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## ABSTRACT

This document, which is designed to assist managers, trainers, or assessors in work-based provision across the United Kingdom, shares the experiences of five work-based learning providers that sought to improve their initial assessment processes. Section 1 explains the purpose of initial assessment and presents guidelines for evaluating intake assessment processes to determine how learner-centered they are, how consistently they are managed across the organization, and how comprehensive they are. Section 2 describes the process improvement activities undertaken at the case study organizations and explains how the following activities can be used to improve existing intake assessment processes: reviewing the sequencing of activities; flowcharting; critically evaluating strengths and weaknesses; conducting development planning; and selecting among a range of practical process improvement strategies. Two case studies focus on learner-centered improvements, two focus on management issues arising during the program improvement process, and one focuses on comprehensive issues. Each case study presents background information on the provider, discusses key issues raised by evaluation of the work-based provision process, summarizes the improvements made, and recaps their benefits to learners. A checklist is presented to help work-based learning providers assess their organization's strengths and areas for improvement. Information on assessing basic skills at entry to post-16 provision is appended. (MN)

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# improving initial assessment in work-based learning



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Muriel Green

# **improving initial assessment in work-based learning**

Muriel Green

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# Foreword

If you are a manager, trainer or assessor in work-based provision, this book should be of interest. It is an outcome of a quality improvement initiative funded by the Learning and Skills Council. This involved the intervention of Learning and Skills Development Agency consultants and the use of flowcharting as a process improvement tool.

The book shares the experiences of a small number of work-based providers who sought to improve their initial assessment processes. All providers are identified in the Acknowledgements section at the back of the book. Where their practice is used to illustrate or exemplify issues raised they are not identified by name.

The main focus of this work is the process of initial assessment and the ways in which it might be improved for the benefit of learners. Although the book makes reference to the use of tools in the implementation of initial assessment, it does not attempt to make any evaluative judgements about them.

It does, however, provide specific information about the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit's approach to screening, initial and diagnostic assessment of literacy, numeracy and language skills. The publication of this book offers a timely opportunity to reconfirm details of the Unit's specific use of terms and new assessment tools. Information can be found in the Appendix on page 32.

I hope that you will be able to use all the information and the case studies to help review and develop your own initial assessment processes. The checklist at the back of the book should help you to evaluate your starting point.

You may want to take ideas and approaches to development from *Initial Assessment: a learner centred process*. This is a CD-ROM and book and can be ordered by telephoning Information Services on 020 7297 9144.

Muriel Green  
Development Adviser  
Raising Quality and Achievement Programme

# Introduction

Are you keen to improve the retention and achievement of your learners? An effective assessment process can help you to achieve this. Different assessment processes are needed at the different stages of the learner's learning journey and each has a different purpose.

The terms to describe these assessment processes are not used consistently across the post-16 sector. Throughout this book the term **initial assessment** is used to mean a staged process that helps the learner cross the threshold to the most appropriate post-16 provision. The outcomes of this process inform:

- early judgements about the learner
- the focus and level of learning
- the skills that will be developed and the needs that will be met.

Information about current interests and achievement can provide a strong basis. The outcomes of screening, diagnostic testing and induction tasks and activities can all be used to put together a detailed picture of the learner as he/she moves through the different stages of the process.

It is really important to 'get it right', so that the learning and support opportunities offered are the best possible match with the interests, abilities, aptitudes, aspirations and needs of the individual. A learner who is on a programme at the right level, and has interest and aptitude for the things they do will be more likely to be successful.

Many learners entering work-based training provision have previously had negative experiences of learning:

*It remains the case that many young people, who have neither done well at school nor enjoyed it, find their way into work-based learning. They have poor educational qualifications, and often, they are believed to have poor basic skills.*

*Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2001-2002  
Adult Learning Inspectorate 2002*

Because of this, assessment needs to be a positive experience for these learners. They need to understand and engage in the process, and use the outcomes to inform what they will learn and how they will learn it.

Many providers recognise the need to improve initial assessment processes. Evidence from the inspectorate confirms this view:

*An individual learning plan cannot be prepared, with any hope of its being pertinent, without the most careful interview and, probably, well-chosen formal testing. This is the fourth consecutive year in which this point has been made in my annual report. Initial assessment nevertheless often remains inadequate.*

*Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2001-2002  
Adult Learning Inspectorate 2002.*

The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme has helped a small number of providers to improve their initial assessment processes using tried and tested quality improvement tools and techniques. This document has been written to share their experience with you.

# Initial assessment

## Purpose: why do you do initial assessment?

Initial assessment should be done with learners to help them be more effective in their learning. It needs to inform what they will learn and how they might learn it. Assessment is both backward and forward-looking. In other words it makes judgements about previous learning and achievements whilst at the same time attempting to give indications, or measures, of the learner's capacity to progress along one of a number of pathways. The outcomes of the process shape the learning and support that can best secure achievement and progression for the individual learner.

Or at least that is what should happen. Where practice is good the learner is clear about why it is happening and how it will help them. However, we know from our recent work that initial assessment can be a negative experience for some learners.

*I was feeling really nervous. I had just left school. I had done all my exams and I hadn't done very well and there was another exam in front of me...and I didn't even think there would be Maths and English – I couldn't really do it... I asked if I could have another go but they said I couldn't.*

Matthew, NVQ in Hospitality and Catering

What do your learners understand about your reasons for assessing them at entry?

## The learner experience: how learner centred is your process?

Too often providers can see initial assessment as a bureaucratic exercise that is more about contract compliance than about learners and learning. A learner centred initial assessment process needs to:

- engage learners and be of benefit to them and their learning
- help learners feel positive about themselves and their potential to learn.

Learners who move in to the world of training with modest or limited achievements need to be learning at a level that offers personal challenge but allows them to succeed. They may need support with specific aspects of their learning. It is important that the process is not seen as part of a deficit model that serves to undermine confidence by focusing only on the things that learners cannot do.

Learners need to:

- understand why you want to put together an early and accurate picture of them
- have access to this information
- feel confident about how the information will be used to help them.





Feedback should be offered as soon as possible after assessment. Ideally feedback should be used to increase the learner's self-awareness, build confidence and motivate them to succeed. Where learners are encouraged to talk about the outcomes of assessment they will be able to develop a language of learning. This will help them take an active role in making decisions about goals and targets for their individual learning plan.

A learning plan can be a key document for the individual learner where it is a 'live' document. It can provide:

- a frequent reference point for progress review
- recognition of success
- a record of goals and targets set.

To what extent does your assessment process prepare your learners to engage in discussion to plan their learning?

## **Management: how consistent is your process across your organisation?**

Consistency is a key management issue. This is particularly so for large organisations with dispersed provision or those that have several different areas of learning. Consistency is best demonstrated when the process is equally effective for ALL learners. It can be judged to be effective when it helps secure the best match between the learner and the learning. For each individual it should initiate feelings of confidence in their ability to achieve through a programme that offers learning opportunities and support, of a level and kind to match aspirations, aptitude, ability and needs. It can seem so simple but evidence from inspections has shown it to be difficult to achieve.

Consistency is about the process and the learner's experience of that process. It is not about using the same initial assessment tools or tests at the same time with all learners. To improve consistency you should focus on the following questions.

