

Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at
NFQ Levels 4–6 in ETBs:
A Handbook of National Guidelines
2021





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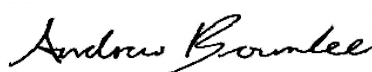
Foreword

It is with great pleasure we present these Guidelines and Toolkit, produced by Dr. Elizabeth McSkeane, on behalf of SOLAS and ETBI.

This work builds on the solid foundations of the SOLAS Guidelines and Toolkit for Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1–3. The recommendations emerging from this report, published in 2018, prompted a thorough exploration of screening and assessment practices across Further Education and Training programme delivery at NFQ Levels 4, 5 and 6. In support of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2020–2024, which emphasises, inclusion, skills and pathways for learners, this work provides the impetus to gain a more holistic understanding of how literacy and numeracy challenges across FET can be met.

Effective screening and assessment processes enable learners to experience richer educational experiences more aligned to their needs and aspirations. Supporting the assessment of literacy and numeracy across the whole of Further Education and Training remains a firm commitment in the Further Education Strategy. These Guidelines and Toolkit will provide assistance to ETBs in their literacy and numeracy assessment practices.

The Guidelines and Toolkit are augmented by a detailed background report which will be of particular interest to those readers who wish to take a deeper dive into the findings, methodologies and examples of international assessment practice.



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Particular thanks go to Dr. Elizabeth McSkeane, whose rigorous and thoughtfully presented findings will inform screening and assessment practices across the full range of further education and training provision for many years to come.

To the learners, FET Directors, Training Centre Managers, Adult Education Organisers, Adult Literacy Organisers, tutors, resource workers, coordinators and staff across Education and Training Boards involved in programme delivery at Levels 4–6. We appreciate the time volunteered to participate in the consultation phase of this project and are grateful for these valuable and authentic insights which have highlighted the rich evidence of good practice that exists across the country.

To the ETBI National Advisory Committee on Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy for their careful reading, respectful feedback and valued insights at all stages of the project.

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To staff in SOLAS and ETBI for a range of supports at all stages of the project.

Glossary of Acronyms

| Acronym | Definition | Description |
|---------|--|--|
| ACSF | Australian Core Skills Framework | Framework describing five core skills of learning reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy, at five levels of proficiency. |
| AfL | Assessment for Learning | An approach to assessment, designed by Black and Wiliam (1998) that mobilises potential of assessment to support learning. |
| BBC | British Broadcasting Corporation | National public service broadcaster of the UK. |
| BKSB | Basic and Key Skills Builder | UK Company specialising in developing Education products designed to improve English and Maths Skills. |
| BTEI | Back to Education Initiative | Second-chance education programme for adults in Ireland. |
| ESOL | English for Speakers of Other Languages | Teaching programmes for English language learners whose first language is not English. |
| ETB | Education and Training Board | The 16 Education and Training Boards are responsible for organising Further Education and Training within a defined geographical area in Ireland. ETBs were established 1 July 2013 to provide education and training provision in communities throughout Ireland. |
| ETBI | Education and Training Boards Ireland | ETBI is the national representative body for Ireland's sixteen Education and Training Boards. |
| FET | Further Education and Training | Post-compulsory education and training programmes up to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. |
| ILP | Individual Learning Plan | Document outlining learning goals and individualised programme. |
| NFQ | National Framework of Qualifications | A 10-level framework for the development, recognition and awarding of qualifications in Ireland. |
| QQI | Qualifications and Quality Ireland | Independent State agency that promotes, maintains and develops the Irish National Framework of Qualifications. |
| SOLAS | An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority | SOLAS is the State Organisation with responsibility for funding, planning and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. |
| VTOS | Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme | A full-time education programme designed to support long-term unemployed adults in Ireland. |

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Section 1:

Introduction to the Guidelines

These Guidelines describe a systematic approach to assessing the literacy and numeracy which is embedded in Further Education and Training programmes at Levels 4, 5, and 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The strategies and procedures described here are designed to support learners in getting maximum benefit from their experience of Further Education and Training (FET), by addressing specific obstacles that may hinder their progress. By making use of the resources and practical methods set out here, programme managers and tutors will be able to:

- Clarify learners' ability to handle the reading, writing and numeracy demands of their chosen programme.
- Identify supports that will build on learners' strengths, and help them to overcome challenges in the literacy or numeracy content that could hinder their progress.

1.1 Why do we need Assessment Guidelines for Literacy & Numeracy in FET?

FET programmes at Levels 4, 5 and 6 place many new demands on learners. These may include advanced study skills and also more complicated literacy and numeracy tasks than those needed for earlier experiences of study, or in daily life. At times, language and number content may be familiar, but, in particular contexts, used in unfamiliar ways. Uncertainty or lack of confidence in using these skills may interfere with students' progress in the technical and vocational content of their programme. In extreme cases, some people may even leave the course.¹

1.1.1 What is the Purpose of these Guidelines?

These Guidelines provide a set of strategies, procedures and sample resources that will enable managers and tutors working with learners, to:

- Identify whether a new learner will need help with reading, writing or numeracy, in order to participate successfully in their chosen programme.
- Decide on a range of appropriate support measures and resources.
- Monitor the learner's progress in literacy and numeracy.
- Collaborate with the team of educators working with them.

¹ A note on terminology: To reflect the diversity of FET, the terms 'learners' and 'students', as well as 'tutors' and 'teachers' are alternated throughout these Guidelines.

- Integrate the teaching, learning and assessment of literacy and numeracy with their chosen programmes.

1.1.2 Who will use these Guidelines?

Creating a successful learning experience for learners in FET programmes is a team effort, which involves the expertise and joint participation of:

- **Programme designers**, who develop courses and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) validation procedures.
- **Managers**, who are responsible for overseeing the full range of activities within the ETB.
- **Programme coordinators**, responsible for organisation, implementation and administration.
- **Tutors/Teachers**, who teach and interact with students on an ongoing basis.
- **Resource staff**, sometimes provided through the adult literacy service or else working as a dedicated resource person for the programme or centre.
- **Guidance staff**, who have a role in supporting learners and helping them to identify the best learning experience for their goals and stage of learning.
- **Learners** themselves.

The roles carried out by FET practitioners vary, depending on the context and structure of the individual programme and often, the centre where it is delivered.

These Guidelines are designed to support FET learners and educators in all learning environments where programmes at NQF levels 4, 5 and 6 are delivered. Sections Two and Three below explore when these different stakeholders may have a role in planning and implementing assessment of literacy and numeracy at different stages in the learning journey.

