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Guidance for assessment and learning
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Initial and diagnostic assessment: a learner-centred process

What is initial and diagnostic assessment?

Initial and diagnostic assessment begin the process of getting to know a learner and building a relationship with them.

- **Initial assessment** happens at the time of a learner's transition into a new learning programme. It is a holistic process, during which you start to build up a picture of an individual's achievements, skills, interests, previous learning experiences and goals, and the learning needs associated with those goals. This information is used as a basis for negotiating a course or programme.
- **Diagnostic assessment** helps to identify specific learning strengths and needs. It determines learning targets and appropriate teaching and learning strategies to achieve them. This is important because many learners have higher-level skills in some areas than in others. Diagnostic assessment happens initially at the beginning of a learning programme and subsequently when the need arises. It is related to specific skills needed for tasks.

The two processes are closely linked: diagnostic assessment adds to the information gathered from initial assessment. Together they help you and the learner build a clear picture of the individual in order to:

- personalise learning
- develop an individual learning plan
- begin the process of assessment for learning that will continue throughout the learner's programme
- make links to progression routes and prepare for the next steps.

A positive experience

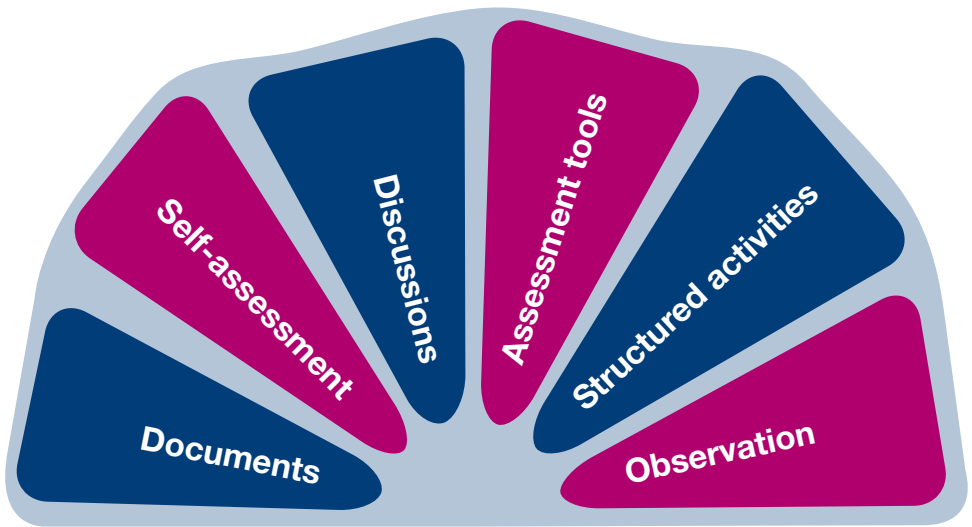
Initial and diagnostic assessment are among learners' first experiences of your organisation and will influence their initial impressions. If the experience is positive, active and involving, this will help to create a climate in which learners are able to negotiate and take responsibility for their learning.

You can help make the experience positive for learners by:

- involving them – do the assessment 'with them' not 'to them'; supporting learners to take an active part will encourage motivation and independence
- building their self-esteem and sense of self-worth
- recognising their strengths and achievements, not just their weaknesses
- linking initial and diagnostic assessment to their own aspirations, such as their career choices or aspects of their everyday life
- making the assessment relevant to their specific context for learning.

Initial and diagnostic assessment: methods and approaches

Initial and diagnostic assessment should involve a range of methods and approaches, none of which is sufficient on its own. It is important to evaluate the quality of information obtained from particular methods. Once you have begun to get to know the learner and their learning preferences, you will be better able to select the appropriate assessment methods. The diagram on page 4 shows a range of possible methods.



Adapted from *The initial assessment toolkit*
(Key Skills Support Programme, 2007)

- **Documents** and records give evidence of achievements and include qualifications, records of achievement, references, non-academic certificates and awards.
- **Self-assessment** gives learners some idea of where their strengths and weaknesses lie. It is vital to take learners' own views into account and to make the most of this knowledge.
- **Discussions** and interviews allow the teacher and learner to get to know each other. They also provide an excellent opportunity to feed back the results of other assessment methods and to probe more deeply.
- **Assessment tools** can play an important role in objective initial and diagnostic assessment of literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) skills. Tools are also sometimes used to assess occupational skills and learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- **Structured group or individual activities** during induction and early parts of the programme allow learners to apply specific skills. A free writing task, for example, gives a rounded picture of how someone actually writes. Such a task also helps to put learners at the centre of the assessment process because they can write about themselves and their interests.

