

Findings from Ofqual's technical evaluation of apprenticeship End- Point Assessment materials

Information to support awarding
organisations' delivery of
End-Point Assessments

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We have written this document to support End-Point Assessment Organisations (EPAOs) as they develop their assessment materials to deliver apprenticeship End-Point Assessments (EPAs). It sets out what we have learned from our consideration of EPA materials to date.

Foreword

Ofqual provides External Quality Assurance (EQA) of apprenticeship EPAs in line with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education's (The Institute's) EQA framework.

Each apprenticeship standard comprises an occupational standard and an assessment plan developed by a trailblazer group of employers which are approved by the Institute. EPAOs use the assessment plan to develop their EPA, which measures the competence of apprentices. All apprentices must take an independent EPA at the end of their training to confirm that they have achieved occupational competence.

We approach the EQA of apprenticeship EPAs with the same seriousness and focus as other qualifications that we regulate. Evaluation of EPA materials is a key part of EQA.

We want to make sure that the EPA assesses the knowledge, skills and behaviours specified consistently and accurately, so that employers and apprentices can have confidence in results wherever and whenever the assessment takes place. When undertaking technical evaluation, we consider whether the EPA can:

- reliably test the knowledge, skills and behaviours specified in the apprenticeship standard and assessment plan
- be graded in-line with the assessment plan
- enable results to be trusted as a measure of what an apprentice knows and can do

The next section of this document explores the purpose and process underpinning technical evaluation.

Technical evaluation - what is it for?

Ofqual works to secure and maintain qualifications standards, and promote confidence in qualifications. One of the ways we do this is to ensure that assessment is reliable and valid, so that it measures the right things in the right way.

The Institute maintains overall responsibility for the quality of apprenticeships. Its EQA framework encompasses upfront quality control mechanisms, ongoing quality assurance, and continuous improvement. Technical evaluation is used throughout the EQA process QA, including as part of detailed 'readiness checks' to ensure EPAOs are ready to deliver high quality EPA, and during the monitoring phase to ensure quality is maintained over time. Technical evaluation is a continuous improvement tool, as the findings can help EPAOs improve the quality of their materials. It also allows us to identify risks across and within apprenticeship standards, and consider emerging trends over time.

The complex area of assessment validity is at the core of the technical evaluation process for EPAs. In this context, assessment is more than the task undertaken by apprentices. It also includes the guidance for assessors and apprentices, and the policies and procedures that assessors need to follow. For example, the assessment of a practical observation or a written test will also include guidance on how it should be delivered and accurately marked. It is important that all elements of assessment are sufficiently valid – there is no point having good assessment criteria if the assessor training is deficient, for example.

A considerable amount of what is required for valid assessment in EPAs has already been identified by employers in the assessment plan. The plan outlines what an apprentice needs to demonstrate; the length and nature of the related assessments (such as a written test, an observation or a discussion); and what level of performance is needed for each grade.

Consequently, a key focus of technical evaluation is to look in detail at whether the EPA, which is developed by EPAOs, reflects the employer-set assessment plan. Adherence to the assessment plan is key to consistency across EPAs delivered by different EPAOs for the same standard.

We focus our scrutiny particularly on areas that have the potential to undermine assessment validity, which includes the clarity and sufficiency of assessment tasks. This could include, for example, whether the tasks are clear to apprentices and have an appropriate level of challenge or difficulty. Also critical is the clarity and sufficiency of information provided to assessors; such as what's expected for different grades to be achieved in relation to different aspects of the assessment, as well as how the assessment must be conducted.

Variation in areas like these may have significant implications for the accuracy of results, consistency and fairness. We therefore consider them carefully as part of the technical evaluation process.

If you are unsure about an element of an assessment plan for which we are the EQA provider, please contact us and we will try to resolve the issue.

The benefits of technical evaluation

For EPAOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> helps identify areas for improvement supports consistent interpretation of the assessment plan helps increase the reliability of assessor judgements
For apprentices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> supports fair and reliable outcomes supports a consistent assessment experience, regardless of location or EPAO
For employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> checks that the requirements of the assessment plan are met checks that competence is measured effectively builds confidence in the apprenticeship system
For the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifies trends and risks over time provides intelligence to partner organisations

Technical evaluation – what does it involve?

