

Fall Institute 2011

IALS (INTERNATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY)  
ITS MEANING AND IMPACT FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

OCTOBER 23-25, 2011

BANFF, AB

A slow burn:  
the impact of IALS in Australia

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Document category:

Country story

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*As a researcher at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) I've been working on PISA reading since 1998, and I now coordinate test development for PISA. My connection with adult assessment began when we selected some items from IALS to include in the PISA 2000 reading assessment. The association between levels of adult literacy and the PISA levels, describing 15-year-olds' reading proficiency, was reported in Reading for Change: Performance and Engagement across Countries. Results from PISA 2000 (Kirsch, et al., 2002). In 2008-9, I led the development of the new literacy items for PIAAC and more recently managed test development for a New Zealand large-scale adaptive assessment of adult literacy and numeracy. I serve on the Australian reference group for PIAAC.*

*In preparing this country story, I gratefully acknowledge the very substantial contributions of Dave Tout, my colleague at ACER, and of adult literacy consultant Jan Hagston. My thanks also to Michelle Circelli of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, for sharing her knowledge of current developments, and to both her and Kelly Nelson of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) for suggesting contacts and resources.*

### **A slow burn: the impact of IALS in Australia**

Australia has put its hand up to participate in all the international literacy surveys on offer: IALS in the second wave (1996), the ALL Survey in the second wave (2006), and PIAAC in 2011-12 – in the field right now. Nevertheless, until very recently Australia's general response to the surveys can best be described as inert: more in the vein of our habitual "she'll be right" than the "clever country" that our prime minister of the 1980s urged us to become. For most of the period since the IALS results were published in 1997, Australia paid little attention to reports on our performance in international surveys of literacy – and this is not confined to the adult sector.

Australia is one of only four countries whose performance in PISA reading declined significantly between 2000 (the first cycle of the assessment) and 2009 (OECD, 2010),<sup>1</sup> and this decline was apparent by 2006 (Thomson & De Bortoli, 2008); yet there has been virtually no response in the public domain. A Melbourne newspaper article about tertiary education remarked earlier in October 2011, "Local politicians and policymakers seem oblivious to international comparisons, except in the most simplified gold-silver-bronze form of university league tables. This is mining boom-fed insular complacency. Even our declining student performance in PISA – which would create panic in education ministries in Western Europe or east Asia – is scarcely on the radar" (Marginson, 2011).

A review of Australia's profile in adult literacy development, taking into account IALS and its descendants, shows at best a patchy picture: a surge of activity in the late eighties and early nineties, then apparently a yawning gap, punctuated by IALS, until about 2010 when both industry and government began taking renewed and concerted steps to improve adult skills as a result of the ALL data.

Yet we were not slow to get started – indeed, Australia has been a globally recognised world leader in the development of adult literacy policy and provision (National Research and Development Centre, 2011). A National Policy on Languages was launched in 1987, including an “Adult Literacy Action Campaign”, with two years’ funding and a mandate to enhance understanding of the issue of adult literacy with both quantitative and qualitative data. As a consequence of this policy initiative, a survey based on the US Young Adult Literacy study was conducted across Australia and, in 1989, the first national adult literacy survey was reported in *No Single Measure: A Survey of Australian Adult Literacy* (Wickert, 1989). Despite the author’s concern that the report was being published just as the two-year funding stream dried up, *No Single Measure* had “an extraordinary political impact” (Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL), 1999). Along with the timely support and momentum gained from International Literacy Year (ILY) in 1990, it fed into the development of an Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP). The ALLP expanded the Australian migrant education program to all migrants without functional English Language, not just recent arrivals. The policy also expanded the National Languages Institute of Australia (NLIA) to become the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA). One of the key outcomes resulting from the ALLP was extra funding for a range of programs including provision, publications and research. Initiatives included the Workplace English Language & Literacy (WELL) program and the Adult Literacy Innovative Projects Programme. The Adult Literacy Research Network was established, which evolved into the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Research Consortium (ALNARC). One specific outcome was the National Reporting System (1995), a framework for reporting on the language, literacy and numeracy outcomes of students in workplace and training contexts that has only recently been superseded – but more of that later. In retrospect, it seems likely that Wickert’s report also contributed to the decision by the Commonwealth of Australia to take part in the second wave of IALS.

