

Initial and diagnostic assessment, learner needs and points of referral

This handout will cover:

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- Initial and diagnostic assessment
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Planning to meet the needs of learners

All learning needs to start somewhere, How do *you* know what *your* learners know? Do you know what *they need to know* to achieve the programme or qualification? If you have a learner who already has some knowledge of the subject, they may become bored if you are teaching them what they already know. However, if you have a learner who doesn't know anything about the subject, they will need to learn more.

Identifying this becomes your starting point for finding out about your learner, what individual needs they may have, and matching this to the content of the programme or qualification they will be working towards. You will need to introduce your subject to your learners in a logical and progressive way, to build upon their current skills, knowledge and understanding.

Prior to a learner commencing, information; advice and guidance (IAG) should be given to them regarding their programme choice. This should be clear, unambiguous and impartial to ensure it meets their needs and capability. This process should ensure learners are on the right programme at the right level. You should also inform learners of how they will be assessed during the programme, for example; assignments, observations or tests. This will ensure there are no surprises once they have started, and ensures the planning process will go smoothly.

Initial and diagnostic assessment

This is the formal process whereby you can ascertain your learners' prior skills, knowledge and understanding. It's also an opportunity to identify any aspects which might otherwise go unnoticed, for example: poor numerical or writing skills. Initial

assessment is carried out at the beginning of something, for example: a course or a session. Diagnostic assessment can be carried out at any time, to diagnose any gaps in learning, or any particular learning or learner needs.

A *learning* need relates to supporting the subject i.e. English, maths, writing and study skills. Specific needs are often referred to as SEND: special educational needs and disabilities.

A *learner* need relates to the individual i.e. general advice and guidance such as transport, childcare, financial support, safety and welfare.

Initial and diagnostic assessments can be carried out in person, for example, during an interview, or online, preferably prior to commencement. If they are carried out after the learner has started, time will have been wasted if the programme is unsuitable for them, as they could have been guided to something more appropriate.

In the workplace, a *training needs analysis* (TNA) could be carried out with staff to identify areas which require training, perhaps to meet a particular job role.

It might not be your responsibility to interview prospective learners or to carry out initial assessments or TNAs. However, you will need to know the results to enable you to support your learners. Try not to make any assumptions about the learner, you will need to meet them in person to really get to know them.

Initial and diagnostic assessments can help you find a starting point for your learner. The results should help you negotiate appropriate targets with your learners, ensuring they are on the right programme at the right level with the right support they need to succeed.

Examples of initial and diagnostic assessment activities

These can include:

- application/enrolment forms: completed online or as a hard copy prior to a learner commencing
- interview/discussion: asking your learner why they are applying and ascertaining if they meet any particular entry requirements
- observations: it may be necessary to observe your learner performing a skill, perhaps if they are based in the workplace, before agreeing an appropriate programme and level. Observation during initial assessment activities will give you a sense of how your learner performs, and what they know and can do already
- self-assessment: asking your learner to assess their own skills and knowledge towards the programme requirements. This is often known as a *skills scan* and relies on the learner being honest about their achievements
- structured activities, for example role plays or simulations to see how a learner performs, or how they can work with others

- tests, for example, in English or maths.

Any initial and diagnostic assessments you use, should have a purpose, and not just be completed for the sake of it. The results should always be used for the benefit of the learners and the learning process.

It's all about being *proactive* before learning starts, and *active* when learning is taking place, rather than being *reactive* to a situation when it might be too late to do anything about it.

You will need to keep appropriate records of the results and you might need to discuss these with others who have an involvement with your learners. For example, other teachers or support staff. However, some aspects might need to remain confidential. You will need to find out your organisation's requirements for record keeping and confidentiality of information.

Initial assessment can:

- allow for differentiation
- ascertain why your learner wants to take the programme, along with their capability to achieve
- ensure your learner is applying for the right type of programme
- find out the expectations and motivations of your learner
- identify any information which needs to be shared with colleagues
- identify any specific additional support needs or any reasonable adjustments which may be required.

