave time for networks to build capacity in this area. In other cases, there was not enough demand. An absence of large layoffs, no action centres, and the presence of a highly educated workforce with relatively few adult learners worked to keep demand low.

One network director stated that the local employment service providers resented the funding for the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) coming to the network rather than to service providers, and that the network decided how much to pay the assessor. Literacy and Basic Skills delivery agencies were not as keen on the concept of centralized assessment once they realized that their agency would not benefit financially from EESA.

One respondent stated that Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) providers had been known to modify the pathways recommended by the EESA assessor. LBS agencies did not always agree with the assessment results, and therefore did not follow them.

A final concern related to the **needs of specialized populations** such as Francophones, deaf, and deaf-blind which are greater in number in some regions than others. If translators had to be hired to work alongside assessors, costs would be prohibitive.

5.0 Findings from Service Providers

Research also included interviews with five Hamilton area service providers who have experience using the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) and other forms of common assessment. The findings presented here are based on responses to a common template of six open-ended interview questions (found in Appendix C), five of which were the same questions asked to regional literacy networks. The sixth question asked whether the assessment process helped move clients forward on their pathways to training, to upgrading, or to employment.

5.1 Association with EESA

Five organizations in Hamilton have been using EESA, though their experience differs in terms of volume (ranging from 1 to 30 assessments a month). Some have been using EESA since its inception in 2007, and before that utilized a different assessment tool offered by the Adult Basic Education Association of Hamilton-Wentworth. Two are visited by an itinerant assessor so that assessments can be completed in a location clients already know and, in one case, where childminding is available.

Most of the agencies providing EESA receive funding from the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU). With the creation and growth of Second Career, the usage of this assessment tool increased as well. Now that Second Career is changing and the initial influx of clients has declined and also that the EO transformation is now moving forward but not yet fully operational in July 2010, the number of EESAs has dropped. Due to these funding changes, some organizations will stop offering this service to clients.

5.2 Differences between EESA-type assessments and those given by delivery agencies

EESA assessments were viewed as being very in-depth, even too in-depth for some clients. In contrast, employment services tend to be more focused on employment readiness not academic functioning. Some employment services do assess employment readiness through a skills inventory, tests of personality type, or a survey of labour market awareness, but they do not normally focus on literacy.

Clients may be referred to the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) through self identification, or also if they have difficulty filling out forms or responding to written communication.

5.3 Benefits of centralized assessment

Respondents noted that centralized assessment offered more choices to clients, because it was not assessing for specific programs. For some participants it works well, but for others it is not really necessary as “we already know where they are headed.” They felt that the impartiality of the assessor benefitted the clients, and also that it added legitimacy to the assessment.

The quality of the assessor was also mentioned as important: employment service providers do not generally have any staff with literacy expertise. It was felt that assessors brought in a different skill set, and that this higher level of

expertise around education, academic and literacy complemented the skills of employment counsellors.

Respondents who received itinerant services strongly supported them and viewed them as very helpful, even essential, to client progress. As one respondent noted: “We bring services to the clients in an environment where they are already comfortable. That eliminates a barrier. Normally they won’t bother to go [to a new location for services].” They stated that clients liked the one stop shopping for most services: they could get answers to their questions, get an assessment, and visit an employment counsellor all in one visit.

Other respondents noted that centralized assessment helped the employment service provider keep track of the kind of information the client has used. They also liked that EESA provides service providers a clear pathway to follow with the client. They liked the concise recommendations and action plans. Regarding EESA in particular, it was felt that it was more objective about what clients need, their occupation and their goals. Compared to academic institutions whose assessments are based on academic success and not based on occupational need, EESA was viewed as more practical.

Finally, respondents stated that centralized assessment such as EESA can save clients time and money in the long run – because they may not actually need the upgrading they thought they needed. Noting the cost of EESA, several respondents stated that it was an investment, and that it provided cost and time effective options. At least one respondent stated that EESA actually reduced government costs because of the increased success in terms of course completion and overall client achievement.

5.4 Drawbacks of centralized assessment

Cost was cited as an issue by service providers, especially for service providers not funded through the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU). Though most felt that the costs were justified, service providers always operate under budgetary constraints. MTCU organizations have a limited budget for diagnostic assessment. It was also stated that many clients who are not affiliated with MTCU or Ontario Works would benefit from taking the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA), but that there were no funds to pay for their assessments.

Another drawback voiced was that EESA is the only literacy assessment tool offered in Hamilton. It was felt that not all clients needed the entire assessment, but that service providers were not able to choose a less intensive assessment option and that, in any case, they did not have the expertise to know whether or

not the full EESA was warranted in the first place. Another service provider stated that the organization did not take time to find out about other assessment options because EESA had been in place for several years. These comments speak to uncertainty as to what other tools may exist but also the time involved in seeking out appropriate tools. Service providers are left to trust the “literacy experts” to deliver the best options for assessment tools.

