Improving initial assessment
Guide to good practice

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learning for work

department for
education and skills
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

Key Skills
SUPPORT PROGRAMME
Enhancing skills
for life and work

Acknowledgements

Contents

About this guide

This guide is aimed at anyone in work-based training who is responsible for learners during their first few weeks. It will help you to:

- understand the value and purpose of initial assessment in key skills and Skills for Life

- become familiar with a range of techniques for the initial assessment

- plan an initial assessment system that is accurate, consistent and fair

- check whether your organisation has all the necessary skills and resources.

Overall, the aim is to help you and your colleagues to guarantee that every one of your learners approaches their learning programme on the basis of a clear, accurate and fully rounded assessment of their skills attainments and potential.

Key messages

This guide offers a number of messages about the initial assessment process:

- Done well, initial assessment offers real benefits to learners, trainers and employers. It is not just an administrative or contractual requirement – it offers a vital chance to match training delivery to individual needs, increasing motivation, commitment and achievement.

  See **Section 1: Why initial assessment?**

- Initial assessment should focus on learners' potential – what they should be able to achieve in the future – as well as their existing attainments.

  See **Section 1: Why initial assessment?**

- Initial assessment provides the launch pad for the individual's learning plan – and the chance for trainer and learner to build up trust and start to work together.

  See **Section 2: The need for a system.**
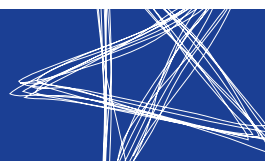
- Effective initial assessment uses a blend of six techniques:

  – documents

  – self-assessment

  – discussions

  – observation

  – structured activities

  – tests.

  See **Section 3: Techniques and approaches.**

- The picture of an individual's abilities and needs built up by using these techniques should be brought together through a system that is:

  – fair

  – positive

  – consistent

  – rigorous

  – documented

  – linked to a dynamic learning plan.

  See **Section 4: Planning your initial assessment system.**

Section 1
Why initial assessment?

Initial assessment can be one of the most valuable parts of an individual's learning programme. Done well, accurate and supportive initial assessment can:

- make sure that learning and assessment are genuinely grounded in the individual's needs and priorities

- reduce the time and resources wasted by learners going over old ground unnecessarily

- reduce the risk of learners being frustrated or demotivated by trying to do tasks beyond their current level of competence

- give providers a head start in making sure that each individual can receive his or her full entitlement.

The overall purpose of initial assessment is to allow trainers and learners to:

- agree starting points

- identify targets

- plan routes towards these targets.

Room for improvement?

There are still too many providers who neglect initial assessment of key skills – and probably even more where information is collected, perhaps taking up quite a lot of the learner's time, and then never really acted on. Overall, the impression is that the state of the art has moved on quite slowly over the last 2–3 years – in contrast with other areas of key skills practice.

Key Skills Work, Issue 22 (KSSP January 2005)

The ALI *Annual report of the chief inspector 2004–05* published in December 2005 noted that in work-based learning:

recurring themes in providers with poor achievement included inadequate initial assessment.

Research carried out by a team from City of Bristol College, and summarised in the article from which this quote is taken, has explored the ways in which initial assessment is used to identify learners' needs.

The research has highlighted some areas of good practice. In particular, the researchers have found encouraging signs that, for an increasing number of providers, the boundaries between initial and formative assessment are breaking down so that initial assessment is seen as the first stage of formative assessment rather than a one-off that takes place in the first week of the programme. What is more, there are signs that, when this happens, retention and completion rates improve: learners are more likely to complete their skills programmes and qualifications.

However, the research highlights a number of issues that remain.

- Initial assessment is often neglected, or carried out to meet funding requirements rather than to inform individual learning plans.

- Often based on identifying what learners can't do rather than what they can do, it can generate a sense of failure and does not build confidence.

- Initial assessment is often not set in context or linked to learners' aspirations – it may be more like English and maths than key skills.

- Initial assessment is very often a one-off process over too short a time period and is not linked to the rest of the learning.

- Results are often not rigorous, are not used effectively or are poorly interpreted.

- Wider key skills are rarely assessed as part of initial assessment.

- Initial assessment is rarely holistic – it does not take the whole person into account.
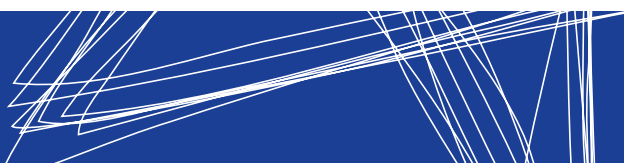
What we mean by initial assessment

The starting point is to be clear about what the term 'initial assessment' means. In this guide we mean initial assessment **once a learner has entered a programme**.

Attainment and potential

An important point in considering the purpose of initial assessment is to remember that it is concerned with both:

- what learners have already achieved – their **attainment**

- what they should be able to achieve in the future – their **potential**.

You cannot afford just to recognise attainment. You also need to focus on individuals' potential, and start to plan ways of helping them achieve this.

Initial assessment is distinct from two other related activities:

- **determining programme eligibility** – making basic decisions on whether individuals qualify for particular programmes and funding regimes. In the work-based route this decision is often made before an individual has any contact with a training provider or employer

- **recruitment and selection** – deciding whether an individual is the best and most appropriate person to join a programme or fill a vacancy.