During technical evaluation, we review the assessment materials that support delivery of the EPA. This is an important check not only to ensure that the assessment design proposed by the EPAO meets the requirements of the assessment plan but also that it is compliant with our [General Conditions of Recognition](#) and [EPA qualification level conditions](#). Examples of these are shown on pages 9-10.

Technical evaluation takes place either before an EPA is available to apprentices, as part of a readiness check, or at any point while the EPA is live and being taken, as part of monitoring activity or special conditions.

The materials we look at can include sample question papers where there are written tests, sample multiple choice questions, guidance for assessors and apprentices, information on the approach to grading, task briefs and descriptions, and any other relevant information.

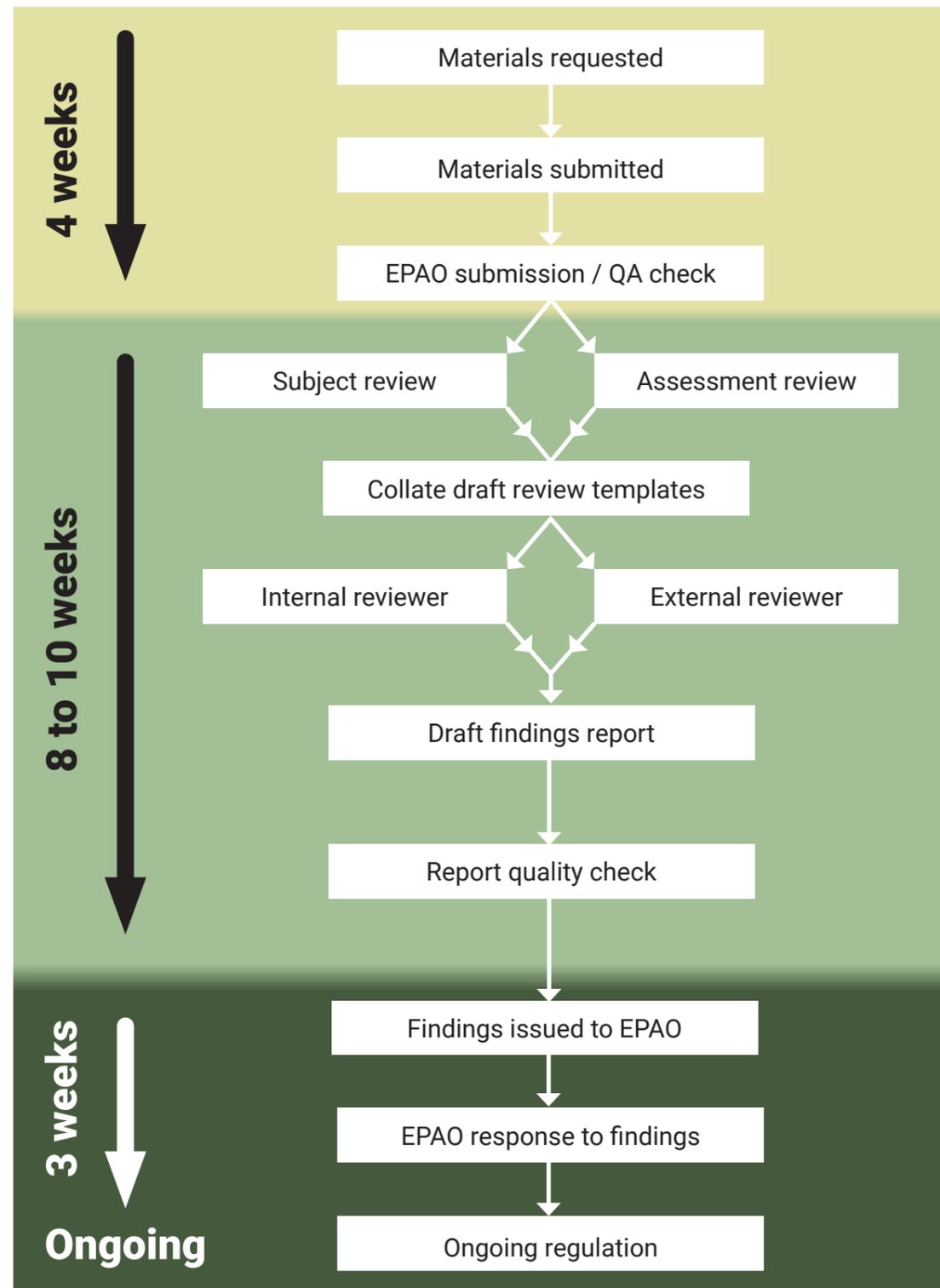
We use both assessment and industry experts to carry out this process. This approach allows us to combine in-house assessment expertise with external subject expertise to make an informed judgement on assessment materials.

