

Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP)

of the

Pacific Community (SPC)

**The Global Alliance to Monitor Learning
(GAML)**

TCG Working Group on Learning Assessments

**Pacific Islands Literacy and
Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) and
Pacific Assessment of Lower
Secondary (PALS)**

Update on PILNA and PALS

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Since the first administration in 2012, PILNA has completed four assessment cycles, with the recent and most challenging one from 2020 to 2022.
- 1.2. PILNA addresses targets identified in SDG 4 by providing governments, schools, communities, and students with a measure of the reading, writing and numeracy skills of students who have completed four and six years of basic education. PILNA also includes students with special needs, although accommodation is limited to access to enlarged print and extended time of the test. This valuable information enables stakeholders to develop interventions and policies. It also encourages political support and raises community awareness about the necessity to improve the learning outcomes of young people in the Pacific.
- 1.3. PILNA enables the collection of evidence of how children at Year 4 and 6 have achieved the learning outcomes in reading, writing and numeracy that are stipulated in the 2016 regional benchmarks.
- 1.4. EQAP is responsible for the development and overall coordination and management of all the PILNA activities. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) provides technical expertise and support to quality assure activities that are delivered.
- 1.5. The project to develop the lower secondary assessment is a component of the PacREF work plan and comes under the *Student Outcomes and Wellbeing* pillar; this is further detailed under the following in the PacREF implementation plan:

OW RG 3: Regional assessment at lower secondary aligned to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.1.1. Goal 4.1.1 is:

‘Proportion of children and young people (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex’

This means that at the core of the assessment we should be ensuring that our data on reading and mathematics is of central focus, but that does not exclude other subjects and domain areas.

- 1.6. The specific activities within the PacREF implementation plan are as follows:
 - 1.6.1. **OP OW 2.3:** Measures that demonstrate success at different levels of education are identified.
 - 1.6.2. **OW 2.3.1:** Regional consultation to determine what kind of measures would be most valued at the lower secondary level.

1.6.3. **OW 2.3.2:** Development of pilot tools for the use at the regional and national levels at lower secondary level as per the outcomes of the consultation and informed by international good practices.

2. Changes to PILNA in the most recent cycle

- 2.1. **Reading and writing in separate proficiency scales:** Whilst reading and writing are both components of the PILNA Literacy assessment and the skills involved in those components are similar, both domains assess markedly different constructs. From a psychometric perspective, assessing reading and writing as separate constructs strengthens the theoretical underpinning of the PILNA measurement model. Despite separating literacy into two separate reading and writing scales, it remains possible to report results in such a way that considers the current and previous PILNA cycles. For example, ACER and EQAP experts conducted some back-mapping of longitudinal data of interest from PILNA 2012 and 2015 to the new separate scales. Another example is comparing some PILNA 2018 reading results on their own with the PILNA 2021 results and undertaking the same comparison with writing. While these comparisons have been reported with caveats, they provide valuable bridging information as PILNA moves into its fifth cycle in 2025. Reporting on separate reading and writing scales gives governments a more focused understanding of what students know and can do in literacy.
- 2.2. **Rotated booklet design:** PILNA cycles up to and including PILNA 2018 used only one version of each test booklet, one for literacy and one for numeracy. For PILNA 2021, there were multiple versions of these tests that students could receive. This was due to the new rotated booklet design, tested in the PILNA 2020 field study and then fully implemented in PILNA 2021. This design allowed for more questions to be asked across the sample of students so more information about student performance could be collected. Questions could be asked that covered more content and cognitive skills, had a wider level of difficulty, and elicited more types of responses. The design also enabled twice as many questions to be trialled in the PILNA 2020 field study than previous PILNA cycles.
- 2.3. **PILNA 2021 reporting:** The PILNA 2021 reporting was changed from traditional printed document into an interactive online web-based environment. In order to adapt the report from a traditional PDF format into an online interactive format EQAP engaged the services of a web development agency. Over the course of 2022, the design and build of the report was undertaken with the content being uploaded into the report as it became ready.

The PILNA 2021 results were reported by proficiency level in reading and numeracy and reported by performance scores in reading, writing and numeracy. The proficiency levels for writing are yet to be finalized since the literacy scale, a

combination of both reading and writing used in past cycles has now been split into two discrete scales, one for reading and another for writing.

3. Using PILNA data

- 3.1. **PILNA Dissemination:** The PILNA dissemination was carried out from September 2022 through to January 2023. Each dissemination visit was organised in consultation with the ministry or department of education in the respective country. The format of the visits was suggested but individual adjustments were made to suit national needs.