- What is the process and what needs to happen?
- Where and when should it happen?
- Who needs to make it happen?
- Do the people involved have the understanding, skills and assessment tools to be effective in their roles?

### **First stage of the initial assessment process**

It may be helpful to illustrate this point with reference to the first stage of the initial assessment process.

- You will want to know about a learner's vocational interest, aptitude, ability and motivation and you will start to confirm this through an interview.
- You may produce a standard set of open questions that can be used to structure all interviews.
- You may decide that you want to secure references, reports and/or records of achievement for all learners.
- You may aim always to communicate appropriately with key partners, like Connexions for example.

Note that it may not always be possible, or appropriate, to use tools, tests or activities to look at aptitude for all learners. If you do use assessment instruments at this stage they need to be chosen because they will help a specific learner and not because they are quick and easy to use.

Structures and systems need to support the process. Figure 1 below shows that administrative systems can be standardised and still allow you to differentiate the learner's experience at a particular stage. It also illustrates that where assessment tools are used they may differ depending on the circumstances of individual learners. In choosing tools it is important to be clear about what you need to know about a learner and to be confident that the tool selected will provide the information. Validity and reliability of tools is an important issue.

**Figure 1** A consistent approach that differentiates for individual learners

Provider YY offers work-based training to 16–19 year olds. At the selection stage of the process Provider YY uses an initial interview to make judgements about vocational interest, aptitude and the level of programme that might be most suited to ability and needs. A screening/initial assessment tool can be used at this stage to identify the most appropriate level of programme. In this case learners will be helped to understand why they will do it and how the outcomes will be fed back to them and used to help them.

- A standard letter goes to all potential learners setting out what will happen in the interview.
- A standard set of open questions is used at interview to explore vocational interests/aptitude, attitude/experience, academic performance, motivation and potential.
- A standard form is designed to capture data.
- All learners are invited to bring copies of qualifications, NRAs, evidence of interests, experience.
- References are sought in advance of interviews.
- Outcomes of vocational aptitude tests done through Careers/Connexions are sought in advance of interviews.
- Where performance in GCSE is not known or is at grade D or below a basic skills assessment tool is used to help determine levels of literacy, numeracy and language skills.
- Where learners have evidence of performance in GCSE at grades A–C and need to achieve key skills they do a key skills screening test to help determine application of number, communication and IT levels.

All interviews end on a positive note and leave the learner feeling that they have been listened to, that they are clearer about the vocational pathway they would like to follow and understand the level of programme that will help them progress their learning to secure achievement.

### **Are staff sufficiently trained?**

Staff need to feel confident and be competent to fulfil their roles within the initial assessment process. They need to understand what they are doing and how what they do can benefit the learner. There needs to be clarity about how one person's role relates to that of others, with clear channels of communication and information flow.

Training to improve understanding of purpose, process, structures and systems can be cost effective if managed at whole organisation or large group level. The development of skills to interview, mark and interpret tests, analyse a range of information from different sources and give feedback are likely to be most successful on a smaller group basis with opportunities to practise skills as a feature of the sessions. In the case of some specialist assessment instruments staff will need to achieve qualified status to administer tests.

### **The importance of quality systems**

Where standardised administrative systems can be set up it will be possible to capture and record data from a variety of different sources. Involve a range of staff in the development of such systems so that colleagues working at all levels across

different sites can feel a sense of ownership for a common approach. Ideally information systems will provide opportunities to use data both for the benefit of individuals and their learning, and also at a strategic level to inform longer term planning and resourcing decisions.

Continuous review and evaluation of initial assessment processes will help your organisation monitor its practice and improve it where needed. Ideally, you will build in quality systems from the beginning. It will be important to seek the views of learners through learner feedback mechanisms as soon as possible after the experience. Data can be collected from:

- ☒ questionnaires
- ☒ group discussions
- ☒ individual interviews.

Staff and partner organisations can also provide valuable feedback on how they have found the processes.

A critical question is, of course, whether changes to assessment processes have made an impact on learner retention and completion. If placement on programmes, motivation of learners and support for learning all improve, retention, completion and achievement should also improve. The case studies set out later in the book all illustrate improvements and benefits to learners. They are, of necessity, based on relatively short-term outcomes and improvements are difficult to quantify. Many of the organisations have plans for longer-term improvements which will not yet have borne fruit.

What would be the key indicators of effective initial assessment?

## Scope: how comprehensive is your initial assessment?

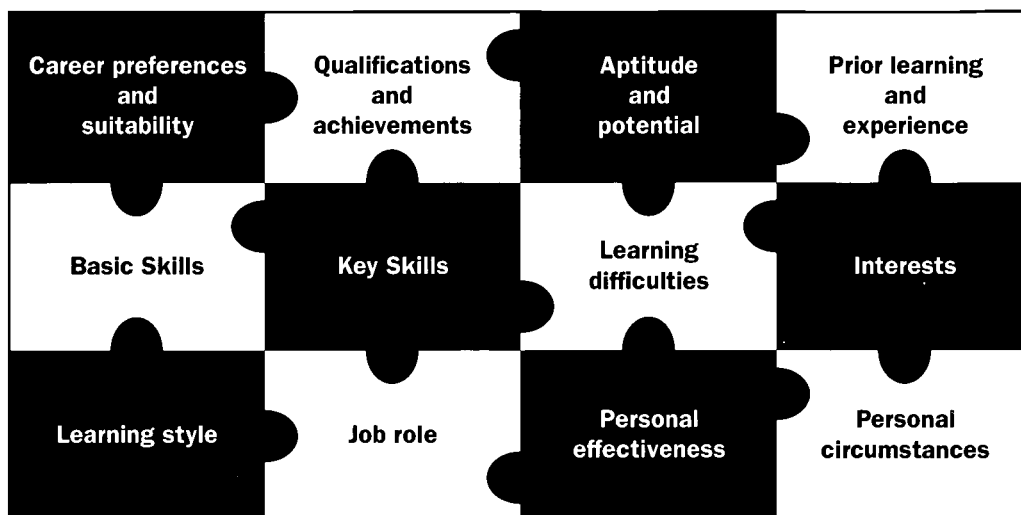
Initial assessment, although a well used term, is perhaps unhelpful. 'Initial' suggests that all the assessment happens at the start and as we know the process actually takes the learner from outside the post-16 sector. It crosses them over the threshold and continues to make judgements about them in the early stages of their programme.

The different stages of the process generate a range of different kinds of information about the learner. A holistic approach that moves from pre-entry and through induction will provide the most rigorous and comprehensive picture of the learner and their learning. It will take a bit of time to put together a detailed picture of the learner but it is better to give this time than to rely on the outcomes of a quick test used at entry.

Be careful not to over-interpret test results or use them in a fragmented way. They provide one piece of the jigsaw and need to be set beside other pieces to form the whole picture of the learner. Where tests are used they need to be fit for purpose and valid and reliable indicators of those things they claim to measure. In the case of specialist tests those administering them will need to be trained.

The jigsaw below is 'borrowed' from *Initial Assessment of Learning and Support Needs and Planning Learning to Meet Needs*, DfEE, LSC, 2001. It is helpful in outlining the breadth and scope of information drawn in to the initial assessment process.

