

## **ASSESSMENT FOR ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN THE WESTERN CAPE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT (SOUTH AFRICA)**

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Assessment is the fulcrum around which the curriculum swivels – allowing ideas to be presented, discussed, questioned and criticised so that the teacher is able to make a judgement whether the learner has the necessary competencies to achieve the outcomes of the curriculum. In assessing adults, one of the key things that has changed over the past five years has been the need to recognise prior learning.

The recognition of prior learning (both in the formal context but also informally) is a critical move away from an educational system that mostly thought of the learner as an empty container that had to be filled with knowledge.

Drawing on the learner's experience and this is more relevant to adults, allows the teacher to develop a lesson with the needs of the learner always at the forefront of planning. This approach both allows the teacher to tap into the learner's background but also their thinking. It draws learners into the lessons and makes assessment more meaningful as the teacher is able to diagnose learning difficulties earlier, provide specific feedback that could assist in overcoming the learning difficulty and allow learners further opportunities to demonstrate their competency.

The role of adult basic education and training (ABET), in a country where there are high illiteracy rates, cannot be underestimated in attempting to bridge the obvious gaps brought about by years of deprivation through a system that denied millions of it's people a chance at empowering themselves with basic knowledge and skills. In a world that has become smaller and more advanced than ever before, those that lack basic skills will be set aside from actively 'participating in social, cultural, political and economic activities of society' (Baatjes, 2002).

Post Apartheid South Africa has instituted a National Qualifications Framework in which the first rung (NQ1) is the first exit qualification for schools, industry and ABET – the qualification is called the General Education and Training Certificate (GETC). Designed for learners that have gained competency in the basic education, it is planned for schools in 2008, while ABET is set to have the first GET certificates issued during this year by UMALUSI, the educational quality assurer for general and further education and training.

The qualification for ABET requires learners to have the fundamentals of Language, Literacy and Communication (LLC) and Mathematical Literacy (ML); credits from at least four core learning areas such as Arts and Culture, Economics and Management Sciences, Human and Social Sciences, Life Orientation, Natural Sciences and Technology. Credits should also be gained from electives such as Ancillary Health Care, Applied Agriculture and Agricultural Technology, Tourism and Small, Medium and Micro-enterprises. For an adult, where the need for basic educational knowledge and skills as well as vocational skills is important, the combination of core and electives is a good idea. Challenges for the Adult Centres include funding the vast number of learning areas while budgets are very low for ABET in South Africa, finding teachers with sufficient expertise to teach the various learning areas and assessing the learners according to nationally set out unit standards (packages of outcomes).

At present, the assessment of ABET at the NQ1 level is a national responsibility with provincial management. The assessment is quality assured by UMALUSI, with the unit standards being generated at the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Participation in the ABET assessment attracts support from Public Adult Learning Centres, Youth Centres, Department of Correctional Services, City Council of Cape Town. In 2002, certain banks, SANDF, SARS all indicated interest. The need for the national assessment has therefore gained ground and will remain one of the major routes for learners to be assessed and accredited.

The GETC will allow learners to enter further education, at school or at colleges. Some universities have even accepted adult learners with GET fundamentals for certain of their courses. The GETC needs to be seen by the public and especially

business as a nationally recognised qualification that carries a certain currency. Government's commitment to free education stretches to the NQ1 level and in 2001, the department of labour released the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS), which indicated that 70% of workers should have a NQ 1 level qualification by 2005. According to Baatjes (2002), about 600 000 workers in the Mining as well as Manufacturing Sectors have less than ten years of schooling. These are but two sectors, the need for ABET is thus essential is ensuring that NSDS target has a chance of being met and more importantly, that those who have been disadvantaged in the past are provided with a second chance to empower themselves and in so doing uplift their community as well as the nation as a whole. Education is an empowering activity – no more so than in ABET, which has played a significant role in the political changes that have come about in this country.

How valid is the GETC? If one thinks that the recipient should, in theory at least, be skilled in communication, Mathematics, basic science, economics as well as have gained skills in the Arts or Social Science, have a good self-esteem and also have skills for a vocation - a well rounded person with the potential to be taught and who can learn rapidly emerges.

