



COMPASS - Engaging the Disengaged

COMPASS is a unique new literacy and numeracy assessment resource developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), a world leader in educational research.

In 2009, the South Australian Innovative Community Action Network (ICAN) approached ACER seeking an online multiple choice assessment that would better enable them to gauge the literacy and numeracy skills of disengaged students as part of the Department of Education and Children's Services *Youth Engagement Strategy and School Retention Action Plan*.

Realising that a test to target this specific population of students was not available, ACER worked with ICAN and the Department to develop a specialised assessment that would suite students in South Australia who for a variety of reasons, had experienced limited or disrupted exposure to formal education, testing and assessment.

Disengagement from education in the middle to upper school years is identified as one of the defining barriers to successful higher education, training and employment opportunities for young adults. A lack of literacy and numeracy skills significantly decreases the employability prospects of young people and limits the potential for academic success and the transition to a fulfilling and stable career path.

ACER identified a key target age group of 12-19 years old and established a categorical breakdown of the student population including:

- those in Years 9-10 who are enrolled at school but with irregular attendance for **early intervention**
- those in Years 10-11 who are enrolled in school but have patchy attendance for **keeping on track**
- those from a variety of age groups who are enrolled in some school certificate subjects but who are not currently attending school for **re-engagement**

With the support of ICAN, ACER worked on developing an assessment that would attempt to break the educational malaise experienced by these students and to actively engage them to connect with the test content. To achieve this, a challenge emerged in finding a way design test questions that not only reflected the interests and life experiences of young adults, but also matched the level of question difficulty to a target population where skill levels by their nature were bound to be varied.

The most common method of relating test content to a target population is to trial questions on a sample group with similar characteristics. In the case of COMPASS, it was evident that the most suitable and accessible trial population existed in the students participating in the ICAN program. ACER worked with ICAN case managers to facilitate a number of evaluation sessions where students sat down and reviewed the test questions.

The process had one clear objective and that was to test the quality of the questions. Students were not evaluated on their test performance but instead were asked to provide feedback on the look and feel of the questions, the attractiveness of the images and the ease of navigation in the online format. Case managers were also asked to provide feedback on ease of use and well as student engagement with test.

An overwhelming 86% of ICAN case managers concluded that students appeared to engage with the test and seemed genuinely interested in doing their best. Further feedback informed us that students really liked the 'lifelike' images and this highlights the importance of the test design and the uniqueness of the test compared to more traditional forms of literacy and numeracy assessments.

The success of COMPASS with the ICAN students signified to ACER both a greater reach and demand for an engaging and valid literacy and numeracy assessment for students who have experienced a disrupted educational pathway. A number of schools, community organisations and government-service providers have since used COMPASS to gain an insight into the skills of individual students. Armed with this information, they have been able to guide students into appropriate pathways with evidence based objective appraisals of student's abilities and their potential for improvement.

COMPASS for the Careers Advisor:

There are a number of features unique to COMPASS that highlight its potential as an effective resource for career advisors to add to their suite of tools for providing informed advice to students about their skills and needs in preparing for the transition from schooling:

- On-demand, online delivery supporting flexible testing and learning options (administration requires only a computer with internet connection and can be conducted in either a school or non-school setting)
- Detailed test administrator guidelines
- In-depth individual reporting highlighting a student's strengths and weaknesses in literacy and numeracy that is instantly accessible once a student has completed the assessment. Reports are aligned to the Australian Core Skills Framework and various State and Territory learning outcomes (i.e. VELS)
- A pay-as-you-go option for pricing, ensuring an efficient use of funding resources

Further information about the COMPASS is available at www.acer.edu.au/tests/compass or by contacting Education Consultant, John Morath at morath@acer.edu.au.

Additional information about ICAN is available at <http://www.decs.sa.gov.au>