

Quality Assurance

National Thematic Report

2022-23

Initial Assessment

A report on the quality of *Initial Assessment* within Modern Apprenticeships

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Background

SDS introduced thematic quality reviews in 2021-22 which are short reviews and are not graded.

The key aim of this review was to understand the contribution of Initial Assessment practice to quality indicator 1.1 (*Providers prepare and develop effective work-based learning provision*) and provide a benchmark on the added value and impact of this activity for key stakeholders (apprentices, employers, and SDS).

The key objectives of the review were to assess:

- The nature of initial assessment processes that learning providers plan for;
- The implementation of initial assessment processes for all types of Modern Apprentices including those who face barriers to their learning; and
- The impact initial assessment practice has on the delivery and outcomes for individual apprentices and their employers.

30 providers were included in the review activity and a list is included in Appendix 1.

Methodology

The review activity was carried out by a team of six SDS EFQM qualified Quality Assessors. The approach was one of sampling Learning Plans and related documentation for selected apprentices and triangulating this evidence by interviewing apprentices (from this sample), employers, and provider staff.

The findings of each of the reviews have been brought together in this national report which is designed to inform relevant stakeholders about the quality of the initial assessment process and its associated outputs. The report should assist learning providers in developing quality improvement and enhancement activities and includes examples of effective practice identified during the review.

In total the review team:

- Spoke to 130 apprentices; 77 employer staff; 87 provider staff; and
- Reviewed 135 Learning Plans and a range of other associated documents

The report uses the following terms to describe numbers and proportions in relation to our sampling¹:

almost all	over 90%
most	75 – 90%
majority	51 – 74%
half	50%
less than half	15 – 49%
few	up to 15%

¹ These proportions follow custom and practice utilised by recognised vocational education quality models

Evaluation of how effectively Initial Assessment is implemented

- The majority of providers ensure that the outputs from Initial Assessment are well reflected in apprentices' learning plans and various other documents. In general, learning plans are completed to a high standard detailing the qualification to be undertaken; prior qualifications achieved; career aspirations; core skills achieved; on and off-the-job training elements; and personal interests / hobbies, with several examples of additional support needs being documented where relevant. These comprehensive documents ensure apprentices have a clear understanding of their future learning journey and the support available to help them progress through their Modern Apprenticeship.

However, for less than half of the providers, individual learning plans were incomplete and lacked information from the initial assessment, such as additional support needs and core skill requirements. For a few providers, the individual learning plans were generic and not sufficiently individualised for each apprentice, and as a consequence, added no value to the apprentices' journeys.

- Most providers communicate the findings of the Initial Assessment process to apprentices extremely well. This tends to be done verbally but most providers take a multifaceted approach to this and use a range of tools for communication. Most apprentices interviewed spoke positively about provider interaction throughout the initial assessment process. This effective communication at the early stages of their learning journey ensures that the structure of the MA programme, timescales for completion of units, and support plans are fully understood by apprentices.

However, a few apprentices did not have a strong understanding of the Initial Assessment process; did not fully understand the core skills requirements or the relevance to their job role; and felt the communication throughout development of their learning plan and timing of learning was poor. In a very small number of cases, apprentices were unable to recall any conversations on initial assessment; were not aware they had a learning plan; and were unclear of progress on their qualification. This means they are unclear of a key element of the of the qualification they are working towards (specifically core skills units), and their application and value within the workplace, and overall, this lack of understanding of Initial Assessment diminishes their experience on the programme.

- Most providers are effective in communicating the Initial Assessment findings to employers and/or mentors. Employers value the regular communication; up to date industry knowledge; and awareness of their business needs. This ensures apprentices are on the most appropriate and relevant qualification for their job role, and that employers are well placed to support apprentices.

However, in a few cases, employers were unable to recall the findings from the Initial Assessment process and felt it lacked detail and clarity. This means that employers do not have a clear understanding of the training requirements for their employee to enable them to support apprentices with progression towards completion of their qualification.

Evaluation of how effectively Initial Assessment processes are reviewed

- Most providers have a strong understanding of the correlation between a successful Initial Assessment process and successful delivery leading to positive outcomes for apprentices. Regular discussion and collaboration with employers; robust recruitment practices; adapting teaching styles and addressing additional support needs through Initial Assessment were some of the examples observed which help assessors deliver the programme in the most effective way and contribute to high retention levels and strong achievement rates.

