

Assessing learning

This handout will cover:

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- The assessment cycle
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- Internal and external assessment requirements
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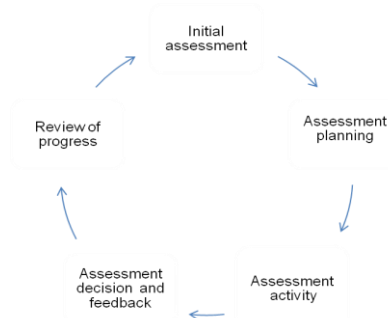
What is assessment?

Assessment is a way of finding out if learning has taken place, it is a process of making a decision regarding your learner's knowledge and/or performance against set criteria. Assessment activities can be *informal* to check progress – known as *formative assessment* (or assessment *for* learning). They can also be *formal* to confirm achievement – known as *summative assessment* (or assessment *of* learning).

Formative assessment checks progress i.e. by using questions, quizzes, discussions and is *ongoing*. Summative assessment confirms achievement (or not) i.e. by using tests, exams, assignments, observations and is usually *at the end* of a unit or programme.

The assessment cycle

Assessment usually follows a cycle:



Initial assessment – ascertaining information regarding your learners: for example, any specific assessment requirements they may have or any further training and support that they may need. This information can be obtained in a range of ways, for example, application forms, interviews, diagnostic tests and discussions. This process might not always be carried out by you but the information obtained must be passed on to you. Initial assessment is known as assessment *for* learning, because it helps prepare learners *for* assessment and identifies their potential.

Assessment planning – agreeing suitable types and methods of assessment with learners, setting appropriate target dates and involving others as necessary, such as colleagues, witnesses or workplace supervisors.

Assessment activity – using relevant approaches and activities, for example, observation, questioning, assignments or gathering appropriate evidence of competence. Assessment can be formative (usually ongoing and informal to check progress e.g. a discussion) and/or summative (usually at the end and formal e.g. a test). Summative assessment is often known as assessment *of* learning because it counts towards the achievement *of* something.

Assessment decision and feedback – making a judgement of success or otherwise or allocating a grade and advising how to achieve a higher grade in future. Providing constructive and developmental feedback and agreeing upon any further action that may be necessary.

Review of progress – reviewing progress and achievement and discussing any other issues that may be relevant to the learning and assessment process.

The cycle can then begin again with an initial assessment regarding the next area to be assessed. Records should be maintained throughout all aspects of the assessment cycle and quality assurance activities should take place on an ongoing basis.

Principles of assessment

There are many principles, theories and models of assessment. One principle is the assessment cycle, another is VARCS.

For example:

Valid – the assessment process and work produced by the learner is appropriate and relevant.

Authentic – the work has been produced solely by the learner.

Reliable – the work is consistent and at the required level i.e. if the assessment was carried out again with similar learners, similar results would be achieved.

Current – the work is still relevant at the time of assessment.

Sufficient – the work covers all the assessment requirements.

Types of assessment

Assessment types relate to the *purpose* of assessment i.e. the reason assessment is carried out.

Five frequently used types are:

- Initial and diagnostic
- formative
- summative
- holistic.

Initial and diagnostic assessments are the formal processes whereby you can ascertain your learners' prior skills and knowledge. It's also an opportunity to identify any aspects which might otherwise go unnoticed, for example, poor numerical or writing skills. Initial assessment, as the word implies, 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.

Formative assessment should take place continually and is usually carried out informally to check progress, identify any support requirements and inform further development. Assessing your learners on a formative basis will enable you to see if they are ready for a summative or final assessment. Formative assessment is usually informal, devised by yourself, and often called assessment *for* learning because it helps prepare learners *for* formal assessment.

Summative assessment usually occurs at the end of a session, programme, topic, unit or full qualification. It is a measure of achievement rather than progress. This type of assessment can often be quite stressful to learners and sometimes leads to a fail result, even though the learner is quite capable under other circumstances. Summative assessment is usually formal, devised by the awarding organisation that accredits the qualification, and is often called assessment *of* learning because it counts towards the achievement *of* something.

Holistic assessment enables learners to demonstrate several criteria from different aspects or units at the same time. You might be able to observe naturally occurring situations in addition to what had originally been planned. For example, if you are watching a learner perform a task and they also do something which had not been planned for but which occurs naturally during the activity. Don't discount this, but inform your learner you were able to assess them for these other aspects as well. It can also save duplication and repetition.

Assessment methods

Assessment *methods* are different to *types*. A method is *how* the assessment type will be used e.g. questions for initial assessment, observation for formative assessment, an exam for summative assessment. The methods can be formal or informal. Formal methods count towards achievement whereas informal methods check ongoing progress

You might be provided with tests or assignments for your learners to complete. To be sure your learners are ready for assessment you could use activities, quizzes and smaller tasks for them to carry out on a formative basis. This would make the assessment process more interesting and highlight any areas which need further development before the summative assessment takes place.

