Initial assessment
finding out about learners

What?
- know what you want
- develop the system
- interviews and discussions
- tasks and assignments
- tests
- feedback to learners.

Why?

Initial assessment provides the information needed to plan an individual’s learning and improve their chances of learning effectively. Without it, there are only assumptions. It’s always possible to make some predictions about learners from an application form or selection test, but it’s an insecure basis for planning. Learners themselves bring assumptions about learning based on the past, and some of these may get in the way of looking ahead to a new way of learning.

Employers, providers and learners themselves all need to know more. Initial assessment is a vital part of the process of finding out.

A good initial assessment process:
- is done early on – in the first few days or weeks of contact with learners
- is different from selection – though information gained through the selection process should be useful (see the factsheet entitled ‘Selection’)
- is a process, not a single event
- uses a range of methods
- helps employers and providers to find out about learners
- helps learners to find out about themselves and their programme (what they will learn, and how).

The outcomes of initial assessment help to inform the individual learning plan (ILP). In fact, it would be difficult to supply all the information needed for an ILP without carrying out a thorough initial assessment. There’s more on this in the factsheet entitled ‘Individual learning plans’.

A thorough process is almost certain to involve all or most of these methods:
- Interviews – carefully planned and carried out by people who know what they are doing.
- Discussions – opportunities to talk informally with learners, for example while they carry out tasks or activities.
- Tasks and assignments – designed to find out specific things, such as how a learner relates to others or how much they know about a particular topic.
- Tests – formal tests of skills or knowledge, psychometric tests, self-assessments.

“Done well, initial assessment sets the scene for a successful and productive relationship . . . [It] provides the essential opportunity, early in the learning programme, for learner and tutor to work closely together to look back at what has been learned or achieved in the past; to look forward to what the learner wants to achieve in the future; and to identify the steps which need to be taken, and the support required, if the learner is to attain their goal.”

Adult Learning Inspectorate (2003)
Starting Points: Initial Assessment

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Initial assessment can also capture a learner’s starting points, so that distance travelled during their time on a programme can be measured. Measurements of distance travelled are useful, especially where learners do not achieve full or part qualifications – part success in achieving the qualifications may be a feature of continuing employment or promotion in some cases.

How?

Know what you want

The obvious purpose of initial assessment is to:

- agree starting points
- identify learning goals
- plan routes towards these goals.

If it’s done well, accurately and supportively, initial assessment can help to:

- identify attainment – the level of knowledge a learner has already reached
- identify potential – what a learner could be capable of achieving
- identify the level of programme a learner should start on
- identify what support the learner needs
- plan the programme
- form the basis for measuring distance travelled.

There’s another purpose to initial assessment that may be less obvious but is equally important. The way initial assessment is done tells learners something important about their future. A process that engages the learner is likely to make them feel better about themselves and positive about the learning they are about to start. A process that is perfunctory, or where everything is done ‘to’ rather than ‘with’ learners, will probably give them a demoralising view of the future.

It should go without saying that employers and providers want the best for learners. It’s just as important that learners should know right from the start that they are entitled to the best for themselves.

An inspector comments:

> Whatever the scope and nature of the initial assessment process, it has to be used effectively. This means not simply recording the results, but using them to inform the learning plan, referring back at review points, and linking them to on-going assessment point in the learner's programme. In the best examples, the links are clear between initial assessment results and the detail of individual learning plans and targets.

Develop the system

A combination of methods is needed to provide complete and accurate information.

- Looking at documentary information – application forms, records of achievement, references, progress files and so on can provide useful information about the skills and abilities that the individual brings to their learning.
- Self-assessment – the individual’s own views should be taken seriously. They are an important dimension in the overall picture, put into perspective by information from other sources.
- Interviews and discussions – they provide an ideal situation for staff and learners to get to know each other.
- Observation - direct observation of how a learner performs either at or away from the workplace will provide valuable information on their skills and work-readiness.
Structured tasks and assignments – it may also be relevant to create situations that have been designed specifically to give valid and reliable samples of the individual’s performance in certain tasks, or in skills such as communicating and working with others.