**Figure 2** Learner information to be considered during initial assessment



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### Putting together the jigsaw

Snippets of information can come from a range of sources:

- the learner
- those involved in the learner's earlier phases of learning
- the results of testing
- the outcomes of practical tasks and activities.

Think about the range of professionals who are involved in working with you to put together the pieces of jigsaw for your learners. Building strong partnerships with Connexions and Job Centre Plus will help you strengthen your initial interview process particularly where information flows smoothly between organisations.

### Selection interviews

A well-managed selection interview can generate a lot of useful information. This can come from the learner, those involved with earlier phases of their learning and guidance, as well as in the form of qualifications. Such information can be drawn on to provide a strong indication of interest, aptitude and ability. However, it will be wise to check out assumptions through screening, diagnostic assessments and induction activities as the learner progresses through induction and into their main programme of work.

### Screening tools

Screening tools can be used at an early stage in the process. As a simple rule of thumb, it may help to remember that screening tests provide crude measures and seek to place individuals in a population with others who share a common set of characteristics. A screening test will not give a detailed profile of individual strengths and weaknesses. It will serve only to flag up the need for further assessment. The outcomes of screening can be used in different ways, for example in relation to key skills:

- To guide an individual learner toward a programme at a level at which they will be most likely to succeed.

- As evidence of the need to use a diagnostic test to provide detail of the strengths and weaknesses of those found to be performing at a specific level but needing to progress to a higher level.
- As an indicator of a need to use specialist assessment tools to identify specific learning difficulties.
- To contribute to aggregate data used to inform planning and resourcing decisions: for example, where a significant proportion of learners are at Level 2 or below they will need opportunities to develop their skills. Staffing and programme planning will need consideration.

### Diagnostic tools

Diagnostic tests, tasks and activities should provide details of individual strengths and weaknesses. They are usually administered during induction. Where the focus of activity relates directly to the programme of work they can be fun activities that help build a positive climate and personal motivation for the way ahead.

The outcomes should be used to shape the detail of an individual learning programme and inform the support needed to help the learner build on his/her strengths and overcome weaknesses. Some learners who need specialist testing for specific learning difficulties can identify themselves at this stage or even later.

### Learning style inventories

Learning styles inventories will provide details of different learning preferences. Outcomes can be used in different ways. Knowledge of learning preferences can help learners exploit opportunities to learn through activities that match well with preferred style. However there should also be support for learners to learn when teaching/training strategies do not match well with preferred learning style. For example, a caterer who found that he preferred to learn through hands on activity was quick to learn in practical sessions in the kitchen but needed support with approaches to theoretical work that were used in off the job training.

### A note on tests

Now is not the time to go into a lot of detail about different tests. The important thing is that where they are used they are well chosen and fit for purpose. It should go without saying that tests are best developed by professional organisations that do proper trials of the items used. This will mean that you can feel confident to trust the information they give you. If you are in the business of assessing basic skills at entry it is important that you refer to details of new assessment tools in the Appendix on page 32.

You will be wise to remember that an individual test provides only one source of information. It needs to be pulled together with information drawn from different sources so that the learner and provider can see the whole picture when decisions are made about learning and support. The learner's own view of their interest, ability and needs will bring a different but important perspective.

How do you and colleagues triangulate evidence from across the process to form a basis for decisions?

The next section of the document looks at process improvement and examines how a small number of providers used flowcharting as a basis for improving their initial assessment in relation to some of the issues and practice noted above. This is followed by a checklist: Improving Initial Assessment, on page 29, which you can use to record your strengths and areas for development.

# Process improvement

*Simply stated, processes are the activities and tasks that are carried out to produce goods and services.<sup>1</sup>*

In the case of this particular piece of work the process is initial assessment. The process involves learners in activities and tasks that serve to confirm what and how they might best learn.

## Overview

Nineteen providers were helped to improve their initial assessment processes. To do this they engaged in:

- a review of the sequencing of activities undertaken through initial assessment provision
- the production of a pictorial representation of their process – a flowchart
- a critical evaluation of strengths and weaknesses in their initial assessment process
- development planning
- a range of practical strategies to improve their initial assessment practice.

Consultants supported providers with all of the activities listed above. Providers were also offered opportunities to attend support seminars that were planned to provide timely updates, practical case studies of effective practice and time to reflect and network.

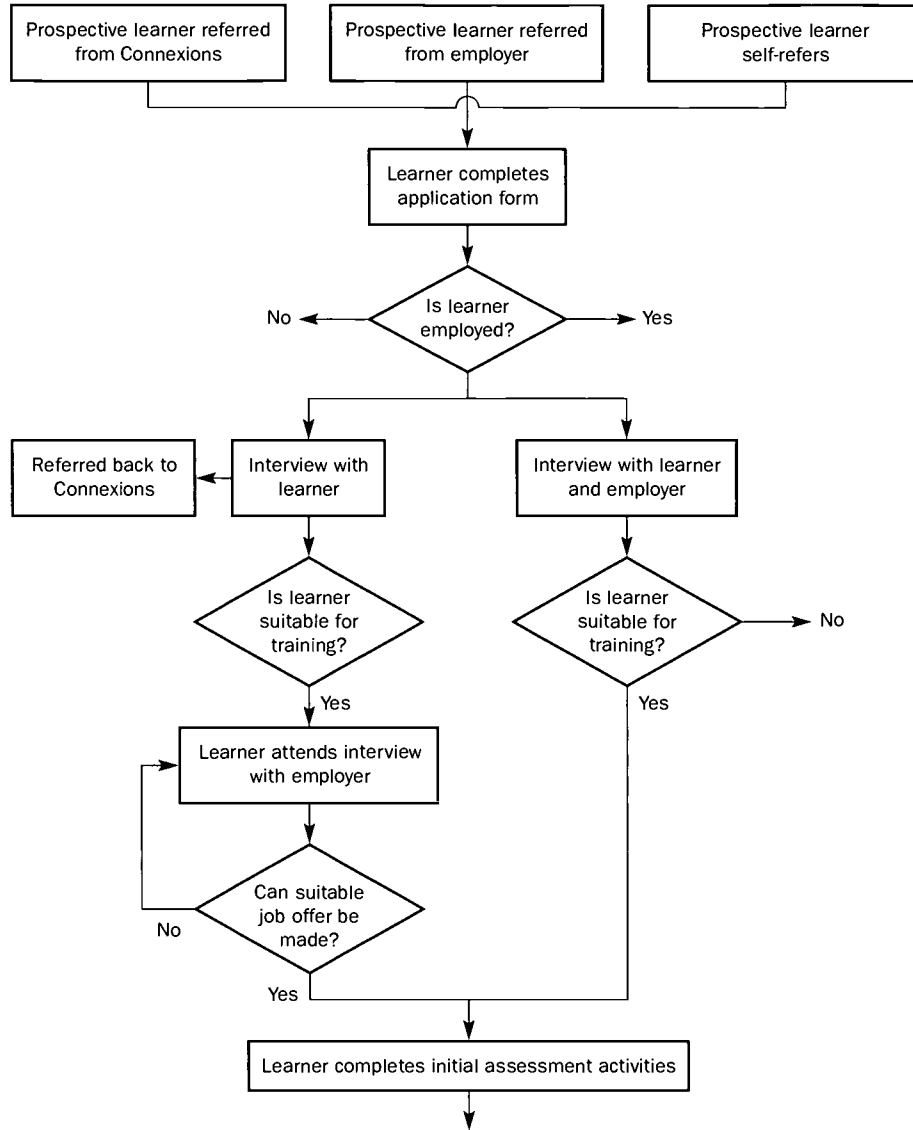
## Flowcharting

Flowcharting was the technique used to define the beginning and the end as well as the shape of the initial assessment process. It produced for each provider a pictorial representation of the sequence of activities that made their initial assessment process, indicated links and flagged up decision points. Figure 3 shows the first part of a single organisation's initial assessment process. The provider is identified as provider A.

