

Initial and Ongoing Assessment of English Language Competency of Migrant Learners in Further Education and Training

Part 2: Guidelines

2021



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Section 5:

Guidelines on Initial and Ongoing Assessment

5.1. Introduction to the Guidelines

The guidelines presented in this section (Part 2: Guidelines) of the research outline a systematic approach to the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners accessing ESOL and/or other relevant Further Education and Training programmes. These guidelines are wholly informed by the results of the various data gathering mechanisms employed throughout this research project; namely the initial online survey, the regional engagement sessions with co-ordinators and tutors, additional engagements with NALA and QQI, and the learner focus groups. In addition, the results of these various data gathering mechanisms are further enhanced and validated by references to the international literature review, which also included references to international models of best practice in the initial assessment of English language competency.

The guidelines and process outlined here are specifically designed to support migrant learners accessing unaccredited and accredited ESOL and/or other relevant FET programmes up to and including NFQ level 4.¹ As such the focus of these guidelines is the learner and the toolkit which accompanies the guidelines are designed to place the learner firmly at the centre of the process. Therefore, the resources and process outlined in both the guidelines and toolkit have two core objectives:

1. Provide migrant learners with an accurate assessment of their English language competency across the four core skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.
2. Identify appropriate language and additional learning supports, where required, to support migrant learners to develop their English language competency as part of their social, economic and cultural integration into local and wider Irish society.

¹ The focus of the guidelines and toolkit provided in this toolkit has been limited to programmes up to and including NFQ level 4 as this has been the traditional remit of the ESOL supports provided by the Adult Literacy Service. However, it is also recognised that the provision of relevant supports and options need to be addressed, possibly in the context of a future phase of this project.

5.2. Rationale for developing initial and ongoing assessment guidelines

***'Language is not a genetic gift; it is a social gift. Learning a new language is becoming a member of the club – the community of speakers of that language.'*²**

While learning a second or additional language is a difficult undertaking, the reality is that if, as a migrant, you relocate to another country where your native language is not spoken, you will need to learn the language of that country if you wish to interact and integrate, even at the most basic level. In this regard, ETBs are tasked with providing free English language programmes for those migrant learners, asylum seekers and programme refugees most at risk of social exclusion. There is, therefore, an onus on ETBs to not only provide ESOL supports but to also ensure these supports are learner-centred and focused on enhancing the basic English language competency of those most vulnerable migrant learners currently living in Irish society.

The success of providing such a service centres on the ability of providers to engage with learners at their level, reassure them and provide them with the most appropriate language support at the correct level. The most meaningful way of achieving this is by actively engaging with migrant learners from their initial point of entry to the ETB and through the administration of an initial assessment tool aimed at establishing an accurate baseline assessment of their English language competency at this stage. This is where the guidelines on the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners come into force.

5.2.1. Purpose of initial and ongoing assessment guidelines

The guidelines outlined in this research are designed to assist ESOL programme co-ordinators and tutors to:

1. Formally assess all migrant learners at point of entry for the purpose of establishing a baseline initial assessment of their English language competency in the four core skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking,
2. Decide on the most appropriate level of ESOL programme to provide in response to the results of the initial assessment process,
3. Determine if additional literacy supports are required to support migrant learners on their learning journey,
4. Monitor, through ongoing assessment mechanisms, learner progress in both English language and/or literacy skills development to help make informed decisions on appropriate and relevant progression routes.

² <https://www.british-study.com/blog/inspirational-quotes-for-language-learners/>

5.2.2. Who do these guidelines apply to?

While, as previously highlighted, the primary focus of these guidelines is migrant learners.³ The delivery of a meaningful, learner-centred initial assessment process is a team effort which requires the active participation of several key personnel, to include:

Service Programme co-ordinators responsible for the day-to-day co-ordination of the ETB's ESOL and literacy programmes,

ESOL/literacy tutors involved in the delivery of language and/or literacy programmes and supports,

Guidance staff involved in supporting learners to identify appropriate learning opportunities and supports,

Programme developers involved in the development of both unaccredited and accredited ESOL and/or ESOL-linked programmes,

Learners themselves.

It is important, at this stage, to highlight that structures regarding the management and day-to-day co-ordination of the ESOL programme vary across ETBs. For example, some ETBs have a dedicated ESOL Co-ordinator in place. Since most ETBs do not have such a resource, it is incumbent on service programme co-ordinators to stipulate in advance which staff are responsible for the various tasks involved in the planning, implementation and recording of the initial and ongoing assessment processes and outcomes.

5.3. General principles underpinning the guidelines

Learners should always be at the centre of the initial and ongoing assessment processes. In addition, these processes should add value to the wider teaching, learning and assessment processes and experiences for both learners and tutors. In terms of tutors, the results of the assessments should help inform them of a learner's current English competency level, their needs in terms of skills development, their motivation for learning and short, medium and long-term goals in terms of their

integration and progression within and outside of FET. In terms of the learners, the results of the initial assessment should ensure that they receive courses and other required supports at the most appropriate level. These should be delivered in a timely and more transparent manner.

There has been much discussion regarding the importance of both the general principles of assessment and the more specific principles of language assessment and that the guidelines contained herein rely on these principles. These principles are discussed in greater detail in **Section 1 (Part 1: Research Report)** of this research, but for ease of reference, they are summarised in **Figure 5.1**.