However, a few providers showed limited understanding of how a robust Initial Assessment process can support effective delivery. This could increase the risk of early leavers from their apprenticeships.

- Half of the providers sampled have sufficient processes in place to evaluate the Initial Assessment process, which include gathering apprentice and employer feedback surveys and reviewing these at internal team / standardisation meetings. There were several examples noted of improvements being implemented to the Initial Assessment process including the introduction of meta-skills to Initial Assessment; adaptations to forms regarding additional support and aptitude; introduction of a “skills scan” questionnaire to determine the apprentice’s starting point; and implementation of a neurodiversity online assessment. This commitment to ongoing continuous improvement ensures that Initial Assessment processes have positive outcomes for apprentices and employers.

However, for the other half of providers in the sample, there is scope to improve their processes by gathering formal feedback from employers and apprentices and ensuring there is a wider variety of views. For a few providers, there is not a clear process in place to review how the Initial Assessment is working.

Added value and impact of the Initial Assessment process

- Almost all apprentices interviewed valued the Initial Assessment process, particularly the sensitive handling of additional support need information and the subsequent levels of support put in place. Apprentices welcomed the detailed discussions with provider staff; accommodation of individual learning styles; advice on optional unit choice selection; and clarity on how the programme would be delivered. Apprentices felt these approaches enabled them to sustain a commitment to their learning and set them up well for success in their apprenticeship.

However, a few apprentices felt some aspects of the Initial Assessment process could be improved, such as being provided with more clarity on the amount of time they would receive from their employer to complete their coursework: and the timescales for completion of the recruitment and Initial Assessment. As a result,

they did not feel informed of the full requirements of the apprenticeship, or that the Initial Assessment process set them up for success.

- Most apprentices were satisfied that the Modern Apprenticeship matched their career aspirations and addressed any skills gaps. Apprentices commented on the support they received from assessors when discussing optional unit choice selection and how units would match to existing job role and support career progression. As a result of robust Initial Assessment discussions, most apprentices were clear on core skills requirements including what they still had to achieve and how these would be delivered. This ensures that apprentices are engaged in their development plan and motivated to complete the programme.

However, a few apprentices expressed frustration at the lack of clarity on portfolio requirements; being asked to repeat specific elements of their programme; and observed that while their apprenticeship was meeting their current needs, they were uncertain how it would support them to achieve their future career ambitions. This lack of clarity means apprentices do not understand or see the value of undertaking a qualification, or how it supports their career goals.

- Almost all employers / mentors interviewed were very satisfied and valued the approach to Initial Assessment taken by providers. They commented positively that providers understood their business needs well; ensured appropriate information was collated and shared; and removed barriers for apprentices which gave them the platform to progress and succeed. This combination of robust Initial Assessment processes and strong partnerships ensures employers / mentors are clear on the requirements of the programme and can support apprentices in a very person-centred and individualised way.

However, a few employers / mentors felt there was some room for improvement in terms of awareness of different routes into the apprenticeship to ensure this adequately supports workforce planning; and improvements to communication once the Initial Assessment process had concluded.

Effective Practice Summary

The following effective provider practice was highlighted during the review:

- Implementation of employer “referral forms” and introduction of an online neurodiversity tool / VARK questionnaires to identify individual learning styles;
- Development of comprehensive guidance documents for managers / mentors within the apprentice’s workplace;
- Deployment of regular apprentice and employer surveys to gather stakeholder feedback on Initial Assessment which drives improvement; and
- Introduction of meta-skills within the Initial Assessment process

Further detail on the effective practice exemplars is provided on pages 8 – 11.

Recommendations

All learning providers should invest time at the outset of the apprentice's learning journey to ensure training meets their individual needs, adds value for the employer, and guarantees good use of public training funds.

This should include:

- Continuing to ensure that Initial Assessment takes account of prior experience; aligns to the apprentices' job role and removes potential barriers to success;
- Ensuring the Initial Assessment process adds value to the learner journey and that outputs inform their learning plan and subsequent training activities;
- Continuing to ensure employers understand their responsibilities and contribute effectively to Initial Assessment processes to optimise the apprentice's chances of sustaining their learning and achieving a successful outcome;
- Ensuring staff undertaking Initial Assessment understand their responsibilities, the importance of the process, and can implement effective practice in carrying out activities;
- Continuing to undertake robust self-evaluation activities to quality assure Initial Assessment arrangements including gathering apprentice and employer feedback, ensuring documentation and systems contain sufficient detail to support the apprentice journey; and
- Ensuring staff undertake relevant CPD to contribute to the continuous improvement of their Initial Assessment approach.