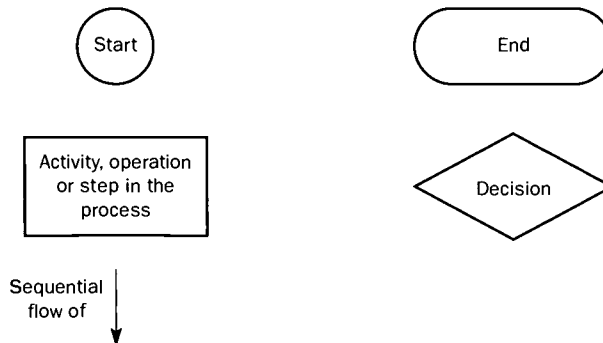
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<sup>1</sup> *Improving Learning Processes* Philip Cox, LSDA 2002

**Figure 3** An excerpt from a flowchart



The excerpt from a flowchart seen above presents a simple picture of part of one organisation's process. The complete flowcharts would include the following symbols:



You will see most of these symbols used in other excerpts throughout the book. Original flowcharts were all produced with *Visio* software.

## The review process

The review process was always led by a consultant as it is best to give the facilitator role to someone external to the process. A team of staff who represented different levels in the organisation and different stages of the process took part in each review.

In the case of Provider A the following people were involved:

- Operational Manager
- Recruitment/Marketing Team Leader
- Training Officer
- NVQ Assessor
- Employers
- Quality Manager
- Administrator
- Prospects/Connexions representative

The facilitator asked questions of the team to help unpick the initial assessment process – why, what, who, where, when, how? Throughout the session it remained important to focus on what actually happened, not on what they wanted to happen. Having representatives from all levels across the organisation with different perceptions of the process secured essential reality checks.

Responses to questions were recorded on post-it notes; issues raised were noted but ‘parked’. Time given to discuss issues would have detracted from the business of unravelling the process, but they were moved back into discussion at a later stage.

The post-it notes were organised into related groupings before being positioned sequentially to ‘flow in to the chart’. This organisation subsequently helped shape the pictorial representation of the process.

## Critical evaluations

The team of staff were then encouraged to critically evaluate the initial assessment process through consideration of the flowchart and supplementary notes of issues raised. The flowchart helped people understand their own role in the process and the ways in which they interfaced with others. It helped to identify:

- inconsistencies
- duplication
- gaps
- redundant activities
- ambiguities
- undefined responsibilities
- poor routing of work and other problems.

The team of staff identified and prioritised areas for improvement.

## Improving practice

It was important that the team of staff formed a vision of how things should be before sitting down to plan for improvement. Knowledge of effective practice gleaned from visits, good practice seminars or case studies helped to shape the vision.



However, manageability had to be key. In the real world providers were not all positioned to totally redesign their initial assessment process. In all cases the 19 providers worked with their consultant to build on strengths and prioritise issues for action. Figures 4–6 below highlight the issues identified across the group.

Different providers worked to address these issues in their improvement strategies. The case studies that follow aim to share their ideas and practice. Each is structured to provide an overview of the provider, a brief snapshot of their starting point using an excerpt from their flowchart, key issues raised by evaluation of the flowchart, improvements put in place and benefits to learners.

Can any of the strategies used in the case studies help you improve your initial assessment practice?

Figure 4 Learner centred issues

- ☐ Learners' understanding of purpose.
- ☐ Making the process clear for learners.
- ☐ Engaging learners in the process.
- ☐ Giving feedback to learners.
- ☐ Helping learners use the outcomes of assessment in a positive way.
- ☐ Using initial assessment outcomes to build confidence and motivate learners.
- ☐ Informing/shaping the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) with the learner.
- ☐ Helping learners set goals and targets that they 'own'.
- ☐ Regularly reviewing progress, celebrating achievements, setting new targets.
- ☐ Using the ILP as a 'living' document.
- ☐ Using the outcomes of initial assessment and review to re-route learners or to reconfirm long-term career goals.

Figure 5 Management issues

- ☐ Clarity of purpose: strong focus on learners.
- ☐ Understanding and training of staff.
- ☐ Timing of assessment.
- ☐ Careful use of tools, fitness for purpose.
- ☐ Gathering and using data from other agencies.
- ☐ Quality and consistency.
- ☐ Using data to progress individual learners.
- ☐ Using aggregate data to inform planning and resourcing.

Figure 6 Comprehensiveness

- ☐ Using information from earlier experiences of learning: schools, employer, training provider.
- ☐ Using the interview to explore the learner's perception of self and evidence of previous learning.
- ☐ Using interviews and aptitude tests and tasks to indicate vocational interests and potential.
- ☐ Screening as a crude indicator, in the case of basic skills, of the need for further assessment and in other cases to give an indication of level.
- ☐ Diagnostic assessment to identify specific strengths and weaknesses: basic skills, key skills, programme specific skills.
- ☐ Specialist assessment to identify learning difficulties and disabilities.
- ☐ Learning styles inventories to assess learning preferences.
- ☐ Self-assessment by learners.
- ☐ Creating the whole picture, triangularity, information/evidence.

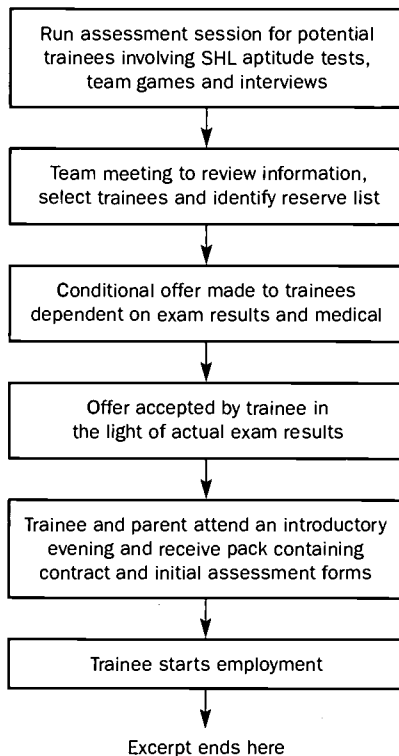
# Learner centred improvements: case studies

## Provider B

### Background

Provider B is part of a large manufacturing company and provides parts for the automotive industry. It has two main sites, each in a different part of the country. The main site was established 40 years ago and has a long history of having run an apprentice training school. Provider B offers employment and training for some 55 learners who follow AMA programmes in Engineering or AMA or FMA programmes in Business Administration. It also caters for a small number of learners who are employed by local companies.

