

Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at NQF Levels 4-6 in ETBs: **Frequently Asked Questions**

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Frequently Asked Questions

Further Education and Training

Assessment at NFQ Levels 4–6

1. Why do we need Guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy in Further Education and Training? Shouldn't learners be proficient in these skills before they enrol in Further Education and Training programmes at Levels 4, 5 and 6?

Yes, and most Further Education and Training students have no problem with literacy or numeracy. However, a substantial minority of learners in some programmes do find it difficult to apply their reading, writing and numeracy skills in real life situations. In addition, some people who have good general reading, writing and numeracy may be unfamiliar with the specific aspects of literacy and numeracy contained in their area of study.

2. In which areas of FET provision should the literacy and numeracy assessment described in the Guidelines be implemented?

Research has shown that learners in need of additional literacy and numeracy supports are engaged in learning across the full range of NFQ Levels which span the Further Education and Training system. If additional needs go unnoticed at the foundational levels, there is evidence to suggest that this can permeate the learning experiences of those who progress onto FET programmes at the higher end of NFQ provision (levels 4, 5 and 6).

3. How do these Guidelines on literacy and numeracy assessment differ from the assessments we already carry out for QQI programmes, in Maths and Communications, for example?

QQI assessments are designed to *lead to an award*, whereas the literacy and numeracy assessment Guidelines are designed to *support teaching and learning*. This approach focuses on how well students can apply the relevant literacy and numeracy skills in real life, in the context of their Further Education and Training programme. This involves assessing not only knowledge and skills, but other aspects of real-life application, such as fluency and independence.

4. What methods of assessment do the Guidelines support?

Literacy and numeracy assessment in Further Education and Training can involve a number of steps, including an *initial interview*, plus a performance task for initial assessment; and by *performance tasks* for ongoing assessment. The initial interview may be an individual meeting but this is not necessarily always the case. The interview could also be carried out as part of a group meeting. Some centres include literacy or numeracy assessment as part of routine, introductory group activities and events, such as open days, Induction Programmes, Learning to Learn Programmes or other introductory sessions. Management and staff in individual ETBs and centres are free to decide how best to fit this into the local learning environment.

5. What does the performance task assessment method involve?

A performance task is a meaningful activity which allows learners to demonstrate their literacy or numeracy strengths and support needs. Performance tasks are developed or sourced by the centre and may be built around real-life activities such as induction topics, or elements of course work, or any other topic of interest to the learner.

6. How are assessment results recorded?

Information gathered from the initial assessment interview and performance task may be recorded on the supplied Individual Learner Plan (ILP). Where ETBs are using the supplied ILP, results from observing learners' performance tasks in the course of their study (ongoing assessment) may be recorded using a special notation on the Individual Progress Tracking Form (IPTF). There is one ILP and one IPTF for each learner, kept as part of their file.

7. I have reservations about using these supplied forms to record the results. Can we continue to use our own recording documentation instead?

The supplied guidelines, toolkit and recording instruments represent an opportunity for ETBs to address initial and ongoing assessment in a way that is consistent across locations and programmes. The guidelines are based on good practice encountered in ETBs and, therefore, should be reflective of approaches already in place. Using the supplied guidelines, toolkit and recording instruments should not be a huge leap for staff in ETBs, who may consider integrating their existing recording tools with these new resources. This will ensure consistency of approach across and within ETBs, which ultimately benefits the learner.

It is envisaged that widespread and consistent use of the guidelines, toolkit and recording instruments will:

- (a) highlight key elements of literacy/ numeracy which are essential for real-life application of the skills;
- (b) ensure a common understanding of the different elements involved in competence;
- (c) inform SOLAS/ETBI of any revisions needed to the guidelines, toolkit and recording instruments and provide important feedback based on practical experience of using them.

8. Where and how should these records of results be stored? What is the procedure?

Storage of learner records will be subject to local storage and security procedures already in place in ETBs. This includes ensuring compliance with the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

9. Can we record the assessment results online, instead of using a paper version of the Individual Learner Plan and Tracking form?

Currently it is not possible to record the assessment results online. However this facility may become available in the future. The answer to FAQ No. 7 above provides further detail on the intended use of the recording forms supplied in the Levels 4-6 Toolkit.

10. Our ETB Further Education and Training centre provides many programmes and caters for hundreds of learners. It isn't practical for us to meet every student before they start their course. What can we do about initial assessment if we can't conduct an initial interview?

As noted in answer 4 above, the initial interview need not necessarily be an individual meeting. Large centres may incorporate literacy and numeracy assessment into their routine induction activities such as Learning to Learn Programmes or other introductory sessions. Management and staff in individual ETBs and centres are free to decide how best to fit this into the local learning environment.

11. We provide many programmes, at different levels. How we can use the same approach to initial assessment when our learning contexts are so varied?

