



SUBMISSION TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO THE PROTECTION AND DETENTION OF CHILDREN IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Executive Summary

Developing and delivering appropriate programs that serve to engage and develop youth within the correctional system is challenging for many reasons. When the program sets the young candidate up to fail because it is too difficult or the candidate becomes bored because the program is too easy, the outcomes will be unsuccessful.

Ideally, programs will be designed to challenge each candidate to succeed. To do this, programs must be designed within the learning capacity of the candidates. The challenge has always been to measure the learning capacity with an accurate and fair measure, as all assessments involve language.

The **Q Test** which ValueEdge Consulting (VEC) has **used with Indigenous candidates within the corrective services** system is language-free and culture-fair and **predicts a person's learning potential providing the information the educators need to match learning programs to the learning potential of candidates.**

Introduction

Critical to many effective rehabilitation programs is the development of the individual's sense of self-worth through education and development programs, delivered while they are in detention. For these programs to be effective in achieving these aims, it is important that they have the cognitive capacity to be successful in completing the program. The program must not set them up to fail, nor should it be so easy that they are not challenged and become bored.

Unfortunately, most pre-assessments use instruments that are language and often culturally-based disadvantaging participants whose first language is not English or who have had limited educational opportunities.

VEC is an organisation specialising in the assessment of candidates' ability to be trained and developed for employment roles. We have also been involved in the development of an assessment instrument 'The **Q Test**' which is language-free and culture-fair and is suitable for the assessment of the training potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island People who have limited English and or education.

The instrument **provides an assessment of a person's training and learning potential and has been used in Australia and overseas** to provide guidance on appropriate levels of training that would be challenging but achievable often for people who have had limited if any schooling. As the assessment does not depend on schooling **it can be used with all adults over the age of 15 years.**

The use of the Q Test within Corrective Services

We have discussed the use of the assessment with correctional authorities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory meeting with the managers and educational teams of the prisons in Darwin and Alice Springs. Two assessment programs were conducted in the Northern Territory as part of programs conducted by **YouthWorX NT Prison Program in 2012 and 2013**. The 2012 program involved males and 2013 program was for females. In both of these programs the assessments contributed to understanding their learning potential.

In Western Australia a program was established as part of a joint project with Rio Tinto, Minurmaghlia Mia Tafe, E&VT Unit, ValueEdge Consulting and the Roebourne Regional Prison.

The Roebourne project

In Darwin and in Western Australia, the Q Test has been used to identify people with the capacity to undertake specific training programs as part of remediation while in prison.

At Roebourne Prison in Western Australia, Rio Tinto offered job-ready training in prison and an opportunity to apply for a job on release to candidates who met their normal selection standard, using the Q Test in the place of traditional language-based assessments. Of the first 20 assessed, 60% scored higher than 0.5 SD above the mean, in comparison with a normal population where 30% would be expected to score at that level.

Dr Delphine McFarlane, Campus Manager (Vocational), Roebourne Regional Prison, who was in charge of the program, provided a report to a correctional conference in Perth. Her overarching comment was related to the strong increase in self-belief after the assessment results were shared with the prisoners.

In summary, of a total of 33 prisoners who were assessed, 29 were successful and completed the training. 25 of these had been repeat offenders. 17 entered mainstream employment post-release, while a number returned to their communities. Two years later, 15 were still in employment. The more significant figure was that only 5 (or 16%) of the 29 had reoffended, compared to the usual recidivism rate of 70%. The following is a further comment from Dr McFarlane, Campus Manager (Vocational), Roebourne Regional Prison :

“The use of the test takes guesswork out of accurate placement of Aboriginal prisoners in programs appropriate to their potential for learning. For us, the Q Test has identified prisoners with apparent low literacy and numeracy levels who can be fast-tracked through intensive literacy and numeracy programs, before moving into vocational training. In other words, we are ultimately placing more prisoners in skills training than previously, and attaining better outcomes accordingly. It's clearly evident that Q Testing helps enormously.”

An Historical Overview of the Development and Use of four Language-free Tests

The **Q Test** was derived from earlier language free instruments as described below and has recently been **further developed by digitising** the activities and presenting them on a tablet. These developments are described below.

The PIR Test

The precursor to the Q Test was developed and thoroughly researched by psychologists from the Directorate of Psychology of the Australian Army in response to a need to improve selection and reduce training failures of indigenous recruits for the Pacific Island Regiment in Papua New Guinea. A failure rate of 20% on the recruit courses, resulting in shame for the

tribesmen and expense for the Army, prompted the Army to seek psychological help to develop an assessment of training potential or trainability.

A number of subtests were developed, having been trialled as tests known to be valid with European subjects. They were modified in their presentation to minimise cultural factors that had been shown to negatively impact Papuan subjects. These modified tests were given to current trainees and the results were compared with assessments by the trainers of the recruits' trainability. A high correlation between the two assessments was found. The tests were shown to predict trainability and prospective candidates were assessed by the recruiters before they were accepted for enlistment. This reduced the failure rate from 20% to 2%.

