



Validity and Impact of Centralized Assessment

Full Research Report

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Executive Summary

Centralized or common assessment (CA) refers to a model in which individuals have their learning and skills needs assessed at a “neutral” agency and are then referred to other specific organizations and programs for education or training.

This report presents the evaluation results of a pilot project delivered by three Ontario learning networks in the field of Literacy and Basic Skills. The pilot project introduced a ministry-funded centralized assessment model with the intention of being able to ascertain the feasibility of such a model provided at no cost to learners or service providers. Assessments were offered in three formats -- one-to-one in person, group format in person, and one-to-one distance using technology (Skype) -- in 2012 and early 2013.

The evaluation process consisted of surveys and interviews with service provider agencies, CA assessors, and learners who accessed CA during the pilot project. It also included a scan of CA in other fields. Four CA case studies are presented in this report: second language training, mental health care, children’s services, and LBS. Best practices were identified from the CA case studies.

Evaluation of the central assessment pilot project indicates strong support for this model in the pilot regions, and strong ratings on most factors examined. Fully 95% of clients agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the pilot assessment process. All survey respondents from referring agencies were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall process as well as the coordination among agencies within the referral system. Receiving agencies were the weakest in their reviews of CA, but most were satisfied with the CA model as it was carried out in the pilot and stated that CA helped to save time at intake. Some receiving agencies reassessed all clients, thereby reducing the efficiency of CA model. Overall, CA was deemed efficient, easy to use, appropriate for learners, and it had a positive impact as measured in the research.

In terms of the various delivery models of assessment, it was found that each of the three models tested - one-to-one, group, and distance - had pros and cons. The one-to-one in-person model was favoured by assessors and referring agencies above the other two, but the pilot generated some knowledge around implementation of the distance model that could be of use in the future.

The primary recommendation from this evaluation is that any further implementation of CA include convening key players (agencies and individuals) for discussion and an

exchange of views regarding whether and how reassessments could be avoided, including via better implementation of common assessment protocols and a reconsideration of how assessments are funded.

Also, further implementation of central assessment models make use of these best practices identified in the research. These practices include

- a. Recognizing that introducing CA and working in partnership has implications for practitioners
- b. Establishing regular, two-way communication to share program information and aggregate client data, address concerns, and problem solve.
- c. Ensuring that assessments are easy to access, a particular challenge in rural and remote areas
- d. Consulting with service providers working with particular populations such as aboriginals and newcomers to explore any barriers around CA.
- e. Ensure that common assessment protocols are respected, including through ongoing training on reading the results of action plans and understanding how they fit into the overall system.

The pilot project encountered some challenges around implementation, but pilot projects are in essence designed to identify and “iron out” wrinkles ahead of larger-scale program implementation. In this sense, it was a normal pilot.

In sum, all measures indicated positive response to central assessment as implemented in the pilot. Learners, assessors, referring agencies and receiving agencies each identified value in the central assessment model.

List of Acronyms and Terms

ABEA	Adult Basic Education Association (Learning Network in Hamilton)
ASR	Assessor (defined on page 6)
CA	Central assessment
CLARS	Coordinated Language Assessment and Referral Services (new centralized assessment process for ESL in Ontario)
CLB	Canadian Language Benchmark
EO	Employment Ontario
ESL	English as a Second Language
LBS	Literacy and Basic Skills
LLN	Literacy Link Niagara (Learning Network in Niagara)
MTCU	Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (Ontario)
OALCF	Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework, a competency-based framework that supports the development of adult literacy programming delivered through the LBS Program
ODSP	Ontario Disability Supports Program (provincial disability benefit)
OW	Ontario Works (provincial social assistance)
Project READ	Project READ Literacy Network or PRLN (Learning Network in Waterloo)
REC	Receiving Agency (defined on page 6)
REF	Referring Agency (defined on page 6)

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1. Overview of Topic and Project

Centralized or common assessment refers to a model in which individuals have their learning and skills needs assessed at a “neutral” agency and are then referred to other specific organizations and programs for education or training. The receiving organizations may conduct further assessment of clients in order to place them into the right level of delivery.

This project explored the return of investment and design of centralized or common assessment (CA) processes for EO - LBS by monitoring and evaluating the results of a pilot project delivered by three Ontario networks. Normally, the networks offer a fee-for-service assessment structure, with community partners and employment service providers paying this fee. This pilot project introduced a ministry-funded centralized assessment model with the intention of being able to ascertain the feasibility of a centralized assessment model provided at no cost to learners or service providers. Assessments were offered in three formats -- one-to-one in person, group format in person, and one-to-one distance using technology (Skype) -- over a period of months in 2012 and 2013.

This project was limited to three networks already involved in centralized assessment on a fee- for-service basis: Adult Basic Education Association (ABEA), Project READ Literacy Network (Project READ), and Literacy Link Niagara (LLN).

2. Objectives of the Evaluation

As described in the original proposal by ABEA to MTCU, the purpose of the evaluation is to

- evaluate centralized assessment with recommendations for a workable model for LBS
- recommend protocols for a centralized assessment model
- share best practices of centralized assessment used by local CLARS sites
- evaluate the effectiveness, efficiency and rate of return on establishing centralized assessment for EO (as much as possible given limitations on data)
- evaluate the impact of centralized assessment on service coordination
- evaluate models of centralized assessment for urban and rural areas, including distance assessment process and the use of technology

Building on this understanding, this evaluation was designed to measure the effectiveness of a particular system or design within organisations and networks - such as systems of communication, financial systems, manufacturing systems, etc. In this case, the system is that of centralized assessment.

As such, it was neither a program nor outcomes evaluation (investigating whether programs and activities affect outcomes for program and activity participants) nor a process evaluation (focusing on whether programs and activities are operating as planned).

In evaluating a system, we assess the system to see if it does what it was supposed to do.¹ Is it working? More specifically,

- Is the system efficient? (Does it operate quickly, smoothly and with minimal waste? Is the system saving time, and resources?)
- Is the system easy to use? (Are all of the system's users able to use the system easily and effectively? Can new staff understand and use the system with minimal training?)

¹ <http://www.igcseict.info/theory/8/index.html>, University of Cambridge International Examinations

- Is the system appropriate? (Is the system suitable for the LBS networks? Does the system actually meet the needs of the networks?)

In the case of this particular evaluation, we evaluate the system by checking Users' Responses. Do they like it? Does it make their work easier? What, if anything, could be improved? This feedback can be collected in the form of Questionnaires, Interviews, and Observations.

The table that forms Appendix A to this report details how each evaluation objective was reached in this particular process, identifying the indicators, sources of information, and data collection methods.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Literature Review

The research began with a literature review on centralized assessment, focusing on effectiveness and efficiency as well as on different delivery models, including for urban and rural settings. The review included key word searches in scholarly article databases (e.g., Scholars Portal) and in the “grey literature” produced by government, not-for-profit organizations, and private researchers. A handful of articles were found, most of which focused on common assessment in the British context.

3.2 Data Collection and Sample Size

This evaluation employed a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis. In the Ontario Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) field, there are a number of key players, each of which contributed data to this evaluation.

Learners or clients who identify a need for literacy supports, often in order to pursue educational or work-related goals

Referring agencies work with learners and identify a need for a literacy assessment. Programs and organizations that refer learners include Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Supports Program, EO providers, and LBS organizations.

Assessors assist learners in working through tools that assess their literacy and numeracy skills. Assessors work for learning networks and often provide information and referral to learners in terms of next steps.

Receiving agencies provide services to learners after they have received an assessment. These agencies consist of community-based organizations focused on LBS as well as LBS programs offered by colleges and school boards.