**Figure 7** Excerpt from flowchart



### Key issues raised by evaluation of the process

- Information generated from interview, aptitude tests and team games is not shared with learners and used with them to inform the learning plan.

- Information is gathered about prior experience, communication skills, working with others, problem solving and personal effectiveness. There is also a medical assessment.
- There is no assessment of basic skills, key skills or learning styles.
- Additional support needs are not identified.

### **Improvements**

Provider B decided in the first instance to make the initial assessment process more learner centred.

- The appropriate training officer now explains the need for information to the learners. The officer confirms that each learner will receive individual feedback from the assessment process. When feedback is given the emphasis is placed on 'how you were successful, where you have development potential'. The officer completes, with the learner, an initial assessment form. At this stage it is possible to include information about aptitude and career preferences.
- The initial assessment form is 'owned' by the learner. He/she has already been engaged in discussion with a training officer to help complete some sections.
- Each learner is introduced to the concept of learning styles through the induction process that takes place when the learner starts employment. All learners are given their own Honey and Mumford Learning Styles booklet. All learners complete the learning styles inventory and benefit from an individual feedback session (45 minutes each) that sets out to help them understand better their learning preferences and the implications for their learning throughout the programme.

Plans are also in place to introduce a key skills assessment, learner self assessment and staff training.

### **Benefits to learners**

Learners have been very positive about their pre-entry initial assessment experience. They have welcomed the individual feedback and some have reported that their success in gaining a place with the provider has built self-esteem and a belief in their potential to achieve.

Learners have enjoyed the learning styles inventory experienced as a part of the induction process. Time given for individual feedback has been much valued. Learners have been able to discuss the outcomes with their trainer to add information to the initial assessment form.

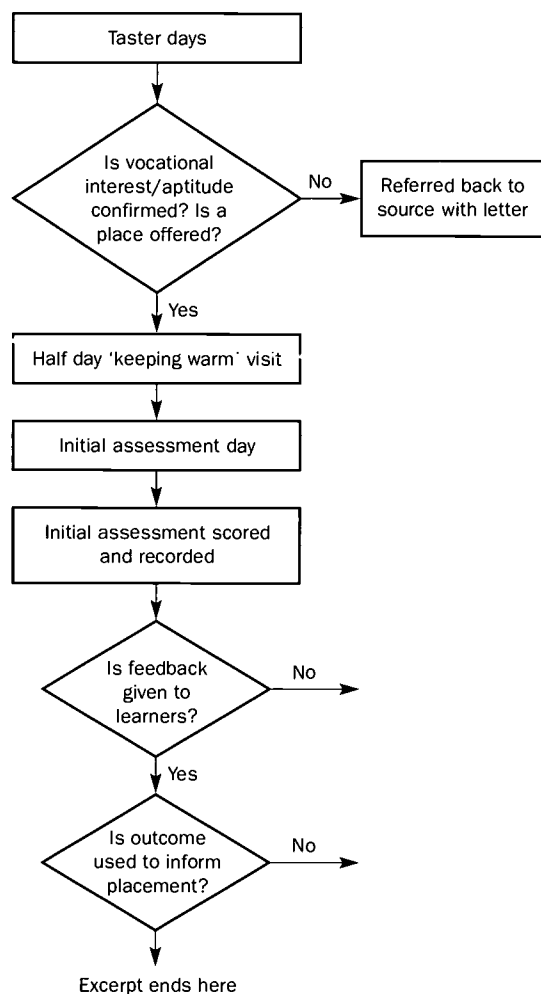
Learners 'own' the initial assessment forms and should understand the significance for them of the information noted. They have been talking to each other about how they will learn best. They are demonstrating a real interest in learning.

## **Provider C**

### **Background**

Provider C is a small, local, provider with about 25 learners. Training is focused on Engineering. Learners are working toward FMAs or AMAs.

**Figure 8** Excerpt from flowchart



### Key issues raised by evaluation of the process

- Taster days, 'keeping warm' visits and practical vocational interest/aptitude tasks all help to confirm interest and aptitude for a particular vocational pathway.
- Interviews are used to check the learner's interests, understanding of the vocational area and qualification framework. Scripted questions for one-to-one interviews provide a common framework.
- Information from schools, previous employers, careers are not requested.
- An initial assessment day is used to administer a basic skills screening test, key skills tests that draw on QCA originated test items, Bennett Mechanical Comprehension Test and a Learning Styles assessment. There is a lack of clarity about the purpose of initial assessment and the appropriacy and timing of selected testing regimes. There is no feedback to learners.
- The initial assessment experience could be daunting for learners.
- There is no systematic assessment of additional learning needs.

## Improvements

Provider C decided to develop a more holistic, learner centred initial assessment process that took place over an extended period of time rather than the original day.

- The provider replaced the initial assessment day with a new induction process run over the course of a week. This was designed to confirm vocational interest and aptitude, and assess skills needed to achieve at specific levels:
- Literacy, numeracy and IT levels were assessed using the LearnDirect assessment materials.
- Personal/interpersonal and problem solving skills were assessed through team activities. Learners were observed and assessed in a practical project that involved learners in moving a heavy gearbox.
- Assessment involved the use of staff checklists to record learner performance in the problem solving task and the use of video to capture evidence of performance in group activities.
- Learning styles were assessed using a multi-sensory model.
- Feedback to learners drew on this information and was used to secure a commitment to work to achieve qualifications at the most appropriate level. LearnDirect materials are being used to help learners improve and make progress with basic and/or key skills as appropriate.

## Benefits to learners

The roll out of different assessments over the course of a week was less daunting to learners than the previous assessment day. Indeed, paired and group work with a vocational bias was both interactive and enjoyable.

The outcomes of assessment helped shape a clear picture of the whole learner in relation to the demands of the FMA or AMA. The level of programme offered was a good match for the starting point of each learner.

Individuals received feedback that aimed to build confidence in their ability to succeed by building on their strengths and working to improve weaknesses.

Individual Learning Plans were informed by knowledge of individual strengths and weaknesses. These were developed with individual learners through a one-to-one support session.