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- **Observation** gives a broader picture of the whole person and how they perform in a range of contexts. This will give insights into learners' strengths, how they work with others, how they think, how confident they are and how willing they are to ask for help.
- Make the assessment relevant to the learner's context and interests. This may mean planning activities or using assessment tools related to a learner's vocational area or life interests.
- Gather information from activities that learners carry out in other parts of their programme. For example, you can:
 - observe them on a work placement
 - use examples of their writing to assess their skills.
- Select a blend of assessment methods to suit the individual learner and their circumstances.

Tools for assessing literacy, language and numeracy (Skills for Life)

The terms initial and diagnostic assessment are widely used to describe tools that have been designed to assess LLN. In this case, the terms are not referring to the holistic initial and diagnostic assessment process described so far, but rather to a specific element within that process.

A range of tools to support initial and diagnostic assessment of LLN skills has been developed on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills, now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. The tools are now available through the Quality Improvement Agency.

- **Initial assessment tools** provide information about a learner's current levels of literacy and numeracy, measured against national standards. They are useful in helping to match a learner to an appropriate learning programme and in directing further, more in-depth, assessment.

The tools are available in both paper- and computer-based forms, in a standard version, a workplace version and in versions tailored for the health, retail, transport and cleaning industries.

- **Diagnostic assessment materials** assess all aspects of the adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL core curricula and some aspects of the pre-Entry curriculum. There are also materials that can be used to explore whether a learner would benefit from further assessment for specific learning difficulties (eg dyslexia). Specific diagnostic tasks should be selected and used at the start of a learning programme but also regularly throughout the programme to assess particular skills as further needs are identified. The diagnostic materials help you to discuss and agree with the learner:
 - learning targets for both consolidating existing skills and developing new ones
 - recommendations about how the learner will tackle new learning
 - their own priorities, for example, a skills need at work.

See the ‘Want to know more section?’ for details about how to obtain free copies of these initial and diagnostic assessment tools.

Who carries out initial and diagnostic assessment? What skills are needed?

Staff who carry out initial assessment are able to:

- understand the whole assessment process
- present it to learners in a positive and constructive way
- value and engage with learners
- use a variety of approaches appropriate to individual learners and their context for learning
- interpret results appropriately and give professional feedback to learners
- recommend learning programmes
- refer learners for further expert assessment.

In addition to the above, staff who carry out diagnostic assessment can also:

- use the outcomes to plan individual and group learning
- monitor progress.

It is important that staff involved in initial and diagnostic assessment are well trained and able to use professional judgement. A team approach ensures consistency and reliability and increases staff confidence and skills. If LLN tools are used as part of the assessment process, staff need to have training in their effective use.

Feedback from assessment

Giving timely, constructive feedback to individuals is crucial to effective initial and diagnostic assessment.

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- Stress the positive. Always celebrate what a learner has done well. This helps to build confidence.
- Seek learners' views and value their contribution. This will help them to get better at assessing their own work, which is vital to them becoming independent learners.
- Frame questions carefully and use prompts such as 'Would you like to say more about that?'
- Pause for a few seconds after questions have been posed or responses have been given, to encourage learners to carefully consider and expand on what they have said.
- Be specific. Avoid generalisations such as 'There are a lot of inaccuracies' and instead focus on individual points which you can discuss with the learners.
- Focus on things learners can change, and avoid overloading them with too much feedback at once.
- Look for ways forward together. Share ideas and explore solutions rather than always putting forward your own suggestions.
- Agree what you will both do as a result. This could include agreeing new targets or planning learning opportunities.

Feedback is not a one-way process. Invite the learner to comment on what you do as well.

Using the data from initial and diagnostic assessment

For you and the learner

Information from the initial and diagnostic assessment process should be used to develop individual learning goals and targets and to inform appropriate teaching and learning strategies and use of resources. It should be recorded in the individual learning plan, session plans and schemes of work. Effective use of assessment data:

- makes sure that planned learning is grounded in the learners' needs and priorities
- avoids learners wasting time by going over old ground unnecessarily
- reduces the risk of learners being frustrated by tasks that are beyond them.

Data should be shared with all staff supporting the learners so that all learning can be differentiated to take account of their strengths and needs.

It is important that where learners are following vocational pathways, vocational and LLN staff work together to plan learning in response to the findings from initial and diagnostic assessment. This ensures that learners have opportunities to develop LLN skills in their vocational context.