If you are not provided with assessment activities, make sure you choose types and methods which are appropriate, and that the activities you use will cover all the required criteria at the right level.

Examples of formal and informal assessment methods include the following: (some can occur in both depending upon the situation).

Formal assessment methods	Informal assessment methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assignments • case studies • essays • examinations • multiple-choice questions • observations • professional discussions • projects • recognition of prior learning • reviewing learner evidence • tests • witness testimony • written questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • crosswords • discussions • gapped handouts (sentences with missing words) • journals/diaries • peer and self-assessment • puzzles • practical activities • questions: oral, written, multiple choice • quizzes • role plays • simulation • worksheets and workbooks

Internal and external assessment requirements

Internal relate to those within your organisation, such as checking a learner's work for plagiarism and ensuring it is authentic.

External relate to those from other organisations such as the time limit within which learners must be registered with an awarding organisation.

Examples include:

- access and fair assessment
- appeals
- authenticity
- complaints
- confidentiality of information
- copyright and data protection
- equality and diversity
- health and safety
- observation of teaching, learning and assessment
- quality assurance
- plagiarism
- safeguarding and prevent duty.

Individual needs

If you have learners with any particular needs or requirements, you should consider how you can help meet these. Always check with your organisation regarding what you can and can't do as you may need approval to make any reasonable adjustments.

Some examples of meeting your learners' needs include:

- adapting or providing resources and equipment for a learner who is partially sighted
- adapting the environment for a learner who is physically disabled
- allowing extra time for a learner with dyslexia or dyscalculia
- changing the date and/or time for a learner who works shifts
- providing specialist support staff to improve English and maths skills
- providing the assessment information in an alternative format such as spoken instead of written for a learner who has impaired vision
- using a different location which is more accessible to learners who have to travel far.

Making a decision

It is quite a responsibility to make a judgement and confirm achievement (or otherwise) as it can affect your learner's motivation, personal and professional development. You must only make a decision based on what you have assessed i.e. the requirements of the unit, qualification or aspect being assessed, along with

any prior knowledge or skills. There may be various internal and external regulations, requirements and pressures which can impact upon assessor decisions.

All methods used should enable the learner to produce valid, authentic, reliable, current and sufficient (VARCS). This helps judge if a learner has been successful and has achieved the requirements.

Decisions should be fair, safe and ethical:

- Fair – the assessment type was appropriate to all learners at the required level, is inclusive, i.e. available to all, and differentiates for any particular needs.
- Safe - the methods used were ethical, the work can be confirmed as authentic, confidentiality was taken into account, learning and assessment was not compromised in any way, nor was the learner's experience or potential to achieve (safe in this context does not relate to health and safety).
- Ethical – the assessment took into account confidentiality, integrity, safety, security and learner welfare.

You should:

- ensure all the relevant aspects or criteria have been met
- take into account any naturally occurring activities which weren't planned for
- ensure you are accurate and consistent with your decisions
- point out errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation to help your learner's literacy skills (in written work).

Factors to consider include:

- assessment requirements – have both you and your learner interpreted these in the same way?
- cheating – have any learners colluded together, cheated in any way or copied someone else's work?
- consistency – are you being fair to all your learners or are you biased towards some learners more than others?
- methods of assessment – have you used appropriate or alternative methods, for example, asking verbal questions rather than issuing written questions for a learner who has dyslexia?

- plagiarism – have any learners copied work from others or the internet, or not referenced their research adequately? You could type a sentence of their work into a search engine to see if it already exists elsewhere.
- pressure – do you feel under pressure to pass learners who are borderline, perhaps due to funding measures, targets, inspectors or employer expectations?
- risks – are any of your learners likely to leave, or do they need extra support for any reason? Don't feel obliged to give too much support, to the extent that your learner's work becomes your own.
- trends – is there a pattern, i.e. are most learners making the same mistakes? If so, it could be that they have misinterpreted something or you have misinformed them or been vague or ambiguous. If this is the case, you could summarise the trends and discuss them with your learners. You could also discuss aspects of good practice to further their development.
- type of assessment – i.e. formal or informal assessments – you might be more lenient with informal assessments to encourage your learners. However, you do need to be fair and ethical with all your methods and decisions, for example, regarding safety and confidentiality.

Providing feedback

All learners need to know how they are progressing, and what they have achieved. Feedback regarding their progress and achievements will help encourage and motivate them. This can be given formally after an assessment, for example, in writing, or informally by talking to your learner

The advantages of providing feedback are:

- it creates opportunities for clarification, discussion and progression
- it emphasises progress rather than failure
- it can boost your learner's confidence and motivation
- it identifies further learning opportunities or actions required
- your learner knows what they have achieved
- your learner knows what they need to improve or change.