1.2 What are the General Principles Underpinning these Guidelines?

Literacy and numeracy assessment described here is founded on a learner-centred ethos which supports teaching and learning, and is carried out according to the principles of good adult education practice and literacy work. These include the

principles and procedures for assessment defined by the QQI, which state that assessment should be underpinned by:²

- **Validity**: is fit for purpose and generates evidence of learning and achievement.
- **Reliability**: uses valid assessment techniques that produce consistent decisions.
- **Fairness**: offers equal opportunities in procedures and practices for all learners.
- **Quality**: has credibility and status.
- **Transparency**: is viewed with clarity and understanding by all stakeholders.
- **Complementarity**: separates the roles of programme provider and QQI.

Although these Guidelines are consistent with QQI principles, the procedures set out here do not seek to replicate or replace the QQI assessment system but rather, to complement it. Methods of planning, implementing and recording are designed to address **not the technical specifications of the learner's chosen programme, but the reading, writing and number skills embedded in it.**

Vocational programme content, therefore, provides a real-life context within which students can enhance their reading, writing and number skills. This will ensure that they can:

- Successfully navigate the programme content.
- Follow the learning materials, methods and resources.
- Handle the demands of the programme assessments.

Assessment of learners' literacy and numeracy in this context is also underpinned by the principles of good adult education and literacy practice that inform all literacy work and adult education. This is:³

- **Learner-centred**: based on the individual's knowledge, skills, goals, aspirations.
- **Voluntary**: carried out with learner's informed choice.
- **Confidential**: findings are stored securely and used on need-to-know basis for learning purposes only.
- **Constructive**: supports student in developing awareness of their potential.

² QQI (2015) "Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for Providers," Dublin: QQI, pp 5,6.

³ SOLAS (2018) "Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy at NQF Levels 1-3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report," p.5. <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/5451e6dd60/initial-and-ongoing-assessment-of-adult.pdf>

- **Accurate:** generates verifiable evidence of progress and achievement.
- **Purposeful:** leads to action that will support learner's progress.

Although these Guidelines address literacy and numeracy in the context of Further Education and Training, this does not mean that the work should be confined solely to the demands of the workplace or training programme. Teaching, learning and assessment of literacy and numeracy in FET also provide an opportunity for learners to broaden and expand their skills beyond the learning situation, so that they can apply those skills in a wide range of settings, as they need them: in the workplace, in their lives as citizens and in daily and community life.

1.3 What is the Purpose and General Approach to Assessment Adopted for these Guidelines?

Assessment may be carried out for many purposes. These are often distinguished by the relationship between assessment, and the teaching and learning process:

- **Assessment OF learning:** this refers to summative assessment, which is designed to demonstrate the learner's achievement at the end of a learning experience and often leads to a qualification.
- **Assessment FOR learning:** uses assessment to give the individual detailed feedback on teaching and learning.
- **Assessment AS learning:** consciously sets out to use more informal assessment processes as a teaching tool, especially to promote the student's engagement as a learner, elicit reflection and enhance critical thinking.

Summative assessment of Level 4, 5 and 6 programmes is already carried out in accordance with the requirements of the QQI assessment system. These Guidelines, in contrast, address assessment as a tool for providing feedback to learners. This approach is consistent with the principles and methods of Assessment **for** Learning, and provides systematic support for the teaching and learning process, which corresponds to Assessment **as** Learning.

The assessment procedures described in Sections Two and Three below support important stages in the individual's learning journey. Literacy and numeracy assessment is carried out for distinct, but related, purposes:

- **Initial assessment:** Experienced practitioners report that this is a process, rather than a single event. It is carried out over a period of time and encompasses several distinct, but related, stages:
 - **Alerting:** Sometimes called 'screening', this takes place when the person first joins, or is preparing to join, the programme. The purpose at this stage is to find out "Is there a difficulty?"
 - **Placing:** If the answer to the above question is "Yes," more detailed assessment provides information that indicates the best learning environment for the person.
 - **Diagnostic:** This sets out to identify the learner's specific strengths, weaknesses and support needs.

The initial assessment process facilitates managers, tutors and students in working together to set learning goals that will help the individual to achieve their wider aspirations, whether for study, work or other kinds of personal empowerment.

- **Ongoing assessment** is a regular part of teaching and learning throughout the individual's time on the programme. This involves many different activities designed to monitor the learner's progress and thereby support teaching and learning. This includes checking the student's work in relation to learning goals identified during initial assessment.

As ongoing assessment is carried out with the aim of adjusting teaching and learning to the individuals emerging needs, it performs the function of **formative assessment**.

- **Formative assessment** gives the tutor and learner information about where the person is making progress, any obstacles that may arise and how the learner and tutor can improve the teaching and learning process. This may be carried out in the early stages of, or during, a programme.⁴

⁴ QQI (2013) op. cit., p. 53.

1.4 What are the Steps Involved in Assessing Literacy and Numeracy in FET?

Figure 1: Steps in Assessing Literacy and Numeracy in FET, Programme Levels 4,5 & 6.



The stages set out in Figure 1 above, and the role of the various stakeholders, are explored in more detail in the next three sections.

Table 1: Structure of Guidelines

| Section Two Planning: Content and Context | Section Three Implementing Initial Assessment | Section Four Implementing Ongoing Assessment |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What to assess • When to assess • In which context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial assessment, planning • Methods | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formative assessment, formal and informal • Recording results |

An accompanying Toolkit includes sample material which supports these three stages, as well as a list of useful references and resources.

Section 2:

Assessment Content and Context

In order to find out whether a learner needs support in literacy and/or numeracy, and identify the teaching methods and resources that will suit them best, it is important to clarify what these concepts mean in the context of Further Education and Training programmes at Levels 4, 5 and 6. This means probing whether 'literacy' and 'numeracy' in these higher level FET programmes refer to the QQI content in reading, writing and mathematics at Levels 1, 2 and 3; or if there is merit in including a different, or broader, skill set.

In addition, it is important to clarify the specific literacy and numeracy demands contained in Further Education and Training programmes.

All this information, taken together, provides guidance on what needs to be assessed, for both initial and in ongoing assessment.

2.1 What do we mean by 'Literacy' and 'Numeracy' in Further Education and Training?

In the context of FET programmes at Levels 4, 5 and 6, each of the following components is an important aspect of literacy and numeracy:

- **Basic level skills**, traditionally associated with literacy and numeracy programmes, such as spelling, grammar and basic number operations. These are expressed in QQI modules in reading, writing, and a series of mathematical modules at Levels 1, 2 and 3 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).
- **Advanced literacy and numeracy skills** are associated with higher level FET programmes of study. These include tasks such as report writing, use of mathematical formulae, referencing and note-taking.

For the purpose of these Guidelines, 'literacy' and 'numeracy' are taken to encompass both of these categories: that is, **any language, communication or mathematical content embedded in the technical programme that is necessary for the learner to complete the work successfully.**

Some demands recur across all programmes, which suggests that it may be useful to focus on these generic skills. However, often literacy and numeracy tasks are used in ways that are specific to particular programmes. This highlights the distinction between generic and contextualised literacy and numeracy.