Formal tests – where the individual’s rating or score is compared with that of others. It’s important that the tests have been properly designed and validated. Generally speaking, homemade tests are not sufficiently reliable.

These different methods need to be put together in a structured way to produce an effective system. There should be:

- a timetable showing clearly when and where each method will be used
- enough members of staff who are able to carry them out
- the resources to support them
- a consistent approach, so that the process is effective for all learners wherever and whenever it takes place.

**Interviews and discussions**

Talking to learners, asking them questions and listening to what they say is an essential part of initial assessment. As well as providing information, conversations with learners generally help them to feel part of the organisation.

Neither interviews nor discussions need to be formal, but they should be planned and structured. There are two main reasons for this:

- A structured approach is likely to elicit more information than one that is free-flow.
- It’s fair to ask learners the same sort of questions, rather than leave the questioning open to individual members of staff.

Of course, having a structured approach doesn’t mean being inflexible and missing out on opportunities to explore particular topics with individual learners. One approach is to use an aide memoire as the basis for the discussion, and a standard format for recording the information. Questions are usually more productive if they are open-ended, and learners’ responses can be explored further with probing questions.

### Topics covered in interviews and discussions

- application forms
- reasons for applying
- career aims and aspirations
- personal skills
- previous experiences
- prior achievements
- support needed
- hobbies and interests
- likes/dislikes
- travel to work and training
- health
- personal circumstances

Staff conducting interviews and facilitating discussions with learners don’t necessarily need qualifications, but they should be trained to use appropriate techniques. It’s also good practice for interviews and discussions to be observed by another person from time to time, preferably as part of a structured observation process. Interviews may be carried out by two members of staff.

**Tasks and assignments**

Watching a person doing something is often the quickest and most reliable way of learning about their level of technical skills or assessing attributes such as how people work in a team, confidence, decision-making and problem-solving. From a learner’s point of view, it’s a chance to demonstrate what they can do.
Tasks and assignments should be chosen carefully to be:
- meaningful and relevant to learners
- within their capabilities, though parts may be stretching
- easy to observe and assess.

Tasks may be:
- individual – to assess someone’s practical and technical skills and aptitude
- group – to assess how individuals behave in groups.

Short tasks can be built into an initial assessment process quite easily and can take place in a training centre or the workplace. More extended tasks, particularly those that focus on occupational skills, are best built into the workplace. Sometimes it’s helpful to offer learners work tasters during which they can assess how suitable a particular job or occupation is.

Tests

It’s fine to use tests as part of initial assessment but:
- the information gained from test results must serve a useful purpose
- the tests themselves should be properly designed so the results are reliable
- staff are trained (and with some tests qualified) to mark them and interpret the results
- learners are not put off by taking them, or discouraged by the results.

Tests are often used during selection and initial assessment. Although there’s no clear line between them, the purpose of using tests at selection is generally to determine whether a potential learner has the skills and aptitude to succeed in a particular occupation or job, or to identify what kind of occupation might be most suitable. The key purpose of tests used for initial assessment is to elicit more detailed and specific information about a learner’s likely support needs, so that these can be identified and addressed in the learning plan.

Tests are most often used in initial assessment to provide this kind of information about a learner’s:
- practical skills and aptitude
- basic skills and key skills
- attributes such as motivation and personal effectiveness
- learning styles and preferences.

Outcomes from tests should be used alongside information from other sources. It’s risky to use test results on their own. One good way of using them is during one-to-one discussions with learners, so that they have the chance to put their own views about how well (or poorly) they performed on the test.

There are various different categories of tests, and some overlap between the categories:
- Screening tests – designed to place an individual with others who share common characteristics, e.g. in terms of basic skills.
- Diagnostic tests – designed to provide more detailed information about individual strengths and weaknesses, often in the form of a profile.
- Inventories – designed to provide an indication of personal preferences, e.g. for styles of learning.
- Self-assessments – designed to encourage individuals to reflect on their own performance.
- Psychometric tests – designed to provide objective measures of psychological characteristics in order to give an indication of the person’s potential and capability in a specific area.