Industry experts come from a wide range of backgrounds. They could have extensive skills and experience in a particular industry as a practitioner, or experience of being a teacher, assessor, examiner or an academic. Industry experts complement the internal review process by providing an occupational view of what is required in different standards and at different levels.

As part of technical evaluation we review a range of documents which may include the delivery plan, support materials, assessor recruitment plan and Internal Quality Assurance policies.

Our collated findings are used to provide feedback to EPAOs on their assessment materials. This includes making sure EPAOs understand the actions needed to improve. Technical evaluation can also form part of an EPAO's special conditions as part of their readiness check.

Summary of the technical evaluation process



Scope of work

This analysis focuses on the first wave of 50 EPAs that have been through technical evaluation over the last two years. It sets out our findings and identifies good practice, along with suggestions for improvement. We hope that the findings will support EPAOs to produce high quality assessment materials and ensure that the EPAs they deliver are fit for purpose.

Our analysis of these EPAs identified a range of issues. We have grouped these issues into eight categories across apprenticeship standards and EPAOs, according to the frequency of the issue.

We identified issues in 3 categories, affecting over half of the EPAs we reviewed:

1. Insufficient assessor guidance – unclear task requirements.
2. Insufficient assessor guidance – little or no exemplification of grading criteria or performance requirements.
3. General errors, contradictions and inaccuracies in materials.

We then identified a further 5 issues in over a quarter of the EPAs reviewed:

4. Assessment / performance requirements differ from the assessment / grading criteria set out in the assessment plan.
5. Lack of clarity around the task requirements for the apprentice.
6. Not all Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours (KSBs) are covered.
7. More than one correct answer in Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs).
8. EPA not meeting the requirements of the assessment plan.

We explore these issues in detail on page 10.

Supporting assessment validity

Our analysis has identified areas of more effective practice in EPA design and development. Some of these are specific to particular assessment methods and may aid compliance with our conditions. EPAOs may wish to use these findings as a basis for developing stronger materials.

EPAOs who interpret an assessment plan as a high-level guide to assessment generally produce high quality assessment materials. These organisations understand that additional expertise is needed to ensure accurate and consistent performance judgements are made.

Overall, EPAOs produce better quality assessment materials when:

- materials for different audiences – such as assessors and apprentices – are aligned and do not contradict each other
- a clear and simple method of grade aggregation is supplied
- a clear and robust quality assurance process is in place

We have highlighted more effective practice in assessment materials for the most common assessment types below.

Written tests

- take into consideration different employment contexts when setting tests and writing mark schemes; by ensuring that questions aren't focused on part of the industry that the apprentice may not have experience of where a standard covers multiple job roles
- provide only one possible correct answer where there is one mark available in the mark scheme
- provide enough information to allow assessors to apply the mark scheme accurately and consistently
- ensure short and extended answer mark schemes provide sufficient information about the range of credit-worthy responses
- ensure question stems are free from ambiguity and are accessible to the apprentices; for example, through use of appropriate language, and by ensuring the question elicits what the mark scheme rewards

Observations

- provide minimum and maximum assessment times (if these are not defined in the assessment plan)
- include some exemplification of the grading criteria to show what an assessor should be looking for in practice
- provide examples of what an apprentice might do to demonstrate the different grade criteria
- provide clarification of what happens should an apprentice not have an opportunity to demonstrate a certain criteria
- provide clear recording documents, which allow the assessor to note down details of the observation