SDS should:

- Continue to support providers to enhance the Initial Assessment process through sharing effective practice and providing CPD.
- Utilise the findings of this report to benchmark future practice of providers regarding Initial Assessment processes

Aberdeen Association of Social Service

Apprentices are provided with excellent communication regarding the findings of IA. Learner feedback was consistently positive towards the involvement of the provider and the comfortable environment they created. All apprentices within the sample were clear on how the IA process was carried out and how the results would be used to support them moving forward. In one instance the learner was provided with a detailed psychology report following a clinical assessment regarding an ASN being identified by the provider. This allowed them to fully understand their needs moving forward and access appropriate support. As a result of the provider's clear communication apprentices felt fully informed regarding their apprenticeship, support on offer, and had awareness of the expectations the provider required from them.

The provider is extremely effective in communicating IA findings with mentors. They deploy a consistent approach where staff both verbally feedback to employers and use online resources to share findings. Mentors interviewed valued the communication from the provider with one adding they were given a copy of a psychology report following identifying an ASN from a learner. This was extremely beneficial for the workplace and helped them to fully understand the support required by the learner and have a comprehensive awareness of the topic. This opinion was matched by all mentors interviewed who felt communication following IA helped them create a positive environment for the apprentice and fully comprehend their needs.

Aberdeen Association have a clear focus on evaluating processes and using findings to create meaningful change. As a result of the excellent evaluation, the provider has decided to implement Meta Skills within the IA which has allowed the subject to be gradually introduced within the programme. This serves as a clear example of the focus towards evaluation and implementing change which has allowed for a positive development of processes.

Bell Decorating Group Limited

The provider demonstrates a strong desire to seek innovation and ideas to enhance the initial assessment process. For example, the decision to build a 'VARK' learning-style questionnaire was derived from learning via a training course recently attended. This learning was raised as part of a standardisation meeting, discussed as a team, and then embedded into the current process. This shows that the provider is open and willing to seek for new ideas externally to drive improvement in their service delivery.

The provider has effective approaches in place to understand the impact of initial assessment process on delivery and outcomes. Structured report arrangements require the provider to report on recruitment and sustainability of apprentices and measure and track their destinations. This data is presented to the board of directors periodically. In the event a learner leaves the programme early without achieving, assessors ascertain the reason to understand if there is a correlation with initial assessment and whether improvements can be made. Therefore, based on the combination of data gathered and analysed, there is opportunity to draw conclusions on the impact of the initial assessment process.

Competence Based Training Limited

A strong ethos of continuous improvement is in evidence which enables the provider to evaluate its services and make improvements. Staff are proactive with effective communication and a sharing of values which supports a person-centred approach to delivery. The process is informed by feedback gathered from a variety of sources including apprentices, employers, external verifiers and SDS - apprentice surveys are issued at key stages of delivery, including post-induction. In identifying a need for better employer engagement, the provider's staff have recently reviewed its Initial Assessment process and introduced an Employer Referral form which requires confirmation of their apprentice's competency in key tasks, supporting the provider to understand their suitability / readiness for the programme and inform specific pathways. This led to the introduction of an initial call between the assessor and apprentice to support completion of the pre-induction task for apprentices and build relationships. Cited as being an effective introduction to reflective writing, the provider uses the pre-induction task well to understand the apprentice's job role, commitment and determine their learning styles. The design and delivery of Learner Development Plans tailored to the provider's specific requirements are visually engaging with the input of partners (Concept Northern) in order to confirm the accessibility of documentation. Implementation of these enhancements is monitored through monthly Team Meetings with the Quality Action Plan seen as a working document, thereby ensuring timely and effective responses. Such approaches demonstrate the provider's commitment to the cycle of continuous improvement.

Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service

Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service has developed a comprehensive guidance document - Modern Apprenticeship - A Guide for Managers. The guide provides line managers with an overview of how the MA programme integrates with COPFS recruitment; the different elements of the apprenticeship programme; workforce planning and locations for new recruits; apprentice induction week; apprentice contracts and progress reviews; details of SVQ assessors and their role; e-learning packages and HR Policies; the role of the individual stakeholders (SDS, awarding bodies, assessors, line managers and apprentices); the induction timetable and the programme delivery plan. The guide provides a detailed explanation of the qualifications that will be studied during the apprenticeship programme; the e portfolio system and the gathering of evidence. There is a section in the guide dedicated to Selecting the SVQ to Suit the Modern Apprentice. This section provides a comprehensive overview of the mandatory and optional units available and provides line managers with relevant information to contribute effectively to discussions about unit selection. The guide explains how the apprentice's job role should link to the unit choice. The guide also provides details on the Certificate in Prosecution Practice and how this links to the work of COPFS. Core skills are also detailed, explaining programme requirements and how these will be achieved. This guide ensures that line managers are fully informed about the MA programme and have the relevant knowledge and understanding to contribute effectively to discussions about the most appropriate units for the qualification. As a result, line managers are well placed to make effective contributions to initial assessment activity and this has a positive impact of apprentice retention on the programme.

Hays Travel Limited

Following recruitment, each apprentice completes a Cognassist neurodiversity assessment which identifies their learning style and enables the provider to personalise their learner journey. The provider uses this positively and takes time to discuss the findings with apprentices as a reflective tool and recognise their individual areas of strength. For the minority of apprentices requiring additional support, a personal development plan and strategies such as brain training exercises are identified and updated monthly to overcome barriers and support their progression. While too early to establish the impact on achievement rates, this enables the provider to better understand apprentice support needs and enhance their experience on the programme.

Lorndale Aberdeen Limited (Great Western Assessment & Training Centre)

The provider has an excellent process for reviewing the effectiveness of IA whilst being able to present clear evidence on how this results in meaningful change. The provider values and promotes a culture surrounding continuous improvement with all staff interviewed supporting this ethos. Lorndale Aberdeen gather data from apprentice and employer surveys, monthly assessor meetings and identify areas they can develop through using a range of resources, such as SDS training. All findings are recorded by the provider and discussed at monthly meetings; this has allowed Lorndale Aberdeen to implement a range of improvements that have greatly improved their processes such as creating an IA policy which is one of a range of examples.

Mentor Training Centre Limited

Mentor Training place great importance on having robust processes and clearly understand the link between initial assessment and delivery and outcomes. The correlation between initial assessment and good outcomes for apprentices was evident in all staff and employer interviews and the providers early leaver data supports this. The provider makes a significant investment of their time to ensure a robust initial assessment process takes place. Each candidate is allocated to an assessor who supports the learner during the three-month trial period to complete the extensive induction project. The project itself is extremely efficient in gaining an understanding of each person's capabilities while also giving a good overview of what the job of a dental nurse entails for the candidate. This investment of time and resource is highly valued by all stakeholders and ensures that candidates embark on their apprenticeship with an extremely clear understanding of what work-based learning entails and the confidence to progress well throughout the qualification.

Microcom Training Limited

Microcom have a clear focus on evaluating processes and using findings to create meaningful change. As a result of the excellent evaluation, the provider has decided to implement Meta Skills within the IA which has allowed the subject to be gradually introduced within the programme and update their policy regarding the usage of artificial intelligence. This policy focused on informing candidates on the measures Microcom have in place to identify the usage of artificial intelligence within coursework and the consequences of using software to complete assignments. This serves as a clear example of the focus towards evaluation and implementing change which has allowed for a positive development of processes that benefits all parties.

Appendix 1 – Provider Sample

The 30 providers included in the thematic review were:

- Aberdeen Association of Social Service
- Advance Training (Scotland) Limited
- AVQ Management Ltd
- Ayrshire Learning Business Academy LTD (Trading as Jungle Hair Academy)
- Bell Decorating Group Limited
- BPP Holdings Limited
- Cairellot Learning Centre Limited
- CITB (Also Known as Construction Industry Training Board)
- Competence Based Training Ltd
- Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service
- Hays Travel Limited
- JB Management (Scotland) Limited
- L&G Learning (Scotland) Ltd
- Lorndale Aberdeen Limited (Great Western Assessment & Training Centre)
- Mentor Training Centre Limited
- Microcom Training Limited
- R T Resources Limited
- Road Haulage Association Limited
- Rolls-Royce Power Engineering Plc (ta Rolls-Royce Vulcan)
- Rural Skills Scotland Limited
- Scottish Electrical Charitable Training Trust
- Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
- SEETEC Outsource Training and Skills Limited
- Set Training and Resourcing Limited
- Shetland Recreational Trust
- Sports Academy (Scotland) Limited
- The Training Folk Ltd
- The Zone Initiative Limited
- Training for Care
- Xtra-Mile.com Limited