- **Generic skills:** these are general literacy or numeracy skills that recur in many or most situations, including work, study and everyday life.
- **Context-specific skills** involve literacy and numeracy tasks which are embedded in a particular situation, such as work or study, where reading, writing or number skills are used in ways specific to a given setting.

These Guidelines support assessment of generic literacy and numeracy tasks, and also, those embedded in the specific contexts of subject teaching and learning.

A further useful aspect of literacy and numeracy, relevant to all the components described above, is captured by the **wider dimensions** of literacy and numeracy.

- **Wider dimensions** of literacy and numeracy express those elements needed for the person to perform a skill how, where and when they need it with:
 - Independence
 - Fluency
 - In different settings

These wider dimensions are of great importance because students, in order to follow their programmes successfully, need to apply their knowledge and skills in the real world. In FET, the immediate context is study and workplace learning, which also supports other personal and social goals.

2.2 Competence

The effective application of skills in real-life situations is often referred to as 'competence.' The Council of the European Union has defined competence as:

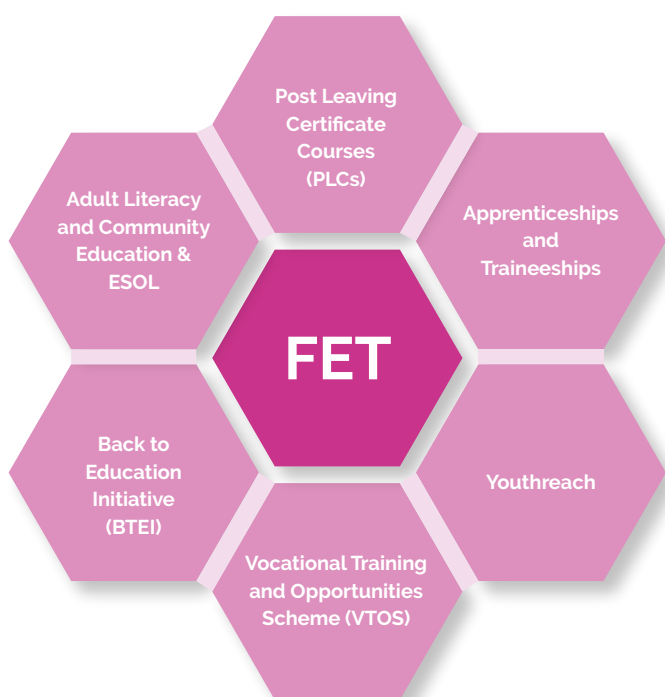
"...the ability of individuals to act in a self-organised way by deploying a combination of knowledge, skills, and personal and social capabilities appropriate to each context and relevant to each situation."⁵

Competence therefore refers to the ability of an individual to apply the relevant skill as and when they need to, in the appropriate manner for the situation. Competence is also one of the framework strands of the National Framework of Qualifications, where it is defined as:

"...the process of governing the application of knowledge to a set of tasks that is typically acquired by practice and reflection. It is the effective and creative demonstration and deployment of knowledge and skill in human situations. Such situations could comprise general, social and civic ones as well as specific occupational ones."⁶

The specific methods used for planning, assessing and recording the results, are tailored to the stage and purpose of the processes, and also, to the learning environment in which the Further Education and Training programme is delivered. The teaching and learning procedures for each of these different learning environments influence how, when and where assessment of the literacy and numeracy embedded in FET programmes can take place.

Figure 2: FET Settings where Literacy & Numeracy Assessment Takes Place



⁵ Council of The European Union (2010), Council Conclusions on Competences Supporting Lifelong Learning and the New Skills for New Jobs Initiative, May 11th, 2010, Council Conclusions on Competences supporting lifelong learning and the new skills for new jobs initiative, May 10th, 2010. <http://www.aede-france.org/New-skills-new-jobs-EN.html>

⁶ QQI (2013) "Quality Assuring Assessment: Guidelines for Providers," Dublin: QQI p. 53. <https://www.slideshare.net/ibrahimkhleifat/quality-assuring-assessment-guidelines-for-providers-revised-2013-134471070>

PLCs – Full-time programmes for young people and adults. Courses lead to QQI Major Awards Levels 5 or 6. Provided in ETBs and some voluntary, secondary & community schools.

Adult Literacy, Community, ESOL – Part-time learning opportunities for people who want to improve their skills to enhance participation in the community or workforce.

Apprenticeships – Combine learning in the workplace (at least 50%) and in colleges or training centres. Programmes last 2–4 years and lead to NFQ qualifications Levels 5–10. Programmes are industry-led, and are currently available in 45 occupations across 11 sectors.

Traineeships – Are structured training programmes of between 6–20 months' duration that combine learning in an education and training setting, with workplace learning. Programmes are delivered by ETBs in partnership with industry representatives and employers and lead to NFQ qualifications Levels 4–6.

BTEI – Part-time courses for young people and adults, over 16s who have not completed Leaving Certificate. Supports return to learning for people who need to combine work and family responsibilities.

Youthreach – A full-time training and work-experience programme for early school leavers aged 15–20. Provides opportunities for QQI certification mostly at NFQ Levels 3–4.

VTOS – A full-time programme aimed at long-term unemployed people. Of two years' duration and delivered in ETBs.

The overall purpose of these Guidelines on Literacy and Numeracy Assessment in Further Education and Training programmes at NFQ Levels 4, 5 and 6 is to support FET practitioners and learners in assessing and thereby, teaching students' literacy and numeracy competence, as the need arises in any of these settings where FET programmes are delivered.

This involves probing the individual's ability to apply the literacy and numeracy skills they need to navigate their programme, carry out the demands of a job and handle other life tasks.

2.3 Planning for Literacy/Numeracy Assessment

In order to plan for literacy and numeracy assessment, the following elements are considered:

- **Identify the literacy and numeracy elements embedded in the programme.**
- **Assess the learner's literacy/numeracy support needs.⁷**

2.3.1 Literacy and Numeracy Audit

QQI modules vary in the amount of literacy and numeracy embedded in the work, and also, in the specific skills and tasks learners will need to handle in order to make progress in their programme. An important first step is to analyse the module content to identify exactly what those demands are. Depending on the organisation and staff available, this analysis may be carried out by the:

- Programme developer.
- Programme coordinator.
- Adult literacy resource staff.