Interview or professional discussions

- provide minimum and maximum assessment times (if these are not in the assessment plan)
- provide example questions to aid consistency
- clarify the use of prompts in assessments, such as the number of prompts permitted and the type of prompt allowed
- provide recording documents, which allow the assessor to note down details of the interview/discussion

Portfolio, showcase or journals

Set out the expectations for portfolios, for example:

- the number of pieces of evidence required
- types of evidence to include
- format required
- how and when to submit
- have a clear and effective process for authenticating evidence

Risks to assessment validity

Many of the issues identified by technical evaluation are a threat to assessment validity. Compliance with Ofqual's Conditions helps to support assessment validity.

Ofqual-recognised EPAOs must comply with The Conditions and any specific qualification level conditions which are relevant to the assessments they are developing; in this case the EPA qualification level conditions.

The Conditions are rules written to support valid assessment outcomes. They underpin the technical evaluation process and support the entire EPA lifecycle from design and development, through delivery, awarding and review. Some Conditions are more pertinent to technical evaluation than others.

Examples of relevant Conditions

Section E of The Conditions is all about the design and development of qualifications, and ensuring an assessment is fit for purpose.

Condition E4.2 states that EPAOs must ensure that an assessment:

- is fit for purpose
- allows each specified level of attainment detailed in the specification to be reached by a Learner who has attained the required level of knowledge, skills and understanding
- allows Assessors to be able to differentiate accurately and consistently between a range of attainments by Learners

Section H of The Conditions contains rules about marking and issuing results.

Condition H1.1 states that for each qualification which it makes available, an awarding organisation must have in place effective arrangements to ensure that, as far as possible, the criteria against which Learners' performance will be differentiated are:

- understood by Assessors and accurately applied
- applied consistently by Assessors, regardless of the identity of the Assessor, Learner or Centre

Considering the above Conditions, and others, when undertaking technical evaluation provides us with a benchmark against which we can test the strength of the materials provided.

Frequent issues

Here we provide further detail on the issues identified from technical evaluation of assessment materials within the eight most frequently identified categories.

1. Insufficient assessor guidance – unclear task requirements

Two thirds of evaluated EPA materials had issues with the clarity of the task requirements in the guidance provided to assessors. These types of issues pose a risk that assessment requirements are left too open to interpretation, and that judgements, and ultimately grading decisions, are not comparable between different apprentices. Often they did not consider:

- whether the apprentice showcase should or should not involve a discussion
- how the assessor should identify and select scenarios for the scenario test assessment method
- whether extra time should be allowed if the assessment isn't completed in the allocated time
- how the assessor chooses which practical tasks to assess the apprentice on. For example, being clear about whether an assessor should be choosing tasks relating to different areas of the apprentice's occupation, or from a single occupational area

2. Insufficient assessor guidance – little or no exemplification of grading criteria or performance requirements

Two thirds of EPA materials had issues with a lack of exemplification of the grade criteria or performance requirements, by which assessors judge proficiency. The issues in this category relate to how the materials support the application of grading criteria and inform judgements that are accurate, consistent and reliable between assessors. A lack of necessary detail might result in variations of interpretation by assessors, inconsistent approaches to criteria and once again incomparability of results.

For example, in some cases it was unclear from the materials:

- how the marking criteria should be interpreted and applied by assessors
- how assessors should ensure consistency in applying the marking criteria
- how assessors should differentiate between grades for timed assessments
- what the evidence requirements were

3. Contradictions and inaccuracies in materials

Half of the EPAs we reviewed had a wide range of different errors, from spelling and grammar mistakes to contradictions between apprentice and assessor versions of materials. Such errors affect the expectations of both apprentices and assessors of the assessment experience and may result in unfair practices for apprentices.