More specifically, data was collected through

- interviews with 5 individuals experienced with centralized assessments, either in LBS (in regions outside the pilot project area) or in CLARS
- interviews with 5 assessors, denoted by ASR in this report

- online survey of referring agencies (all agencies in the three regions were invited to participate, after attempts to arrange individual interviews were unsuccessful), with 10 surveys completed and denoted by REF in this report
- online survey of receiving agencies - mostly LBS providers (all agencies in the three regions were invited to participate, after attempts to arrange individual interviews were unsuccessful), yielding 11 completed surveys and denoted by REC in this report
- focus group of front-line workers in receiving agencies, conducted by ABEA
- post-assessment structured survey of 98 persons, comprising approximately 1/3 of learners who were assessed as part of the pilot project, administered by the networks as part of their follow up
- conference call with 6 representatives from TCU (see Section 3.4 for details)

3.3 Ethics and Confidentiality

All participants were fully informed about the nature of the study and their participation. They provided informed consent prior to beginning the research. They were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any time without consequence, penalty and judgment. They were informed that they may also refuse to answer any questions that they are not comfortable with. All information was kept confidential as their names were not to be used in the study in reports.

All electronic information was stored on a password protected computer and all personal information was encrypted. All paper documents were stored in a filing cabinet at the researchers' home offices and will be destroyed five years after completion of the study.

A transcript of the statement outlining the above information was read at the start of each interview for this project (with the exception of client interviews, for which our questions will simply be added to an existing interview template). Further details are available upon request from the author.

3.4 Limitations and Challenges

The original research design included telephone interviews with staff in referring agencies (such as Ontario Works) and receiving agencies (mostly LBS providers). Due to a very low response rate to interview requests and a number of failed interviews in

which the person was not available at the pre-designated time or decided after beginning the interview that they could not answer the questions, it was decided to pursue an online survey that allowed for an option to remain anonymous. This approach yielded 21 complete interviews. These numbers meet our targets, but an online survey does not provide the rich results normally obtained by a one-to-one interview.

The original plan included obtaining feedback from MTCU representatives. Four open-ended questions were sent to MTCU representatives familiar with CA in the three pilot regions. It was decided that it was premature or inappropriate to engage in the discussions prior to the completion of the project and that the discussion would assist MTCU in responding to the project once completed.

4. Central Assessment: Case Studies

In this section, four case studies of central assessment are presented:

- 1) Coordinated Language Assessment and Referral System (CLARS), Ontario
- 2) Community Mental Health Common Assessment (CMHCA), Ontario
- 3) Common Assessment Framework in Children's Services, UK
- 4) LBS Central Assessment, Ontario (external to the present pilot)

Each of these is presented following the same structure: an overview, a list of benefits and challenges of CA in this sector, any best practices identified in the research, and finally discussion that includes how the case study informs CA in the LBS field. At the end of this chapter, some synthesized key findings around best practices are presented.

4.1 Coordinated Language Assessment and Referral System (CLARS), Ontario²

Overview

English and French as a second language instruction is offered via two main programs in Ontario, one federal and one provincial. Citizenship and Immigration Canada funds Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) for 50,000 learners in Ontario, all of whom are permanent residents or convention refugees. LINC is a standardized program with common, established benchmarks. Another 120,000 students are enrolled in provincial language programs (English as a Second Language or ESL) funded by the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration. These courses are provided primarily through adult or continuing education departments of school boards, are not as standardized, and have less stringent eligibility requirements.

These language streams each have their own assessment processes for placing learners, and learners may be assessed multiple times as their status or location changes, such as if they moved from one school board district to another. This has created a number of

² Note: Information presented in this section is based on interviews with 3 individuals involved in the creation and delivery of CLARS, including Mourad Mardikian, Manager, Language Training Unit, Immigration Programs Branch, Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, Ontario who has been working on CLARS since idea inception in 2008. Information was also obtained from various online documents and presentations.

challenges in the language learning system. According to one key informant interviewed for this research:

Lack of consistency was a major issue we faced. Also many newcomers who were eligible for LINC still opted for ESL, and from that point on government could not track them, so we lacked knowledge of their progress. So there were inconsistencies in describing proficiency as well as gaps in terms of knowing their pathways. There was also duplication. People had to be assessed multiple times because their assessments were not recognized. And assessors naturally wanted to keep those they assessed in their own programs, so not all newcomers knew about all their options.

This is the context in which CLARS was conceived.

As part of an initiative to improve coordination between federal and provincial level services, in early 2008 civil servants recommended the creation of a front-end common assessment for second language learning. This evolved into the Coordinated Language Assessment and Referral System or CLARS. The main impetus for CLARS is to create a clear, standardized approach, with cost savings being a secondary consideration (interview).

Pilot delivery of CLARS has been running in three regions since 2011, with ongoing refinements of the system being made before an anticipated comprehensive roll out across the province by the end of 2013. As of June 2012, 35 meetings had taken place between MCI and CIC on CLARS. According to an interviewee, the concept of CLARS is simple, but “the devil is in the details.”

The CLARS Vision. As articulated in official CLARS documents, CLARS is envisioned to be a coordinated language assessment and referral system that

- is learner-oriented and outcomes-based
- provides fair and seamless assessment and referral (i.e. centralized third-party assessment and referrals at designated assessment centres)
- is relevant and responsive
- provides to the newcomer
 - an indication of his/her language skills

- an explanation of training needed to advance to the next desired level of proficiency
- referral to sites where the training can be accessed
- a personal portable record

According to one service provider who has experience with CLARS, it recognizes that other options such as literacy and upgrading may be needed as well, not just ESL. CLARS is seen as a “harmonization of assessment” (interview).

The CLARS Approach. Learner-centred – learner choice based on assessment and best fit with respect to needs. CLARS includes

- one standardized set of tools/tests, CLB based, applied by trained and certified assessors
- assessors who are not teachers and are located in CLARS centres
- learners being directed to CLARS assessment centres first (by all SPOs)
- learners being assigned a unique identifier and entered into a common data base (HARTs) – attendance; CLB proficiency levels (beginning competency; developing competency; and completing competency) all entered into HARTs
- multiple ways to access the assessment
 - fixed centres with daytime and evening hours
 - satellite centres with part time hours
 - itinerant assessors on a regularly scheduled basis
 - itinerant assessors operating on demand, e.g., for a specific course
 - distance or remote assessment – in discussion but not yet in place

One interviewee expressed these reasons for liking the CLARS model: “Oh yes, objectively it is so much better, adds standardization, consistency, and [learners are] told about all possibilities so they can then make an informed choice.”

Benefits and Challenges

The advantages of CLARS identified in interviews include

- cost savings
- common standards
- learners are better aware of options
- clients make choices
- agencies have better community knowledge, can see community gaps and make recommendations to funders
- intake worker uses holistic approach

Cost savings. We have replaced two part-time assessors (4 days/week) with one PT assessor (4 days/week), mostly due to reduced duplication. We can also channel more resources into assessment and away from registration. Savings from the pilot projects are definitely being seen.³

We are providing common standards. The Big Mac should taste the same no matter where you eat it. Courses will each have common course descriptions based on CLB's.

Learners are better aware of all their options, not just those within a particular school board.

Clients make choices, it in their hands. CLARS operates on a business model in which we have to meet client-driven need.

We now have a clear idea of peoples' options, why they go to different places. We know where the gaps are, where the demand is. We can pass this along to our funders. We can track where people move through our database, also their most common professions.

We introduced the position of intake worker who has a holistic view and asks a lot of questions, including but not limited to language, for example, childminding needs and any disabilities.

Challenges of CLARS identified in interviews

³ According to another key informant, cost was never part of the conversation. The implementation will actually cost in the 'seven figures' to implement, according to this individual, though it is believed that it will save money in the long run by reducing duplication.

Many of the challenges identified in the interviews relate to uncertainty and change, especially as a program undergoes pilot testing. One key informant noted: “Change brings fear of the unknown, hence the need for lots of early and ongoing communication.” Another stated: “Ambiguity is unavoidable but it is challenging, especially in a pilot situation... Getting everyone to agree to what is suggested, to buy into the change, to see the benefits and not just the work involved.”

There have also been some challenges in terms of defining eligibility for the various ESL/FSL programs so that appropriate referrals can be made. Good communication among various government departments has been helpful here as well.

Best Practices

Because CLARS is still in pilot stage, few best practices have been publicly identified. Under CLARS, there is a central booking system. Assessments can be booked by assessment centres and via all language training providers. They use the “comments” section of the booking tool to note any special requirements.