# Management issues: case studies

## Provider D

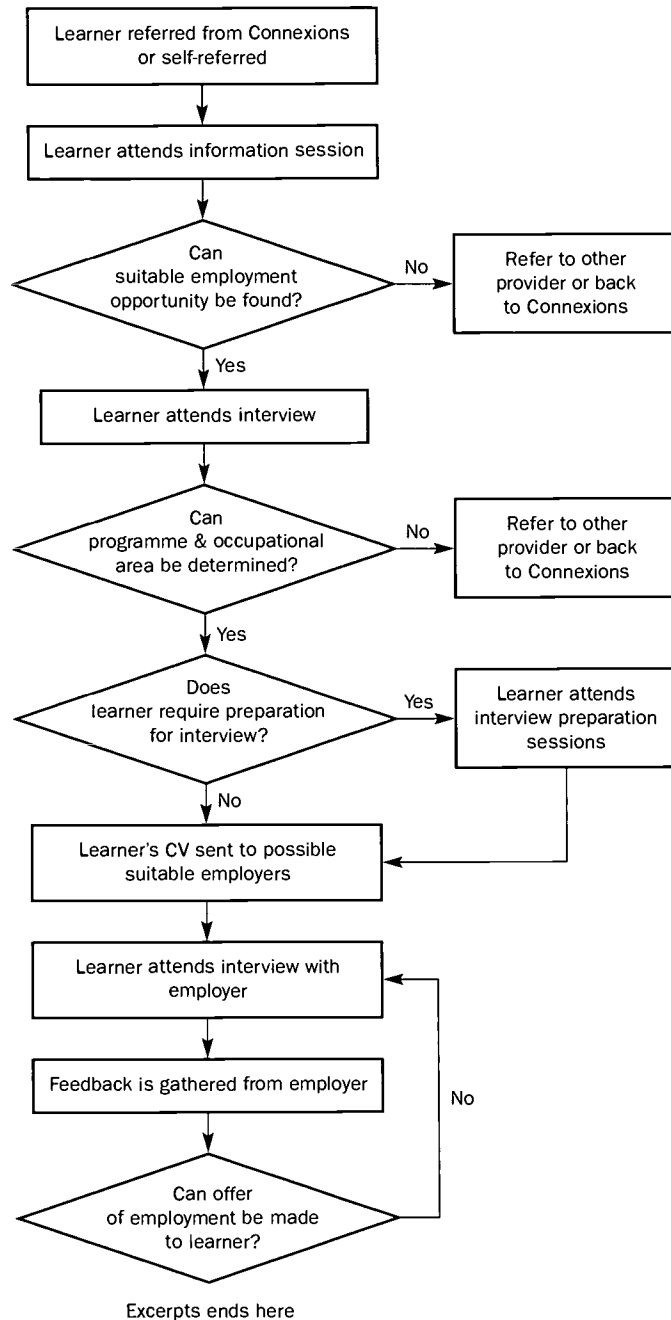
### Background

Provider D is a private training company with four training centres dispersed throughout one area of the country. It provides training for over 500 young people and adults on FMAs, AMAs, NVQ and Job Centre Plus programmes. Training is offered in four vocational areas: Business Administration, Customer Service, Hospitality and Information Technology.

### Key issues raised by evaluation of the process

- A comprehensive range of information was collected through each stage of the initial assessment process including guidance, selection and induction.
- A standard set of questions was used in initial interviews to explore previous experience, qualifications, interests and personal motivation. A standard form was used to record information generated by discussion. All information was drawn on to inform decisions about the occupational area and level and type of programme to be followed.
- Most initial assessment activities took place during induction. The process involved the completion of an accreditation of prior learning pack, a learning styles questionnaire and an occupational self-assessment to determine underpinning knowledge at appropriate levels as well as the completion of a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats analysis (SWOT).
- The outcomes of all the above were attached to the learning plan. Key skills were assessed after the learning plan had been developed.
- Approximately 24 different members of staff were involved in the various aspects of the initial assessment process. This included recruitment specialists, assessors and trainers. In many cases different staff would contribute to the assessment of an individual learner. It was clear that there was no shared understanding of purpose and that practice was inconsistent across the organisation.
- Assessment was 'done to learners', there was no feedback and information was not used to best effect in shaping the Individual Learning Plans.

**Figure 9** Excerpt from flowchart



### Improvements

As so many staff were involved in the process, provider D decided to focus on management issues in a bid to improve the consistency of the quality of the learner's experience. The first improvement activity undertaken was a staff training programme.

Staff were helped to develop a shared understanding of the purpose of initial assessment. All staff were involved in an interactive training day where structured group work took place based on learner case studies.

Case studies provided a wide range of information about a group of four fictitious learners. Information was organised into categories, each category representing one of the initial assessment elements from the provider's process:

- a completed APL pack
- a marked basic skills screening test
- a completed learning styles questionnaire
- an IT audit
- learner self assessments.

Groups were asked to review and evaluate the whole package of information about a specified individual and agree a level and type of programme for the individual.

It became clear that information had been understood and interpreted in very different ways by staff. For example, not all staff realised that the level of literacy demonstrated by a learner performing at 'entry level' in a basic skills initial assessment is broadly equivalent to the standard of literacy demonstrated by an average seven year old (National Curriculum Level 2).

Discussion stimulated by this realisation was wide ranging and touched on:

- the need to offer support to learners who are at 'entry' or Level 1 as they move into training
- the need to do further assessment to make informed judgements about the exact nature and type of support needed
- the need to feedback the outcomes of assessment in a positive way to build confidence and motivate the learner
- the need to ensure that learning opportunities and support are offered, taken up and progress monitored
- the fact that learners who have achieved grades A to C in GCSEs, including English and Mathematics, have already demonstrated literacy and numeracy equivalent to Level 2 and do not need to do a basic skills assessment. Other initial assessment tests or tasks will be more relevant to them depending on their aspirations and needs.

Having considered and discussed all the information provided in the case studies groups were invited to draw up a learning plan for each learner. The earlier exercise had helped staff understand the need to get the level right for each individual. They now recognised the need for learning and support to be outlined in the plan.

Group members also prepared learner action plans for the case study learners and used these as a basis for mock reviews. This experience threw up some interesting issues.

- Long term goals are usually qualifications and will only be achieved after quite a length of time.
- Short term targets needed to focus on short steps to be taken in the movement toward the achievement of the long term goal. Targets needed to take account of learning, support and assessment activities.
- These targets needed to be specific, measurable, achievable and time related.
- Targets needed to be 'owned' by learners and therefore needed to be set by them and not by the staff.
- Reviews inevitably identified important information about learners that had not come to light through initial assessment. The Individual Learning Plan needed to be a 'live' document and to be revisited and revised where necessary as the learner progressed through the programme.



## **Benefits to learners**

Learners better understood how initial assessment can help them.

Learners who came through basic skills assessment at Entry level, or at Level 1, were offered opportunities to develop skills through learning and support activities.

Learners received feedback from initial assessment and were more involved in discussion to draw up the Individual Learning Plan.

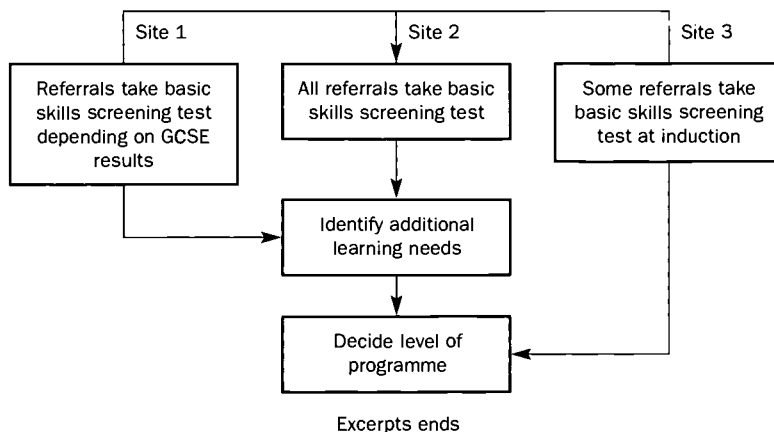
Learners were supported in setting their own short term targets through review sessions.

