

Apprenticeship end-point assessments: Ofqual's approach to external quality assurance

A guide for employers



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About this guidance

- 1.1 The government is introducing new apprenticeships in England, led by the [Institute for Apprenticeships](#). This guide is aimed at employers involved in this process. It details the way in which Ofqual, as the statutory regulator of qualifications, will approach the external quality assurance of end-point assessments (EPAs).
- 1.2 Each apprentice is required to take an EPA to complete their apprenticeship. The EPA will be delivered by a registered end-point assessment organisation (EPAO).
- 1.3 The purpose of external quality assurance is to ensure that there is a consistent quality and approach to assessment across an apprenticeship standard, regardless of which organisation is delivering the assessment and where and when the EPA is carried out.

Ofqual and external quality assurance

- 1.4 If you are designing an apprenticeship standard, you will choose the external quality assurance approach that you believe best suits your needs. We provide one of a number of options open to you. Alternatively, you can choose an employer-led model, or have external quality assurance provided by a professional body, or through the [Institute for Apprenticeships](#).
- 1.5 Where Ofqual is selected to provide external quality assurance, both the EPAO and EPA are subject to our regulation.
- 1.6 You can therefore be confident that where Ofqual is involved, the EPAO providing the EPA will be a regulated awarding organisation that has been through a formal process of recognition by us and is subject to our requirements. This means that we have tested their capacity and capability to undertake assessments consistently and reliably.
- 1.7 We provide external quality assurance using a range of legal powers available to us. This includes being able to set rules and enforce them; these are legally binding on the organisations that we recognise.
- 1.8 Specifically, we can require an EPAO to undertake or cease certain activities, intervene where there are issues with the quality of their assessments, or in extreme circumstances, we could fine the EPAO or withdraw its recognition. Withdrawing recognition would then prevent that organisation from undertaking or awarding EPAs against that apprenticeship standard.
- 1.9 Using all our regulatory powers together means that we can act to prevent things going wrong or, if things do go wrong, we can get them back on track and protect the interests of apprentices.
- 1.10 When we provide external quality assurance we use our experience and expertise as specialists in assessment and the monitoring of standards. We focus on the validity of the EPA - this means that we expect the EPA to assess the requirements in the apprenticeship standard consistently and accurately, so that people can have confidence in results wherever and whenever the assessment is conducted.
- 1.11 We do not charge for providing external quality assurance and have no plans to do so.

Seeking Ofqual as the external quality assurance provider

- 1.12 In the process of developing a new apprenticeship with the Institute for Apprenticeships, you are required to submit an apprenticeship standard and assessment plan for approval. You are required to state who the external quality assurance provider will be within the assessment plan.
- 1.13 If you want us to be involved, you will find it most beneficial to invite us to be the external quality assurance provider before the Institute approves the apprenticeship standard and assessment plan. We recommend that you get in touch when you have completed initial thinking about your assessment plan, while it is in development.
- 1.14 Working in this way enables us to provide you with feedback and gives you the opportunity to revise and refine the plan with the benefit of our assessment expertise. You can therefore have greater assurance that the resulting assessment plan will support good quality EPAs that will test the right things in a reliable way.

After an apprenticeship standard is approved

- 1.15 There are some circumstances when you may want to approach us to provide external quality assurance for an apprenticeship standard after the Institute has approved the assessment plan. This may be because you wish to change external quality assurance provider, or because originally there was no external quality assurance provider specified.
- 1.16 If this is the case, we will also work with you to refine and develop the assessment plan as part of a technical review process. If substantial changes are made then it may have to be resubmitted to the Institute for approval. We work closely with the Institute to ensure that our processes align and do not introduce burden or confusion.
- 1.17 We will not assume responsibility for the external quality assurance of the apprenticeship standard until the assessment plan has passed our technical review (see below).

What this means for you

- 1.18 You can approach Ofqual to be the external quality assurance provider for your apprenticeship standard before or after the Institute approves it.
- 1.19 If you are interested in Ofqual providing external quality assurance then we recommend getting in touch at an early stage if possible.

- 1.20 To make a formal request for Ofqual to be the external quality assurance provider, you will need to send a formal request from the Chair of the trailblazer group, providing details of the relevant apprenticeship standards and including the draft assessment plans. You can email this to apprenticeships@ofqual.gov.uk.

