

Handout – Minimising risks

Assessing a learner and confirming their success can be very rewarding, however, there are risks involved. Being aware of these will hopefully help you to minimise or prevent them from occurring. The risks apply not only with regard to the health, safety and welfare of all concerned, but also what might occur in your own area of responsibility for your particular subject. Just ask yourself what could possibly go wrong, and if you think of something, then there is a risk.

Learner risks

You will need to minimise risks such as putting unnecessary stress upon learners, over-assessing, under-assessing or being unfair and expecting too much too soon. Some learners might not be ready to be observed regarding a practical skill, or feel so pressured by target dates for a theory test that they resort to colluding or plagiarising work. When assessing written work, you will need to be aware that some learners, intentionally or not, might plagiarise the work of others. Learners should take responsibility for referencing any sources used in all work submitted, and may be required to sign a declaration or an authenticity statement.

If you are assessing the work of learners you have not met, for example, by e-assessment, it can be very difficult to ensure the authenticity of their work. Your organisation might require each learner to attend an interview at some point and bring along some form of photo identification such as a driving licence, passport or employee card.

Assessor risks

There are risks on your part as an assessor, for example, pressure to pass learners quickly due to funding and targets might lead you to allow something that you normally wouldn't. There is also the risk that you might unknowingly offer favouritism or bias towards some learners over others.

A risk to yourself could be if you carry out assessments in the work environment and visit places with which you are not familiar. You might need to travel early or late in the dark, find locations on foot, take public transport or drive to areas with which you are not familiar. If you are visiting places on your own, you will be classed as a lone worker and your organisation should have a policy for your protection. Having a mobile phone is helpful in such situations. If not, note where the nearest public phone or shop is. You may find it useful to use satellite navigation when driving, and/or to search the internet beforehand for the postcode you are visiting. The results will show you a street map and pictures of the local area to enable you to visualise where you are going.

The type of employment contract you have might also pose a risk. For example, if you work for more than one organisation, it could be difficult to determine who you report to if you have any concerns. Standardisation of practice might also be difficult if assessors are not all in the same location or working for the same organisation.

Other risks

Besides risks to learners and to yourself, there are other risks which you might encounter. If you are assessing in the work environment, you might come across employers who are not very supportive of their staff. For example, someone might make it difficult for you to visit at a certain time in order to carry out a formal assessment. If you can, try to build a good working relationship with your learner's employer or supervisor.

You might not be allowed to assess close friends or relatives, or if you can, your decisions might need to be countersigned by impartial assessor and be quality assured. If you are assessing an accredited qualification, the awarding organisation will be able to provide you with guidance regarding this.

Continued...

Situations which could pose a risk to assessment *(in alphabetical order)*

- a lack of confidence by the assessor to make correct decisions
- a lack of standardisation activities leading to one assessor giving more of an advantage to a learner than another assessor of the same subject
- a learner copying another learner's work
- a learner's lack of confidence or resistance to be assessed
- an assessor not taking into account a learner's particular needs
- an unsuitable environment for assessment to take place
- answers to questions being obtained inappropriately by learners which leads to cheating
- assessing relatives or not disclosing conflicts of interest
- assessing written work too quickly and not noticing errors, plagiarism or cheating
- assessors giving learners the answers or doing some of the work for them
- assessors using inappropriate assessment activities
- assessors using leading questions to obtain the correct answers they require
- assessors visiting unfamiliar places and under pressure to arrive by a certain time therefore rushing an assessment activity
- awarding organisations prescribing assessment methods which might not complement the qualification, a learner's needs or the learning environment
- changes to qualifications or standards not being interpreted correctly by assessors, or not being communicated to assessors by others
- employers not supportive of assessment in the workplace, or are not good at communicating with the assessor
- favouritism and bias by an assessor towards some learners over others
- feedback to the learner which is unhelpful or ineffective
- high turnover of staff resulting in inconsistent support to learners
- ineffective internal quality assurance system
- instructions too complex or too easy for the learners' ability
- insufficient or incorrect action/assessment planning

- internal and external quality assurance action points not being correctly communicated to those concerned, or not carried out
- lack of resources or time to perform the assessment role correctly
- learners creating a portfolio of evidence which is based on quantity rather than quality, i.e. submitting too much evidence which does not meet the requirements
- learners not registered with an awarding organisation prior to being assessed for a qualification
- learners submitting the work of others as their own
- learners using quotes from others when answering theory questions and not referencing them, leading to plagiarism
- marking and grading carried out incorrectly by assessors
- misinterpreting the assessment requirements and/or criteria (by learners and assessors)
- pressure on assessors to pass learners quickly due to funding and targets
- time pressures and targets put upon learners
- unreliable witness testimonies from the workplace
- unsuitable assessment methods i.e. an observation when questions would suffice
- unsuitable assessment types i.e. summative being used instead of formative
- unwelcome disruptions and interruptions when assessing, such as noise or telephone calls.