Like its progeny ALL and PIAAC, IALS down under was conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), who reported the results in *Aspects of Literacy: Profiles and Perceptions* (Skinner, 1997) and *Aspects of literacy: assessed skill levels, Australia 1996* (McLennan, 1997). Australia’s profile, in broad terms, was not unlike that of other English-speaking countries such as New Zealand and Canada: well over 40% of the population in each of prose, document and quantitative literacy performed at or below Level 2. Yet it had much less impact.

An accident of political history meant that the report itself did not make much of a splash. At about the same time as it was published, a new conservative government was elected, after thirteen years of the Labor government that had supported the adult literacy initiatives described above. But even disregarding the changed political scene, the title of the ABS report – *Aspects of Literacy* – is indicative, in that it implies a reservation about IALS. Only “aspects”. The “limitations of the data”, according to one of the very few commentaries on IALS in Australia (Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL), 1999), included the emphasis on information processing at the expense of writing, the non-Australian source of the texts and tasks, and the “contrived” complexity of the Level 4 and 5 tasks. The ACAL paper also queried the strenuousness of the 0.8 response probability standard and the

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<sup>1</sup> There has been a similar decline in performance in PISA mathematics, between 2003 and 2009.

inability of the data to provide a basis for predictions about future requirements and challenges. Such commentary expressed, and no doubt also fuelled, the resistance of many adult education practitioners, who had and have a default antipathy to any kind of standardised assessment.

In the years following the publication of the IALS reports, there was little action in adult literacy at a national level. This period also coincided with the end of many programs established under the ALLP and the dismantling of many organisations and support mechanisms that had underpinned the delivery of adult literacy provision and professional development across Australia.

Nevertheless, there were still pockets of support for what IALS had revealed about the state of adult literacy in Australia, and a small but strategic campaign was mounted to argue for our participation in the ALL survey. A review developed at the NLLIA argued that, “In the past, lack of data hindered policy development. IALS has provided a wealth of data to support the development of policies and strategies. The IALS data are rich and under-utilised in Australia” (Hagston, 2002). NLLIA and ABS arranged a joint forum in Canberra on adult literacy studies to coincide with a visit from Scott Murray (Statistics Canada). This is regarded by those involved as a turning point in the decision to participate in the ALL survey (personal communication, Dave Tout). So Australia did ultimately take part in ALL. The survey was conducted by the ABS in 2006, and reported in 2007 – this time simply as *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Australia, 2006* (ABS, 2007).

The Australian ALL results showed that between 46% (more than 7 million adults) and 70% of adults in Australia had poor skills (levels 1 or 2) across one or more of the four skill domains of prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem-solving. Compared to the 1996 results from IALS, there was some upward movement in performance from the lowest skill levels. In prose literacy, there was a significant 3% percentage point decrease in the proportion of adults with a skill level of level 1 and a corresponding 2 to 3% increase in the proportion of adults with skill levels 2 and 3. In document literacy, there was also a significant decrease in the proportion of adults with the lowest skill level (ABS, 2007).

It is now becoming apparent that the release of the international ALL results had a much wider impact in Australia than did the release of the IALS data a decade earlier. While many in the adult literacy field still have reservations about the international studies, industry and government have taken note of the results and on a number of different fronts reports, programs and strategies have emerged since 2007 to improve the language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills of the Australian workforce.