How we undertake external quality assurance

1.21 There are five aspects to our external quality assurance:

1. Technical review of the assessment plan
2. Ofqual recognition of end-point assessment organisations
3. Technical evaluation of the end-point assessment
4. Ongoing supervision of the end-point assessment when it is in the market
5. Regulatory action if something goes wrong

Technical review of the assessment plan

- 5.1 Our initial involvement is our offer of support in the development of your assessment plan. The assessment plan is the framework that EPAOs will use to develop the EPA.
- 5.2 A technical advisory group of our assessment experts will review your draft, focusing on making sure that EPAOs will be able to use it to develop good quality EPAs that will test the right things in a reliable way.
- 5.3 It is crucial that the assessment plan is carefully specified in unambiguous terms, as there may be a range of different EPAOs interpreting it. We are happy to support you in achieving this. Our review will look to ensure that the assessment plan will enable consistent and accurate measurement of the requirements specified in the apprenticeship standard. The central question that our technical advisory group ask is: is there anything in the assessment plan that would cause an EPAO to develop an EPA that is not sufficiently valid?
- 5.4 We will not accept requests for external quality assurance unless our technical advisory group has reviewed the assessment plan. We will, however, work with you in an iterative way until our technical advisory group is satisfied, and provide you with specific feedback.
- 5.5 We have [published our findings from reviews of up to 100 assessment plans](#) to-date, which you may find useful to cross-reference.
- 5.6 Once the assessment plan has been evaluated by our technical advisory group, we notify your trailblazer group Chair confirming that we have accepted its request for external quality assurance. We also formally notify the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the Institute for Apprenticeships at this stage, and Ofqual will become the named external quality assurance provider.

- 5.7 We publish [details of the apprenticeship standards for which we provide external quality assurance](#) on our website. We also publish the details of those we are working towards accepting, and the stage they are at.

Ofqual recognition of end-point assessment organisations

- 5.8 Once an assessment plan is formally approved by the Institute, assessment organisations can come forward and apply for entry onto the Education and Skills Funding Agency's '[Register for End Point Assessment Organisations](#)' against that particular apprenticeship standard.¹
- 5.9 When Ofqual is confirmed as providing external quality assurance for an apprenticeship standard, the Education and Skills Funding Agency will ensure that only EPAOs who are recognised by Ofqual as awarding organisations can be approved to develop EPAs against that standard. This is to ensure that the EPAOs involved will be subject to our regulatory requirements.
- 5.10 EPAOs can apply to be recognised by Ofqual at any time. Passing through the Ofqual recognition process means that an organisation's capacity and capability to deliver EPAs has been checked and that they are subject to our legally-binding requirements. We have published [further information about our recognition process](#). We seek to actively support organisations who wish to become recognised by Ofqual.

Technical evaluation of end-point assessments

- 5.11 A crucial part of our external quality assurance is the technical evaluation we give to the EPAs themselves when EPAOs have developed them. This is an important check to see whether the assessment an EPAO is proposing to use meets the specifications that employers set out in the assessment plan.
- 5.12 Where possible, we aim to review an EPA before an apprentice takes it. A technical evaluation could however happen at any point in the lifecycle of the EPA.
- 5.13 Our expectation is that an EPA should:
- reliably test the knowledge, skills and behaviours you have specified in the apprenticeship standard and assessment plan
 - be graded in line with the assessment plan

¹ [The full list of approved apprenticeship](#) standards is published by the Institute for Apprenticeships.

- enable results to be trusted as a measure of what an apprentice knows and can do
 - be kept under regular review by the EPAO
- 5.14 When we have reviewed EPAs, we provide feedback to the EPAO, which can include indicating where amendments are needed to secure, or improve, the quality of the assessment.
- 5.15 We record our findings from the evaluation and will refer to these when monitoring the ongoing delivery of EPAs when they are in the market.

Ongoing supervision of the EPAO and the EPA when in the market

6. Recognised EPAOs are required to meet our rules, the 'General Conditions of Recognition', on an ongoing basis. These cover all aspects of an EPA where there are risks to safe delivery and the maintenance of standards.
- 6.1 We engage with recognised EPAOs proactively to promote good practice and to prevent poor behaviours. Through our engagement, provision of information and guidance on many aspects of our rules, we equip awarding organisations to meet our requirements
- 6.2 Alongside guidance and communication, we have established methods for monitoring the delivery of qualifications and assessments that are live in the market.
- 6.3 We require EPAOs that are regulated to report to us if anything, in their view, is likely to or does go wrong, or means that they might not be compliant with our rules. We track these notifications and frequently look at themes and behaviours that might indicate that there are bigger issues.
- 6.4 We also carefully monitor intelligence that we gather from stakeholders who have an interest in the qualification or assessment. These might be training providers, schools or colleges. They might be relevant organisations like the Education and Skills Funding Agency or Ofsted. In the case of apprenticeships, they are likely to be employers like you. We operate a helpdesk where anyone can report an issue, and we have teams of staff proactively engaging with stakeholders across the country.
- 6.5 We have access to the data that regulated EPAOs gather about the number of apprentices who are entered for and pass their EPA and at what grade, and we monitor these trends as well.
- 6.6 We use all the information we gather to create risk analyses that inform the action we might then take, and we have a number of regulatory tools to support

our approach. We might choose to audit a number of EPAOs and their EPA delivery if we see a key risk emerging, for example in a particular sector. We might choose to undertake additional technical evaluation of the relevant EPA. We may initiate some research in to a specific thematic area. We may decide that a risk has so much potential impact that we will launch an investigation into a specific regulated EPAO.