Whichever combination of staff takes on this task, **the literacy/numeracy programme audit should be a collaborative effort between a subject expert and a literacy/numeracy expert.**

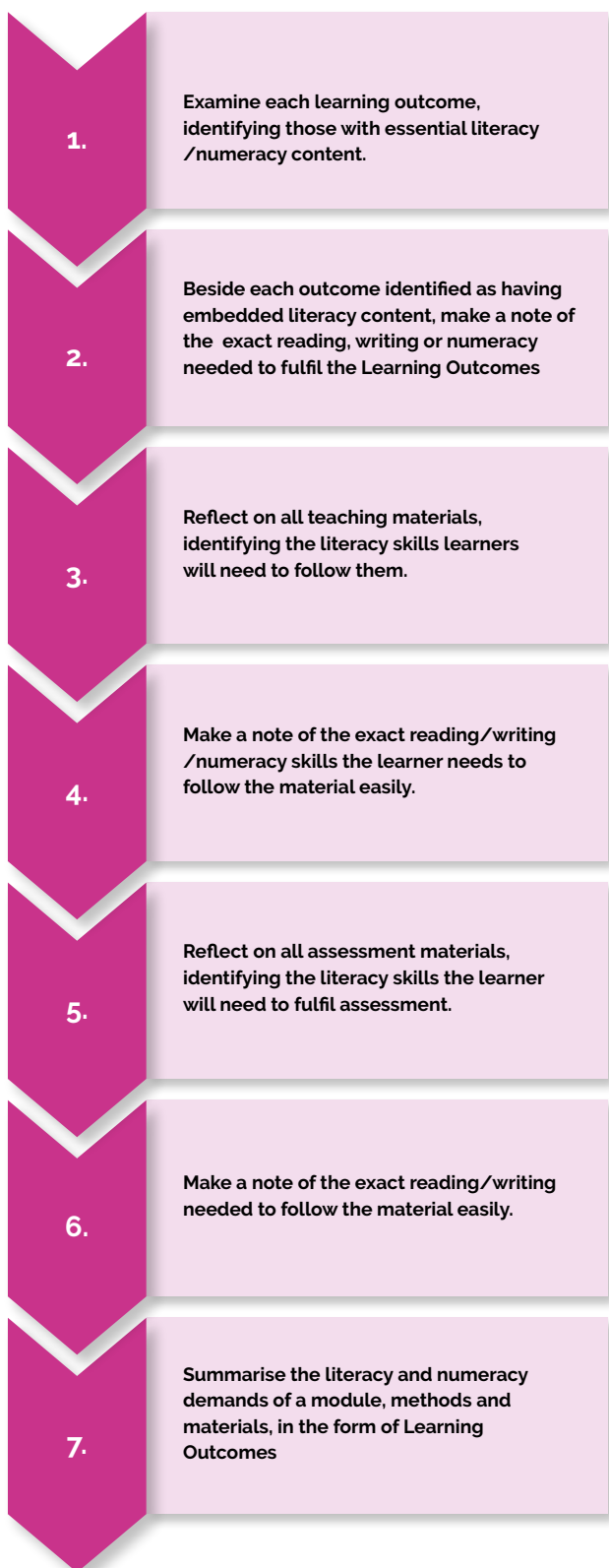
Figure 3 below summarises the process. This involves looking not only at the module learning outcomes, but also the teaching materials and QQI assessment procedures for the technical elements of the programme, including assignments, portfolios and examinations.

Toolkit 1 contains a sample checklist which includes a literacy/numeracy audit of a Level 5 module, accompanied by a blank version in Toolkit 2 for later use.

⁷ In order to plan for literacy and numeracy assessment, the following elements are considered:

- Identify the literacy and numeracy elements embedded in the programme.
- Assess the learner's literacy/numeracy support needs.
- Be cognisant of the principles underpinning Universal Design for FET, endorsed at a policy level (DES, 2019:29). UDL provides flexibility in the way information is provided, in the way learners are engaged, and in the way learners respond, or are facilitated to demonstrate knowledge and skills.
- Where appropriate, gain a deeper understanding of learner's literacy / numeracy support needs through the National Learner Forum.

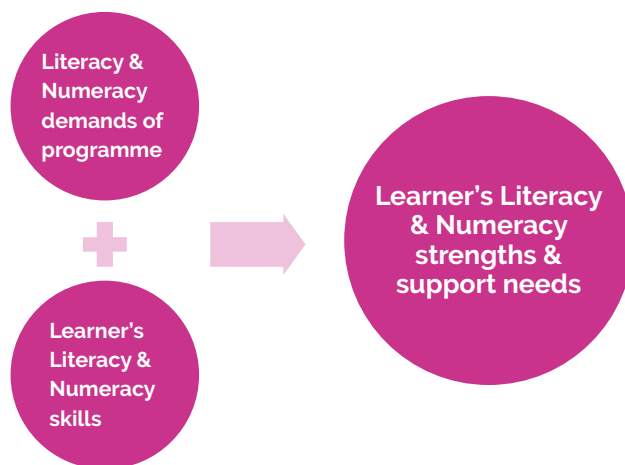
Figure 3: Literacy/Numeracy Audit of QQI Programme/Standards



Once the literacy and numeracy content embedded in the programme has been identified and recorded using the checklist in Toolkit 2, the identified skills should then be summarised and expressed as **literacy/numeracy learning outcomes**. Toolkit 3 contains a sample completed Learning Outcomes List, accompanied by a blank version in Toolkit 4.

By carrying out this programme audit in advance, programme managers, tutors and learners get a clear idea of the literacy/numeracy demands which learners will face.

Figure 4: Identifying Literacy and Numeracy Learning Needs



This information can then be examined alongside the insights arising from the initial assessment of the individual learner's literacy and numeracy skills. In this way, the student's support needs in relation to the programme can be identified at an early stage in their participation.

The literacy and numeracy audit is an important step in the process of discovering the learner's support needs.

The second important stage is individual initial assessment.

Section 3:

Initial Assessment

This section starts by exploring where and when initial assessment of literacy and numeracy can take place in Further Education and Training programmes at Levels 4, 5 and 6. This is followed by a description of practical assessment strategies, methods and resources used to assess learners' skills at this stage.

Procedures for carrying out initial assessment in Further Education and Training programmes at these levels are often connected to the recruitment process. Because of the large number of FET programmes, the wide variety of learning environments in which they are delivered as well as the diverse operational procedures of ETBs and individual centres, new students are recruited in many different ways, using a range of strategies and events. The choice of recruitment strategy is influenced by many factors, some of which are specific to a particular locality.

Many of these recruitment strategies provide opportunities for exploring new learners' literacy and numeracy skills before or very soon after they enrol on their programme of choice. However, strategies that work well in centres where all programmes are delivered on the same campus may not be practical in ETBs where programmes are delivered in geographically scattered outreach centres.

3.1 Planning for Initial Assessment

Figure 5 below provides a structured method for programme managers to analyse the logistical and practical factors which may influence decisions when planning when, where and how to assess the literacy and numeracy skills of new recruits in Further Education and Training programmes at Levels 4, 5 and 6 in their programme or centre. The process is described in three steps:

Step 1 Opportunities: Identify the opportunities available for conducting initial assessment of literacy and numeracy: which of these are currently in place, or could be implemented easily?