This interest and commitment is evident in several high-profile reports, notably *National Workforce Literacy Project: Report on Employers Views on Workplace Literacy and Numeracy Skills* (Australian Industry Group, 2010); *No More Excuses: An Industry Response to the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Challenge* (Industry Skills Councils, 2011); and *Skills for Prosperity – A Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training* (Skills Australia, 2011). The urging of the report has led to an unprecedented surge of national commitment to action on improving adult skills, including LLN. The Australian Government has within the last few months announced a National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults, to be implemented from January 2012 to 2020. Under this strategy the Australian

Government will work with state and territory governments to develop a program for improving the foundation skills of adults and will open up discussion about priority areas for action over the next ten years. The announcement of the National Strategy explicitly refers to ALL results: the Strategy “is being developed as a response to ABS findings that approximately 40 per cent of employed and 60 per cent of unemployed Australians had poor or very poor literacy and numeracy skills” (Australian Government, 2011b). The budget announcement for 2011-12 promised \$3 billion over six years, for “Skilling Australia’s Future Workforce”, including reform of the training system (Australian Government, 2011a).

Industry awareness and government policy is driving an increasing role for the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector in engaging disadvantaged groups, to improve the literacy and numeracy levels of the existing workforce and those looking to enter the workforce. For example, there is broad industry support for the implementation of literacy and numeracy achievement standards for entry into the energy sector trade qualifications. The key is ensuring that students who do not meet the entry standard are supported to address identified shortfalls.

In another development, the national Industry Skills Councils are evaluating the feasibility of assessing technical, pedagogical and administrative aspects of trainers and teachers of adults. For example, within two years it is planned that all vocational education teachers will themselves require certification that they have satisfactory levels of literacy and numeracy proficiency.

Another activity indicating the impact of ALL is a development related to the [Australian Core Skills Framework](#) (ACSF), a framework that describes levels of skills of participants in national VET programs across the country. The ACSF addresses the five core skills of learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy. Since 2008 the ACSF has replaced the National Reporting System (NRS) which, as mentioned previously, had been used by Australian LLN specialists since 1995. While the NRS was primarily conceived of as a reporting tool, the ACSF has been designed as a framework with applications for a range of contexts. For example, it provides benchmarks against which performance can be described in detail in each of the core skills. It can also be used to describe the core skills needed in a particular context, such as the workplace, or to map curricula. The ACSF is also now being used to map the English language, literacy and numeracy requirements of industry-specific training (in Australia these requirements are called Training Packages).

In response to the ALL results, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), comprising state and federal representatives, specified, as a progress indicator, that the proportions of the working age population at ALL levels 1 and 2 would be monitored (COAG, 2008; COAG Reform Council, 2009). However, it was recognised that such monitoring could not be done directly through the international surveys more than once every ten years, based on current rates – not often enough for governments’ purposes. On the other hand, the ACSF is now routinely used with adults whose literacy and numeracy skills are thought or known to be low and in need of development: that is, those likely to be performing at literacy and numeracy levels equivalent to ALL levels 1 and 2. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) was therefore commissioned to investigate ways of aligning the ACSF with ALL levels, in order that progress in improving LLN might more frequently be

monitored against something equivalent to international benchmarks. This project began in 2010 with a feasibility study, in which a small group of experts used their professional judgement to map IALS/ALL tasks onto ACSF levels, using a methodology similar to that described by Greg Brooks in the [England country story](#). The project is continuing with a larger-scale validation exercise to align IALS/ALL levels with the ACSF standards, conducted with up to 600 adult literacy educators round Australia.

In summary, while there was a sense of frustration at the lack of policy response in the years following the 1997 report on IALS in Australia, over the last year or two, there has been a new vigour in attempts to lift levels of adult literacy and numeracy, apparently in direct response to ALL, with concrete action at the national level. It is difficult to be precise about how IALS specifically led to this firing up of activity, but certainly the spark of IALS has contributed to a slow burn over the last fifteen years. The real significance of IALS' legacy may become increasingly apparent with a longer backward view, at the very least as the parent of ALL and PIAAC. The value of international adult literacy studies is now recognised at policy level in Australia. And the scheduled release of the PIAAC results in 2013 will, as the COAG announcement of 2008 indicated, be used to monitor the success of LLN programs initiated under the current ten-year plan.

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