The Queensland Test

The late Professor McElwain and George Kearney (now Emeritus Professor G Kearney) reviewed the test and then further researched the complex issues surrounding cross-cultural assessment. Their work between 1958 and 1970 resulted in significant changes to the original subtests and the creation of new measures. The final instrument was administered without the use of any spoken or written language. The instrument and the assessment process allow, *'The assessor and candidate to communicate through broad communication channels where the language and culture of the assessor do not negatively impact the performance of the candidate'*.

They extended their work and focused their research on three groups of indigenous Australians:

- Those living in remote Northern Territory communities who had limited contact with western society
- Groups from closed settlements such as Palm Island and Cherburg where there was a higher level of contact with western society
- Indigenous groups living in suburban Brisbane.

A key outcome of the research was the development of the Queensland Test.

The Queensland Test was shown to predict trainability across two indigenous cultures, as well as other samples including a group of adult applicants seeking enlistment in the army, several populations of members of the predominant suburban community with western ancestry and a group of hearing-impaired children. As the test did not involve the use of language it could be applied to different language groups and a number of features of the test reduced as much as possible the impact of cultural differences. There was limited application of the test over a significant period as there was little interest in cross cultural testing for a functional purpose. Also at that time, there was virtually unlimited funding for training and other development and therefore selection of the most appropriate candidates for training was considered unnecessary.

The Queensland test was also applied at various times in India, Fiji, the Gilbert Ellice Islands and with various specific clinical populations in Australia.

The Q Test

In 2004, VEC, an Australian consultancy specialising in psychological assessment and based in Melbourne, was supporting a large mining company operating in West Papua as they introduced psychological assessment as part of their recruitment process.

The mining company had a strong commitment to the development of the indigenous people, the Seven Suku (tribes) who were the traditional land owners of the mine site.

It was the mining company's plan to use traditional Indonesian language-based ability tests (these were Western tests translated into Bahasa Indonesian) to stream these village people into training programs that matched their ability to learn. These programs would range from those for unskilled employees through to programs for operators, skilled employees, highly skilled technical staff and graduates.

The Tribal Chiefs welcomed the initiative, but when they were told that Indonesian language-based tests were to form part of the program, they threatened to withdraw their support for the development project. VEC was asked to explore with the senior tribal chief the reason they were considering withdrawing their support. His reply was clear and strongly felt, *'The tests are not fair for my people'* and when asked *'Why?'* he replied *'The tests are in Indonesian and my people don't speak Indonesian and the tests are for educated people and my people are village people. You go and get a good test.'*

The possibility of introducing the Queensland Test was explored by VEC and it was agreed the test would be very appropriate. A condition of its introduction was an agreement from the mining company to allow the conduct of research to validate the suitability of the test for the proposed purpose. This study showed a correlation of $r = 0.598$ between the Q Test results and the Supervisor's assessment of the 100 employees from the Seven Suku population.

A number of small modifications were made to the test and it was rebadged as the Q Test. Like the Queensland test, the Q Test is an individually administered test where the assessor works with one subject at a time. It is a test of performance or a non-verbal type of test in a strict sense, where the acts of both the assessor and the subject consist solely of the manipulation of physical material. No verbal behaviour is required at any point, by either the assessor or the subject. **The Q Test consists of 6 subtests that assess the following:**

- Sequential Memory
- Visual Memory
- Planning
- Abstract Manipulation
- Pattern Matching
- Design Sequencing.

After the candidate is told, *'We will not be talking – just watch and copy'*, there is no language used throughout the test administration.

The Q Test was to be used to stream candidates into roles within the company or into training programs. This had significant implications for the way data was reported and so in parallel with the validation process, work was done with the managers to develop a meaningful report. Professor Kearney also reviewed the original test and made a number of improvements, including the addition of a sixth sub test, Design Sequencing.

The **Q Test was used for all indigenous recruitment on this project.** The test was also used in recruitment and selection by two large mining ventures in Laos, where companies were committed to local employment, specialist training and employee promotion.

My Potentia

With the validity and benefits that could be derived from the Q Test established and with demand growing, it was recognised that as an individually administered assessment instrument the Q Test presented users with two significant problems:

- Assessment required a significant commitment of staff and time
- The training of competent assessors required an intensive 4 – day training program.

As the traditional psychological assessments moved to utilise online technology to improve the efficiency of the assessment process, VEC and Professor Kearney considered the possibility of using digital technology to re- create the Q Test on a tablet without introducing any language into the assessment process. A digital version of the Q Test was required to enable language-free assessments to be delivered to large populations of candidates.

The company, My Potentia, was established and Real Serious Games was identified as the digital partner in the venture to create a new assessment instrument called ‘My Potentia’.

Professor Kearney maintained his interest and has remained the Psychological advisor to the project. The aim of the project was to build a digital version of the Q Test, retaining the inherent qualities of the original test delivered on a tablet. The instrument was ready for trialling in June 2015.

Conclusion

Our experience indicates that **identifying a young person’s learning potential *before they are placed in training programs can have significant advantages for them*** by preventing them being confronted by training material that is beyond their capacity or by presenting material that is too easy resulting in them becoming bored and disruptive. With the advent of a more-effective means of dispensing the Q Test digitally, it is highly recommended as a valuable aid to developing the opportunities of young people – particularly those involved in the criminal justice system, who very often have been part of a dysfunctional family and have had interrupted and limited educational opportunities, but who often have a greatly untapped potential to learn and succeed.