- 6.7 We have an annual programme of activity and well-established Risk, Audit, Research and Legal teams who carry it out for us.
- 6.8 All these strands provide evidence and examples of poor and good practice to inform sector-wide improvements and learning.

Regulatory action if something goes wrong

6.9 If something is likely to or does go wrong, and there is sufficient evidence to prove it, we can act to enforce our rules. When we do this, our priority will be the protection of the apprentices involved, and to ensure that employers retain confidence in the EPAs.

6.10 We can:

- impose additional rules on an EPAO to deal with specific issues
- require regulated EPAOs to do things, or stop doing things, to bring them into compliance
- seek financial penalties in proportionate circumstances, such as serious breaches that affect the standard of the EPA or public confidence
- withdraw an EPAO's regulated status for some or all of its EPAs as necessary, preventing it from undertaking and awarding EPAs against an apprenticeship standard

6.11 We are accountable for making these decisions fairly and properly and our action must be proportionate.

6.12 If we take regulatory action, we will communicate it appropriately to support the prevention of similar incidents in the future.

A collaborative approach to providing external quality assurance

- 6.13 You may feel that choosing an industry-led route or a professional body to provide the external quality assurance is right for your apprenticeship standard and sector. We recognise that you may also want the EPAs taken by your apprentices to be regulated, and therefore subject to all the protection and quality assurance outlined above.
- 6.14 In these circumstances, we are happy to consider working in collaboration with another external quality assurance provider.
- 6.15 Our requirements for this arrangement are that any EPAOs involved will have to be recognised by us as regulated awarding organisations. We will also need your assessment plan to have been reviewed and accepted by our technical advisory group. To begin exploring working with us please contact apprenticeships@ofqual.gov.uk.

Glossary

Apprenticeship standard: The knowledge, skills, and behaviours agreed by employers that apprentices must meet. 'Standard' may also mean the level of demand of an assessment or qualification.

Assessment plan: Developed by a trailblazer group, this provides details of the end-point assessment, which details the assessment methods to be used and the application of grading.

Comparability: Generating assessment outcomes that are comparable between end-point assessment organisations and over time. There are two reasons for this:

- to reach fair comparisons about the attainment of learners, e.g. where apprentices are working against the same apprenticeship standard but with different end-point assessment organisations
- to ensure that the outcomes can be used as a measure of standards

End-point assessment (EPA): A synoptic assessment of the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that have been learnt throughout the apprenticeship. The purpose of the assessment is to make sure the apprentice meets the standard set by employers and are fully competent in the occupation. It is taken by apprentices at the very end of the on-programme phase of training when their employer (and in some cases their training provider) is satisfied that they have met the "gateway" criteria to undertake the assessment. End-point assessments are graded and successful completion leads to the awarding of an apprenticeship certificate. ²

End Point Assessment Organisations (EPAO): Approved organisations listed on the ESFA's 'Register of Apprenticeship End-Point Assessment Organisations'. Previously referred to as apprenticeship assessment organisations (AAOs) they were listed on the - then known as - [Register of Approved Assessment Organisations \(RoAAO\)](#).

ESFA: The Education and Skills Funding Agency.
The government agency accountable for funding education and skills for children, young people and adults.

External quality assurance: A requirement of all apprenticeship standards, provided by one of four routes.

² <http://futureapprenticeships.org.uk/end-point-assessment/>

General Conditions of Recognition (the Conditions): Our rules, including all conditions to which an awarding organisation's recognition is subject.

Institute: [The Institute for Apprenticeships](#). The crown, non-departmental public body, responsible for empowering employers to define and create apprenticeships.

Recognition: We review an organisation's capacity and capability to deliver qualifications and assessments before recognising them. Our recognition process is open and we provide specific support to those who would like to become recognised. Once recognised, organisations become regulated awarding organisations, subject to our General Conditions of Recognition. We are able to withdraw recognition if necessary and justifiable.

trailblazer group: The group of employers that have come to develop one or more apprenticeship standards for their sector. This group is representative of the make-up of that sector, including in size, geographical distribution, and diversity.

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Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation

Spring Place
Coventry Business Park
Herald Avenue
Coventry CV5 6UB

Telephone 0300 303 3344

Textphone 0300 303 3345

Helpline 0300 303 3346