Diagnostic assessment can:

- ascertain learning preferences e.g. visual, aural, read/write and kinaesthetic (VARK)
- enable learners to demonstrate their current level of skills, knowledge and understanding regarding the subject
- ensure learners can access appropriate support for the subject
- give your learner the confidence to negotiate and agree individual learning goals and targets
- identify an appropriate starting point and level
- identify gaps in skills, knowledge and understanding to highlight areas to work on
- identify previous experience, knowledge, achievements and transferable skills
- identify specific requirements: for example, to help improve English, maths, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills.

Learning preferences

There is an old Chinese proverb: I hear - I forget, I see - I remember, I do - I understand. When you hear lots of information you may find it difficult to remember it all. If you can see something taking place that represents what you hear, you will hopefully remember more. However, if you actually carry out the task, you will understand the full process and remember how to do it again. Once learners put theory into practice they will begin to understand what they have learnt.

Learners also have a particular *learning preference* or *style*, a way that helps them to learn which is based on listening, seeing and doing.

This can be included as part of the initial assessment process. However, some people are in favour of using learning preferences (or styles), whereas others aren't. The current thinking is that there is no valid research to justify their use. However, you need to make your own decision on whether using the results of these tests will work for your learners. You will also need to check whether the organisation you work for advocates their use or not. Here are two examples: Fleming, and Honey & Mumford.

Fleming (2005) stated people can be grouped into four styles of learning: visual, aural, read/write and kinaesthetic (VARK)

Visual examples (seeing) - learners usually:

- are meticulous and neat in appearance
- find verbal instructions difficult
- memorise by looking at pictures
- notice details observe rather than act or talk
- like watching videos/DVDs.

Aural examples (listening and talking) - learners usually:

- are easily distracted
- enjoy talking and listening to others
- have difficulty with written instructions
- hum, sing and whisper or talk out loud
- ask questions
- don't like noisy environment.

Read/write examples (reading and writing) – learners usually:

- are good spellers and have good handwriting
- enjoy research
- like re-writing what others have written
- like to read books
- use a dictionary and thesaurus

- write lists and make notes.

Kinaesthetic examples (doing) - learners usually:

- are tactile towards others
- do not like reading and are often poor spellers
- enjoy worksheets and discussions
- fidget with pens whilst studying
- like practical activities
- use their hands whilst talking.

Honey & Mumford (1992) suggest learners are a mixture of the following four styles:

Activist learners like to deal with new problems and experiences and like lots of activities to keep them busy. They love challenges and are enthusiastic.

Pragmatist learners like to apply what they have learned to practical situations. They like logical reasons for doing something.

Theorist learners need time to take in information, they prefer to read lots of material and think about something before applying it. They like things that have been tried and tested.

Reflector learners think deeply about what they are learning and the activities they could do to apply this learning. They will then try something and think about it again. Not all learners fall into one style; they may be multi-modal, i.e. a mixture of two or more styles enabling learning to take place more quickly.

Agreeing individual learning plans (ILP)

Once you have the information you require, along with the results of any necessary tests, you can make the decision as to whether the programme or qualification your prospective learner is wanting to take, is in fact the right one for them. If they haven't met any particular entry requirements, you will tactfully need to discuss this with them and guide them elsewhere if necessary. If the learner has been accepted onto the programme, the next step will be to create an individual learning plan (ILP). This will outline what they will be working towards, along with target dates and any support they might require.

You will need to know what you are going to teach, and your learners need to know what they are going to learn. These should be formally negotiated and agreed, however, they can be amended at any time if necessary. You should encourage your learners to talk to you and give you feedback as to how they are progressing, and how they feel their learning can be supported.

An ILP is like a contract with each learner, it outlines what they are expected to achieve and when, and helps formalise the learning process. There should be a clear link between the goals and targets on the ILP, the teaching, learning and assessment approaches, and the programme or qualification aims. A supportive and respectful relationship between your learners and yourself will ensure that realistic goals and targets are agreed.