The GETC has to have an equivalence for the sectors of ABET, schools and industry if the NQF is to succeed. The role of the quality assurer, UMALUSI, in verifying and validating the assessment that leads to the qualification becomes all the more important. UMALUSI have embarked on a validation test in 2003 which they have used for ABET and will use for mainstream schools (grade 9) later in the year. The problem is that the differences in ABET and schools are vast. Besides funding and time allocation, resources etc, the Minister of Education's Review Committee of 2000 mentioned that a National Curriculum Statement for ABET and schools would be needed. So far, only the schools version has appeared. The critical issue of too many outcomes to be covered, especially in assessment, has not been addressed by ABET where centres have far less time to prepare learners that are at a greater disadvantage in that they are not schooled in the assessment system that is dominating at present.

Besides the actual curriculum, assessment in each learning area at schools consist of 75% continuous assessment (CASS) and 25% external assessment (in the form of a

nationally developed Common Task). All the assessing is done at the site of learning by the school staff, though moderation is external. ABET has 50% CASS that is assessed internally and moderated externally by district officials. It is further verified by UMALUSI as well as the provincial office. The other 50% is made up by a national examination. Question papers are set by national panels, moderated internally and then externally by UMALUSI. The papers are set according national guidelines using unit standards that have been registered at SAQA.

The papers are translated into Afrikaans but no provision is made for African languages (besides LLC). The senior certificate system in South Africa has the same dilemma and attempts to compensate by awarding a +5 top up for all candidates that indicate an African language as their mother tongue. This is something that ABET has proposed for it's NQ1 assessment.

The days of teaching ABET as a charity practiced only to make adults feel good about themselves are gone. ABET needs to be seen as a vehicle for empowering adults and youth that have experienced disadvantages or in need of a second chance with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that will allow them to take their rightful place in society. Governments need to look at ABET as a long-term investment rather than a quick fix for political gain. Thus providing the necessary support and involving labour as well as business in acceptance of ABET and their associated assessment practices becomes important.

In the Western Cape, assessment of adults at Public Adult Learning Centres and also at the Correctional Services begins as soon as the learner applies to the learning centre. Through an interview or placement assessment, the learner is put into a level at which he/she will manage the best. Placement assessment is aimed at making the learner feel comfortable in the classroom, being at a level that is not too easy so that they will become bored or not too difficult that they will become frustrated. This is not easy, especially as the national department supplied placement tools for all the ABET learning areas. In 2001, the WCED took a decision to implement only the placement tools for LLC and Mathematics from 2002 onward. Placement according to these fundamentals was felt to be a way of placing adults at the 'correct level' where they would have appropriate numeracy and literacy skills to deal with other learning

areas as well. The costs of production of the various tools as well as the time consumed in administering them was also taken into account. This has proved to be a successful move from the feedback that the department has received from the centres. The pass percentages as well as the turnout rate (percentage registered candidates actually writing examinations) for NQ1 examinations has increased significantly. One of the chief markers of the ABET examinations in October 2002 felt that the learners had been placed better than before.

Since there is no formal RPL system in place that will credit learners, placement serves to at least recognise prior learning and 'credit' the learner with the level at which they would be placed.

In 1999, when I first became involved in ABET as an advisor, all assessment was done at the site level. National initiatives of cascading training in OBE, Learning programmes, Formative and Summative assessment, learning support material were vigorously being implemented at provincial level. The dilution of the cascade system as well as an ineffective programme for implementation at the centre level, as well as the fact that the turnover rate of teachers at ABET centres is high, meant that valuable initiatives had been wasted. There were a few successes but these were the exception rather than the rule.

The year 2000 was ground breaking for assessment in ABET. In fact, it was the year that assessment moved at such pace that it became the "Trojan" of the curriculum. This term was coined by Mr Herman Kotze, the architect of the first summative assessment for ABET at the NQ1 level conducted by the WCED. This was a pilot project and participation was optional. For the first time in South Africa, ABET examinations were written in the fundamentals as well as all core learning areas. The final results contained a year mark made up of site based assessment as well as a mock examination set by the assessors who had set the final papers as well. For the assessors, it was pioneering work in that there were no previous question papers to consult. The assessors also conducted workshops that provided guidelines on the examinations.

The final results were shocking and showed a glaring lack of adherence to the nationally prescribed unit standards. The examination system had however been initiated and could grow from this pilot.