Both of these activities are concerned with 'yes/no' decisions about whether or not an individual joins a particular employer or training provider. In contrast, initial assessment is not a once-and-for-all event – it is the first step in an ongoing process of matching needs to opportunities.

But it is important to recognise that eligibility and recruitment can make a difference to initial assessment. An effective initial assessment system can allow mistakes made in determining programme eligibility to be spotted very early on. And information from recruitment and selection can be highly relevant to initial assessment even though it was originally gathered to help choose between competing candidates.

'Initial assessment is not a once-and-for-all event – it is the first step in an ongoing process of matching needs to opportunities.'

'A range of approaches and activities can add depth and clarity to the picture of the learner's attainment and potential.'

Techniques for initial assessment

Initial assessment is more than a paper exercise. It is not just one technique but relies on the skilled and considered use of a range of approaches and activities, each of which can add depth and clarity to the picture of the learner's attainment and potential.

In this guide we highlight six of the techniques which could find a place in your organisation's initial assessment toolkit.

- **Documents** – qualifications, records of achievement, references and so on can all provide useful information about the skills and abilities that the individual brings to his or her programme.

- **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.

- **Discussions** – provide an ideal situation for trainer and learner to get to know each other.

- **Observation** – direct evidence of how the person performs either at or away from the workplace.

- **Structured activities** – it may also be relevant to create situations that have been designed specifically to give valid and reliable samples of the individual's performance.

- **Tests** – where the individual's rating or score is compared with that of others.

This guide will help you to examine what could be involved in each of these techniques in more detail. And, importantly, you will also have a chance to look at how they can be integrated into a coherent system – one designed to make sure that initial assessment is accurate, consistent and fair.

Section 2
The need for a system

Effective initial assessment depends on having a proper system and coordinated processes. An initial assessment system is simply a way of doing things which is:

- **fair** – all individuals are treated equally, and there should be no discrimination, even implicitly

- **positive** – the initial assessment experience should be positive for learners, and should keep stress to a minimum

- **consistent** – you need to be confident that the results of initial assessment are right first time and every time

- **rigorous** – it is equally important that the results of initial assessment are sound and provide a true picture of the learner's skills, knowledge and learning needs

- **documented** – the system should generate records which are simple to use and understand

- **linked** – to a dynamic learning plan which informs the individual's development and is continually reviewed and updated.

Having a sound system for initial assessment is an essential aspect of quality management. Quality depends on having effective systems which ensure that people know the right way of doing things. If the system is poor, then much of the work put in is wasted, and the results are likely to be unreliable.

Benefits of an effective system

- **Learners** know that they are being taken seriously and treated fairly. It is vital that any initial assessment process should be a positive experience which makes learners feel valued, increases their confidence and boosts their self-esteem. It must not give negative or inappropriate messages about learning and assessment.

- **Teachers and trainers** are confident that they know what sort of help and support learners need.

- **The organisation** can be confident that it is tackling initial assessment appropriately, and that it will be prepared for inspection.

'Dialogue lies at the heart of an initial assessment system.'

Starting a dialogue

Dialogue lies at the heart of an initial assessment system. Initial assessment should be the start of a conversation between trainer and learner that will continue throughout their work together. And this dialogue is central to the key skill improving own learning and performance.

Initial assessment is the first step in the following processes:

- **Negotiating learning.** The key skill improving own learning and performance is founded on the process of negotiated learning, where trainer and learner meet to identify needs and to plan and agree what they hope to achieve.

- **Formative assessment.** The research highlights the importance of seeing initial assessment as the first stage of formative assessment. This process of reviewing progress regularly and receiving constructive feedback is also central to improving own learning and performance.

- **Developing a relationship.** Initial assessment should help trainer and learner get to know each other and begin to build trust and cooperation.

You can see this dialogue as an unfolding spiral where, as the diagram shows, initial assessment acts as the starting point for a repeating pattern of learning and review.

All this underlines the fundamental importance of getting the initial assessment system right. If initial assessment encourages dialogue, negotiated learning and continuous formative assessment, then these processes will naturally continue throughout the time the learner is with you. He or she will be clear from the outset that their training will be positively different from their school experience. And they will be encouraged to take real ownership of their programme and their achievements.

However, if initial assessment is an 'add-on' which runs counter to the longer-term learning process, then it may undermine what comes later and you will have to spend more time building effective relationships with learners.