Figure 5.1: Figure 5.1 Principles of (language) assesment⁴



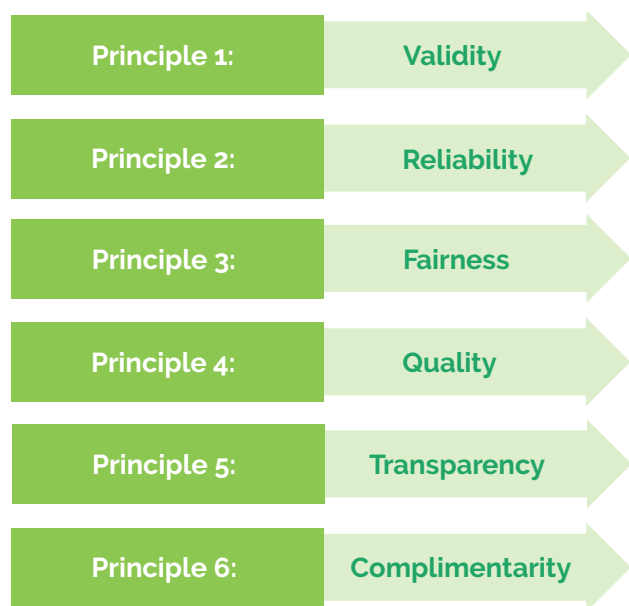
In addition to these principles, it is important to highlight that initial and ongoing assessment is being carried out for the purpose of providing appropriate ESOL and/or ESOL-related programmes to migrant learners, both unaccredited and accredited. In terms of accredited programmes learners will most likely be pursuing QQI accredited programmes, and as such the guidelines need to be cognisant of the requirements of such awards. There is, therefore, a need for the guidelines to align with the QQI principles and procedures for assessment.⁵ It is important to note that most of these principles overlap with the principles of language assessment as outlined, but in the interest of clarity are outlined in **Figure 5.2**.

³ As referenced elsewhere in this research, the term migrant learner is used because it is most reflective of the fact that the guidelines and resources contained in this toolkit are suitable for use with any non-native English speaker accessing, not only ESOL supports, but also wider FET provision where targeted English language supports may or may not be required.

⁴ Douglas Brown, H & Abeywickrama (2010) "Language Assessment: Principles and Classroom Practices," United States: Pearson Education

⁵ QQI (2013) "Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for Providers," pp.5-6, Dublin, QQI. To view the guidelines, please click the link.

Figure 5.2 QQI Principles of Assessment⁶



Validity: Assessments must be fit for purpose and produce evidence of learning achieved.

Reliability: Assessment methods and techniques produce consistent and reliable results.

Fairness: Assessment procedures are applied fairly and consistently so that all learners are provided equal opportunities.

Quality: Assessment procedures and resources must be quality assured and inspire confidence and credibility in the overall process.

Transparency: Assessment process and results must be implemented, and results must provide clarity and ease of understanding for all stakeholders involved in the process.

Complementarity: The assessment process separates the roles and responsibilities of QQI and programme providers.

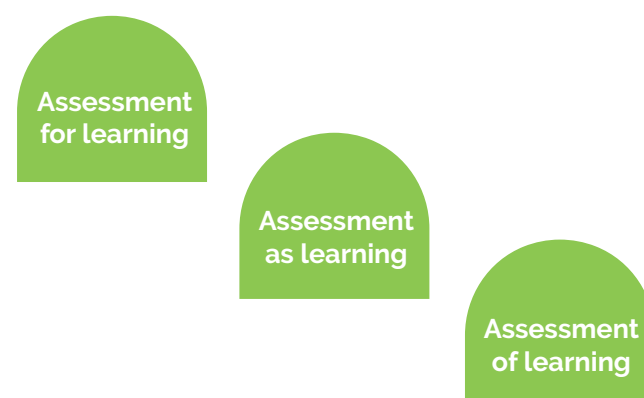
Both the principles of language assessment and QQI assessment are tried and tested and are widely recognised and endorsed across the wider FET sector. It is, therefore, neither the intention nor the desire of these guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment to replicate or supersede these principles, but rather it is hoped that these new

guidelines will complement both existing sets of guidelines.

5.4. Purpose of the assessment process proposed in the guidelines

The purpose of initially assessing the English language competency of migrant learners at their point of entry is well documented, but in the context of the present discussion, assessment is generally carried out for one of three primary reasons as outlined in **Figure 5.3**:

Figure 5.3 Purpose of Assessment



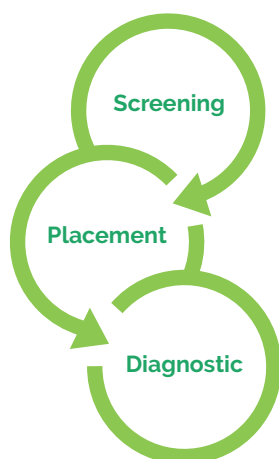
The initial assessment guidelines outlined in this research are most closely related to assessment for learning as the process and resources outlined herein are designed to provide both learners and tutors with an initial baseline assessment of English language competency at pre-entry stage. Consequently, the results of the initial assessment can be used to make valuable decisions regarding the direction of the teaching, learning and assessment experience offered for learners.

Furthermore, initial assessment can take many guises⁷ and as alluded to in **Section 1.5 (Part 1: Research Report)** it is most likely that a meaningful and inclusive model of initial assessment will include a combination of these methods as part of a standardised, staged and ongoing process. As such, it is a multi-layered process that consists of several interconnected elements as outlined in **Section 1.5 (Part 1: Research Report)**:

⁶ QQI (2013) "Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for Providers," pp.5-6, Dublin, QQI.

⁷ See Section 1.5 (Part 1: Research Report) Figure 1.2

Figure 5.4 Staged process of initial assessment⁸



Screening – This first phase of the initial assessment process takes place at point of entry to the ETB and seeks to determine a learner's approximate skills level by identifying whether or not there is a language or literacy difficulty.⁹

Placement – This stage follows the initial screening process particularly if a difficulty is identified and further, a more in-depth assessment is required. The purpose of this stage of the process is to establish a baseline academic or skills level assessment to ensure the most appropriate supports and learning environment are provided.

Diagnostic – This is the most robust stage of the process where the aim is to identify specific learner strengths, weaknesses and specific learning needs.

In reality, the initial assessment process outlined in these guidelines is so intrinsically interconnected, as outlined in **Figure 5.4**, that it is almost impossible to separate the various elements of the process. This will become evident when the Initial Assessment Tool (IAT) is presented in the next section (Part 3: Toolkit) of this research report. Overall, the most important take-away from this present discussion is that initial assessment is an integrated multi-layered, staged, ongoing process that aims to assist learners to achieve their personal, social, economic and cultural goals through the enhancement of their English language competency in the first instance.