# Provider E

## Background

Provider E is a large provider of work-based learning with some 700 learners. Learners are placed in different locations throughout a wide geographical area. Learners work toward FMA/AMA, NVQ, Key Skills and Technical Certificates. Most of the off the job training is offered by the provider but some is subcontracted out to local colleges. Twenty six per cent of the current cohort of learners has been endorsed as having special learning or social needs.

**Figure 10** Excerpt from flowchart



## Key issues raised by evaluation of the process

- There was a range of initial assessment experience in using different tools and techniques across the organisation.
- There was a lack of consistency in timing and use of tools and techniques across the organisation.
- Information from assessment was not shared with learners.
- Information from initial assessment was not used to inform Individual Learning Plans.
- Data was not used to inform planning and resourcing of training and support across the organisation.

## Improvements

Provider E recognised the need to draw on experience from across the organisation to improve the consistency of the learner's experience of the initial assessment process. They were particularly keen to see the outcomes of the process improve learning. At the same time they planned to improve quality assurance systems for their initial assessment processes. Activities included the following:

- Nine staff from across the organisation met monthly over a period of five months to plan, implement and report on a shared improvement strategy. In between the monthly meetings the nine worked within one of three short life task groups. Each group focused on a different aspect of development and at each monthly meeting progress was shared and targets set.
  - Group 1 reviewed the ways in which existing assessment tools were being used. The group worked across the organisation to find out the level and kind of information needed about learners and the assessment tools, techniques and activities that could be used to generate it.

- Group 2 reviewed and evaluated the administrative systems used to support the process with a view to making them more effective. Standardised letters and forms were developed to request and record information about learners from pre-entry through to on-programme.
- Group 3 worked to develop a quality policy and quality assurance systems that were compatible with the organisation's quality assurance procedures.
- A staff development programme was devised to give all staff involved in initial assessment the opportunity to clarify purpose, better understand their role in the process and see how their own role related to that of other key individuals.
  - Forty training officers and administrators from across the different sites of the organisation all attended a training session to clarify new processes and the ways in which they needed to work together to administer them.
  - Staff were trained to use assessment tools selectively and appropriately as a part of the initial assessment process.
  - Emphasis was given to the need to record information on standard forms and use it for the benefit of the learners.
  - Specific training sessions were organised to help staff develop the skills of giving feedback to learners. Emphasis was given to the need to be positive and constructive.
  - Data about learners with additional needs was used to inform decisions about staffing and support. Two new staff were been appointed to work peripatetically across the whole organisation to support learners with additional social needs.

### **Benefits to learners**

Initial assessment processes are explained to learners.

Tools used to support the process are those judged to provide the information needed to secure for each individual a learning programme of the level and type best suited to their interests, aptitude, ability and needs. Different tools are used with learners at different levels.

Learners receive feedback from the process. Efforts are made to show sensitivity and to make this a positive experience.

Information from the initial assessment process is used to help learners set out an Individual Learning Plan.

Learners who need additional support are given specialist help.

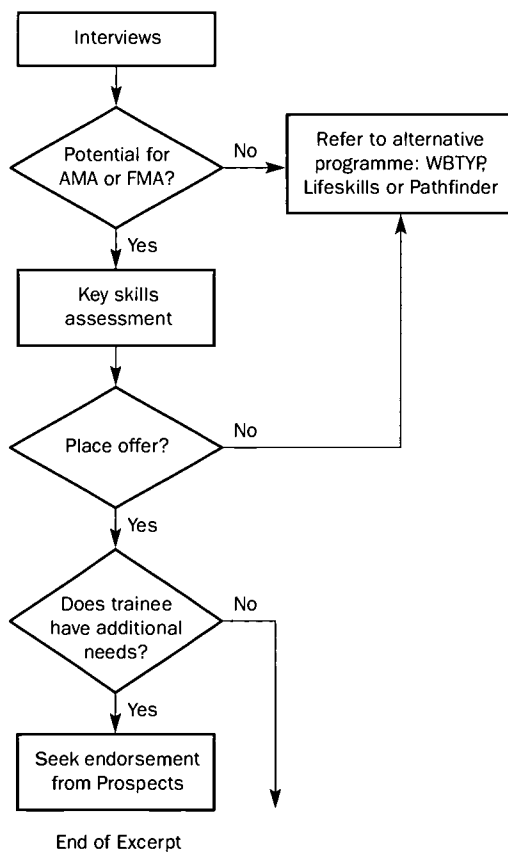
# Comprehensive issues: case studies

## Provider F

### Background

Provider F offers work-based training programmes to about 80 learners across three different sites. Learners can follow programmes in a range of occupational areas: Business Administration, Retail, Customer Service, IT, Distribution and Warehousing. Learners can join programmes throughout the year and there are opportunities for progression within the company. For example, learners may come in to do Lifeskills and progress to FMA or NVQs. In addition the company provides programmes for Job Centre Plus clients. Twenty six percent of the current cohort of learners have been endorsed as having special learning or social needs.

**Figure 11** Excerpt from flowchart



## Key issues raised by evaluation of the process

- There was strong commitment to learners and some very supportive entry processes.
- Very little referral information was provided by Prospects/Connexions or Job Centre Plus. Assessment processes and their outcomes were operated in isolation by different agencies and this was not in the best interest of the learner.
- There was a lack of understanding about the difference between screening to identify levels for placement and diagnostic assessment to shape learning and identify support needs.
- A wide variety of assessment tools and tests were used on different programmes. Tools used focus on: career and occupational preferences, interest and motivation, basic skills, key skills, learning styles. Some learners were involved in multiple testing which was not always useful or used.
- There was a recognition that some learners experienced the same tests each time they wanted to progress into or through a post-16 provider placement.
- Assessment outcomes were not pulled together in a comprehensive record to be used to inform learning plans. Neither was there a means of adding or updating information as more was learned about individuals.

## Improvements

A common learner record was designed to structure and record the outcomes of different forms of initial assessment. The record is used across the organisation, and information is built up over time. The aim is to have the record move with the learner. Collaborative links have been developed with other agencies and training providers in the area with a view to sharing good practice. The aim is to promote the concept of an ongoing learner record.

A two week, off-the-job introductory programme has been created for WBL learners before they start with their placement company. This offers an opportunity to assess skills for different job roles against a skill scan profile as well as screening for levels of basic or key skills.

The outcomes of screening/initial assessment tests are used to inform decisions about further diagnostic tests. The basic skills co-ordinator has attended a two day course on diagnostic assessment. Specialist testing to identify learning difficulties or disabilities is used to identify support needs where relevant. Prospects/Connexions are contacted to trigger endorsement where appropriate.

Work placement visits are arranged and the assignment completed through this is used to provide further information for the learner record. Learners have five individual sessions with a member of staff during the two weeks to discuss long-term goals and short-term targets. These are recorded in an individual learning plan.

## Benefits to learners

Learners benefit from individual support, guidance and advice in using assessment data to identify goals and targets. Communication of information between sections and staff makes it easier to look holistically at assessment outcomes with learners.