In 2001, the WCED conducted the first June assessment – in order to provide a second opportunity for adult learners to present themselves for summative assessment. The need for this assessment was argued on the basis that seasonal workers needed to be given an opportunity to partake in the summative assessment. Furthermore, learners that did not pass in October could now write again without having to wait a whole year to repeat – in the meantime, they could be doing another learning area. An improvement was recorded in the assessment and the department felt that pass rates would increase as the learners and teachers became more familiar with the type of question papers being set by the assessors. A worrying aspect was the low turnout rate for both October and June assessments.

In November 2001, the first national ABET examination was written. No CASS was used for this assessment. The pass rates as well as turnout rates were once again very low.

Training in portfolio assessment was undertaken in 2001 and this would form the basis of assessment practice in the future. At present, the University of South Africa assesses ABET learners based upon the portfolios they submit. The WCED also released schemes of work for each learning area containing ideas for assessment, especially the capability task that would cover all the outcomes of a particular unit standard. The capability tasks are seen as being similar to the common tasks for assessment (CTA) idea that is being used in the schools at present.

The year 2002 saw a change in the structure of the WCED. The ABET Sub-directorate ceased to exist as an entity on its own. Planners were appointed at Head Office for Institutional Management and Governance (IMG), ABET Curriculum and also for ABET Assessment. For the first time, full time ABET curriculum advisors were appointed in the districts (called EMDCs – Educational Management Development Centres).

In June 2002, the WCED was the only provincial department that implemented the national ABET examinations. No CASS was again used but the overall percentage pass rate as well as the turnout rate showed signs of improvement. Past question papers were distributed to the adult centres, workshops were held regarding examination techniques and planning, chief markers presented workshops mediating their learning area reports as well as the new national guidelines for assessment, and websites for ABET curriculum (<http://curriculum.wcape.school.za/site/24/page/view/>) and ABET assessment (<http://curriculum.wcape.school.za/site/19/page/view/59>) were established.

In October 2002, CASS was used for the first time at national level and counted 50% of the final mark. The national policy on the conduct of the ABET examinations had also been published in June 2002. This policy, very similar to the senior certificate examination, provides the details for appointing markers, dealing with irregularities, capturing of data etc.

UMALUSI, the national department as well as provincial officials monitored the examination processes extensively. The examination results were standardised by UMALUSI and the CASS was then moderated against the standardised examination results. Thus, since the advent of the examination in ABET, a move initially made to uplift and develop the standard of ABET assessment, CASS was relegated to a secondary role.

In fact, the CASS being implemented at centre level was still test based and lacking in the fundamentals of OBA. This unfortunately was to be expected as teachers at ABET centres are poorly paid and are often underqualified. The expertise needed to implement outcomes based assessment is still lacking.

Policy in 2002 (WCED circular 75/2002) provided recommendations for CASS per learning area as well as providing a format for a portfolio. Recording lists for formative assessment for each learner as well as class lists for the calculation of the CASS mark were also provided. The circular also contained the moderation tool that would be used in the province during 2002.

The results from the October 2002 assessment were a pleasant improvement to previous examinations. All learning areas including the electives had been written in the Western Cape and the turnout rate of over 60% was the highest in the country. Pass rates for all learning areas showed improvement with some learning areas recording significantly higher percentage pass rates.

Despite the optimism caused by this higher pass rate, the low standard of CASS in many centres was still a huge cause for concern. The teachers need training in assessment and need to be registered as assessors. This is a complex task. Firstly, the teachers are employed on a part-time basis and the turnover rate for teachers from one year to the next is high. Secondly, teachers are often not specialists in their fields at the NQ1 level – this is especially true in a centre where the teacher is excellent at the ABET levels 1 and 2 where only the fundamentals are used. When this teacher is used in a specialist learning area such as Natural Sciences or Economics and Management Sciences, they often struggle. Thirdly, funding for training teachers as assessors and registering them on the SAQA database is limited – the WCED is looking to first train the mainstream teachers in the coming year.

June 2003 has seen another national assessment – this time, three provinces participated. The portfolio, prescribed by UMALUSI, was too demanding for the June assessment though it would most probably be acceptable for the October assessment. Due to time constraints, many centres did not fully comply with the UMALUSI requirements. There were pockets of excellence in the Western Cape and one district in particular provided a good example to the rest.