Furthermore, since initial assessment is identified as a staged and ongoing process that traverses a learner's journey throughout a programme of learning, it is important to highlight that ongoing assessment is a core component of ensuring that the teaching and learning that takes place remains relevant to the needs of learners and alerts tutors to specific aspects of the teaching and learning process that may need modification. In other words, ongoing assessment is essentially performed through the guise of formative assessment, which can best be described as the ongoing, day-to-day informal assessment of a learner's understanding. The aim of formative assessment is to assist the tutors in determining the best approach to help learners develop their understanding of a particular topic or skill¹⁰ or as QQI state it:

'aims to generate or inform individualised feedback to a learner to help improve their competence to achieve intended learning outcomes (ILOs) or to inform adjustments to teaching strategies to support a learner or a group to achieve intended learning outcomes.'¹¹

⁸ See Section 1.5 (Part 1: Research Report)

⁹ SOLAS (2020) "Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ Levels 4-6 in ETBs: Background Report." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (n.d.) "What is Formative Assessment?," Belfast: CEA, http://ccea.org.uk/curriculum/assess_progress/types_assessment/formative

¹¹ QQI (2018) "Green Paper on Assessment of Learners and Learning," p.135, Dublin: Quality and Qualifications Ireland. To view the full green paper, please click [here](#).

5.5. Steps involved in the initial assessment process

In common with the approach taken in the guidelines on the initial assessment of literacy and numeracy at NFQ levels 4 – 6,¹² the initial assessment process consists of 3 steps as outlined in **Figure 5.5**:

Figure 5.5 Steps in the initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency process



This three-step process aligns with a similar process outlined in the above-referenced guidelines on the initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy at NFQ levels 4 to 6. Each of these steps has a distinct role to play in the overall initial and ongoing assessment process. These are set out in detail in **Figure 5.6**. The process outlined below also helps clarify the format in which the guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment of English language competency are presented.

Figure 5.6 Structure of initial and ongoing assessment guidelines¹³



The guidelines outlined in the next section will be presented under the headings and structures outlined in **Figures 5.5** and **5.6** respectively.

5.6. Guidelines on Initial and Ongoing Assessment of English language competency

Table 5.1 provides an overview of the guidelines under each of the headings and sub-headings identified in **Figure 5.6**. Each of these guidelines will be outlined in detail throughout this section of the report.

¹² SOLAS (2020) "Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ Levels 4-6 in ETBs: Background Report." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).

¹³ Adapted from SOLAS (2020) "Final Report: Assessment of adult literacy and numeracy programmes at NFQ levels 4, 5 and 6: initial and ongoing." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).

Table 5.1 Overview of guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment

Planning		
What to assess	When to assess	Who to assess
<u>Guideline 1:</u> Initial assessment should assess all four core skills.	<u>Guideline 2:</u> Initial assessment should be a staged ongoing process which spans the entirety of a migrant learner's engagement on a programme of learning.	<u>Guideline 3:</u> Migrant learners accessing ESOL programmes or looking to access wider FET provision ¹⁴ up to NFQ level 4 will be expected to undertake an initial assessment, where appropriate, at point of entry and continue to undergo ongoing assessment as required for the duration of their time on a FET programme.
Initial Assessment		
Administration	Tracking & Recording	
<u>Guideline 4:</u> Initial and ongoing assessment should be administered by suitably qualified and experienced ESOL personnel. <u>Guideline 5:</u> The initial and ongoing assessment processes must be easy to administer and allow for an objective assessment of a migrant learner's core language skills.	<u>Guideline 6:</u> Appropriate records should be maintained and continuously updated to help track learner progression.	
Ongoing Assessment		
Formative Assessment	Assessment for Progression	
<u>Guideline 7:</u> ETBs should implement a process of informal assessment to complement the more formal approach assessment process as part of a meaningful approach to ongoing assessment.	<u>Guideline 8:</u> ETBs should conduct, where required, an appropriate end of course (summative) assessment with the express purpose of determining whether a learner is ready for onward progression.	

¹⁴ Wider FET provision includes any type of provision typically provided by ETB FET Services up to NFQ level 4 and may include, for example, basic literacy and numeracy skills, family learning, Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education, Skills for Work, Youthreach, community education, Back to Education Initiative.

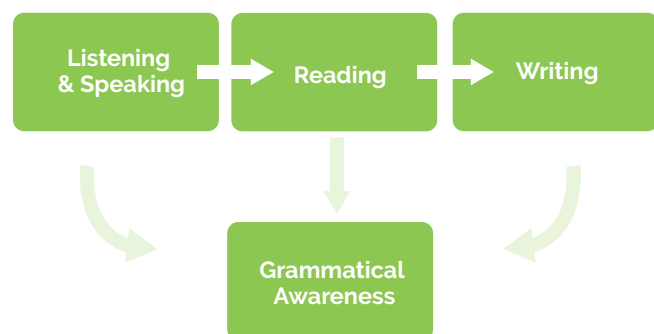
5.6.1 Planning initial and ongoing assessment

1. What to assess

Guideline 1: Initial assessment should assess all four core skills

One of the key findings from this research project, in particular the regional engagement sessions, was that any process of initial assessment should focus on assessing language competency across the four core skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. In fact, for the process of initial assessment to be effective it has been widely recognised and reported that all four core skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking need to be assessed. Consequently, the Initial Assessment Tool (IAT) provided in the toolkit accompanying this research includes resources for the assessment of all four core skills. **Figure 5.7** outlines the approach to initial assessment being advocated in these guidelines. In advocating this approach to the initial assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners, this guideline is firmly aligned to the European Commission's Key Competences for Lifelong Learning.¹⁵

Figure 5.7 Proposed approach to initial assessment of language competency



It is important to note that the approach being proposed here, as outlined in **Figure 5.7**, is not an entirely new one. In fact, it is in line with the approach contained in the Scottish model of initial assessment, which as previously highlighted in this report, is a model that ETBs have a strong affinity to. Therefore, rather than attempting to reinvent the wheel, it is recommended, in this research report, that the Scottish model is adapted to fit the Irish context. Furthermore, it is the model that will cause the least disruption for ETBs given that there is such

a strong alignment to and appreciation of it as a benchmark of best practice. Notwithstanding this, however, it is important to highlight that the assessment of all four core skills would be a new departure for ETBs since, up to now the focus of initial assessment has largely been on a combination of the four core skills, but rarely all four as part of an integrated initial assessment process.