The Guidelines support a flexible approach to initial assessment which can be adapted to suit the circumstances of your centre and students. So, although the *methods* are common to all ETBs – interview and performance task – the *content, timing and materials* are sourced locally, to suit the needs of the context. The initial interview can form part of your existing induction activities, either at a centre level or as part of the individual programme. Performance task(s) are selected or developed in your centre, possibly with input from course tutors.

12. Most of our learners apply online, so we don't meet them until after they have started the course. How can we assess their literacy and numeracy needs under that recruitment system?

New students who have applied online may have support requirements that are either undiagnosed, or which remain undisclosed at point of entry. Without initial literacy and numeracy assessment, some of these learners may struggle with assignments or even leave the course before their support needs are identified. Individual centres are free to identify opportunities appropriate to their local context when initial assessment can take place. These may include Induction, Learning to Learn, or other introductory sessions which are routinely scheduled at the start of the programme. Any of these can provide opportunities to identify students who may need help, before it is too late.

13. What is the difference between initial assessment and ongoing assessment, in this system?

Initial assessment identifies the learner's strengths and needs in relation to literacy and numeracy, at or near the start of their programme. Ongoing assessment tracks learners' progress on the learning needs identified at the start, and also addresses new needs that might come up during the programme. Ongoing assessment is therefore an integral part of teaching and learning.

14. Who actually carries out initial assessment and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy in Further Education and Training?

Initial Assessment:

Depending on staffing, resources and recruitment procedures, initial assessment may be carried out by a programme coordinator, course tutor and/or resource person as part of an individual or a group meeting. In some centres, the adult literacy service and/or guidance staff may have a role. ETBs and centre managers work with staff to identify who takes on particular roles in assessment.

Ongoing Assessment:

The course tutor is best placed to observe how learners are managing the literacy and numeracy demands of the course, on a day-to-day basis, with the support of resource staff and/or the adult literacy service.

15. I am a subject tutor, not a literacy/numeracy expert. How can I get involved in assessing those skills, if this isn't my area of expertise?

It is important that assessment procedures organised at centre level ensure adequate support for subject tutors when they are observing how learners are managing the literacy and numeracy embedded within their subject. Depending on local structures, this may involve a resource worker and/or the adult literacy service. It may also be beneficial for tutors to engage in some basic training which could provide valuable insight into the kind of difficulties that can arise, and ways of handling those within the subject context.

16. As a subject tutor, how can I prepare to support students in the literacy or numeracy difficulties that might arise in my course?

As an expert in your field, you are best placed to identify the literacy and numeracy demands of your subject, including the skills needed to use the tools and materials in the context of your further education programme. You can work with the resource person and/or the adult literacy service to clarify the literacy and numeracy demands your students are likely to meet. The literacy and numeracy support staff can give you tips on how you can support learners in handling those demands. They can also point you towards short or longer-term training programmes in Integrating Literacy/Numeracy, if you want to take this any further.

17. As a Further Education and Training subject tutor, my first responsibility is to cover a demanding curriculum and support my students in achieving their QQI award. How can I find the time to include even more assessment, of literacy and numeracy, on top of everything else? Won't that take time out of our coursework?

Students' progress on literacy and numeracy in the subject does need to be assessed explicitly, but that does not mean it has to be separate from, or in addition to, coursework. In fact, it is better if ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy happens *during* the regular classwork. If you have a good idea of the reading, writing and numeracy demands of your subject (see 16 above) you, and/or the resource tutor, will be well-placed to notice when people are managing and when they get stuck.

18. Why are technology and digital literacy not included in the range of skills to be assessed?

Definitions of 'literacy' are rapidly expanding to include many aspects of digital literacy, and the use of technology as a problem-solving tool was an important element of the last Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) report. Work on integrating digital and technological skills into assessment is forthcoming. It is expected that this will draw on existing European frameworks for technology and Digital Literacy, in particular the European Commission Digital Competence Framework (DigComp). Assessment of technology and digital literacy will adopt a similar approach to these Guidelines in focussing on competence.

19. Can we use this system to assess ESOL students?

No, this system is designed for native speakers of English. A companion system tailored specially to ESOL learners is now available for use with that target group.

20. Will the results I record for initial and ongoing assessment be used for accountability purposes by SOLAS or any other government agency, e.g. to judge the success of a programme, of teaching or to influence funding?

No. The purpose and use of the system described in these Guidelines is to support teaching and learning.

21. How do these guidelines align with the FET Strategy 2020-2024?

The current FET strategy calls for a sustained commitment to inclusion, skills and pathways for learners over the present strategic period and beyond. The implementation of these guidelines will support equity of access, participation, completion and achievement for all learners in FET and will complement existing guidelines at levels 1-3 and build on the many innovative approaches to assessment already evident in ETBs. Furthermore, initial and ongoing assessment of Literacy and Numeracy at levels 4-6 and 1-3 will operate within the context of commitments in the current strategy, including a new approach to Consistent Support for Learners (CSL), implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for FET and ongoing advances in Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL).

