White Paper on Quality Assurance and Maintenance

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Executive summary

This white paper covers quality assurance and maintenance of standards in relation to the assessment of apprentices. These aspects are important because apprentices need to know that the standards they are working to are current and reflect best practice, while employers need to be confident that the assessment demonstrates that the apprentice has met the standards and is equipped to do a specified job.

Maintenance of standards and assessment

Maintenance is not just about responding to changes but also about anticipating and planning for changes. Trailblazer groups will need to consider their overall approach to reviews and changes. How often will they take place? Will changes affect the assessment approach or evidence produced, or both? Who will be responsible for the changes?

Quality assurance approaches and components

To receive public funds to offer end-point assessment, organisations will have to be registered on the Register of Apprentice Assessment Organisations (ROAAO).

Employers will be able to choose from the list of organisations registered. One of the considerations in making that selection will be the quality assurance approach taken by the organisations on the list — with different components or combination of components being proposed. Some of the components found in these approaches are:

- **The assessment** — how has the assessment has been put together and how does it ensure that it assesses what it is meant to assess?
- **The evidence** — has the apprentice provided enough evidence of sufficient quality to confirm that they have reached the required standard?
- **The assessor’s judgement** — does the quality assurance system require an independent, external person to look at the way the assessor has judged the assessment evidence?
- **Standardisation** — how do assessors reach consensus on assessment evidence against set standards that are consistent over time?

Any quality assurance of assessment or qualifications also has to consider re-assessment, non-compliance, appeals and complaints.

For SQA, quality assurance of assessment spans development to delivery. This ensures that whether a qualification is delivered in Beijing, Edinburgh or Newcastle, the same high standards are being met.
Introduction

This is the third white paper in our series of thought pieces around assessment in the new apprenticeships. The previous white paper on independence and impartiality touched briefly on issues relating to quality and maintenance. We explore these in more depth here and in doing so we hope to stimulate ideas and debate among Trailblazer groups, employers and those involved in developing and implementing standards and carrying out assessment of apprentices.
Why do quality assurance and maintenance matter?

Good quality assurance and maintenance of standards and assessments have a direct impact on apprentices, employers and the sectors in which they work.

There is a direct impact on the lives of apprentices who take an assessment or qualification to demonstrate they have met the standards required to do a particular job. Apprentices need to know that the standards they are working to are current and reflect best practice. The assessment and/or qualifications they take to meet these standards need to be meaningful and worthwhile — reflecting their current abilities and future aspirations. They need to know that it will equip them to do a job well and with confidence.

The converse of this is that employers need to have confidence that standards are current for the industry or sector and that this is reflected in appropriate qualifications/assessments. They must be confident that the assessment demonstrates that the apprentice has met the standard and is equipped with the right skills, behaviours and attitude to do a specified job. Employers need to know that, irrespective of where the apprentice takes an assessment, it has been, or will be, carried out to the same high standard — past, present and future.

Finally, the reputation of the whole sector rests on the reliability of the standards and the integrity of the assessment/qualification. If either is compromised, then this will impact on those working in a sector and those using the products or services provided by the sector. Assessments must assess what they are meant to assess; must be transparent; and demonstrate that apprentices have met the agreed standards. Quality assurance mechanisms are required to ensure all these are integral to development and delivery.

Below, we discuss some general principles underpinning quality assurance and maintenance and then focus on some specific issues and considerations relating to standards and assessment.
General principles

We all recognise high quality when we see it and we know when it is not there — whether that is a product, service, process, or system. We have an expectation of high quality as standard rather than as exception, and we look for it in all walks of life. For users of products, services, processes or systems, the quality will be judged on their use. So providers need to build in quality assurance to ensure that what is delivered meets the high expectations of users.

Credible quality assurance requires three essential ingredients. It must be planned, integrated and transparent. Statements on quality are made by most companies and providers of goods and services but to have credibility, any claim of high quality must be evidenced.

In relation to qualifications and assessment, good quality assurance mechanisms act as a guarantee that a person who has passed an assessment and/or achieved a qualification has done so in circumstances where decisions made about that assessment are consistent and based on robust assessment evidence.

Another important aspect of quality assurance is maintenance. Standards, assessment and qualifications need to reflect best practice and be fit for purpose. They also need to be up to date so those developing and providing standards, assessments and qualifications need to be responsive to changes that occur in a range of areas, including:

• new technology and tools
• updated or new work practices
• changed or new knowledge
• legislative and regulatory requirements
Maintenance of standards and assessment

Standards need to be current and reflect the best practice in industry here and now. However, this can be challenging — especially in industries and sectors where the ‘here and now’ can change relatively quickly. Trailblazer groups will need to take into account a number of considerations in the maintenance of standards and assessment.

One is deciding the overall approach to review and change. Is it a planned review (one year, two years, five years) or only when necessary, or is it a mix of planned and ad hoc? For example, if there is regulatory change the sector will need to respond within the time limit of new regulations being introduced but other changes may be able to be implemented at a time convenient to the industry. Importantly, changes to standards need to be considered and implemented at the right time so as to minimise any negative impact.

Another consideration is the impact of changes on assessment, assessors, and preparation of apprentices for assessment. Will it affect the assessment approach or evidence produced or both?

Finally, who will be responsible for changes? This is not just about responding to changes but also anticipating and planning for changes. Related to this is how updates and changes are communicated to all relevant people.
Quality assurance approaches and components

Standards need to be met each time an assessment is taken, across time and irrespective of location. So an apprentice working for a large employer in London and taking an assessment at the beginning of a year has to meet the same standards as an apprentice working for a small business in Newcastle taking that assessment 10 months later.