In line, therefore, with the Scottish model, the initial assessment process proposed in this report advocates a sequential approach, commencing with a face-to-face interview with the learner which should be conducted on a one-to-one basis. Based on the results of this oral assessment informed decisions can be made regarding the level of reading and writing tasks to assign to the learner, all of which can be carried out in a group setting.

Assessing learners on what they know

There was also much commentary and discussion throughout the research process regarding the need for a standardised approach to initial assessment which was both user-friendly and sensitive to the needs of migrant learners. Furthermore, since the profile of migrant learners accessing ETB ESOL provision tends to be the most vulnerable of the wider migrant population, it is extremely important to engage with these learners and initially assess them in a way that is wholly sensitive to their specific needs, skills and abilities. In addition, it is equally important to ensure that learners' previous educational experiences and qualifications are considered as part of the wider initial assessment process. In this regard, it is important to note that such previous experience may not have been a positive one and the overarching approach of any newly developed Initial Assessment Tool (IAT) should be to assess learners on what they actually know and not what they don't know. Having said that, it is important to highlight that achievement of this aim is dependent on the appropriate alignment of QQI accredited awards in respect of ESOL qualifications, to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Part 1: Research Report (Appendix 4))

¹⁵ European Commission (2019) "Key Competences for Lifelong Learning," p.7, Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union. To view the full document, please click [here](#).

Concise and Practical Initial Assessment

While the need to assess all four core language skills as part of a standardised approach to initial assessment has been widely recognised as a model of best practice, the assessment of all four skills does not have to take place within the context of a single session; rather the assessment could be spread out over a number of shorter sessions as part of a staged, ongoing approach to initial assessment. There is, however, an important caveat here relating to the integrity of the overall initial assessment process. As an example, the informal interview could take place during the initial meeting with the ESOL Co-ordinator, while the reading and writing components could take place on a separate day as part of an induction session.

While the understandable desire is to develop a tool that is concise and time friendly to administer, the reality is that this may not be possible in the case of the initial assessment of English language competency. In advocating and developing a more formalised and standardised approach to initial assessment, there is a consequential effect that it will be a process that requires considerable learner and tutor effort. On the converse, however, if the process is allowed to remain informal and develop more organically, the reality may well be that it will be more time consuming and demanding of time and effort on both the learner and tutors part, and this is something that these guidelines are attempting to avoid. In reality, therefore, quick and easy is not the solution, but rather there needs to be a greater understanding developed amongst co-ordinators and tutors that it is better to employ appropriate effort and time in ensuring that a sufficiently meaningful and robust system of initial assessment is in place. This will ensure that tutors are provided with sufficiently in-depth information to allow them to understand more what type of learners they have on their programme and what their English language competency levels are across the four skills are. In the long run, this will make the tutor's job easier, while also making the entire learning process more meaningful and learner centred.

Industry Standard Initial Assessment Tools

In light of the discussion of industry-standard initial assessment tools in **Section 2 (Research Report)**, the guidelines recommend that grammatical awareness and accuracy be assessed as an integrated part of the oral, reading and writing assessment tasks. A strong caveat exists here too, in that test administrators need to be acutely aware of the danger of over-correction of learner errors. In this respect, administrators need to be sensitive to learner needs, skills and abilities, as well as their previous educational backgrounds and experiences, while also being mindful of the learning objectives of potential programmes that the learner might pursue.

Learners with spiky profiles

A further concern highlighted by co-ordinators and tutors related to learners with spiky profiles. This is also one of the core challenges at present due to the current structure of existing ESOL QQI certified components at levels 3 and 4. These existing modules cover some or all of the four core skills to varying degrees, which is not conducive to addressing certain issues such as learners with spiky profiles. For example, there is little focus on written production at level 3, but at level 4 there is a requirement for learners to produce ten pieces of substantial writing. In relation to a learner whose written competency is considerably lower than their competency in the other three skills, this is hardly an effective or appropriate support structure.

Learners with additional needs

Given the increasingly more diverse profile of migrant learners accessing ETB ESOL provision, the reality is that more and more learners may be presenting with literacy needs.

Such needs may not be initially clear at first, given that an underlying literacy need may be masked by the language difficulty, and as such the literacy difficulty may only emerge over time as the learner's English language skills develop. There is, therefore, considerable merit in ensuring that these guidelines are aligned to the guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy at levels 1 to 3¹⁶ and levels 4 to 6¹⁷ as part of a continuum of initial assessment across the wider FET sector.

16 SOLAS (2018) "Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click [here](#).

17 SOLAS (2020) "Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ Levels 4-6 in ETBs: Background Report." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).

5.6.1.1 Key principles underpinning Guideline 1

Table 5.2 outlines the key principles underpinning guideline 1; principles which have been informed by the international literature review, as well as feedback from the various data gathering methods employed throughout this research project.

Table 5.2 Key principles underpinning Guideline 1

Key principles underpinning Guideline 1	
1.	The initial assessment process should be concise and practical in layout and approach.
2.	The initial assessment process should assess learners on what they know, not what they don't know.
3.	The initial assessment process must be sensitive to the learners' needs, skills and abilities, and materials or resources used should also be relevant to the social, economic and cultural circumstances of migrant learners and the wider migrant population.
4.	The initial assessment process should be user-friendly, time-efficient, consistent, reliable and accessible to all migrant learners.

2. When to assess

Guideline 2: Initial assessment should be a staged, ongoing process which spans the entirety of a learner's engagement on a particular programme of learning.

One of the more consistent points identified and discussed throughout this research related to the need to ensure that initial assessment is seen as more than a once-off occurrence that takes place at point of entry alone. Instead, initial assessment must be seen as a staged, ongoing process that spans a learner's earliest interactions on a programme of learning from point of entry onwards. As such, initial assessment in the context of these guidelines is viewed as an ongoing process, but more than that, it is a multi-layered method of establishing and building on a baseline assessment of a migrant learner's English language competency level at strategic points in time on their overall learning journey. In this way not only does initial assessment

become more of a staged, ongoing process, but it actually makes it more difficult to differentiate where initial assessment ends and ongoing assessment begins. This is the true essence of an integrated approach to assessment and will help ensure that the programmes and supports provided to learners remain relevant and effective at all times.