Elements of the system

A number of elements are needed to make up a good initial assessment system, as shown below.
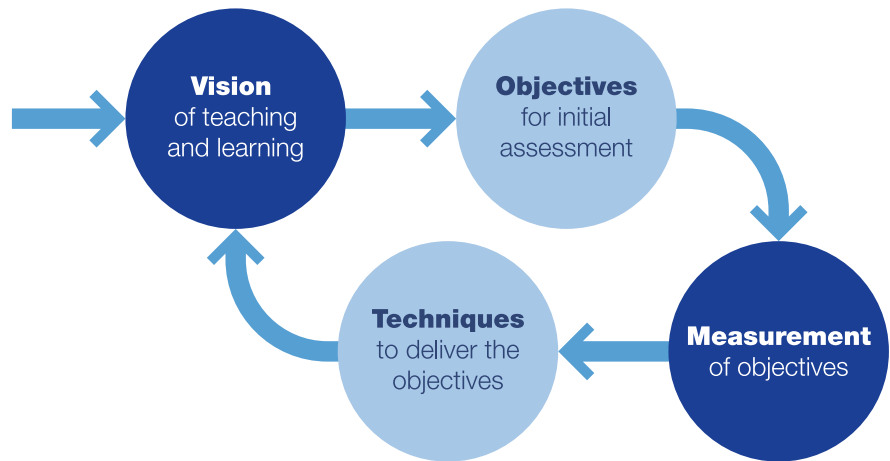
In broad terms, a system should answer the following questions:
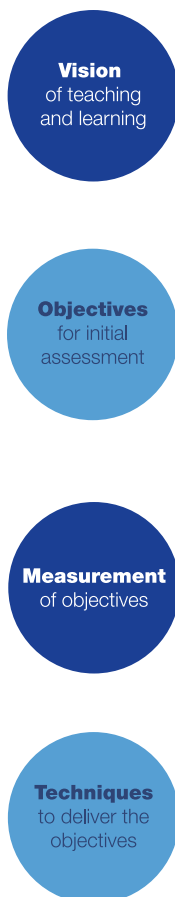
- **Why are you doing initial assessment?** You need a clear vision of how the organisation views its relationships with learners and its approach to teaching and learning. Learners' attitudes to initial assessment will be dictated by your organisation's attitude: if you see assessment as something you 'do' to learners, don't be surprised if they feel intimidated or resentful. But if, on the other hand, you treat each learner as an equal partner in the process, you can expect a much more positive reaction.

- **What will result from initial assessment?** Once the overall vision is clear, you can then identify the objectives that your initial assessment system must deliver. Above all, the system should help develop truly individual learning plans which clearly identify each person's initial learning needs, and appropriate and practical ways of achieving them.

- **How will you know that initial assessment is working?** Objectives will only be useful if you have clear methods for measuring them and gauging whether the initial assessment system is genuinely fair, accurate and consistent. Often, the results of initial assessment are filed away after induction and not used again (or only pulled out at inspection time).

- **What combination of techniques and approaches will you use?** The detailed choice of techniques and approaches must be informed by the overall vision and the target objectives.
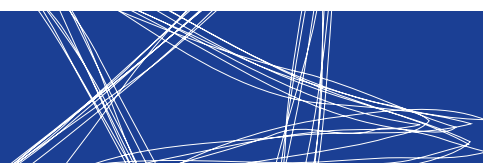
A working system

The example that follows shows one initial assessment system in practice. It outlines how the overall system involves a number of processes which in turn draw on different techniques and approaches. The overall system is based on a clear vision – that learning should be learner-centred and that, as far as possible, learners should be in charge of what they do.

Stage	Initial assessment process	Main techniques used
Initial interview	Assessment of learners' aspirations and entry level abilities in the skills	Interview/structured discussion Self-assessment
Induction (off-job)	More in-depth assessment – particularly of the wider key skills	Observation Self-assessment Formal tests Structured activities
Induction into the workplace	Assessment of how the learner applies the skills in the working context	Structured activities Observation
Agreeing a learning plan 1 Setting targets for performance 2 Agreeing how these will be achieved	How results of initial assessment contribute to the setting of targets and the ways in which they will be achieved	Structured activities can be used to help learners develop their competence
Reviewing progress		Giving feedback and resetting targets

Linking to the individual learning plan

Assuming that you create a system that functions well, then the results of your initial assessments should give you a clear picture of learners' skills attainments and potential. You need to incorporate performance targets into the individual's overall/learning plan. Remember that skills don't just 'happen'– learners need to know exactly what's expected of them in terms of performance targets, otherwise they won't necessarily reach the required standards.

Section 3
Techniques and approaches

This section outlines the main techniques to use when carrying out initial assessment of key skills and Skills for Life with learners:

- documents

- self-assessment

- discussions

- observation

- structured activities

- tests.

We begin by outlining what each technique involves. We then go on to suggest some guidelines that may help make each technique effective, illustrating these with case studies where appropriate. Finally, we invite you to reflect on the scope for each technique in your own organisation.

The section ends by looking at how the different techniques should be combined.

Documents

It makes sense to make the best possible use of the written information about an individual that you have available as he or she starts his or her programme. You need to take account of both the information that learners bring with them and the material that is generated during their first few days with you.

Documents learners bring with them

Learners may arrive with documents from school, college, other training providers or from their life outside learning. Here are some of the different types of document that can be useful in initial assessment of key skills.

- Certificates from school or college will show what the learner has achieved and had certificated.

- Progress File may provide a detailed insight into learner's experiences and aspirations before coming to you. For more on Progress File see http://www.dfes.gov.uk/progressfile/index.cfm.

- School reports will give teachers' opinions of the learner's strengths and weaknesses.

- References and testimonials from previous employers or other courses may give other people's opinions of the learner's strengths and weaknesses.

- Personal statements may give examples of the learner's writing and a feel for their aspirations.

- Other certificates may show what the learner has achieved, possibly outside school.

Documents like these will generally be relevant to the individual's attainment – but they can also give you some early indications of their future potential.

Documents generated early on

These are likely to include examples of the learner's work, such as:

- application forms and any other material used as part of your selection and recruitment process

- material that the learner creates during their induction period. As the guide *Getting started with key skills and Skills for Life* suggests, it makes sense when designing induction activities to identify scope for showing or practising skills from the very start

- documents that the learner produces early on at work – for example, memos, letters, spreadsheets, costings, emails, etc.