In terms of referrals, the pilot has shown higher enrolment if the referral is done at the assessment centre by assessors. If a client has decided on his or her next steps, enrolment can happen at the same visit with the assessor. If there are no spaces at the chosen site, the client is put on the waitlist. If the client defers the referral, he or she can self-refer at a later time, or possibly return to the assessment centre for referral.

Discussion

When CLARS has been fully implemented, it will provide a single path of entry to official language programming in Ontario. It has an intended goal of eliminating assessment duplication. In contrast, there is no common entry point for LBS clients at present. If central assessment were fully implemented in LBS, there could be a single path of entry as well.

Similar to the conceptualization of central assessment in the LBS field, CLARS is a client-centred model. It provides learners with a referral slip. They can then make their own course selections at the organization of their choice at their convenience. Learners who do not register in courses right away may have to be reassessed if their language skills have changed, for example, because they have improved their language skills while working.

CLARS also includes a back-end support system that tracks learners through a common database known as HARTS. The common database makes it easy to search for

information, reduces the need to reassess learners, and captures their progress. There has been discussion of developing a “learner passport” or transcript as well. When learners take steps to register for language training, it is noted in the database. Also, the system will not allow learners to register above the level at which they have been assessed. In LBS, the idea of a complete tracking system for LBS learners is not part of the current central assessment pilot. A tracking system around CA could be valuable if CA were instituted within the LBS system.

Under CLARS, language providers within the same community will meet together under Community Partnership Committees which include all language training providers in a locality. CLARS centres will share information about demand and gaps in service so that service providers might be able to fill the gaps. Language providers are meeting each other and starting to work together.

The benefits expressed by the CLARS research in this report as stated earlier include

- cost savings over the long-run
- common standards
- learners are better aware of options
- clients make choices
- agencies have better community knowledge, can see community gaps and make recommendations to funders
- intake worker uses holistic approach

These same benefits are directly applicable to a CA approach within LBS. As part of service coordination, regional networks are well situated to support clients in making decisions about their upgrading. Networks know their communities through their facilitation of planning and ongoing networking with community partners. They understand the OALCF, are aware of community gaps and able to identify the programs to best meet the needs of learners, without an invested interest in service delivery. This in fact is, service coordination in a meaningful way to learners and programs.

4.2 Community Mental Health Common Assessment (CMH CA), Ontario

Overview

Until quite recently, Ontario's 300+ Community Mental Health agencies used a wide variety of assessment practices. The Community Mental Health Common Assessment Project (CMH CAP) has been an attempt to meet the sector's vision of a streamlined assessment process that will standardize current practices across the province.

According to the CMH CAP website, the aggregate information gathered from this process will inform planning and decision-making, while promoting best practices for the sector.⁴

The Ontario Common Assessment of Need (OCAN) is a standardized assessment tool that assists with mental health recovery. It was designed for Community Mental Health agencies based on input from consumers, researchers, policy makers and front line workers. The tool considers 23 aspects of a consumer's life. Before or during conversations with a health worker, consumers can complete their own version of the assessment. With all agencies using one common assessment approach, information can be shared more easily and agencies can better direct consumers to the most appropriate supports.

Beginning in December 2007, CMH CAP worked with sector stakeholders to develop and test OCAN. All 14 Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) were involved in implementing OCAN. More than three-quarters of the 294 eligible community mental health organizations are now using the tool, with the remainder having the option to do so by the end of 2012, when the project wrapped up.⁵

Originally piloted in the NE LHIN in addition to 16 pilot organizations representing several LHINs through the Province, CMH CAP is in the process of implementing the OCAN throughout the Province of Ontario. Implementations are rolling-out on a LHIN-by-LHIN basis.

⁴ Community Mental Health Common Assessment Project, <https://www.ccim.on.ca/CMHA/OCAN/default.aspx>

⁵ CMH CAP Project Profile 2012, accessed from https://www.ccim.on.ca/CMHA/OCAN/Document/CMHProjectProfile_20120215_v1%206_CMHCAP-FINAL.pdf

Benefits and Challenges

Limited information is available about the specific benefits and challenges of using OCAN in the mental health field. The most relevant study focuses more on the tool itself and on particularities of implementation as they pertain to LHINs and do not focus much on common assessment as a model.⁶ This report did identify several benefits for piloting OCAN implementation to the NE LHIN such as

- developing trust and closer relationships among health service providers
- “virtually” integrating the community mental health system by establishing a common language and promoting a more collaborative approach
- building an infrastructure to collect common and standard information, which may assist in future planning

According to the report, OCAN captures the consumer’s voice by identifying individual needs, matching these needs to existing services, and highlighting service gaps.

Best Practices

This is a very recent project but some best practices were identified in the *Lessons Learned* report from 2010, even if they do not capture more recent findings from the pilot. The following factors were identified as key to ensuring successful LHIN-wide OCAN implementation:

- regular, two-way communication with the project team and organizations to inform, address, and problem solve
- support from the project team throughout implementation for all levels
- sensitivity and awareness to issues that may arise
- sensitivity and awareness to other concurrent projects underway in the sector⁷

Aboriginal service providers participated in the pilot project and supported the development of a common assessment tool. However, a recommendation was made “to devise cultural supports to better reflect the Aboriginal individual’s recovery

⁶ Community Mental Health Common Assessment Project, *Lessons Learned Summary Report, North East LHIN OCAN Implementation Pilot*, June 2010, 23pp.

⁷ *Lessons Learned Report*, 2010, p. 9.

journey and community realities in order to improve uptake and implementation of OCAN.”⁸

Discussion

Given the recent completion date of the project, further research might unveil more findings that would be of interest to LBS in Ontario. Transferable best practices relate to the importance of two-way communication as well as developing trust and strong relationships among LBS service providers. Also, data gathered from common assessment should be used to inform future LBS planning.

With networks as the lead for service coordination, more reflection on the role of centralized assessment as part of service coordination needs to be considered. The success of OCAN is in part dependent upon the integration of services through a strong supportive infrastructure which provides common information and supports planning. The success of OALCF is also dependent on an effective and efficient support system (or infrastructure) and CA can be instrumental in undergirding information/referral and ultimately client success. CA can also provide a source for common information and analysis used for EO community planning processes, as well as for MTCU program planning, evaluation and implementation.

⁸ *Lessons Learned Report, 2010, p. 5.*

4.3 Common Assessment Framework in Children's Services, UK

Overview

Over the past decade, the United Kingdom has transformed the structure and delivery of services for children and young people by initiating new alliances between public and not-for-profit agencies, including new forms of partnership. One element of this transformation has been the development of a common assessment framework (CAF), envisaged as a multi-agency tool to provide a standardized formal approach to the assessment of need, to facilitate earlier interventions, and to promote children's well-being. The CAF was intended to replace individual assessment procedures across all children's services, thereby reducing assessment duplication.

One overview of the CAF process notes that it is:

subject of detailed government guidance (Department for Education and Skills 2006), involves completion of a standard assessment form by any professional engaging with children who identifies that a child has additional needs that cannot be met within their own agency. Key features of the CAF include its holistic nature; that its completion involves the active participation of the child and his/her parents/care givers; and that it involves some skill in the practitioner, in working with the family and making professional judgements.⁹

The CAF was rolled out nationally in the UK between April 2006 and March 2008.¹⁰

⁹ Sue Adamson and Catherine Deverell, CAF in the country: implementing the Common Assessment Framework in a rural area, *Child and Family Social Work* 14, April 2009, p. 401. See also Department for Education and Skills, *Common Assessment Framework for Children and Young People: Practitioner's Guide* (Department for Education and Skills, London, 2006).

¹⁰ Fiona Collins and Janet McCray, Partnership working in services for children: Use of the common assessment framework, *Journal of Interprofessional Care* 26, 2012, 134-140.