The proposed approach to initial and ongoing assessment is set out below:

Stage 1: Initial Assessment

Initial assessment is carried out on a staged basis for the purpose of determining a learner's level of English language competency across the four core skills areas and to ensure their placement on the most appropriate learning programme.

Stage 2: Ongoing Assessment

Ongoing assessment takes place on a staged basis at strategic points throughout a learner's participation in a particular learning programme as a means of monitoring their progress and identifying whether additional supports are required.

Stage 3: Progression

Following a learner's successful completion of a particular learning programme, they should be prepared for progression to the next level. However, given that the ESOL component at QQI level 3 only focuses on some of the four core skills, while the following on QQI level 4 component focuses on all four skills in a more balanced and substantive way, it would be incorrect to automatically assume that a learner is ready for progression in such instances. Conversely, the recommendation here, is that a separate, independent of QQI requirements, summative assessment should be conducted to more accurately assess a learner's suitability for progression. In other words, a separate end of course summative assessment should act as an initial assessment for progression to the next level. This also addresses the concern raised at the regional consultation sessions regarding the need to assess learners between levels for the same reasons identified in relation to existing QQI ESOL component awards.

5.6.1.2 Key principles underpinning Guideline 2

Table 5.3 outlines the key principles underpinning guideline 2; principles which have been informed by the international literature review, as well as feedback from the various data gathering methods employed throughout this research project.

Table 5.3 Key principles underpinning Guideline 2

Key principles underpinning Guideline 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none">5. Learner readiness needs to be considered as part of the overall process. As such the process needs to be flexible enough to recognise that not all learners are ready to be formally assessed at point of entry.6. To enhance the reliability of the overall initial and ongoing assessment processes, these processes are being designed and advocated as staged and ongoing over the entire duration of a learner's participation in a learning programme to the extent that both the initial and ongoing assessment processes are intrinsically linked.

3. Who to assess

Guideline 3: Migrant learners accessing ESOL programmes or looking to access wider FET provision up to NFQ level 4 will be expected to undertake an initial assessment, where appropriate, at their point of entry and continue to undergo ongoing assessment as required for the duration of their time on a FET programme.

Assessing migrant learners at point of entry and on an ongoing basis

In stipulating that migrant learners will be expected to undertake an initial assessment at point of entry, it is important to remember some of the previously referenced mitigating factors, in particular the fact that not all learners are ready for initial assessment at this point in time. To clarify further, it may well be that some learners may not be ready for formal initial assessment, but there may well be a role for a more informal process in such instances. For example, learners could be engaged in an informal conversation in an attempt to elicit basic personal information or their ability to carry out basic everyday instructions could also be observed. Furthermore, as these learners progress through

their chosen programme of learning they will be able to participate in the formal ongoing assessment process as outlined in this report.

It should also be noted that the initial and ongoing assessment processes outlined in this research apply to migrant learners seeking access to all types of FET provision up to and including NFQ level 4. Therefore, in instances where a learner satisfies the language requirement of a non-ESOL FET programme, as a result of the initial assessment process, it would seem arbitrary and inequitable to continuously assess the learner's English language skills throughout the FET programme in question.

In conclusion, as with all aspects of the guidelines and toolkit presented in this research, it is at the discretion of individual ETBs to decide on how best to implement them. Notwithstanding this, it is imperative that ETBs avoid the over-assessment of learners, as this could negatively impact the learning experience for the learner, as well as undermining the quality assured process outlined in this research.

Programme pre-requisites

In assessing migrant learners at point of entry it is important to consider the pre-requisites, if any, for certain FET programmes that the learners may be seeking access to. For example, if a migrant learner is seeking access to a traineeship or apprenticeship programmes, there will most likely be a minimum language requirement stipulated for entry onto the programme. While the Initial Assessment Tool (IAT) contained in this research is specifically designed to cater for learners seeking access to unaccredited and accredited ESOL and wider FET provision up to and including level 4 on the NFQ, it can still be used to establish a baseline assessment of a learner's general language competency and to ascertain whether or not their English language ability is at or above a level 4 standard. If the latter is the case, then a more focused initial assessment, capable of assessing a learner's technical language abilities and requirements would be necessary.

5.6.2 Administering Initial and Ongoing Assessments

1. Administration

Guideline 4: Initial and ongoing assessment should be administered by suitably qualified and experienced ESOL personnel.

Who will administer the initial and ongoing assessment processes?

One of the key issues identified by co-ordinators as part of the regional engagement process was the fact that there is no standardised or agreed co-ordination structure for the ESOL programme. In general, the ESOL programme is delivered as part of the wider Adult Literacy Service, and as such is co-ordinated by the Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) who, in addition to managing all aspects of the Adult Literacy Service, may not have a specific background in ESOL or languages. Some ETBs may have an ESOL Co-ordinator in place who has a background in ESOL or languages, but this is the exception rather than the norm. Furthermore, the report on **English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 – 3 in ETBs**¹⁸ highlighted that of 11 ALOs nationally with responsibility for ESOL provision, 9 of these worked on a part-time basis. In addition, of the 6 ESOL Co-ordinators employed in ETBs, 3 of these also worked on a part-time basis.

While ESOL and/or literacy tutors have an important role to play in the wider process, especially in terms of ongoing assessment, there are certain aspects of the process that require service-wide co-ordination. This report is, therefore, recommending that a commitment be made to exploring the possibility of putting in place appropriate national and local ESOL co-ordination supports. This should be considered as part of the implementation of the specific recommendation relating to staffing identified in the 2018 SOLAS report on **English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 – 3 in ETBs**.¹⁹

In summary, there is a role for co-ordinators and tutors in the administration of the initial and ongoing assessment processes, and whoever has responsibility for particular aspects of these processes should have appropriate qualifications in the area of ESOL^{20 21} or languages in general.

A further concern raised throughout the regional engagement sessions related to the initial and ongoing assessment of migrant learners accessing non-ESOL FET programmes, in particular at NFQ levels 5 and 6 within the PLC, VTOS or Training Services environments, and the identification of persons responsible for the assessment processes in these contexts. In response to this, the recommendation from this report is that, in developing an appropriate co-ordination function for ESOL provision as outlined, such support should extend across the wider FET Services.