Documentary information like this can be particularly useful for communication/literacy assessment because it can show aspects of the learner's writing, spelling, punctuation and analytical skills.

'Documents can show aspects of the learner's writing, spelling, punctuation and analytical skills.'

Guidelines for using documents

- Employer references can often give you a good first indication of the individual's performance in the wider key skills.

- Build links with local schools so that you have a clearer idea of the meaning of any documents learners may bring with them. Education/business partnerships and work experience programmes provide good vehicles for making these links.

- Documents can suggest questions that you follow up in more detail through other initial assessment techniques.

- Try not to take documentary information purely at face value. Discuss the picture you have started to build up with the learner and see if he or she can add any explanations or further insights.

CIRCA, a training provider in South East London, uses documents as part of their initial assessment of key skills. For example, the application form is scrutinised for communication skills, such as handwriting and spelling skills, and the ability to follow instructions.

Auditing your current practice

What documents do you use for initial assessment?

Why do you use these?

How accurate and useful is the information you gain?

What do **you** gain from this?

What do **your learners** gain from this?

What else could you do?

Self-assessment

It is important to take account of the individual's own views about their abilities. Self-assessment can be useful in several ways. It's easy to lose sight of the individual and his or her preferences during the early stages, and self-assessment reduces this risk.

Most learners have an idea of where their strengths and weaknesses lie so it makes sense to ask them about this at the start. There are different ways of doing this:

- You can ask learners to assess their abilities in broad terms against the main key skill or Skills for Life components.

- Learners can be given more detailed self-assessment questionnaires that ask them to rate their skills against a series of questions. The questions may require yes/no answers, or may ask individuals to score themselves on a scale. Questions could, for example, be based on statements in the key skill or Skills for Life standards.

- Some providers also ask learners about areas outside work where they may use their skills. Examples include Duke of Edinburgh awards, voluntary work, hobbies or pastimes that involve activities such as planning events or projects and working with other people as part of a team.

'They are a good ice-breaker in terms of talking to the candidate about key skills. From a void of knowing nothing, it gives you an idea of what's going to result.'

Trainer

Self-assessment can provide valuable information about skill levels. It can also help to introduce the key skills Skills for Life to learners and give them an opportunity to start thinking about the skills for themselves.

Bear in mind that different learners may like different approaches to self-assessment. It doesn't just have to take the form of a questionnaire - for example, you could write statements on cards and ask learners to sort them according to whether each statement is something they do always, sometimes or hardly ever. The vital thing about self-assessment is that it forms a useful starting point for dialogue – you can probe with learners what they mean and in the process find out a lot more about their strengths and weaknesses.

It is also worth revisiting the results of self-assessment in future review sessions. If you record the self-assessment in some way, you could review this with the learner later on to explore the distance they have travelled. This helps with the process of moving from initial assessment into formative assessment and can be very motivating for learners.

Guidelines for self-assessment

- It is important to introduce self-assessment in a constructive, non-threatening way. Stress to learners the benefits that it will have in terms of helping to plan a learning programme tailored to their needs.

- Make sure someone is available to help if the learner has any questions.

- Any self-assessment documents should be written in clear, accessible language that learners understand.

- Self-assessment is unlikely to be enough on its own – learners may over- or under-estimate their skills. Indeed, self-assessment is often most effective if it forms a starting point for discussion.

Auditing your current practice

What use do you make of self-assessment in initial assessment?

Why do you do this?

How accurate and useful is the information you gain?

What do **you** gain from this?

What do **your learners** gain from this?

What else could you do?

Discussions

Interviews and discussions between trainer and learner are among the most commonly used techniques in initial assessment. Examples include:

- **screening interviews** which take place when first meeting an individual – perhaps as part of selection and recruitment

- **diagnostic interviews and reviews** which take place once the learner has been recruited on to a programme. During this interview you may look at a range of diagnostic exercises undertaken by the learner, discuss the outcomes and start to agree a learning plan

- **discussions during induction** which can provide excellent opportunities for getting to know learners and identifying their strengths and weaknesses.

Interviews and discussions provide an ideal forum for two-way questioning and discussions and giving feedback.

Structured discussions

It is important to structure interviews and discussions so that you gain the right information and involve the learner in discussions about their future training. It is also important to be fair and objective.

Interviews and discussions can provide an excellent opportunity to give learners feedback on the results of other initial assessment methods, and to probe more deeply. For example, if a learner's self-assessment suggests that they are unconfident about speaking in group discussions, you could explore the reasons for this. Are they more confident with people they know well, for example? Do they feel more confident if they are really on top of the topic?

Similarly, if a diagnostic test shows that they had difficulty with a number question about percentages, why was this? Did they not understand the question? Was it a case of them knowing how to work out percentages, but making a slip in doing it? If so, do they need more help with checking their answers, or are they finding a basic number operation difficult? Or do they need more help with calculating percentages?

You can also probe more deeply into what motivates learners and how the key skills/Skills for Life may impact on their learning programme and their longer-term plans and choice of career.

Guidelines for discussions

- Make sure you possess relevant interview skills such as:

  - questioning and listening techniques

  - the ability to read body language

  - good practice in equal opportunities.

- Make sure that you create an environment that encourages good communication. A one-to-one meeting is often best as any extra staff can be intimidating. Take account of the need for privacy, timing and lack of interruption.