Benefits and Challenges

According to one review of the common assessment model in children's services, this model benefits service users by "meeting the whole range of their needs in a coordinated rather than in a piecemeal way," and it benefits organizations by "achieving resource economies and bridging gaps."¹¹

There have been a number of challenges around implementation of CAF in the UK context. One relates to difficulties ascertaining the balance between central government direction and priorities for partnership activity and local determination. Service providers were directed to work together in partnership and to take a holistic approach to clients, but at the same time they were still required to meet various performance outcomes, and government policy encouraged competitiveness among agencies rather than cooperation. In the words of one manager of a social care agency:

The government has said to us as all agencies you will work together you will communicate you will find ways to work in an educated way around children's needs but with the other hand it has said you will hit these targets you will meet these performance criteria . . . but the targets that they have given are not integrated targets those very targets separate us . . .¹²

In sum, the child-focused CAF model was seen as a good one, but in reality the individual and agency targets were perceived to be prioritized over a child-centered approach. As a result, in its early years, the CAF was effective in some regions while floundering elsewhere.¹³

A second challenge relates to lack of common understanding among practitioners as to whether CAF is primarily (1) a stand-alone assessment tool, (2) a tool for referrals, that is, to obtain resources for clients, or (3) a means of generating discussion with clients and reassuring them about their situations and options.¹⁴ Practitioners unfamiliar with holistic assessments, or reluctant to change familiar patterns of working, were more likely to see and use CAF as a referral mechanism rather than as an assessment which is linked to a referral.

¹¹ N. Farmakopoulou, What lies underneath? An interorganisational analysis of collaboration between education and social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 32, (2002): 1051–1066, cited in Adamson and Deverell, p. 401.

¹² Cited in Collins and McCray, 2012, p. 137.

¹³ Collins and McCray, 2012, p. 134.

¹⁴ M. Brandon, A. Howe, V. Dagley, C. Salter, C. Warren, and J. Black, *Evaluating the Common Assessment Framework and Lead Professional Guidance and Implementation*, Research Report No. 740 (Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills, 2006).

Best Practices

Studies of the CAF point to some general best practices around common assessment, including

- recognition that partnership working has profound implications for practitioners
- overcoming distrust among service provider agencies
- integration of CAF and other assessments needed by service providers
- putting children at the centre of thinking, planning and service delivery

Recognition that partnership working has profound implications for practitioners is important. It necessitates changes to working practices and the need to acquire new knowledge, skills, beliefs and identities. An emphasis on improving outcomes for service users can help bring service providers together around a common goal, even recognizing that a variety of services are instrumental to meeting service need. Participation in the CAF process raised awareness of other agencies and practitioners' contributions to realization of a common aim, that service providers come from different angles but are all trying to work for the best interest of the child.

Service provider agencies overcome distrust of each other by improving opportunities for inter-agency contact, including those designed to improve skills and confidence. This is particularly important in rural areas where service providers work in more isolated contexts.

Service provider agencies integrate CAF and other assessments that are being used, and they show a greater willingness to replace specialist assessments with CAF.

The will to put children (or, more broadly, service users) at the centre of thinking, planning and service delivery needs to happen at all levels of government, so that a continuum of services can be provided.

Discussion

The CAF in the UK is a far-reaching model engaging service providers across various sectors that work with children and families, including education, health, and social work. Implementing a common assessment tool across sectors is much more ambitious than common assessment as it applies to LBS in Ontario. Centralized assessors in Ontario are in the literacy field and employed by a learning network. Nonetheless, the

recommendations around communication and increased understanding across service provider networks are highly applicable in Ontario LBS. It is only through communication and training that service providers will understand the role and value of CA.

The challenges that have arisen in the UK case have implications for LBS in Ontario. First, if governments wish to encourage partnerships among service providers in the not-for-profit sector, they should revise expected outcomes accordingly. Also, even though centralized assessors themselves may share an understanding about the purposes of common assessment, it remains important to communicate and discuss that understanding with service providers on the sending and receiving end of LBS assessments.

4.4 LBS Central Assessment, Ontario (external to the present pilot)

Overview

Variations of CA are practiced in the LBS field in Ontario communities that fall outside of the CA pilot project area. One Ontario LBS agency has an arrangement with OW, in which an LBS assessor is housed in the OW office. Referrals come from OW case managers and are quite simple for all parties involved. The assessments are co-funded by OW and the LBS delivery agency.

In another community, one of the LBS networks has a physical presence at a local Employment Services provider. OW and ES send clients to this location, and it has become a first stop for many people. The assessor shares referral data at local LSP meetings, including number of clients referred for assessment, where they were referred, and where they ultimately ended up. This transparency provides evidence that one LBS provider is not benefitting at the expense of others. This arrangement is being discontinued due to lack of funding for the assessments.

In other communities, regional learning networks conduct CA for OW recipients on a fee for service basis. In the community interviewed for this project, OW wanted assessments to inform case plan as well as make referrals, but literacy providers were apprehensive of doing assessments of OW clients who were not likely to enroll in their program. CA alleviated stress on the program of doing assessments that did not lead to enrolment. Also, in some cases, the CA was a first step in moving from OW to ODSP.

Central assessment was also used in employment services prior to ES transformation in 2009. Assessment centres, such as the one operated by VPI in Hamilton, served as gateways to former federally funded employment services.

Benefits and Challenges

Benefits include a straightforward and clear referral process at one point of contact in which learners are easily able to access assessors and have assessments conducted.

Several challenges were identified including

- LBS agencies can become concerned that they are not receiving their “fair share” of clients. Sometimes numbers are down across the region, or case managers may not be sending as many clients for assessment, but a particular agency may

have the perception that it is not getting a fair share of referrals. This harms the process and likelihood of CA being successful. In the words of an interviewee, "It's those little things that could kill a CA, not necessarily the process or even the quality of the assessments."

- lack of recognition by MTCU of the time it takes to do a proper assessment and referral.
- larger organizations such as colleges often have their own formal assessment programs and are not interested in relying on third-party assessments
- in larger cities, it was expressed that a streamlined process of CA risks losing "that real specialized knowledge of neighbourhood services, of people who have developed tremendous relationships with other programs [and have] that type of knowledge of community services." (interview)

Several informants identified funding as a challenge for CA. This challenge does not relate to the model itself, but rather how it is funded. Some networks subsidize CA because they view it as valuable to the community. In one respondent's view:

Service providers don't get that it will save time and money for them overall... Government would have to fund in order to make CA happen. And this is not likely to happen. (interview)

Informants also discussed a number of other challenges related to literacy assessments in general, but not unique to CA. Although low literacy is often one of the barriers faced by marginalized individuals, it may be difficult to get learners to engage in literacy programs. Some of the CA tools can help in this regard in that they provide learners with some positive feedback that may encourage them to follow a plan.

Best Practices

A 2008 study of common assessment tools stated that any broad implementation of CA should include four key elements including

- professional development and training
- guidelines for the administration and interpretation of assessment tools and results
- mentoring by experienced assessors to guide the development of assessment best practices among peers
- a phasing in or practice piloting of various tools/resources over an extended timeline.

According to the study authors, “This staged approach will result in a stronger knowledge base amongst assessors, more consistent use of assessment tools/resources and more informed learners/clients.”¹⁵

Research also identified the importance of regular meetings of assessors and local service providers to share information about demand and gaps in service, to share information as to where people are being referred (transparency), and to build relationships that cross organizational boundaries. Networks, as the support organization are well positioned to facilitate this type of discussion and communication and are in fact, are doing so now as part of service coordination. According to one informant, CA can

work well where there is a desire for it to work well. Takes cooperation and keeping egos in check. ... The assessors are very strong in these places and recognized by other LBS agencies as such. They trust the assessor. So when all is in alignment, it works very well. They have a longstanding system.