The dissemination visits were typically held over a period of three to four days. The first day included a presentation of regional and national PILNA results to the senior ministry personnel (decision makers).

The second presentation of the results targeted more specifically the operational needs of ministry officers, the curriculum and assessment units.

The third presentation was a workshop for the teachers and head teachers targeting more specifically the learning outcomes that were assessed and how students performed in these learning outcomes as well as providing intervention strategies for improvements. Intervention activities included teachers working on the coding data and specially finding strategies to address the learning outcomes where more than 50% of students were assigned a code 0.

- 3.2. **Data Workshops to build deeper understanding of the PILNA data:** The PILNA 2021 data was shared back to countries in Excel spreadsheets that included student by student responses as well as a data dictionary linking responses to learning outcomes and the coding system used. For PILNA 2021, the data files were sent to countries immediately following the results release as countries are encouraged to explore their PILNA data, along with other relevant datasets, in their efforts to inform policy and planning decisions. Further to this, a data workshop was held in November 2022 for the nine large (not SIS) countries. The workshop was aimed at building deeper understanding of the PILNA data included in the reports, including the statistical methods used and how to interpret the report results. A second data workshop, building on the first, was held in May 2023 to promote the continued exploration and use of PILNA data at the national level.

4. PALS Progress and Timeline: 2022 - 2024

- 4.1. OW 2.3.1: *Regional consultation to determine what kind of measures would be most valued at the lower secondary level.*
- 4.1.1. Dec 2022 – February 2023: Country consultations. *Completed.*
- 4.1.2. January – March 2023: Work has begun on the Initial draft of the assessment framework. *Completed.*

- 4.1.3. 20-24th February: Consultation with Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) our technical partners for final framework design. *Completed.*
- 4.1.4. March – May 2023: Creation of the framework proposal. *Completed.*
- 4.1.5. 4-5th May 2023: Presentation of framework proposal to the Steering Committee. The members of the steering committee were asked to discuss and inform decisions on the type of assessment, domains, and frequency of the assessment. The final decision was to assess reading, writing and numeracy to allow linking to PILNA, to add both a written and a practical science component and to include an assessment of critical thinking as new elements for lower secondary. Throughout, the assessment would link to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific and focus on themes related to climate, sustainability and resilience. *Completed.*
- 4.2. **OW 2.3.2:** *Development of pilot tools for the use at the regional and national levels at lower secondary level as per the outcomes of the consultation and informed by international good practices.*
- 4.2.1. 12th-16th June 2023: Countries were invited to send representatives to an item-writing workshop to create pilot assessment items. During this workshop the items plus the corresponding grading tools were designed and workshopped. Work on procedural and supporting documentation was also workshopped collaboratively. *Completed.*
- 4.2.2. July through to October 1st 2023: the following additional materials were created:
- 4.2.2.1. Items finalised for the first pilot through quality assurance processes
 - 4.2.2.2. SMME (Standardisation, Marking, Moderation, External Moderation)
 - 4.2.2.3. Training and all additional supporting documentation
- 4.2.3. 1-31st October 2023: The first pilot of the items and procedures took place and included:
- 4.2.3.1. An initial series of webinars for all ministry officials, school heads and teachers taking part in the pilot.
 - 4.2.3.2. A member of the large-scale assessment team at EQAP visited the schools taking part in the pilot to support processes of conducting the assessment. They made observations and had discussions with participants looking for the strengths and challenges of the implementation. Dependant on permissions this also included the ‘student voice’.
 - 4.2.4. November 2023– January 2024: Analysis of the first pilot. This will involve reviewing the cognitive and contextual instruments to determine the effectiveness and functionality within the assessment framework.

Reviews of holistic data will also take place regarding the processes and procedures of the assessment implementation in its entirety. *In progress.*

4.2.5. February 2024: interim technical report for internal use (not public) will be available detailing trial data and recommendations for the second pilot. *In progress.*

4.2.6. March – May 2024: Preparations for a second round of pilots to be carried out mid-2024. The exact nature of pilots will be determined by the first pilot and interim technical report and the pilots will take place across multiple countries.

5. Plans for 2024 and beyond

5.1. Item and instrument development for PILNA 2025 are well underway with a field trial set for October 2024. An additional year was taken between cycle 4 (2021) and cycle 5 (now set for 2025) at the request of the steering committee, citing pandemic-related stressors as a reason.

5.2. PILNA 2025 main study is set for October 2025 with analysis and reporting to follow in 2026.

5.3. PALS field trial will take place in 2025 with an anticipated main study in 2026.