Step 2 Scope: Clarify the scope of assessment possible in each setting: which aspects of literacy and numeracy can be probed? Generic or contextualised skills? Technical skills or wider dimensions? Can assessment take place in a meaningful context such as Learning to Learn or Induction?

Step 3 Methods & Tools: Identify the methods and tools most suitable for generating the information about literacy and numeracy relevant to the particular setting.

Figure 5: Choosing Initial Assessment Opportunities and Strategies

| QUESTION | | TASK | | STRATEGY |
|---|-----|--|--|--|
| 1. Do we have an Open Day to promote new programmes? | Yes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify the literacy/numeracy/learning demands of programmes, for prospective learners. | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a one- or two-page description of study expectations & requirements. Provide a one-page summary of the literacy/numeracy content of the programme. |
| 2. Do we conduct a pre-enrolment individual interview? | Yes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify the learner's general ability in, and attitude towards literacy/numeracy and learning. Present the literacy/numeracy/learning demands of this programme. | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure the discussion using interview schedule. Record general findings on the ILP/checklist. |
| 3. Do we conduct an advance group meeting with all new learners of specific programmes? | Yes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide overview of general study skills required in FET. Clarify the specific literacy/numeracy/learning demands of the chosen FET programme, for prospective learners. | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make presentations/conduct group work on subject-specific study skills. Observe learners performing <i>generic</i> skills demonstration tasks. Record findings on ILP/checklist. |
| 4. Do we provide a 'Learning to Learn' preparatory programme or session? | Yes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide practical exercises in general study skills. Identify the new learner's <i>general and specific</i> abilities and attitude in relation to the literacy, numeracy, learning skills <i>embedded in their chosen programme</i>. | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make presentations/conduct group work on general study skills. Observe learners performing skills demonstration tasks. Record findings using ILP/checklist. |
| 5. Do we conduct a post-enrolment individual interview? | Yes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify the new learner's <i>general and specific</i> abilities and attitudes in relation to the literacy, numeracy, learning skills requirements <i>embedded in their chosen programme</i>. | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure the discussion using interview schedule. Record findings using the ILP/checklist. |
| 6. Do we provide a post-enrolment Induction Programme or session? | Yes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide an overview of general Induction topics. Identify new learners' <i>general and specific</i> abilities, attitudes and support needs in relation to the literacy, numeracy and learning requirements <i>embedded in their chosen programme</i>. | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make presentations/conduct group work on general Induction topics. Observe learners performing skills demonstration tasks. Record findings on ILP/checklist. |

3.2 Opportunities for Initial Assessment

Initial assessment of FET learners' literacy and numeracy skills may be carried out, or at least initiated, during one or more of the following:

- **Open day** for ETB, programme or centre, organised to promote FET to the public.
- **Group meeting** of new learners who have enrolled on a specific programme.
- **Learning to learn** programme providing a session, day or several days' introduction to study skills.
- **Interview** with new learners, either before or after their enrolment, attended by the programme coordinator and sometimes tutor and/or resource staff.
- **Induction programme** with individual learner or group, which may take place either before or after enrolment.

In some FET programmes, such as Youthreach, new learners may be enrolled on the programme before any initial assessment is carried out. This system may operate also in some FET higher level programmes, where individuals can enrol online.

The timing of initial assessment, before or after enrolment, can have an impact on the function and scope of the process.

In this context, it is important to clarify that the purpose of initial assessment of FET learners' literacy and numeracy skills is to support learners' participation in the programme of their choice, not to exclude them from it. However, sometimes the individual's literacy and numeracy needs may be greater than can realistically be supported within the programme of their choice.

- **Before enrolment**, initial assessment may be used to identify a minimum standard that applicants should meet for entry. Applicants who do not meet the standard may be provided with extra support to facilitate their participation; or, if necessary, referred to an alternative programme at a lower level, or to the Adult Literacy Service.
- **After enrolment**, the focus is on identifying the learner's support needs, to maximise their progress and success in the programme.

When learners are advised that their programme of choice is not the best option for them at that time, they may be offered an alternative, or

referred for support to the Adult Literacy Service. Professional judgements of programme managers and other assessors should be supported by robust evidence. The initial assessment process generates objective and transparent evidence which provides information for the learner, and for other FET or adult literacy educators who will work with them.

3.3 Assessment Methods, Initial Assessment

3.3.1 Individual Interview

An initial individual interview with the new learner is carried out for all programmes, in all settings. The purpose of this is to find out about the person's background, motivation and enthusiasm for learning, whether they have received an assessment identifying a learning difficulty, or if they themselves identify any literacy and numeracy needs. Toolkit 5 provides 'Discussion Prompts' that summarise the range of topics generally explored with new students during this informal meeting. This can be used alongside the checklist of literacy and numeracy items contained in Toolkit 6.

3.3.2 Performance Task

More detailed information about the learner's literacy and numeracy support needs is gathered when the person carries out **skills demonstrations of one or more performance tasks**. This may be presented during the initial individual interview, or at a later meeting or session. Performance tasks may address different aspects of literacy and/or numeracy, in different ways. Toolkits 7–9 provide a series of samples which comprise the following range of task types and contexts:

- **Skills Demonstration of Generic Task**
A generic task is one that is common to many or even all settings, such as Health and Safety. Toolkit 7 show how this authentic context can provide a vehicle for probing aspects of the learner's abilities in selected areas of literacy and numeracy.
- **Skills Demonstration of Specific Task**
FET programmes provide a rich source of material for developing performance tasks that are contextualised to specific areas of learning or work. An example of this is given in Toolkit 8.
- **Skills Demonstration in the context of Induction Session**
All programmes and centres provide an Induction for new students that focuses

on local systems, timetables and often, regulations. This information may be available to learners in the form of handouts or booklets. The performance task in Toolkit 9 uses the Induction Programme carried out in a Youthreach centre in order to demonstrate a context within which specific elements of literacy and numeracy are probed.

- **Session Plan incorporating several performance tasks, for use in multiple contexts**

This set of tasks is similar to the other performance tasks, but in this case the assessment may take place in several contexts: an open day, or a study skills session tailored for a particular programme or an Induction Programme.

Figure 6: Overview of Initial Assessment Strategy: Methods

Overview of Initial Assessment Strategy

Initial Interview and a choice of the following methods:

- Skills demonstration (performance task) of generic literacy/numeracy.
- Skills demonstration (performance task) of specific literacy/numeracy tasks related to the programme.
- Skills demonstration (performance task) of literacy/numeracy in a context relevant to the centre e.g. Induction or Learning to Learn session or programme.