For managers and the organisation

Good initial and diagnostic assessment make a significant contribution to the overall quality of provision by:

- ensuring that learners are on the right course or programme
- maintaining motivation
- improving learners' achievement and progression.

Your organisation should require you to record assessment results on the Management Information System (MIS). Assessment data should be collated and analysed to ensure that programmes offered are appropriate for the skills profile of learners. Key messages from the assessment data relating to particular programmes should be fed back to curriculum teams to inform the development of appropriate teaching and learning strategies so that all learners are provided with suitable opportunities to develop and progress.

Want to know more?

For detailed guidance on assessing learners' skills, attainments and potential, see *Improving initial assessment: good practice guide* (Key Skills Support Programme, 2006): **www.ksspforwork.org.uk**

To learn more about the wide range of varied and motivational initial assessment methods, see *The initial assessment toolkit* (Key Skills Support Programme, 2007): **www.ksspforwork.org.uk**

To find out more about the Move On approach, online practice tests and skills development opportunities: **www.move-on.org.uk**

To download:

- *Good practice guidelines for the skills check and initial assessment* (DfES, 2006)
- paper- and computer-based Skills for Life initial assessment tools (a standard version and editions tailored to the retail, transport, health and cleaning industries): **www.toolslibrary.co.uk**

To find:

- Skills for Life diagnostic assessment tools for literacy, ESOL, numeracy and dyslexia
- tutor instruction manuals describing the diagnostic assessment process and good practice in assessment: **www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/teachingandlearning**

To find out about improving initial assessment in the workplace, see *Improving initial assessment in work-based learning* (Green, 2003): **www.LSNeducation.org.uk/pubs**

To find an introduction and an overview of the initial assessment process, see *Initial assessment: a learner-centred process* (Green, 2003): **www.LSNeducation.org.uk/pubs**

To find ideas and resources to support the use of observation in initial assessment, see *Improving initial assessment of personal and social skills in Entry to Employment*: **http://teachingandlearning.qia.org.uk/default.aspx#e2e_assessment**

How initial and diagnostic assessment fit in with other assessment processes

Assessment for learning

- Recognises what has been learnt, including progress in literacy, language and numeracy
- Recognises what still needs to be learnt and how
 - Provides feedback to learners in ways that help them to improve

The individual learning plan records:

- achievements and reflections
- further learning targets
- reviewed progression options

Diagnostic assessment

- Is a detailed assessment of specific skills
- Informs teaching and learning strategies
- Can include a diagnostic assessment tool as part of the detailed assessment of literacy, language and numeracy skills

The learner

- Informed
- Making decisions
- Negotiating and using their individual learning plan (ILP)
 - Developing reflective skills

The individual learning plan:

- records precise learning targets
- details appropriate learning
- steers learning towards achievement of long-term goals

The individual learning plan records:

- the need (or not) for future assessment
- long-term goals and aspirations
- progression routes

Skills check

- Takes place during the information, advice and guidance (IAG) process
- Informs signposting and referral to learning, training or employment opportunities
- Is a quick assessment to establish abilities and needs in literacy, language and numeracy
- Can include a literacy, language or numeracy skills check tool

The individual learning plan records:

- current achievement levels
 - the need for further assessment in specific areas
- long-term goals and aspirations
- progression routes

Initial assessment

- Begins the process of identifying abilities, interests, aspirations and needs
- Informs selection of the right learning programme
- Can include an initial assessment tool as part of the identification of a learner's literacy, language or numeracy level

About this series

This is one of five leaflets on assessment and learning produced by QIA. Other titles in the series are:

- High-quality assessment processes: guidance for managers
- Using skills checks
- Individual learning plans
- Assessment for learning.

The focus for the guidance leaflets is informed by recent QIA work that highlights the need for:

- greater clarity about the purposes and forms of assessment
- the development and/or honing of understanding and skills to manage and implement assessment at different stages
- effective learner-centred processes
- specific learner feedback that identifies what the learner knows and can do, what the learner needs to learn and how they can learn it
- appropriate use of assessment tools
- effective use of assessment data by learners, teachers, managers and organisations
- effective use of individual learning plans so that they are at the heart of assessment, learning and support processes
- self-assessment and quality assurance processes that take account of the important role played by assessment.

Go to the assessment area of the Skills for Life Improvement Programme website (www.sflip.org.uk) to download copies of all five leaflets, for ideas on how to use the leaflets to support staff and organisational development, and to access a resource bank of supporting material.

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