To help agree a realistic ILP, you could:

- refer to the results of initial and diagnostic assessments as a starting point
- consider how you will embed skills such as English, maths and ICT
- make sure the goals and targets are individual to each learner, there is no *one size fits all*
- communicate the goals and targets both verbally and in writing, to enable your learners to fully understand the requirements
- communicate with anyone else involved in the learning process such as learning support assistant or workplace supervisors
- use regular tutorial and review sessions to discuss and update the ILP with your learner.

It is important that all targets are documented, whether they are *hard* targets, i.e. directly based on the programme or qualification, or *soft* targets, i.e. personal goals.

Identifying learner needs

Some learners will have particular needs which may affect their attendance, behaviour, learning, progress and/or achievement. Your responsibility regarding identifying learner needs may differ depending upon your job role.

There might be specialist staff available in your organisation who you could liaise with, such as those who give information, advice and guidance (IAG)

Identifying any learner needs prior to them commencing the course will ensure they can be effectively supported, and that they are on the right course. A thorough initial assessment can help with this.

Some examples of ways of ascertaining needs include:

- application process i.e. completion of a form (manual or online)
- interview process i.e. a discussion (face to face or telephone)
- initial and diagnostic assessment i.e. a questionnaire to ascertain learning preferences, an activity or test to ascertain current knowledge and skills
- through conversations and observations i.e. a discussion during a session or observing a learner's lack of numeracy skills

- e-mails and other electronic communication i.e. noticing spelling and grammar errors
- online diagnostics i.e. an English test.

Examples of learner needs

Some learners may experience certain challenges to learning and assessment due to particular needs.

These can include:

- financial and health issues
- a mental or physical disability
- visual or hearing impairment
- personal problems
- lack of study or academic skills, ESOL (English for speakers of other languages)
- varying work patterns
- dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia
- autism
- Asperger syndrome
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

These can be identified through initial assessment, interviews and discussions (online or in person).

Meeting learner needs

Don't think that you have to meet all your learners' needs on your own. There may be some that you can meet, for example, help with study skills, or others you cannot meet, for example, health concerns. However, you can refer your learner to someone or an organisation or agency that might be able to help them.

Points of referral

These could be internal i.e. people within your organisation, or external, i.e. people, agencies and organisations.

Example: internal – first aiders, language interpreters, specialist colleagues

Example: external – carers, charities, health centres, police, relevant websites and agencies such as alcohol, debt, drugs, Samaritans, Citizens Advice.

It's useful to find out who the internal and external people and organisations are, so that you can contact them quickly if you need to.

Reading list

Ayers H and Gray F (2006) *An A to Z Practical Guide to Learning Difficulties* London David Fulton Publishers

Delaney J Cope A (2016) *Supporting Maths and English in Post-14 Education and Training* London OU Press

Gravells A (2017) *Principles and Practices of Teaching and Training* London Learning Matters SAGE Publications Ltd

Gravells A & Simpson S (2012) *Equality and Diversity in the Lifelong Learning Sector* (2nd Edn) London Learning Matters

Powell S and Tummons J (2011) *Inclusive Practice in the Lifelong Learning Sector* Exeter Learning Matters

Read H (2013) *The Best Initial Assessment Guide* Bideford Read On Publications Ltd

Hodkinson A (2015) *Key Issues in Special Educational Needs and Inclusion* London SAGE Publications Ltd

Tutt R & Williams P (2015) *The SEND Code of Practice (0-25 years)* London SAGE Publications Ltd

Website list

Basic Key Skills Builder - www.bksb.co.uk

Disability Rights UK - <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org>

Dyslexia Association – www.dyslexia.uk.net

Fleming VARK questionnaire - www.vark-learn.com

Honey & Mumford Learner Types free online quiz: <http://resources.eln.io/honey-mumford-learner-types-1986-questionnaire-online/>

Initial assessment for using technology - <http://wip.exeter.ac.uk/collaborate/itest/>

Initial and diagnostic assessment materials - <https://tinyurl.com/zovyvex>

Reading list for learning support - www.anngravells.com/reading-lists/learning-support

World of inclusion – <https://tinyurl.com/klsvtn>