Indeed, the importance of relationships and strong partnerships that include mutual education and common terminology has been identified in other reports that are broader in scope. According to the 2008 study cited above,

The *Ontario Learns* report identified the importance of local partnerships among delivery agencies and community organizations that create seamless pathways

¹⁵ Project READ, *Common Assessment Tools Pilot in Three Communities: Kitchener-Waterloo, London, Sudbury Anglophone and Sudbury Francophone, Final Project Report*. Presented to Ontario Ministry of Education, Adult Education Unit in cooperation with MTCU, July 4, 2008, p. 5.

for adult learners and enrich the quality and variety of programming to meet local needs. Inherent in strong partnerships are mutual understanding and philosophy, compatible goals and protocols, and a common language to exchange information and support clients/learners. A common language is key to assessing prior learning and skills and being able to share that information with across agencies and educators.¹⁶

The *Ontario Learns* report does not focus on CA in particular, but its findings reinforce the importance of partnerships and communication in the LBS field.

Discussion

Each of the practices and findings in this section has direct relevance to the implementation of CA in Ontario in the LBS field. In the examples above, the CA model is premised on strong relationships among service providers, and keeping rivalry over clients at bay. Ongoing education of parties involved in service delivery is important, particularly as some agencies have high staff turnover. Education should include an overview of CA, and a demonstration of how it is supportive rather than in competition with literacy providers. An analogy could be made with the health care field. Networks that provide CA could be seen as general practitioners who meet with patients, diagnose their needs, and send them on to the specialists who can best help them. Receiving agencies, in turn, are the specialists.

With finite resources programs may not see the value in allocating resources to clients they may not serve as learners. This is reinforced in the current Performance Management Framework which recognizes the % of learner targets achieved as an indication of efficiency. However, if CA were funded so that assessments were offered at no cost to learners or agencies, clients would know the path to take, thereby increasing efficiency.

¹⁶ Project READ, *Common Assessment Tools Pilot*, 2008, p. 7.

4.5 Synthesis of Best Practices

Based on the four examples of central assessment presented above, a number of best practices can be identified. Examples from which the practices are drawn are noted in parentheses:

- a. Begin any initiative around central assessment with the recognition that working in partnership has implications for practitioners, including changes to working practices and the need to acquire new knowledge, and skills. (CAF)
- b. Regular, two-way communication is established between assessors and organizations to share program information and aggregate client data, address concerns, and problem solve. This could be achieved through regular face-to-face group meetings. (LBS, CAF) Outcomes:
 - a. increases transparency and helps overcome any distrust among service provider agencies
 - b. strengthens relationships
 - c. brings service providers together around a common goal: to improve outcomes for clients
 - d. spreads awareness of sector-related developments
- c. Assessments must be easy to access. This has been identified as a challenge in rural and remote areas in particular. Itinerant services or distance learning options can mitigate the challenges of distance in less populated areas. (LBS)
- d. The use of a central booking system facilitates referrals and movement of clients into programs, provided that the client has decided on his or her next steps. This may not be practical in all models of central assessment. (CLARS)
- e. Consult with service providers working with particular populations such as aboriginals and newcomers to explore any barriers to uptake and implementation of common assessment. (CMH CA)
- f. Integrate common assessment tool with other assessments needed by service providers so that any assessment duplication can be reduced. (CAF)
- g. Use a supportive infrastructure to move integration forward. (CMH CA)

5. Research Results

In addition to the case studies of central assessment presented above, this research was informed by interviews with and surveys of participants in the recently-completed pilot project, including clients, assessors, referring agencies, and receiving agencies. Their responses are presented in this section. The evaluation objectives are each characterized by several variables, each of which will be addressed in this section:

Efficiency

- a. System operates smoothly, with coordination among various partners and building on existing resources and reducing duplication
- b. Clients understand why they are being assessed
- c. Clients know next steps to take

Ease of use

- a. Process is clear for system users (agencies and clients)
- b. Clients find the assessment recommendations easy to understand

Appropriateness

- a. System/Process is suitable for literacy assessments in pilot regions
- b. Client was admitted to recommended program or service (after being assessed)
- c. Clients are completing recommended program or service
- d. System meets the needs of users

Satisfaction of system users

- a. Clients have timely, useful and accurate information needed to make informed decisions
- b. Creation of personal plan
- c. Client satisfaction
- d. Agency satisfaction with process

Impact

- a. Client actually took next steps, is following the action plan
- b. Time saved in agencies

Table 1. Client Ratings of Assessment Process (%)*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>Efficiencies:</i>				
I clearly understood why I needed an assessment.	43.6	52.1	4.3	0.0
I understood the assessment process (e.g., where to go, who to contact afterwards, etc.)	41.9	49.5	7.5	1.1
<i>Ease of Use:</i>				
The assessment service was easily accessible.	49.5	48.4	2.2	0.0
My assessment recommendations are easy to understand.	33.3	64.5	2.2	0.0
<i>Client Satisfaction:</i>				
The assessment process took my needs into consideration.	41.5	55.3	3.2	0.0
The staff at the assessment agency were helpful.	59.1	37.6	1.1	2.2
My assessment helps me to better understand the type of skills training or education I need.	28.0	61.3	8.6	2.2
Overall, I was satisfied with the assessment process.	48.4	46.2	4.3	1.1

* Based on survey responses of 98 learners who participated in the pilot project and responded to a post-assessment telephone survey administered by the networks

5.1 Efficiency of centralized assessment process

System operates smoothly, with coordination

Many research participants stated that central assessment provided efficiencies by assisting learners who were not aware of services, saving time over all, and identifying the levels at which learners should be placed.

Some of the survey responses that addressed efficiency were:

The benefit is that it gives them one place to go if they are interested in upgrading, but are confused by the number of upgrading options out there. They have an assessment, and then get a discussion about which location may be a good fit for them with knowledgeable staff. This is easier than walking into an agency and hoping they've come to the right door, only to be sent somewhere else. (REC Jan 23, 2013 12:28 PM)

It is good for developing or establishing a rapport as well as setting up a formal referral process. And, in the instance that some questions arise or an employment counsellor requires clarification, they have that direct contact. (REF Jan 28, 2013 9:58 AM)

Less confusion - easier process - less duplication (REF Jan 23, 2013 12:38 PM)

I think it is really good for the community as a whole, and from the clients perspective I think it is very useful. If I were a client myself this is the route I would choose, just because it offers a much more in depth action plan than the other routes available. In addition in using the centralized assessment program clients are privy to the knowledge that [the network] has to offer. [The network] is a centre that is a hive of information and is generally the most knowledgeable and up to date with the various services available. It is hard to be up to date on everything that is occurring in a community and having the centralized assessment program allows this to happen in a far more organized and coherent way. (REC Dec 2012)

However, some receiving agencies still conduct their own assessments or supplement the central assessment, even after a network assessment has been conducted. This is inefficient. Some respondents felt that CA actually delayed learner progress, for

example, this response: “No such benefits, actually a hassle. Everything is delayed to be honest.” (REF Jan 22, 2013 6:09 AM)

The Common Assessment protocol states programs are not to reassess clients. They are only to assess gaps for program placement and learner plan development purposes. Also, if there is a waiting list to get into a program anyway, then CA does not change a learner’s timelines at all.

All five assessors interviewed were either satisfied or very satisfied with the coordination between their agency and the agencies referring clients to them as well as with the coordination between their agency and the agencies to which they refer clients (after assessment are completed). On the whole, they were more satisfied with relationships with referring agencies than with receiving agencies. Several noted the strong relationships and good communication that exist in their region.

Clients understand why they are being assessed

As shown in Table 1, in the client surveys, just over 95% of clients agreed or strongly agreed that with the statement: I clearly understood why I needed an assessment.

Clients know next steps to take

Over 90% of clients surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: I understood the assessment process (e.g., where to go, who to contact afterwards, etc.)

5.2 Ease of use of centralized assessment process

Process is clear for system users (agencies and clients)

In the survey of individuals from referring agencies, 50% of respondents cited no difficulties regarding referring learners to networks for assessments. Among the other half of respondents who cited difficulties, the reasons given did not pertain to the pilot project per se. For example, the most commonly-cited difficulty regarding assessments referred to cost, a concern that did not exist in the pilot scenario.

Another difficulty was described in these words: "Uncertain which program is appropriate for client based on what client requires and what program offers sometimes proved difficult." (REF Jan 24, 2013 12:08 PM). This response indicates a lack of understanding of the CA model in the first place as referring agencies do not need to know what programs are appropriate.