In terms of qualifications, it is recommended that those responsible for ESOL co-ordination should have, as a minimum, an NFQ Level 7 qualification in English language teaching. Furthermore, those responsible for ESOL co-ordination should also have a background in or have received appropriate training in literacy awareness so that they can competently identify any literacy difficulties amongst migrant learners.

Guideline 5: The initial and ongoing assessment processes must be easy to administer and allow for an objective assessment of a migrant learner's core language skills.

As a whole, it is vitally important to ensure that the wider initial and ongoing assessment processes are as user friendly and easy to administer as possible. Sight must not be lost of the fact that the learner is at the centre of the process and that in advocating for the development of standardised processes, the desire is to make the experience as accessible as possible for the learners and to ensure that the services response are meaningful and sensitive to their particular skills, needs and abilities, as well as being cognisant of their previous educational backgrounds and abilities.

¹⁸ SOLAS (2018) English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 – 3 in ETBs. Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the full report click [here](#).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ There have been some concerns raised regarding the appropriateness, to the ESOL setting, of ACELS approved English Language teaching qualifications. This issue is outside the scope of this project but warrants further discussion.

²¹ In determining appropriate qualifications for ESOL co-ordinators and tutors, it should be recognised that many tutors and co-ordinators have built up a broad range of experience and skills over many years. Consequently, appropriate professional development opportunities should be considered in consultation with both co-ordinators and tutors.

On the converse, the initial and ongoing assessments must also be easy to administer for the co-ordinators or tutors conducting the process. In this regard the toolkit must include:

- Guiding questions to support the standardisation of the process, particularly in relation to the listening and speaking assessment components.
- A scoring rubric, with reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to allow for the objective correction and interpretation of assessment results.

2. Tracking and Recording

Guideline 6: Appropriate records should be maintained and consistently updated to help track learner progression.

As part of the administration of the initial and ongoing assessment processes co-ordinators and tutors must ensure that they maintain appropriate records and update them on a regular basis to ensure that a migrant learner's progress is documented. That being said, it is also important to ensure that the tracking and reporting process does not become overly onerous on either the learner or the ESOL Co-ordinator/administrator. In this respect, the standardised templates and forms contained in **Section 6** (Part 3: Toolkit) are designed to assist personnel in this regard and to ensure that the process is as time friendly and efficient as possible.

In addition, **Section 6** also contains articulated 'Can do statements'²² linked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which allows for, not only the identification of a learner's starting level of English language competency as part of the initial assessment process, but also allows the learner to precisely and objectively keep track of their progress throughout a particular learning programme. It is important, however, to note that the 'Can Do Statements' referenced as part of this research report are only samples, intended as an aid for individual ETBs to develop their own. The justification for this lies in the fact that, if this report was to be overly prescriptive in terms of setting out

'Can Do Statements' it could become outdated as updated and/or new QQI accredited programmes come on stream.

5.6.3 Ongoing Assessment

1. Formative Assessment

Guidelines 7: ETBs should implement a process of informal formative assessment to complement the more formal approach as part of a meaningful process of ongoing assessment.

It is important to both highlight and acknowledge that informal formative assessment takes place on an ongoing basis across all ETBs as part of a tutor's role in monitoring learner progression in terms of the programme content and wider language skills development. Such informal approaches to formative assessment include classroom observations, perhaps in the form of simulated role-play scenarios or performance in QQI assignments. Ultimately, the purpose here is to react to specific issues or problems in a prompt and timely manner to ensure that the wider teaching and learning process remains relevant to and supportive of, a learner's specific needs, skills and abilities.

More formalised approaches to formative assessment also exist amongst some ETBs and these are recorded and tracked in a more structured manner, but also bear similarities to the more informal approach outlined previously. More specifically, as highlighted in the initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy at NFQ levels 4 – 6,²³ these more formal approaches to formative assessment align to the Assignment for Learning movement which 'is based on the principle that conscious, systematic use of formative assessment can improve the outcomes of learning, as well as enhancing learners' motivation and self-esteem.'²⁴

It is precisely in this vein that these guidelines and associated toolkit are constructed so as to ensure that the wider teaching, learning and assessment procedures remain firmly learner-focused and place the learner at the heart of these activities, particularly the assessment process. As such, the ongoing assessment process being advocated in this research is advocating both informal and formal

²² These 'Can Do Statement' Tracking Forms are adapted from the Global Scale of English Can Do descriptors which can be accessed by clicking on the link.

²³ SOLAS (2020) "Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at NFQ Levels 4-6 in ETBs: Background Report." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/ Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).

²⁴ Ibid

mechanisms, as discussed in this section, that allows tutors and learners to:

- Set clear goals and criteria for success;
- Track progress in relation to these goals and criteria;
- Provide immediate feedback to help improve learner progression;
- Use feedback to strengthen approaches to teaching and learning;
- Assess the impact of learner motivation on learner performance and/or intention to progress.

The clear targets identified above also conform to Guideline 8 as outlined in the next section.

2. Assessment for Progression

Guidelines 8: ETBs should conduct, where required, an appropriate end of course assessment with the express purpose of determining whether or not a learner is ready for onward progression.

One of the biggest challenges to promoting and encouraging meaningful progression amongst migrant learners are the inherent issues and deficiencies within the existing QQI ESOL component awards at levels 3 and 4. In other words, at level 3 the primary focus is on listening, speaking and reading, with a very limited focus on written production. This is in stark contrast to the level 4 ESOL module whereby there is considerable focus on all four core language skills, including writing. As such, it would be quite difficult to automatically assume that a migrant learner, upon successful completion of the level 3 component awards, is ready to progress to level 4.

Furthermore, in terms of encouraging the progression of migrant learners to other FET programmes, similar issues exist with a wide range of existing QQI component awards. While it is not the intention here to duplicate or replace the QQI assessment requirements, in response to these issues, a separate, independent end-of-course assessment may be required in advance of progression to other modules.