The Toolkit performance tasks are samples only, provided as a model which FET practitioners can build on when developing their own initial assessment performance tasks.

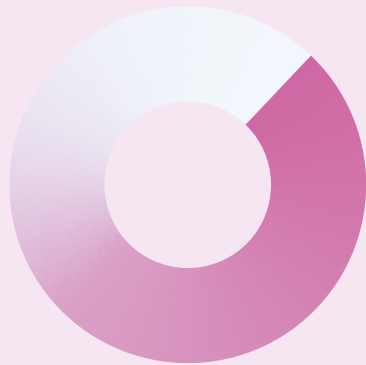
3.4 Who Carries Out Initial Assessment?

Depending on the roles and responsibilities of staff in each centre, initial assessment may be carried out by one or more of the following:

- **Programme coordinator**
- **Guidance staff**
- **Resource staff**
- **Literacy tutor**
- **Course tutor/teacher**

Some programmes are supported by a dedicated team: for example, the Support to Apprentices Programme, governed by the Support to Apprentices Group, plans, carries out and follows up initial assessments. However, as most programmes and centres do not have the benefit of this resource, it is important for managers and programme coordinators to clarify in advance which staff are responsible for the various tasks involved in planning, implementing and recording assessment processes and outcomes.

Section 4: Ongoing Assessment



Ongoing assessment is an integral part of day-to-day teaching and learning. FET tutors already assess how their learners are progressing when they observe and give feedback on their participation, how they manage class or homework activities, and their performance on periodic QQI assignments.

4.1 The Need for Ongoing Assessment of Literacy and Numeracy in FET

This section explores ways in which tutors/teachers and literacy/numeracy resource staff can monitor how well students are handling the **literacy and numeracy demands of the programme**, rather than the technical content, on an ongoing basis.

If learners are making progress in the vocational knowledge and skills elements of the programme, it may be tempting to assume that they are now able to manage the embedded literacy or numeracy content as well. This may not be the case. Unless the language and numeracy content is explicitly addressed, there is no guarantee that difficulties identified during initial assessment really have been resolved. Nor does this take into account any new literacy or numeracy demands that may arise as the programme become more complex.

FET programme coordinators, tutors/teachers and resource staff all have a role in explicitly monitoring learners' progress in the literacy and numeracy learning goals identified during initial assessment, and also in supporting students in meeting any new demands that emerge later.

Depending on local systems and the resources available in specific courses and centres, the functions involved in ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy may be carried out by different people. For example,

- **Programme co-ordinators** may participate in the literacy/numeracy audit, which identifies the literacy/numeracy content of the programme in advance.
- **Tutors** observe learners' work on an ongoing basis, and their progress on the literacy and numeracy gaps identified during initial assessment. As subject experts, tutors may also have a role in the literacy/numeracy audit.
- **Resource staff** and/or adult literacy tutors may assist programme tutors/teachers in monitoring and periodically recording learners' progress in literacy and numeracy. They may also assist with the literacy/numeracy audit.

However, the precise distribution of these tasks can vary from place to place. Where programmes are resourced by a dedicated support team, most of these processes are carried out by expert staff who work alongside tutors to assess learners' skills and provide ongoing literacy or numeracy support, as it is needed.⁸ Otherwise, staff in ETBs, programmes and centres decide who carries out the various functions involved.

4.2 Ongoing Assessment Of Learners' Progress on Literacy/Numeracy

In order to carry out ongoing assessment of students' competence in the literacy and numeracy elements of the FET programme, a starting point, or base line is identified by combining:

- The literacy and numeracy content embedded in the programme.
- The learner's literacy and numeracy needs emerging during initial assessment.

The literacy/numeracy Audit (Toolkit 1 and 2) clarifies the literacy and numeracy demands of the programme. This analysis, summarised as learning outcomes (Toolkit 3 and 4) provides a starting point from which to **connect initial and ongoing assessment**. This ensures that the student's progress on important demands of reading, writing or use of numbers are followed up while they are working on the vocational content of their programme. Any new elements that arise during the programme can be added on an ongoing basis.

4.3 Overview of Methods: Ongoing Assessment

Ongoing assessment of learners' progress in the technical and vocational programme content often takes the form of dialogue between tutor/teacher and student: checking, confirming and refining the learner's understanding and application of the work. This **formative assessment** is an integral part of the teaching and learning process.

In the context of ongoing literacy and numeracy assessment in FET Programmes at Levels 4, 5 and 6, it is useful to distinguish between **informal** and **formal formative assessment**.

4.3.1 Informal Formative Assessment⁹

Informal formative assessment takes place as part of the everyday social interaction between tutor and learner, when normal learning activities present frequent opportunities to observe and gather evidence of students learning. Such evidence may include:

- Verbal inputs and responses, such as learners' questions, to the tutor and/or in group activities and informal conversation.
- Written work.
- Practical demonstrations of how they perform on task.
- Non-verbal cues such as body language, eye contact, paralinguistic cues.

These day-to-day interactions can indicate:

- How far a student understands the knowledge and concepts involved in a task.
- Their command of the practical demands of a task.
- The social elements of the work.
- Aspects of the wider dimensions of learning such as independence and fluency.
- General attitude to their work.

Information gathered during this **informal formative assessment** process is usually acted on immediately, as the tutor/teacher engages with the learner and makes helpful adjustments. Specific tutor input may include:

- Providing explanations.
- Making demonstrations.
- Involving other students in discussion.
- Offering more information.
- Supplying additional materials.
- Adjusting teaching approach.
- Introducing new materials or modes of learning.

⁸ Support to Apprentices Programme for Craft Apprenticeships operates in all ETBs countrywide.

⁹ Maria Araceli Ruiz-Primo (2011) "Informal formative assessment: The role of instructional dialogues in assessing learners' learning," Maria Araceli Ruiz-Primo Laboratory of Educational Assessment, Research, and Innovation (LEARN), University of Colorado Denver, Denver, CO, United States.

4.3.2 Assessment Conversations

Much of this **informal formative assessment** is carried out during focussed dialogues between learners and tutor, both individually and in groups. These are sometimes known as "assessment conversations." Assessment Conversations:

- Are often conducted with explicit reference to a defined learning goal e.g. literacy/numeracy learning outcomes.
- Are integrated into a regular learning activity e.g. vocational content.
- Are interactive and involve dialogue.
- May happen outside the formal learning situation, as well as within a formal session.

Toolkit 11 provides an overview of the main features of Assessment Conversations.

For the most part, evidence of progress gathered during this informal formative assessment process is entwined with teaching and learning. Insights are usually acted on in the ways mentioned above, **but not recorded.**

Assessment Conversations which focus periodically and explicitly on learners' literacy and numeracy learning goals are a powerful strategy which ensures that these important learning outcomes receive the attention they need, in the context of the vocational programme content.