There are different feedback methods which include:

Descriptive – describes examples of what could be improved and why, and is usually formal. Using this method lets you describe what your learner has done, how they have achieved the required assessment requirements and what they can do to progress further.

Evaluative – usually just a statement such as *well done* or *good*. This method does not offer helpful or constructive advice and is usually informal. It does not give learners the opportunity to know what was done well or how they could improve.

Constructive – is specific and focused to confirm your learner's achievement or to give developmental points in a positive and helpful way.

Destructive – relates to improvements which are needed and is often given in a negative way which could demoralise your learner.

Objective – clearly relates to specific assessment requirements and is factual regarding what has and has not been met.

Subjective – is often just a personal opinion and can be biased, for example, if the assessor is friendly with the learner. Feedback might be vague and not based on the assessment requirements.

It's useful to:

- ask the learner how they feel they have done before providing your feedback
- use eye contact, speak clearly and allow time for learner questions and clarification
- state something positive first to maintain attention
- own your statements by beginning with 'i'
- use the word 'however' instead of 'but' (if there is a 'but')
- be clear, genuine, honest, unambiguous, factual, constructive and detailed
- keep focussed on the activity not the person
- identify strengths and limitations
- state how your learner can improve and agree what needs to be done next.

Questioning

Questions should be used when assessing and providing feedback, such as:

Open: 'How would you.....?'

Closed: 'Would you.....?'

Probing: 'Why exactly was that?'

Prompting: 'What about...?'

Clarifying: 'Can you go over that again?'

Leading: 'So what you are saying is... '

Hypothetical: 'What would you do if...?'

Reflecting: 'If you could do that again, how would you approach it?'

Try not to use 'Do you understand?' Learners might say yes even though they don't understand, as they don't want to embarrass themselves.

Record keeping

It is important to keep records, otherwise how can you prove what progress your learners have made and exactly what they have achieved? You will also need to satisfy any external requirements, such as those from awarding organisations or regulatory authorities. The time period for keeping records will usually be for a set period, for example three years. If a learner loses their work, without any assessment records you have nothing to show what was assessed, and quality assurers may need to sample the records along with the learners' work.

You should never give original records to learners – always give a copy as originals should be kept at the organisation. It is harder for a learner to forge something on a copy than on an original. Record keeping must ensure confidentiality and adhere to data protection regulations.

Examples of records include:

- action and assessment plans
- authentication declarations/statements
- formative and summative records
- feedback and review records
- observation reports
- progress reports
- tracking sheets: i.e. achievement dates and grades.

Communicating with others

At some point, you might need to liaise with other people who are involved in the assessment process of your learners. For example, to inform them of any particular learner requirements to ensure consistency of support. You might need to liaise with a representative from the awarding organisation if you want to change an assessment activity. For example, if you have a learner who would benefit from verbal questions instead of written questions. You could have a learner who would prefer to be assessed bilingually, and you would therefore need to liaise with another member of staff who could help.

Examples of other people you could communicate with include:

- administration staff – to register learners with an awarding organisation
- finance staff – to help with funding, grants and loans
- internal quality assurers – to ensure the assessment process is fair
- learning support staff – to provide support to learners as necessary
- managers – to ensure organisational procedures are followed

- other teachers and trainers – to communicate information regarding learner progress
- workplace supervisors – to provide information regarding progress
- safeguarding officers – to help ensure the wellbeing of learners
- support workers – to provide help and support when needed
- work placement co-ordinators – to arrange and monitor suitable work experience placements.

Reading list

Armitage A & Renwick M (2008) *Assessment in FE: A Practical Guide for Lecturers* London Bloomsbury

Gravells A (2021) *Principles and Practices of Assessment* London Learning Matters SAGE

Mansell S (2020) *50 Assessment Approaches* London Learning Matters SAGE

Greer I (2019) *The Vocational Assessor Handbook* London Kogan Page

Read H (2016) *The Best Assessor's Guide* Bideford Read On Publications Ltd

Tummons J (2011) *Assessing Learning in the Lifelong Learning Sector* Exeter Learning Matters

Wilson L (2012) *Practical teaching: A guide to assessment and quality assurance* Andover Cengage Learning

Website list

Assessment in education - <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/caie20/24/1>

Assessor resources - www.anngravells.com/resources/assessment123

Chartered Institute for Educational Assessors – www.ciea.org.uk

Developing Assessment Feedback - <http://escalate.ac.uk/4147>

Initial Assessment Tools – www.toolslibrary.co.uk

Methods of assessment - <https://www.reading.ac.uk/engageinassessment/different-ways-to-assess/eia-different-assessment-methods.aspx>

Plagiarism: www.plagiarism.org

Reading lists - <https://www.anngravells.com/reading-lists/index>

Types of assessment - <https://www.marketing91.com/types-of-assessment/>