In an attempt to avoid the over-assessment of learners, it is important to emphasise that a formalised additional end-of-course assessment may not always be required, or indeed appropriate,

particularly in relation to certified programmes. Given the important relationship that the tutor builds up with the learner throughout a programme, he/she is best placed to judge what additional end-of-course assessment may or may not be required in advance of a learner progressing to another ESOL or wider FET programme. For example, a tutor will be able to factor in important considerations such as learner motivation and/or intention to progress as key benchmarks for determining readiness for progression.

Equally, it should be noted that the 'Can do' statements included with this research report (See **Section 6.5 (Part 3: Toolkit)**) can be used for this purpose. In other words, if completed on an ongoing basis by the tutor and learner, these statements can be reviewed at the end-of-the programme in tandem with the learner's performance, motivation and intentions to determine whether or not they are ready to progress.

Finally, in the case of uncertified programmes it is important that in addition to the 'Can do' statements, some form of summative assessment takes place to determine learner readiness and suitability for progression. From the evidence provided by ETBs at the consultation stage, it would appear that this is routine practice in many ETBs and should be strongly encouraged. In such instances, the end-of-course summative assessment carried out can act as the initial assessment for a subsequent certified programme.

5.7. Special Considerations underpinning the initial and ongoing assessment guidelines

The initial and ongoing guidelines as outlined in the previous section are linked to a number of key underpinning principles and considerations outlined as follows:

1. Initial and ongoing assessment processes and tools are linked to the initial and ongoing assessment guidelines and toolkits for literacy and numeracy at levels 1 to 3 and levels 4 to 6 to create a continuum of initial and ongoing assessment.
2. The initial and ongoing assessment processes conform to both the principles of language assessment and the principles of assessment as outlined in **Sections 1.4.1 and 3.4 (Part 1: Research Report)**.
3. The initial and ongoing assessment processes and tools outlined in this research report conform to international best practices, in

particular those outlined in the International Literature Review. Especially relevant here, due to the fact that a considerable number of co-ordinators and tutors referenced it throughout the online survey and regional engagement sessions, is the Scottish model which influenced the model outlined in this report.

4. The initial and ongoing assessment toolkits should be tested and piloted and validated against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).
5. As a direct response to key concerns regarding the subjectivity of certain aspects of the initial and ongoing assessment processes, the toolkit will be accompanied by a scoring rubric linked to the CEFR to have the objectivity, validity and reliability of the overall processes.

Progression pathways that are both relevant and realistic are required for all migrant learners and while this is a much broader issue, attempts have been made here to encourage progression within existing programmes. Further resources will be required to bridge the gap between core ESOL provision, and the pre-entry language requirements now required for the new apprenticeship programmes.

6. While this research strongly advocates a standardised approach to the initial and ongoing assessment process, it also strongly advocated that the resources and toolkit included should be adapted to suit specific local needs and issues as a one fits all approach would not work given the diverse and complex nature of FET provision nationally.
7. The initial and ongoing assessment processes need to be conscious of and aligned to, programme demands, but this is a situation that needs to be closely monitored to take account of developments in relation to updated and/or newly developed QQI ESOL awards. The challenge here, therefore, is to ensure that the resources and toolkits provided in this research report are reflective of existing programme demands, while also being cognisant of potential future needs and demands so that significant redrafting of the guidelines and toolkit is not required in the short-term.

8. To avoid the danger of the over-correction of learners, the toolkits needs to bear in mind this fact and the need to develop learner motivation and confidence. As such the toolkit will provide clear guidelines in this respect and the scoring rubrics will deal with this issue.
9. The initial and ongoing assessment toolkits also need to have a time limit attached out of fairness to learners, and to ensure that the process remains valid and reliable. In other words, all learners must be allocated the same period of time for completing the different aspects of the initial and ongoing assessment process.
10. As mentioned earlier these guidelines are predicated on the implementation of an appropriate staff structure for the management of the ESOL Service which, at a minimum should include a national ESOL Co-ordinator and a local ESOL Co-ordinator in each of the 16 ETBs.

5.8. Professional development on the implementation of the guidelines

It is recommended in this report that an appropriate model of cascading these guidelines and associated toolkits be put in place to ensure the consistent interpretation and application of wider processes of initial and ongoing assessment. Such a model should also include fostering an understanding amongst co-ordinators and tutors on the interpretation of results. A train the trainer model would be the desired approach to this. It would be more cost and time-efficient, while also allowing individual ETBs to take ownership of the guidelines and toolkit. It would also allow implementation in a way that conforms to the core principles and objectives as set out in this research report, but also in a way that is wholly sensitive to the specific needs of individual ETBs.

It is worth noting that the professional development requirements outlined here are separate from the professional qualification requirements outlined in **Section 5.6.2.**

5.9. Limitations of Guidelines and Forming a Continuum of Initial and Ongoing Assessment

The guidelines contained within this research report have been designed to support the initial and ongoing assessment of the language competency of migrant learners accessing FET provision up to NQF level 4.²⁵ It is designed as a resource for programme co-ordinators, tutors, programme developers, adult education guidance staff and the learners themselves.

Furthermore, the resources and tools supplied in this research report have been designed in a way that allows for the collection of meaningful data about the learners that will enhance the teaching, learning and assessment experiences of all learners. In so doing, it is intended that this approach will minimise 'the extent to which undiagnosed difficulties impede their progress.'²⁶ The reality, however, is that these guidelines and toolkits are not designed to resolve such difficulties. While it is important to ensure that the process is as rigorous and in-depth as possible, and thus generating meaningful and effective data, it is the quality of teaching and learning that will ensure that these difficulties are adequately and appropriately dealt with. It is, therefore, important that both co-ordinators and tutors are aware of the various supports and services available outside the context of these guidelines and toolkits, so that learners can be provided with, or signposted to, the most appropriate support. The relevant supports that may be of use in such circumstances are outlined below:

1. Guidelines and toolkit for the initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy at NQF levels 1 – 3;
2. Guidelines and toolkit for the assessment of literacy and numeracy at NQF levels 4 – 6;
3. Support for literacy difficulties emerging from the learners' native language.

In other words, these guidelines on initial and ongoing assessment of the English language

competency of migrant learners form a continuum of initial and ongoing assessment along with the companion guidelines for literacy and numeracy programmes at levels 1 – 3²⁷ and levels 4 – 6.²⁸

5.10. Impact of Covid-19 on the research

While this research was largely completed prior to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, it would be remiss not to acknowledge and identify some of the more obvious implications that the pandemic will have on the implementation of the guidelines and toolkit outlined in this report.