Finally, one provider cited transportation as a concern as this provider was located in a rural community and getting to a larger urban centre.

Some the responses to the survey were:

Gives them options and time guidelines for their upgrading (REF Jan 23, 2013 6:33 AM)

It does give me information about what to test and clients' needs and wants. (REF Jan 23, 2013 6:24 AM)

They receive information about all agencies. (REF Jan 22, 2013 1:20 PM)

In sum, only one provider cited difficulties with referrals that actually pertained to the pilot project, and that difficulty pertained to rural communities specifically.

Clients find the assessment recommendations easy to understand

As shown in Table 1, in the client surveys, more than 97% of clients agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: The assessment service was easily accessible.

In the client surveys, more than 97% of clients agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: My assessment recommendations are easy to understand.

A related point pertains to the options open to learners. Under the CA model, learners have more choices. One assessor offered this perspective:

If you have a client who doesn't like a certain agency, may not feel comfortable saying they want to go somewhere else. But this model allows them to come back to an assessor and ask for a different plan. I have had that happen, oh yes. I was surprised how often I heard from clients for this reason, or just to say thanks. (ASR Feb 01, 2013)

By this logic, recommendations are not only easy to understand, but learners can return and ask for variations to their plans.

5.3 Appropriateness of centralized assessment process

System/Process is suitable for educational assessments

This pilot project revealed the extent to which existing relationships between learning networks and service providers can influence uptake of CA. In one region where CA was already well-established, the uptake of the pilot assessments was great. In another region where CA was not well-established, the network faced more challenges getting service providers to participate in the pilot.

Overall, it was felt that the piloted CA system is very appropriate for educational assessments. An assessor interviewed for this project provided insight into the benefits of CA:

When Second Career came along, I saw clients in action centres who didn't know about our assessments. They would often fail out of programs due to lack of literacy skills; then I assessed a lot of people who then entered the program more slowly but they stuck with it, did not fail out, were successful. I would like to see money available to ES or via the networks to pay for CA. It does take 3-5 hrs/client so it costs. But it is really "an essential service." If they start out with a literacy assessment, learners get to the right place the first time. It doesn't matter to us where they go for service, as long as it is the best program for them. Would save money in the long run in the adult education system by not putting them on some fast track while lacking LBS they need to succeed. Saves time, frustration, is confidence building. CA should become part of EO services.
(ASR1 January 30)

Another assessor felt that CA is particularly appropriate for "barriered" clients:

I am definitely a big supporter of CA, especially for clients with multiple barriers. Maybe they don't move forward with everything all at once, but they have the information and they have identified steps, know which order to go in.
(ASR2 January 30)

Indeed, one of the assessment tools used in the pilot was the Learning Challenges Assessment Tool (LCAT), created to assess persons with learning challenges or suspected learning challenges. This unique tool was developed by ABEA in 2005 and serves a particular group that otherwise would not benefit from assessment. In fact, LCAT was used for 40% of ABEA's pilot project assessments. This is an example of CA

can assist learners who may not qualify or be suitable for LBS programs but who nonetheless find assessment useful in helping them to map out next steps in their lives.

Client was admitted to recommended program or service (after being assessed)

See Section 5.5 under Impact, on page 39.

Clients are completing recommended program or service

See Section 5.5 under Impact, on page 39.

System meets the needs of users (including delivery models)

Among the receiving agencies surveys, 9 of the 11 respondents stated that their network made appropriate referrals to the agency. Some of the responses were as follows:

[Network] is very knowledgeable about the various LBS service providers in our areas, and makes appropriate referrals. (REC Jan 23, 2013 12:53 PM)

[Network] is extremely good at referrals. We have never had a problem with the referrals we have gotten from them.... The process provides us consistency in our ratings of the clients. But I would say that the main benefit provided to our clients directly is that the assessment allows them to see the bigger picture. It also provides them with various links showing the various stages and steps they need to take. It provides the clients with choices of concurrent learning and just generally provides them with a good variety of options in which they can choose from. (REC Dec 2012)

A few stated that clients often get re-assessed by the receiving agency anyway. One respondent stated:

Some of the assessments are appropriate and some are not. Most need some form of partial re-assessment to determine their actual suitability for our program, depending on their learning goals. After interviewing them, some clients are referred to other, more appropriate programs.... Assessment method used by referring agency doesn't match our own assessment methods: e.g. use of calculators, therefore, client skill levels do not correspond to our entry

requirement. 2) Client goals or deadlines don't correspond to what our service offers. 3) Client goals are not realistic given the amount of upgrading needed, or the amount of time the client has for upgrading. (REC Jan 30, 2013 7:22 AM)¹⁷

When asked about the reassessments, one assessor offered several reasons why these might occur. Receiving agencies either did not trust the assessments, needed better training on how to read the assessments, never bothered to read the assessments, or simply just preferred to do their own. (ASR Feb 19, 2013)

Referring agencies were also on the whole in agreement that the system meets the needs of the users. In spite of reassessments happening referring agencies were also on the whole in agreement that the system meets the needs of the users. As a client-focused system, this is key to determining the value of CA.

Assessors and receiving agencies were also asked their views on the various delivery models of assessment, including which ones they had experience with, and their strengths and weaknesses. As shown in Table 2 (next page), each model does have pro's and cons, though the one-to-one in-person model was favoured above the other two. Distance options were seen as useful in overcoming distance barriers but not as beneficial for learners. The evaluation did not solicit client perspectives on the delivery models.

The critique of group assessment as lacking confidentiality for learners was not borne out in the actual description of group assessment provided by one assessor. Under the group model, instructions are reviewed as a group, then learners break into individual work spaces with individual activities. The assessor works with each of them in private to complete the plan.

Distance assessment was the particular focus of the pilot in the Niagara Region. In contrast to the other two networks that focused on in-person assessments, LLN encountered numerous challenges. Since this was the first recorded instance distance assessment had been conducted, much of their resources were invested into developing promotional strategies and referral protocols. As obstacles were encountered, adjustments to the project were made and new directions were set. Strategically LLN decided to offer Skype assessments to the clients and 3 local employment services and not OW, in an effort to build alliances between the network and ES agencies. When referrals from those agencies were not forthcoming, the project scope was broadened

¹⁷ The use of calculators as part of essential skill profiles is an internal program decision.

and offered to other networks in the province. Three networks participated: QUILL, Simcoe-Muskoka and LOCS. Many fewer assessments were completed in Niagara compared to Hamilton and Waterloo/Wellington. Some distance tools were deemed superior to Skype but it was decided to use Skype because it is more widely known and used.

Table 2. Findings on Delivery Models of Assessment

Delivery model	Pros	Cons
One to One	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible scheduling Private, safe environment Personalized attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessor's time may be more limited 'No shows' waste assessor's time
Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saves time for assessor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of individual attention Limited flexibility of appointment time/date Lack of confidentiality
Distance options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overcomes transportation barriers faced by some populations (in remote locations, disabled, incarcerated, etc.) Many people already familiar with Skype 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where internet connection slow, prolongs assessment Need access to equipment Not as thorough Some people uncomfortable with the technology Skype not the best platform, but used because it is the most commonly known

5.4 Satisfaction of system users with centralized assessment

One of the most obvious ways of evaluating central assessment is by asking system users how satisfied they are with it. In this evaluation, satisfaction was also measured by considering the creation of tools and information to help learners.

Creation of personal plan

All learners are given a personal plan as part of their assessment.

Clients have timely, useful and accurate information needed to make informed decisions

As part of the assessment process, all clients are provided with up-to-date information about local programs and courses that suit their needs.

Client satisfaction

As detailed in Table 1, clients are overwhelmingly satisfied with CA. Just over 97% of clients agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: The assessment process took my needs into consideration.

