

## **The challenge of vocational assessment - scope and diversity**

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The Technical and Vocational special interest group (SIG) has been reflecting on the richness of the vocational qualification market and the complexity of trying to synthesise what assessment looks like for those involved in its development and delivery. For those close to it, its diversity is liberating, but this diversity presents a challenge for the Institute to engage with key stakeholders and establish a clear presence and role within this assessment space.

There is universal acceptance that assessment serves many functions, including both for and of learning. However, without undervaluing its wider role, its use is inherently associated with qualifications; arguably as achievement quickly conveys information to stakeholders. To place technical and vocational assessment in context, it is helpful to initially consider the most recent Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) qualification landscape for England. It is clear the market is dominated by GCSEs, AS and A levels, certainly in terms of volume. From Q4 2019 to Q3 2020, there were 10.3M certificates issued, with GCSEs, AS and A levels taking the lions share at 6.1M. However, these certificates only accounted for 386 qualifications offered by four (4) awarding organisations.

That leaves 13,491 available qualifications offered by 150 awarding organisations. These qualifications will have their own approach to assessment, nuanced by factors such as level, progression routes, type of control, subject sector area, etc.

Technical and vocational assessment spans all levels between Entry level 3 and Level 7; arguably, it also contains Level 8. Some qualifications will be intended to support progression into employment, or progression into a related role for those already in employment. Some qualifications will be intended to support progression onto higher level study. Other qualifications will be intended to demonstrate competence (at a micro or macro level) and may be considered a 'licence to practice', or required to enter a specific profession.

In respect of control, at one extreme on the spectrum there is internally set - internally marked - externally moderated, whilst at the other extreme is externally set - externally marked. Some qualifications contain a mixed approach and indeed, might have multiple approaches for different assessments used within a single qualification. For example, a qualification consisting of two contributory assessments might have an externally set and marked test of knowledge, with an internally set and externally moderated demonstration of skills. The weighting of contributory assessments towards the final assessment outcome may also be subject to variability, even between qualifications considered broadly comparable.

Reflecting on the subject sector area, for some qualifications to have public/ employer credibility, there is commonly a need for assessment to mimic, or model real-world tasks. This significantly increases the complexity associated with manageability of assessment, including access to resources, or indeed the learners themselves. For example, with some qualifications associated with the land-based sector, there is a seasonal dimension which must be considered, or with some qualifications associated with healthcare, there are 24/7 shift working patterns which must be considered.

The technical and vocational assessment environment has become increasingly diverse with the move from apprenticeship frameworks to standards. The latter has resulted in arguably

700+ different approaches to assessment and a specific focus on independent assessment which is changing the nature of the pool of those making assessment decisions. This has also led to the growth in the number of awarding organisations (approximately 250), many of whom have a sole focus on apprenticeship end-point assessment, which Ofqual treat as qualifications from a regulatory perspective. This has resulted in an increasingly competitive commercial assessment market. For example, there are approximately 33 awarding organisations offering end-point assessment for Level 3 Business Administrator for employers and training providers to choose between. Whilst Ofqual is the main qualification regulator, they do not exclusively regulate, or quality assure the apprenticeship market. There are others including the Office for Students (OfS), which although work to the same principles, have differing approaches. This brave new(ish) apprenticeship world has resulted in increased complexity, particularly at higher levels. For example, there are Level 7 apprenticeships regulated by Ofqual, but Level 7 degree-integrated apprenticeships regulated by the OfS.

The move to apprenticeship standards has resulted in change to the assessor pool. Previously apprenticeship frameworks relied on qualifications internally assessed by assessors engaged by the provider/ centre, and subject to external verification. There was a general acceptance that those involved either held, or were working towards assessment delivery or quality assurance qualifications. With the move towards standards, there has been growth in the number of assessors, often coming from industry, often with little assessment experience. Whilst there are some permanent assessors, the pool has a high proportion of casual assessors, often working for multiple awarding organisations. Through social media some of these assessors have expressed a desire to join a community of practice, which currently does not exist.

The perceived constant churn within technical and vocational qualifications appears to continue (e.g., the emergence of Progression Qualifications), There is also an increasing direct influence of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education ( IfATE) through either being involved alongside Ofqual in approving qualifications before the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) (or Department for Education (DfE)) make the final decision on funding (e.g., Technical Qualifications) or separately 'badging' qualifications (e.g., Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs)). This is leading to a significant need for development of external assessments by an increasing number of awarding organisations, often with a limited internal knowledge or assessment expertise. Whether there is sufficient credible expertise within the sector to support assessment development has been indirectly posed by Ofqual who are currently asking questions of assessment resilience and capacity.

With the transition of work from IfATE to Skills England and the changes inevitably coming with a new government, there is still much we do not yet know. However, there is an inherent opportunity for the Institute in terms of building and enhancing technical and vocational assessment knowledge and skills, both within England and also across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. To achieve this, engagement with key stakeholders will be critical, as will prioritisation of positioning against assessment development and assessment delivery.