Due, however, to the ever-evolving nature of the pandemic, and the fact that, under the terms of the Irish government's roadmap for living with Covid-19,²⁹ Ireland is constantly moving between five levels of restrictions, it is impossible to assess the full impact of the pandemic on the implementation of the guidelines and toolkit. Given, however, that we are unlikely to see a return to high levels of face-to-face engagement in the medium term, it is clear that this will negatively impact the completion of the initial assessment process.

The Individual Learning Plan (ILP) and many of the other templates included in the toolkit have been designed in an interactive way and are available to individual ETBs in soft copy. The various assessment tasks, however, have been developed to be administered in either a one-to-one or group-based face-to-face environment. While one-to-one assessments may still be permissible at certain levels of the government's roadmap, it is recognised that this approach may not be practical given the high number of migrant learners regularly seeking access to ESOL and wider FET provision. Furthermore, ongoing efforts to limit people's social contacts are likely to prove equally problematic.

Consequently, it is recommended that the feasibility of developing an online version of the toolkit, even in the short-term, should be explored by SOLAS in consultation with ETBs participating in the piloting of the guidelines and toolkit. This approach would allow ETBs to continue the good practice of initially assessing learners at point of entry, while complying, in full, with the public health restrictions in place at any given time throughout the duration of the

²⁵ The term migrant learner is used throughout this research to reinforce this point, that these guidelines and toolkit are designed for use, where appropriate, with any non-native English speaker seeking access to FET provision up to and including NQF level 4 and which may or may not include English language supports. appropriate, with any non-native English speaker seeking access to FET provision up to and including NQF level 4 and which may or may not include English language supports.

²⁶ SOLAS (2020) "Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at NQF Levels 4-6 in ETBs: Background Report." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).

²⁷ SOLAS (2018) Initial and Ongoing Assessment of Adult Literacy and Numeracy at NQF levels 1 – 3: Guidelines, Toolkit and Research Report. Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority.

²⁸ SOLAS (2020) "Assessing Literacy and Numeracy at NQF Levels 4-6 in ETBs: Background Report." Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority (forthcoming).

²⁹ Government of Ireland (2020) "Resilience and Recovery 2020 – 2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19." To view the full report, click here.

current pandemic.

5.11. Summary of recommendations

A number of key recommendations on the implementation of these guidelines have been identified throughout this research report. In addition, a number of recommendations have also been made regarding the further development and expansion of the initial and ongoing assessment of the English language competency of migrant learners. For ease of reference, these recommendations are summarised here.

1. SOLAS, Education and Trainings Boards Ireland (ETBI) and the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, should advance the development of a **national ESOL framework** which includes the wider reforms necessary to bring about a joined-up, comprehensive support system for the benefit of those migrant learners seeking access to FET provision. Furthermore, as recommended in the 2018 review of ESOL provision entitled English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 – 3 in ETBs,³⁰ this national framework should lead to the development of local ESOL frameworks within each of the 16 ETBs.
2. Any references to **equivalences between the NFQ and CEFR** throughout this research are for the purpose of providing a baseline and is solely the opinion of the report's author and/or other personnel consulted in the course of the research. It is, therefore, recommended that this issue be revisited in the context of the future updating and/or development of new ESOL awards at NFQ levels 1 – 4.
3. The initial and ongoing assessment process outlined in this research report is premised on the recommendation that it is **an integrated, multi-layered, staged, ongoing process** that aims to assist learners to achieve their personal, social, economic and cultural goals through the enhancement of their English language competency.
4. In this research report, it is recommended that a commitment be made to exploring the possibility of putting in place **appropriate national and local ESOL co-ordination supports**. This should be considered as part of the implementation of the specific recommendations relating to staffing identified in the 2018 SOLAS report.³¹
5. In developing an **appropriate co-ordination function** for ESOL provision as outlined, such supports should extend across the wider FET Services, to include apprenticeships and traineeships, PLC and VTOS provision.
6. In terms of **qualifications**, it is recommended, that those responsible for ESOL co-ordination should have, as a minimum requirement, an NFQ level 7 qualification in English language teaching. In addition, those responsible for ESOL co-ordination should also have a background in or have received appropriate training in literacy awareness so that they can competently identify any literacy difficulties amongst migrant learners.
7. An **appropriate model of cascading the guidelines and associated toolkit** should be put in place to ensure the consistent interpretation and application of the wider process of initial and ongoing assessment. Such a model should also include fostering an understanding amongst co-ordinators and tutors on the interpretation of the assessment results. A train the trainer model would be the desired approach to this as it would be more cost-effective and time-efficient, while also allowing individual ETBs to take ownership of the guidelines and toolkit.
8. The guidelines and toolkit outlined in this research report should be **piloted** in a small number of ETBs.
9. In parallel with the testing and piloting of the guidelines and toolkit, a detailed **national ESOL audit** of existing unaccredited and accredited programmes should be carried out. In relation to accredited programmes, both the contents of this research report and the processes outlined therein should be considered in the context of reviewing existing and/or developing new QQI accredited ESOL awards as a result of the ongoing review of QQI standards and awards at NFQ levels 1 – 4. This will ensure that all newly devised ESOL components or major/specific purpose awards seamlessly align with the initial and ongoing assessment processes as outlined. This includes an assessment of the

30 SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 – 3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the report in full, click this [link](#)

31 SOLAS (2018) "English language provision and language assessment for low-skilled and unemployed migrants: Recommendations for good practice at NFQ levels 1 – 3 in ETBs," Dublin: SOLAS/An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna/Further Education and Training Authority. To view the report in full, click this [link](#).

role of the CEFR in relation to QQI accredited programmes. The new ETBI/SOLAS working group on the development of unaccredited ESOL programmes also has a role to play in this audit, in terms of ensuring equality of access and opportunity for all migrant learners irrespective of the ETB attended or the certification status of the programme being pursued.

10. SOLAS to explore, in consultation with pilot ETBs, the feasibility of developing an **online version** of the toolkit so that the negative impact of Covid-19 on the implementation of the guidelines and toolkit can be mitigated.



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