4.3.3 Formal Formative Assessment

Formal Formative Assessment

This approach to formative assessment shares many of the same features, but involves more explicit, systematic feedback. The most significant difference is that **periodically, the insights arising from formal formative assessment are recorded.**

Some of the more structured elements are useful for the explicit, conscious tracking of progress associated with **formal formative assessment**. These include:

- Carefully chosen questioning techniques
- Learners' self-assessment
- Learners' peer-assessment
- Observation of the student's performance of a real-life task, or on a constructed task which replicates a real-life situation.

- Creating portfolios and learning logs
- Group work
- Discussion
- Project work

The 'observation of learner's performance of a real-life or constructed task,' together with discussion, is the assessment strategy of choice for both initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy in FET.

4.3.4 Assessment for Learning

Useful examples of both informal and formal formative assessment in action are highlighted in the Assessment for Learning approach. Assessment for Learning (AfL) is based on the idea that assessment can have a positive, as well as a negative, impact on the process and outcomes of teaching and learning. An important research project synthesised over 250 other studies.¹⁰ It confirmed that conscious, systematic use of formative assessment can improve the outcomes of learning, as well as enhance students' motivation and self-esteem. The AfL approach uses assessment to support "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there."¹¹

Assessment for Learning may be carried out:

- On a day-to-day basis, giving specific and finely-tuned feedback to learners.
- Periodically, as part of a progress review.
- Transitionally, when the learner reaches a bridge to another learning experience.

The key features of Assessment for Learning include:

- Putting learning at the centre of the assessment process.
- Involving learners in their own assessments.
- Setting clear goals and criteria for success.
- Tracking progress in relation to goals and criteria.
- Giving immediate feedback to improve learners' progress.
- Using feedback to strengthen the teaching strategy.

¹⁰ Black P. & Dylan William, D. (1998) "Assessment and Classroom Learning," *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5:1, 7-74.

¹¹ Ibid.

- Inviting learners to reflect on their own learning.

Assessment for Learning can therefore support both formal and informal formative assessment.

4.4 Recording Assessment Outcomes

Managers and tutors routinely keep notes of important information about a learner's support needs, progress and achievements. In the context of literacy and numeracy assessment, it is important to record some of the outcomes of the initial and ongoing assessment processes. This provides a record of the learner's progress in literacy and numeracy; and ensures that they have robust, objective evidence of their skills and progress.

The purpose of periodically recording literacy and numeracy progress is therefore to enhance teaching and learning, not only in literacy and numeracy, but also in the vocational elements of their programme. This will also provide grounding for future work in other settings, whether study, personal, community or working life.

Assessment outcomes for initial and ongoing literacy and numeracy assessment in FET are recorded using two recording tools:

- **Individual Learner Plan (ILP)** for the main outcomes of initial assessment (See Toolkit 12).
- **Individual Progress Tracking Form**, for the main outcomes arising from ongoing assessment (See Toolkit 13).

The Individual Learner Plan (ILP) and Individual Progress Tracking Form facilitate quick and easy recording of key aspects of student's literacy and numeracy needs, and their progress in working on those learning goals.

4.4.1 Using the Individual Learner Plan

The ILP is a working document that can be revisited and expanded over time, as more information about the learners strengths and needs becomes available. This is where the assessors record information gathered from the initial assessment interview and performance tasks. The recording process works as follows:

- In Section 1, note the literacy and numeracy learning outcomes the learner needs to work on and their current level of competence. This is the base line from which future progress is monitored.

- In Section 2, briefly describe the performance task(s) used for their Skills Demonstration
- In Section 3, if it is possible to do so at this stage, identify any wider dimensions relevant to the learner at that time.

4.4.2 Using the Individual Progress Tracking Form

The Individual Progress Tracking Form allows the programme coordinator, tutor and literacy resource staff to see where the learner is making progress in literacy and numeracy over time.

- In column (a), insert the learning outcomes identified by the initial assessment process and recorded on the ILP. This is the base line from which progress is recorded.
- Of the Wider Dimensions, choose only those relevant to the student i.e. those dimensions they need to work on to achieve competence in the context of their programme.
- Use column (b) to make a note of learner's progress within two or three months of the base-line assessment.
- Repeat periodically, at least once a term.

Evidence of progress recorded here may be generated by observation of the learner's work on:

- A specially designed performance task OR
- The tasks involved in the normal course of their programme.

Note: The Individual Learner Plan and the Individual Progress Tracking Form are teaching tools only. They are not designed for accreditation or statistical purposes and are used only by the learner and the tutor and any managers or resource staff who support their learning.

Ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy in FET Programmes at Levels 4, 5 and 6 involves focusing on elements which are integrated into the main subject content, rather than being the principal focus of the teaching and learning. This vocational content provides a rich context for observing learners' literacy and numeracy in action, in a meaningful situation.