I had the opportunity to mentor some of the advisors on the CASS process at the beginning of the year. The mentoring programme included the following:

1. CASS – how do we improve the practice of CASS?
  - using the guidelines and the circulars in quality circles.
  - Administration of CASS at site as well as at EMDC level.
  - Feedback to learners.
  - Multiple opportunities provided to do an assessment task.
  - Identifying and acknowledging best practice.



- Filling the gaps – how to support.
- Ensuring that learning is actually taking place and not having assessment for the sake of marks or just to fill a portfolio.

## 2. Monitoring – the role of the CA.

- a development approach not inspection.
- Supporting by knowing what is expected.
- Transparency in the process.
- Structured CASS development through quality circles. Learning area groups develop CASS activities for the whole EMDC that all implement and reflect on. Standards are set in this way and moderation becomes a continuous process instead of a once off event.

## 3. Moderation: putting a system in place:

- being transparent about the criteria.
- Supporting the administrative aspect of CASS.
- Facilitating learning area groups until they are comfortable to work on their own.
- Understanding what is expected by the provincial, national and UMALUSI verifiers.

## 4. Examinations: improving the numbers and pass rate.

### Improving the numbers:

- increasing the profile of the ABET level 4 e.g. people who work in the police garages still are expected to obtain a 'JC' before they can be classified as 'genuine' police employees. Why is the non-existent 'JC' still being used as a standard? SAQA needs to engage in a campaign to educate the public service, business and society in general about the NQF. Only once the 'currency' of the GETC is accepted will we draw bigger numbers.
- A letter from the SG will be sent to EMDCs for the employers.

### Improving the pass rate:

- getting good CASS practice. Giving learners confidence in themselves and their work. Good practice regarding feedback; multiple opportunities; Specific testing.
- Knowing how to use the summative guidelines effectively in learning area groups.
- Using the past papers effectively (skills needed e.g MCQs, graphs etc)
- Implementing mock tests per learning area

In the future, I would like to see a CASS system dominating the ABET sector with the summative assessment used as a validation of the learner's competence in reaching the outcomes of the unit standards. The use of capability tasks (one per unit standard) for CASS would be necessary to generate evidence of competence for the portfolio. By having one capability task per unit standard, the number of items that needs to be recorded will be reduced – important as the administration of OBA was found to be excessive and difficult to implement effectively.

Support for cluster meetings for developing the CASS tasks per learning area is crucial as it will be the catalyst for real development of assessment practice. By implementing a task developed in a cluster and then reflecting on the implementation, teachers will be setting standards, raising understanding of processes, sharing assessment instruments and moderating their tasks based on consensus, using the provincial moderation tool. By supplying the tool to all centres, the teachers are immediately focused on what is necessary for the tasks and tools that they have to develop.

By having a moderation process that follows the implementation of the CASS, development of all the colleagues in a particular learning area becomes optimal. The collegial atmosphere of a cluster has the potential to build the teacher whose understanding and own practice is below par whereas it affords the above average teacher the opportunity to share their skills and gain valuable leadership skills.

The role of the ABET curriculum advisor becomes one of a facilitator as the responsibility for producing excellence becomes one of the team as a whole. Ultimately, it improves the service that the learners receive. The cluster allows ample

opportunity for reflection and a chance for a teacher to redo a task if necessary. This is in keeping with OBE where a learner has multiple opportunities to do an assessment.

It was pleasing that certain EMDCs showed the variety that was evident in the provincial recommendations. Centres presented portfolios as prescribed, assessment tools such as checklists and rubrics were evident and completed educator portfolios were present. One could see the potential of the process. As teachers become more accustomed with the new assessment practice and see the greater value of CASS for the learner, I believe that it will become the major assessment for ABET.

Challenges such as high turnover rates for teachers, learners not attending classes, learners not handing in portfolios or tasks toward their portfolio will still present themselves in this sector.

As long as we get the message over that in order to present oneself for the summative assessment, a portfolio that chronicles one's achievement of the outcomes of the unit standards for a particular learning area will have to be forthcoming.

Finally, as long as more learners present themselves for this assessment, as long as the standard of the portfolios improve, as long as the unit standards are seen to be used at centre level and placement is effectively implemented, we will strive for excellence and be hopeful that ABET can indeed play a vital role in the transformation in the fortunes of the adult learners.

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