One aspect of quality assurance — which organisations have been approved to offer assessment — has been established through the Register of Apprentice Assessment Organisations (ROAAO). To receive public funds and be able to offer end-point assessment, organisations will have to be registered on the ROAAO. As part of this, organisations will have had to show: their experience of the end-to-end assessment process and the particular area the standard is in; sufficient assessment capacity and capability; sufficient numbers of experienced and qualified staff to administer and deliver end-point assessment; and evidence of appropriately qualified assessors and, if appropriate, invigilators.

Employers will be able to choose from a list of organisations registered with ROAA, and in its recent guidance to employers the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) has said ‘We suggest that you carry out your own checks so that you are sure the organisation you select is the right one for you and your apprentice.’

One of the considerations in making that selection will be the quality assurance approach taken by the organisations on the list — with different components or combination of components being proposed. For example, many existing awarding organisations have an approach where delivery of assessment is subject to both internal quality assurance processes (often involving peer assessors and line managers) and external scrutiny (with independent verifiers). Some of the components found in these approaches are discussed below.

The assessment

One component is the way an assessment has been put together and ensuring that it assesses what it is meant to assess. For example, if an apprentice needs to show that they are competent in a practical activity this is different from them explaining or describing what that is. In this case, the assessment would have to involve a practical activity. If the assessment was an interview, for example, this would only demonstrate the apprentice’s knowledge but not their ability to actually do something.

It is beneficial to establish this at the development stage of the assessment as it mitigates any issues that might arise in the future around evidence produced to meet the standard.
Quality assurance approaches and components

The evidence

Another component is the evidence that apprentices have to produce as part of the assessment process. Assessors will need to ensure that the apprentice has provided enough evidence of sufficient quality to confirm that they have reached the required standard. This evidence will be used to support their claim to have met the standard and the judgement of the assessor in accepting/rejecting evidence.

The assessor’s judgement

Many quality assurance systems will ask for an independent, external person to look at the way the assessor has judged the assessment evidence. For example, they might consider whether the assessor accepted the right amount and type of evidence. They might want to see if the assessor has judged the evidence accurately against the standard. They might want to look at the decision of the assessor in awarding a Pass, Merit or Distinction. Finally, they might look at whether the decisions of an assessor have been consistent across different apprentices and over time. What is important here is that it is assessors’ judgements that are being quality assured and this is different from mechanisms to support assessors’ judgements — often known as standardisation.

Standardisation

Standardisation normally involves assessors working on reaching consensus on assessment evidence against set standards rather than an external person/organisation looking at the judgements made by assessors.

It is an important mechanism to support assessors’ judgements. It fosters a common understanding of standards and encourages the sharing and dissemination of good practice. It also allows assessors to identify discrepancies, adjust their judgements and apply processes and criteria consistently.

This can be done by two or more assessors independently assessing the same evidence, eg written test, practical activity, product, etc and discussing their interpretation of standards, judgement of evidence, and points of difference — with the aim of reaching consensus which they can then all apply to future assessments.

Standardisation activities could be carried out at various points in the life-cycle of an end-point assessment. Depending on feedback from external scrutiny of judgements, the frequency of standardisation activity may be increased or decreased. If there are changes to standards and assessment it would probably be beneficial to carry out a new standardisation exercise.
Re-assessment, non-compliance, appeals and complaints

Any quality assurance of assessment or qualifications also has to consider re-assessment, non-compliance, appeals and complaints (the latter two also being a requirement for organisations registering with ROAAO).

Re-assessment
Those developing and delivering end-point assessment will need to consider what happens if the part or all of the evidence presented by an apprentice does not meet the standard. Is there a policy/process for evidence to be re-submitted/re-assessed and, if so, would this be for part or all of the assessment? Would the apprentice have to submit completely new evidence or only correct previous omissions, e.g. undertake a new task or do a similar task in a new context, or re-take part or all of a written test, or add a new piece of information to a portfolio?

Non-compliance
Another consideration is if assessors’ judgements are not deemed to be correct as a result of external scrutiny. This could include individual assessors accepting insufficient evidence; making judgements that are too lenient or too hard; and making inconsistent judgements. It could also include inconsistencies between different assessors working in the same or different geographical/work locations. If an assessor’s or group of assessors’ judgements are called into question, what action would need to be taken in response?

Appeals
There also needs to be a procedure in place for those who feel a judgement made by an assessor is not fair. In the case of end-point assessment, this would be around whether an assessment was a pass/fail, pass/merit, or merit/distinction. In these circumstances organisations would need to ensure that a process was in place for: the re-examination of evidence; escalation to the right level of authority; and who would have the final decision whether an appeal was upheld or overturned.

Complaints
Complaints may involve the way an assessment has been carried out. As with appeals, organisations need to have a clear process in place with escalation points and a final decision point.
Each approach and its components will suit the needs of different industries, their standards and their assessment approach, and therefore will have to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

For SQA, quality assurance of assessment spans development to delivery. It starts with prior verification to ensure assessment is valid and reliable, moves through to assessor judgement of assessment evidence; involves robust internal verification by centres; and ends with thorough external verification to ensure standards are being met across centres. This ensures that whether a qualification is delivered in Beijing, Edinburgh or Newcastle, the same high standards are being met.
Further advice and guidance

If SQA can assist you in exploring this guidance further, provide independent services directly, or build capacity in assessment and quality assurance then please contact SQA’s Trailblazer team.

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