- Explain to the learner what is going to happen before you start the discussion and what will happen next.

Aim for continuity throughout the process. Often the people who carry out initial interviews have quite limited contact with learners once they have started their programmes. Although lots of information is gained at interview, it may not always be passed on to the right people. One way round this is to ask all staff to make an input into a bank of questions which can be asked at interview.

Chelmer Training interviews learners one-to-one, to gain in-depth knowledge of each individual. They use a form to record the information gathered, including both learning needs and other aspects such as time-keeping and attitude.

'I like having a conversation with the instructors. They respect you and you respect them back. Nothing nasty is said about anyone. Here we've got the opportunity to do jobs and learn from them. If you get it wrong, they run you through it again - they don't moan about it. They just give you the help you need to understand it.'

Learner at Bedford Training Group

Auditing your current practice

What use do you make of interviews and discussions in initial assessment?

How accurate and useful is the information you gain?

What do **you** gain from this?

What do **your learners** gain from this?

What else could you do? Do you need to do more work on, for example:

- interviewing skills?

- recording results?

Observation

Observation is a reliable way of seeing how well someone performs. It can provide information about individuals' skills in action – as opposed to their underpinning knowledge – and allows you to make an informed judgement about their current level and learning needs.

Observing skills should be a more-or-less continuous process. This means taking opportunities to look at what learners are doing and:

- seeing where they are – and are not – using particular skills

- making a judgement about whether they are using them effectively and to the required standards

- recognising if learners are having problems with a particular skill, or are avoiding developing it

- using the opportunity to give feedback and encourage learners to practise their skills.

Observation also provides a broader picture of the 'whole' person – how they use a particular skill in practice and how they integrate that skill into an activity. Observation can suit learners who don't like using paper and pencil or 'test' methods.

Guidelines for successful observation

- Know exactly what you're looking for.

- Be as unobtrusive as possible.

- Record the results accurately and fully so that they contribute to the individual's overall learning programme.

- Be prepared to give learners positive feedback on their performance.

- Try not to cover too much or more than one individual's performance at a time.

- Be flexible enough to take account of the unexpected.

- Ensure that other people working with learners feed the results of observation into the initial assessment process.

At **Gordon Franks** the trainers observe learners during the induction week carrying out a range of activities individually and in groups. They look out for anything that provides information about the learners' skills and ways of learning – for example, whether they prefer to work things out alone, whether they ask other learners for help, whether they offer help to other people. They look for specific things learners are good at as well as for any difficulties they have.

Auditing your current practice

What use do you make of observation in initial assessment?

Why do you do this?

How accurate and useful is the information you gain?

What do **you** gain from this?

What do **your learners** gain from this?

What else could you do?

Structured activities

Structured activities give opportunities to see how learners cope with the key skills/Skills for Life, what their strengths are and where they need to develop skills. They also give insights into how they work together in different groupings, how their thinking works on a variety of topics, how confident or otherwise they are and how willing they are to ask others for help.

Structured activities can take many forms. They could include:

*   **group activities during induction** – for example, you can ask learners to work in pairs or teams to tackle a problem or find out information. This will be enjoyable and will help learners to get to know each other while at the same time giving valuable insights into a range of skills

*   **individual activities during induction** – for example, a short piece of writing by a learner can give you a more rounded picture of how they write and what their development needs are than a diagnostic test. You can also get a good idea of specific aspects of your learners' writing and keyboard skills by observing them completing a form on paper or on-screen. A research activity into the learner's chosen industry will show how they operate in finding information from a variety of sources

*   **individual activities** tackled by learners during their first few weeks at work

*   **other activities**, which might even include outward bound programmes.

Any activities should be enjoyable and purposeful for your learners. As well as being very useful in identifying skills that need to be developed, they will show skills and knowledge that the learner already has, and both can inform the individual learning plan.

At **Bedford Training Group** groups of learners work together whenever possible during the induction process. They complete ice-breaker activities to find out about each other and their chosen industry. As a group, they participate in a game that looks at tools used in engineering. Trainer Des Roberts says:

It's a good way for the learners to get to know the tutor and each other. They have to use team-working, communication and problem-solving skills in this exercise. It's also great for motivation.

An awareness of how the key skills contribute to a range of learning activities helps the Bedford Training Group to get the most out of all learning opportunities. For example, while the learners are reading information about fire equipment for Health and Safety, they are also developing their reading and understanding skills.
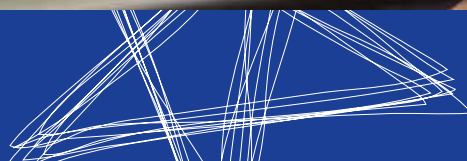
Guidelines for using structured activities

- Be clear about what is being covered and how you will observe and assess the results of the activity.

- Make sure that you brief the learner in advance on what's expected and what you will be looking for.

- Where appropriate, involve the individual in the choice of activity.

- Always brief the employer if you are expecting the learner to perform a work task. Involve them too if activities involve things like presentations or asking colleagues for help or input.

- Don't give a big activity to a learner who may not be confident about using the skill in question. Use other initial assessment techniques to find out exactly what the problems are and arrange for further training and development first, or set smaller, more manageable activities with access to support if necessary.

- Remember, it's OK for the learner to ask for help if they get stuck. This highlights problems and potential development needs and will help you to plan their training programme. In terms of learner motivation, it can be more positive for them to come to you with any problems or weaknesses.