Some service providers sent clients to the Adult Basic Education Association (ABEA) for assessments as opposed to having the ABEA assessor visit their site. One of these expressed concern that sending clients to ABEA created another step for clients, one that seems out of place in a “one stop shop” model.

A final concern expressed by service providers was that third party assessments offer a “one size fits all approach” that is not suited to the unique circumstances of their clients. It was felt that service providers had more “hands on” experience and were more in tune with the needs of their clients.

5.5 Role of assessment in helping move clients forward on their pathways

Without exception, service providers felt that EESA was helpful in moving clients forward on a particular pathway. One noted that the linkages to school board service providers had been very helpful. According to service providers, using EESA helped them ensure that clients were sent in the right direction the first time. They liked the clear assessments and educational action plans, and the resulting ability to map out a complete plan for clients. One service provider noted: “Yes, clients were able to get clear goals and objectives, and to know their levels especially in math and English.”

On the whole, service providers expressed the view that the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) could benefit many more individuals beyond the current client base, including recent high school graduates who struggled in school and have not developed any career path. It was felt that EESA helped Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) clients, but that many others who might benefit either did not know about it or would not be able to afford it.

6.0 Key Findings and Recommendations

The interviews described above yielded a rich pool of responses that contain many valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of centralized

assessment as embodied in EESA. Despite the diversity of responses, there are some key themes that are readily identifiable from the research.

6.1 Most significant benefits of centralized assessment

Though respondents spoke equally about benefits and drawbacks, the benefits identified can be summed up more concisely. Research identified several key benefits of centralized assessment

- impartial assessors who have expertise in literacy, knowledge of available resources and next steps, and no vested interest in a particular service - (this benefit was identified by almost everyone interviewed for the project)
- assessment results and follow up plans that empowered clients to move forward with a clear, feasible plan, going to the right place the first time, thereby preventing wasted steps and efficiently using limited resources
- standardized reporting format that becomes familiar to service providers who can quickly find what they need
- centralized data that enables networks to identify client trends at a high level - this in turn contributes to their ability to be effective community planners

6.2 Most significant drawbacks to centralized assessment

In terms of drawbacks to centralized assessment, almost all responses pertained to difficulties with implementation as opposed to criticisms of centralized assessment itself. With regard to the latter, the principal criticism of the actual assessment was that a single assessment tool may not be appropriate for all client groups. It was expressed that service providers and clients should have the option to choose from a variety of tools in order to select the one that most fits their needs. In the cases of specialized client groups -- e.g., immigrants, Francophones, disabled persons – this may mean using a variety of tools modifying the tool or having an assessor who has experience working with specialized populations.

With regard to the implementation of centralized assessment, the following difficulties were identified by respondents.

- A. The costs of centralized assessment to service providers who, even if the costs are reasonable, have not traditionally paid for assessments and have limited budgets to do so.
- B. From the network perspective, hesitancy to change existing relationships with service providers. The negotiations and agreements required under a fee for service model such as the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) seemed beyond the comfort zones and resource levels of some network directors. In regions with dozens of service providers, it is not feasible for networks to connect with all of them.
- C. Quality control, namely how to maintain capacity and quality when demand for common assessment is inconsistent. Finding independent assessors who are willing to work sporadically is a challenge, and assessors need to work regularly to maintain a high level of quality in their assessments. Another quality control issue is result of the size of the network area - maintaining quality control is difficult in larger geographical regions.
- D. The large physical area covered by some networks, especially in regions with smaller populations, requires significant investment of time and transportation costs. Even some of the regions characterized by large population bases cover considerable territory.
- E. The additional step, and often travel, required of clients on top of existing service provider intake processes that runs counter to the “one stop shop” approach being promoted under the new Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) model. A solution to this is to take the service to the client.
- F. That focusing on assessment distracted networks from their primary role of program support. Some networks directors and boards of directors did not wish to add service provision to the scope of activities they already managed.

In brief, the drawbacks of common assessment identified in this research were much more focused on difficulties with implementation rather than the idea or principle of centralized assessment.

The findings from the research suggest many possible recommendations. These recommendations are aimed at two stakeholder groups: to the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) as the principal funder of assessment

in Ontario and to the Adult Basic Education Association of Hamilton-Wentworth (ABEA), the organization that developed the Educational Essential Skills Assessment (EESA) and trains assessors around the province.

6.3 Recommendations for MTCU

In view of the value that the EESA offers to the literacy and employment services field, it is recommended that MTCU devote resources to better supporting use of EESA. This could be achieved by the following (not in order of importance):

- A. Ensuring that government field representatives clarify with their local service providers the conditions for use of discretionary funds available to cover the costs of assessment. The launch of transformation funding on August 1, 2010 provides an ideal time to clarify budgetary and other matters of interest to service providers. The message needs to be understood by everyone and then clarified so that there is consistency in the message being delivered.
- B. Providing supports to ensure that EESA can be offered on site for local service providers. Barrired clients benefit from co-location of services, and it is also in keeping with the “one stop shop” idea of services.
- C. Continuing the MTCU lead in ensuring there is greater understanding between literacy and employments services, including the value of a full assessment of skills.
- D. Encouraging all EO agencies to access use a centralized assessment process as well as an assessment tool kit. In this case, the EESA forms part of a “tool kit” approach to centralized assessment. This may best be done through a pilot project that models the use of all different types of literacy and essential skills assessment tools.