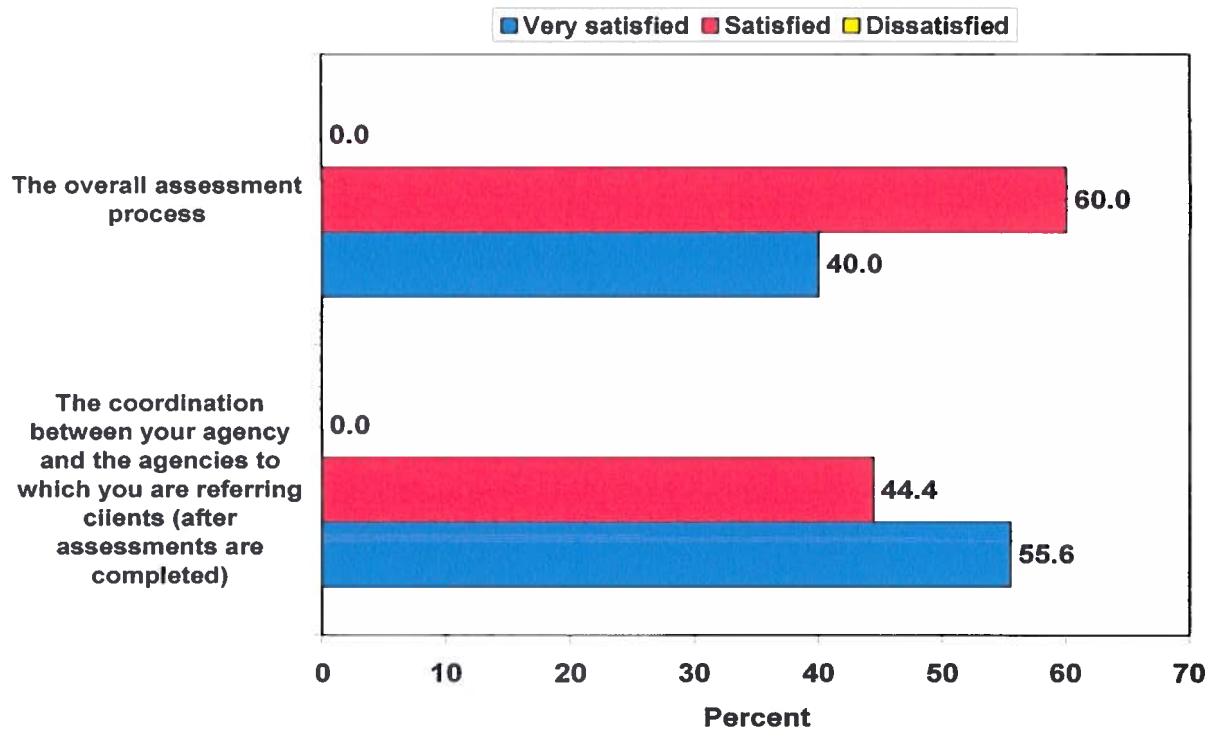
Similarly, in the client surveys, 99% of clients agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: The staff at the assessment agency were helpful.

Finally, 95% of clients agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: Overall I was satisfied with the assessment process.

Agency satisfaction with process

These are measured by questions in the surveys of staff at referring agencies that were part of the pilot assessment process. The survey responses (shown in Figure A) indicate overwhelming satisfaction with the process by referring agencies.

Figure A. Referring Agency Satisfaction



5.5 Impact of centralized assessment

Clients take next steps

According to responses in the client surveys, just under half of learners had registered for or begun to take at least one of the courses or programs recommended in their assessments (see Table 3). The surveys were completed as part of the normal follow-up call made to clients, and these normally occurred one to four months after completion of the assessment.

Among those who responded that they had taken next steps, respondents identified a variety of situations.

- 21% had made contact with agency or program, awaiting response
- 17% had registered, but not yet started
- 55% had already started a course or program
- 6% had already completed a course or program

Table 3. Next Steps (%)**

Have you registered for or begun to take any of the courses/programs recommended in your assessment?	
Yes	48.9
No	51.1
If you have already started or completed a course/program, was it appropriate for your needs?	
Yes	66.1
No	33.9

** Based on survey responses of learners who participated in the pilot project and responded to a post-assessment telephone survey: 94 responded the first question, and 56 responded to the second question.

Respondents who indicated that they had not taken courses/programs or that the course/program was not appropriate for their needs were asked to explain.

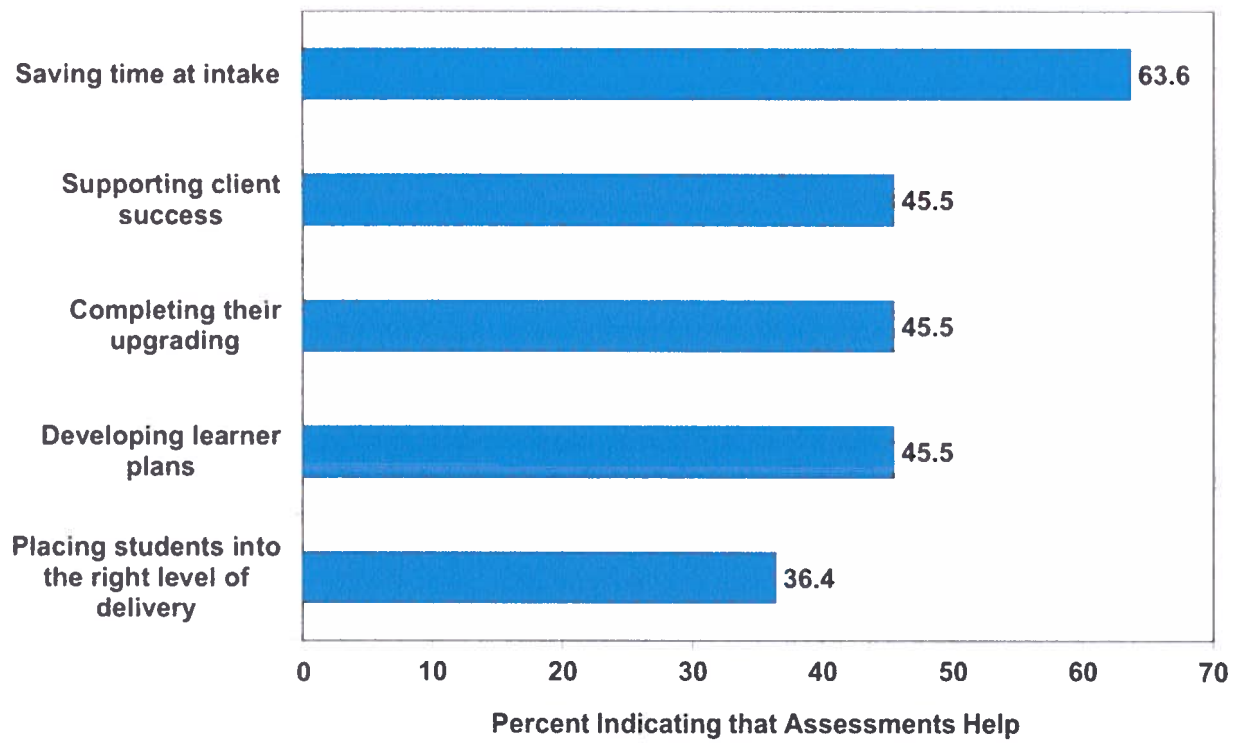
Among those who responded that they had not taken next steps, open-ended responses yielded a wide range of reasons given. The most commonly cited reasons related to family obligations, existing work commitments, and to a lesser extent health issues. Some were waiting for admission to a program, some were on a waiting list, and some were waiting for registration to open. One candid person admitted to "having a hard time getting motivated."

Among respondents stated that the course/program was not appropriate for their needs, the most common responses were related to family and work-related. Only one response actually addressed actual components of a course or program. This person stated: "too easy feeling like it's a waste of time." Otherwise, the responses here mirrored those in the previous question.

Time Saved and Other Benefits

Among receiving agencies that receive clients who have been assessed, more than 60% stated that it saves time at intake. And 45.5% stated that it helped with supporting client success, completing their upgrading, and developing learner plans. Finally, 36.4% said that CA helped to place learners into the right level of delivery.