During the 2-day generic induction programme at **Luton Borough Council** the concept of key skills is introduced using tutor input, quizzes, dominoes and handouts.

All new learners take part in a 4-day residential outward bound course. Activities on it are based around the 'plan, do, review' concept and help develop team-building skills in particular. They plan and give a presentation at the end of the course.

Luton Borough Council stresses to learners that key skills are life skills and are essential skills for their job. Because learners develop a good understanding of key skills at the beginning of their programme, they are better able to identify key skills learning and evidence opportunities in their work.

Auditing your current practice

What use do you make of structured activities in initial assessment?

Why do you do this?

How accurate and useful is the information you gain?

What do **you** gain from this?

What do **your learners** gain from this?

What else could you do?

Tests

Many providers make use of tests, in particular to assess learners' number/numeracy and communication/literacy skills in the hope that these will provide standardised ways of assessing a learner's attainment and potential.

If such tests are to be reliable, they need to have been developed and tested rigorously. In creating 'psychometric' tests, experienced professionals (usually psychologists) have carefully collected responses from hundreds – often thousands or tens of thousands – of people. The final product is an instrument where every item has been chosen because it can be shown that different people respond in different ways and where data are available so that your individual learner's response can be compared with typical profiles.

This development process often takes several years: it relies on detailed and sophisticated statistical analysis. Increasingly, this kind of test is becoming available in interactive, computer-based formats, so that completing the test need not seem like a classroom or form-filling exercise.

Avoid 'homespun' tests

Very few, if any, training providers have the time, resources and expertise to develop diagnostic tests for themselves. There is a lot more involved than just mimicking the style and format of professionally developed instruments – a trap that some training organisations have unfortunately fallen into in the past. Rather, the task for your organisation is likely to be one of choosing the most appropriate test or tests and then interpreting the results you get in an intelligent way as one part of your overall initial assessment system.

Look for reliability and validity

The specialists who develop psychometric instruments are looking for two ideals – 'reliability' and 'validity'. You need some understanding of these technical terms if you are to select tests appropriately.

- **Reliability** refers to the extent to which the test produces consistent results. Items should be excluded if the same person would respond differently if retested within a short space of time.

- **Validity** is the extent to which the test genuinely measures what it claims to measure. It is no good, for example, including items which claim to test a person's ability in arithmetic but which, in fact, depend more on their ability to understand the wording of the question.

Some free test materials are available from government-funded programmes. For example, the Move On programme has produced a CD with two types of test: mini tests in numeracy/number and literacy/communication and practice tests that follow the format of the on-screen tests. See the Where next? section of this guide for more details.

Psychologists distinguish between two types of validity:

– **Face validity:** put simply, does the item look as if it measures the right thing?

– **Content validity:** does statistical evidence confirm that it measures the right thing? Note that it is possible for an item to have content validity without face validity – so a question which looks relevant to the individual's readiness to work with others may, in fact, have been included because it shows something about his or her potential to solve problems.

All reputable published tests provide statistical information about the instrument's reliability and validity.

There are tests on the market which claim to measure key skills **attainment**. There are, however, no published tests currently available that have been specifically developed to **predict** performance across the key skills units. This emphasises how important it is for training providers and their advisers to judge how much value any test may have as part of an integrated key skills initial assessment system.

Demands on staff

It is important to recognise that using tests makes significant demands on the skills and understanding of trainers. Many such tests may only be purchased and used by individuals who have the necessary certification from the British Psychological Society.

You need to be confident that you and your colleagues have the right knowledge and experience in terms of:

• **choosing suitable tests** – do you understand the technical requirements in terms of reliability and validity, and can you make an accurate appraisal of the test's relevance?

• **interpreting test results** – again, do you have the technical and statistical understanding to know what the results tell you about the learner's performance?

• **offering feedback** – and can you get this information across to the learner using language that he or she will understand?

Acorn Training uses a range of approaches to build up a full picture. Short courses use provider-designed initial assessment which includes a piece of free writing about the learner's company – a reflective rather than a factual account. This is compared with the Skills for Life Level 2 competences. The assessor identifies areas for development in reading and writing according to the referencing system in the core curriculum, gives feedback to the learner and negotiates a learning plan.

'The numbers themselves are not what's really important – it's the conversation they lead into that matters more.'
Sammy Ryan, Haddon Business Training Centre

'Although we use tests, we handle the results with care. For example, I often find I get a richer picture of a learner's writing skills by asking them to produce a short piece of free writing than from a communication test.'

Trainer

Guidelines for using tests

- Make sure that you understand the relevance of the test to your overall system. You need to be sure that it really adds extra information or provides an important check against data collected through other methods.

- Try not to present the exercise as a test or examination. It may be particularly important to avoid any potential confusion with external assessment.

- Review the value of the test over time. Is it giving you valuable and accurate predictions of learner performance? If the answer is 'no', then it lacks content validity in your context.

- Continue to check the Key Skills Support Programme website at www.keyskillssupport.net for information about any new tests that may become available.

Auditing your current practice

What tests (if any) do you use?

Why do you use them?

What evidence do you have about their validity and reliability?

How accurate and useful is the information you gain?

What do **you** gain from this?

What do **your learners** gain from this?

What else could you do?