6.4 Recommendations for ABEA

In view of the significant investment already made in EESA, the generally positive feedback about the tool, and the need to create more consistent demand for assessments, it is recommended that the Adult Basic Education Association of Hamilton-Wentworth (ABEA) work with regional networks to market EESA to non-MTCU service providers, including local school boards, adult education centres, Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program (in regions where there is not already an existing relationship).

In view of the drawbacks identified to administering EESA, it is recommended that ABEA

- A. Explore creation of online or distance options for administering EESA. This would cut down on travel time and costs, allow for better quality control (including gaining of experience by assessors), and improve supports to specialized client groups such as Francophones.
- B. Continue to seek funding supports to promote EESA to service providers and train assessors around the province, particularly in regions that may have the highest demand for this type of assessment (e.g., large manufacturing base, lower education levels of workers).
- C. Educate community partners more fully on the background and purpose of the EESA, including improving understanding of (1) the benefits of in-depth assessments for all clients and (2) how the Literacy and Basic Skills system works regarding network role verses delivery agencies and what literacy testing does in fact occur beyond EESA.

7.0 References

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Appendix A: Regional Literacy Networks, Interview List

Jennine Agnew-Kata, Literacy Network of Durham Region

Doug Noyes, Literacy Link of Eastern Ontario (Lleo)

Gay Douglas Broerse, Literacy Link Niagara

Tamara Kaattari, Literacy Link South Central (London)

Annemarie Wesolowski, Literacy Northwest (Thunder Bay)

Lesley Hamilton, Literacy Ontario Central South (Peterborough)

Katrina Grieze, Interim ED, and Casey Irvin, Literacy Access Network
Coordinator, Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy

Two anonymous assessors, Mid North Network for the Coordination and
Development of Adult Learning

Mary Wiggin, Ottawa Community Coalition for Literacy

Matthew Shulman, Peel-Halton-Dufferin Adult Learning Network

Jane Tuer, Project Read Literacy Network, Waterloo-Wellington

Debera Flynn, Quill Learning Network (Walkerton)

Stephanie Hobbs, Simcoe/Muskoka Literacy Network

Andrea Dickinson, Tri-County Literacy Network (Chatham)

Appendix B: Hamilton Service Providers, Interview List

Rosemary Aswani, St. Joseph Immigrant Women's Centre

Karen Craig and Geoff Beere, Living Rock

Donna de Jong, John Howard Society

Sandra Kelly, City of Hamilton/Ontario Works

Jennifer Sturgess, vpi

Appendix C: Interview Template

Sarah Wayland
May 2010

I have been contracted by the Adult Basic Education Association in Hamilton to conduct an evaluation of the centralized assessment.

The objectives of the research are:

- To examine and evaluate the value of implementing an independent, centralized assessment services, with a specific focus on EESA (Educational Essential Skills Assessment)
- To provide a preliminary assessment regarding whether an independent, centralized service is viable in all regions of Ontario

(For regional literacy networks) As part of this research, I am interviewing ED's of 14 regional networks.

(For Hamilton service providers) As part of this research, I am interviewing users of EESA in Hamilton.

I would like to list your name at the end of the final report, but no specific statements will be attributed to you. If for some reason I do wish to quote something you say in the report, I will first obtain your permission to do so. You may refuse to answer any question, and you may end the interview at any time.

Interview questions:

1. Can you please begin by describing in general terms your organization's association with EESA, e.g., how long you have been using, how frequently it is used.
2. Based on this experience, what would you say are the benefits of having an impartial, centralized assessment process?

Probe as required: What would you say are the benefits with respect to various stakeholders in the process, including clients, delivery agencies, referring agencies, employment services, and TCU?

3. Based on your experience, what are the drawbacks of having such an assessment process in place?

Probe as required: What would you say are the drawbacks with respect to various stakeholders in the process, including clients, delivery agencies, referring agencies, employment services, and TCU?

4. What differences exist between EESA-type assessment and the assessments that employment services give at the intake, throughout delivery, and on exit?
5. In your view, is there any value to having assessments conducted at the network or system level rather than at the organizational level? Please explain.
6. (For regional literacy networks only) Does your region have any particular challenges with respect to adopting a third party assessment tool such as EESA? If so, what are they?
7. (For Hamilton service providers only) Based on your organization's experience with EESA, does the assessment process help move clients forward on their pathways (to training, to upgrading, to employment)? Please explain.