As always, the important thing when choosing which tests to use, or whether to use them at all, is that the people administering them understand the purpose of the chosen test, know the conditions under which it should be used and realise its limitations. Information about commercially available tests can be found in the publications listed on the back page of this factsheet.
Feedback to learners

It's a natural instinct, once you’ve done something, to want to know how well you did it. Learners benefit from getting feedback in two main ways:

- Motivation – knowing that it’s gone well helps to boost confidence.
- Improvement – knowing where it didn’t go so well, and how to do better next time, means that even an unsuccessful task has led to something useful.

All assessment carries with it the possibility of giving feedback. It's good practice to give the feedback, and not to withhold it. The activities learners do as part of initial assessment are among the first experiences they have of being assessed in their new learning environment. So it’s doubly important to give the feedback and make it useful. Not only does it help to give meaning to the assessment experiences, it also creates in learners the sense that they are being taken seriously.

Good feedback is:

- learner-centred – learners are fully involved, give their own views, discuss their performance and agree actions
- specific – based on what the learner has done and clearly related to the standards they are aiming to achieve in their work
- timely – soon after the learning ‘event’, when it’s fresh in the mind
- planned – so that learners know it will happen, and expect it
- structured – so that the process follows a consistent pattern, such as the one shown in the diagram.

Find out more by reading the factsheet entitled ‘Feedback’.

Where and when?

Generally, initial assessment starts soon after a learner has been accepted, and before the learning programme really gets going. Initial assessment is a process, not a single event, and the process may take anything from half a day (the bare minimum) to several days over a period of weeks.

In Modern Apprenticeships, there may be pressure to start learners at work quickly, so the process may take place in the workplace. There are benefits in this, e.g. the opportunity to assess learners carrying out specific work tasks.

Case studies and examples

Working with employers

One provider, which recruits apprentices for employers, takes care to link their own initial assessment of learners with the selection criteria used by employers. They also compare the results from their own process with results from assessment conducted by the employer. This enables all three parties – learner, employer and provider – to be confident that the job opportunity is likely to be suitable and appropriate. It also means that both the provider and employer are jointly involved from the start in identify learners’ training and development needs.
**Intensive initial assessment**

Another provider carries out a concentrated initial assessment process over ten days with small groups of learners – the maximum is eight in a group. The process is structured to include assessment of literacy and numeracy, how the young people work together, their levels of concentration and motivation, as well as issues such as health and personal circumstances.

The programme is highly active and participatory. There are team-building activities, short tasks, specialist inputs on topics such as health, relationships and anger management, and formal assessments. A range of tests is used to assess basic skills, learning styles and vocational interest. At the end, learners review their progress, complete an activity plan and agree what support they will receive.

**A standardised process**

Getting a consistent approach that also allows staff to identify individual needs is the main priority for one national provider that takes ‘all-comers’ on its programmes. Learners are invited to an initial interview. At the same time, information is obtained from Connexions about any tests done to date.

At the interview, a standard set of questions is used to explore the interests, experience and aptitudes of the learner, and information is recorded on a standard form. Unless learners have above Grade D in GCSEs, a basic skills assessment test is carried out during a break in the interview. At the end, the member of staff carrying out the assessment discusses with the learner which programme would suit them best.

**Resources**

- Green, M (2003) Improving initial assessment in work-based learning. (LSDA)

**Stay in touch**

- [www.ali.gov.uk](http://www.ali.gov.uk)
- [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk)
- [www.lsa.org.uk](http://www.lsa.org.uk)

**Checklist**

- What do you expect learners to get out of the initial assessment process?
- What do you hope to learn about your learners?
- Which methods are used as part of initial assessment?
- How does the system ensure consistency, while still enabling you to find out about individuals?
- How are initial assessment interviews and discussions structured?
- What tasks do learners carry out as part of initial assessment, and where are they done?
- Which tests are used, and for what purposes?
- At what point is feedback given to learners about the results of their initial assessment?