Combining techniques

This section has highlighted the wide variety of techniques and approaches to initial assessment. Each technique has its own strengths and weaknesses, and no single technique is likely to be enough on its own. It follows that an effective initial assessment system is likely to combine at least two and usually more techniques.

The following questions should help you in your choice of techniques:

• Which techniques are most likely to suit our learners?

• Which techniques fit most closely with our overall vision of teaching and learning?

• Which techniques are likely to fit best with our existing ways of working or help us to move towards our designed way of working?

• What combination of techniques will give us the most reliable picture of our learners' abilities?

Whichever combination of approaches you adopt, the dialogue between trainer and learner must be central. As Section 1 stressed, initial assessment is most effective when it is the first stage of formative assessment. The other techniques can provide valuable additional data to complement this dialogue, and can help you to double-check the impressions you gain from personal contact. However, there is no substitute for starting the trainer–learner interchange.

Questions to ask about your organisation

Bring together the comments you have made in the 'Auditing your current practice' boxes on individual techniques and approaches and consider these questions.

• What changes will you make to existing techniques and methods?

• Which additional techniques will you adopt?

• What are the implications of this?

Section 4
Planning your initial assessment system

This guide has emphasised the need for a proper system for initial assessment. This final section focuses on how you can:

• audit your current initial assessment arrangements

• plan any changes needed to improve your system

• continuously monitor and develop your system.

Auditing your existing initial assessment arrangements

To audit your initial assessment arrangements, you need to reflect on the topics covered in this guide.

• Consider your **vision** of how the organisation views its relationships with learners and its approach to teaching and learning, and the impact this has – or should have – on initial assessment.

• Review the **objectives** of your initial assessment system. The results of initial assessment should feed into other aspects of learners' programmes.

 – **Teaching and learning:** where initial assessment shows a need for skills development, this should feed into learning plans.

 – **Monitoring and review:** the results of initial assessment will give you the basis for reviewing progress over time with your learners.

 – **Assessment:** however, don't expect learners to undertake assessments too early – they are likely to have some learning to do first!

• Think about how you **measure** what you do to ensure that the initial assessment system is fair, accurate and consistent – and that you meet the demands for good practice required by awarding bodies and inspectors.

'Make sure your initial assessment system is fair, accurate and consistent....'

- Consider whether you are using an appropriate blend of **techniques** and **approaches** – for this you can refer back to your answers to questions about how you use different techniques in your organisation.

It is worth noting that if this process is followed and learners take an active part in planning and reviewing their own training, they develop and practise the key skill improving own learning and performance.

Gordon Franks adopts a holistic approach to initial assessment. During a 'fun week' learners undertake an extensive range of activities, from free writing and number activities to quizzes and mapping activities. These provide information on how they approach problems and how this may impact on the way in which they learn and interact with other people.

The initial assessment process focuses on building confidence and releasing potential. To improve the confidence and self-esteem of E2E learners, a circus juggler is invited to deliver a workshop. Learners are taught simple tricks that they will be able to perform by the end of the workshop. At the start of the session learners are encouraged to let the balls fall. This illustrates to learners, in a fun way, that it is OK to get things wrong – you don't have to get everything right first time but you can improve and succeed with practice.

Another technique that is used to build confidence is to hire an artist who delivers a workshop in which learners and tutors produce a simple painting – even learners who insist that they can't paint. This is used to illustrate to learners that you do not know what you can achieve until you try, and that everyone has untapped potential.

The initial assessment process is used to gather information about the learner and get to know the learner as an individual. It starts the process of building a constructive working relationship. It also provides learners with detailed information about themselves and the way in which they learn. In many cases the process helps to explain why learners have not achieved at school.

The results of initial assessment feed through into later parts of the programme: for instance, learners may attend workshops which target specific skills they need to develop.

A system audit

The following chart lists the main criteria for an effective initial assessment system introduced at the start of this guide. Use this to assess your existing arrangements. Ideally, it makes sense to carry out this audit as a team.

- Look at each criterion in turn and decide how true this is for your existing arrangements. If it is completely true, give a score of 4. If it is not true at all, give a score of 1. If it is partly true, give yourself a score of 2 or 3.

- Total all your scores together – the closer you are to 24 points, the better your system.

- Where you have scored 1 or 2, note down possible improvements you could make in the 'Priorities for change' column.

Criterion	Score (1–4)	Priorities for change
Is your system fair? Are all learners treated equally, without explicit or implicit discrimination?		
Is your system positive? Is the initial assessment experience positive for learners, with minimum stress?		
Is your system consistent? Are you confident that the results of initial assessment are right first time and every time?		
Is your system rigorous? Does initial assessment provide a true picture of the individual's skills, knowledge and learning needs?		
Is your system documented? Does the system generate records which are simple to use and understand?		
Is your system linked – to a dynamic learning plan which informs the learner's development and is continually reviewed and updated?		

Planning and implementing change

What you have just done may have highlighted areas where there is scope for change to your arrangements. Some examples of these could include:

- clarifying your vision of teaching and learning

- needing to investigate further how effective certain techniques and approaches are

- using one or more techniques and approaches that you do not use at the moment

- the need for staff development – your choice of techniques and approaches may mean that staff need more training in order to support initial assessment

- the need for changes in documentation.

These changes will only take place if they are managed. Your organisation will need to:

- create an action plan with clear tasks, deadlines and responsibilities

- gain support and commitment from all stakeholders

- manage the process of change until the new arrangements are working.