Learners have ownership of the data and are better able to engage in discussion about starting points and future goals.

A rigorous assessment of skills takes place over an extended period of time to confirm vocational interest and aptitude, confirm the best level of work/study and identify strengths and weaknesses.

## Improving initial assessment: a checklist

You can use the checklist to record your strengths and areas for development.

Key: **A** : Well developed practice

**B** : Practice which has some strengths but needs further development

**C** : Practice which needs much development and support.

<b>LEARNER EXPERIENCE: HOW LEARNER CENTRED IS YOUR PROCESS?</b>	<b>CIRCLE ONE</b>
Learners have a clear understanding of the purpose of initial assessment	A B C
Learners understand how and when they will be assessed and what they can gain from the process	A B C
Learners are engaged in the assessment process, they feel that assessment is done with them rather than to them	A B C
Learners receive feedback from initial assessment	A B C
Feedback is positive and helps learners feel confident that they will be successful in their learning programme	A B C
Learners are able to use the outcomes of initial assessment to help them understand their learning	A B C
Learners are encouraged to discuss their learning and support needs as they are supported in drawing up an Individual Learning Plan	A B C
Learners use knowledge of strengths and weaknesses to set their own short-term learning targets that are challenging, specific, achievable and time related	A B C
Learners have opportunities to review their progress and set new targets	A B C
Learners are given support where initial assessment and reviews identify needs	A B C
<b>MANAGEMENT: HOW CONSISTENT IS YOUR PROCESS?</b>	<b>CIRCLE ONE</b>
Staff understand the purpose of initial assessment in terms of learner gains	A B C
Staff understand the initial assessment process	A B C
The timing of different elements of the process is linked to purpose	A B C
Tools and techniques used are fit for purpose: tests and tasks used provide the specific information that is needed	A B C
Staff understand the role they play in the process and the ways in which their role relates to others	A B C
Staff training helps them feel confident and competent in their role	A B C
Staff understand and use a range of information from different assessment activities to inform decisions about individual learners and their learning	A B C

<b>MANAGEMENT: HOW CONSISTENT IS YOUR PROCESS?</b>	<b>CIRCLE ONE</b>
Aggregate data is collected and used to inform organisational planning for learning and support	A B C
Monitoring and review systems are used to good effect to improve the process	A B C
<b>SCOPE: HOW COMPREHENSIVE IS YOUR INITIAL ASSESSMENT?</b>	<b>CIRCLE ONE</b>
Information is sought and used from earlier experiences of learning: schools, employers, careers	A B C
Learners are themselves invited to assess their interests, ability, aptitude and potential	A B C
Assessment tools and tasks that are used to help provide a more detailed picture are fit for purpose	A B C
Care is taken in selecting assessment tools to secure valid and reliable information	A B C
Care is taken to avoid the overuse of tests	A B C
Aptitude tests and tasks are used to identify areas of interest and potential	A B C
Screening/initial assessment tools are used only to identify a need for further assessment or 'levels' of performance and are not over-interpreted in terms of specific individual needs	A B C
Diagnostic tools and tasks are used to identify specific strengths and areas for development in relation to programme demands	A B C
Learning styles inventories are used to identify learning preferences	A B C
Specialist assessment tools are used to identify specific learning needs	A B C
The outcomes of different kinds of initial assessment are used together, and with the learner, to look at the whole picture to inform what is learnt, how it is learnt and how the learner is supported	A B C

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank three groups of people who have played a part in putting together this book. First, the providers who worked with us to review and develop their initial assessment processes.

Aspire Training  
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Bicton College  
Cannington College  
Carver Training  
CG Resources  
Charter Training Services Ltd  
DDI Training Ltd  
Enterprise Training Group  
Fortan  
Performance through People  
Rathbone Training  
RWP Training and Development  
Sharp Edge Training  
Somerset County Training  
Swindon Pressings Ltd  
Taurus Skills Foundation  
Total People Ltd  
Training Development Services

All have contributed to LSDA's thinking about practical improvements to initial assessment in work-based learning provision. I am particularly grateful to providers who have allowed LSDA to publish excerpts from their flowcharts and share an overview of their initial progress in improving practice.

Second, I would like to thank the team of consultants who worked so hard to support providers: Rosemary Moore, Lynne Clough, Felicity Munday and Enid Worsley. They have travelled the country to provide individual support to all the organisations listed above. They also organised and ran support seminars. Without their helpful advice and suggestions for the book it would not have been written. I need to make mention here of another consultant, Liz Perry, who has led a different team of process improvement consultants. Liz's team briefing notes informed the section on process improvement.

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# Appendix: assessing basic skills at entry to post-16 provision

## Background

The introduction of the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy allow providers to identify literacy, numeracy and language skill levels more accurately and consistently. All adult literacy, numeracy and language screening and assessment should be based on the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy. Assessment should inform the development and review of individual learning plans.

## Assessment processes

The Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit uses the following terms to describe assessment at entry to post-16 provision:

### ■ Screening

Basic skills screening is used to identify learners who would benefit from more in-depth assessment. A screening tool has been developed, *Fast Track*, and is available from the Basic Skills Agency. Versions are being developed for work place settings and community settings. A screening tool for ESOL is also being developed.

### ■ Initial assessment

Learners may have different levels of reading, writing, numeracy and language needs. Initial assessment tools can identify skills and levels and will help to place learners in the most appropriate learning programmes. These tools are available from the Basic Skills Agency.

### ■ Diagnostic assessment

Diagnostic assessment materials can help to identify a detailed profile of skills and weaknesses. Diagnostic assessment materials have been recently developed. Diagnostic assessment must be carried out by a literacy, numeracy or ESOL specialist with Level 4 qualifications.

To order a free copy of the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, contact the DfES publications on 0845 602 2260 or by email: [dfes@prolog.uk.com](mailto:dfes@prolog.uk.com).

Free copies of the adult ESOL core curriculum, the adult literacy and numeracy core curricula, the pre-entry curriculum framework and *Access for All* are available from:

The Basic Skills Agency  
Admail 524  
London WC1A 1BR

Tel 0870 600 2400  
Fax 0870 600 2401  
Email [basicskills@twoten.press.net](mailto:basicskills@twoten.press.net)  
[www.basic-skills.co.uk](http://www.basic-skills.co.uk)

To order screening (*Fast Track*) and initial assessment materials, contact the Basic Skills Agency orderline on 0870 600 2400. For advice on diagnostic assessment, contact the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit on 0207 273 1223 or visit the website on [www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/teachingandlearning](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/teachingandlearning).

This book focuses on the process of initial assessment in the workplace and looks at ways in which it can be improved for the benefit of learners. It shares the experience of a number of work-based providers who sought to improve their approach to initial assessment, and will help other learning providers review and develop their initial assessment processes.

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## **Raising Quality and Achievement Programme**

The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in partnership with the Association of Colleges and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion.

- We aim to reach all colleges and work-based learning providers.
- We offer extra support to colleges and work-based learning providers that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a programme of research and evaluation.
- The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is funded by a grant to the Learning and Skills Development Agency from the Learning and Skills Council.

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