For example, in some materials:

- titles of assessor guidance documents were unspecific and the wording was difficult to follow
- there were discrepancies about how and when the EPA should be booked – for example, in one case there was guidance stating the EPA should be booked 10 days in advance and opposing guidance which said it should be booked 20 days in advance
- there were inconsistencies in approach, with one set of guidance stating that invigilators should mark the test, whilst another stated that this is not permitted

4. Assessment requirements differ from the criteria set out in the assessment plan

The following issues affected a smaller number of assessment materials but are still significant enough to be categorised as serious issues which pose a risk to assessment validity. The issues range from rewording grading criteria to creating performance criteria that do not fully cover what the assessment plan intends.

For example, in some materials:

- the grading descriptors for merit and distinction didn't match the criteria in the assessment plan
- the description of the grading criteria for an assessment method didn't reflect the description of the criteria within the assessment plan
- the list of knowledge and behaviours for an assessment method didn't match the requirements of the assessment plan

5. Lack of clarity around the task requirements for the apprentice

This issue refers to the lack of detail provided to apprentices about what the different assessment tasks entail.

For example, in some apprentice guidance:

- it wasn't clear that assessors may use the reflective journal as part of the assessment if they don't observe elements naturally during the observation itself
- arrangements for the preparation and submission of the portfolio were not sufficiently clear
- there was conflicting information relating to submitting portfolio evidence. For example, in one part of a document it stated that the portfolio should be submitted when an apprentice reaches Gateway, and later on it stated that it should be completed during the three months leading up to the EPA
- there was no information on how to achieve a pass or distinction for the knowledge tests

6. Not all Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours (KSBs) are covered

The issues in this category relate to the coverage of KSBs as set out in the assessment plan.

For example, in some assessment guidance:

- not all elements of the standard were covered, which could result in an apprentice passing a specific assessment without having demonstrated all of the requirements set out in the assessment plan
- the criteria provided was not specific enough, which could lead to some criteria stipulated in the plan not being assessed. In one instance, "identify the knowledge, understanding and skills needed for your role" was used to cover several of the criteria from the assessment plan
- the language used was different from that used in the assessment plan, so it was not clear that all criteria from the plan were covered

7. More than one correct answer in multiple choice questions

On a number of occasions, technical evaluation identified that some multiple-choice tests had items where more than one of the possible options could be considered correct, but only one of the responses was rewarded in the mark scheme. In such a circumstance an apprentice might provide a legitimate answer to a question, but may not be rewarded with a mark.

8. EPA doesn't meet the requirements of the assessment plan

This section relates to assessment methods and guidance not meeting the requirements of the assessment plan. Such anomalies might lead to a variety of issues, including different assessment methods being used to assess the same things within a standard, incomparable experiences for apprentices and unfair practices, leading to inconsistent and unreliable results.

For example, in some materials:

- questions for the professional discussion were outlined in the assessment plan but not referenced in the assessor guidance
- the assessment plan stated that the assessor should 'use a range of questions devised by the EPAO' for the professional discussion, but the assessor guidance stated that assessors should review log books to identify areas to explore during the assessment
- the assessment plan didn't reference assessment of the showcase in the professional discussion, but the apprenticeship standard handbook and the apprentice EPA handbook stated that the professional discussion involves questions relating to the evidence within the showcase
- the assessment plan stated there should be 20 questions in an assessment that lasts one hour but there were 15 questions in the assessment which lasted 90 minutes

Conclusion

Developing high quality and coherent assessment materials is a vital first step to delivering effective and reliable EPAs. Such quality and coherence is achieved not only through the parameters of how an assessment method is delivered – such as timings and structure – but also through the guidance for assessors and guidance for apprentices, so they understand what will be expected of them during assessment. Alignment with the assessment plan is key to ensuring consistency of EPAs across EPAOs delivering for a specific standard.

EPAOs need to apply their own expertise and experience to develop fair, consistent and reliable assessments for apprentices - providing clarity and adding detail where required. This will provide assurance that EPAs are a robust and trusted assessment of occupational competence for employers, apprentices and others who use and rely on them.

Further reading

[General Conditions of Recognition](#)

[EPA qualification level Conditions](#)

[The Institute's simplified EQA framework](#)

[Apprenticeship end point assessments: a guide for employers](#)

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Earlsdon Park

53-55 Butts Road

Coventry

CV1 3BH

0300 303 3344

public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/ofqual