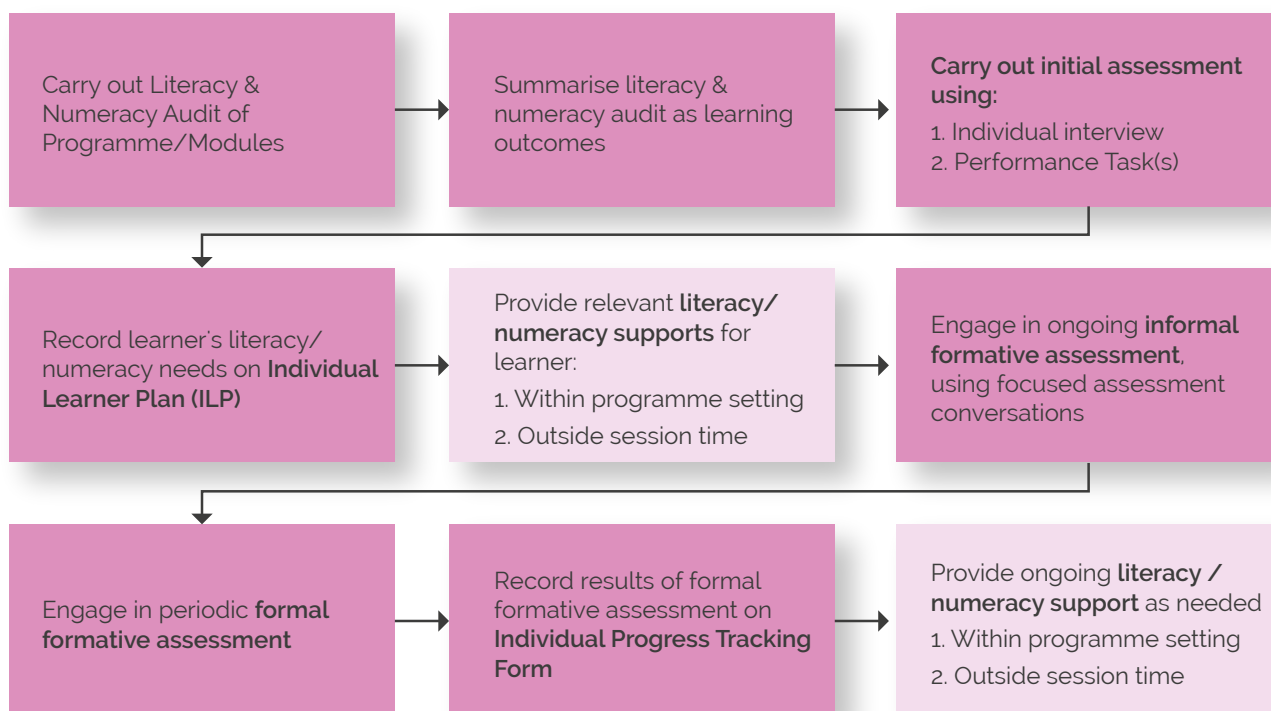
4.5 Summary of Process

The inter-related components involved in planning, implementing and coordinating initial and ongoing assessment involves the following steps:

- Identify the literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge embedded in vocational area (Literacy and Numeracy Audit).
- Summarise and record these as learning outcomes.
- Identify learner's general and specific learning strengths and needs using:
 - **One-to-one interview** AND
 - **Performance task.**
- Record literacy/numeracy needs as learning goals on ILP.
- Ensure all staff – tutors and resource staff – have this information.
- Carry out ongoing informal formative assessment of vocational area, with particular attention to literacy/numeracy content and learners' needs.
- Carry out periodic formal formative assessment of literacy/numeracy embedded in programme.
- Record literacy and numeracy progress on the Individual Progress Tracking Form at least once a term.

These steps are summarised in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Overview of Initial & Ongoing Literacy/ Numeracy Assessment in FET



4.5.1 The Role of the Tutor

Informal formative assessment is carried out by the course tutor, who routinely observes and gives feedback on learners' progress for the entire duration of the course. Monitoring students' competence in the literacy and numeracy embedded in the programme is part of this process, carried out informally, on an ongoing basis. To support them in this task, tutors need the benefit of advance information about the literacy and numeracy demands of their subject area. This is provided by the Literacy/Numeracy Audit. This advance knowledge alerts them to any literacy or numeracy-related areas that may need extra attention during work on the vocational content of the programme.

Formal formative assessment - Depending on the resources allocated to the programme and their own experience and expertise, some tutors may find it useful to take on the task of the periodic recording of learners' literacy and numeracy progress using the recording tools supplied (Toolkit 12 and 13).

However, due to limitations of time and other resources, this may not always be possible. In these cases, it is important for programme managers and coordinators to identify in advance who takes responsibility for each of the assessment functions summarised in Figure 7 below. Toolkit 14 provides a Planning Guide.

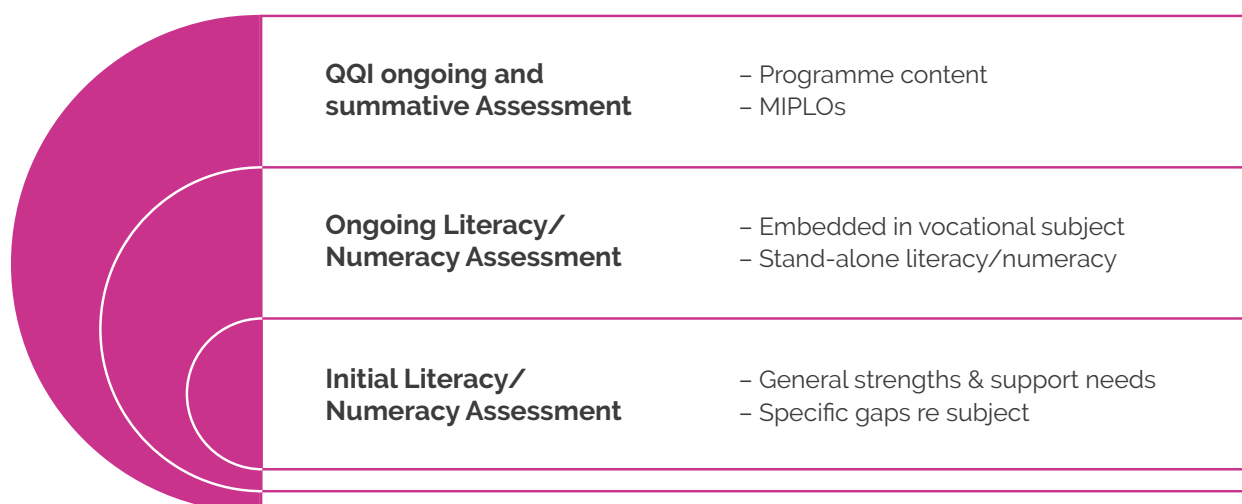
4.5.2 Connecting with QQI Procedures

Managers, programme developers and sometimes tutors of QQI programmes, already have a role in planning for assessment. An important element of the QQI programme validation process involves preparation of an assessment brief, which sets out the Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes (MIPLOs); and also, the strategies by which the MIPLOs will be assessed.

The process of identifying and assessing literacy and numeracy content of Level 4, 5 and 6 programmes may be carried out **alongside the development of the QQI assessment brief for the programme**.

By identifying literacy and numeracy learning outcomes at an early stage, programme managers and tutors/teachers will be equipped to support students in managing the programme content and assessment requirements they will encounter during the learning journey.

Figure 8: Connection Between QQI Assessment and Literacy/Numeracy Assessment



Literacy and numeracy learning outcomes (Toolkit 3 and 4) documented in the ILP can complement the programme learning outcomes contained in the QQI assessment brief.

4.6 Assessment Actions

The information gathered during initial and ongoing assessment of FET learners' literacy and numeracy should lead to some course of action that will build on students' strengths and help them to overcome obstacles. Support may be provided by the tutor in the first instance, complemented or directed by resource staff, or by tutors from the Adult Literacy Service.

Practical actions arising from assessment information may take the form of:

- Modified teaching methods and/or materials.
- Specific focus by tutor on the teaching of literacy/numeracy within the subject sessions.
- Team teaching with resource worker.
- One-to-one or small group support provided by resource worker/adult literacy service outside subject class.

Notwithstanding the importance of initial and ongoing literacy and numeracy assessment of learners following FET programmes at Levels 4, 5 and 6, it is important to recognise that this is only a starting point. The benefits and usefulness of assessment depends on what happens next. Resources provided in the Toolkit offer an initial set of tools for tutors, programme managers and planners, to be used in conjunction with wider systemic supports available to the programme, centres and individual learners.

Notes