Figure B. Receiving agencies: Compared to clients who don't have centralized assessments done, does assessment help with any of the following?



It is interesting that close to two-thirds of respondents state that CA saves time at intake, yet only one-third state that it places students the right level of delivery. How could CA save time if it placed students in the wrong level? A possible explanation for this discrepancy in the research results is that receiving agencies may save time at intake but then find out later out later that learners have been placed in the wrong level. There is no evidence to indicate that this happens, but it would explain the apparently contradictory responses.

A number of responses from receiving agencies provide further insight into these findings. Regarding time savings, they made the following points in support of CA being a timesaver:

[CA] determines that the client is a good fit for our agency and provides personal and assessment information on the client, saving us intake and assessment time. It introduces another step in the intake process to verify that the client is ready to learn. (REC Jan 23, 2013 12:53 PM)

Centralized assessment helps us know that the person coming through our doors has been pre-screened and is appropriate for our agency. It also cuts back on

assessment time. I think that more people make it to an LBS agency when other referral agencies have one place to refer to, rather than four or five. For example, it is easier for OW case workers to learn about one place to refer clients with literacy challenges than to learn about each individual agency. As such, workers are more likely to make a referral - and an appropriate referral [through the CA site] - meaning more people make it to our doors. (REC Jan 23, 2013 12:28 PM)

Time saving; good networking between agencies (REC Jan 22, 2013 1:20 PM)

it provides us with reduced assessment time and prep time with each of our clients. Also the clients come in with a goal that they want to achieve and they are less likely to change their minds over time and tend to remain more objective about the whole process. (REC Dec 2012)

When asked to state actual time reported for intake of clients with assessments and those without assessments, the answers varied. Half indicated a time savings of one-half to one hour, one indicated a time savings of 15 minutes, and 3 reported no change, in one case because all clients were assessed again. In follow-up communication with one of the LBS programs run through a school board, a manager reported that staff spent an average of 45 minutes with clients who came with a network assessment, compared to "up to 3 hours assessing and discussing the class" with clients who need a full assessment (email, March 21, 2013).

In the case where clients were reassessed, receiving staff did not believe that the assessment tool used provided a complete picture of a client's skills (despite the tool being recognized by MTCU), and so all clients were reassessed. Along those lines, one respondent stated:

A client coming to us who has not been previously assessed elsewhere actually takes less time than a previously assessed client. If the referral is appropriate, then approximately the same amount of time is needed, minus the time to score the assessment. * However, when the referral is not suitable, it will actually take longer. This may include whole or partial re-assessment for results that are ambiguous or not useful. This may include math re-assessment without using calculators, creating and scheduling times for reassessment if necessary, assisting the client with appropriate referrals, explaining the process and explaining why re-assessment is necessary, etc. (REC Jan 30, 2013 7:22 AM)

Another respondent felt that their agency was better suited to do the assessments because the tool is more detailed, it is a large organization with lots of option for clients, and because the client could be placed immediately into a class upon completion of assessment.

There are times when CA did not work well during the pilot, namely when reassessments were done in the receiving agency, either because the central assessment was deemed inappropriate or because the receiving agency did not recognize the CA. In cases where this might result in referral to a different receiving agency, this was thought to be inconvenient and discouraging to the client. LBS providers stated that clients may begin a program but quickly discover that they need to develop more foundational skills in order to be able to do the work required. It was felt that if they were then referred elsewhere, according to one respondent, “this can be seen as a ‘fail’ by the client and discourage their efforts.”¹⁸

In sum, on the whole, receiving agencies felt that CA saved them time, but some agencies reassessed clients which did not result in as much time saved, or even any time saved.

This issue of reassessment and supplemental assessments arose often in the evaluation of the pilot project. Yet referral protocols do exist, as do common assessment practices. In two of the three networks involved in the pilot project (ABEA and Project READ) programs have agreed to not reassess clients. Receiving agencies agree to only assess gaps in terms of actual program placement, not to fully reassess clients. Nonetheless, reassessment does occur. As such, it is an area that should be addressed by the Ministry and local service providers if central assessment initiatives move forward in the province.

¹⁸ None of the clients surveyed as part of this evaluation recounted any such experience, but it is included here as an example of what receiving agencies sometimes see.

6. Synthesis of Findings and Recommendations

This report contains a robust and detailed overview of findings on central assessment as it has been implemented in this LBS pilot project as well as in other sectors. Evaluation of the central assessment pilot project indicates strong support for this model in the pilot regions, but also a few areas for improvement, some of which can be addressed through the best practices from the CA case studies outlined in Section 4 of this report.

In the pilot process, central assessment rated well on the factors examined. For the most part, it was deemed efficient, easy to use, appropriate for learners, and it had a positive impact as measured in the research. In terms of the various delivery models of assessment, it was found that each of the three models tested – one-to-one, group, and distance – had pros and cons. The one-to-one in-person model was favoured by assessors and referring agencies above the other two, but the pilot generated some knowledge around implementation of the distance model that could be of use in the future.

Central assessment as it existed in the pilot was strongly supported by **clients**, only a handful of whom were dissatisfied with any elements of the assessment process. Fully 95% agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the pilot assessment process.

Assessors interviewed for this project were also very strongly in support of CA. This is not surprising as the assessors have been trained in CA and are aware of its merits.

All survey respondents from **referring agencies** were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall process as well as the coordination among agencies within the referral system. Their open-ended responses to the survey were on the whole very positive as well.

Receiving agencies were the weakest in their reviews of CA. In general, survey respondents from receiving agencies were satisfied with the CA model as it was carried out in the pilot. Most stated that CA helped to save time at intake, but a significant minority did not find that CA saved time. Also, fewer than half of respondents stated CA helped with each of the following: supporting client success, completing their upgrading, developing learner plans, and placing learners into the right level of delivery. Unfortunately, the nature of this data (an online survey with an option for anonymity) did not allow for further probing of these findings.

Several of the respondents stated that their agency reassessed all clients anyway, despite the existence of CA protocols in two of the three pilot regions. Indeed, reassessment is a key area of concern identified in this research. If service providers are either not confident in the CA tool for whatever reason or find it incomplete, and if they reassess clients as a matter of course, then CA is simply causing an extra and unnecessary step for learners. **As such, it is recommended that any further implementation of CA first bring together key players in these agencies for discussion and an exchange of views regarding whether and how reassessments could be avoided, including via better implementation of common assessment protocols and a reconsideration of how assessments are funded.**

Further, it is recommended that further implementation of central assessment models make use of these best practices identified in the research:

- a. Begin any initiative around central assessment with the recognition that working in partnership has implications for practitioners, including changes to working practices and the need to acquire new knowledge, and skills. Through CA a stronger EO system can emerge through education and discussions. It is through a well-established CA system that full EO integration can be supported.
- b. Regular, two-way communication is established between assessors and organizations to share program information and aggregate client data, address concerns, and problem solve. This could be achieved through regular face-to-face group meetings. As the leads for service coordination, networks are well placed to enhance current communication around assessment, build stronger referral protocols and ensure clients access the right program the first time. The benefits of strong communication should include:
 - a. increased transparency and helps overcome any distrust among service provider agencies
 - b. stronger relationships
 - c. more collaboration - brings service providers together around a common goal: to improve outcomes for clients
 - d. greater awareness of sector-related developments
- c. Assessments must be easy to access. This has been identified as a challenge in rural and remote areas in particular. Itinerant services or distance learning options can mitigate the challenges of distance in less populated areas.

- d. Consult with service providers working with particular populations such as aboriginals and newcomers to explore any barriers to uptake and implementation of common assessment.
- e. Ensure that common assessment protocols are respected, including through ongoing training on reading the results of action plans and understanding how they fit into the overall system.

In summary, all measures of the pilot indicated positive response to central assessment. Service Coordination is the big picture view and implementation of delivery in a community. The regional networks as impartial providers and service coordination leads are well positioned as leaders in CA. The primary of area for improvement is to increase efficiency and impact of CA by reducing incidences of reassessment by service providers.