Continuous improvement

Your initial assessment system should not be set in concrete. You need scope to modify and develop it in the light of experience and new developments. So you will need systems for monitoring the outcomes of initial assessment. These will include:

- gaining feedback on the system from staff, learners and employers as this arises

- setting dates when you will review the system more formally and plan further changes.

It makes sense to include these arrangements in your plan of action.

In summary...

As you plan, modify and add to your own organisation's initial assessment system, it is worth revisiting some of the general principles that have been outlined here as you do so.

- Think of initial assessment as spread out over a period of time in the early days of the training programme.

- Initial assessment isn't something you just do once. Rather, it kicks off the process of assessing, setting targets, planning, reviewing then carrying out further assessment if necessary before setting new targets and beginning the process again.

- Effective initial assessment depends on having a system that is:

  - fair

  - positive

  - consistent

  - rigorous

  - documented

  - linked to a dynamic learning plan.

- It is important to use a blend of techniques when carrying out initial assessment of key skills and Skills for Life with learners. These can include:

  - documents

  - self-assessment

  - discussions

  - observation

  - structured activities

  - tests.

Where next?

Help from the Key Skills Support Programme

The Key Skills Support Programme offers training in initial assessment based around a toolkit of initial assessment resources which is closely linked to this guide.

Other guides in this series include:

• *Preparing for the level 1 and 2 tests*. This guide explains what the tests involve, looks at ways of preparing learners and discusses the arrangements your centre will need to make.

• *Getting started with key skills and Skills for Life*. This guide focuses on introducing key skills and Skills for Life successfully to learners during the early stages of their programmes.

You can download copies of both publications from
http://www.ksspforwork.org.uk/guides.php
or order them from the address on the back cover of this guide.

To contact the Key Skills Support Programme

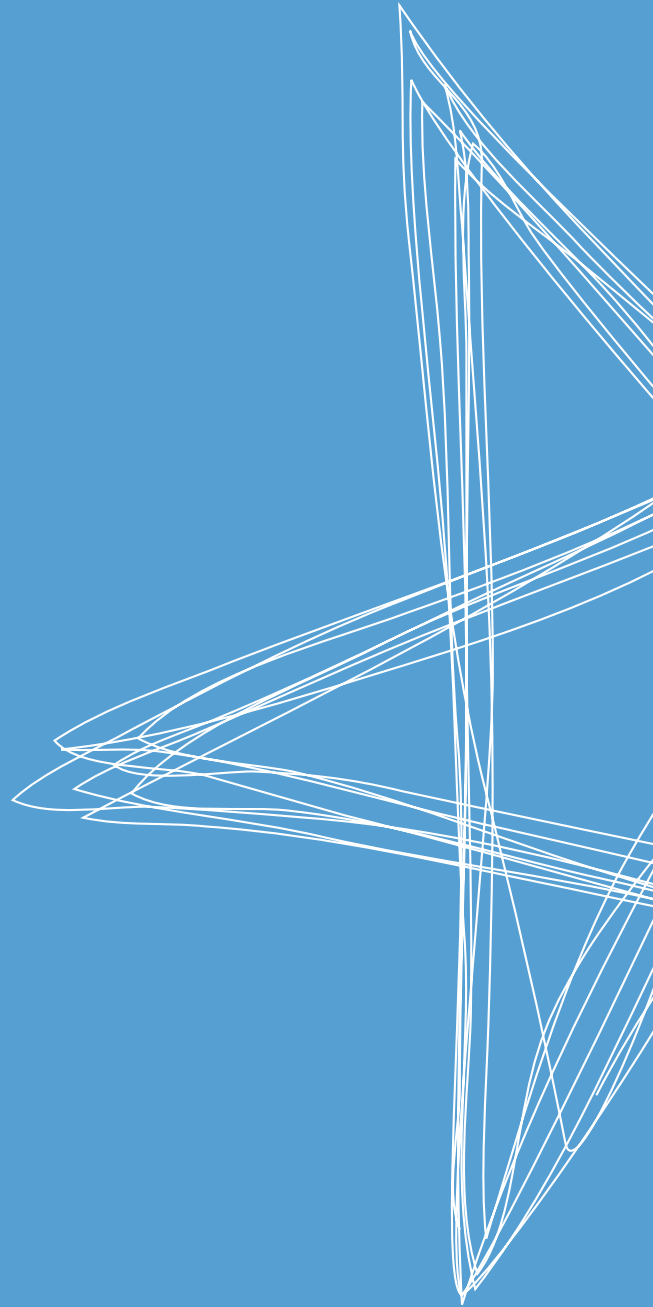Telephone the KSSP Helpline: 0845 602 3386
Email: helpline@lfw.org.uk
Write to: Key Skills Support Programme,
Learning for Work, The Cottage Office,
Eightlands Road, Dewsbury,
West Yorkshire WF13 2PF.

The **Skills for Life programme** provides a range of resources and guidance on working with the Skills for Life. See their website at www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus. They have also developed some initial assessment resources. See www.toolslibrary.co.uk.

The **Move On** programme has produced some useful resources, including a practice tests CD which includes two types of test: mini tests in numeracy/number and literacy/communication, and practice tests that follow the format of the on-screen tests. You can use these to gain information about the learner's strengths and weaknesses and then for test practice later on. See www.move-on.org.uk.